

Ralph Bunche

SECTION ONE

SOURCE: <https://www.biography.com/people/ralph-bunche-9231128>

Ralph Bunche was a Nobel Peace Prize–winning academic and U.N. diplomat known for his peacekeeping efforts in the Middle East, Africa and the Mediterranean.

Who Was Ralph Bunche?

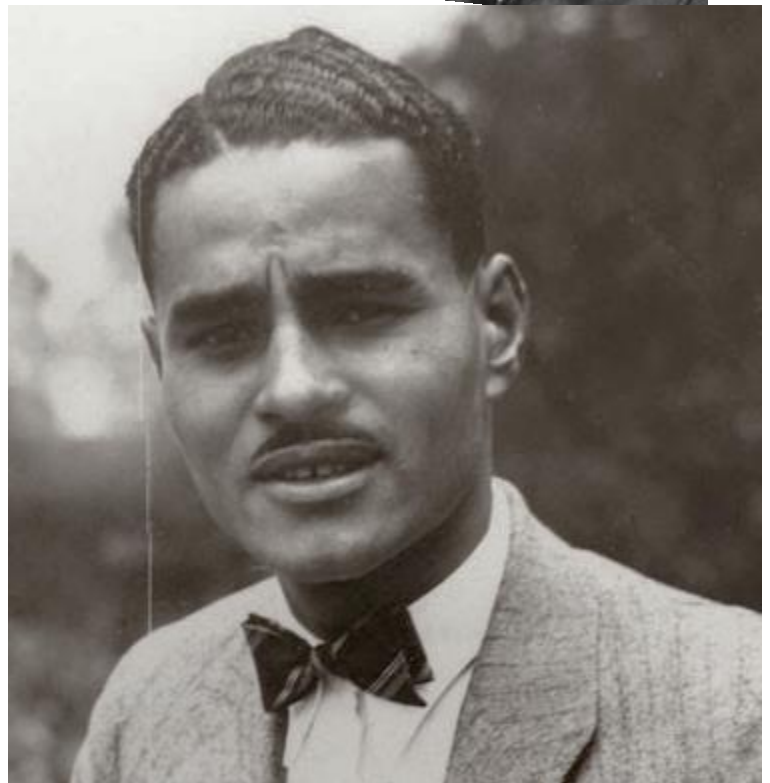
Born in the early 20th century in Detroit, Michigan, Ralph Bunche became a world-renowned diplomat for the [United Nations](#), winning the Nobel Peace Prize for brokering the 1949 Armistice Agreements in the Middle East. Known for his patience and optimism, he continued to negotiate peaceful settlements through his rise to the rank of under-secretary-general for the U.N., while also contributing to the civil rights struggle back home. Bunche died in 1971 in New York City.



Winning the Nobel Peace Prize

In 1950, Ralph Bunche was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating the 1949 Armistice Agreements between Israel and four Arab states. He was the first African American and person of color to receive the award.

Initially tasked in 1947 to assist mediator Count Folke Bernadotte of Sweden, Bunche took over talks on the island of Rhodes after Bernadotte was killed in a September 1948 terrorist attack. The long negotiation process was defined by the diplomat's



willingness to meet with both sides and be meticulous, calm and patient about getting parties to sit with each other and find ways to compromise.

Career with the United Nations

Bunche served an important role in the founding of the United Nations. He was an adviser to the U.S. delegation at the 1945 San Francisco Conference, helping to draft Chapters XI and XII of the United Nations Charter. Bunche then joined the U.N. Secretariat in 1946 as director of the Trusteeship Division, giving him responsibility for

overseeing the administration of the U.N. Trust Territories as they progressed toward self-government and independence.



Bunche's work was continually informed by his belief in the power of negotiation and diplomacy over battle. Toward the end of the 1950s he had become U.N. under-secretary-general for special political affairs and had overseen the dispatch of thousands of non-fighting, neutral troops in the [1956 Suez conflict](#). Bunche cited this effort as "the single most satisfying work" he'd ever done, as military forces were being used to maintain peace and not aid war.

