

Ralph Johnson Bunche*

Ralph Johnson Bunche (1903-1971) achieved national and international prominence in 1949 when he successfully mediated a series of armistice agreements between Israel and four Arab states. It was a feat of international diplomacy unparalleled in the long history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and it won him the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize, the first time that a person of color had been so honored.

Bunche joined the U.N. Secretariat in 1946 as director of the Trusteeship Division. In this position he was responsible for overseeing the administration of the United Nations Trust Territories all of which ultimately attained self-government and independence under his guidance. He is credited with having played a critical role at the United Nations in the de-colonization of the world that took place after World War II. In 1957, Bunche was appointed by Dag Hammarskjöld as Undersecretary General for Special Political Affairs, the highest position that can be held by an American in the world organization. Between 1949 and his retirement shortly before his death in 1971, Bunche played significant peacekeeping and mediation roles in several major international conflicts, including the Suez War of 1956 and 1967; the Congo crisis of 1960 and conflicts in Yemen, Cyprus, and Kashmir. He is considered to be the “Father of Peacekeeping” because he conceived and implemented many of the techniques and strategies for international peacekeeping operations that are still in use today by the U.N. In the course of his more than two decades of service to the United Nations, Bunche came to be regarded as the very embodiment of the organization and its ideals, often being referred to as “Mr. U.N.”

Born in modest circumstances and orphaned at an early age, Ralph Bunche grew up under the guidance of his maternal grandmother, Lucy Taylor Johnson. He won a scholarship to UCLA, graduating summa cum laude in 1927 with a scholarship to do post-graduate studies at Harvard University. In 1934 his dissertation on colonialism earned him the Toppan Prize for the year’s best dissertation in political science at Harvard University.

While Bunche is best known for his work at the U.N., his earlier career as a scholar, educator and civil rights activist was also remarkable. In 1928, he was invited to join the faculty of Howard University where he reorganized and headed the political science department and became one of the leaders of a small cadre of radical black intellectuals whom W.E.B. Du Bois labeled the “Young Turks”. Bunche was the youngest member of this group, which included Sterling Brown, E. Franklin Frazier, Abram Harris and Emmet Dorsey. These men represented a new generation of African American intellectuals who approached the “Negro problem” from a perspective that was radically different from that of their predecessors. Among the best known of Bunche’s writings is *A World View of Race*, a treatise on race and colonialism that was published in 1936.

Between 1936 and 1938, in preparation for a book he planned to write on the impact of colonialism upon indigenous peoples and societies, Bunche traveled extensively throughout Africa and the Far East. Upon returning to the United States, he accepted an invitation from Gunnar Myrdal to join him as chief researcher and

writer on a major study designed to explore the impact of race on American society. The study, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, was for decades after its publication in 1944 the primary resource for educators, administrators and others interested in addressing the problems arising from a racially segregated American society.

Bunche's wartime government service began in 1941 when he joined the newly created office of the Coordinator of Information (later the Office of Strategic Services or OSS) as a senior social scientist analyst. Shortly thereafter he was appointed to a post at the State Department where he was involved in planning for the post-war world, much of which focused on the future of the vast overseas possessions of the European powers. In 1945, as advisor to the U.S. delegation to the San Francisco Conference, Bunche played a key role in drafting Chapters XI and XII of the United Nations Charter, which laid the foundation for the eventual de-colonization of the world.

In 1936, he co-founded the National Negro Congress. Bunche's involvement with the organization, which was eventually taken over by communist sympathizers, led to his investigation by the Senate Internal Security Sub-Committee regarding his supposed ties to the Communist Party. Bunche was eventually cleared of all charges, continued his work at the U.N., and shortly afterwards was appointed Under Secretary-General (without portfolio).

Although his position at the U.N. made it politically difficult for him to publicly criticize U.S. policy, Bunche took every opportunity that his celebrity afforded him to speak out against racism in the U.S. And, despite the criticism to which he was subjected, Bunche was actively involved with the Civil Rights Movement. He endorsed the non-violent resistance approach used by Martin Luther King, Jr. and marched with King in the 1963 March on Washington and again in 1965 in the Selma-to-Montgomery Voting Rights March.

In the decades following his Nobel Peace Prize award, Bunche was one of the most revered public figures in America and the world. He was offered a professorship at Harvard University and was awarded honorary doctorates from 69 of America's leading universities. Among the numerous honors received was the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor that the country can confer on its citizens. As the first African American to "cross over" in a field other than sports and entertainment, Bunche symbolized the racial progress that many Americans were hoping for. But, as Bunche never failed to remind both black and white Americans, he was not free as long as all Americans were not free. Yet in many ways Bunche had risen above race.

In his biography, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*, Sir Brian Urquhart describes Bunche's legacy to his country and the world:

"In his journey...through the universities and the capitals, the continents and the conflicts, of the world, Bunche left a legacy of principle, fairness, creative innovation, and solid achievement which deeply impressed his contemporaries and inspired his successors. His memory lives on, especially

in the long struggle for human dignity and against racial discrimination and bigotry, and the growing effectiveness of the United Nations in resolving conflicts and keeping the peace. As Ralph Johnson Bunche would have wished, that is his living memorial.”

**Adapted from the Teacher's Guide by Thom Ward for Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*

Suggested Websites and Other Resources – Ralph J. Bunche

www.ralphbunche.com

The homepage for both *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* and *Ralph Bunche: The Odyssey Continues*. Links to photographs, biographical information, and support materials for teachers.

<http://www.pbs.org/ralphbunche>

This address points to information about the two-hour film, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*, including links to photographs, summaries of key events and accomplishments in Dr. Bunche's life, and related educational materials. *Ralph Bunche: The Odyssey Continues* is an expanded version of this documentary that aired nationally on PBS.

<http://www.ralphbunchecentenary.org/>

The homepage for the Ralph Bunche Centenary celebrations which took place in 2003-2004, with links to photos, bibliographies, and other resources.

<http://www.un.org>

The homepage for the United Nations, including links to the Cyber School Bus (educational support materials) and Model U.N. program.

<http://nobelprize.org/>

The homepage for the Nobel Foundation, including links to information about the Peace Prize, lists of Peace Prize winners, their acceptance speeches, and biographies.

<http://cia.gov>

The homepage for the Central Intelligence Agency, including links to The World Factbook, a public domain resource of facts and maps about every country in the world.

<http://americanmemory.org>

A digitalized collection of millions of artifacts from the Library of Congress, the American Memory Historical Collections contains primary sources — photos, videos, audio recordings, maps, handwritten journals, and more.

<http://www.socialstudies.org>

The homepage of the National Council for the Social Studies, with links to teaching resources, lesson plans, and standards.

Infinite Patience, Indomitable Will: Ralph Bunche: His Struggle for Peace and Justice, a curriculum based on primary source documents developed by the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA. For ordering information and sample lessons from world and U.S. history based on primary sources, go to:

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/>

The United Nations: Challenges and Change, a curriculum for secondary level students produced by Choices for the 21st Century Education Program, Watson Institute, Brown University. For information and ordering, go to:

http://www.choices.edu/curriculum_unit.cfm?id=39