

A Problematic Prize?

Norway's Left flips out over the Nobel Committee's honoring of María Corina Machado.

By Bruce Bawer

On December 10, the Norwegian establishment was presented with a challenge. That afternoon, at Oslo City Hall, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to María Corina Machado for “her struggle to achieve a just and peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy” in her homeland of Venezuela. The ceremony opened with a surprisingly melodic and affecting song by Danny Ocean, a 33-year-old Venezuelan performer, now living in the U.S., who has used his worldwide fame to express his love for his country and its people, to castigate the Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro, and to champion Machado, [telling](#) NPR recently, in an admirable display of moral clarity, that Machado’s struggle “is about light versus dark...good versus evil.”



Ocean was followed by Jørgen Watne Frydnes, chairman of the

Norwegian Nobel Committee, who in a long, uncompromising address served up harrowing anecdotes demonstrating that Venezuela under Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, has “evolved into a brutal authoritarian state.” Indeed, Frydnes repeated the word “authoritarian” several times, thereby explicitly rejecting the benign view of the two Venezuelan *caudillos* that has long been held by not a few members of Norway’s left-wing political, academic, and media establishment. Case in point: the politician Eirik Vold, who in a 2010 op-ed [celebrated](#) Chávez as a “survivor” who’d endured “military coups and assassination attempts” and whose noble war against inequality had won him the love of the poor and the hatred of the middle class and rich. Three years later Vold [praised](#) Chávez as a “teacher” from whom Vold’s fellow “red-green” Norwegian politicians could learn to take on the rich more aggressively and thus win voter support for socialist programs.

None of that sort of rhetoric was on display at Oslo City Hall on Wednesday. Nobel officials having received a voice message from Machado that morning, saying that she wouldn’t be able to get to Oslo in time for the ceremony but would arrive later in the day ([reportedly](#), the laureate, who lives in hiding, had taken a boat the previous evening to Curaçao before flying to Oslo), the prize was accepted by her lovely daughter Ana Corina Sosa Machado, who has lived in the U.S. for nine years and has not seen her mother in two. Sosa delivered her mother’s acceptance [speech](#) with feeling and dignity. It was, in large part, a history lesson: in 1811, Venezuelans ratified the first free constitution in the Spanish-speaking world; buoyed by oil wealth, Venezuela became Latin America’s “most stable” democracy.

But Venezuelans made a mistake. They took their freedom for granted. “We assumed freedom was as permanent as the air we breathed. We cherished our rights but forgot our duties.” And so, in 1999, they elected Chávez as president. He “dismantled

our democracy...corrupting the military, purging independent judges, censoring the press, manipulating elections, persecuting dissent" – and stealing the country's oil revenues. Under Chávez and Maduro, "the economy collapsed by more than 80%. Poverty surpassed 86%. Nine million Venezuelans were forced to flee." Both dictators also pursued a divide-and-conquer strategy, consolidating their power by encouraging the people to see themselves as members of radically opposed ideological, racial, and social groups.

Hope seemed gone. But it wasn't. Within the last few years, more and more Venezuelans overcame their fear and lent their voices to the freedom movement. When Machado, after winning the opposition primary, was banned from running for president in last year's election, she recruited a replacement, Edmundo González Urrutia, who received "67% of the vote, in every state, city, village." A shocked Maduro ordered soldiers "to expel volunteers from voting centers and block them from receiving the original tally sheets they were legally entitled to. But the soldiers disobeyed." Terror ensued. Yet the people didn't knuckle under. The "march to freedom" continues.

It was a magnificent, stirring speech. For an American listener, Machado's account of a free people who, neglecting to defend their freedom, elected a socialist who proceeded to divide them by identity categories, could not but sound vaguely familiar. Ditto the story about the socialists' attempt to steal an election. Machado's central message – that one should never take freedom for granted – was essentially a restatement of Ronald Reagan's dictum that freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.

But for many listeners in the corridors of Norwegian power, the speech was discomfiting. Because, to their ears, it sounded unbearably American. You see, sophisticated Norwegians love yammering on about peace – which for them is inextricable from diplomacy and dialogue – but if you try to talk seriously about freedom they reply with a smirk. Yes, Norway is a

founding member of NATO and was on our side in the Cold War, but a great many members of its *bien pensant* types, then as now, have never seen the conflict between the Free World and the Communist bloc as a matter of “light versus dark,” to quote Danny Ocean. They’re too nuanced for such childishness, which only naïve, brainwashed fools – i.e., Americans – could fall for.

Freedom! As recently as on October 5, *Aftenposten*, Norway’s newspaper of record, ran something that’s a perennial feature of Norwegian journalism: a snide swipe at the absurd pretense that the so-called “land of freedom” is really free. This time around, the article in question was an [editorial](#) headlined “Freedom has gone off the rails in the land of freedom.” Citing a recent TV program that showed kids in Florida learning to use guns and to stand up to leftist indoctrination in schools, the editors held it up as evidence that MAGA stalwarts have lost “respect for crucial aspects of freedom itself” – which, they maintained, should not be “first and foremost” about “the right to carry automatic weapons, the right to view politicians and other ‘elites’ with suspicion, or the right to deny the result of a democratic presidential election.” I would submit that if you don’t view “elites” with suspicion, your days as a free individual are numbered. But that’s just me.