Bunche continued his service into the 1960s, orchestrating the cessation of conflict in the Congo (Zaire), Cyprus and Bahrain. He became the under-secretary-general of the U.N. in 1968, the highest post held by an American in the organization.

Civil Rights Work

Prominently involved in social activism by the 1930s, Ralph Bunche was among the group of African-American intellectuals coined the "Young Turks" by [W.E.B. Du Bois](#). His integrationist beliefs were adopted by [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) and other civil rights leaders in the 1950s.

Bunche later joined King for the 1963 [March on Washington](#) and the 1965 [Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March](#). He also served on the board of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) for more than two decades.



Stellar Student and Academic Work

Bunche attended Jefferson High School in Los Angeles, excelling in athletics before graduating as class valedictorian. He followed a similar path at the Southern Branch of the University of California, known today as UCLA, playing varsity sports and again graduating first in his class. He worked as a janitor to pay for additional expenses and also joined a ship's crew during summers, after being put to work upon being caught as a stowaway en route to a college military program.

Enrolling at Harvard University, Bunche earned his M.A. in 1928 and his Ph.D. in governmental/international relations in 1934, thus becoming the first African American to earn a political science doctorate.

Bunche also joined the faculty of Howard University in 1928, and he subsequently helped to launch its political science department. He later did postgraduate anthropological work at institutions like the London School of Economics and the University of Cape Town, and became co-director of Swarthmore College's Institute of Race Relations by the mid-1930s.

Drawing from his personal experiences, Bunche penned the 1936 book *A World View of Race*. He also assisted journalist/sociologist Gunnar Myrdal in his research for *An American Dilemma* (1944), which looked unflinchingly at racial discrimination in the United States.

Early Years

Ralph Johnson Bunche was born on August 7, 1904 (some sources say 1903), in Detroit, Michigan. After his family relocated to Albuquerque, New Mexico, Bunche's mother died during his early adolescence; reports vary on whether his father died soon after or abandoned the family.

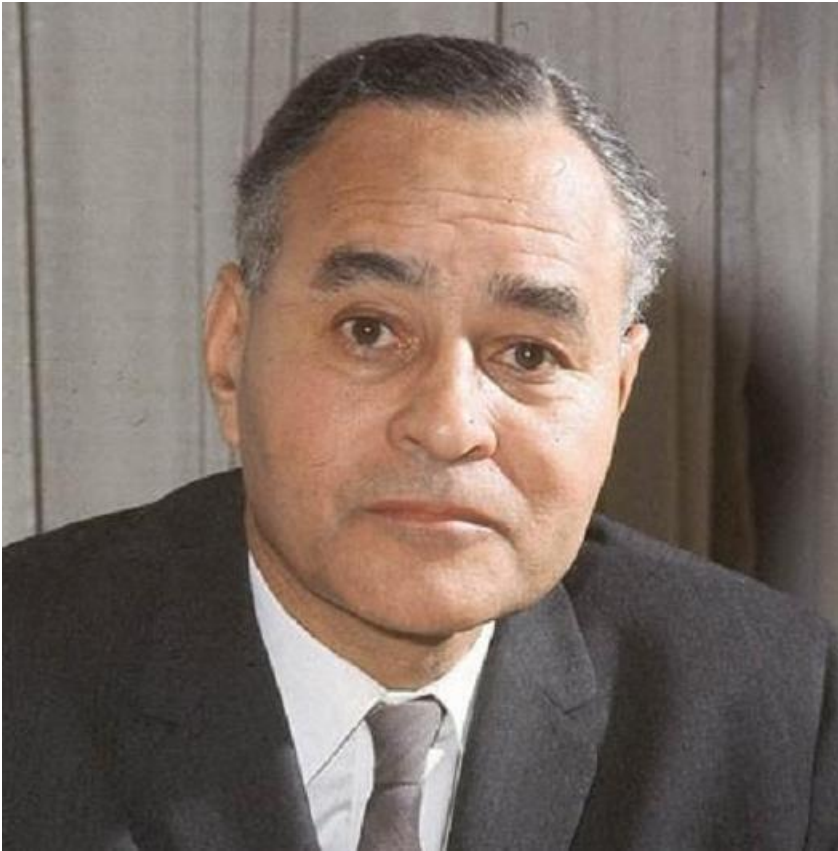
Bunche and his younger sister then relocated to Los Angeles and were taken in by his maternal grandmother, Lucy Taylor Johnson, who became a major advocate for the education of her grandson.

