

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

Over a Billiard Table

Ralph Bunche and the First Nobel Prize Won by a Black American

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Contribution Track • ERA IV–VI • Detroit, Michigan

Who He Is

Ralph Bunche was born August 7, 1904, in Detroit. Orphaned by about age thirteen after his mother's death, he was raised by his grandmother in Los Angeles, graduating valedictorian of Jefferson High School and summa cum laude from UCLA in 1927. He earned his Ph.D. in political science from Harvard in 1934 — widely credited as the first African American to earn that degree in the field — with a dissertation on French colonial administration in West Africa.

Howard and the Founding of the UN

Bunche founded and chaired Howard University's political science department from 1928 to 1950, and served as chief research associate to Gunnar Myrdal's landmark 1944 study of American race relations, *An American Dilemma*. During World War II he moved to State Department work on colonial and African affairs, then helped shape the United Nations itself at the 1944 Dumbarton Oaks Conference and the 1945 San Francisco Charter Conference. In 1946 UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie put him in charge of the Trusteeship Department — the machinery used to dismantle colonial rule across Africa and Asia — earning him recognition from historians as its principal architect. He also worked with Eleanor Roosevelt on the drafting effort behind the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Rhodes, 1949

Bunche became chief aide to UN mediator Count Folke Bernadotte on the Palestine question in 1948; after Bernadotte's assassination that September, Bunche took over as acting mediator. Over roughly eleven months of negotiation on the island of Rhodes — reportedly including sessions held over a billiard table with Israeli negotiator Moshe Dayan — he secured the 1949 Armistice Agreements. For this work he received the Nobel Peace Prize for 1950, the first Black person, and the first person of African descent, to win any Nobel Prize.

"If in atomic war there would be survivors, there could be no victors." — Ralph Bunche, Nobel Lecture, 1950

Twenty-Five Years at the UN

Bunche remained at the UN for a quarter century, mediating or overseeing crises in the Sinai, the Congo, Yemen, Cyprus, Kashmir, and Bahrain, and supervising the 1965 India-Pakistan ceasefire. He marched with Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma in 1965 and was a vocal supporter of the NAACP and Urban League even as his role as an international civil servant constrained his public activism. In 1959, when a country club in Queens denied his son membership, then reversed itself after press coverage, Bunche refused the offer, saying it was "not based on racial equality." He died December 9, 1971, in New York, at sixty-seven.

NC Local Lens

No documented North Carolina, Fayetteville, or Cumberland County connection was found for Ralph Bunche in this research pass. His institutional homes were Los Angeles, Washington D.C., New York, and the United Nations itself. This entry claims no NC tie.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Retirement date: the Nobel Prize's own biography gives October 1, 1971; other sources say he retired in June 1971 — not reconciled here.

Cause of death: sources cite heart disease and diabetes, with some adding kidney disease as a contributing factor.

"First" Black American political science Ph.D.: stated as fact by most sources consulted; treat as well-established but not universally uncontested framing.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Ralph Bunche — Biographical," The Nobel Prize, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1950/bunche/biographical/>.
2. "The Nobel Peace Prize 1950," The Nobel Prize, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1950/summary/>.
3. Ralph Bunche, "Some Reflections on Peace in Our Time" (Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1950), The Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1950/bunche/lecture/>.
4. "Ralph Bunche," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ralph-Bunche>.
5. Brian Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche: An American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).
6. Charles P. Henry, *Ralph Bunche: Model Negro or American Other?* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

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