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The *Nobel* Savage

Norwegian Do-Goodery as Tragedy

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A widespread and not altogether ridiculous presumption is that small countries, because they can never compete with bigger countries when it comes to economic, political, or military force, tend to orient themselves toward various forms of soft power. Since "aiming for status may well be the only game in town" for these small countries, they become players in a game of "small state status seeking" (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015: 16) – constantly working to maintain a reputation for diplomacy and advocacy, mediation and cooperation, human rights and humanitarianism. Norway is arguably a paradigmatic case of this mode of international relations: While it has never aimed to become a *great* power, it has pursued intensely an ambition of becoming a *good* one (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015). Whatever influence Norway has on the world stage has been gained not by force, or by the threat of force, but by moral example.

This, at any rate, is how things often seem – to Norwegians and foreigners alike. The American scholar Christine Ingebritsen, for instance, classes Norway with the other Scandinavian countries as "norm entrepreneurs" which, by virtue of their characteristic welfare state, have been inclined to project their domestic "model of generous and consistent aid to the poor" (Ingebritsen 2002: 11) onto the world at large. Regardless of how accurate this analysis is, there is no denying that ideas of Norway as a "humanitarian superpower" (Tvedt 2002; Leira 2007), as a "peace nation" (Nissen 2015; Pisarska 2016), and as a frontrunner for sustainability (Ross 2019; Anker 2020) have circulated widely. Whenever a broadly mediatized index puts Norway at or near the top of the world's nations – which has, by now, become a routine occurrence – it appears only to cement former Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland's idea that "Being good is typically Norwegian."[1]

[1] G. H. Brundtland (1992). "Det er typisk norsk å være god," www.virksommeord.no/tale/5485/.

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While there may be some truth to this, we would do well to acknowledge that these images are, first and foremost, aspects of Norway's "nation brand" (see Browning 2007; Aronczyk 2013), and that nation brands are not simple reflections of reality, but products of efforts by certain individuals and institutions to *make* the nation appear in a particular way. To the extent that such efforts have been successful in Norway's case, one will be forced to admit that there is a certain gap between brand and reality: Norway, the peace nation, is a notable producer of weapons and ammunition (Lie and Mikalsen 2012), and regularly deploys its troops abroad (Egeberg 2017). Norway, the environmental pioneer, is one of the world's largest exporters of fossil fuels, and still a long way from delivering on its climate commitments (Sæther 2017). And Norway, the human rights advocate, has been accused of criminalizing immigration (Johansen et al. 2013), as well as of dubious incarceration practices.[2] This goes to show that a small country seeking international status by way of reputation lives dangerously, as it is constantly at risk of being exposed as a hypocrite.

My interest in this chapter is the work that, in the face of such risk, goes into maintaining Norway's self-image and reputation as a good power. I will argue that a key mechanism of such maintenance work is the strategic production and management of ignorance, a phrase that refers to various forms of secrecy, selection, or suppression of information (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008; see also McGoey 2019). While this mechanism may be at work in maintaining the image of any nation, there is reason to believe it is particularly key to small states who endeavor to lead by moral example.

In what follows, I present what the literature has to say about the role of strategic ignorance in creating and maintaining a nation's self-image and reputation. I will then devote the bulk of the chapter to a rhetorical criticism of the TV series *Nobel*, focusing on the narrative means used by the series to give Norway's long-standing contribution to the military operation in Afghanistan fictional form.

Nobel not only exposes Norwegian practices at odds with a strand in this nation's self-image and reputation, it also dramatizes the complex work that goes into maintaining an image of "Norway," at home and abroad. Most importantly, it exposes how strategic ignorance about Norway is produced in the everyday lives of soldiers, politicians,

[2] Nina Johnsrud (2015). "Har kritisert glattcelle-bruk i 22 år," *Dagsavisen*, June 15.

diplomats, media, and citizens. My argument will be that, while *Nobel* artfully fictionalizes how an image of Norway is maintained through production and management of ignorance, the story comes with some troublesome implications. Notably, the tragic form of the narrative suggests that such strategic ignorance management will ultimately, and necessarily, *fail* – that the presumed good power will be revealed as a do-gooder, as secrets are exposed and knowledge replaces ignorance. In the real world, however, this idea offers false hope, and might possibly even be counterproductive: If, by presenting Norway's do-goodery as tragedy, *Nobel* offers its audience a *catharsis* from which viewers emerge with renewed faith – as is the supposition of the tragic form – this series lands us in a wicked paradox indeed.

