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## AN UNEASY PEACE: BARACK OBAMA'S NOBEL PEACE PRIZE LECTURE

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*An unexpected Nobel Peace Prize placed Barack Obama in a difficult position. He was, after all, commander-in-chief of a military currently engaged in two wars, one of which many felt was unjustified. The doubled rhetoric through which Obama managed this situation forecast the strategy he deploys in his Nobel Lecture itself; he invites his audience to attend to war and peace neither as wicked nor ideal but as realistic, interdependent, and indeed comparable modes of human interaction. The result is that war and peace are held in a delicate balance through the force of a somewhat vaguely articulated moral compass.*

**O**n Friday, October 9, 2009, at about 5:03 AM, Eastern Standard Time, the White House Situation Room forwarded an e-mail to the White House staff with this subject line: "Item of Interest: President Obama Wins Nobel Peace Prize." About an hour later, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs awoke Obama with a phone call.<sup>1</sup> It would be an understatement to say that Obama was not expecting to win the Nobel Prize. "Obama had not been mentioned as among front-runners for the prize," CNN reported, "and the roomful of reporters gasped when Thorbjorn Jagland, chairman of the Nobel committee, announced that the president was the winner."<sup>2</sup> It was widely noted that nominations for the prize were due by February 1, 2009, only 12 days after Obama took office.

The Nobel Prize Committee issued a brief four-paragraph statement

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announcing the award, citing Obama's "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples," his "vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons," "a new climate in international politics" featuring "[m]ultilateral diplomacy," and "a more constructive role [for the United States] in meeting the great climactic challenges the world is confronting." "Only very rarely," the Committee concluded, "has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future."<sup>3</sup> Responding to questions about the lack of specifics in the announcement and to Obama's relatively slim record of accomplishment, Jagland noted that the Committee wanted to "promote what he stands for" and that "this is a long-standing history of the Nobel ... Committee." He also acknowledged a suatory motive behind the award: "This is also a message from the Committee, namely ... that they want all the leaders, all the people, all the nations also to go along with his concept, namely to resolve conflicts within the framework of diplomacy and within the framework of international institutions."<sup>4</sup>

Reaction to the news was swift and varied. There were the pro forma statements of recognition, many of which were notably muted in tone. John McCain, for example, Obama's opponent in the 2008 election, released this brief statement: "I congratulate him on receiving this prestigious award. I join my fellow Americans in expressing pride in our president on this occasion." The Republican Governor of Minnesota, Tim Pawlenty, noted that "there will be some people who are saying, 'Was it based on good intentions and thoughts, or is it going to be based on good results?' But I think the appropriate response is, when anybody wins a Nobel Prize, that is a very noteworthy development and designation, and I think the appropriate response is to say, 'Congratulations.'" There was also the predictable vituperation. Rush Limbaugh advised that "[t]he Nobel gang just suicide-bombed themselves" by awarding the prize to Obama, rendering the honor "now worth as much as whatever prizes they are putting in Cracker Jacks these days."<sup>5</sup> Republican Representative Gresham Barratt of South Carolina wondered "what the international community loved best—his waffling on Afghanistan, pulling defense missiles out of Eastern Europe, turning his back on freedom fighters in Honduras, coddling Castro, siding with Palestinians against Israel or almost getting tough on Iran."<sup>6</sup> One opinion piece in the *Washington Post* suggested that it was unconstitutional for Obama to receive the Nobel Prize because it violated Article I, Section 9, of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits office holders from accepting an "emolument" from a foreign king.<sup>7</sup> Michael Steele,

chairperson of the Republican National Committee, sent out an e-mail observing that “President Obama won’t be receiving any awards from Americans for job creation, fiscal responsibility, or backing up rhetoric with concrete action”—the e-mail subject line was “Nobel Prize for Awesomeness.”<sup>8</sup>

But perhaps the most confounded reaction was from the White House itself. Although the administration might have hoped that the prize would help to further Obama’s cause, strengthening his appeal at a time when his agenda seemed stalled on a number of fronts—healthcare, economic recovery, job formation, wartime strategy—they understood that it could have the opposite effect. David Axelrod, for example, architect of Obama’s campaign and a senior advisor to the president, noted: “I’d like to believe that winning the Nobel Peace Prize is not a political liability But this isn’t something I gave a moment of thought to until today. Hopefully people will receive it with some sense of pride. But I don’t know; it’s uncharted waters.”<sup>9</sup> The Obama administration found itself in the awkward position of trying to downplay one of the planet’s most high-profile awards. Throughout the campaign, Obama’s opponents had mocked him as “international superstar with no accomplishments,”<sup>10</sup> and the awarding of the prize based on admittedly slim accomplishments seemed likely to invite similar assessments. As one former member of George W. Bush’s administration put it, the prize easily could become “a gift to the right.”<sup>11</sup> An editorial in the Canadian *Globe and Mail* put it succinctly: “The prize could help Mr. Obama’s cause or it could dash his hopes on the shoals of xenophobic domestic politics.”<sup>12</sup> As Lynn Sweet noted dryly, “There was no celebration at the White House for the Nobel Peace Prize.”<sup>13</sup>

