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In the naem of Hope: Perpetual War and the Noble Peace Prize

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Last Friday, our nation was confronted with the reality that President Barack "Hope" Obama had been awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize - and the 1984 references flowed like wine.

"Warmonger Wins Peace Prize" [cried](#) a former government official. One antiwar activist [wondered](#) if we had "slipped through a crack in the space-time continuum, and landed in a world where up is down, right is left, and war is peace." And on that cold October morning, we glimpsed once again that dystopian future envisioned by George Orwell over sixty years ago - where language itself had been transformed until nothing meant what it seemed to mean.

President Obama is an enigma. He commands nearly 200,000 troops (70,000 in [Afghanistan](#), and 125,000 in [Iraq](#)) in wars on [two fronts](#) that show little sign of ending. That should be little reason for surprise; his campaign was never based on an anti-war platform (despite however much we might deceive ourselves). As early as 2007, he threatened to invade Pakistan and open a new front in Mr. Bush's "War on Terror", declaring "I will not hesitate to use military force to take out terrorists who pose a direct threat to America."

In that same [speech](#), he also talked of lofty ideals, democracy, and values, with his characteristic charisma. He presented an unforgettable image of a young child standing amidst the ruins of the third world, looking up at an American helicopter. "The America I know is the last, best hope for that child," he said. "The relentless opponent of terror and tyranny, the light of hope to the world." As our President accepted his [prize](#) as a "call to action", many wondered nostalgically about what had happened to that elusive "light of hope."

Meanwhile, Pakistanis and Afghans reacted with disbelief at what they hoped was a cruel joke. The Christian Science Monitor [quoted](#) a taxi driver in Islamabad as saying, "Everyone I know curses Obama, and if he was here in front of me, I would curse him, too."

A "warmonger" according to the Oxford English Dictionary is "one who seeks to bring about war." Someone who actively pursues and seeks to expand a currently existing state of war would seem to go above and beyond that definition. But what if that same person also delivers heart-rending exhortations to human rights and morality, telling us stories of little boys and girls for whom our nation represents hope of a better future? Does that make him less of a warmonger? Or does it make him an even more dangerous one?

Alfred Nobel's will stipulates that the recipient of the Peace Prize shall have done the most work for the "abolition or reduction of standing armies" in the previous year. Confronted by this apparent contradiction, Geir Lundestad, Secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, [defends](#) the choice of Mr. Obama in a bizarre and fascinating eight-minute interview. "Of course," he responds matter-of-factly, "a superpower like the United States is bound to be involved in all kinds of complex situations. We are not telling him that he should do this or that in these situations." "Situation" is apparently the hip new euphemism for drone attacks that kill innocent malnourished children and senseless wars that cause our neighbors to be sent home in body-bags.

War is thus defined as the natural state of affairs for "superpowers" - this is the cynical subtext of the Nobel Committee's decision. "Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia," wrote Orwell. There is no objective reality; the past is but a figment of the imagination. If the Nobel Peace Prize Committee tells us that war is compatible with peace, who are we to say otherwise?

The notion of hope itself has been transformed - there was a time when it meant the courage to envision a better future, one unconstrained by the harsh realities of the day. "Reach for the stars," we were told while growing up. Today, hope has come to mean settling for the path of least resistance and accepting the world before us with all its flaws. In parroting the dogma of "hope" so vigorously, perhaps we conceal a deeper fear that we have set our standards too low - that we have ceased to hope.

When Dr. Lundestad was asked about the danger of setting high expectations for Pres. Obama, he chuckled nervously. "Of course, he can do all kinds of things in his remaining term," he admitted. "But he should not be afraid that the Nobel Committee will denounce him. We never denounce our laureates, we always stand by them." In that moment, one couldn't help but feel that the Committee was only a reflection of society.

The hopeless leading the hopeless -- in the name of hope.