NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Peacemakers also see the world as it is

Colman McCarthy | Jan. 9, 2010

A U.S. Army soldier from Task Force Denali Platoon 1-40 CAV fires a mortar during a patrol at Nadir-Chawcod district in Khowst province, Afghanistan, Dec. 16. (CNS/Reuters/Zohra Bensemra)

As with a berg of ice in a shipping lane, Barack Obama?s Nobel Peace Prize speech in Oslo, Norway, was a collision between peacemaking and war-making.

Several times he mentioned Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. ?There?s nothing weak, nothing passive, nothing naive in their creed or lives,? he said. But the praise was faint, the tone patronizing. ?I face the world as it is,? said the nation?s latest war president, implying that Gandhi and King were dwellers in another world where they and the rest of dream-driven pacifists have their heads either in the clouds or in the sand. ?There will be times,? Obama said, ?when nations, acting individually or in concert, will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.?

He meant violent force, the force of bombing, the force of the gun and grenade, the interrogator?s garrote -- not the kind of force in which King and Gandhi placed their faith: moral force, the force of noncooperation, the force of justice, the force of well-organized resistance and the force of fighting fire not with fire but with water.

Three years after King was in Oslo collecting his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, he said: ?Here is the true meaning of compassion and nonviolence -- when it helps us see the enemy?s point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. From his view we may indeed see the basic weakness of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.?

Those lines were from an antiwar speech in April 1967, when the Vietnam War was cresting. Editorials in both The Washington Post and The New York Times dismissed it as the ill-informed babble of a pacifist lightweight who should stick to civil rights and leave foreign policy issues to the enlightened ones who ?face the world as it is.? Both newspapers, which endorse the Bush-Obama war in Afghanistan as strongly as they once did the war in Vietnam, would surely write off King?s antiwar views were he around to express them today.

In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize -- with a straight face as he defended his war policy -- Obama said that ?compared to some of the giants of history who have received this prize,? his accomplishments ?are slight.?

Did his giants include Desmond Tutu? The 1984 laureate said in 2002: ?The war on terrorism will not be won as long as there are people desperate with disease and living in poverty and squalor. Sharing our prosperity is the best weapon against terrorism.?

Or perhaps Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, the 1980 recipient who wrote in Christ in a Poncho: In ?nonviolent combat, what we do is just exactly what nice players aren?t supposed to do. We refuse to play by one of the rules of the system tries to foist on us: the rule that says you have to counter violence with violence. If your opponent can get you to swallow that idea, then they can unleash still greater violence upon you. The essential thing in nonviolent combat is for us to render those tactics inoperative by refusing to play by the rules and by imposing our own conditions instead.?

Or Oscar Arias Sánchez, the winner in 1987: ?Three billion people live in tragic poverty, and 40,000 children die each day from diseases that could be prevented. War is a missed opportunity for humanitarian investment. It is a crime against every child who calls out for food rather than for guns.?

That, too, is the world as it is -- not the fantasy world of Obama and his war council, who believe that one more killing spree in Afghanistan will bring peace, one more surge and evil will be conquered, one more show of force and we?ll finally show ?em.

[Colman McCarthy directs the Center for Teaching Peace in Washington.]

Three opinions on President Obama's Nobel speech

Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese calls **Obama A realistic idealist at Oslo** [1].

But NCR columnists Coleman McCarthy says, Obama too easily dismissed Martin Luther King Jr. and Ghandi and that the president should have studied othe Nobel laurates more, bcause, he said, **Peacemakers also see the world as it is** [2].

David Kreiger writes that Obama's Oslo speech "must reflect the divisions within himself and his personal struggles to reconcile them. ... How troubling it is to see this man of hope bogged down by war, not only on the ground but in his mind." Kreiger's essay is called **The Nobel War Lecture** [3].

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