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Ralph Bunche: Model Negro or American Other?

Charles P. Henry
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In 1950 Ralph Bunche became the first African-American to win the Nobel Peace Prize. As the director of the Trusteeship Division of the United Nations, Bunche shaped that organization's role in peacekeeping efforts. At the March on Washington in 1963 he spoke immediately preceding Martin Luther King, Jr. Today, however, as Charles P. Henry points out, Bunche is virtually forgotten. In this book, Henry seeks answers to why Bunche went from being called by Ebony magazine perhaps the most influential Negro of the first half of twentieth century to obscurity.

Born in Detroit in 1903, Bunche moved several times as a child before settling in Los Angeles with his grandmother after his mother's death and father's abandonment. He graduated from UCLA before heading to Harvard for graduate work. As a young man Bunche wrote to W. E. B. Du Bois offering his services and requesting guidance for how best to serve his race. After receiving his master's degree in government, Bunche accepted a teaching position at Howard University in 1928. During the 1930s, Bunche, like many black intellectuals of the era, was attracted to Marxism though was wary of the Communist Party. He also traveled to Africa to study colonialism, which provided the subject matter for his dissertation (Ph.D. Harvard 1934).

Bunche was a significant contributor to Gunnar Myrdal's monumental study of race relations An American Dilemma (1945), writing over three thousand manuscript pages for the study. Shortly before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Bunche left academia to accept a position with the Office of the Coordinator of Information (later the Office of Strategic Services) as an expert on Africa. Bunche was drawn to the position because of his recognition of the growing threat of fascism. Physically unable to serve in the military, Bunche was eager to participate in the war effort in the best way possible. After the war, Bunche accepted a position with the newly formed United Nations, where he would become internationally recognized. His negotiation of a 1948 truce in Palestine earned him the Nobel Peace Prize.

Henry is at his best in this book when unraveling the complex situations Bunche faced as a UN representative in Palestine and in particular in the Congo in 1960. Also insightful is Henry's assertion that attributes Bunche's current obscurity to the perception that he was too "white," too atypical of an African-American to be embraced by an African-American community drawn progressively toward Black Power in the 1960s. Where the biography falls short in presenting a portrait of the man behind the public acts.

ERIK BLEDSOE (December 16, 1998)

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