



THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE AWARD FOR JIMMY CARTER

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On October 11, 2002, the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that the Nobel Peace Prize of 2002 was to be granted to Jimmy Carter. The purpose of this paper is to tell the story of the Carter prize: why he did not receive it in 1978 for his mediation between Israel and Egypt; Carter's attitude toward the prize in the following years; the announcement in 2002 and its complications; the Nobel addresses at the award ceremony; and the Carter award in perspective.¹ I will also draw upon my personal experiences.

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At 4:02 a.m. on October 11 the phone rang at the Carter residence in Plains, Georgia. Rosalynn Carter, who answered, was worried, thinking it might be about one of their children. Then she thought it might be a prank. But, to her surprise, it was a call from Oslo, asking Jimmy Carter to phone back at 4:30 a.m. to Geir Lundestad, Secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee. Rosalynn told one of Carter's Secret Service men to inform him directly. The excited messenger, who is from Nicaragua, blurted the words to Carter in Spanish, which fortunately Carter understands. Lundestad told him on the phone that in thirty minutes, at 11:00 a.m. in Oslo, the announcement would be made that Carter had won the Peace Prize. We can imagine how the Carters reacted to the unexpected news.²

Why Carter Did Not Receive the Prize in 1978

In the announcement, the Committee called Carter's mediation in 1978 "a vital contribution to the Camp David Accords" and "in itself a great enough achievement to qualify for the Nobel Peace Prize." Why, then, did he not receive the prize along with Menachem Begin of Israel and Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt ?

It was not until some years after 1978 that we learned the reason from the memoirs of Baron Stig Ramel, executive director of the Nobel Foundation from 1972 to 1992. He told how when the Norwegian Nobel Committee members were considering the award in September, 1978, and had already decided upon Begin and Sadat, they asked Ramel, who represented the governing body of all the Nobel prizes, whether they could add Carter, even though he had not been nominated

¹ The official documentation of the award is available on the web site of the Nobel Foundation's electronic museum: <http://www.nobel.se/peace/laureates>. This includes the text of the announcement by the Norwegian Nobel Committee on October 11, and the texts of the addresses at the award ceremony on December 10, 2002: the presentation by Gunnar Berge, Chairman of the Committee, and the Nobel lecture by Jimmy Carter, as well as a picture of Carter's diploma.

² Interview with Jimmy Carter by Moni Basu in *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 12, 2002, p. A11.

by the deadline of February 1, 1978, or in the first meeting of the Norwegian Committee later that month. Ramel's response was that this would be a violation of the statutes of the Nobel Foundation, and it could not be done.³

The Committee then made its announcement of the prize for Begin and Sadat, referring to Carter's "great role." Moreover, in the award ceremony Aase Lionaes, Committee chair, called Carter "the master builder responsible for the bridge that had to be built between Egypt and Israel." In that ceremony both Begin and Sadat also paid high tribute to Carter.⁴

Looking back, in the award ceremony of 2002, Chairman Gunnar Berge of the Nobel Committee declared in his speech of presentation to Carter that the Committee had wished to give him the prize in 1978, but a "mere formality prevented Carter from receiving his well-earned Peace Prize at that time." Elsewhere this has also been spoken of as a "glitch," but there happens to be good reason for it. The very first sentence of the will of Alfred Nobel of 1895, the basis for the establishment of the Nobel prizes, states that the prizes are to go "to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." This first sentence is also quoted in Article #1 of the Statutes of the Nobel Foundation.⁵

This time factor has not always been adhered to, and many prizes in all the Nobel fields have been granted for achievements in years earlier than the year just past. This has been justified by considering such accomplishments as generally recognized only more recently. Many scientific achievements would seem to need more time to demonstrate their true merit. Prizes to statesmen for peacemaking often should actually be left for future historians to judge, after there has been time for consequences to be observed and documents to be examined.

Jimmy Carter's remarkable mediation efforts at Camp David took place only six weeks before the Committee announced the prize and long after the nominations for the year had been closed on February 1. According to the "preceding year" clause, Carter would have been clearly eligible in 1979, but as the prize had gone to Sadat and Begin in 1978, a prize for mediation between them was certainly out of the question for the following year.

