

Ralph Johnson Bunche

January 1982 Calendar

Ralph Johnson Bunche, scholar, statesman, mediator and diplomat, was the first person of color to win the Nobel Peace Prize, which he received in 1950 for achieving a cease-fire and peace settlement in the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine.

Born in Detroit in 1904, Bunche had a difficult childhood. His parents were in poor health, and at age 13 he became an orphan to be raised by his grandmother, who moved the family to Los Angeles. Bunche graduated with honors from high school, and from UCLA where he earned a bachelor's degree in international affairs. With a scholarship granted by Harvard University and \$1,000 fund raised by the black community of Los Angeles, Bunche began his graduate studies in political science. He earned his master's degree in government in 1928 and for the next six years both taught at Howard University and worked towards his doctorate at Harvard.

Deafness in one ear barred him from military service in World War II. He did invaluable work for the Office of Strategic Services, where he planned African bases for an invasion of Europe. He later moved to the State Department, where he was the first black to be in charge of a State Department office.



In 1946 Bunche began working at the United Nations on loan from the State Department. From June of 1947 to August of 1949, Bunche worked on the most important assignment of his career - the confrontation between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. In early 1948 when fighting between Arabs and Israelis became especially severe, the U.N. appointed Bunche as chief aide to its mediator. When the mediator was assassinated, Bunche was named acting U.N. mediator on Palestine. After 11 months of virtually ceaseless negotiating, Bunche obtained signatures on armistice agreements between Israel and the Arab states.

After this accomplishment, Bunche was awarded the Spingarn Prize by the NAACP in 1949, and given over 30 honorary degrees. Bunche retired from the U.N. in 1971, having been the highest-ranking American in the U.N. Secretariat.