

Who Deserves the Nobel Peace Prize?

How the AFSC Makes Its Nominations

By Irwin Abrams

In receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947, the American Friends Service Committee became an authorized nominator for future prizes; they proposed Mohandas Gandhi for the 1948 prize. Since then the AFSC has sent nominations to the Norwegian Nobel Committee almost annually. Friends know all too little about the work of the AFSC's Nobel Peace Prize Nominating Committee and the long list of AFSC nominees over the years for which it has been responsible.

The Norwegian committee itself uses the broadest criteria in making its decisions. Alfred Nobel wrote in his will that the peace prize was to be given "to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between the nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies, and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses." Nobel planned his prizes only for persons, but the statutes adopted permitted the prizeawarding bodies also to make an award to "an institution or an association." The Swedish institutions awarding the prizes for physics, chemistry, medicine, and literature have followed Nobel's wishes, while the Norwegian committee has named 17 institutions for its prizes along with the 84 individuals.

Nobel's reference to disarmament and peace congresses reflected his interest in the organized peace movement of the time, and the Norwegian committee has indeed granted prizes to peace activists, especially in the early years after the prizes were established in 1901. It was Nobel's phrase, "fraternity between nations," that enabled the Committee to grant its prizes to such a wide variety of recipients, including statesmen, humanitarians, international lawyers, religious leaders, and, in more recent years, champions of human rights.

The AFSC Nobel Committee has formulated its own criteria, without expecting the AFSC nominee to have a perfect score on each one: 1) commitment to nonviolent methods; 2) quality as a person and sustained contributions to peace in such areas as justice, human dignity, and the integrity of the environment; and 3) possession of a world view rather than a parochial concern, with potential for a global rather than a limited impact.

In its search for nominees, the committee is expected to include all parts of the world, noting critical areas of conflict, and to consider how a Nobel Prize could further a peaceful result, as well as the relevance of a candidate's work to AFSC or other Quaker experience.

Many, but not all, of the AFSC nominees have been pacifists, including André Trocmé, Wilhelm Mensching, Danilo Dolci, Moon Ik Hwan of Korea, Quakers Ham Sok Hon, also of Korea, and Elise Boulding, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (U.S.A.) and the International F.O.R. Buddhists named were Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand and Maha Ghosananda of Cambodia. National

leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Premier Gro Harlem Brundland of Norway, have been nominated, as have Dag Hammarskjöld and U Thant, secretaries general of the UN. Anti-apartheid nominees along with Desmond Tutu were Stephen Biko and Beyers Naudé. Another human rights nominee was Ibrahim Rugova, nonviolent leader of the Albanian minority in Serbia, strongly recommended to AFSC by Friends in Europe. American public figures nominated have included Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, Dr. Frank P. Graham, Cesar Chavez, and Norman Cousins.

The naming of Jimmy Carter both in 1991 and 1997 has sparked discussion among Friends who remembered policies they had opposed when he was in office. The AFSC committee was not unmindful of such criticisms, but in reaching its decision was moved particularly by Carter's unprecedented peacemaking in his postpresidential years.

Only three of the AFSC nominees have won the prize, doubtlessly nominated by others as well: Lord Boyd Orr, director general of the Food and Agriculture Organization (1949); Dag Hammarskjöld (1961); and Martin Luther King Jr. (1964). The AFSC not only chose a winner in 1949, but its very first nomination, for Gandhi in 1948, was given careful consideration in Oslo. After Gandhi's assassination, the Norwegian committee asked the advice of its Swedish partners about posthumous prizes, but finally announced there would be no award for 1948, "since there was no suitable living candidate."

In 1973 the AFSC nominee, Bishop Helder Camara of Brazil, received two votes in the five-member Norwegian Nobel Committee, but the other three were for Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, probably the most unpopular Nobel Peace Prize ever granted. When the committee chair gave the press the impression that the decision had been unanimous, the two in the minority felt they had to resign, and the matter became public, a most unusual situation. A widespread movement of protest in the country produced funds for a "Norwegian People's Prize" for Camara. At the AFSC, staff members wanted to give back the AFSC prize, but the Board settled for a joint delegation with British Friends to ask the Nobel Committee in Oslo for more worthy prize winners in the future.

We know of other occasions when the AFSC came close. Desmond Tutu, the AFSC nominee in 1981, won the prize in 1984. In 1986 and 1987 the AFSC nominated Sir Brian Urquhart, the UN administrator of peace-keeping, and in 1988 the Nobel Committee gave the prize to the UN Peace-Keeping Forces. In 1991 the AFSC Nobel Committee was about to nominate Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma for the 1992 prize when she was announced as the winner for 1991.

The deadline of February 1 of a given year for nominations of that year's prize to reach Oslo sets the timetable for the AFSC committee. Thus in February, 1997, when the Oslo Nobel Committee at its first meeting went over the list of all valid nominations received for 1997, the AFSC Nobel Committee was holding its first meeting to look over its own long list for 1998, compiled by adding to names from previous years those received from Friends and others in response to a widespread solicitation. All these candidates were then examined by AFSC committee members in preparation for their second meeting in September, when the short list is agreed upon. Members are then assigned a name or two to research and write a report on, to be circulated to the others before the final meeting in November. Then the AFSC committee makes its choice and discusses

the report to be made to the AFSC board. After board approval, one or two members may draft the letter the Executive Secretary sends to Oslo and also put together the supporting documentation to accompany it.

This process represents hard, dedicated work by the committee members, with the assistance of an AFSC staff member. Is all this effort and the travel expense to attend the three meetings justified, when so few of the AFSC nominees become prize winners? It is always possible of course that the AFSC may call the Norwegian committee's attention to an overlooked candidate. The best answer, however, has to do with what happens to the AFSC nomination. The Norwegian committee does not publish the names of the nominees and discourages nominators from making their nominations public. Quaker Peace and Service in England, successor to the Friends body that was co-recipient in 1947, does keep its nominations confidential.

The AFSC, on the other hand, makes a press release of its choice, notifies its nominee, and is prepared to tell the world. The AFSC has learned from its nominees that not only does the AFSC action give them significant moral support personally, but word of "the Quaker nomination" means an important boost to the cause for which they are working. For the AFSC family and supporters, as well as for the wider public, this publicity can also bring about important education for peace.

Rather ironically, in its 45 nominations the AFSC has only four times submitted the names of other institutions: the Service Civile Internationale (1957), the joint F.O.R. nomination (1970), the Committee of Cooperation for Peace in Chile (1976), and the Law of the Sea Treaty (1984). Inmost of its nominations over the years, the AFSC Nobel committees would seem to have agreed with Baroness Bertha von Suttner, Nobel's friend who influenced him in including peace among his prizes. On learning that institutions were to be recipients, she protested that "they were only a form, a body-but the soul of a society always resides in an individual. It is the energy, the dedication, the sacred fire which fills a heart and spirit, that is what propels a movement.

To me it is just such an individual whose life can inspire the rest of us to do better with our own. This is the reason I have given so many years to writing and speaking about the Nobel Peace Prize and its laureates, and why I feel so strongly that all the efforts of the AFSC Nobel Committee in discovering, researching, discussing, and finally publicizing the activities of such persons are well justified, whether or not our nominee becomes the prize winner.

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