On Obama’s calendar that morning, time was blocked out to prepare for an afternoon meeting about plans for war—specifically the possibility of a “troop surge” in Afghanistan—but instead, at a little after 11:00 am, he held a hastily organized press conference in the White House Rose Garden to respond to receiving a prize for peace. The statement Obama delivered bore the awkward marks of an attempt not to diminish the honor while at the same time deflating and deflecting it.<sup>14</sup> He begins by noting that “this is not how I expected to wake up this morning,” and then tells how his daughter Malia had greeted him by saying: “Daddy, you won the Nobel Peace Prize, and it is Bo’s [their dog’s] birthday!” His younger daughter, Sasha, then reminded him, that “we have a three-day weekend coming up.” “So it’s good,” Obama notes, “to have kids to keep things in perspective.”

Obama’s strategy in this brief statement is of interest because of the way

that it forecasts his strategy in the Nobel Prize Lecture itself—to place the award in perspective through a display of balanced phrases. He declares that he is not only “both surprised and deeply humbled,” but also that he does not “view it as a recognition of my own accomplishments, but rather as an affirmation of American leadership on behalf of aspirations held by people in all nations.” “To be honest,” he continues, “I do not feel that I deserve to be in the company of so many of the transformative figures who’ve been honored by this prize—men and women who’ve inspired me and inspired the entire world through their courageous pursuit of peace.” And yet he will accept the award, because “this prize reflects the kind of world that those men and women, and all Americans, want to build—a world that gives life to the promise of our founding documents.” He understands the award as “a call for all nations to confront the common challenges of the 21st century,” and he enumerates these challenges, and briefly outlines his administration’s position on them: nuclear disarmament, nuclear power, climate change, “the way that we see one another,” “the rights of all Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace and security in nations of their own,” the war on terror, the global economic crisis. The result is not a response to his critics but an attempt to redefine the prize within a broader scope and to effect a diffusion of the potential controversy by articulating points of view in a series of antitheses. About two months later, on December 1, Obama addressed the nation from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point on “The Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” He thanked the men and women serving in the armed forces, emphasized the successes of the U.S. military in Afghanistan and Iraq, and reminded the audience that he had called for a gradual withdrawal of forces from Iraq. And he also called for “an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan.”<sup>15</sup> Two days later, “Mr. Obama sat down in the Oval Office with two speech writers, Ben Rhodes and Jon Favreau, and began to offer an outline for what he would like to say in Oslo.”<sup>16</sup>

The resulting text is a curious affair. A common observation was that, for a speech given on the occasion of accepting a prize for peace, it actually has quite a lot to say about war. In fact, the speech is almost evenly divided, so that half of it talks about peace and the other half talks about war.<sup>17</sup> And it is this even division of attention that presents the key point of the speech—this is a speech that invites us to attend equally to war and to peace, to imagine them as essentially parallel if not potentially similar, and ultimately to put our faith in a rather vaguely articulated “moral compass” as a means to navigate between the two. Specifically, after an introduction that establishes both the

strategy of viewing the award from a broader perspective and a motif of balance that will extend throughout the speech, Obama provides a brief history of the just war tradition that attributes to that tradition an ability actually to forestall war. And yet, despite its success, Obama argues that the just war tradition must be modified to address the reality of present exigencies. In the most significant portion of the speech, he formulates this modification through parallel explications of his vision for a “just war” and a “just peace.” In his conclusion Obama suggests that a “moral compass” should guide us through the complexities of his vision. The result is a world held in delicate balance, with power and reason, realism and idealism, might and right in an unstable symbiosis. It may be that this is an altogether fitting vision of peace for the twenty-first century, for a world destabilized among so many conflicting axes, a world that seems wildly unsuited to intractable rules. But if so, it is a precarious peace, indeed.

### Materializing Peace

Like the brief announcement in the Rose Garden, the Nobel Prize address opens with Obama acknowledging “the considerable controversy that your generous decision has generated.”<sup>18</sup> In part, this controversy “is because I am at the beginning, and not the end, of my labors on the world stage” and thus he acknowledges that his “accomplishments are slight” compared to those of others who have won the award. “But perhaps the most profound issue surrounding my receipt of this prize,” Obama notes, “is the fact that I am the Commander-in-Chief of the military of a nation in the midst of two wars.” He has “an acute sense of the costs of armed conflict,” and these have filled him with “difficult questions about the relationship between war and peace, and our effort to replace one with the other.” These lines lay out the basic rhetorical form of the speech: Obama understands the horror of war and the fragility of peace to be indissoluble, so that even at an occasion when he is expected to celebrate peace he is not able to avoid a thorough discussion of war; and while he does not say here that he wishes to render them interchangeable, to say that we might “replace” war with peace does suggest at least some potential equivalencies.

