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THE ABSOLUTELY INDISPENSABLE MAN: RALPH BUNCHE,
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PREFACE DRAFT

On March 29, 1951, at the Pantages Theater on Hollywood Boulevard, hundreds of actors, directors, and entertainment moguls gathered for the 23rd Academy Awards. The crowd—and the many listeners on the radio nationwide—waited for the final and biggest award of the night: Best Picture. Among the films in the running were the Spencer Tracy comedy *Father of the Bride*; *Sunset Blvd*, the classic saga of old Hollywood decline; and *All About Eve*, the Broadway drama starring Bette Davis.

The host for the evening, the dapper, slim Fred Astaire, leaned into the podium. “For the presenter of the final award,” Astaire said,

We’ve stepped outside the industry. We’ve stayed true to our Los Angeles roots, however. I’d call him the town’s most distinguished son. He achieved the miracle of peace in Palestine; he won the Nobel Prize; he is now one of the large figures in the United Nations organization. It’s an honor for all of us to hear from Dr. Ralph Bunche.¹

Ralph Johnson Bunche, a forty-seven year old official at the then-new United Nations, walked across the broad stage wearing a white tie and tails and clutching some papers. Abundant applause and a fanfare of trumpets rang out. Bunche, who had grown up in Los Angeles, paused at the lectern to look out at the sparkling crowd. Speaking at first a bit stiffly and slowly, he thanked Astaire and began his speech.

Quickly striking a serious tone, and invoking the Cold War context of 1950’s America, Bunche declared that it is “imperative to our way of life that this great medium be kept fully free.” Freedom, he continued, brought “sober responsibilities.” As a result, it was vital that the film industry reflect democracy and “be directed toward democratic objectives.” As the audience listened respectfully, he discussed the new United Nations organization, which just five years before had held its first meetings in London. The UN looked to Hollywood, he explained, for aid

in achieving a world of peace and brotherhood. Bunche (or perhaps his speechwriter) tried to leaven this sober message with a few weak jokes about comedy and drama among diplomats. But he soon circled back to the main point he wanted the audience to take home: through the UN, “honorable peace can be achieved and secured.”

His address complete, Bunche turned to the pressing matter at hand: the winner of the Oscar for Best Picture. After being handed a small white card--envelopes were not yet used in those days--he brought the heady evening to a close, announcing that *All About Eve* had triumphed. As legendary producer Daryl Zanuck bounded up to the podium, Bunche smiled broadly as he offered him a golden statuette and shook his hand.

Ralph Bunche’s turn on the Academy Awards stage was emblematic of the extraordinary celebrity he enjoyed in midcentury America. His fame was not just recognized by Hollywood. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, he was bombarded with speaking invitations, job offers, and appeals for his appearance. His Nobel Peace Prize, awarded the year before he spoke at the Pantages Theater, recognized his groundbreaking mediation between the new state of Israel and its Arab neighbors. The Nobel Prize made him a household name for many Americans. He received a ticker tape parade down Broadway’s Canyon of Heroes and became the subject of an inspirational ABC docudrama. Presidents sought his advice; world leaders his attention; visionaries and activists—including Martin Luther King, Jr.—his advocacy. Bunche had enjoyed abundant professional success, but relatively little personal fame, until his landmark efforts in Palestine brought him to popular attention.

The mediation in the Middle East changed Ralph Bunche’s life. He was soon on a first name basis with presidents from Harry Truman to Richard Nixon, as well as leaders from around the globe. His impressive and seemingly perfect life story became grist for the mill of American progress. *The Nation* called Bunche “a symbol throughout the world of the American Negro’s increasingly effective struggle for equality.”² As a high-ranking Black man in the very white world of diplomacy, numerous administrations sought to bring him back to Washington, DC, from the United Nations, where he remained until his untimely death in 1971. Once “the most honored African American in America,” Ralph Bunche is largely forgotten today; remembered by some as an master of international diplomacy, by others as an “icon of racial equality,” yet little known to the public at large.³

Bunche merits recognition both for his extraordinary American life and for the lens he provides on two significant features of the 20th century—the creation of the postwar international order and the struggle for racial equality—that are rarely joined but deserve to be, and that he himself married in the realm of ideas and in his own person. As a scholar, he helped produce the landmark book *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. As an advocate, he later stood on the Lincoln Memorial as Martin Luther King, Jr gave his iconic speech at the March on Washington. Yet he spent most of his career as a diplomat at the United Nations, and was present at the creation of the international order that still shapes our world today. His hands lay behind some of the signal features of the postwar world, from peacekeeping to conflict mediation to his most significant and lasting legacy, the one that made both peacekeeping and mediation so often necessary: the retreat of European empire.

