

# *Ralph Bunche, International Civil Servant*

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These Notes focus on the role Ralph Bunche played in various capacities during his 25 years of service at the United Nations. They were prepared for instructors interested in using *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* to enhance their presentation in courses on the United Nations and international organizations. The Notes provide some preliminary answers to the following questions:

Why is Ralph Johnson Bunche considered to be the ideal international servant?

Hundreds, if not thousands, of distinguished individuals from countries all over the world have served in high posts with the United Nations Secretariat in the more than half century of its existence. But no one stands out as the exemplar par excellence of the international servant as does Ralph Bunche. Bunche brought to his metier beyond the sine qua non of dedication to duty and hard work, the rare combination of intellectual acuity and human sensitivity, of erudite expertise with the personality of an empathetic humanitarian that served him well in whatever assignment he undertook for the organization.

What were some of the principles that guided him in his work?

A clue may be found in the valedictory address Bunche delivered upon his graduation from UCLA in 1928 where he told his fellow graduates that "If the mission of [their "higher"] education be filled ... We shall have become more altruistic and less selfish ... more internationally-minded -- less insular-minded [and] have succeeded in slipping in the skin of others." He also spoke of the 'great man' -- the leader, the socially valuable man as the large-hearted citizen of the Universe, member of the universal society."

What factors in Bunche's background and training prepared him for his job as Director of the U.N. Trusteeship Department?

Bunche's doctoral dissertation at Harvard, *French Administration in Togoland and Dahomey* (1934) examined the workings of one of the mandated territories of the League of Nations Mandate System, the earliest instance of international intervention in the pre-World War II imperial colonial preserves and the precursor of the United Nations Trusteeship System. His post-doctoral study in anthropology with the world's most eminent anthropologists -- Melville Herskovits at Northwestern University, Bronislaw Malinowski in London and Isaac Schapera in Cape Town, South Africa -- together with research field trips in West Africa, East Africa, South Africa and Southeast Asia gave him first-hand knowledge and experience in the problems of colonialism in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

As a result of his studies and research in the 1930's, Bunche was recognized as one of the foremost experts on colonialism in the United States both inside and outside the government. In 1941, he was called upon to work as social science analyst in the Africa and Far East Section of the Office of the Coordination of Information, the precursor to the Office of Strategic Services. At the same time he was participating in the Committee on Africa, the War and Peace Aims, serving as head of the editorial committee that, in 1942, published *The Atlantic Charter and Africa from an American Standpoint*. That same year, he served as rapporteur of the round-table on social and demographic matters at the Mont Tremblant Conference (Quebec) of the Institute of Pacific Relations, which brought together distinguished colonial administrators and scholars. Bunche was lauded for his report to the conference which contains his vision of the role of the world community when he wrote: "Schemes of future international organization ... must always be the good life for the people. International machinery will mean something to the man in the Orient, as indeed to the common man throughout world, only when translated into terms that he can understand: peace, bread, housing, clothing, education, good health, and above all, the right to walk with dignity on the world's great boulevards."

In the Office of Strategic Services he served as chief of the Africa Section of its Research and Analysis Branch until he was called in 1944 to join the State Department's post-war planning group, working on the future of colonial territories. In this office, plans for the implementation of the Atlantic Charter's promise of "the right of all peoples [including colonial] to choose the form of government under which they will live" were being developed for inclusion in a yet-to-be created United Nations Organization. The framework for the United Nations was developed at the Dumbarton Oaks Conference in August 1944. Bunche attended this conference as an adviser to the U.S. delegation but the issue of colonies was not dealt with due to a strong difference of opinion within the American delegation between the State and Navy departments. It was not until the San Francisco Conference in June 1945 that the differences were resolved and the issues of the future of colonial territories were included in the UN Charter's Chapter XI, "Declaration Regarding Non-Self Governing Territories", Chapter XII, "International Trusteeship System" and Chapter XIII, "The Trusteeship Council." Bunche was an adviser to the American delegation to the conference and played an important role behind the scenes in getting these sections adopted. Later, at the UN General Assembly's First Session in London, Bunche, as backup to John Foster Dulles, often represented the United States on the Fourth Committee which dealt with colonial matters.