There is little need to make the point that Obama’s speech cribs generously from the just war tradition. Many media commentators and analysts, together with academics posting to online blogs or contributing to broadcast

reports, have duly pointed this out.<sup>19</sup> Obama himself makes the reference explicit. “War,” he points out, “in one form or another, appeared with the first man,” but “over time ... [as] philosophers and clerics and statesmen” sought to “regulate the destructive power of war,” the “concept of a ‘just war’ emerged, suggesting that war is justified only when certain conditions were met: if it is waged as a last resort or in self-defense; if the force used is proportional; and if, whenever possible, civilians are spared from violence.” This is a compressed but still credible representation of key tenets of the just war tradition—Obama, ever the academic, can be counted upon to cite his sources.<sup>20</sup>

In affiliating himself explicitly with the just war tradition, Obama does not merely adopt an agreed-upon set of precepts. Just war thought is more accurately referred to as a “tradition” rather than a “theory” or “doctrine,” because beyond general agreement about a finite number of central tenets, just war thought encompasses a range of presumptions and attitudes toward war. Necessarily, then, Obama emphasizes particular strands within the just war tradition rather than breaking with it or modifying it. Some just war theorists, emphasizing the tenet of war only as a “last resort,” understand the just war tradition as entailing a presumption against war; others, emphasizing that just war theory invites a case to be made in support of war, based upon strict guidelines or precepts, see no such antiwar presumption.<sup>21</sup> Obama clearly understands the just war tradition to present a presumption against war. But the interesting thing is that as his narrative progresses, this antiwar presumption transforms into an antiwar capability; that is, as Obama tells this tale, the philosophical presumption against war becomes materially manifest as an actual war deterrent. Where Michael Walzer, for example, defines the “success” of the just war tradition as the fact that it provides what is now largely accepted as the standard discourse that frames arguments for war, Obama argues that it actually has been successful at deterring war.

Obama notes that although war has been a persistent fact of human life from “the dawn of history” to “the nuclear age,” the fact is that “for most of history, this concept of ‘just war’ was rarely observed.” He argues that it began to exert a palpable influence on human events only after World War II, when “it became clear to victor and vanquished alike that the world needed institutions to prevent another world war.” The Marshall Plan and the United Nations helped to institutionalize just war principles, together with “mechanisms to govern the waging of war, [and] treaties to protect human rights, prevent genocide, restrict the most dangerous weapons.” “In many

ways,” Obama notes, “these efforts succeeded.” They have not succeeded in bringing peace, of course, for “terrible wars have been fought, and atrocities committed. But there has been no Third World War.” The just war tradition, to the extent that its tenets are now almost universally invoked when statesmen and politicians make their cases for war, actually seems to have diminished the likelihood and extent of war.<sup>22</sup>

But despite its success, “this old architecture is buckling under the weight of new threats. The world may no longer shudder at the prospect of war between two nuclear superpowers, but proliferation may increase the risk of catastrophe. Terrorism has long been a tactic, but modern technology allows a few small men with outsized rage to murder innocents on a horrific scale.” These developments “require us to think in new ways about the notions of just war and the imperatives of a just peace.” Obama explicitly signals the realist tincture of his thinking regarding the just war tradition: “We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations—acting individually or in concert—will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.” With those words, we immediately find ourselves outside the more pacific tradition of antiwar presumption; it is not merely possible that war may be justified on moral grounds, and nor is it merely likely. It is, rather, at least in some cases, inevitable. Obama acknowledges that this attitude places him outside of the moral arc of two men whom he greatly admires, but though he acknowledges that “there’s nothing weak—nothing passive—nothing naïve—in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King,” still he recognizes that he “cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people.”<sup>23</sup> Having suggested that the ubiquity of just war theory has succeeded in making war less likely, Obama has argued for a realist modification that, if it were to become the predominant discourse about war, would make war more likely. “So yes,” he concludes, “the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace.”

The vehicle of this modification is “a gradual evolution of human institutions.” The phrase is borrowed, as Obama acknowledges, from John F. Kennedy’s “Strategy of Peace” address delivered at American University in June 1963. But Kennedy used the phrase to introduce a discussion of “peace as the necessary, rational end of rational men.” He urged us to “examine our attitude towards peace itself” so that we could imagine it as attainable, to “reexamine our attitude towards the Soviet Union” so that

common virtues might be emphasized over differences, and to “reexamine our attitude towards the cold war” so that we might see it as an opportunity to be watchful for “changes within the Communist bloc [that] might bring within reach solutions which now seem beyond us.”<sup>24</sup> In what John Murphy has suggested was “perhaps his finest hour,” Kennedy indeed was attempting to articulate a strategy for peace—or, at least, a tactic for redirecting some of the tension and restrained hostility of the Cold War.<sup>25</sup> Kennedy was seeking a conception of peace that might be applicable and coherent within a Cold War context. Obama’s purpose is both more narrow and more complex.