Actually, there was good reason for the Committee to have waited. Camp David had produced the framework for an agreement, and by October 12, 1978, negotiations to draft the peace treaty

³ Stig Ramel, *Pojken i dörren* (Stockholm, Atlantis, 1994), pp. 256-258. I also discussed this with Baron Ramel in two interviews in Stockholm, December 1999 and December 2001.

⁴ Irwin Abrams, ed., *Nobel Lectures in Peace 1971-1980* (Singapore, World Scientific, 1997): pp. 183, 187, 197.

⁵ Alfred Nobel's Will, Appendix B, Irwin Abrams, *The Nobel Peace Prize and the Laureates. An Illustrated Biographical History 1901-2001* (Nantucket, MA: Science History Publications/USA, 2001) p. 339. Nobel Foundation, *Statutes of the Nobel Foundation* (Stockholm).

had begun, with the hope that the treaty would be ready to be signed on November 19, the anniversary of Sadat's dramatic trip to Jerusalem, which had made Camp David possible. However, when the Committee announced the prizes on October 27, these negotiations were stalled. On that very morning Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was vainly trying to get Israeli Foreign Minister Moïse Dayan to compromise, and the Egyptian representative was packing his bags to return to Cairo. Vance had to call off the negotiating session planned for the afternoon.

In Oslo there was strong feeling that Sadat should have had the prize alone. A rumor circulated that the pro-Israel Committee Chair, Aase Lionaes, had brought about the addition of Begin. Apprehensive about anti-Israel public feeling, the authorities moved the award ceremony to the old Akershus fortress-castle, surrounded by police and soldiers, to which Begin was brought by helicopter from the royal palace where he stayed. Sadat decided not to attend the ceremony, but sent a representative. The peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was not signed until March 26, 1979.

This peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, which without Carter would never have been achieved, has withstood all the difficulties their relationship has faced and remains today the one important peace treaty in this area of conflict. On the other hand, Camp David did nothing to temper Begin's anti-Palestinian position, which was to stand in the way of future efforts for reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians.

Jimmy Carter and the Prize, 1979-2002

The Norwegian Nobel Committee does not release the official list of nominees and their nominators for fifty years, but Douglas Brinkley has found in Jimmy Carter's papers the copy of a letter Sadat wrote to the Committee dated April 11, 1981, after Carter had left office, nominating him for the Peace Prize. Sadat cited his "genuine dedication to the cause of human rights," his "unwavering commitment" to Middle East peace and his efforts to find a solution to the Palestinian problem. Brinkley speaks of Sadat "spearheading a campaign" to win the 1981 prize for Carter, but we do not know of any others involved. Sadat's nomination of Carter was too late for the 1981 prize, but it could have been considered in 1982, even though Sadat was tragically assassinated in October 1981.⁶

In December 2002, Berge in his presentation address at the award ceremony said: "Every year since then [1978], there have been speculations about when Carter would receive the Peace

⁶ Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey Beyond the White House* (New York, Penguin, 1999), pp. 27, 490.

Prize. And every year he has been obliged to comment on awards given to others. This he has always done with the same generosity, though once, in a very mild outburst, he did say: ‘I’d be delighted, not to mention surprised, if just once before I die nobody would suggest that what I’m really trying to do with these years — my hidden agenda — is to win the Peace Prize.’”

Nominations for Carter multiplied after the opening of the Carter Center in 1982, including one from a previous recipient, the American Friends Service Committee. Carter was now involved in the significant work of his post-presidential career, developing programs to resolve global conflicts, promote democracy and economic development, fight hunger and disease and work for human rights, and especially, with his access to world leaders, making personal efforts in what is called second-track diplomacy,

By 1994 he had been nominated at least five times, and there was much speculation that his much-publicized peace efforts that year in Haiti and North Korea would win him the award. But it was not to be, and in December James Wooten, a senior correspondent for ABC News, interviewed Carter and asked if he had been disappointed not to have won the prize.