Only a day before the Nobel ceremony, I’d paged through the current issue of *Morgenbladet*, Norway’s leading opinion weekly, in which the main topic was the tyrant in the White House: Maria Berg Reinertsen “[went](#) through 217 presidential orders – and decrees, memoranda, laws and proclamations” – and found Trump to be “something completely new in the autocratic fauna of our time”; Janne Haaland Matlary [argued](#) that in Trump’s world, Norway can disappear at any time, and should therefore join the EU immediately; Rune Lykkeberg [contended](#) that in pre-Trump America, Europe “had a good friend who beat up others,” but now, in Trump, “we have a

spouse who has begun to beat *us* up.” There was plenty more in this vein, but you get the idea.

Which brings us to the not-so-little detail that made this year’s Nobel Prize especially uncomfortable for Norwegian elites: namely, that Machado, who was being honored for being something close to the very embodiment of freedom, has explicitly aligned herself with Trump, whom those same elites view as the very embodiment of authoritarianism. In October, when she was told that she’d won the prize, she phoned Trump at once to say that she was dedicating it to him. And last month, after Trump ordered military strikes on Venezuelan vessels that were reportedly transporting narcotics, the Norwegian media condemned him roundly – but Machado [applauded](#) him, saying that his action would “protect millions of lives of Latin American citizens and certainly Venezuelan citizens” from a “narco-terror structure that has declared war on the Venezuelan people and to democratic nations in the region.”

Few things, believe me, could appall a self-respecting Norwegian intellectual more than Machado’s praise for Trump. Which explains why, immediately after Sosa finished delivering her mother’s speech, Christina Pletten of *Aftenposten* banged out a [column](#) headlined: “Sure, the Peace Prize winner is extremely conservative. But she has an important message.” Noting that members of Parliament from two major parties had boycotted the ceremony, and that several peace groups had refused to take part in the traditional torchlight procession and had even held a public protest against Machado on Tuesday night, calling her a “warmonger,” Pletten pronounced all of this “unfair and dishonest,” given that “Machado has waged a peaceful struggle for democracy for several decades.” Yes, Machado has gone far in her support for Trump – “perhaps too far.” Still, concluded Pletten, Machado is “a worthy winner.”

Imagine a country in which the awarding of a peace prize to

such a person needs to be defended! But so it goes in the land of the fjords. As one of my Facebook “friends” [observed](#), “the Peace Prize should really have been awarded to the Venezuelan opposition much earlier” – for example, to longtime opposition politician Leopoldo López, who was nominated for it in 2018. But “at that time Norwegian politicians and parts of the Norwegian establishment chose to support the dictatorship in Venezuela.” The only reason why Machado won this year, maintained my “friend,” is that Trump “forced Norway to turn.” Is this true? It’s been denied. But if it *is* true, well, three cheers for Trump.

Pletten mentioned the Tuesday night protest against Machado. I wasn’t there, but my old friend Thor Halvorsen, the Venezuela-born president of the Human Rights Foundation (and cousin of Leopoldo López), was. He [posted](#) pictures on Facebook: a big Che banner; a hammer-and-sickle flag. The protesters, he noted, didn’t utter “a single word of criticism for Nicolás Maduro’s dictatorship. Not one word about the political prisoners. Not one word about torture.” The “overwhelming majority” of them, he pointed out, “were Norwegians” – people using their free speech “to erase a dictatorship that jails people for speech.”

Little more than an hour after Pletten’s column went online, NRK-TV’s daily debate program, *Dagsnytt 18*, hosted a [debate](#) about Machado. After Conservative parliamentarian Bård Ludvig Thorheim emphatically declared that Machado had risked her life by bravely standing up to a regime that had imprisoned, tortured, and murdered countless victims, Magnus Marsdal of Manifest Media – who’d already gone on record as saying that the awarding of the prize to Machado “brings shame to Norway” and that it should instead be called a “war prize” – joked that Thorheim had purchased his argument at Nille, a chain of stores that sell modest items at low prices. Marsdal’s sneering insult was the ultimate expression of elitist disdain for ordinary Norwegians to whom the word

“freedom” actually means something.

Of course, what makes Machado a cause of deep unease among many of Norway’s progressive pundits – and among many of their counterparts elsewhere – is the fact that she totally upends the central premise of their current worldview. They’ve worked hard to sell the public on the notion that Trump is autocratic and that the present left-wing governments of Western Europe – and, above all, the EU regime in Brussels, where one woman, Ursula van der Leyen, the unelected president of the European Commission, singlehandedly drafts all legislation, including restrictions on speech, not to mention innumerable other constraints on freedom – are the very definition of democratic. The truth, needless to say, is precisely the opposite. And with every word that Machado speaks – and every word that her splendid daughter speaks on her behalf – she helps to explode this outrageous lie. More power to her. And may she soon be sitting in the Milaflores Palace, where she belongs.

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