## War and Peace

Obama says Kennedy’s phrase—“a gradual evolution of human institutions”—twice, probably for emphasis, but this repetition also signals the complex parallel relationship between war and peace that Obama will describe. Specifically, he describes war and peace not as ideals toward which to strive or as two ends of a spectrum, but rather as an interdependent coupling fundamental to a realistic view of human relations. Obama first describes his version of a just war for the twenty-first century and then describes his vision of a just peace. But the parallel form of these two discussions is clearer if the analysis proceeds topically, treating each point together with its complement. In other words, because the “just war” section and the “just peace” section are developed through a set of three parallel topics, passages from the “just war” section and the “just peace” section can be juxtaposed under these topical headings, rather than treated in the order in which Obama presents them. Both the “war” and the “peace” sections begin with the need to establish and enforce agreed-upon standards of conduct; the second argument in each case is for the development of a capacity for balancing competing perspectives; and the third argument concerns the mode of engagement through which the delicate balance might be sustained in alignment with the agreed-upon standards.

The opening argument of this section of the speech falls under the heading of *jus ad bellum*, the criteria that govern the justification of war. “I believe,” Obama declares, “that all nations—strong and weak alike—must adhere to standards that govern the use of force.” Although he, “like any head of state,” reserves a right to unilateral action if necessary for national defense, he also is “convinced that adhering to standards, international standards, strengthens those who do, and isolates and weakens those who don’t.” The



current war in Afghanistan and the 1990–1991 Gulf War are provided as examples of conflicts that at least initially enjoyed international support. This is an important realist movement within the just war tradition, as Obama effectively interprets “international standards” as widespread consensus, so that the morality of war is to be judged not by absolute or universal moral codes but instead according to the ability of a particular conflict to garner multinational endorsement.

With regard to peace, Obama is clear about the need to establish and enforce codes of conduct: “First, in dealing with those nations that break rules and laws, I believe that we must develop alternatives to violence that are tough enough to actually change behavior—for if we want a lasting peace, then the words of the international community must mean something.” Note again the equation between standards of conduct and international consensus. “Intransigence must be met with increased pressure,” he notes, “and such pressure exists only when the world stands together as one.”<sup>26</sup> Controlling the proliferation of nuclear weapons is one instance where “nations agreed to be bound by a treaty”; and if the entire world were aligned against rogue states such as “Iran and North Korea,” vigilant against “the danger of an arms race in the Middle East or East Asia,” and prepared to respond with nonviolent force to human tragedies such as “genocide in Darfur, systematic rape in Congo, repression in Burma,” then perhaps we might be able to avoid the outbreak of violence. This is not to be a particularly peaceful peace, then, but one that requires a well-organized phalanx of powerful nations who have placed themselves on constant alert, who have declared themselves willing to engage in efficient and decisive action, and who have pledged both blood and treasure. Similar to the way that Obama operationalized the universalized moral principles of *jus ad bellum* into a multinational consensus, here he declares that a commitment to world peace is manifest in a global echelon designed to coerce uncooperative nations into cooperation.

Obama’s second point, with regard to the just war tradition, also falls under the heading of *jus ad bellum* and concerns the ability to balance the desire for peace with the reality of war. He believes that “force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans” and that in such cases inaction “tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later.” The idea that “militaries with a clear mandate” might play a role in keeping the peace does not demonstrably violate most just war doctrine as long as it does not supersede what many would argue is its central tenet—that war should be waged only as a last resort. But then Obama mounts an argument

that, although it does not explicitly subordinate the “last resort” tenet to the “peacekeeping” potential of war, does suggest that there may be times when war might be engaged in proactively, as a means toward creating peace. “I understand why war is not popular,” Obama notes, “but I also know this: The belief that peace is desirable is rarely enough to achieve it.” NATO and U.N. “peacekeeping forces” should be honored, he says, “not as makers of war, but ... as wagers of peace.” He does not elaborate, but to wage peace would seem to reinforce the idea that war might even be justified as a preemptive action to create peace, or a potentially peaceful regime, where none now exists.

Obama’s parallel second point about peace similarly advocates for a form of balance, but rather than sustaining an equilibrium between war and peace, here Obama argues for bringing “painstaking diplomacy” and “exhortation” into productive play. The peace that he is imagining at first seems characterized by transcendence rather than balance. For example, Obama denies the “false suggestion that these [individual rights] are somehow Western principles, foreign to local cultures or stages of a nation’s development” and rejects the tension in the United States “between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists—a tension that suggests a stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world.” But as Obama moves away from general principles and toward modes of action, it becomes clear that the primary motif is of balanced judgment. He acknowledges, for example, “that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation,” but also “that sanctions without outreach—condemnation without discussion—can carry forward only a crippling status quo.” He cites Richard Nixon, Pope John Paul II, and Ronald Reagan as exemplars of this approach, because they leavened their “condemnation” with “discussion.”

