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The Nobel Prize Isn't Worth It

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, Feb. 5—The interesting thing about President Nixon's nomination to receive the Nobel Peace Prize is that he did not intervene to stop his admirers from entering his name in this unhappy competition.

Should we infer that the President really cares about such dubious certification of excellence as prizes bestow? It looks that way. And if he does, then how will he interpret the matter if the prize givers' decision goes against him?

As he tells us repeatedly, his is a personality that dotes on competition. Once engaged, he hates to lose. In a competition for a peace prize, his reputation might seem to him to be at issue, although it certainly wouldn't be. A loss in such a competition would surely not improve his day. And when the President's day is unhappy it tends to be an unhappy day for the entire country.

The sensible course would be for him to withdraw now before the whole business becomes an issue, which might escalate into a struggle, which might blow up into a crisis. Dignity, statesmanship and common sense all argue against Presidential involvement.

Presidents should be above caring about prizes. Prizes are important to scientists and writers because they can be converted into bigger royalty payments and juicier faculty positions at flossier institutions, but Presidents ought to be beyond these mercantile considerations.

It is possible, of course, that the President believes prizes really count in some absolute way—that the committees which distribute prizes are in touch with some truth higher than frail human intelligence heavily burdened with prejudice and passing whim. If so, it would be natural for him to desire the certification—"Great Maker of Peace"—which he presumed it within the power of a committee to pass down to him, from Mount Sinai as it were.

It seems doubtful that the President is so innocent. He originates, after all, in southern California, the land of the Oscar, and must know that prizes are mostly politics. But knowing this, why let himself become involved in what, after the struggle for the Presidency, must be very small-bore politics indeed?

Whether President Nixon is a Great

OBSERVER

Maker of Peace is not a question that can be determined by a wave of the thumbs in the name of Alfred Nobel. Historians will decide that in their own good time, or perhaps not decide it, or perhaps decide that the question is not worth trying to decide, for historians can be even more ruthless and quixotic than the press which so afflicts Mr. Nixon.

Shall we suppose that they will be impressed by a Nobel Peace Prize? Not likely. What benefits then might flow to President Nixon in the event he wins the prize? Well, the President is itching to be hailed as a peacemaker. The urge gleamed in the needle he applied to the reporters the other day when he declared that he had produced "peace with honor" in Vietnam, although some of them would gag at writing the words.

His admirers have been taunting the old war critics to get up on both feet and praise him for the war's end. And the old critics, of course, do not oblige. There is very little hailing here, and even that little has the paid-for-and-delivered sound of the claque about it.

A peace prize would be a hail of sorts. It would be some reward for a President exhilarated by an achievement which seems to have left most of his people merely spent. There would be a special sweetness in the opportunity to appear in Sweden to accept it, for Sweden had very critical spokesmen during the Christmas bombing, spokesmen who said he was a very terrible maker of war.

The fierce competitor in him is not, when he has won a big one, above rubbing it in; there would be momentary personal pleasure in showing the Swedes what kind of statesman they had foolishly denounced.

In the unhappy event he is not declared the winner, there would arise a situation which everyone could easily do without. A President who believes himself a great peacemaker, finding himself denied the accolade for reasons that may be ascribed to bad political motives—well, we cannot guess how he might respond, but we know his fondness for surprises. The President ought to get his name back out of that hat and settle down with a good, fat, calm Victorian novel.
