



NORWAY

A Nobel Pursuit

An Interview with Geir Lundestad,
Director, Norwegian Nobel Institute



Geir Lundestad

EDITORS' NOTE Geir Lundestad also serves as the Secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee. However, he is not a member of the committee itself. Lundestad graduated from the University of Oslo in 1970 with a degree in history and, in 1976 with a doctorate from the University of Tromsø, the world's northernmost university. From 1974 to 1990, he held various positions as Lecturer and Professor at the University of Tromsø before beginning his positions with the Norwegian Nobel Institute and Committee. Subsequently, he has been associated with the University of Oslo as an Adjunct Professor of International History. Lundestad spent several years in the United States as a research fellow at Harvard

University and at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. He is a member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The Norwegian Nobel Institute (nobelpeaceprize.org) was established in 1904 in Kristiania (today Oslo), Norway. The principal duty of the Nobel Institute is to assist the Norwegian Nobel Committee in the task of selecting the recipient(s) of the annual Nobel Peace Prize and to organize the Nobel award event in Oslo. The institute is situated in the center of the city, just by the side of the Royal Palace. The institute's library is the largest of its kind in Norway. The Nobel Institute also has its own research department, organizing research related to peace and war, and arranges meetings, seminars, and lectures, in addition to holding the Nobel Symposia.

You have a great sense of humor. One would expect the Nobel Committee to be very serious. Are they?

We are. We have our serious moments and we like our decisions to be taken seriously, but we have a lot of fun when we meet. I come from the very northern part of Norway and we pride ourselves on many things, including our sense of humor.

A lot of people don't understand that there are Swedish Committees and a Norwegian Committee.

Yes, the explanation is simple: This is the way Alfred Nobel wanted it and spelled it out in his will from 1895. He was not married and he didn't have children, but he had a vast fortune – he had many patents and invented many things, including dynamite, and he used most of his tremendous wealth for these prizes.

The peace prize is awarded in Oslo and the prizes in medicine, physics, chemistry, and literature are awarded in Stockholm.

In 1969, a memorial prize in economics was added, but this was not a true Nobel prize, although this distinction has been lost to the outside world.

Is there competition between the committees?

Since they have five prizes, they have five committees. We have one prize and one committee in Oslo. The official version is that we are exceedingly close friends. It happens that we have our disagreements, but nothing very serious.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee for Peace is very controversial – you seem to pick people that many in certain parts of the world don't agree with. Is it more socialistic?

No. The committee has five members and they have covered the broad political spectrum in Norway.

But they're all members of the committee part time. You're the glue that keeps everybody together?

This is true. I'm the full-time person. They come in for the meetings, and we normally have six or seven meetings per year.

We don't think there is necessarily anything wrong with controversy. Maybe our most successful prizes have been very controversial. The prize for 1935 went to Carl von Ossietzky, who was the symbol of the opposition to Hitler, and Hitler became furious over it. We awarded prizes to Andrei Sakharov and Lech Walesa, and the old men in the Kremlin became furious over that.

We awarded prizes to the Dalai Lama and to Liu Xiaobo, and the not-so-quiet old men in Beijing became furious over that.

It's not our objective to make all men as furious as possible, but we should never be afraid to stand on principle.

This doesn't mean that all controversial prizes are successful. But the committee should not be afraid of controversy.

You have an unusual sense of humor for someone in such a distinguished position. You have written some books including one called *The Rise and Decline of the American "Empire"*.

I added "Empire" in quotation marks to offend the Americans.

What is that book about? Has the U.S. fallen?

No. Notice the title: it says the rise and decline, not fall. America's position is still very strong; It is undoubtedly the leading power in the world even now.

But if you compare it with previous years, there has been a decline. In 1945, the United States produced as much as the rest of the world together. Now, this percentage is 21, so it has declined from 50. America has also discovered that its military might is not quite as useful as it thought.

Afghanistan and Iraq showed their limitations. Nobody is going to fight a full war with America – they fight asymmetrical wars and they present a huge problem to America.

America also has many other problems, including the debt and political system.

So America is still number one and will remain number one, at least for the next decade or so, but it's likely that within 10 years, China will have a higher production and a larger GDP than the U.S., which will be the first time since 1870 that a country has had a larger GDP than the U.S.

You must have some amusing stories about these high-level secret meetings.

Yes. In 1994, when we awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Rabin, this was very controversial and one member left the committee because he disliked the choice, so we got a new member.

We were anxious about what would happen, but these three were on good terms so they had no difficulties speaking to each other, and I was to follow them closely.

On December 10th, I went down to Yasser Arafat's suite to escort him to the formal banquet and I met his wife, Suha, and she said, you must give them a few minutes because they are doing what they enjoy the most. I walked into the inner part of the suite and there was Yasser Arafat and many leaders of the PLO watching Tom and Jerry cartoons. It was Yasser Arafat's favorite cartoon. So they have their moments of relaxation too.

You're in office for how long?

The members serve six-year terms and they may be reelected, but I became the director and secretary in 1990, so I have been doing this for 24 years. But I will be retiring at the end of this year because then I will be 70. ●