3.1 Producing National Ignorance

In the last decade or so, research on nations as "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) has been extended, but at the same time complicated, by critical research on nation branding. Scholars like Sue Curry Jansen (2008) and Melissa Aronczyk (2013) have argued, for instance, that, in our age of globalized neoliberalism, the line between the nation as *community* and the nation as *commodity* has been blurred, as the commercialized idiom of the latter has begun to encroach on the former. And while there is no agreement among scholars about just how malignant this commercialization is (see Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016), studies have shown that campaigns to present nations abroad often come into conflict with domestic ideas about what the nation in question is (Jansen 2008; Jordan 2014). The research has thus found many potential tensions between "imagined communities" and "imaged communities" (Clerc and Glover 2015).

Paul Jordan notes, for instance, that "Branding and marketing a nation is . . . inevitably a more fraught project than the branding of commercial goods," not least because it intensifies the question of "who decides/purports to speak on behalf of the nation" (2014: 283–284). In a study of a campaign to brand Estonia, Jordan notes that, in such campaigns, the "perspective of the public living in [the] states that are engaged in the process of nation branding [is] all too often . . . neglected" (2014: 284), and proceeds to show how nation branding campaigns have often collided with the nation's own self-image. In Estonia, citizens felt that the branding campaign "was not organic, and in a sense was a label imposed on Estonia from outside by people with little or no connection to Estonia

the country" (2014: 298). The conundrum, Jordan argues, is that "Nations are complex entities and nation branding as a practice strips them down to a simplified representation in a bid to enhance the marketability of a state. But nation states are not products, so can they really be branded and marketed in the same way?" (2014: 300). Likewise, Göran Bolin and his coauthors have argued persuasively that the basic purposes of nation building and nation branding are clearly distinct, so while there is "tension between the inward- and outward-directed dimensions of the phenomenon" (Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016: 275), there are probably limits to the traffic from one to the other. As they phrase it, while nations are about the heart and soul, nation brands are about the face (Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016; see also Bolin and Miazhevich 2018).

While these studies make sense of how nation branding, in a narrow sense, promotes the reputation of nations in the twenty-first century, the ensuing debates have not left us with many substantial insights into the broader mechanisms by which this happens. Because they tend to focus on branding campaigns designed and effectuated by consultants and agencies, these studies do not sufficiently capture how other institutions – or even citizens themselves – contribute to making and maintaining an image of the nation, domestically and abroad. Hence, these studies cannot explain how nations, while "complex entities," are also "simplified representations," in the sense that they tend to remove from view anything that is unpalatable to the national self-image. We can gain valuable insights about these things, however, if we attach these questions to the literature on agnotology, that is, the study of how and why and with what consequences ignorance is produced.

The study of how strategic ignorance is produced and maintained was first opened up by Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger in their edited volume, *Agnotology* (2008), which demonstrated not just how central ignorance is to social life, but how it can be – and often is – used intentionally to protect and promote certain *people* (say, a celebrity), *products* (not least tobacco and oil), or *prejudices* ("whites are better than blacks"; "men are superior to women").

More recently, Linsey McGoey (2019) has developed this paradigm further, in a study that focuses mainly on how strategic ignorance has been produced to maintain certain cherished economic ideas and principles. Defining strategic ignorance as "any actions which mobilize, manufacture, or exploit unknowns in a wider environment to avoid liability for earlier actions" (2019: 3) or, also, as the ways in which

"non-disclosure is tactically deployed to avoid the repercussions of inconvenient evidence" (2019: 2), McGoey suggests that, while the practice is perhaps most typical of corporate elites out to secure their own privilege, it also extends to ordinary citizens in their imagining of the nation. "[C]itizens typically resent the effort to draw attention to global atrocities carried out by their own governments in both the past and the present" (2019: 40), she notes, and adds that "societies often derive a sense of national identity through what [Gayatri Spivak] terms 'sanctioned ignorance' of state crimes that could undermine a sense of national respectability or honor" (2019: 41). McGoey suggests that such "national mythmaking" can also result in "elite ignorance at the academic level," as the myth "comes to be slowly misperceived as factual reality" (2019: 43).

In what follows, I will offer a reading of the series *Nobel*, as an illustration of how strategic ignorance plays a role in making and maintaining a nation's self-image and reputation. While the series' critique of the "Norwegian brand" is valuable in itself, I believe it might also add a useful perspective to our general knowledge about the broad mechanisms through which such brands are made. Notably, *Nobel* shows that efforts to make and maintain the self-image and reputation of a nation cut across established divides between domestic and foreign, community and commodity. As I will argue, however, the series might also lead us to think, less fruitfully, that such ignorance management schemes are bound, in the end, to fail.