Carter emphasized that in no way was winning the prize the main motive of his humanitarian work. “My goodness,” Carter said, “What if it were? What if the Nobel were really the be-all and end-all of my existence? And what if it never happened? Which it probably won’t. There are so many hundreds of people working for the same things just as hard as I am and some of them much harder. But what if that’s what really mattered most and it never came about? Well, what sort of dried up, shriveled up, disappointed, frustrated old prune of a man would I be then? Poor ol’ Jimmy Carter. He never got his prize.”⁷

Nominating Jimmy Carter

At this point I want to draw upon my personal experience. In December 2001, on celebration of the 100th year of the Nobel Peace Prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee invited previous winners of the peace prize to a symposium in Oslo, held just before the award ceremony for Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, that year’s co-winner with the United Nations. Among other recipients who attended were Norman Borlaug (1970), Mairead Corrigan Maguire (1976), Desmond Tutu (1984), Elie Wiesel (1986), Oscar Arias Sanchez (1987), the Dalai Lama (1989), Rigoberta Menchú Tum (1992), Joseph Rotblat (1995), José Ramos-Horta (1996), Jody Williams (1997), John Hume (1998) and David Trimble (1998).

⁷ Brinkley, *op. cit.*, pp. 437-438. On Carter’s motivation, see also Kenneth E. Morris, *Jimmy Carter: American Moralist* (Athens, Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 1996); Peter G. Bourne, *Jimmy Carter: A Comprehensive Biography from Plains to the Postpresidency* (New York: Scribner, 1997); Dan Ariail and Cheryl Heckler-Feltz, *The Carpenter’s Apprentice: The Spiritual Biography of Jimmy Carter*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1996).

As a guest at the symposium, I looked upon that august body and reflected on what a spiritual force they represented, a moral power which our troubled world sorely needed. I had just published my centennial history of the peace prize, and I was especially aware of how the Norwegian Nobel Committees had served the cause of peace over the years by holding up such individuals for the rest of us to seek to emulate. And now Kofi Annan in a few days was to join their number, continuing that record.

As a university professor of history, I am eligible to submit nominations, and I had been nominating Jimmy Carter since 1991. In my nomination in January, I spoke of these thoughts and wrote, “I could not help but think how Jimmy Carter belonged in that charmed circle. The Committee’s prize for him would not only confirm his world reputation as a moral leader, but emphasize those very high moral qualities in a message to the world.” I went on to say that in writing about the Committee’s superior century-long record, “I do not gloss over unfortunate choices, but the absence of Gandhi, considered the most serious error, can be explained. The omission of Carter would be more difficult to explain, but I keep hoping.”⁸

When I heard on October 11 in a telephone call from Oslo at 4:05 a.m. that Carter had finally been chosen, I was exultant. Already during the week I had been interviewed by several radio stations about what might happen in Oslo. I had naturally mentioned Carter among others as a possible selection, but only with hope. Now it had come true, and in the interviews planned for that day I could speak enthusiastically. But I learned that there had been some complications with the announcement in Oslo, and that there would be explaining to do.

Complications with the Announcement

The text of the announcement seemed clear enough. It was brief, only four paragraphs. The first was general, stating that the award was for Carter’s “decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development.”

The second paragraph referred to his “vital contribution to the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, in itself a great enough achievement to qualify for the Nobel Peace Prize.” The third paragraph referred to the Carter Center, which was celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2002. Through its diversity of activities, Carter had been active in several of the problem areas which had figured prominently in previous peace prizes. It was the fourth paragraph which led to

⁸ Letter, Irwin Abrams to Professor Dr. Geir Lundestad, Secretary, Norwegian Nobel Committee, January 25, 2002; <http://www.irwinabrams.com/articles/nomination.html>

controversy. It stated: “In a situation currently marked by threats of the use of power, Carter has stood by principles that conflicts must as far as possible be resolved through mediation and international co-operation based on international law, respect for human rights, and economic development.”

The announcement which the Norwegian Nobel Committee usually makes in October explains the basis of its choice for the award, and it is the only document about the reasons for its decision which the Committee as a whole approves for publication. It was rumored that this time the Committee had worked hard to reach agreement. The final paragraph of the statement referred to a long held position of Jimmy Carter, but the phrase “in a situation currently marked by threats of the use of power” could be welcomed by critics of the Iraq policy of President Bush, who was at that time getting Congressional support for the use of force, if necessary.

