

The right to walk with dignity



“The real objective must always be the good life for all the people. International machinery will mean something to the common man throughout the world only when it is translated into terms that he can understand: peace, bread, housing, clothing, education, good health, and above all, the right to walk with dignity on the world’s great boulevards.”

—Bunche at international conference in Mont Tremblant, Canada, organized to consider the shape of the post-war world, December 1942.

The professional optimist

“I am a professional optimist. If I were not a professional optimist through 21 years in the United Nations service, mainly in conflict areas—Palestine, Congo, here (Cyprus), and in Kashmir—I would be crazy. You have to be optimistic in this work or get out of it...that is, optimistic in the sense of assuming that there is no problem—Cyprus or any other—which cannot be solved and that, therefore, you have to keep at it persistently and you have to have confidence that it can be solved...Personally, I am inclined to pessimism. But by profession I am inclined towards optimism. That makes a good balance.”

—Remarks by Bunche at Nicosia International Airport, Cyprus, July 1966.

Quiet diplomacy



“Towards the end of his life, and at the request of Secretary-General U Thant, Bunche presided over negotiations between Iran, Great Britain and Bahrain. The dispute involved Bahrain’s demand for independence from Great Britain and control over its natural resources. Despite ill health, and with the utmost attention to detail, Bunche negotiated a settlement guaranteeing Bahrain’s independence which was acceptable to all parties. The Bahrain mediation was important because it was a textbook example of settling a dispute by quiet diplomacy before it degenerated into conflict.”

—Excerpt from “Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey”, by Brian Urquhart.



On war and peace

*“A*midst the frenzy and irrationality of a topsy-turvy world, some simple truths would appear to be self-evident...There are some in the world who are prematurely resigned to the inevitability of war. Among them are the advocates of “preventive war”, who in their resignation to war, wish merely to select their own time for initiating it. To suggest that war can prevent war is a base play on words and a despicable form of war-mongering. The objective of any who sincerely believe in peace clearly must be to exhaust every honorable recourse in the effort to save the peace.”

—Excerpt from Bunche’s Nobel Prize Lecture, Oslo, Norway, 10 December 1950.

On third party mediation

“When (Bunche) saw that the parties were not reaching agreement, he did something very important: he drafted proposals. He said, the Israeli position and the Arab position are apart or different—not all that different—so let’s split the difference. And he would make actual proposals for the text and both the Israelis and the Egyptians, and later the Syrians, Lebanese and Jordanians could accept from a trusted third party, proposals that neither of them could initiate himself or accept from his rival... (Bunche) understood, therefore, that he had a great power in that he could write those parts of the agreement which could be accepted by the parties, with some show of reluctance, but which neither of them could possibly have drafted themselves. So it was a very active role indeed. I would say it set...a new tradition in United Nations mediation.”


—Abba Eban, member of the Israeli delegation at the Rhodes armistice talks, 1949.

A story that needs to be told



“The larger society chose to see Bunche as non-black – if not white, then somehow above race... When the larger society no longer needed his legacy for its purposes, he was forgotten. For the black community, Bunche became invisible – his identity lost. That is why Ralph Johnson Bunche is unknown today and that is why his story must be told.”

— Excerpt from “Ralph Bunche: Model Negro or American Other?” by historian Charles P. Henry, from the collection “Ralph Bunche: The Man and His Times”, edited by Benjamin Rivlin.



On human nature...

“I am optimistic enough about my fellow human beings to believe that it is human attitudes, not human nature, that must be feared—and changed...Certainly there is nothing in human nature which renders it impossible for men to live peacefully and harmoniously with one another. Hatred, intolerance, bigotry, chauvinism are never innate—they are the bad lessons taught in society.”

— Excerpt from Bunche’s Lincoln Day address, 12 February, 1951.

Step out into the world with your head high



“In rearing my children I have passed on the philosophy that (my grandmother) Nana taught me as a youngster... the right to be treated as an equal by all other men, she said, is man’s birthright. Never permit anyone to treat you otherwise...Only weaklings give up in the face of obstacles. Be honest and frank with yourself and the world at all times...Never compromise what you know to be the right. Never pick a fight, but never run from one if your principles are at stake. Go out into the world with your head high, and keep it high at all times...Step out into the world with your head high, fight for what is right, but show understanding and tolerance for others.”

—Excerpt from Bunche’s Nobel Prize Lecture, Oslo, Norway, 10 December 1950.