

Ralph Bunche: 1903–1971

Visionary for World Peace

Ralph Bunche was a brilliant scholar and eminent professor who became an internationalist. For his meticulous, unflagging and ultimately successful efforts to resolve the first Arab-Israeli conflict in 1949, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1950, becoming the first black man accorded such distinguished recognition by Norway's Nobel Institute.

He is considered by many to be the original architect of United Nations peacekeeping, a concept he put into practice on the ground in the Middle East and in numerous “hot-spots” around the globe.

During twenty-five years of devoted service to the United Nations, Bunche championed the principle of equal rights for everyone, regardless of race or creed. He believed in “the essential goodness of all people, and that no problem in human relations is insoluble”. Through the UN Trusteeship Council, Bunche readied the international stage for an unprecedented period of transformation, dismantling the old colonial systems in Africa and Asia, and guiding scores of emerging nations through the transition to independence in the post-war era.

Bunche played a prominent role in the drafting of the United Nations Charter, the foundation on which all principles of the Organization are based. He never surrendered in the fight for what he passionately believed to be man's birthright – “the right to be treated as an equal by all other men.” Ralph Bunche was a staunch advocate of human rights, and believed that the struggle for civil rights in America was inextricably linked to the wider cause of justice and freedom for people of all races throughout the world.

Ralph Bunche: The Early Years

Scholar and World Traveler

Born on 7 August 1903 to a family of modest means in Detroit, Michigan, Ralph Bunche grew up primarily in non-segregated neighborhoods. His family moved from Michigan to Ohio, Tennessee and New Mexico. Ralph was orphaned at eleven and thereafter raised by his grandmother “Nana” Johnson in the Watts district of Los Angeles, California.

Bunche was valedictorian of his graduating high school class and won an athletic scholarship to the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA), where he played varsity basketball, participated in debate classes and campus journalism, and graduated summa cum laude with a major in international relations in 1927. The following year he was offered a scholarship to study political science at prestigious Harvard University and, upon completing his M.A., was asked to join the faculty at Howard University in Washington, D.C.—the foremost black college in the United States—where he established their first Political Science Department.

At Howard, Ralph met Ruth Ethel Harris, a school teacher working her way through Howard’s night school, and in 1930 they were married. Bunche pursued an interest in Africa and in colonial and racial issues, and was awarded a scholarship in 1932 to conduct his first field research in West Africa—in Dahomey (now Benin) and Togoland (now Togo and part of Ghana). In 1934, Bunche became the first African-American to earn a Ph.D. degree in government at Harvard University—and also the first in the United States. His dissertation won the Toppan Prize for outstanding research in social studies, and from 1936 to 1938 he carried out post-doctoral studies in anthropology at Northwestern University, the London School of Economics, and Cape Town University in South Africa.

Throughout these years, Bunche retained his position as a faculty member at Howard University. He and his colleagues at Howard were part of an activist “intellectual black elite” in the United States, organizing protests and national conferences, and writing extensively on racial issues and racial equality. They were in the vanguard of what would become a national movement for civil rights decades later. While on sabbatical in 1938, Bunche joined other scholars at the Carnegie Corporation in New York City, where he served as chief assistant and researcher to Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal on “*An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*”—a study of the social, political and economic status of blacks in America.

During the war years, Bunche became a member of the so-called “black cabinet” which President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his advisers consulted on minority issues, and in 1941 he joined the Office of Strategic Services as an expert in colonial and African affairs. Bunche caught the attention of the U.S. State Department in 1944. Despite his reputation as a leading authority on Africa, Bunche’s appointment as Associate Chief of the Division of Dependent Area Affairs was opposed initially, because of his race. Secretary of State Cordell Hull personally intervened to assure that Bunche was hired, making him the first black American to be appointed as officer at the State Department.

Ralph Bunche: Creating the United Nations

Building the Foundation

At the close of World War Two, Bunche was active in the preliminary planning for the United Nations at the Dumbarton Oaks Conversations held in Washington, D.C. in late August, 1944. As an adviser to the U.S. delegation in San Francisco for the founding or “Charter conference” of the United Nations in June 1945, he was closely involved in drafting the UN Charter. In 1946, again as a member of the U.S. delegation, he attended the first session of the UN General Assembly held in London. Soon afterwards, the UN’s first Secretary-General, Norwegian Trygve Lie, “borrowed” Bunche from the U.S. State Department, appointing him Director of the fledgling United Nations Trusteeship Department.

