

This Day in History... August 7, 1904

Birth of Ralph Bunche

Ralph Johnson Bunche was born on August 7, 1904, in Detroit, Michigan.

In his youth, Bunche and his family moved around a bit, spending time in Toledo, Ohio; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Los Angeles, California. He was a bright student, a member of the debate team, and the valedictorian of his high school class.

Bunche attended the University of California, Los Angeles, where he again graduated as valedictorian. From there, he went on to Harvard and earned his doctorate in political science. Bunche was the first African American to earn a PhD in political science at an American college. While he was still earning his doctorate, Bunche began teaching political science at Howard University. He then published his first book, *World View of Race*, in 1936.

During World War II, Bunche worked for the Office of Strategic Services, which later became the CIA. He worked as a senior social analyst for Colonial Affairs. Then in 1943, he was moved to the State Department, where he worked as associate chief of the Division of Dependent Area Affairs. In that role, he was a leader of the Institute of Pacific Relations.

While serving in the Department of State, Bunche was a delegate or advisor to nine international conferences in just four years. In 1944, he joined the early planning for the United Nations Conference on International Organization in San Francisco. During the same conference, Bunche was an adviser to the US delegation. Bunche, along with Eleanor Roosevelt, is considered a major force in the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1946, he became director of the UN Department of Trusteeship. From 1955 to 1971, Bunche served as under-secretary of the UN.

In 1947, Bunche joined in the negotiations to end the Arab-Israeli conflict in Palestine. He was part of the UN Special Committee on Palestine and traveled to the Middle East to mediate the discussions. When the chief mediator was assassinated, Bunche replaced him and helped negotiate an armistice, reportedly over playing pool with the Israeli representative. For his service, Bunche was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950, making him the first African American ever to receive this illustrious award.

Bunche worked actively, as an American citizen and as UN under-secretary-general, for improved race relations, human rights, decolonization, and international peacekeeping. His work contributed to the decolonization of several nations and advanced human rights around the world. Bunche's influence can still be seen in the UN's peacekeeping strategies and conflict resolutions today.

Bunche was also an active supporter of the civil rights movement. He wrote articles, delivered speeches in support, and attended the March on Washington and the Selma March.

Stamp from the UN offices in Vienna



From the Great Americans Series



Stamp issued for Bunche's 100th birthday.

Bunche was made under-secretary-general of the UN in 1968. However, his health began to decline and he resigned within a few years. Bunche died on December 9, 1971. In addition to his Nobel Peace Prize, Bunche received the NAACP's Spingarn Medal and the Boy Scouts' Silver Buffalo Award. Several buildings, parks, schools, and other locations have been named in his honor.

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