What might have been left implicit, however, was made explicit by Committee Chairman Berge when he declared in his conference with the press after reading the announcement, on October 11, that the prize “must be interpreted as a “criticism of the present U.S. administration.” One of the Norwegian reporters asked Berge whether what he meant could be described by a colloquial Norwegian expression, which actually means something more moderate than a slap in the face, Berge answered the question, “Unconditionally, yes.” And when his vernacular phrase was translated for the foreign press as “a kick in the leg,” and reported as having been said by Berge himself, his criticism of the Bush administration was given resounding emphasis in the press. One correspondent with whom I spoke thought the destination of the kick was to be a higher part of the anatomy than the leg.⁹

On the day of this announcement, CNN-International aired a program which went out all over the world and was repeated the next day. There were three parts, first a section on Carter, using earlier taped footage of North Korea and Cuba, but including Carter speaking to a small group in his home town of Plains some hours after hearing about his prize. The second part was with Chairman Berge, which had been taped earlier in Norway. My section was recorded live in Dayton in the late afternoon.

In the Carter section, when asked about Bush’s policy on Iraq, he mentioned how members of the administration, Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, had publicly spoken for unilateral action, calling the use of United Nations inspectors in Iraq looking for weapons of mass destruction a waste of time and saying that it was not necessary to pay attention to the UN. President Bush at that time had been persuaded by Secretary of State Powell to turn first to the UN, and Carter, ever the mediator, applauded this move, saying happily that Bush had

⁹ “Sending a Message With the Peace Prize,” by Donald G. McNeil, Jr., in *New York Times*, October 13, 2002.

moved closer to his own position. Unfortunately, it was the hawks who were later to win Bush over to their more aggressive stance.

In his section, Berge was asked about his statement in the morning that the award was the Committee's criticism of the Bush administration. Since then two members of the Committee had publicly declared that the Committee had not even discussed this interpretation. The five members elected by the Norwegian legislature reflect the voting strength of its parties, and both Inger-Marie Ytterhorn of the nationalist Progressive Party of the right and Hanna Kvanmo of the Socialist Left Party, disassociated themselves from Berge's remark. Ytterhorn explained that she would not have approved the last paragraph of the announcement if she thought it was critical of President Bush. Members of her party in the legislature had nominated both Bush and Prime Minister Blair for the prize. On the other hand, Hanna Kvanmo of the far left party was likely to have agreed with Berge about Bush, and for her to declare that the Committee had not even discussed Berge's interpretation makes her statement highly credible.¹⁰

Consequently, in the CNN program Berge spoke very carefully. He explained how it had been the reporter who had used the phrase, "a kick in the leg," not he, and he said that he had only given his own opinion as Chairman. But he still maintained that criticism of Bush in the last paragraph of the announcement "can be interpreted as a critique of the Bush administration," even if that was "only a small element" in the decision for Carter. Most important in the choice, Berge said, was repairing the "mistake" (sic!) of 1978 and Carter's outstanding work for peace.

In my own part of the CNN program, the interviewer also asked me whether I thought that Iraq had "tipped the balance" in the decision for Carter. In this program as well as my other media interviews I tried to explain how the chairman did not speak in behalf of the Committee and how Carter had won the prize through his own achievements.

The controversy was naturally newsworthy to the press. In their headlines and stories on October 12, *The New York Times* called the award "a jab" against Bush, and the London press went the same way: the *Financial Times* headline said "it was regarded as swipe at Bush"; the *Independent* said that the Norwegian Nobel Committee had "delivered an outstanding public rebuke" to Bush; to the *Daily Telegraph* it was an "insult to Bush"; to the *Guardian* "a deliberate slap" at Bush. Editorials did better by Carter. *The London Times*, for example, declared that Berge's remarks "demean Mr. Carter's achievements, damage the prestige and influence of the prize and are a disgrace to his fellow judges." And the *Guardian* wrote that both as president and

¹⁰ The *Associated Press* dispatch, carried in the *Springfield (Ohio) News-Sun*, October 12, 2002, reported the remarks of these two Nobel Committee members.

as former president Carter “has embodied everything that is best about American values and power.”¹¹

The Award Ceremony, December 10, 2002

Two months later at the ceremony on December 10, which is always on the anniversary of Nobel’s death in 1896, Berge took care in his speech of presentation to speak only of Carter’s high qualifications for the prize. He gave special emphasis to the last paragraph of the October announcement but did not mention Bush. His concluding words might have been a little more gracious. He declared, “Jimmy Carter will probably not go down in American history as the most effective President. But he is certainly the best ex-president the country ever had.”