Bunche saw no dissonance in this pairing of diplomacy and civil rights. He fought to make both America and the world more just, more free, and more fair. During his lifetime—and in part due to his efforts—nearly a billion people of color gained independence from foreign rule.

The titanic global conflicts of the 20th century, from the Great War to the Cold War, are rarely viewed today through the lens of race and rights. Yet for much of the 20th century race was arguably *the* central principle in international relations, and colonialism—which generally meant the control by Europeans of Africans, Asians, and others—the key connective concept. To Bunche racial justice was a global, not merely national, issue, and empire one of racism's most potent and perilous guises. Colonialism was an oppressive form of governance, and the fight to end empire provided a throughline in his career.

Ralph Bunche was born into the heyday of colonial rule. By his death, the number of independent nations in the world had tripled. From the thoroughly white-dominated world of early 20th century empires came our world today: one of large power disparities, to be sure, but also one of sovereign, independent states led by governments of all races and religions. At the end of the Second World War European leaders like Winston Churchill fought vigorously to keep their prewar empires alive, yet quickly found they could not. In the early years of the UN Bunche spoke before the NAACP at the Hollywood Bowl and declared “The age of colonialism is in its twilight.”⁴ And he was right. In 1960 alone, a year he famously dubbed “The Year of

Africa,” seventeen new states gained their independence. Though it would take many years to win, the battle between Churchill’s vision of empire and Bunche’s vision of equality was ultimately no contest.

A modest man, Bunche did not and could not lay claim to this vast transformation in geopolitics. The systematic dismantling of empire was driven by a complex mix of charismatic liberation leaders, powerful ideas about self-determination and nationalism, the interests of the new postwar superpowers, and sometimes violent struggle. But as a prominent scholar, advocate, and policymaker, he played a critical role in fostering the decolonization of the globe. While the high hopes of some new nations were soon dashed against the rocks of realpolitik, Bunche always saw that the larger issue was a moral question: in his words, whether “the white man could ever accept darker peoples as equals.”⁵

The end of European empire transformed the global order. In its wake came the rise of what was once called the Third World*, with implications for everything from the Vietnam War and the OPEC oil shocks of the 70’s to the triumph of neoliberalism and the contemporary rise of China. It also, in important ways, coincided with what many consider a new and more subtle form of empire: the United States’ informal version, which generally eschewed territorial control in favor of military, political, and economic dominance. Ralph Bunche not only propelled forward the unraveling of traditional empire but helped to devise ways to blunt its sharper edges, pioneering novel methods of keeping peace and stemming conflict in the often-turbulent politics that resulted from nation-building. Most of this work occurred at the United Nations, his professional home for 25 years. He helped build the organization from its wartime origins in Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s State Department, and then spent the remainder of his life as one of its best-known officials. His story is as a result closely, even inextricably, aligned with the story of the UN.

From nearly its opening moments until today the UN has been castigated for failing to end the world’s tragedies. Yet as the legendary American diplomat Richard Holbrooke once said, blaming the UN for failing to create peace is like blaming Madison Square Garden for the Knicks

* Today “Third World” is seen by some as pejorative, with terms like “Global South” preferred. Still, Third World remains the most common term today, though its peak usage was in the 1980s. For historical accuracy I use Third World in many contexts throughout this book.

failing to win.⁶ Holbrooke was not wrong, but sometimes a different setting *can* change the outcome. Bunche was a true UN believer, and during his career he saw the UN manage, dampen, and even avert crises. He also witnessed its evolution into an organization that was as much about the emerging Third World as it was a tool of the victorious great powers of the wartime Allied coalition. In particular, he was a key player in two underappreciated UN-led developments that helped build the global rules-based order that emerged from the ashes of war.