In making “one final point about the use of force,” Obama turns to *jus in bello*, the criteria that address the conduct of war itself. “Even as we make difficult decisions about going to war,” he notes, “we must also think clearly about how we fight it.” He notes that the first Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Henry Dunant, “the founder of the Red Cross, and a driving force behind the Geneva Conventions.” Interestingly, Obama’s case for abiding by rules of engagement includes both a “moral” and a “strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct.” Even when the United States confronts “a vicious adversary that abides by no rules ... the United States of America must remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war. That is what makes us different from those whom we fight.” Obama argues that this is why he has

“prohibited torture,” “ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed,” and “reaffirmed America’s commitment to abide by the Geneva Conventions.” One of relatively few moments of sustained applause was provoked by the line: “We lose ourselves when we compromise the very ideals that we fight to defend.” Of course, the United States is not merely different from its enemies, by this logic, but superior. Indeed, the United States emerges from Obama’s engagement with the just war tradition not only as the standard bearer of moral war, but as its arbiter; his redefinition of the moral standards as the ability to assemble consensus, his elevation of individual rights to the status of universal value, and his portrayal of peacekeeping as a program of waging peace largely cedes to the United States the authority to judge the morality of war.

A similar exceptionalism informs the conduct of peace, for “a just peace includes not only civil and political rights—it must encompass economic security and opportunity. For true peace is not just freedom from fear, but freedom from want.” Peace is not merely an idealized goal toward which to strive, but has strategic value in its own right; and just as he argued for a strategic interest in binding the United States to codes of conduct with regard to war, so too the strategic value of waging peace benefits American interests. This is why, for example, “helping farmers feed their own people—or nations educate their children and care for the sick—is not mere charity.” Obama argues that the United States is guided in these matters by “enlightened self-interest” because it recognizes “that development rarely takes root without security,” “that security does not exist where human beings do not have access to enough food, or clean water, or the medicine and shelter they need to survive,” and that the “absence of hope can rot a society from within.” It is not in the best interests of the United States to contribute to this rot, of course, and it is in this context that Obama urges that “the world must come together to confront climate change.” The self-interested strategic connotations of his peace-building enterprise are explicit, as he notes that “it is not merely scientists and environmental activists who call for swift and forceful action—it’s military leaders in my own country and others who understand our common security hangs in the balance.”

### Moral Imagination

Obama’s penchant for balanced phrases is in full flower in this speech, and not only in those sections of the text specifically addressing a need for balanced

judgment. The opening lines, again, acknowledge both the honor of receiving the prize and the controversy it has generated, and the irony of receiving a prize for peace while serving as president of a nation engaged in two wars. He acknowledges that there is a “reflexive suspicion of America, the world’s sole military superpower,” but also urges that “the world must remember” that the “United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms.” A “soldier’s courage and sacrifice is full of glory But war itself is never glorious.” He urges that “part of our challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable [*sic*] truths—that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly.” He “understand[s] why war is not popular,” but also realizes that the “belief that peace is desirable is rarely enough to achieve it.” The cumulative effect is somewhat vertiginous, as we are presented with multiple instances when choices must be made between options that appear equally attractive, advantageous, or inevitable, and yet to this point in the speech have been provided no clear method or framework to choose between them. Obama tells us that although there is “no simple formula,” still “we must try as best we can to balance isolation and engagement, pressure and incentives, so that human rights and dignity are advanced over time.”

Such a preponderance of doubled figures reinforces the balanced constructions that govern the core of the speech, the parallel development of a just war and a just peace. The doubled figures, in other words, establish a verbal context within which the core parallel developments of just war and just peace are situated, functioning not unlike a “scene,” in Kenneth Burke’s terms. As Burke reminds us, scenes invite particular qualities in acts and attitudes, and in this case this scenic backdrop of doubled figures encourages a disposition to see things from two perspectives simultaneously.<sup>27</sup> When within this scene Obama presents just war and just peace through parallel constructions—defining each through stiff consequences for misconduct, a faculty for making judgments by balancing alternatives, and strategic self-interest—their interdependence is emphasized. They are encountered as complementary, rather than opposite; that is, the audience is invited to contemplate both war and peace as ever-present modes of human conduct rather than as two starkly delineated options between which a choice must be made. War and peace are in this way figured in a play of signification, so that their meanings remain distinct while the precise moment when one shades into the other is considerably blurred.

Obama does offer a device for navigating this murky path, but it is perhaps unsatisfyingly vague: “the continued expansion of our moral imagination.” This expansion entails a recognition of “how similar we are,” despite the fact that “the dizzying pace of globalization [and] the cultural leveling of modernity” lead people instead to “fear the loss of what they cherish in their particular identities—their race, their tribe, and perhaps most powerfully their religion.” These tendencies, and especially the latter, must be resisted, for “no Holy War can ever be a just war.” In a war fought on the basis of religious certainty, a belief “that you are carrying out divine will, there is no need for restraint—no need to spare the pregnant mother, or the medic, or the Red Cross worker, or even a person of one’s own faith.” A Holy War can never result in peace, in other words, because it precludes the possibility of balance and judgment, which in Obama’s vision are key components of a just peace. And it is at this point that Obama provides a maxim to serve as a moral touchstone: “the one rule that lies at the heart of every major religion is that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.”

