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Al Gore's Gift of Life for Generations To Come

By Leonard Fein

Our quiz for the week: Who was Bertha von Suttner? Or Tobias Asser?

Don't know? Let's try a couple of easier names: Wangari Maathai? Shirin Ebadi?

Still stumped? Alright let's make it easy: What do the four people I've mentioned so far have in common with Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Jane Addams?

Alright, then: These are seven of the 106 individuals who have won the Nobel Prize for Peace in the years since 1901, when it was first awarded to Henry Dunant, founder of the International Committee of the Red Cross and originator of the first Geneva Convention, and Frederic Passy, founder and president of the first French peace society.

What calls this roster to mind just now is, of course, the award of the 2007 prize to Al Gore — actually, to Albert Arnold Gore, Jr. The Gore award has, of course, given rise to all manner of speculation.

Will he or won't he? If he does, will it be Gore-Obama or, perhaps enabling us to recycle old campaign buttons by merely affixing them upside down, Gore-Clinton? Or, as Scott Ott suggests on Scappleface.com, will the Supreme Court now decide to award the Nobel medal, diploma and prize money to George W. Bush?

My own view is that Gore's award is richly deserved. I have no idea whether the world in general or the United States in particular will rise to the awesome challenge of global warming, but if we somehow do, the persistence and intelligence of Al Gore will have been nothing less than a gift of life for generations to come.

That's not always or even often been the case with regard to the Nobel Peace Prize. In medicine, physics, chemistry and even the dismal science of economics, the Nobel awards tend to recognize highly specific achievements: a vaccine, a formula, a technique. This year's physics award, for example, was shared by Albert Fert and Peter Grunberg "for the discovery of giant magnetoresistance," and last year's in medicine went to Andrew Fire and Craig Mello "for their discover of RNA interference-gene slicing by double-stranded RNA."

Where good science is inherently transnational and good scientists all speak the universal language of science, the literature price is multilingual; for some time now, the committee has actively sought to call attention to the lifetime work of writers often unknown in the West. In the last 40 years, recipients from 26 different countries have been named.

The peace award is a still wispiest thing. It has recognized peace movements, general humanitarian efforts, advocacy of human rights, mediation of international conflicts and arms control. There are Albert Schweitzer, Mother Theresa, Jimmy Carter and Elie Wiesel. There's the International Peace Bureau in Switzerland, honored in four different years between 1902 and 1910, itself a recipient as were four laureates associated with it. There's the International Committee for the Red Cross, honored as an institution in 1917, 1944 and 1963 and then, perhaps indicative of change in the human condition and even more, change in the modes of our response to that condition, there's Doctors Without Borders in 1999.

There are people who've achieved their fame through addressing one specific conflict: Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk (South Africa), Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin (Israel and the Palestinians), Anwar Sadat and Menahem Begin (Israel and Egypt), Ralph Bunch (Israel and the Arabs), Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho (America and Vietnam), John Hume and David Trimble (Northern Ireland), Betty Williams and Malread Corrigan (also Northern Ireland), and lately there have been more grassroots type such as Wangari Muta Maathai of Kenya and Rigoberta Menchu Tum of Guatemala.

There is no need, faced with all these true worthies, to rank them. The work of some has been or may yet prove lasting, the work of others more time-bound or more reflective of abiding hope than of real achievement. There are some honorees whose names scarcely evoke thoughts of peace, such as Kissinger and Arafat, others whose contributions have proved so transient that they confirm that the prize committee is not endowed with prescience.

Still, it's hard to resist personal favorites. For me, Doctors Without Borders is so profoundly heroic in its work that an oak leaf cluster should be added to its Nobel medal every year, and I am ever awed by Jody Williams, the founding coordinator of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Over a period of five years, this woman and her colleagues succeeded not only in forcing the land mines issue onto the international agenda, but in shepherding an international treaty banning antipersonnel land mines, approved in Oslo in 1992, where she and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines received the prize in 1997.

These days, we can only speculate on how different our nation — and the world — might be had the Supreme Court not elected Bush to the presidency in 2000. That time it was Gore, the man, who was putsched aside.

This time, we can do more than merely speculate on what our world, and our children's, will look like a generation or two from now if Gore's zeal and passion do not ignite our own. For the signs have been given us, and the data.

We knew, when Bush took office, that the Republic would withstand the damage he would do; we were confident the nation was blessed with adequate margin for error. But the environment? There can be no such certainty.

Nature is less forgiving, and each week of continuing delay will take a year of remedy to repair — if by the time we have mobilized the needed will and the needed resources, repair is still a possibility. The error is ongoing, the damage beyond measure.