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The Dalai Lama and the Nobel Prize: Correcting a Misunderstanding

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By A. Tom Grunfeld

As many readers of this blog doubtless realize, everything having to do with Tibet is subject to mythologizing. That the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts on behalf of Tibetan independence is one of these myths. This notion gets mentioned in the Western press routinely, and it sometimes even shows up in comments by academic specialists. In fact, the prize was awarded to him more because of the events in Tiananmen Square that had happened just a few months before the award than for anything related to the Tibet struggle per se.

Indeed, it appears that if there had been no confrontations at Tiananmen in 1989, the Dalai Lama would not have received the prize. To be sure, the European community began to embrace the Dalai Lama and his cause after his speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 1988 when he announced a major concession to Beijing giving up the demand for independence for autonomy. Moreover, the demonstrations and the subsequent bloody suppression in Lhasa in spring 1989 generated additional support and sympathy for the Tibetans. But it appears unlikely that those events alone got him the prize. The situation is described fully in an October 13, 1989, *New York Times* article "[How, and Why, the Dalai Lama Won the Peace Prize.](#)" (To read it in full, follow the link.) To give a sense of its take on the situation, which was based on interviews with informants close to the prize selection process, here are some excerpts from it:

People close to the Nobel Peace Prize selection process say that the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan leader, gained the advantage over other candidates, including President Mikhail S. Gorbachev of the Soviet Union, largely because of the brutal suppression of the democracy movement in China and the international outrage that followed.

As China called the Dalai Lama's honor "preposterous," people in Oslo who are close to the Norwegian Nobel Committee said in telephone interviews that the choice of the Dalai Lama was an attempt both to influence events in China and to recognize the efforts of student leaders of the democracy movement, which was crushed by Chinese troops in June.

The Dalai Lama, as religious and political leader of Tibet, has been waging a nonviolent struggle for nearly 40 years to end Chinese domination of his homeland.

He was named the 1989 recipient of the prize last week and was "among the favorites from the beginning," said Jakob Sverdrup, secretary to the Nobel Committee and director of the Nobel Institute...

Mr. Sverdrup said that the award often swung back and forth between winners who represented humanitarian ideals and those in the trenches of international power politics. The choice of the Dalai Lama was in some ways a combination of both, he said...

In addition to Mr. Gorbachev, front-runners included Vaclav Havel and Jiri Hajek, prominent Czechoslovak dissidents. The committee settled on the Dalai Lama in mid-September... informants said, three months after hundreds of people were killed in Beijing when the Chinese authorities cracked down on the democracy movement. In the aftermath of the crackdown, there was pressure from Norwegians to have the movement's student leaders named as recipients of this year's award, despite the fact that the Feb. 1 deadline for nominations had long passed...

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