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## Is Obama's Nobel Peace Prize a bit premature?

ASK THE PHILOSOPHER: Tim Soutphommasane | October 17, 2009

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**Should US President Barack Obama have accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, given that he hasn't yet accomplished anything significant on the world stage?**

*Isn't there something not quite right in him accepting an award that he himself has said he doesn't deserve?*

**J.S., Potts Point, NSW**

BARACK Obama winning the Nobel Peace Prize reminds me of Aesop's fable about the north wind and the sun. One day the wind and the sun were arguing about which was the stronger and entered into a contest. Whichever of them could strip a passing traveller of his cloak would be declared the victor.

First went the wind, whose gusts only succeeded in making the traveller hold his cloak tightly around him. Eventually the windrelented.

When it was the sun's turn, it shone with all its warmth, prompting the traveller to take off his cloak. Unable to withstand the rising heat, the traveller then stopped in his tracks and went off to bathe in a nearby stream.

Warm persuasion, the story is meant to tell us, is more effective than cold force.

Obama's undisputed powers of persuasion have certainly left the Nobel committee standing without its cloak of credibility and also, you might say, in need of a wake-up dip in the icy waters of Oslo harbour.

Even supporters of the US President have found it hard to deny that the Nobel Prize was a premature act of recognition. Whether it is nuclear disarmament, climate change, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or indeed Afghanistan, Obama remains a long way off from achieving a discernible legacy of peace.

This is not to deny the Nobel committee was within its rights to give its prize to Obama. The awarding of jury prizes inevitably will be subjective. The committee's decision this year reflects its hopes for what he may achieve, in time and with good fortune. But why should honours be awarded on the basis of potential rather than on the basis of desert? Surely the Nobel must be an award for best and fairest, not for rookie of the year.

It is a fair point. In his acceptance speech last week, Obama acknowledged he did not "deserve to be in the company of so many of the transformative figures who've been honoured by this prize".

Any ritual humility aside, Obama revealingly conceded that "throughout history, the Nobel Peace Prize has not just been used to honour specific achievement" but "also been used as a means to give momentum to a set of causes".

A more genuinely humble President would have declined the prize. He would not have been the first to do so: Le Duc Tho did in 1973, as did Jean-Paul Sartre (with the prize for literature) in 1964. Such a gesture would only have enhanced Obama's standing. Of course, it is always difficult for politicians to turn down accolades.

As Machiavelli wrote: "Nothing makes a prince more esteemed than showing himself to be extraordinary." There are few honours with the same exalted status as the Nobel.

Yet it is also worth remembering Machiavelli's ideal prince was also one who understood that public esteem rests not on rhetoric but on accomplishing and organising great deeds. Actions, as the saying goes, speak louder than words.

Well, at least they used to.

*Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address: [philosophercolumn@gmail.com](mailto:philosophercolumn@gmail.com)*

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