By George Friedman

U.S. President Barack Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize last week. Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, established the prize, which was to be awarded to the person who has accomplished "the most or the best work for fraternity among nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the promotion of peace congresses." The mechanism for awarding the peace prize is very different from the other Nobel categories. Academic bodies, such as the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, decide who wins the other prizes. Alfred Nobel's will stated, however, that a committee of five selected by the Norwegian legislature, or Storting, should award the peace prize.

The committee that awarded the peace prize to Obama consists of chairman Thorbjorn Jagland, president of the Storting and former Labor Party prime minister and foreign minister of Norway; Kaci Kullmann Five, a former member of the Storting and president of the Conservative Party; Sissel Marie Ronbeck, a former Social Democratic member of the Storting; Inger-Marie Ytterhorn, a former member of the Storting and current senior adviser to the Progress Party; and Agot Valle, a current member of the Storting and spokeswoman on foreign affairs for the Socialist Left Party.

The peace prize committee is therefore a committee of politicians, some present members of parliament, some former members of parliament. Three come from the left (Jagland, Ronbeck and Valle). Two come from the right (Kullman and Ytterhorn). It is reasonable to say that the peace prize committee faithfully reproduces the full spectrum of Norwegian politics.

A Frequently Startling Prize

Prize recipients frequently have proved startling. For example, the first U.S. president to receive the prize was Theodore Roosevelt, who received it in 1906 for helping negotiate peace between Japan and Russia. Roosevelt genuinely sought peace, but ultimately because of American fears that an unbridled Japan would threaten U.S. interests in the Pacific. He sought peace to ensure that Japan would not eliminate Russian power in the Pacific and not hold Port Arthur or any of the other prizes of the Russo-Japanese War. To achieve this peace, he implied that the United States might intervene against Japan.

In brokering negotiations to try to block Japan from exploiting its victory over the Russians, Roosevelt was engaged in pure power politics. The Japanese were in fact quite bitter at the American intervention. (For their part, the Russians were preoccupied with domestic unrest.) But a treaty emerged from the talks, and peace prevailed. Though preserving a balance of power in the Pacific motivated Roosevelt, the Nobel committee didn't seem to care. And given that Alfred Nobel didn't provide much guidance about his intentions for the prize, choosing Roosevelt was as reasonable as the choices for most Nobel Peace Prizes.

In recent years, the awards have gone to political dissidents the committee approved of, such as the Dalai Lama and Lech Walesa, or people supporting causes it agreed with, such as Al Gore. Others were peacemakers in the Theodore Roosevelt mode, such as Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger for working toward peace in Vietnam and Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin for moving toward peace between the Israelis and Palestinians.

Two things must be remembered about the Nobel Peace Prize. The first is that Nobel was never clear about his intentions for it. The second is his decision to have it awarded by politicians from — and we hope the Norwegians will accept our advance apologies — a marginal country relative to the international system. This is not meant as a criticism of Norway, a country we have enjoyed in the past, but the Norwegians sometimes have an idiosyncratic way of viewing the world.

Therefore, the award to Obama was neither more or less odd than some of the previous awards made by five Norwegian politicians no one outside of Norway had ever heard of. But his win does give us an opportunity to consider an important question, namely, why Europeans generally think so highly of Obama.

Obama and the Europeans

Let's begin by being careful with the term European. Eastern Europeans and Russians — all Europeans — do not think very highly of him. The British are reserved on the subject. But on the whole, other Europeans west of the former Soviet satellites and south and east of the English Channel think extremely well of him, and the Norwegians are reflecting this admiration. It is important to understand why they do.

The Europeans experienced catastrophes during the 20th century. Two world wars slaughtered generations of Europeans and shattered Europe's economy. Just after the war, much of Europe maintained standards of living not far above that of the Third World. In a sense, Europe lost everything — millions of lives, empires, even sovereignty as the United States and the Soviet Union occupied and competed in Europe. The catastrophe of the 20th century defines Europe, and what the Europeans want to get away from.

The Cold War gave Europe the opportunity to recover economically, but only in the context of occupation and the threat of war between the Soviets and Americans. A half century of Soviet occupation seared Eastern European souls. During that time, the rest of Europe lived in a paradox of growing prosperity and the apparent imminence of another war. The Europeans were not in control of whether the war would come, or where or how it would be fought. There are therefore two Europes. One, the Europe that was first occupied by Nazi Germany and then by the Soviet Union still lives in the shadow of the dual catastrophes. The other, larger Europe, lives in the shadow of the United States.

Between 1945 and 1991, Western Europe lived in a confrontation with the Soviets. The Europeans lived in dread of Soviet occupation, and though tempted, never capitulated to the Soviets. That meant that the Europeans were forced to depend on the United States for their defense and economic stability, and were therefore subject to America's will. How the

Americans and Russians viewed each other would determine whether war would break out, not what the Europeans thought.

Every aggressive action by the United States, however trivial, was magnified a hundredfold in European minds, as they considered fearfully how the Soviets would respond. In fact, the Americans were much more restrained during the Cold War than Europeans at the time thought. Looking back, the U.S. position in Europe itself was quite passive. But the European terror was that some action in the rest of the world — Cuba, the Middle East, Vietnam — would cause the Soviets to respond in Europe, costing them everything they had built up.