### What was Bunche's role as Director of the Trusteeship Division?

In April 1946, Bunche left the State Department when, at the invitation of Trygve Lie, the UN's first Secretary-General, he was asked to head the new Division of Trusteeship. At the time, this division was viewed as the key unit in the Secretariat concerned with colonial matters. Although it dealt with a small number of colonies, the soon to be established Trust Territories, (mostly former League of Nations Mandates), in contrast to the Division of Non-Self-Governing Territories whose bailiwick included the vast majority of colonies in the world, it had more status since it served one of the six principal organs of the United Nations, the Trusteeship Council, and as such it was instrumental in drafting the original Trusteeship agreements for each Trust Territory. It was Bunche's responsibility to organize the department and to be intimately involved in the negotiations with the various colonial powers in the drafting of the eight trusteeship agreements that covered a total of 14 million inhabitants.

As Director of the Trusteeship Division, Bunche was instrumental in guiding the work of the Trusteeship Council in the discharge of its duties in promoting the political, economic, social and educational development of the inhabitants of the trust territories and their progressive development towards self-government or independence, establishing machinery to receive petitions and dispatching visiting missions to the territories. Although his primary concern was for the Trust Territories, Bunche was always mindful of vast majority of the colonies that were outside the Trusteeship System, and the hundreds of millions living in these areas, for whom little supervisory machinery had been established in the Charter. Bunche believed the Trusteeship System would lead the way to the decolonization of other colonies which, in theory at least, could be placed under trusteeship where they could gain the benefits offered by the Trusteeship System in contrast to the more limited ones in the Declaration Regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories.

What was Bunche's contributions to the UN Peace-keeping Operations? While Bunche was busily engaged in trusteeship matters, the question of the future of Palestine, a League of Nations Mandated Territory administered by Britain, was put on the agenda of the United Nations General Assembly. The Assembly decided to establish the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP) composed of representatives of eleven states with Assistant Secretary-General for Trusteeship Victor Hoo (Bunche's superior in the Secretariat hierarchy) as the Secretary-General's representative to the committee to investigate the situation on the ground and report. Bunche was appointed as 'special assistant to the representative of the Secretary-General.' Bunche brought to this assignment significant background - he had written his doctoral dissertation on a Mandated Territory and he was thoroughly familiar with the status of the Mandate. On UNSCOP, Bunche demonstrated his great skill as a documents draftsman and the role of an exemplary international civil servant when he moved the work of the divided UNSCOP by drafting both the majority and minority report.

With the submission of the UNSCOP report, Bunche returned to his position as Director of the Trusteeship Division. But his stay there was not long-lived. In May 1948, hostilities broke out in Palestine and the United Nations General Assembly established the office of United Nations Mediator in Palestine and Count Folke Bernadotte of Sweden was appointed by the permanent members of the Security Council to this post. Trygve Lie, once again seconded Bunche out of the Trusteeship Department and appointed him Chief Representative of the Secretary-General in Palestine. The Security Council established a Truce Commission for Palestine and this led to the creation of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), the first Peace-keeping mission in the Middle East. When Count Bernadotte was assassinated in September 1949, Bunche was appointed to the position of Acting Mediator. An immediate task confronting him was to organize an operational team of observers to supervise the truces or cease fires in the fighting. Abortive efforts were undertaken by the British Foreign Office and the American State Department to replace the office of Acting Mediator with a Palestine Conciliation Commission. Ever since his experience with UNSCOP, Bunche had acquired unique skills and understanding in dealing with Arabs and Israelis. He put these skills to good use in mediating an armistice between Israel and its four Arab neighboring states on the island of Rhodes in January 1949. With the accident of a political murder and this success, Bunche had been catapulted from a middle-level post in the UN bureaucracy to that of a top-level executive diplomat identified with the United Nations efforts at Peace-keeping. For this achievement he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. Characteristic of Bunche, he went out of his way to underscore that the truce supervision work and the mediation since the assassination of Bernadotte was entirely a Secretariat operation.

But this was only the beginning of Bunche's involvement in Peace-keeping. Although he returned to his position as Director of the Trusteeship Division, the demands for his expertise returned him to Peace-keeping, which became his central activity of the United Nations.