Obama invokes the Golden Rule within a revision of the just war tradition that is, as Kenneth Anderson points out, strongly informed by “Niebuhrian realism.” This is “a form of moral realism that has elements of just war ethics but also a much stronger sense of traditional realism.”<sup>28</sup> Obama has identified Reinhold Niebuhr as one of his favorite philosophers, citing such key Niebuhrian concepts as “the compelling idea that there’s serious evil in the world” and the need to avoid “swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.”<sup>29</sup> Obama’s speech is replete with concepts that align with a Niebuhrian realism; in this speech, a Niebuhrian ethics is evident in Obama’s effort to craft a more complex and a more radically contingent form of just war theory. As John Carlson explains, rather than “a prescribed set of ethical principles as found in just war theory, ethical realism furnishes a meta-ethical approach to war: a framework for making judgments about moral-political judgments.”<sup>30</sup> But this radical contingency means placing peace into an unstable yet symbiotic relationship with war: not only can one not exist without the other, but they are in constant danger of collapsing into each other.

For example, a Niebuhrian ethics acknowledges that “without coercion there could be no order, and without order there could be no justice” so that “all social cooperation on a larger scale than the most intimate social group requires a measure of coercion.”<sup>31</sup> This corresponds to Obama’s insistence that peace requires a coordinated multinational effort to establish codes of conduct and to inflict coercive pressure upon uncooperative states. But one of

the consequences of this perspective is that it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish war from peace. For Niebuhr, “violence is a special form of coercion” and is not necessarily “evil or wrong, because it is not inevitably the expression of ill will.”<sup>32</sup> Rather than a bright line dividing peace from war, we have something more akin to a range of human activity, and somewhere near the middle peace shades almost imperceptibly into war, coercion into violence. Similarly, Obama’s apparent rejection of unchanging or universalized moral codes—by redefining them as consensus—corresponds to Niebuhr’s insistence that “all means are to be judged consequentially for their efficacy towards the end.”<sup>33</sup> As such, Niebuhr, like Obama, “rejects any just war approach which offers straightforward rules and the promise that, if they are followed, then moral standards can be upheld in international relations.”<sup>34</sup> A moral war is recognized and defined more through the exercise of prudence than through the application of precept, so that there are no firm or extrinsic barriers preventing war from bleeding into peace. Obama’s world stands on a perpetual brink of peace. Or war.

### Conclusion

A just peace, it would seem, is a peculiarly delicate and complex matter. It will not sprout up on its own in the stillness between wars, but must be coerced through a unified block of nations willing to impose muscular sanctions; and peace also must be gently nurtured through diplomacy, even with oppressive and repugnant regimes; and even then, peace requires a sustained and prudent equilibrium of motives and interests—humanitarian and strategic, moral and scientific, preemptive and defensive. Just peace, in short, seems to have quite a lot in common with just war: it depends upon adherence to internationally agreed-upon rules, assumes the “inherent rights and dignity of every individual” and thus demands their just treatment, requires the use of (nonviolent) force proportional to secure the objective, and entails “sacrifice” by the “wagers of peace” within a context of balanced forces arrayed in complementary confrontation. And yet unlike war, which seems a tar pit into which the human race continuously threatens to cast itself, peace might germinate only if cajoled and coaxed and even then seems always in danger of wilting.

Within this context, the Golden Rule seems intended not only to provide a moral framework through which to sort out the murky distinctions between

war and peace, but also to nourish and sustain a just peace. Unexpectedly, where earlier in the speech Obama distanced himself from the teachings of Gandhi and King as being insufficiently realist, here he reclaims those teachings as moral touchstones that would guide realist judgments concerning the balance between peace and war. The ethic of reciprocity represented by the Golden Rule is characterized by Obama as a “law of love” exemplified by the “non-violence practiced by men like Gandhi and King.” Though following this rule “may not have been practical or possible in every circumstance,” Obama reiterates, it is “the love that they preached—their fundamental faith in human progress—that must always be the North Star that guides us on our journey.” The Golden Rule allows us to recognize that “we are fallible. We make mistakes, and fall victim to the temptations of pride, and power, and sometimes evil.” Though to some it may seem “silly or naïve,” if we dismiss it as such, “if we lose that faith,” Obama tells us, we will then “lose our moral compass.”

This compass is governed by a morality based on a process of perspective-taking rather than on unwavering precept; it does not consist of a list of thou-shalt-nots but rather on a willingness to see the world, however temporarily, from the point of view of another; its signature attitude would entail a radical flexibility rather than an unyielding rigidity. It also is a compass that is articulated in and through a particular way of speaking, characterized by the many figures of balance and equilibrium that populate the text—antithesis, chiasmus, parallelism, isocolon, and so on. What Obama is providing in this speech is a way of talking about the relationship between war and peace, a way of addressing both of them at the same time and acknowledging their interdependence, and so a way of speaking that avoids a purified idealism. It is, finally, a thoroughly rhetorical understanding of war and peace; it is governed by the practical judgment that rhetorical training has always been meant to foster, and it is coupled fundamentally to a particular style of speech.

