

Ralph Bunche, Government and Foreign Policy

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Association with Government Agencies

Dr. Ralph J. Bunche expressed an early interest in international affairs and he was extremely sensitive to its complexities early in his life, even as an undergraduate student at UCLA. This is evidenced by a prescient statement he made in 1926 as a member of the debate team:

"There is not the slightest doubt that by vicious use of propaganda, preying upon the racial and nationalistic hatreds of the peoples of the world, this universe could very shortly again be transformed into a seething cauldron of infuriated nations." (Brian Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*, New York: W. W. Norton and Co. p. 40)

He went on to suggest in this statement that, building upon a positive view of the efforts of the League of Nations, peace could "only be achieved through international organization involving every nation of the world; and the full development of the international mind or will." Then, as a graduate student at Harvard University, he was exposed to the issues of Colonialism first-hand through field research in West Africa for his Doctoral Dissertation in which he compared French colonial administration in Togoland and Dahomey.

Later on, as a professional political scientist at Howard University, Bunche taught courses and conducted research on a number of issues related to the behavior of governments and he became an assiduous student of the dynamics of European Colonialism, especially in Africa. One of the most respected authorities on that subject in the United States, Bunche became convinced that Colonialism was immoral and that, in any case, it would gradually come to an end. In May of 1936, he organized a Conference at Howard University on, "The Crisis of Modern Imperialism in Africa," and later traveled to London, South and East Africa, and Southeast Asia, under sponsorship of the Social Science Research Council as preparation for his study of Western colonialism from the perspective of the colonial peoples.

Ralph Bunche left his position as a Professor of Political Science at Howard University in Washington, DC on September 10, 1941 to assume a career in the U.S. foreign policy establishment as an analyst in the Office of Coordination of Information, located in the Library of Congress. This office, which soon after became the Office of Strategic Services, had the task of preparing information on international issues related to the war effort. Bunche, became head of the Africa section which played a role in providing information on North Africa for the U. S. military campaign.

Then, on January 4, 1944, Bunche was appointed to a post in the Near East and African Section of the Department of State. Not long after, in July 1944, he was assigned to the International Security Organization Section of the State Department to work on matters related to Trusteeship which involved post-war planning for so-called "Dependent territories." Bunche joined the United Nations Secretariat as head of the Trusteeship Division in December of 1946, thus beginning a long career as an international civil servant.

Questions

The film raises provocative questions such as:

- Why did Ralph Bunche, a former professor and progressive political activist, go to work for an intelligence agency of the US government?
- Why did Bunche move to the State Department and how was he received as its first black officer?
- Why was Bunche seconded to the United Nations Trusteeship Division and what was his contribution to the development of that institution's mechanism for decolonization of "Third World territories?"
- Why did Bunche refuse to return to the State Department and what might have been his future and that of his family if he had returned?
- What relationship did Bunche have with other black leaders about the course of World War II and black participation in it? How did they perceive his new role and responsibilities in the United States government and the United Nations?
- Given the drafting of the document, The Atlantic Charter and Africa, did Ralph Bunche and black leaders have similar views on the disposition of African territory in the post-war period?

Modern relevance

The study of the life of Dr. Ralph Bunche, as well as the dialogue provoked by the answers to the questions raised above, not only clarify the rationale for many of the exploits in which he was involved, but also suggests issues that, historically, have been consistent themes of African American participation in American foreign affairs. Black Americans have had a role in American diplomacy as Black ambassadors at least since Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett was appointed as Envoy to Haiti, April 6, 1869, followed by Frederick Douglass. However, the major route to high diplomatic service for blacks, since Bunche's time, has been through politics as members of Congress serving on the U.S. Delegation to the United Nations or who have had Congressional foreign affairs responsibilities. No African American has risen to a post similar to that held by Ralph Bunche since he departed as Undersecretary to the United Nations.