3.2 *Nobel*: Disillusion in Seven Parts

Centered on Norway's deployment of troops to Afghanistan, *Nobel* is arguably the most successful attempt to date to fictionalize Norway's involvement in military operations abroad.[3] It was certainly not the first attempt to raise this issue in the Norwegian public sphere; in fact, almost from the very start, Norway's operation in Afghanistan had been the object of a steady stream of news reports, books, documentaries, and

[3] The seven-part series, which was conceived and written by Mette M. Bølstad and Stephen Uhlander, first aired on Norway's public broadcaster, NRK, in the fall of 2016. It was one of that season's big hits on Norwegian television, and as per 2020, NRK still advertises it on its streaming platform as one of its "most viewed" shows. Since its launch, it has also been made available to an international audience via Netflix, and in 2016, it won the broadcasting award Prix Europa for best drama.

more, some of which was fairly critical.[4] Although the slant of this information flow varied somewhat, it would be fair to say that criticism of the operation had largely failed to make much of an impact on policy (see Eide and Ottosen 2013). The war dragged on, and just as *Nobel* was preparing for its launch, a white paper on Norway's operation in Afghanistan came out, which went quite far toward concluding that the operation – often referred to as "the longest war" – had been a failure: "Despite more than fifteen years of international effort," the report stated somberly, "the situation in Afghanistan remains discouraging." As for Norway's role, it concluded simply that "Overall, Norway's contribution did not make a significant difference to the international mission in Afghanistan" (NOU 2016: 11).

While this increasingly pessimistic context might have provided *Nobel* with a more receptive audience than it might otherwise have had, this series is nothing so straightforward as an intervention into an ongoing debate about Norway's engagements abroad. Rather, *Nobel* is a multifaceted exercise in reflective self-criticism on behalf of the Norwegian nation. As I read it, *Nobel* makes a drama of the many dilemmas of Norwegian foreign policy – not least, how willingly this "peace nation" goes to war – and exposes some of the intricate work that goes into maintaining the image of Norway as a good power.

The series revolves around Erling Riiser, a soldier in Norway's Special Forces, and his wife, Johanne Riiser, a chief-of-staff for Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Building a cast of characters outward from this conveniently placed pair allows *Nobel* to interweave stories on the ground in Afghanistan with behind-the-scenes politics in both Norway and abroad, while it also creates a familiar dramatic frame that touches on marital turbulence, generational bitterness, love triangles, troublesome coworkers, and more. As a collective, the Norwegian characters of the series quite obviously stand for the Norwegian nation, or more precisely, for what historian Terje Tvedt has dubbed *det sørpolitiske system* ("the South-political system"), i.e. the Norwegian elite involved in "humanitarian" efforts in developing countries (Tvedt 2003; see also Toje 2012).

[4] In 2011, for instance, NRK ran a six-part documentary, called *Norway at War – on Mission in Afghanistan*, which was followed up, in 2012, by a stand-alone documentary, *Afghan Nightmare*, and then, in 2013, by a four-part series called *Exit Afghanistan*. The war has also attracted the attention of Norwegian scholarship, of which Eide and Ottosen (2013) is the most relevant contribution for my purposes.

Nobel presents a tapestry of plotlines which all connect, in one way or another, to a conflict over land and power in Afghanistan. A local landlord, Sharif Zamani, owns a piece of oil-rich land, and the Norwegians are tirelessly trying to persuade him to enter into an agreement with Norway's aid agency, NORAD, to enact a petroleum law, inspired by Norway's success with managing its own fossil fuels. The main proponent of this scheme is Rolf Innherad, who works at NORAD's "Oil for Development" program, but whose efforts until now have been frustrated by Zamani.[5] The purpose of the Norwegian law, as Innherad sees it, is to make sure "the spoils can remain with the Afghan people," but Zamani "wants to make money," and is consequently inclined to consider a competing bid from the more commercially inclined Chinese. In frustration, Innherad recruits the partnership of Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs, "Umin." The Minister is apprehensive at first, since Innherad's agenda involves sidelining the Chinese, with whom Umin is trying to close a sizeable trade deal. As the story progresses, however, Umin not only warms to the plan, but begins to see the petroleum law as an occasion for his own scheme to bring peace to Afghanistan.

The plot thickens when Riiser, who has recently returned to Norway from Afghanistan, receives a puzzling text message, apparently from a superior officer, ordering him to immediately pursue a target in Oslo. Obviously, this order goes against protocol, and the message is odd in a number of other ways. Still, it is both well informed and acute, so Riiser rushes to execute the order. Execute is precisely what Riiser does to the target, who turns out to be none other than Sharif Zamani. It later transpires that the message was *not* sent from any official quarters after all, and this circumstance supplies *Nobel* with an element of the *whodunnit*: Who had this information? Who would impersonate Riiser's superiors? And why?