It may be that this is an altogether fitting and proper understanding of war and peace as we enter the twenty-first century, for it is a century that seems characterized, at least so far, by a multiplication of instabilities and competing interests linked with a sometimes startling lack of perspectival flexibility and intercultural understanding. Obama is calling for, and modeling, a peculiar combination of realism and prudence that may indeed present the ameliorative yet proactive stance that that seems right for these uncertain times.<sup>35</sup> But it may be that the “moral compass” upon which this articulation depends would not be robust enough to foster and sustain a just peace; it

may be that Obama does not provide a pragmatic vocabulary sufficient to the task of differentiating war and peace when they seem so often to blur into one another; and, perhaps most tellingly, it may be that this vision will have difficulty attracting adherents when the very instability that it seems crafted to address also renders more attractive the rigid fundamentalisms that it is intended to critique. In this speech Obama has presented a novel and suggestive vision of the relationship between war and peace, but while it is in many ways provocative, it seems hardly reassuring.

## Notes

1. Mark Thompson, "Obama Accepts the Nobel Prize: 'Surprised and Deeply Humbled,'" *Time*, October 9, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1929447,00.html> (accessed March 2011).
2. "Obama: Nobel Peace Prize is 'Call to Action,'" *CNN.com*, October 9, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/europe/10/09/nobel.peace.prize/index.html> (accessed March 2011).
3. "The Nobel Peace Prize for 2009: Barack Obama," October 9, 2009, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/press.html) (accessed March 2011).
4. "Obama: Nobel Peace Prize is 'Call to Action.'"
5. "A Wide Range of Reactions," *Washington Post*, October 10, 2009, A13.
6. DeWayne Wickham, "Peace Prize Not Without Some Merit," *USA Today*, October 13, 2009, [http://www.usatoday.com/NEWS/usaedition/2009-10-13-column13\\_STI\\_U.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/NEWS/usaedition/2009-10-13-column13_STI_U.htm) (accessed March 2011).
7. Ronald D. Rotunda and J. Peter Pham, "An Unconstitutional Nobel," *Washington Post*, October 16, 2009, A23.
8. "RNC Statement on President Obama's Nobel Peace Prize Award," GOP Press Release, October 9, 2009, [http://www.gop.com/index.php/news/comments/rnc\\_statement\\_on\\_president\\_obamas\\_nobel\\_peace\\_prize\\_award](http://www.gop.com/index.php/news/comments/rnc_statement_on_president_obamas_nobel_peace_prize_award) (accessed March 2011). Responding to these negative reactions, Brad Woodhouse, communications director for the Democratic National Committee, noted, "The Republican Party has thrown in its lot with the terrorists—the Taliban and Hamas this morning—in criticizing the President for receiving the Nobel Peace Prize." Sam Stein, "Obama's Nobel Prize Inspires Conservative Outrage and Confusion," October 9, 2009, *Huffington Post*, October 9, 2009, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/09/obamas-nobel-prize-inspir\\_n\\_315167.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/09/obamas-nobel-prize-inspir_n_315167.html) (accessed March 2011). MediaMatters.org posted a video on YouTube that reviewed both the positive reaction of some conservative pundits and talk-show hosts when the United States lost its bid to host the 2016 summer Olympics, and their negative reaction when Obama was awarded the Peace Prize, and ended with a quotation from Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesperson: "We condemn the award of the Nobel Peace Prize for Obama." "Rooting Against America: Nobel Peace Prize Edition," October 9, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8e28D4vxsU> (accessed March 2011).
9. Adam Nagourney, "An Honor for Intangibles Complicates a Presidency in Search of Success," *New York Times*, October 10, 2009, A08.
10. Lynn Sweet, "Premature Honor a Potential Liability: Opens Door for Critics to Mock President," *Chicago Sun Times*, October 10, 2009, 9.
11. "Obama: Nobel Peace Prize is 'Call to Action.'"
12. Doug Saunders, "He Rejected Missile Defence and Urges Disarmament, but Does Obama Really Deserve the Nobel Peace Prize?; Yes." *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*, October 10, 2009, A1.
13. Sweet, "Premature Honor," 9. Sweet also notes, in that same article, that "[t]he prize was a surprise and a massive distraction that opened the door for Obama's domestic critics to mock him—as they did during the campaign—for being an international superstar with no accomplishments."



Interestingly, Sweet was the reporter who, during a briefing on healthcare, asked Obama a question about the arrest of Henry Louis Gates in the summer of 2009, thus setting off a wildly distracting kerfuffle that eventuated in a “beer summit” wherein Obama, Gates, arresting officer James Crowley, and Vice President Joe Biden all shared some cold ones on the White House lawn.

14. Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Winning the Nobel Peace Prize,” October 9, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-winning-nobel-peace-prize> (accessed March 2011).

15. Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” December 1, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan> (accessed March 2011).

16. Jeff Zeleny, “A Test for Obama, A Wartime Leader Accepting an Award for Peace,” *New York Times*, December 9, 2009, A030.