In the European mind, the Americans prior to 1945 were liberators. After 1945 they were protectors, but protectors who could not be trusted to avoid triggering another war through recklessness or carelessness. The theme dominating European thinking about the United States was that the Americans were too immature, too mercurial and too powerful to really be trusted. From an American point of view, these were the same Europeans who engaged in unparalleled savagery between 1914 and 1945 all on their own, and the period after 1945 — when the Americans dominated Europe — was far more peaceful and prosperous than the previous period. But the European conviction that the Europeans were the sophisticated statesmen and prudent calculators while the Americans were unsophisticated and imprudent did not require an empirical basis. It was built on another reality, which was that Europe had lost everything, including real control over its fate, and that trusting its protector to be cautious was difficult.

The Europeans loathed many presidents, e.g., Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan. Jimmy Carter was not respected. Two were liked: John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton. Kennedy relieved them of the burden of Dwight D. Eisenhower and his dour Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who was deeply distrusted. Clinton was liked for interesting reasons, and understanding this requires examining the post-Cold War era.

The United States and Europe After the Cold War

The year 1991 marked the end of the Cold War. For the first time since 1914, Europeans were prosperous, secure and recovering their sovereignty. The United States wanted little from the Europeans, something that delighted the Europeans. It was a rare historical moment in which the alliance existed in some institutional sense, but not in any major active form. The Balkans had to be dealt with, but those were the Balkans — not an area of major concern.

Europe could finally relax. Another world war would not erase its prosperity, and they were free from active American domination. They could shape their institutions, and they would. It was the perfect time for them, one they thought would last forever.

For the United States, 9/11 changed all that. The Europeans had deep sympathy for the United States post-Sept. 11, sympathy that was on the whole genuine. But the Europeans also believed that former U.S. President George W. Bush had overreacted to the attacks, threatening to unleash a reign of terror on them, engaging in unnecessary wars and above all not consulting them. The last claim was not altogether true: Bush frequently consulted the

Europeans, but they frequently said no to his administration's requests. The Europeans were appalled that Bush continued his policies in spite of their objections; they felt they were being dragged back into a Cold War-type situation for trivial reasons.

The Cold War revolved around Soviet domination of Europe. In the end, whatever the risks, the Cold War was worth the risk and the pain of U.S. domination. But to Europeans, the jihadist threat simply didn't require the effort the United States was prepared to put into it. The United States seemed unsophisticated and reckless, like cowboys.

The older European view of the United States re-emerged, as did the old fear. Throughout the Cold War, the European fear was that a U.S. miscalculation would drag the Europeans into another catastrophic war. Bush's approach to the jihadist war terrified them and deepened their resentment. Their hard-earned prosperity was in jeopardy again because of the Americans, this time for what the Europeans saw as an insufficient reason. The Americans were once again seen as overreacting, Europe's greatest Cold War-era dread.

For Europe, prosperity had become an end in itself. It is ironic that the Europeans regard the Americans as obsessed with money when it is the Europeans who put economic considerations over all other things. But the Europeans mean something different when they talk about money. For the Europeans, money isn't about piling it higher and higher. Instead, money is about security. Their economic goal is not to become wealthy but to be comfortable. Today's Europeans value economic comfort above all other considerations. After Sept. 11, the United States seemed willing to take chances with the Europeans' comfortable economic condition that the Europeans themselves didn't want to take. They loathed George W. Bush for doing so.

Conversely, they love Obama because he took office promising to consult with them. They understood this promise in two ways. One was that in consulting the Europeans, Obama would give them veto power. Second, they understood him as being a president like Kennedy, namely, as one unwilling to take imprudent risks. How they remember Kennedy that way given the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the coup against Diem in Vietnam is hard to fathom, but of course, many Americans remember him the same way. The Europeans compare Obama to an imaginary Kennedy, but what they really think is that he is another Clinton.

Clinton was Clinton because of the times he lived in and not because of his nature: The collapse of the Soviet Union created a peaceful interregnum in which Clinton didn't need to make demands on Europe's comfortable prosperity. George W. Bush lived in a different world, and that caused him to resume taking risks and making demands.

Obama does not live in the 1990s. He is facing Afghanistan, Iran and a range of other crises up to and including a rising Russia that looks uncannily similar to the old Soviet Union. It is difficult to imagine how he can face these risks without taking actions that will be counter to the European wish to be allowed to remain comfortable, and worse, without ignoring the European desire to avoid what they will see as unreasonable U.S. demands. In fact, U.S.-German relations already are not particularly good on Obama's watch. Obama has asked for troops in Afghanistan and been turned down, and has continued to call for NATO expansion, which the Germans don't want.

The Norwegian politicians gave their prize to Obama because they believed that he would leave Europeans in their comfortable prosperity without making unreasonable demands. That is their definition of peace, and Obama seemed to promise that. The Norwegians on the prize committee seem unaware of the course U.S.-German relations have taken, or of Afghanistan and Iran. Alternatively, perhaps they believe Obama can navigate those waters without resorting to war. In that case, it is difficult to imagine what they make of the recent talks with Iran or planning on Afghanistan.

The Norwegians awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to the president of their dreams, not the president who is dealing with Iran and Afghanistan. Obama is not a free actor. He is trapped by the reality he has found himself in, and that reality will push him far away from the Norwegian fantasy. In the end, the United States is the United States — and that is Europe's nightmare, because the United States is not obsessed with maintaining Europe's comfortable prosperity. The United States cannot afford to be, and in the end, neither can President Obama, Nobel Peace Prize or not.