Family Life

Bunche married Ruth Ethel Harris in 1930, and the couple went on to have three children: Joan Harris Bunche, Jane Johnson Bunche Pierce and Ralph Johnson Bunche Jr.

Other Government Work

In 1941, Bunche joined the [Office of Strategic Services](#) (OSS). He was later assigned a senior post in the U.S. State Department, before leaving to join the U.N.



In 1949, U.S. President [Harry Truman](#) offered Bunche the position of assistant secretary of state, but the U.N. mediator turned him down, saying he did not want to subject his children to the segregationist policies that still ruled the nation's capital. Bunche also reportedly turned down an offer from President [John Kennedy](#) to become secretary of state.

Death and Accolades

After suffering from a number of ailments, including kidney and heart disease, Bunche died in New York City on December 9, 1971. Over his career he'd received more than four dozen honorary doctorates and many other accolades, including the U.S. Medal of Freedom from President Kennedy.

Remembered for his contributions to academia and world affairs, the diplomat has been honored with the creation of the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA and the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. A book on his life, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*, by Brian Urquhart, was published in 1993 and later turned into a PBS documentary.

SECTION TWO

SOURCE: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1950/bunche/biographical/>

Ralph Johnson Bunche (August 7, 1904-1971) was born in Detroit, Michigan. His father, Fred Bunche, was a barber in a shop having a clientele of whites only; his mother, Olive (Johnson) Bunche, was an amateur musician; his grandmother, «Nana» Johnson, who lived with the family, had been born into slavery. When Bunche was ten years old, the family moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the hope that the poor health of his parents would improve in the dry climate. Both, however, died two years later. His grandmother, an indomitable woman who appeared Caucasian «on the outside» but was «all black fervor inside»¹, took Ralph and his two sisters to live in Los Angeles.



Here Ralph contributed to the family's hard pressed finances by selling newspapers, serving as house boy for a movie actor, working for a carpet-laying firm, and doing what odd jobs he could find.

His intellectual brilliance appeared early. He won a prize in history and another in English upon completion of his elementary school work and was the valedictorian of his graduating class at Jefferson High School in Los Angeles, where he had been a debater and all-around athlete who competed in football, basketball, baseball, and track. At the University of California at Los Angeles he supported himself with an athletic scholarship, which paid for his collegiate expenses, and with a janitorial job, which paid for his personal expenses. He played varsity basketball on championship teams, was active in debate and campus journalism, and was graduated in 1927, *summa cum laude*, valedictorian of his class, with a major in international relations.

With a scholarship granted by Harvard University and a fund of a thousand dollars raised by the black community of Los Angeles, Bunche began his graduate studies in political science. He completed his master's degree in 1928 and for the next six years alternated between teaching at Howard University and working toward the doctorate at Harvard. The Rosenwald Fellowship, which he held in 1932-1933, enabled him to conduct research in Africa for a dissertation comparing French rule in Togoland and Dahomey. He completed his dissertation in 1934 with such distinction that he was awarded the Toppan Prize for outstanding research in social studies. From 1936 to 1938, on a Social Science Research Council fellowship, he did postdoctoral research in anthropology at Northwestern University, the London School of Economics, and Capetown University in South Africa.

Throughout his career, Bunche has maintained strong ties with education. He chaired the Department of Political Science at Howard University from 1928 until 1950; taught at Harvard University from 1950 to 1952; served as a member of the New York City Board of Education (1958-1964), as a member of the Board of Overseers of Harvard University (1960-1965), as a member of the Board of the Institute of International Education, and as a trustee of Oberlin College, Lincoln University, and New Lincoln School.