The situation that ensues is indicative of how *Nobel* thematizes strategic production of ignorance: Riiser and his superiors must work to maintain secrecy vis-à-vis the press and the public, but at the same time, they must try to uncover what has been kept secret from *them* – namely, who sent the fake message. This central motive is intertwined with various other narrative threads, where secrecy, strategic ignorance, and the exploitation of unknowns are central drivers. These various storylines motivate the final act of the tragedy, where Umin deceives Afghani

[5] Oil for Development is also in real life a prestigious program at NORAD, https://norad.no/en/front/thematic-areas/oil-for-development/.

government officials about his plans to broker a peace between the central government and the intransigent Taliban. Given the tragic thrust of the narrative, this effort is bound to fail: The Taliban uses the occasion to stage an explosion that kills numerous Afghani government officials, along with several Norwegian diplomats, soldiers, and guards.

In effect, *Nobel* suggests that Norway's ambitions as a peace nation are both hubristic and hypocritical: While it may be true that Norway punches above its weight, it nevertheless tends to overestimate its capabilities. Norwegians fatally think that they can save the world all on their own. Any viewer who comes to *Nobel* with ideas like these is up for a long series of disillusions. The series gives us the story of Norway's good power image in the form of tragedy – it paints a picture of a nation so ignorant of its own hubristic hypocrisy that it is bound, in the end, to crash and burn.

3.3 Good Power, Dirty Hands

At the most immediate level, what *Nobel* does is to expose Norway's reputation as a good power to be a sham. Far from doing good, Norway is here a hypocritical nation which gets its hands dirty on a routine basis. This motif infuses the whole series literally from the very start – beginning with the opening credits, which enact the story of *Nobel* as a kind of micro-drama. In a series of shots featuring the key characters, the credits assemble a sequence of extreme slow-motion explosions. These images announce the war-like context of what we are about to see, but more importantly, they act as a forewarning that "things will blow up" in a figurative sense. The sequence hints clearly toward the tragic form, in that the explosions make a chain reaction, where one explosion leads to another, which leads to another, and so on: Objects, buildings, even some of the characters fracture, splinter, and are ripped apart, while debris floats off into the air as pieces of a rough puzzle. The symbolism is straightforward but effective: The Norwegian flag is torn apart, as if it exploded; a white dove flutters above the bloody corpse of Sharif Zamani; a war-torn Afghani landscape is placed above Oslo's city hall – the site of the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony – as a troubled firmament over the unknowing inhabitants of the peace nation. Toward the end of the credits, we see Riiser, our protagonist, standing despondent in the midst of the rubble of an explosion, a *prolepsis* that hints toward the narrative's tragic end. Finally, before the credits give way to the action, the title – *Nobel* – appears on screen. Then, that too explodes.

The series' title is, of course, a play on words, pointing both to Alfred Nobel and to the "noble" (in Norwegian: *nobel*) image of Norway. The title thus captures one of the main themes of the series, namely Norway's hypocrisy, and it does so by activating connotations that already circulate quite widely. Viewers know that Alfred Nobel was not just the originator of the Nobel Peace Prize, but also the inventor of dynamite, so before the action even begins, its title suggests that the paradoxical origin of the Peace Prize has been handed down, as it were, to Norway, the "peace nation." As inheritors of Nobel's legacy, Norwegians ended up with the good as well as the bad, with *both* peace *and* war. In the same way that one might suspect Alfred Nobel of having instituted the Peace Prize as a gloss on his own reputation, *Nobel* leads us to wonder whether Norway's good power image is not just a smokescreen for all sorts of self-righteous or self-interested wrongdoing. *Nobel* feeds such ideas with a number of scenes and plotlines: We see Norwegian forces disobeying their own protocol not to engage in hostilities; rogue Norwegian soldiers on revenge missions against local Afghani mobsters; senior Norwegian military officials unduly pressuring the media not to publish stories that will place the armed forces in a bad light; Norwegian aid programs used as mere covers for personal and national ambitions; and so forth.

As if actual crimes and misdemeanors were not enough, *Nobel* also confronts us with a score of situations in which the Norwegian characters display a rich catalogue of vices, ranging from ambition to arrogance to possessiveness to naiveté. In fact, if we discount certain marginal figures, each of the central characters of *Nobel* either commits a crime or contributes to covering one up, and many of the misdeeds are perpetrated by people in positions of great power and responsibility – like ministers, senior military officers, aid executives, and journalists. And given that we are to understand this cast of characters as a microcosm of a certain (elite) portion of "Norway," the clear implication is that this good power is not quite what it pretends.

The most striking elaboration of this theme is Riiser's decision to kill Zamani, an unconvicted foreign national on Norwegian soil. Our hero, in short, commits murder – leading us to doubt his moral instincts: *Just how far can the good guys go before we must count them as bad?* Instead of offering an easy answer to this question, *Nobel* complicates it, extending our moral deliberations almost to the very end of the story.

