

Conflict Resolution and Peacekeeping

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The following notes suggest ways in which College/University instructors who are teaching courses in Political Science can utilize the film *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*. Such courses include, but are not limited to, international relations, international organization, conflict resolution, peacekeeping and multilateralism.

Introduction

The gulf between theory and practice is no where greater than in the political institutions of the United Nations (UN). The principles and objectives of the UN Charter represent an "ideal" for the international community. They embody a theory of conflict management that rests on great power consensus and collective security. In reality, however, the great powers were unable to reach consensus on how to maintain international peace and security during the Cold War era - the period during which Ralph Bunche loyally served the government of the United States as well as the United Nations. The political realities of the post World War II period handcuffed the UN Security Council and limited the application of the Charter provisions. During this period, Wilsonian utopianism gave way to Realpolitik and the institutional multilateral structures that emerged out of the war floundered in their attempt to keep the world at peace.

It is ironic that in the midst of this chasm of theory and practice stood an individual whose entire career was devoted to blending theory and praxis, scholarship and activism, idealism and pragmatism. Ralph Bunche, to use a Gramscian phrase, can be called an organic intellectual. Whether he was dealing with the decolonization phenomenon, or mediating armistices between Israel and its Arab neighbors, or putting in place the conflict management innovation which we now know as "peacekeeping", Ralph Bunche tried to put theory in the service of practice and to bridge the gap between what was hoped for and what was actually attainable.

It would be useful as you watch the film to ask: to what extent was Ralph Bunche successful in trying to bridge the theory/praxis gap? What were the theoretical underpinnings that guided his actions as a diplomat? What normative convictions did he hold which caused him to devote so much of his time and energy to assisting Africans, Caribbeans and Asians in their quest for independence from the imperial powers? How did his background as a scholar prepare him for a career within the United Nations? Did his attempt as an activist to reconcile the extremes in American society (between black and white, rich and poor) have anything to do with his efforts to end colonization, world poverty and global apartheid? Was there any correlation between his methodical academic writing style and the drafting skill he exhibited in his contributions to Chapters XI, XII and XIII of the UN Charter or in drawing up armistice agreements between Israeli and Arab enemies? How well did his academic and political background prepare him for the task of taking Lester B. Pearson's concept of separating warring factions and turning it into the practice of what we call today as 'peacekeeping'? In the end, how successful was Ralph Bunche in straddling the theory/praxis and scholar/diplomat divide?

Ralph Bunche: From Scholar to Multilateral Diplomat

Henry Kissinger, like Ralph Bunche, was considered an effective diplomat. Yet, his approach to diplomacy provides a study in contrast with that of Ralph Bunche. For one thing, Kissinger's preoccupation was with national diplomacy in the interest of a global superpower, the United States, whereas Bunche devoted himself to multilateral diplomacy in the interest of the international community through the United Nations.

The contrasts do not end there. Bunche, the Harvard educated scholar, probably would have agreed with Kissinger's endorsement of Hans Morgenthau's moderate realism -- which called for a confluence of the geopolitical and moral aims of realpolitik and Wilsonian idealism.¹ But Kissinger's clear preference, ultimately, for a version of amoral realpolitik over Wilsonian idealism² might not have sat that well with Bunche, the UN diplomat. Kissinger had argued that idealism was both 'too vague and too legalistic', and indeed too utopian, to guide responsible, rational statesmanship. Thus, for a realist like Kissinger, the UN could only be an arena and echo for the balancing of the contests of major powers. Whereas, for Bunche, the UN was a potential channel for bringing social equity, justice and peace to the globe, in spite of particular great power national interests.

Ralph Bunche was therefore able to avoid the cynicism that masqueraded as realism, even though he had temporarily lost faith in the essential goodness of humans after witnessing the rise of fascism and Nazism. In the end, he held the conviction that "despite so much wickedness, and evil design in the world, man is essentially good."³ For Bunche, along the continuum between extreme amoral realism and extreme utopian idealism, there were a variety of positions that analysts and policymakers might take with respect to diplomacy. Clearly, from the film one can get a sense of that blending of idealism with realism as Bunche, the UN Acting Mediator (after the assassination of Count Folke Bernadotte), successfully negotiated armistice agreements between Israel and four of its Arab neighboring enemies - Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. This success catapulted Bunche into the spotlight and earned him a Noble Peace Prize in 1950 (the first person of color in the world to achieve that honor).

It might be useful to examine Bunche's role as a UN diplomat and ask whether his success as a mediator was merely coincidental. Was he simply in the right place at the right time? Would there have been a different result if someone other than Bunche were in the position to negotiate the armistice agreement? Was Bunche successful because he was a masterful negotiator or because the Israeli and Arab state leaders had good political and military reasons for accepting this arrangement? Can Bunche's success as a mediator in the Middle East be explained by the fortuitous coincidence of circumstance, or did he really possess and personified the 'moral authority' of the UN? Were Bunche's diplomatic successes due to his intelligence, expert knowledge, sound background preparation and skill at draftsmanship? Or did he simply have the uncanny ability to formulate compromise solutions between belligerent factions? Did it have anything to do with his personal charm, the force of his personality, his patience, his good humor, the fact that he was a black American, or his skill at developing procedural innovations? Was he able to combine stubbornness in terms of the end-goal with flexibility of procedure? How shrewd was he in dealing with the Israelis and Arabs?