The first, that Bunche was perhaps most proud of, was the rise of UN peacekeeping. Colonialism may feel like a dusty relic of the past, but its legacy is still felt today. In much of the world, national borders—often drawn by 19th century Europeans in gilded conference rooms—bear little relation to ethnic, religious, or linguistic divisions. The fight to end empire was a just cause, but it bore some bitter fruit. Since 1945, $\frac{3}{4}$ of all civil wars have been concentrated in formerly colonized nations, from Vietnam and Cambodia to Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. UN peacekeeping was largely developed as a response to these challenges, born of necessity but ultimately proving surprisingly successful.

The notion that foreign militaries could police and deter conflict was not unknown in world history. Contemporary peacekeeping, however, is a radical departure from the power politics of the past. Peacekeeping began as an experiment in the early years of the UN. Bunche played a key role in developing it in the Middle East in the wake of the 1956 Suez Crisis, when Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt suddenly seized control of the vital Suez Canal and Britain, France, and Israel attacked in response. Peacekeeping reached a controversial apogee in Congo in the early 1960s. After decades of brutal rule by Belgium, the huge colony suddenly achieved liberation. Ralph Bunche was there, on the ground, for the chaotic early months of independence. As Congo began to rip apart, the young, fiery liberation leader Patrice Lumumba was assassinated and the Cold War seemed ready to swallow up the new nation. The world looked to UN peacekeepers to maintain control. Bunche remained a key figure in that struggle, especially after the tragic—and to this day, mysterious—death of UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in a plane crash in the Rhodesian jungle in 1961.

Bunche and his UN colleagues developed the basic principles that define contemporary peacekeeping. And for the remainder of his career, knowing it was often essential to secure a stable process of decolonization, he paid close attention to peacekeeping, shaping policy in New

York and flying around the world visiting troops in tense standoffs from Kashmir to Congo to Gaza.

The second key UN practice Ralph Bunche influenced was conflict mediation. Peacekeeping and mediation go hand in hand; both aim to keep a lid on war in a world riven with potential conflict. Bunche's popular fame stemmed from his mediation of one of the most unfortunately enduring of conflicts: that between Arabs and Israelis. After the first UN mediator, Swedish Count Folke Bernadotte, was brazenly gunned down on a Jerusalem street by Israeli underground fighters—an attack that Bunche only narrowly missed—he took over the reins of the process. Months of table-pounding, charm, strategy, and billiards games produced, in Fred Astaire's now sweetly-naïve words, "the miracle of peace in Palestine." Bunche's armistice between Israel and its enemies, achieved while sequestered in a shuttered hotel on the Mediterranean island of Rhodes, seemed to prove that the new UN could do what traditional great powers such as Britain could not.

For the next two decades Bunche was a towering figure in foreign policy circles and an icon of peace and probity to many Americans. Hailed as a modern-day Horatio Alger—literally; he won the Horatio Alger prize in 1952—many Americans looked to him as a powerful symbol of racial integration and success. (Though later, as the civil rights movement grew more radical, he was occasionally disparaged as a token. Malcolm X called him "a black man who didn't know his history.")⁷ Even after the initial ticker tape parade and flurry of invites to speak Bunche continued to operate at the highest levels—negotiating with Presidents and Prime Ministers throughout the world, having dinner with Hollywood stars, and attracting fan and hate mail on a regular basis.

Ralph Bunche's uncompromising beliefs and sharp analytical mind, as well as his personal charm and unassuming manner, explain why Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and many others sought his counsel and commitment. Bunche often resisted his image as a symbol of racial progress. Yet he never lost faith in America. Indeed, he saw America as a model for the diverse societies arising elsewhere: "The very fact of racial diversity in our society makes of our nation throughout the entire world a unique symbol of the promise, the unlimited possibilities for strength and greatness, the spiritual depth and the virility of democracy as a way of life," Bunche declared.⁸ As one of his UN colleagues recollected, he was "absolutely American and the best of America."⁹

It has been 50 years since Ralph Bunche's untimely death. World politics in the 2020s is at a hinge point. The rapid rise of China and the continued diffusion of economic growth and political power have led to increasing uncertainty about who stands where in the global order. Large numbers of Europeans and Americans again fear the rising political, economic, and cultural power of non-white peoples. Political leaders around the world have brazenly made exclusionary racial, ethnic, religious appeals to their followers. The world, once open, seems to be drawing closed. Against this backdrop stand a set of ideas that date back to the destruction and distress of the 20th century – equality between peoples, the virtues of diplomacy, and the value of a rules-based multilateral order. While no pacifist, Bunche believed that if the xenophobic impulses that too often led one people to oppress another could be defeated, the world could be a better place.

