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

The Nobel War Lecture

David Krieger | Jan. 9, 2010

Viewpoint

In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, President Obama, one of the world?s great orators and purveyors of hope, gave a speech that must reflect the divisions within himself and his personal struggles to reconcile them. It was a surprising speech for the occasion. Rather than a speech of vision and hope, it was a speech that sought to justify war, and particularly America?s wars. It was largely an infomercial for war, touting not only war?s necessity but its virtues, and might well be thought of as the ?Nobel War Lecture.?

How troubling it is to see this man of hope bogged down by war, not only on the ground but in his mind. As he put it, ?I am the commander in chief of a nation in the midst of two wars.? One of these wars he seeks to end, but the other he has made his own by committing 30,000 additional troops and justifying it as ?an effort to defend ourselves and all nations from further attacks.? The president persists despite his recognition that ?in today?s wars, many more civilians are killed than soldiers; the seeds of future conflicts are sewn, economies are wrecked, civil societies torn asunder, refugees amassed, and children scarred.?

Where was the vision that was so hopeful in Barack Obama the campaigner for the presidency? Has a year in office reduced him to a ?reality? from which he cannot raise his sights to envision a more peaceful future -- one without war or Predator drone attacks, one in which international cooperation in intelligence-gathering and law enforcement could bring terrorists to justice?

The president tells the world, ?I did not bring with me today a definitive solution to the problems of war.? This is certain. He tells his audience, ?We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth that 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.? Perhaps his decision to bow to the generals and increase the U.S. presence in the war in Afghanistan is weighing heavily on him. Perhaps he seeks a way to find it both ?necessary? and ?morally justified.?

Obama acknowledges his debt to Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., leading proponents of nonviolence, but he cannot find a way to follow their example. He finds instead that ?as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone.? From the lofty visions and practical actions of Gandhi and King, the president brings us down to earth, to his reality that in his position he is fated to carry on with war. ?So yes,? he tells us, ?the instruments of war have a role to play in preserving the peace.?

What does he offer in the stead of peace? He argues that there must be standards governing the use of force. Yes, this is long established, although not often adhered to. One such standard is no use of force without the approval of the United Nations, except in self-defense to repel an imminent attack. But America and its NATO allies often take war into their own hands, ignoring this rule of international law to which all states are bound.

Having justified war, the president offers three paths to building ?a just and lasting peace.? First, he argues for ?alternatives to violence that are tough enough to change behavior.? This makes sense so long as it is applied to

all states equally without double standards. Second, he argues that peace must be based on human dignity and human rights. Of course, this is so. Of course, America should stand for human rights rather than torture and the worst abuse of all -- aggressive war. Third, he makes the point that a just and lasting peace must also be based upon freedom from want. There is nothing to argue with here. Why not use our resources to help eliminate poverty and hunger and expand education and health care throughout the world, rather than pour these resources into waging war?

Obama barely mentioned nuclear disarmament in his speech. When he did, he reiterated his commitment to upholding the Non-proliferation Treaty, calling it ?a centerpiece? of his foreign policy. He then moved quickly to pointing a finger at Iran and North Korea. ?Those who seek peace,? he said, ?cannot stand idly by as nations arm themselves for nuclear war.? He is right; no nation should arm itself for nuclear war, including the United States and the other eight nations that have already done so.

The president might have built a strong, positive and hopeful speech on the need to rid the world of nuclear weapons, instruments of omnicide, but he chose instead to offer up a laundry list of reasons for war. When it came to peace, his message, sadly, was: No, we can?t.

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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 Gandhi and that the president should have studied other Nobel laureates more, because, 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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