

# **Ralph Bunche's Contributions to Political Science and the Study of Race and Politics**

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As the film, "Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey", makes clear, the name Ralph J. Bunche is synonymous with international relations, human rights, self-determination for former colonies, and conflict resolution. Yet, there is another side to Ralph Bunche's career that is just as significant, though less well-known – that of scholar/activist. As Professor Hill of the University of California, Los Angeles mentioned in the documentary, many scholars of the post-World War II generation are just now beginning to understand that Bunche made monumental intellectual contributions to the study of race and race relations in the disciplines of political science and sociology. Bunche's scholarship is associated with the development of the sub-field of Black politics, and more broadly the area of race and politics domestically and internationally. Bunche also coupled his scholarship with strong activism to push the United States to live up to the American Creed, a commitment to the ideals of freedom, liberty and equality for all persons. These Instructor's Notes will highlight his accomplishments in these areas and provide questions that may be used to generate discussion around his ideas.

The film refers to the fact that in 1934, Bunche received a Ph. D. in political science from Harvard University. What it does not tell you, however, is that he was the first black American to receive a Ph. D. in political science from a United States' university. As such, Bunche represents the first generation of black political scientists in the United States, and his influence on the discipline and his training of other black political scientists have left their mark on modern-day political science. Ideas expressed in his dissertation, "French Administration in Togoland and Dahomey," would inform his approach to diplomacy and his push for decolonization. He believed that: 1) European education provided to Africans should allow for the teaching of native customs, history, and languages; 2) that this flexible education should not be based on stereotypes of Africans; and 3) that the knowledge Africans gained should be used for their own independence, and not for the good of the colonial power (Henry 1995: 115). Clearly, these themes were present in many of the video clips of excerpts from Bunche's diary, from his speeches, as well as from the policies that he advocated and pursued in the decolonization of Africa.

It was no accident that President Mordecai Johnson of Howard University assigned to Bunche the responsibility of developing and expanding the political science department at Howard. Clearly, Johnson recognized that this was a young man with a strong intellectual foundation who would add to the already rich and stellar faculty. The video chronicles Bunche's intellectual and political activities while on the faculty at Howard in the 1930s. As a scholar/activist, he made a major contribution to the underpinnings of the modern-civil rights movement that emerged in the 1960s. Also not mentioned in the video was that in 1953, Bunche became the first black president of the American Political Science Association. It is rumored that initially, as with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950, Bunche did not want to accept the nomination, but that he was prevailed upon to do so.

The resistance of the political science discipline to consider black politics a legitimate political science sparked an intellectual battle that was begun by Ralph Bunche in the 1930s. At a 1941 conference on the Interdisciplinary Aspects of Negro Studies, Bunche lamented that the publication prospects in political science for works on the political behavior of Negroes was somewhat limited (Holden 1983, 34). His contributions to the modern foundation of black politics followed three paths—scholarship, university administration, and political activism. As a young instructor in the Division of Social Science at Howard University, Bunche published a little-known, yet extremely significant, article in 1928, entitled, "The Negro in Chicago Politics." This article represents the beginning of Bunche's scholarly writings on the political condition of African Americans. In expressing the importance of studying the political behavior of blacks, Bunche felt that the nation could not ignore one-tenth of the population and that, eventually, blacks were going to gain an "equitable degree of influence in public affairs—local, state and national—of the nation" (Bunche 1928:64).

Two themes were prominent throughout Bunche's writing—strategies for overcoming political exclusion, and the recognition that the interaction of economic conditions and race were critically important in understanding the situation of the American Negro. (This latter perspective represents the early development of a Marxist analysis of black politics with origins in what has recently been named the Howard School of Thought [Henry 1992].) These themes are evident in a 1935 article, "A Critical Analysis of the Tactics and Programs of Minority Groups," and a 1936 piece, "A Critique of New Deal Social Planning as It Affects Negroes." In particular, the 1935 article describes the various approaches by Negro organizations, e.g., racial separatism, economic passive resistance, interracial conciliation, and so forth. Kirby (1990) suggests that Bunche placed all of the "Negro ideologies on the Negro question" into the category of "accommodationism."

In 1939, the Republican National Committee asked Bunche to conduct research on why black voters defected from the party in the two previous national elections (Rivilin 1990, 8-9). Additionally, between 1939 and 1940, Bunche became a major part of the Carnegie Foundation study, "The Negro in America," directed by Gunnar Myrdal. Bunche also recruited political science graduate students from Howard University to go into the South and collect data for Myrdal's study. He produced a number of scholarly papers on Negro leadership, ideologies, and tactics of Negro organizations, the political status of Negroes, and conceptualizations of the Negro problem, much of which was incorporated into the original study. In 1941, he published an article, "The Negro in the Political Life of the United States," which was based on his research for the Myrdal study. Several of Bunche's themes were prominent in Myrdal's 1944 *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Among them were Negro leadership styles and the hypocrisy of American democracy in its treatment of Negro citizens.

*An American Dilemma* was the first comprehensive social science study, ever conducted, of the situation of black Americans. It vividly demonstrated the extent to which black Americans were denied their Constitutional rights, existed under a "separate system of laws" (McClain and Stewart 1999), and how the US treated its black citizens in contradiction to its commitment to equality, freedom, and justice. This study, of which Bunche's work was central to its production, generated a new line of research on race relations in the United States. Bunche's insistence that the inclusion of black Americans in the representative democracy of the United States was essential for the legitimacy and maintenance of that democracy was fundamental to his domestic work for civil rights and his international work for human rights. Moreover, his belief that the study of the politics

of black Americans is a legitimate area of study of political science led to the establishment of the field of Black Politics, and is central to the study of American politics.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Can you identify common themes in Bunche's work on race and US race relations and his approach to decolonization in Africa as portrayed in the documentary?
2. How do you think the themes of his doctoral dissertation on Togoland and Dahomey shaped his views of colonialism?
3. The film alludes to the connections Bunche drew between the decolonization of Africa and the struggles of black Americans for civil rights and liberties in the United States. What are the connections and how do you think Bunche came to the realization that the two were connected?
4. Bunche was a master of conflict resolution on the international stage, as well as possessing the ability to work from the inside for changes in the situation of black Americans in the United States. Reflecting back on the Black Power phase of the Civil Rights Movement, why do you think that the younger generation of blacks did not understand or appreciate the role Bunche played in the success of the Civil Rights Movement?
5. Given what you have been able to glean from the film of Bunche's personality and strengths, do you think that he understood the attitudes of the younger blacks involved in the Black Power Movement? Do you think he understood the source of disagreement between himself and younger blacks?

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Some of the material is drawn from Paula D. McClain and John A. Garcia, "Expanding Disciplinary Boundaries: Black, Latino and Racial Minority Group Politics in Political Science," in Ada W. Finifter (editor), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline, II*. Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association, 1993.