Bunche has always been active in the civil rights movement. At Howard University he was considered by some as a young radical intellectual who criticized both America's social system and the established Negro organizations, but generally he is thought of as a moderate. From his experience as co-director of the Institute of Race Relations at Swarthmore College in 1936, added to his firsthand research performed earlier, he wrote *A World View of Race* (1936). He participated in the Carnegie Corporation's well-known survey of the Negro in America, under the direction of the Swedish sociologist, [Gunnar Myrdal](#), which resulted in the publication of Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944). He was a member of the «Black Cabinet» consulted on minority problems by Roosevelt's administration; declined President Truman's offer of the position of assistant secretary of state because of the segregated housing conditions in Washington, D. C.; helped to lead the civil rights march organized by [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965; supported the action programs of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and of the Urban League. Bunche has not himself formed organizations, nor has he aspired to positions of administrative leadership in existing civil rights organizations. Rather, he has exerted his influence personally in speeches and publications, especially during the twenty-year period from 1945 to 1965. His message has been clear: Racial prejudice is an unreasoned phenomenon without scientific basis in biology or anthropology; «segregation and democracy are incompatible»; blacks should maintain the struggle for equal rights while accepting the responsibilities that come with freedom; whites must demonstrate that «democracy is color-blind»².

Ralph Bunche's enduring fame arises from his service to the U. S. government and to the UN. An adviser to the Department of State and to the military on Africa and colonial areas of strategic military importance during World War II, Bunche moved from his first position as an analyst in the Office of Strategic Services to the desk of acting chief of the Division of Dependent Area Affairs in the State Department. He also discharged various responsibilities in connection with international conferences of the Institute of Pacific Relations, the UN, the [International Labor Organization](#), and the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission.

In 1946, UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie «borrowed» Bunche from the State Department and placed him in charge of the Department of Trusteeship of the UN to handle problems of the world's peoples who had not yet attained self-government. He has been associated with the UN ever since.

From June of 1947 to August of 1949, Bunche worked on the most important assignment of his career – the confrontation between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. He was first appointed as assistant to the UN Special Committee on Palestine, then as principal secretary of the UN Palestine Commission, which was charged with carrying out the partition approved by the UN General Assembly. In early 1948 when this plan was dropped and fighting between Arabs and Israelis became especially severe, the UN appointed Count Folke Bernadotte as mediator and Ralph Bunche as his chief aide. Four months later, on September 17, 1948, Count Bernadotte was assassinated, and Bunche was named acting UN mediator on Palestine. After eleven months of virtually ceaseless negotiating, Bunche obtained signatures on armistice agreements between Israel and the Arab States.

Bunche returned home to a hero's welcome. New York gave him a «ticker tape» parade up Broadway; Los Angeles declared a «Ralph Bunche Day». He was besieged with requests to lecture, was awarded the Spingarn Prize by the NAACP in 1949, was given over thirty honorary degrees in the next three years, and the Nobel Peace Prize for 1950.

Bunche still works for the UN. From 1955 to 1967, he served as undersecretary for Special Political Affairs and since 1968 has been undersecretary-general. During these years he has taken on many special assignments. When war erupted in the Congo in 1960, [Dag Hammarskjöld](#), then secretary-general of the UN, appointed him as his special representative to oversee the UN commitments there. He has shouldered analogous duties in Cyprus, Kashmir, and Yemen.

Replying to an interviewer on the UN's intervention in international crises, Bunche remarked that the «United Nations has had the courage that the League of Nations lacked – to step in and tackle the buzz saw»³. Ralph Bunche has supplied a part of that courage.⁴

Ralph Bunche died on December 9, 1971.

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1. Bunche pays tribute to this «matriarch» of the family in an autobiographical fragment in *Reader's Digest*, «My Most Unforgettable Character».
2. See Gregg Phifer, «Ralph Bunche: Negro Spokesman», *passim*.
3. «Crisis», in *The New Yorker*, 43 (July 29, 1967) 23.
4. Suffering from heart disease and diabetes, Mr. Bunche resigned as UN undersecretary-general on October 1, 1971. He died on December 9, 1971.

From [Nobel Lectures](#), *Peace 1926-1950*, Editor Frederick W. Haberman, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1972

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