The first complicating factor is that Riiser is a soldier. We have already learned that he is capable of things that most ordinary citizens are not, and that this, in a sense, is his job. In one of the very first scenes, we see

Riiser giving the order to "take out" a young boy wearing a suicide west at an Afghan market, a boy of about the same age as his own son. Further, thanks to his previous interactions with Zamani, Riiser is well aware of this man's lack of scruples. Zamani is no good guy, far from it. The most significant extenuating factor, though, is that Riiser catches Zamani in the act of badly mistreating his wife. By intervening, Riiser thus appears to save the life of an innocent person. If these factors stir our sympathy for Riiser, that sentiment quickly deserts us when we realize that Riiser was not on duty and that the killing took place on Norwegian ground, where he has no mandate to do what he did. We wonder why Riiser did not simply call the police. And we are also forced to reflect on why he had to *kill* Zamani. Surely, as a trained special forces soldier, he would have had ways of merely incapacitating him?

Another extenuating circumstance is that Riiser did not act entirely on his own accord – for was he not, after all, *ordered* to do exactly what he did? *Nobel* instills a certain doubt in us, however, about Riiser's motives. We are made to think that he finds the message odd, and quite naturally, since official orders to kill foreign nationals on Norwegian soil tend not to be delivered anonymously by text message. Still, he *does* act on it. Was Riiser out to do the right thing – and nothing else? Or did he also see the fake order as an opportunity to get rid of a bad-to-the-core trouble-maker? Were Riiser's intentions pure or was the killing on some level an act of vengeance?

By prompting us to consider such questions, *Nobel* forces us to take on a much more complicated view of Norway's self-image and reputation. In scene after scene, Norwegians who on the surface seem out to do good, get caught up in complications that they, in their naiveté, had not foreseen, in complex, cross-cutting landscapes of interest that they are not able to navigate, or – as in the Zamani killing – in getting their hands very dirty indeed. Our doubts about whether Riiser, and by extension, Norway, really is as good as we thought are amplified by his superior officer's reaction when he learns about the episode: "You have to remember he was an asshole. The world is better off without him."

As such, this episode epitomizes a motive that recurs throughout the whole series, namely that when the good guys get their hands dirty, they will soon have their hands full maintaining their image as good guys. It is fitting that the special forces should be placed in the middle of this action, as they are known to be a highly secretive outfit, and part of the suspense of the series derives from these elite forces' attempt to withhold information from the Norwegian public.

As the story unfolds, however, the production of ignorance becomes much more complex than the simple imperative to keep the public suitably uninformed; in *Nobel*, strategic ignorance is an endemic feature of the effort to maintain Norway's image and reputation. In the scene above, for instance, the special forces who are normally "in the know" find themselves having been misled and kept in the dark. While they are trying to keep key facts of the episode hidden from the public, they are themselves in fact ignorant of certain other facts. When we later learn that Rolf Innherad, the NORAD executive, sent the message to get Zamani out of the way, we gradually understand that the deceiver is himself being deceived – by Umin, who uses the petroleum law summit to stage the signing of a peace accord. The intriguing aspect of these various levels of secrecy is that this entire web of cross-cutting strategic ignorance is spun by various actors who all seek to produce and maintain an image of Norway as a good power.

3.4 Hypocrisy and Hubris

The many ploys that the characters in this drama use to keep other people in the dark arguably amount to a particular take on the Norwegian nation. In short, the series suggests that, despite what it and others may think, Norway is a hypocrite and a do-gooder. It purports to help others, but the "good" it supposedly does is not always recognized as such by the "recipients," and what is more, the work of keeping up the appearance of being good comes with significant collateral damage. Whether it intends to do so or not, *Nobel* thus presents a view on the production of Norway's self-image and reputation that recalls historian Terje Tvedt's analysis of the Norwegian "regime of goodness," which he argues is driven by a dehistoricizing deontology that casts Norway in the role as a "humanitarian superpower" (Tvedt 2002, 2003), conveniently giving the nation a mission on the world stage as a sort of spearhead of international solidarity. Tvedt's critique, which I believe we find echoed in *Nobel*, is that Norway is prone to do-goodery, and that a certain elite of Norwegians involved in foreign affairs are inspired by a national self-image in which it is practically inconceivable that Norway, in some situation or other, is *not* doing good.

And *Nobel* details a whole catalogue of "Norwegian vices" characteristic of this elite, vices that will, inevitably, cause its downfall. These vices all feed the mothership of hubris, however, which several of the key characters demonstrate in ample measure. It is not simply that the

Norwegians are naïve and believe they can make rather fantastic schemes come true. It is that faith in their own goodness makes them prone to justify dubious means with lofty ends. The moral logic that *Nobel* attaches to the Norwegians is that, as long as your heart is pure, it makes no difference that your hands are dirty. Or, as Umin at one point says, "If we are to accomplish peace in Afghanistan, we can't worry about stepping on some toes."