Key to the transformation of the old colonial system in the post-war era was the creation of a document which would establish a set of universal human rights throughout the world. According to Sir Brian Urquhart, a member of the delegation tasked with drafting the UN’s *Declaration of Human Rights*, Bunche was “extremely concerned that the U.S. and other large powers give the human rights provisions of the covenant the respect that they deserved...He solicited the help of Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt...and between Mrs. Roosevelt and Ralph Bunche, those of us who were on the delegation working on these matters, felt that we had the two strongest international forces—human forces—in the world working in favor of it. I don’t think we would have had a human rights treaty...had it not been for that wonderful team.”

As the new United Nations Headquarters was under construction on the banks of the East River in Manhattan, Bunche was asked by Secretary-General Lie to shift gears from his work on trusteeship issues to the “question of Palestine”, and to act as mediator in the UN’s first major international crisis—the Arab-Israeli war of 1948-1949. Bunche would soon spend most of his time far from New York and the UN Secretariat.

Ralph Bunche: Armistice Talks on Rhodes

Master of Mediation

“Bunche was gifted, some thought almost a genius, at drafting; sooner or later he was able to contrive a formula to defeat almost any problem.” *

The most important assignment of Bunche’s career was his peaceful mediation of the armistice agreements between the new nation of Israel and her four Arab neighbors: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. This ended the first Arab-Israeli war in 1949 and, to date, remains the only time that all the parties to the Middle East conflict signed armistice agreements with Israel.

The UN’s involvement in the region began with creation of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) in early 1947, to deal with the sensitive issue of the partition of then British mandate, Palestine. On 29 November 1947, the UN voted on the historic partition plan for Palestine, including what would become the new State of Israel. However, dissatisfaction with the plan fuelled a series of violent incidents in the region which rapidly degenerated into all-out war. To diffuse the situation, in May 1948 the General Assembly appointed Count Folke Bernadotte of Sweden as the first United Nations Mediator in Palestine, and the first mediator in UN history. At the outset of the conflict, Bunche was assigned to work with Bernadotte, and the team traveled extensively in the Middle East, trying to prolong a fragile but temporary cease-fire established by the UN. As hostilities increased, negotiations faltered and tensions escalated among the parties, the UN became the target of attacks. On 17 September 1948, Bernadotte and a French UN Observer were assassinated by a militant Israeli group known as the “Stern Gang”. Bunche was immediately appointed acting Mediator in Palestine, and made recommendations to the General Assembly and Security Council in Paris in October. This was followed by continued pressure on all parties for an agreement to a cease-fire and finally resulted in the opening of armistice talks on 12 January 1949 on the Greek island of Rhodes.

Following six intensive weeks of endless negotiating at the Hotel des Roses, Bunche’s patience and determination paid off, and he obtained signatures on armistice agreements between Israel and the Arab States. This was the first major challenge to confront the United Nations, and Bunche’s achievement proved that the Organization could fulfill its peacekeeping mandate.

On 10 December 1950, Bunche was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace for his work on the Rhodes armistice agreements. He was the first black man in the world to receive the prestigious Peace Prize, and was selected over such luminaries as British statesman Winston Churchill, U.S. President Harry S. Truman, U.S. General George C. Marshall and French humanist Albert Schweitzer.

Ralph Bunche, the authority on peace mediation, dedicated himself to the exacting work of settling conflicts throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and was responsible for bringing peace to such war-ridden areas as Congo, Cyprus, Kashmir and Yemen.

— *Walter Eytan, from “Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey”, by Brian Urquhart.

Ralph Bunche: UN Trusteeship Council

Africanist and Internationalist

“It must be remembered that in his UN role as director of the Department of Trusteeship, Bunche did more than any other single man in setting out the guidelines which helped the nations of Africa reach independence.” – W. Ofuathey-Kodjoe*

Following World War Two, the Trusteeship System was designed to oversee the administration of and facilitate transition to self-government and independence of the former colonial territories. Secretary-General Trygve Lie appointed Bunche as Director of the newly created Trusteeship Department of the United Nations in 1946. At the time, Bunche was widely recognized as the foremost American expert on Africa and colonial affairs, and as a determined advocate of decolonization. His pioneering work at the UN in the 1950s and 1960s was crucial to the fight for self-determination and political independence by close to a billion people of color throughout the world, or roughly one-third of the world map.

Bunche believed that self-determination of colonial peoples was paramount in the maintenance of international order and world peace. He facilitated this work by establishing economic and technical assistance programs for the newly independent nations and rallied the media to focus world attention on the issue of decolonization.

Soon after the process began, the clear majority of trust territories achieved independence. The goals of the Trusteeship System have been fulfilled to such an extent that all trust territories have attained self-government or independence. More than 80 nations formerly under colonial rule have joined the UN as sovereign independent States. When the UN was founded in 1945, only 51 independent nations were members. Today, there are 191 Member States of the Organization; 16 non-self-governing territories remain, the majority of them small island States.

