

Hopes and fears: A remedy for cynicism

From the Editors in the [January 26, 2010](#) issue

With the terrorist attack that barely failed on a U.S. jetliner on Christmas Day and the opening of a new U.S. “front” against terrorist cells in Yemen, the year 2009 (and the decade of the “00s”) came to a somber conclusion. The struggle against radical Islamic terrorists remains a long, twilight struggle. If they are realistic, Americans know that terrorists are likely to land some blows against them, no matter how sophisticated and coordinated the efforts of security agencies.

The events of year’s end darkened some of the hope that President Obama sparked in June when he went to Cairo, Egypt, to seek “a new beginning” between the U.S. and Muslims around the world. Acknowledging failings on both sides, Obama insisted that America and Islam “need not be in competition” and that they share “common principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.” This eloquent, dramatic gesture toward reconciliation was enough to earn Obama the year’s Nobel Peace Prize—an award given for the hopes it engendered rather than any peace achieved. (The Cairo speech was also judged by the Religion Newswriters Association to be the top religion news story of the year. For more on the year in review, see the [recap](#) in this issue.)

Obama himself recalibrated hopes in early December when he used his Nobel acceptance speech to offer a defense of U.S. military action. Military force remains a necessary instrument of justice in a world where evil exists, he maintained. “Negotiations cannot convince al-Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms.”

Obama went on to offer an almost theological meditation on “the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.” His exemplars of moral action were cases of people heroically hoping against hope, like the “young protestor [who] awaits the brutality of her government but has the courage to march on” and the mother mired in poverty who manages to send her child to school “because she believes that a cruel world still has a place for that child’s dreams.” Embracing paradoxes that theologian

Reinhold Niebuhr would appreciate, Obama concluded: “We can acknowledge that oppression will always be with us and still strive for justice. We can admit the intractability of deprivation and still strive for dignity. Clear-eyed, we can understand there will be war and still strive for peace.”

Obama has a theology for the long, twilight struggle. The challenge, for Obama as for all Christian realists, is to ensure that realism never devolves into cynicism, an acceptance of business as usual.

The way to guard against cynicism is to live in hope. We need both an ultimate hope in the triumph of God’s purposes and the everyday hope of the sort that prompted Obama to go to Cairo in the first place—the hope that shared interests in peace and dignity can be found across boundaries of religion and nation. A hope rooted in a common human identity is, as Niebuhr also taught, profoundly realistic.