In *Nobel*, the Norwegian goodness regime is given dramatic form by several of the key characters, not least Umin, who fills a particularly central, metonymic, role – as symbol and spearhead of that which he is also a part, namely Norway. Umin is quite literally a *representative* of Norway, and thus, a living, breathing incarnation of the "regime of goodness." He is also, however, a representative of certain characteristic Norwegian vices. His foolhardy scheme to bring peace to Afghanistan exemplifies how the goodness regime relies on secrecy. It is not just that Umin possesses information which is unavailable to the common Norwegian, but that his use of this information is paradoxically (one might say, *paternalistically*) motivated by a duty to serve the Norwegian nation. Umin's designs are not plainly corrupt; unlike certain other characters, he is not out to serve his *own* interests in any straightforward, individualistic, way. The vice at play in Umin is not individual glory, but the collective glory that attaches to Norway as a peace nation. So although Umin in virtue of his position is an experienced international player, his way of going about his job is emphatically not that of the more *realpolitische* Americans who occasionally enter the narrative. Umin's monomaniacal attachment to peace prevents him from seeing the facts of the matter; it leads him to assume that others must also see the world as he sees it.

This comes across most clearly in a scene where Umin has staged a negotiation with the Taliban's Mullah Ahmed and his bitter opponent Sharif Zamani. The scene is a rather painful portrayal of how the Norwegian top diplomat is forced to confront his own assumptions about the world. "Even if this country has several parallel ongoing conflicts," begins Umin, "it's obvious to me that behind it all, there exists a solid base for agreement." Unable to conceive of a standpoint outside the ideals of Scandinavian welfare state universalism, Umin adds that: "Everyone wants a society without crime, enough food for everyone, schooling . . ." But at this point, the Mullah forcefully interjects: "For boys!" Umin suggests that some of the Mullah's views about women will be hard to sell internationally, but the Mullah simply responds that the

Taliban has no need for international cooperation. "Look at the map, you're surrounded by superpowers," Umin pleads, and says that, if the different factions could only lay aside their differences, the natural gas underneath them could become a source of great prosperity for Afghanistan. The Norwegian's appeals, which spring from motives of consensus and agreement and the common good, collide, however, with the Afghani's priorities, which are deeply rooted in conflict and partisanship.

Umin's gamble to organize a meeting between these two arch-enemies is risky in itself. Zamani announces that he will need a guarantee that the oil can be extracted without any interference from the Taliban, or they will prefer to make a deal with the Chinese instead – who assumedly are not so concerned about the common good. "You get what you give," Umin says, trying to get the Mullah to commit to an agreement. But the Mullah is not playing by the foreigner's rules:

MULLAH AHMED:	What are you doing here? What do you want?
UMIN:	I have, as you all do, a burning wish for peace in Afghanistan.
MULLAH AHMED:	And what are you prepared to give?
UMIN:	We have an oil deal.
MULLAH AHMED:	[Laughs] And what will we get out of it?
UMIN:	What do you want?
MULLAH AHMED:	Money. A poor warrior in an asymmetric war can always use money. So how much will we get?
UMIN:	For what?
MULLAH AHMED:	You said we all agreed.
UMIN:	Is there any way we can solve this that does not involve our financing Taliban's warfare?
MULLAH AHMED:	Nah . . . [gets up and leaves]. Then there will be no peace after all.

The minister's "burning wish for peace in Afghanistan" is made void. Confronted with something else than his own worldview – in fact, with real, difficult people of flesh and blood – Umin must sit for a lesson in *Realpolitik*. The idea of goodness on which the Norwegian minister relies, turns out to be ineffective; when his deontology bumps up against unapologetically partisan priorities, Umin's schemes fall apart. The Mullah does not desire what Umin unreflectively takes as a premise for the negotiation, namely peace. The Mullah, in fact, *wants war*.

The scene places the Norwegian regime of goodness into deeply troubled circumstances, and in that way, it echoes the sound clip that

overlays *Nobel*'s opening credits, which is taken from Barack Obama's acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, a prize that caused substantial confusion and irritation, considering that Obama at that point had done very little, in many people's estimation, to further peace. Obama did not appear particularly affected, however, but used the acceptance speech – interestingly – to offer a rather hard-nosed defense of violence, which is what we hear over *Nobel*'s opening credits:

> But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their [prophets of nonviolence] examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: *Evil does exist in the world*. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms.

Obama's insight, that *evil does exist in the world*, is precisely what the Norwegians – even their most seasoned and centrally placed diplomat, Umin – can neither see nor accept. The scene where Umin confronts Mullah Ahmed suggests that, despite the Norwegians' assumptions to the contrary, good intentions are not always enough to sort out other people's business. The Mullah implies that the Norwegian's very presence is illegitimate. Meanwhile, Umin has trouble grasping that anyone would *not* want to utilize oil resources for the common good, that they could *not* want peace and prosperity. Despite the paternalistic intention of Umin's proposal – a "deal" meant to serve the "common good" of all Afghanis – the neo-imperialist circumstance of his presence does not even occur to him.

