

This Day in History... December 10, 1901

First Nobel Prizes are Awarded

On December 10, 1901—exactly five years after the death of Alfred Nobel—the world witnessed something entirely new: a set of international awards created to honor people whose work advanced humanity itself. These first Nobel Prizes were not just a tribute to achievement; they were the fulfillment of a very unusual final wish.

Alfred Nobel was a Swedish industrialist and chemist who made his name—and his fortune—in the world of explosives. His early work focused on stabilizing nitroglycerin, a dangerous but powerful substance, and ultimately led to patents for dynamite, blasting gelatin, and ballistite, a smokeless powder propellant. These innovations fueled massive industrial growth in Europe and the United States and made Nobel enormously wealthy.



Famous for inventing dynamite, Nobel held 355 different patents.

Despite his success, he worried about how he would be remembered. When a French newspaper mistakenly printed his obituary and labeled him the “merchant of death,” Nobel was shaken. In response, he quietly rewrote his will. After his death on December 10, 1896, the great majority of his fortune was dedicated to establishing the Nobel Prizes. Nobel specifically instructed that his wealth be used to celebrate peace, progress, and ideas that push the world forward.

The first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901 went to Jean-Henry Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross. At the time of his award, Dunant was living in a Swiss poorhouse, having fallen into poverty after years of humanitarian work. True to his lifelong commitment to helping others, he donated his prize money to charity. The organization he founded would go on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize three more times—in 1917, 1944, and 1963—for its lifesaving efforts during global conflicts.



When Jean-Henry Dunant received the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901, the award itself helped revive global attention toward the Red Cross. The organization had been struggling with funding and visibility, but Dunant's Nobel recognition sparked renewed international support and led several countries to strengthen or expand their national Red Cross societies.

Just a few years later, the Nobel Peace Prize helped spotlight the important diplomatic work of an American president. Following the death of his Secretary of State in July 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt personally stepped in to handle negotiations to end the Russo-Japanese War. Roosevelt invited diplomats from both nations to meet at Sagamore Hill, his home in Oyster Bay, New York, and later at the naval base in Portsmouth, Virginia. These talks eventually produced the Treaty of Portsmouth, marking the end of the conflict. In 1906, Roosevelt was awarded the



Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership in the negotiations, becoming the first American to receive the prestigious honor.

Roosevelt's relationship with the award reflected his strong sense of duty. He refused to travel to Norway to accept the prize while still in office, believing it inappropriate for a sitting president. Instead, he accepted it in 1910 after leaving the White House. Roosevelt treasured the medal but declined to keep the prize money. Convinced that the award recognized not him personally, but the office of the presidency, he planned to use the funds to promote industrial peace in the United States. By 1918, the trust had grown to more than \$45,000. Roosevelt donated the money in 28 separate gifts to support war relief efforts, including contributions to the Red Cross and the YMCA.

Early in the process, the two delegations refused direct contact. Roosevelt shuffled between separate rooms at Sagamore Hill, carrying messages and proposals back and forth. He also used social events such as luncheons, walks, and cigars on the porch to ease mistrust. Several delegates later wrote that Roosevelt's casual, confident style helped thaw the icy relations between the two sides.



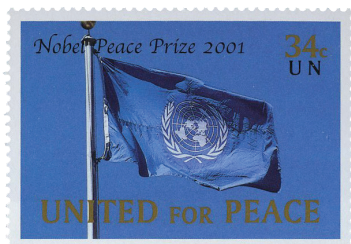
Roosevelt was the first of over 350 Americans to win the Nobel Prize

Nobel's will established five prize categories—physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and peace—to honor work that benefits humanity. (A sixth prize, in economic sciences, was added by the Bank of Sweden in 1968.) Two different organizations award the prizes each December 10, on the anniversary of Nobel's death. In Stockholm, the King of Sweden presents the awards for physics, chemistry, medicine, and literature. Meanwhile, in Oslo, the Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee awards the Peace Prize in a ceremony attended by the King and Queen of Norway. As of 2025,

each Nobel Prize carries a monetary award of 11 million Swedish kronor (roughly US \$1.0–1.2 million), along with a medal and diploma. Up to three individuals may share a single prize; if so, the money is divided among them.

To date, more than 1,000 Nobel Laureates have been recognized, including 990 individuals and over 20 organizations. Among the individual recipients, about 60 women have been honored—far more than in the early decades of the prize's history—while Marie Curie remains one of only four people ever to receive two Nobel Prizes. The youngest laureate is Malala Yousafzai, who was just 17 when she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. The oldest is John B. Goodenough, awarded the 2019 Nobel Prize in Chemistry at the age of 97.

More than a century after Alfred Nobel signed his unusual will, his prizes continue to inspire discoveries, encourage peace, and remind the world that great ideas—when shared—can change everything.



The UN received the Nobel Prize again in 2001 for "their work for a better organized and more peaceful world."



The UN received the Nobel Prize in 1988 for the efforts of their peace-keeping forces.

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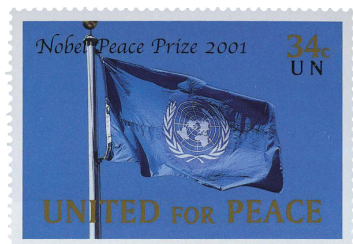
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