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Cover Story **Toward a More Perfect Nobel** **By John Feffer, Foreign Policy In Focus** **BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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When I recently visited Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, a young girl on our tour of the house raised her hand tentatively during the docent's remarks about the enslaved people who worked the plantation.

"Did Jefferson treat his slaves better than other slave-owners?" she asked. The docent responded, wisely, that slavery is slavery, however brilliant or benevolent the owner. Yes, Jefferson did try to avoid splitting up families and paid his slaves extra for game they shot and contributed to the household. But the founding father owned slaves and there's no way around that fact.

You could hear the hopefulness in the girl's question: Surely the man who penned the words "all men are created equal" would transcend the slave-owning conventions of his time. He didn't, despite the [repeated urgings](#) of his Polish friend Tadeusz Kosciuszko. For some, this gap between Jefferson's words and his actions constitute one of America's founding hypocrisies, which continue to tear at the fabric of our society.

But another interpretation links Jefferson through Abraham Lincoln to our current president, Barack Obama. Jefferson's famous words, the "self-evident truths" inscribed in the Declaration of Independence, didn't describe real, existing equality in the United States but, rather, a state toward which Americans must strive. As Lincoln would later [proclaim](#) on George Washington's birthday, the founding fathers "meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be...constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the

happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere."

Which brings us to the Nobel Prize committee's decision to award this year's Peace Prize to Barack Obama. Oslo's decision has generated a great deal of material for stand-up comics and fulminating right-wingers. Rush Limbaugh [sided](#) with the Taliban and Iran in their negative judgment. *The Washington Post* published [selections](#) from their staff blogs, and the journalists perhaps for the first time in their lives sided with Rush (Obama supporter Ruth Marcus, for instance, called the award "ridiculous" and "embarrassing"). The president, according to the collective assessment of U.S. opinion-makers, is undeserving.

The selection committee made a point of emphasizing that they were awarding the prize based on what the president had already done, namely his commitment to nuclear abolition and the shift in U.S. policy on climate change. There was also his Cairo speech, which Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF) contributor Arthur Waskow, in [Toward an Abrahamic Peace](#), calls "an extraordinary opening to the Muslim world — making clear that the new U.S. government understands the Arab and Muslim view of the world and takes seriously even Arab and Muslim critiques of U.S. behavior and policy. The Cairo speech not only set the basic tone of seeking to build a world community rather than an American empire, but also covered all the key specific outstanding issues with a basic outlook of community rather than domination."

Nevertheless, the Nobel award acknowledges aspiration more than achievement, just as the words "all men are created equal" referred not to the United States as it was but as it should be. Obama has laid the rhetorical foundations for a major shift in U.S. policy. That shift, like nuclear abolition, will not happen during Obama's term, perhaps not even in his lifetime. But he has articulated the better dreams of his country.

For the third time in the last 100 years, the United States stands poised to become an equal and cooperative member of a more perfect international community. Woodrow Wilson, the last standing president to win a Nobel Peace Prize, helped to create the League of Nations, which the lead-up to World War II wiped out. After that war, FDR helped set up the pillars of the current international system — the United Nations, World Bank — but the Cold War cut internationalism in half.

Today, the United States faces perils as large as those that faced Jefferson at the time of the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln in the early days of the Civil War. To address the economic crisis, the climate crisis, the energy crisis, the United States must fundamentally alter its relationship with the world and help build the new institutions that reflect this play-well-with-others attitude.

The Nobel Prize is a challenge to Obama to raise his game, match action to rhetoric, and meet this great challenge facing the United States in the world. It will require ending the war in Afghanistan and taking leadership at Copenhagen on climate change. It will require eliminating nuclear weapons rather than just talking about how nice it would be to eliminate nuclear weapons.

Obama can't do this by himself. Jefferson didn't write that "*I* hold these truths to be self-evident." Lincoln did not write the "better angels of *my* nature." The Nobel Prize is the collective achievement of the American people for repudiating the Bush years and making the words of the Declaration of Independence come that much closer to reality.

Now, let's *all* prove that we deserve it.

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator John Feffer, co-director of [Foreign](#)

[Policy In Focus](#). John has authored or edited eight books and numerous articles. Most recently, he has been a Writing Fellow at Provisions Library in Washington, DC and a PanTech fellow in Korean Studies at Stanford University. He is a former associate editor of *World Policy Journal*. He has worked as an international affairs representative in Eastern Europe and East Asia for the American Friends Service Committee. He has also worked for the AFSC on such issues as the global economy, gun control, women and workplace, and domestic politics. He has served as a consultant for the Friends Committee on National Legislation, among other organizations. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Feffer.

[Foreign Policy In Focus](#) is a network for research, analysis and action that brings together more than 700 scholars, advocates and activists who strive to make the United States a more responsible global partner. It is a project of the Institute for Policy Studies ([IPS](#)) in Washington.

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