17. The text of the speech contains approximately 4300 words. After about 300 words of introduction, in which Obama addresses the various controversies surrounding the award, he spends roughly 2000 words talking about war and then another 2000 talking about peace.

18. Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize,” December 10, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize> (accessed March 2011). All references to this address will be to this text. A text transcribed from Obama’s actual delivery is available here:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamanobelprizespeech.htm> (accessed March 2011). A video of Obama delivering the speech is available here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3uU\\_mCNcKM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3uU_mCNcKM) (accessed March 2011).

19. Representative commentary includes: Kenneth Anderson, “Just War Ethics in the Obama Nobel Prize Speech,” *The Volokh Conspiracy* (blog), December 14, 2009, <http://volokh.com/2009/12/14/just-war-ethics-in-the-obama-nobel-prize-speech> (accessed March 2011); George Weigel, “The Just-War Tradition,” *NRO: The National Review Online*, December 12, 2009, <http://article.nationalreview.com/417745/the-just-war-tradition/george-weigel> (accessed March 2011); Roger Alford, “Obama’s Hawkish Nobel Lecture,” *Opinio Juris* (blog), December 10, 2009, <http://opiniojuris.org/2009/12/10/obamas-hawkish-nobel-lecture> (accessed March 2011); Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Obama Defends ‘Just War’ in Nobel Peace Prize Speech,” *USA Today: Faith & Reason* (blog), December 10, 2009, <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/Religion/post/2009/12/obama-nobel-peace-prize-norway/1> (accessed March 2011); Elizabeth Williamson and Jonathan Weisman, “Obama Defends ‘Just War’ at Oslo,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB126043857319785183.html> (accessed March 2011); Dan Gilgoff, “In Nobel Speech, Obama Argues Policies Conform to ‘Just War’ Theory,” *U.S. News & World Report: God & Country* (blog), December 10, 2009, <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/god-and-country/2009/12/10/in-nobel-speech-obama-argues-policies-conform-tojust-war-theory> (accessed March 2011).

20. Mark Evans provides a brief summary of just war theory, in outline form: “Introduction: Moral Theory and the Idea of a Just War,” in *Just War Theory: A Reappraisal*, ed. Mark Evans (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 12–13.

21. As John D. Carlson points out, in “the last thirty years, just war’s engagement with pacifism has been a source of deep debate.” Carlson, “Is There a Christian Realist Theory of War and Peace? Reinhold Niebuhr and Just War Thought,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 28 (2008): 134. See also Richard B. Miller, *Interpretations of Conflict: Ethics, Pacifism, and the Just-War Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 106–24.

22. Michael Walzer, “The Triumph of Just War Theory (and the Dangers of Success),” in *Arguing About War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 3–22. Obama also implies that the success of just war theory has contributed to the ability of commerce to stitch much of the world together, to lift

billions from poverty, and to advance the ideals of liberty—which is far beyond anything that Walzer suggests.

23. Carlson notes that a Niebuhrian ethics provides a “framework that sees politics as it is, not as one hopes it would be.” John D. Carlson, “The Morality, Politics, and Irony of War: Recovering Reinhold Niebuhr’s Ethical Realism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36 (2008): 620. Although it might seem that Obama is stepping away from, or at least attenuating, the Bush doctrine of preemptive war, it should be noted that the language of “threats” within this speech remains vague enough to encompass that doctrine. The document “National Security Strategy” is often cited as the definitive statement of the Bush doctrine as it pertains to preventative war. It states, in part, that “the first duty of the United States Government remains what it always has been: to protect the American people and American interests,” and that “to forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively in exercising our inherent right of self-defense.” “The National Security Strategy,” March 2006, *georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/index.html*, V.a. (accessed March 2011).
24. John F. Kennedy, “American University Commencement Address,” June 10, 1963, *www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkamericanuniversityaddress.html* (accessed March 2011).
25. John M. Murphy, “The Language of the Liberal Consensus: John F. Kennedy, Technical Reason, and the ‘New Economics’ at Yale University,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90 (2004): 145.
26. Here Obama may be channeling Kennedy’s speech at American University more directly, evoking what James J. Kimble describes as a more belligerent “masculine style” in concert with his outline for a just peace. Kimble, “John F. Kennedy, the Construction of Peace, and the Pitfalls of Androgynous Rhetoric,” *Communication Quarterly* 57 (2009): 154–70.
27. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945; rpt., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 3–20, 237–38.
28. Anderson, “Just War Ethics.”
29. Obama, quoted in David Brooks, “Obama, Gospel and Verse,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2007, A5.
30. Carlson, “The Morality, Politics, and Irony of War,” 621.
31. Colm McKeogh, *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 38, 42.
32. McKeogh, *Political Realism*, 29, 104.
33. McKeogh, *Political Realism*, 105.
34. McKeogh, *Political Realism*, 148.
35. Robert Hariman and Francis A. Beer, “What Would be Prudent? Forms of Reasoning in World Politics,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 1 (1998): 299–330.