In his Nobel Lecture Jimmy Carter, with an eye on current events, declared, “Global challenges must be met with an emphasis on peace, in harmony with others, with strong alliances and international consensus.” He quoted the Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche: “To suggest that war can prevent war is a base play on words.... The objective of any who sincerely believe in peace clearly must be to exhaust every honorable recourse in the effort to save the peace. The world has ample evidence that war begets only conditions that beget further war.” Carter also pointed out: “For powerful countries to adopt a principle of preventive war may well set an example that can have catastrophic consequences.”

For the Middle East, Carter declared, “The only reasonable prescription for peace is United Nations Resolution 242. It condemns the acquisition of territory by force, calls for withdrawal of Israel from the occupied territories, and provides for Israelis to live securely and in harmony with their neighbors.” For Iraq, there should be compliance with the unanimous decision of the Security Council that it eliminate all weapons of mass destruction and permit inspectors to confirm that this commitment has been honored.

He told of how when he was a young boy, a beloved teacher had taught him that “an individual is not swept along on a tide of inevitability but can influence even the greatest human events.” He cited a number of Nobel peace laureates whose lives had proven “that even without government power — and often in opposition to it — individuals can enhance human rights and wage peace, actively and effectively.”

¹¹ I am very grateful to Anne C. Kjelling, Head Librarian of the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo for providing me with these press clippings from the London newspapers.

In conclusion Carter declared, “The bond of our common humanity is stronger than the divisiveness of our fears and prejudices. God gives us the capacity for choice. We can alleviate suffering, and we can choose to work together for peace. And we must.”

Conclusion

Some pundits declared that with Nobel Peace Prize, Carter had “redeemed himself.” Others, like the veteran *Christian Science Monitor* Washington correspondent, Godfrey Sperling, pointed out that when historians in 1996 rated the presidents, they placed Carter in the lower middle. Sperling sees pundits today coming up with a different assessment, recognizing that Carter would not “play ball” with leaders of Congress, but would give him credit “for the breath of fresh air he brought to the presidency.” And seeing Carter with his peacemaking and helping the poor as among the greatest of presidents.¹²

Carter himself has little patience with references to his “failed presidency.” He thinks that among his successes, along with the Camp David mediation, were “maintaining global stability during the Cold War when an unresolved political altercation or a serious misjudgment could lead to a nuclear holocaust,” establishing human rights as a basis of U.S. foreign policy, returning Panama to the Panamanians, and securing agreement with Iran to bring home the hostages without a life being lost.

In surveying the history of the prize, we see that laureates have won it for noteworthy political achievements, humanitarian endeavors and promotion of human rights. Carter has had successes in all these fields. He himself has demonstrated that an individual can make a difference. At the evening banquet on December 10 in Oslo, Gunnar Staalsett, Bishop of Oslo and deputy chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, concluded his remarks in saying, “Today, as we listened to the inspired words of the President, we have heard a testimony of faith humbly spoken and courageously practiced. His words echoed the words and spirit of St. Paul: ‘Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.’”¹³

Not long after this occasion in Oslo the United States moved toward military action against Iraq, which turned much of the world’s public opinion against the Bush administration. I wrote a

¹² “Carter Deserves Praise Beyond the Nobel Prize,” by Godfrey Sperling, *Christian Science Monitor*, October 22, 2002. See also *The Carter Presidency: A Re-Evaluation* by John Dumbrell (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993).

¹³ “Remarks at the Carter Nobel Banquet” by Bishop Gunnar Staalsett, December 10, 2002. Text distributed by Norwegian Nobel Institute.

commentary with my own criticism of the Bush administration, which was published abroad.¹⁴ A friend from Slovenia wrote me how glad she was that the Nobel prize for Jimmy Carter represented a very different United States than its current war-like government. I realized then that although I had agreed with the *London Times* that Chairman Berge's remarks had demeaned the Carter prize, this contretemps would soon be forgotten, and his prize would have sent to "a troubled world" the moral message which I had hoped for and which Gunnar Staalsett's eloquent words had recognized. Moreover, not only would the world not lose heart, but in the person of Jimmy Carter the world would not lose heart in America.

¹⁴ Irwin Abrams, "Rethinking Bush's Policy on Iraq," February 13, 2003, Published in translation in *Svenska Dagbladet* (Stockholm, Sweden), *Stavangeravisen* (Stavanger, Norway) and *Delo* (Ljubljana, Slovenia). Available online at: <http://www.irwinabrams.com/articles/iraq.html>.