And though he saw up close how corrupt and pointless politics in the UN could be, he knew the alternatives were worse. In the late 1960s, Richard Nixon toured the UN headquarters with Bunche at his side. Turning to him, Nixon remarked that “it must be discouraging for you to work here.” Never discouraging, the ever-optimistic Bunche said, but “often frustrating.” Nixon, who knew a thing or two about frustration, looked at him knowingly and repeated his words back, as if appreciating their larger significance: “never discouraging, but often frustrating.”¹⁰

Bunche's optimism was tempered by a realism borne of hard experience. He was driven to make the UN work because he saw—or knew—that an international organization *could* be a force for good in a violent world. When the Vietnam War seemed to make a mockery of the UN, Bunche maintained the faith. As Lyndon Johnson increasingly grumbled about Secretary-General U Thant's rising criticism of American intervention, he became, as he often had been in the past, a key interlocutor between Washington and New York. Visiting the White House in 1966, US Ambassador to the UN Arthur Goldberg brought Bunche and Thant, who was up for reappointment for a second term, upstairs to meet privately with the President.

“Ralph is one of the two absolutely indispensable men at the UN,” Goldberg told LBJ—quickly adding that Thant was the other. Downstairs, Secretary of State Dean Rusk told Bunche the real deal: “You will just have to stay on whether U Thant does or not.”¹¹

At his death in 1971 the *New York Times* called Ralph Bunche “the personification of the United Nations.”¹² His life was a life of both struggle and success—for peace and justice; against racism—fought out in the glare of celebrity. And it was a life, especially in its second half, devoted to the UN and its work. Whatever its faults, the UN possesses one unique quality. It remains, in President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s words, “man’s best organized hope to substitute the conference table for the battlefield.”¹³ Bunche shared Ike’s belief. He also knew that a new, more equal postwar order was of a piece with the pursuit of civil rights at home. Once freed from the oppression of colonialism, nations would not necessarily coexist peacefully. Without that freedom, he knew they never would.

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- <sup>1</sup> 22d Academy Awards, Best Picture Presentation, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1L-584xzMI>
- <sup>2</sup> Ben Keppel, *The Work of Democracy*, (Harvard, 1995) at 70
- <sup>3</sup> Keppel, *The Work of Democracy* at 13
- <sup>4</sup> Robert Harris, "Ralph Bunche and Afro-American Participation in Decolonization," in Michael Krenn, ed., *The African-American Voice in US Foreign Policy Since World War II* (Routledge, 1999) at 172
- <sup>5</sup> Ralph Bunche, Speech at Fisk University, Nashville, TN, May 5 1956. Schomburg Center for the Study of Black Culture, Bunche Archives, Box 15/1 A-1.
- <sup>6</sup> Samantha Power, "United it Wobbles," *Washington Post*, January 7, 2007
- <sup>7</sup> Keppel, *Work of Democracy*, at 89
- <sup>8</sup> Bunche, Speech at NAACP Freedom Fulfillment Conference, DC March 10 1954, Box 14B, Schomburg Center for Black Culture Archives
- <sup>9</sup> Joan Liu, recollection, no date, UCLA Archives, Collection 364, Box 2, Folder 12
- <sup>10</sup> Bunche, personal notes, no date (but likely 1968), UN Archives, Box 370/39/16.
- <sup>11</sup> Bunche, notes, June 14, 1966 UN Archives, Box 370/38/1
- <sup>12</sup> "The Faith of Ralph Bunche," *New York Times*, December 10, 1971
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/preparing-next-generation-join-conference-table>