The same sort of incapacity is on display in a related scene, involving Rolf Innherad, the NORAD executive. As he too leaves failed talks with a highly recalcitrant Zamani, Innherad erupts in anger: "Fuck, this is not happening! What a goddamn psychopath. He doesn't care about anything." Arguably, though, it becomes quite apparent from their talks that Zamani indeed cares deeply about a number of things, including his wife, his land, and his future. What he does *not* care for is foreigners who intervene to complicate his relation to these things.

The motivations of both Umin and Innherad are pure; they believe deeply in the goodness of their own agenda. That, however, is part of the problem. Faith in their own goodness blinds them to the possibility that other ways of seeing exist and might be legitimate. In Innherad's case, this blindness will also interfere with his moral compass; when he finds that his appeals to Zamani are to no avail, he sets up a secretive scheme to

have him killed. And while Umin takes no active decision to kill anyone, his own secretive schemes cause a great many lives in the end. As a parable on Norway, the story of Innherad and Umin tells us that this peace nation will have not only to confront violence, but to wield it.

3.5 Nothing Can Stand in the Way of Norwegian Goodness

As in a classic tragedy, the story of *Nobel* brings Riiser and the rest of the cast cascading toward the final catastrophe. Toward the end of the series, Riiser has been taken out of active duty, and via a chain of confusing events, relations with his wife have deteriorated. When she leaves to accompany Umin on a trip to Afghanistan, Riiser decides to take Innherad up on an offer to come along as his private security. But now things spiral ever more wildly out of control. Despite a long line of warning signs, Umin does not relent; he insists on bringing everyone to the table to make peace. Justifying his plan to a somewhat skeptical Johanne Riiser before they leave for Afghanistan, Umin says: "But just think if we can make it happen. A meeting like this, between the government and Taliban, that would be a huge step towards peace in Afghanistan." Laughing, he adds (in English), "*No guts, no glory*."

Apart from the obvious naiveté of his plan, the trouble is that it can only work if Umin keeps central parties ignorant about it; he intentionally neglects to inform the government representatives that the Taliban will also be present. When the Taliban arrive, Innherad objects, as does the Afghani energy minister, but Umin presses on: "Are we ready to sign and begin initial peace talks?" But Umin's pipe dream is about to blow up. Just as he announces that this agreement is "a first step towards public ownership," and that "herein lies a vague glimmer of hope in this troubled nation," a bomb goes off. The Taliban have exploited Umin's dreams of a peace accord for their own, partisan purposes, leaving the building in ruins. Dead bodies litter the reception hall. As Riiser and a handful of others scurry to help those who can be saved, Rolf Innherad, wounded and perplexed, looks over at what appears to be some pages of the petroleum law agreement. A NORAD logo printed proudly on top of the page, a river of fresh, red blood runs across the paper.

If *Nobel* exposes the dirty hands of the presumed good power Norway, showing it to be a hypocritical and self-righteous do-gooder, it does so in a dramatic form much like tragedy. The ultimate catastrophe, where the peace nation's dreams are literally shattered, killing many innocent people in the process, is ushered on by *hubris*, not least that of Rolf

Innherad and Umin, who are so captivated by the ambitions they carry on behalf of the nation as to become quite blind to any obstacles or objections. For them, nothing can stand in the way of Norwegian goodness – until, of course, something does.

3.6 All You Ever Wanted to Know about Ignorance

What *Nobel* gives us, I argue, is a complex and crisscrossing patchwork of secrecies, where groups of people are categorized by their need to know – or *not* know, as the case may be. The various plotlines of the drama present key characters who withhold their identities, who do not disclose their relation to other key characters, or who keep other players in the dark about their real intentions; a military that manipulates the media and the public about crimes committed at home and abroad; members of the elite who liaise with each other to gain classified information; and a media that refrains from publishing stories with obvious news value.

Of course, the withholding of information is a key ingredient in many a crime story, and in *Nobel* – as in many iterations of this genre – we, the viewers, are among those kept in the dark. But as I have suggested, in *Nobel*, the production of ignorance is not just a nifty storytelling technique, it is not there simply to create suspense. Rather, it is the whole point of the series. *Nobel* explores – and critiques – the ignorance-making mechanisms that characterize Norway and Norwegians; it exposes how key players engage in maintenance work to keep this nation's self-image and reputation intact.

The central contribution *Nobel* can make to our thinking on the international work of small states like Norway is to suggest that such complex and crisscrossing patchworks of secrecy will, in the end, come undone. The series' tragic form suggests that all this secrecy, all this deception, all this two-facedness, all these ambitions camouflaged as solidarity, will keep amassing, to a point where the shaky edifice they have built will no longer stand. The ruins that surround Riiser in the opening credits as well as in the final scene is an image of where this strategy will unavoidably end: In the last act, it will all come tumbling down.

