

# Ralph Johnson Bunche

*Brief life of a champion of human dignity: 1903-1971*

by BENJAMIN RIVLIN

IN THE FALL of 1927, the small group of black students at Harvard learned of the impending arrival of an exceptionally gifted new black graduate student from Los Angeles. Ralph Johnson Bunche lived up to his advance notices. Robert C. Weaver '29, Ph.D. '34, LL.D. '64—later the first black presidential cabinet member—reported, “What impressed me most about Ralph was his optimism...based on a long history of overcoming obstacles and an uncanny ability to produce stupendous amounts of work over long sustained periods....”

Orphaned at 13, Bunche was raised by his maternal grandmother, “Nana,” who instilled within him pride in his race and the notion that he “could do it.” When he was assigned to a vocational track in high school, she protested, “Ralph [is] going to college!” He excelled in the academic program, though he was excluded from the citywide honor society because of his race. At UCLA, he stood out as a student and athlete. In his valedictory address, he foresaw his future role as a “scholar-activist,” telling classmates: “Man *learns* and *knows*, but he does not *do* as well as he knows....”

Having earned a master's in government in 1928, Bunche joined the Howard University faculty, then the intellectual powerhouse of Negro America. There he established and chaired the political-science department and met his future wife, Ruth Ethel Harris. He focused on race relations, civil rights, and colonialism, which he saw as a continuum of the struggle to secure racial equality and dignity for all people in America and throughout the world.

The 1930s were filled with teaching, research, and activism. He helped establish the National Negro Congress with A. Philip Randolph, organized a protest against a production of *Porgy and Bess* at Washington's segregated National Theater, prepared a report for the Republican Party program committee on why Negroes had deserted the party of Lincoln, and served as Gunnar Myrdal's chief research associate on the Carnegie Corporation-sponsored study published as *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem in Modern Democracy*. He also published his own perceptive monograph *A World View of Race*, positing that “race is a social concept which can be and is employed effectively to rouse and rationalize emotions [and] an admirable device for the cultivation of group prejudices.”

After research on colonialism in West Africa, Bunche completed his Harvard Ph.D. in 1934, winning the Toppin Prize for the best dissertation in political science. In 1936, he broadened his fieldwork with a trip to East Africa. (To prepare, he studied Swahili in London with Jomo Kenyatta, the future president of Kenya.) He also visited the Union of South Africa. Recognizing the anomaly a black American social scientist presented in that country, he wrote, “[A]ny American Negro visiting South Africa is a missionary

whether or not he wills it. But he doesn't have to be a *religious* missionary.” The negative self-image he found among the nonwhite majority concerned him; although his primary purpose was anthropological research, he gave “pep talks” to bolster African self-esteem. To Bunche, the conditions of colonial peoples throughout the world paralleled the condition of blacks in his own country, subject to racism and economic deprivation. The Urban League's Vernon Jordan noted that he was “an inspirational beacon to young black people for decades...in the forefront of those building new black consciousness in the thirties and forties.” Later Bunche would turn down high appointments from Presidents Harry Truman and John Kennedy, letting it be known that he did not wish to live in then Jim-Crow Washington. Historian John Hope Franklin credits him with “creating a new category of leadership among African-Americans” due to his unique ability “to take the power and prestige he accumulated...to address the problems of his community.”

Bunche's road to world prominence started two months before Pearl Harbor, when he was recruited to work on colonial problems and Africa for what became the Office of Strategic Services. Then came calls in 1944 to the State Department (where he was the first black professional officer), to the San Francisco Conference in 1945 that drafted the UN Charter, and to the UN Secretariat in 1946 as director of the Trusteeship Department. In 1950, he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his successful mediation of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War: the first time the prize was conferred on a UN affiliate and the first recognition by that Nobel committee of any person of color. *Ebony* magazine called him “The Most Honored Negro in the World.” Harvard had already recognized him with an honorary degree in 1949 and offered a tenured professorship in 1950. But by then Bunche had become indispensable to UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and later U Thant. As under secretary-general, he played a major role in the many UN peace-keeping operations organized during his lifetime.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell has said, “As he confronted every tough challenge of his personal and professional life, Ralph Bunche acted on his deeply held conviction that every human being has the capacity to overcome obstacles and to change the world for the better.” As Bunche himself told his Nobel audience, “I...believe in the essential goodness of my fellow man, which leads me to believe that no problem of human relations is ever insoluble.” ▢

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Grace and determination: as boxer, diplomat, and with Martin Luther King Jr. (on the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery), UN Secretary-General U Thant and Lyndon Johnson, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Bunche commissioned special plates to mark the 1949 Egyptian-Israeli armistice negotiations on Rhodes; when a participant asked what he would have done with them had the talks failed, Bunche smiled and replied, "Break them over your heads."