Ralph Bunche: Champion of Self-determination and decolonization

Bunche's focus on the experience of the 750 million indigenous peoples world-wide who were subject to colonialism and imperialism in 1945 can be linked to his interest in the experience of his own people - the subjugated blacks in American society. To him, "the condition of the American Negro and that of black Africa, as well as that of colonial peoples throughout the world, was part and parcel of the same problem of racism and economic deprivation."⁴ His stated mission in life was to combat this problem at home as well as abroad. His academic work, public speeches, monographs and articles had been devoted to addressing this issue in one form or another.⁵

Thus, it comes as no surprise that he, for example, accepted a position in the US government as an expert on colonial problems, became chief of the African section of the Research and Analysis Branch of the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and later went on to work in the Office of Dependent Area Affairs at the US State Department. At the end of World War II Bunche served as adviser on colonialism with the US delegation at the UN founding conference in San Francisco. He was one of the main drafters of the sections of the UN Charter dealing with potential emancipation of colonized peoples and in 1946 joined the UN Secretariat as director of its Trusteeship Division. As one writer put it, Bunche found himself at the center of one of the great historical phenomena of the twentieth century - the process of decolonization, the dissolution of the great European empires, the reassertion of independence by people of color throughout the world in the aftermath of World War II.

Was there something in his academic scholarship that prepared Bunche for these roles? Was he able to transcend racism in his own country because of the positions he held? Did Bunche draw parallels between the plight of black Americans and those who were dispossessed by imperialism? Did his past Marxist and leftist leaning influence the position he took on decolonization? How did his past affect his posts in the UN?

Ralph Bunche: the Peacekeeper

One of the ways in which the UN tried to bridge the gap between theory and practice during the Cold War era was through innovations. Since collective security, as envisioned in the UN Charter, was inoperable due to the hostility of the Cold War climate, the organization had to find creative ways of maintaining international peace and security. Peacekeeping was one of the UN innovations during the Cold War, and Ralph Bunche was at the center of this novel development.

When Canadian Lester B. Pearson proposed to the UN General Assembly a concept that would keep warring factions in the Middle East apart long enough to get them to the bargaining table, it was left to the then UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld to make this concept a reality. The UN Secretary-General turned to Bunche to implement this concept. As Sir Brian Urquhart states: "Ralph Bunche was unquestionably the original practical architect of 'this novel but still fragile creation' that is now called 'peacekeeping', and he probably did more to develop the technique than any other person."⁶ The first ever UN peacekeeping operation dealt with truce supervision in seven states around Palestine in 1948. From this experience the theory and operational practices of peacekeeping developed.

What precisely were the initial rules governing UN peacekeeping operations? Have these rules been sustained over the years? Is UN peacekeeping, as Bunche saw it, a continuation of mediation and diplomacy? What challenges did Bunche face with the early iteration of UN peacekeeping? How successful was the United Nations Emergency Force in the Middle East? Was Bunche's past experience of brokering an armistice arrangement between Israel and its Arab neighbors useful in the development of the first UN peacekeeping operation? How has Bunche's notion of UN peacekeeping changed today?

Conclusion

Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey portrays the life of an intellectual who was also an activist, of a scholar who was also a diplomat, of an idealist who was also a pragmatist, of a black man who was able to transcend race in his fight for peace and justice for the human race. Ralph Bunche's life represents that of a peacemaker, a conflict manager, a mediator, a negotiator, and an innovator. His competence and skill was so sought after that he was able to reach heights which most of his fellow American blacks could never have achieved. Can his success be attributed to luck? He seemed always to be in the right place at the right time. Or does this life story confirm the importance of agency in global politics (i.e. that one person with bright ideas, a moral cause and lofty ambition can indeed make a difference in this world)? You be the judge.

Endnotes

¹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. 891

² *Ibid.*, pp. 812-13

³ Benjamin Rivlin, "The Legacy of Ralph Bunche," Benjamin Rivlin (ed.), *Ralph Bunche: The Man and His Times* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), p.20

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.10-11

⁵ See, for example, the following works by Ralph Bunche: *French Administration in Togoland and Dahomey*, Ph.D. dissertation thesis (Harvard University 1934); *A World View of Race* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968); *Report on the Needs of the Negro*, for the Republican Program Committee (July 1939); "The Negro in the Political Life of the United States," *Journal of Negro Education*, vol.10, no. 3 (July 1941); and "Trusteeship and Non-Self-Governing Territories in the Charter of the United Nations," *Department of State Bulletin*, 13 (December 1945).

⁶ Brian Urquhart, "Ralph Bunche and the Development of UN Peacekeeping," Benjamin Rivlin (ed.), *Ralph Bunche: The Man and His Times* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), p.187

Further Readings

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