In his lecture to Oslo University in Norway upon receiving the Nobel Prize, Bunche said, “The United Nations exists not merely to preserve the peace but also to make change—even radical change—possible without violent upheaval. The United Nations has no vested interests in the status quo. It seeks a more secure world, a world of progress for all peoples. In the dynamic world society which is the objective of the United Nations, all peoples must have equality and equal rights.”

—*Excerpt from “Ralph Bunche: An African Perspective” by W. Ofuathey-Kodjoe, from the collection “Ralph Bunche: The Man and His Times” edited by Benjamin Rivlin.

Ralph Bunche: The Civil Rights Movement

Trailblazer and Activist

Bunche was a trailblazer in the civil rights movement. While co-director of the Institute of Race Relations at Swarthmore College in 1936, he wrote *A World View of Race*. The following year he participated in the Carnegie Corporation's survey of blacks in America, under the direction of Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, which resulted in the publication of Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*.

He was an early champion of fair labor laws, and was a colleague of A. Philip Randolph, black union leader and activist in the 1930s, although he disagreed with the concept of separate unions based on race, and advocated that blacks become members of integrated unions in a wider national movement. In 1931 he organized a protest against the segregated National Theater in Washington, D.C. where *Porgy and Bess* was playing, and succeeded in having the theater integrated during the run of the play. He helped to found the National Negro Congress in 1936, bringing together black leaders—professional and white-collar workers with manual workers, their leaders and organizers. Bunche always remained true to his principles, even though it meant jeopardizing his own professional advancement. Early in his career, when U.S. President Harry S. Truman offered him the position of Assistant Secretary of State, Bunche declined because of the segregated housing conditions in Washington, D.C.

While Bunche actively championed independence movements throughout Africa, he attracted criticism from black activist leaders in the United States for what they perceived as his neglect of the black freedom movement at home during the 1950s and 1960s. But in fact, Bunche traveled extensively throughout the U.S., including the South, using his stature as a Nobel Prize Laureate to speak out against racial discrimination. Bunche was awarded the Spingarn Medal by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1949 and also served as a Director and Board member for 22 years. In 1959 Bunche spoke before the Periclean Club in the City of Birmingham, Alabama, one of the most segregated cities in the South. In his speech he recalled racial incidents from his youth and urged his listeners to never run from a fight for principles. Ironically, though the mayor honored the Nobel Laureate with the “key to the city”, Bunche was refused a room at Birmingham's Dinker-Tutwiler Hotel during his stay.

In 1963, Bunche attended the funeral of Medgar Evers, the civil rights activist who was brutally murdered in front of his family home in Jackson, Mississippi. Bunche drew the wrath of the Southern press when he remarked that Mississippi was more in need of the UN than South Africa. Bunche walked side by side with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965, prominently carrying a UN flag while the peaceful demonstration advanced. Despite his ill health, he walked several miles on the seminal march to demand voter registration rights for blacks in the South and across America.

In spite of the sometimes sluggish progress of the civil rights movement and the inner-city violence of the 1960s in the United States, Bunche continued advocating full integration, criticizing the concept of black separatism. At the same time, Bunche reasoned, whites needed to demonstrate that “democracy is color-blind”. Bunche exerted his influence personally in speeches and publications, particularly from 1945 to 1965. His message was clear: “Racial prejudice is an unreasoned phenomenon without scientific basis in biology or anthropology; segregation and democracy are incompatible”.

Ralph Bunche:

The Final Years

During the last years of his life Bunche was stoic, refusing to allow increasingly poor health to interfere with his work. By early 1971, he was frequently absent from the office for repeated hospital stays. The last important meeting he attended at UN Headquarters concerned the Middle East and was held on 17 May 1971 in Secretary-General U Thant's office, where Bunche struggled to stay focused. It became clear that he would not recover his health.

In June, U Thant agreed formally to relieve Bunche of his Secretariat post. Throughout that summer and fall, Bunche's condition continued to deteriorate. He died early in the morning on 9 December 1971.

In his eulogy of Bunche, U Thant said, "Ralph was both an idealist and a realist. He believed resolutely in the necessity of making the United Nations work, but he never underestimated the difficulties and frustrations of the peacemaker...He was a practical optimist who believed that whatever might go wrong in matters of peace or justice, it was never too late to try again. His love of humanity and his belief in mankind's ultimate goodness carried him through many a crisis which would have broken a lesser man."

In 1980, "Peace Form One", sculpted by Daniel Johnson, whose father Bunche had known in Los Angeles, was dedicated in the small park on First Avenue, opposite the main entrance to the United Nations. The park was renamed "Ralph Bunche Park."

Chiseled in the granite wall at the edge of the park is Bunche's favorite quotation, which he used as a student orator to preface his remarks in a debating competition at UCLA in 1926 – in the words of Isaiah:

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."