What the Media missed in Obama’s Nobel Prize Address

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The discussion of president Obama’s Nobel Prize Address has focused on his use of just war and realism to justify the Afghan War. He did mention “just war” three times. But he emphasized “just peace” four times. He mentioned only three criteria of just war, but all ten practices of just peacemaking.

His theme: “No matter how justified, war promises human tragedy…. Concretely, we must direct our effort to the task that President Kennedy called for long ago… ‘a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature, but on a gradual evolution in human institutions.’” He asked: “What might these practical steps be?”

Just peacemaking is the new ethic of peace and war. It names the ten practical steps that work to make peace, and calls on us to prod governments to take them. It is set forth in the book, Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War. The consensus of thirty scholars, it is based on the plain truth that it makes no sense to spend our time debating whether we approve of a war as just, if we don’t also debate the practices that work to prevent war. To debate that, we need to know the practices that have proven to work in making peace. What is truly remarkable is that now we have a president who knows the practices of just peacemaking, and advocates them in a major international address.

The thirty authors who reached consensus on just peacemaking include both just war theorists and pacifists. We don’t agree on whether war is sometimes justified or not. Not only the pacifists, but many just war theorists think the Afghan War is not justified; the Taliban didn’t attack the Twin Towers or any other nation; their focus is local. They always defeat foreign occupiers.

But we all agree on the ten practices that prevent many wars, and do does Obama. Missing his emphasis on the ten practices of just peacemaking makes us miss his intention, and makes us miss the new paradigm for the ethics of peace and war that gives us new hope. Obama is nothing if he is not about giving us reason for hoping for something better. He concluded his address: “For all the cruelty and hardship of our world, we are not mere prisoners of fate.”

One practice of just peacemaking is to acknowledge our own complicity in conflict and injustice. Obama began: “I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the considerable controversy that your generous decision has generated…. I’m responsible for the deployment of thousands of young Americans to battle in a distant land. Some will kill, and some will be killed.” And he acknowledged the threats of terrorism, new technologies of war, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and though wars between nations have decreased dramatically, wars within nations still take many lives. Thus he pulled the thorn of controversy over his award and demonstrated the humility and respect that are keys to peacemaking.

Just peacemaking says talking, practicing conflict resolution with enemies, even enemies we have strong disagreements with, often solves problems better than war does. Obama said: Nixon
met with Mao, despite Mao’s ordering the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, “and it surely helped set China on a path where millions of its citizens have been lifted from poverty and connected to open societies.” Pope John Paul engaged with Poland, and it created space for the Catholic church, and for Lech Walesa and the Solidarity movement that toppled the dictatorship. Ronald Reagan talked with Gorbachev, and it resulted in arms control, in empowering dissidents throughout Eastern Europe, and in the Soviet Union coming to a peaceful end. So we should talk with North Korea and Iran, and the dictatorial government of Burma, in search of human rights for their people, despite strong disagreements with those governments.

Obama praised the just peacemaking practice of nonviolent direct action, practiced by Gandhi and King, very personally. “As someone who stands here as a living testimony to Dr. King’s work, I am living testimony to the force of non-violence.” He praised Aung Sang Suu Kyi in Burma, and the nonviolent demonstrators in Iran: “It is the responsibility of all free people and free nations to make clear that these movements… have us on their side.”

Throughout the address, he argued for international cooperation. Evidence in the book, Just Peacemaking, says nations that engage in international cooperation experience war less often. Obama said because of his commitment to international cooperation, “That is why I prohibited torture. That is why I ordered the prison at Guantánamo Bay closed. And that is why I have reaffirmed America’s commitment to abide by the Geneva Convention.” No nation “can insist that others follow the rules of the road if we refuse to follow them ourselves.”

Supporting the UN, too, decreases wars. Obama reminded us that the United States led in creating the United Nations, and “there has been no Third World War.”

Throughout, he argued for the just peacemaking practice of supporting human rights. He supported international (not unilateral) sanctions and humanitarian intervention for the sake of human rights. Just Peacemaking writes similarly.

Furthermore, “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.” He gave credit to the Marshall Plan and economic development in Europe for helping prevent World War Three.

And encouraging the spread of democracy spreads peacemaking. Only when Europe achieved democracy did it achieve peace, Obama said. As just peacemaking points out, though democracies may do wrong, and sometimes fight or support wars, they do not send their troops to make wars against other democracies. Obama pointed out that “America has never fought a war against a democracy.”

Reducing offensive weapons is a practice of just peacemaking. Obama committed himself to working with Russia to reduce nuclear weapons, and “to work toward a world without them.”

Just peacemaking calls for supporting grass-roots groups that work for peacemaking. Obama gave his support to the movements of Aung Sang Suu Kyi, Gandhi, King, Mandela, and the
Solidarity Movement in Poland. [I was there in East Germany. Bitterfeld story. Hans Modrow addressing Parliament. I wept.]

The *independent initiatives* he commended were taken by “those who toil in humanitarian organizations to relieve suffering; the unrecognized millions whose quiet acts of courage and compassion inspire even the most hardened cynics.”

He concluded by acknowledging realism, and then advocated the practical work of just peacemaking: “Clear-eyed, we can understand that there will be war, and still strive for peace…. That’s the hope of all the world; and at this moment of challenge, that must be our work here on earth.”

Remarkable! Maybe we have a just peacemaking president!

The Nobel Prize Committee thinks we do. I hope they prove right.

Let us pray, realistically, that he doesn’t end up remembered as the Afghan War President.