

Introduction to the Peace Prize

The Nobel Peace Prize Committee has honored 86 persons and organizations since 1901. Of those, nearly one quarter come from the United States. Such a preponderance of American laureates provides strong evidence of our country's influence in the great events of the last century.

But what does it mean to receive the Nobel Peace Prize? Where does it come from, and who bestows it? How might someone win such an honor? The answers to these questions go back to the invention of dynamite.



Alfred Nobel's invention was actually aimed at making life safer, especially for miners. Dynamite came from mixing nitro-glycerin (one of the most explosive and volatile substances in the world) and *kieselguhr*, a type of fine sand. The resulting mixture was a paste that could safely be shaped and molded.

Nobel's invention was an enormous success, although his earlier experiments blew up the family home and killed Alfred's younger brother. With dynamite being produced all over Europe, Alfred became very wealthy. When he died in 1895, he willed that his money be used to create a foundation. The foundation would honor excellence in five fields: Medicine, Physics, Chemistry, Literature, and Peace. The sixth field of Economics was added in 1968.

Each year, the Nobel Organization invites thousands of experts to nominate people for the various prizes. The nominees are voted on, and each winner is honored with a medal and a cash prize. While the other five prizes are given out in Nobel's homeland of Sweden, the Peace Prize is voted on and awarded by Norway.

The Peace Prize has gone to many different kinds of people, and not without controversy. Mahatma Gandhi, arguably the last century's greatest symbol of nonviolence, was nominated several times but never won. Henry Kissinger, who won in 1973, is considered by some critics to be a war criminal. And of the nearly ninety honorees, only nine have been women.

The following biographies examine the lives of American Peace Prize laureates. They include presidents, diplomats, relief organizations, ministers, soldiers, and more than one farmer. Each of them has made a lasting impact on the global effort to make war obsolete. Along with each biography are vocabulary terms, study questions, extended exercises, and options for using technology in the classroom.

It is hoped that in studying these laureates, we may learn something about the place we all have in making peace a reality.