

The Washington Post

Our Laureate: Neda of Iran

President Obama has won the Nobel Prize for Peace -- but that's not his fault.

Saturday, October 10, 2009

IT'S AN ODD Nobel Peace Prize that almost makes you embarrassed for the honoree. In blessing President Obama, the Nobel Committee intended to boost what it called his "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples." A more suitable time for the prize would have been after those efforts had borne some fruit.

It is no criticism of Mr. Obama to note that, barely nine months into his presidency, his goals are still goals. His peace prize came in the same week that Washington was consumed by a divisive debate over how to win a war in Afghanistan; the Obama administration announced a probable delay in its plan to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; and Israel's foreign minister told the world that the Middle East peace Mr. Obama has been promoting is not coming soon. The Nobel Committee's claim that Mr. Obama has "created a new climate in international politics" is about as realistic as last week's "Saturday Night Live" parody skewering the president for failing to deliver, already, on a series of campaign promises.

We understand how much Scandinavians and other Europeans welcomed the end of the Bush administration; in that sense, Mr. Obama's prize confirms that his ascension to the presidency has improved America's

image in the world, or at least parts of it. But in offering this latest Euro-celebration of the 2008 election, the Norwegian committee has also demonstrated a certain cluelessness about America. If anything animates Mr. Obama's critics in this country, it is the impression that he is the focus of a global cult of personality. This prize, at this time, only feeds that impression, and thus does him no favors politically.

The Nobel Committee's decision is especially puzzling given that a better alternative was readily apparent. This year, hundreds of thousands of ordinary people in Iran braved ferocious official violence to demand their right to vote and to speak freely. Dozens were killed, thousands imprisoned. One of those killed was a young woman named Neda Agha-Soltan; her shooting by thugs working for the Islamist theocracy, captured on video, moved the world. A posthumous

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award for Neda, as the avatar of a democratic movement in Iran, would have recognized the sacrifices that movement has made and encouraged its struggle in a dark hour. Democracy in Iran would not only set a people free, it would also dramatically improve the chances for world peace, since the regime that murdered her is pursuing nuclear weapons in defiance of the international community.

Announcing Friday that he would accept the award, Mr. Obama graciously offered to share it with "the young woman who marches silently in the streets on behalf of her right to be heard even in the face of beatings and bullets." But the mere fact that he avoided mentioning either Neda's name or her country, presumably out of consideration for the Iranian regime with which he is attempting to negotiate, showed the tension that sometimes exists between "diplomacy and cooperation between peoples" on the one hand, and advocacy of human rights on the other. The Nobel Committee could have spared Mr. Obama this dilemma if it had given Neda the award instead of him.

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