

# Ralph Bunche: the skilled negotiator and father of peacekeeping



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## Ralph Bunche: The Skilled Negotiator and Father of Peacekeeping

In *Profiles of Courage*, John F. Kennedy states, “ To be courageous, these stories make clear, requires no exceptional qualifications, no magic formula, no special combination of time, place and circumstance. It is an opportunity that sooner or later is presented to us all. Politics merely furnishes one arena which imposes special tests of courage” (Profiles of Courage, Year, page 55). For Ralph Bunche, the moment of politics that furnished the arena for his unique skills as a negotiator and peacemaker occurred in 1949 on the Greek island of Rhodes as he met with members of the Israeli and Egyptian delegation.

Before we can understand his impact as a skilled negotiator and peacemaker on the international stage, we must explore his upbringing. Born in Detroit, Michigan, Bunche was raised by his maternal grandmother in Los Angeles after his parents passed away. Undoubtedly, his grandmother’s resilience and wisdom had a significant impact on who Bunche would become as a negotiator. Later in his life, he would explain, “ To make our way we must have firm resolve, persistence, tenacity. We must gear ourselves to work hard all the way. We can never let up” (Issues I Face, 2019). Influenced by his grandmother’s strong will, he demonstrated those values throughout high school as he was known as an expert debater and was named valedictorian of his class (Morales, 2018).

Because Bunche was also the grandson of a slave and because of his own experience with racism, his concerns about race relations expanded (Encyclopedia of World Biography). This background likely influenced his

experiences at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) where he earned an athletics scholarship and pursued a degree in international relations, graduating in 1927. His graduation speech offers insight into his philosophy of peace where he commented, “ The future peace and harmony of the world are contingent upon the ability, yours and mine, to effect a remedy” (Morales, 2018). Bunche’s philosophy on race relations and peace would put him on a path to earning a graduate degree in political science from Harvard University and would open doors for him to teach at Harvard and Howard University. While teaching at Howard, he became one of the leaders of a group of Black scholars known as the “ Young Turks.” The Young Turks’ perspective was primarily focused on race which set them apart from others. They also argued issues of “ class, not race” were key to solving the “ Negro-problem” (Morales, 2018).

Bunche’s experiences as a student, teacher, and scholar expanded his awareness of colonialism, or a nation’s possession or control over a colony. According to Bunche (Bunche, UN Audiovisual Library, 1962), William J. Donovan recruited scholarly experts to work with the United States Office of Strategic Services. Bunche was recruited because of his knowledge of Africa, Far Eastern affairs, and colonial affairs and his advocacy of decolonization. After working for the United Nations from June 1947, he was given his first significant task of his career, the 1948 Israeli-Arab war, which was fought between the newly declared state of Israel and a military coalition of Arab states over control of former British Palestine. The clash between the Jews and Arabs escalated in 1948, so Bunche was assigned to mediator Count Folke Bernadotte as his chief aide. As fate would have it, Bunche, who stated

that “ my whole life I was just always falling into things,” (UN Audiovisual Library, 1962) would become the acting United Nations mediator on Palestine after Count Folke Bernadotte was assassinated in Jerusalem.

One must acknowledge the irony that a former classroom teacher who likely engaged in negotiations with students each day now needed to apply the lessons he learned working with young people on the larger world stage between two countries. It was at this time that he needed to demonstrate the unique skills of a teacher that he learned by emulating his favorite teacher, Ms. Bell Sweet, who was his fifth-grade teacher in New Mexico, who conveyed to him “ communication on an equal level of acceptance of equal treatment that I had never experienced in any school room before” (UN Audiovisual Library, 1962). Learning as a teacher that one must treat individuals with respect and respond to their individual needs would serve as the foundation for the long negotiation process that Bunche engaged. He enacted Bernadotte’s first initial truce on June 11, 1948 that lasted until July 8, 1948. The first truce was designed to last 28 days and an arms restriction was declared with the intent that neither side would make any gains from the truce. As a good classroom teacher often does, Bunche assessed the situation and recognized that there was very little progress, so he initiated a second truce effective from July 18, 1948. Unfortunately, both sides rejected the proposal for the second truce, but Bunche who undoubtedly learned how to persist in the midst of a negotiation in the classroom refused to quit as he proposed the final phase, which was the 1949 Armistice Agreements. This phase sought to end the official conflicts between Israeli and Jordanian-Iraqi forces. Bunche acquired signatures from each country to end the

negotiating. Israel signed separate armistices with Egypt on February 24, Lebanon on March 23, Jordan on April , and Syria on July 20 (“ Israel War of Independence”, 1998).

Unfortunately, our public schools teach students very little about Ralph Bunche. The very gentleman known as the father of peacekeeping who learned many of his skills as a negotiator in the classroom is frequently overlooked in the very classrooms where he developed his expertise. Nevertheless, Bunche is a perfect example of a profile of courage who impacted our way of life as Americans.

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