In January of 2001, President George W. Bush appointed Colin Powell to be the first African American Secretary of State, a fact which prompted considerable interest in the question of what would be the nature of his contribution to American foreign policy. Undoubtedly, the range of Dr. Bunche's experience and status in both the State Department and in the United Nations could easily lead one to believe that he may also have held such a position, had he been so disposed. But given the racial context he faced, he most assuredly viewed this as a possibility for the very remote future, if ever.

In fact, Bunche was offered the job of Assistant Secretary of State by Truman in 1948 and Kennedy broached the idea of an appointment to the position of Secretary of State, but Bunche declined both offers to stay at the UN. He also told Truman that he would not be willing to move his family back to Jim Crow Washington.

Discussion Points:

1. In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy sought to change the nature of American ambassadorial representation to Africa and special State Department programs were developed to begin to facilitate the entry of African Americans into the foreign service. What is the status of African Americans in foreign policy roles today and what are the prospects for the future?
2. Many African Americans believed that their inclusion in high levels of the American foreign policy establishment would improve the substance of American foreign policy toward Africa. However, many African heads of state thought that this would be damaging to their relations with the American government, since blacks did not possess the requisite status in American society to assist them. Which view is correct?
3. The office for which Ralph Bunche worked, the Office of Strategic Services, was devoted to winning World War II and was a very different agency from that which afterward became the Central Intelligence Agency. What is the source of the tension that exist between blacks and American intelligence agencies such as the CIA?
4. The leadership skills and other outstanding abilities Bunche possessed, such as drafting diplomatic texts and managing negotiations were pertinent to his success. What is the relevance of such skills to the conduct of American foreign policy today?
5. Few basic texts in international politics, international conflict or international organization, include the exploits of Dr. Ralph Bunche as examples of outstanding diplomacy. Is this because of the heavy emphasis in the discipline on theoretical understanding of the field, the devalued role of international civil servants in diplomatic history of their organizations, or racial discrimination?
6. The United States dominated the development, administration, mission and politics of the United Nations after its birth and for most of the second half of the twentieth Century. Has the United Nations's role in American foreign policy diminished or has the form of that dominance simply changed?

Suggestions for Further Independent research

1. There is a strong inference among some scholars that Dr. Ralph Bunche was largely responsible for the drafting of Chapters 11 and 12 of the United Nations Charter. In light of the tremendous impact which these international legal regimes have had on promoting the independence of colonial peoples, there should be additional research into his contributions to the interplay between the European governments and the leaders of African movements, in a more comprehensive picture of the politics of the independence phenomenon.
2. It is clear that there were individuals within the American State Department such as Cordell Hull, Major Dean Rusk, and others whose views and actions about the inclusion of blacks in high level roles were contrary to those of others in the foreign policy establishment. This internal struggle among leading white elites has rarely been exposed to public view and would be an interesting and important contribution to the relatively sparse literature of race relations in American foreign policy.
3. There have been various African American mobilizations opposing various aspects of American foreign policy, yet there is little research on the efficacy of those movements in changing the substance of policy.

For example, there was the irony of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. leading a massive protest at the United Nations over the crisis in Vietnam while Dr. Ralph Bunche was inside the building voicing his opposition to such tactics. On the other hand, in the 1980s, protest initiated by black activists contributed toward the disengagement of the U.S. Government from South Africa.

Conclusion

Courses in international politics, African studies, African American Studies, American foreign policy making, or American government and politics will find this film to be a rich source of materials on such government related topics as U.S. government preparation for the post war era, the rise of McCarthyism and the impact of the Cold War on the United Nations, U.S. government participation in international crises involving the United Nations, African Americans in U.S. foreign policy and inter-governmental management of African crises.

Secondly, the conditions which promoted the meteoric rise of Ralph Bunche into the higher echelons of international diplomacy deserves more attention by scholars at all levels. This film and Bunche's legacy raises the question of contribution of blacks and other peoples of color to American foreign policy, especially in the context of the expansion of agencies which contribute to such policies, the diversification of American human resources and the growing interests of the country around the world.