In its strongest form, the argument of *Nobel* is that Norway's way of knowing and presenting itself – which are largely coextensive – is a terrible strategy. It is terrible in all senses of the word: It is a form of hypocrisy, and hence *immoral*, but it is also a form of hubris, and hence impractical, or *unrealistic*. Norway's strategy carries great risk, *Nobel*

suggests, because at any point, the hypocrisy can be exposed. If that has not happened yet, it certainly will in the end.

One might object to this argument that to maintain the image or reputation of a nation with the strategic production of ignorance is a necessity for any country. That may be true, since, to the extent even strong states can benefit from soft power strategies, they too are at risk of being exposed as hypocrites. The risk is greater for small countries, however, precisely because this, as de Carvalho and Neumann (2015) pointed out, may be the only strategy available to them. Small states like Norway, who are forced to place all their bets on soft power strategies, cannot very easily take up the strategies that McGoey (2019) calls "strongs" and "smarts" – that is, they cannot appeal to the superiority of their own strength or their own intelligence, since all they will have to back up that claim with is morality, goodness.

3.7 Conclusion: Ignorance Is Bliss

If what *Nobel* does is to present Norway's hypocritical do-goodery as a tragedy, we should note that, while this dramatic form is very effective, it might in the end be counterproductive. According to tradition, the tragic form is supposed to stir the spectators' sense of empathy, so that their feeling of dread and terror builds as the story unfolds, until everything culminates in inevitable catastrophe. The effect of *catharsis*, rendered alternatively as "purification" or "clarification" and presumably (according to Aristotle) to be delivered by tragic spectacles, is supposed to give spectators a renewed perspective on, perhaps even confidence in, themselves. By seeing, and even imagining ourselves into, a story of how terribly bad things can go, we are reassured that *we* will not be going down the same path. In what might seem paradoxical, tragedy aims through intense empathy with the drama to create, in the end, a sense of distance from the horrors it contains.

This effect is complicated in the present case, however, since the primary viewing *we* in question is precisely the *we* that has been exposed in the series. This raises the question of whether the tragic effect is really what we should desire in this case. If "we, Norwegians" were to take from *Nobel* a renewed sense of confidence in ourselves, that would indeed be a paradox of quite gigantic proportions.

As rhetorical scholar Carolyn Miller (1984) famously suggested, genre can productively be understood as a form of social action. If we consider *Nobel* in this light, it would appear that it amounts to a sort of

momentary venting ritual; for a set period of time, *Nobel* invites Norwegians to engage in national self-criticism, but then, at the end, it offers release from the ritual, and allows everyone to go back to normal. It offers national self-flagellation, but done with a silk whip.

To read this national self-criticism as a – ultimately harmless – ritual allows us to understand better why Norwegians do not seem lastingly moved by such scathing critiques of Norway's self-image and reputation as the one offered in *Nobel*. The notion of Norway as a good power is not just a brand that helps differentiate Norway in a globalized and increasingly competitive world, nor is it just a neat way of summing up Norwegians' collective national identity. Rather, this notion is a particularly effective agnostic device, it is a tool that allows Norwegians to distance themselves, politically and morally, from the fact that the world is a nasty place, and which, at the same time, allows other countries to use Norway as a sort of peaceful utopia (see Chapter 1). To put it in no uncertain terms, ignorance is bliss. As McGoey points out, summing up recent research from psychology and behavioral economics, people have a "surprisingly low desire for knowledge." In fact, "people often prefer to act on the basis of ignorance rather than knowledge" (2019: 39). So even if Norway's "small state status seeking" strategy might, as I have pointed out, involve a risk of being exposed as a hypocrite, that does not mean we can assume such exposés will have consequences. As a matter of fact, Norway is quite routinely exposed as a hypocrite, but only rarely do the exposés make a dent. Overall, it is still more comfortable for us to believe in the highly selective self-image, to take the largely doctored reputation at face value. The illusion has great utility.

The very last scene of *Nobel* appears in many ways to incorporate a pessimistic sense that no critique will ever bite, that nothing will ever change – almost as if the series were providing a commentary on itself. We see a group of soldiers, presumably special forces, leave for another mission, while the audio plays a statement from Norway's former Prime Minister (thereafter General Secretary of NATO), Jens Stoltenberg, who underlines that they have agreed to "maintain a presence in Afghanistan, even after the end of our current mission." Even after all this, then, even after the type of catastrophe that ensued from Umin's hubristic and secretive plan to bring peace to Afghanistan, the Norwegians do not change. They never stop believing in what they take to be – obviously – *good*. The very final shot is of a military personnel carrier taking off from the military airport, the implication being that Norway, the peace nation, is – when you look at it – actually quite bellicose.

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