In 1956, the Suez War involving Britain, France, Israel and Egypt set the stage for the creation of a Peace-keeping operation more substantial than UNTSO. Under the leadership of Lester Pearson of Canada, the General Assembly adopted the idea of a truly international peace and police force to keep the borders at peace while a political settlement was being worked out. Bunche was immediately called in by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld to supervise the preparations for the emergency force, which was named the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF). UNEF set the pattern for what has been termed 'classical or first-generation Peace-keeping.' As drafted by Hammarskjöld and Bunche, the role of the first generation of Peace-keeping forces was simply to keep two enemy forces apart, acting as an umpire for ceasefire violations. They were to have only limited military capability, to be used only in self-defense and their composition and deployment required the consent of the parties to the dispute.

### What was Bunche's role in later Peace-keeping operations?

In the twenty years between the 1949 armistice agreement and his retirement, Bunche became the key United Nations figure in the handling of numerous crises gaining the confidence of the first three UN Secretaries-General, Trygve Lie, Dag Hammarskjöld and U Thant. Bunche became the ace troubleshooter for the United Nations. In 1957, he became Under Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs with prime responsibilities for U.N. Peace-keeping operations. Over the years, Bunche was the main organizer, director and expeditor of numerous other UN Peace-keeping and observer missions. These included the United Nations Observer Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL, 1958), United Nations Yemen Observation Mission (UNYOM, 1962), United Nations India-Pakistan Observer Mission (UNIPOM, 1965), United Nations Peace-keeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP, 1964-to date), and United Operations in Congo (ONUC, 1960-64).

The Congo mission was perhaps the most daunting task that confronted Bunche. Unlike all other peace-keeping operations, Bunche was on the spot before the operation began since he had been sent to the Congo to represent the Secretary-General at the independence day ceremonies but also to offer whatever assistance and advice the UN could make available to the new Congo government. In the Congo, Bunche's expertise on colonialism and peace-keeping meshed. Not only was a Bunche's mission in the Congo to organize, recruit, deploy and direct this most difficult of all peace-keeping operations, it also had to fill a vacuum of order and authority, deal with the Belgian diplomatic and military authorities regarding the urgent task of withdrawing Belgian forces from the country, help the new African government establish itself and prevent the country from disintegrating.

Beyond these organized peace-keeping operations, Bunche was involved in numerous other UN activities related to peace. These included heading the secretariat committee that conducted the preparatory studies on the organization of the International Scientific Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy and the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), enhancing the role of the 'good offices' function of the Secretary-General in resolving the crisis in Bahrain in 1969, and working closely with Secretary-General U Thant in his efforts to influence American policies during the Vietnam war.

## What is the legacy of Ralph Bunche for the United Nations?

Bunche's contributions to 'decolonization' and 'peace-keeping', the two most critical sets of issues confronting the United Nations during the first two decades of the organization's existence stand out as his lasting legacy. No single UN official, short of the Secretary-General was so intimately involved in the workings of the United Nations as a whole. Fundamentally, Bunche had a very realistic view of the United Nations and its role. He was committed to practical internationalism, that is the use of international agencies by political leaders to achieve compromises they could otherwise not attain, through a process of international legitimation by third parties. He personified the 'moral authority' of the international civil servant, projecting the positive image of independence, sensitivity, balanced judgement, expertise and competence as he embodied the ideals and principles of the UN Charter. In a sense, Bunche was the embodiment of an effective United Nations. Above all, Bunche was a realistic idealist in so far as the United Nations was concerned. When the United Nations was denigrated in the United States as a 'threat to our national sovereignty,' Bunche reacted strongly saying "This is sheer humbug, for the UN has no executive or legislative authority; it is not a world government or even an approach to one, and can impose nothing on us ..." At the same time he saw a vital need for the United Nations and the related international organizations which were created to deal with the 'appalling dangers' inherent in the 'threatening chaos in international relations.' But he said that "the problems of thousands of years could not be solved in a decade or two by the enunciation of a set of principles ... and the setting up of new organizations ...; their main work lay ahead and they should not be discouraged if the difficulties appeared at times to be unsurmountable." There is a certain 'indispensability of the United Nations' to help provide the ultimate goal of an effective system of international order.