



World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

PROGRAMME: No. 923 recorded 20 November 2003

GUEST: Brian Urquhart
Ralph Bunche Biographer

Thomas Weiss
Director
Ralph Bunche Institute

James Jonah
Senior Fellow
Ralph Bunche Institute

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

“The UN & The Legacy of Ralph Bunche”

Ralph Bunche was a skilled negotiator, respected academic, civil rights leader and civil servant who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In the twentieth century, Bunche was a towering figure: a great American and a great internationalist. Has Ralph Bunche been forgotten by today’s diplomats and students of international relations? What is his legacy? What meaning does it have for the United Nations – and the U.S. role in world affairs – today? In this special edition of **World Chronicle**, these questions are discussed with the help of Sir Brian Urquhart, author of the definitive biography of Ralph Bunche and a former head of UN peacekeeping; Professor Thomas Weiss, Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies; and James O.C. Jonah, former UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the News & Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration: 28:00
Executive Producer: Michele Zaccheo
Director: Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant: Lebe L. Besa

ANNOUNCER: From the United Nations in New York, an unedited interview programme on global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is **World Chronicle**.

Today we're talking about a towering figure of the twentieth century – Ralph Bunche. He was a skilled negotiator, respected academic, civil rights leader, and civil servant who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Bunche was a great American and a great internationalist. What is his legacy? What meaning does it have for the United Nations, and the U.S. role in international affairs, today? Joining us on this special programme are: Brian Urquhart – author of the definitive biography of Ralph Bunche, and a former UN Under-Secretary-General; also with us, Thomas Weiss, Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies and Co-Director of the UN Intellectual History project; and James Jonah, Senior Fellow at the Ralph Bunche Institute and former Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

LITTLEJOHNS: Sir Brian, you knew Bunche better than anyone and you've said that he's now shamefully forgotten. The UN has tried to make up for that with a yearlong centennial celebration of his birth in August 1903. What is the legacy we spoke about in the introduction?

URQUHART: I think there are two thoughts of legacy with someone like Ralph Bunche. Incidentally, Ralph Bunche was an incredibly modest man. He hated getting credit so it's partly his own fault. He even tried to turn down the Nobel Peace Prize on the grounds that he was simply doing his job, however he was rather sharply ordered by the Secretary-General to accept it. But I think there are two legacies: one, I mean, obvious is the sort of practical ones. I mean his enormous contribution to the early civil rights movement, even before it was called civil rights movement, both as an activist and a writer; his contribution to the writing of "An American Dilemma", which was the most important book still, I think, on the race problem in the United States; his work on the Charter – he's the only person I know who drafted two chapters of the UN Charter. He then became a UN civil servant and, of course, he's well known for mediating the end of the first Arab-Israeli war, the armistice agreements between Israel and for...

LITTLEJOHNS: For which he was awarded the peace prize.

URQUHART: ...which he got the Nobel Peace Prize. And this was the only written agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbours, I think, for some 30 years. So it was an amazing achievement. And then, of course, he invented peacekeeping. Well, it wasn't called peacekeeping then but he was more or less the architect and the builder of the first peacekeeping operations, the person who wrote the rules and really described the functioning

of this -- at that time it was not called peacekeeping – this new technique for trying to contain conflict.

I think there's another legacy though which is, in the long run, even more important. Bunche was, I must say, a person for whom the word integrity might have been coined. He was a person of unshakable honesty and decency. He was a passionate fighter for decency, against bigotry, against injustice, against pretentiousness. He wasn't really very interested in his own reputation. He is, to me at any rate, the model of an intellectual in action and a great and dynamic public servant, both in the United States and also in the United Nations. And I think that he is a sort of a role model. He is also a very good model of how to behave. I mean I said at his funeral the grander Ralph Bunche became the nicer he became also. He became less and less interested in his own reputation and so on as he went on.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tom Weiss, you are the head of the institute that bears Ralph Bunche's name, how do you see his legacy?

WEISS: I'd like to actually pick up where Brian left off. It seems to me that there are two things that students need to take away from his life. One, intellectual honesty requires that you do something with it. It's not enough to stay in the stacks, it's not enough just to write things, you ought to try to put your ideas into action. The second thing – which I actually take from his personal life in Brian's biography and elsewhere – is that he didn't believe in whining. He didn't look for excuses. There are lots of reasons why he should have been mired in poverty in Detroit or Los Angeles. He'd somehow got on with it. There are lots of reasons why the UN should have failed here, there and elsewhere -- and it has – but there are also reasons why you should push ahead. And he didn't look for excuses, he just got on with it. And it seems to me that those are two big messages that students should take away from his life and, hopefully, from some of our work at the Bunche Institute.

LITTLEJOHNS: James Jonah, what's your reaction to the life of Ralph Bunche and his contribution to the UN and, as Brian has referred to, international peacekeeping?

JONAH: Well, as an African we were extremely happy when we learned that there was a Black man – and from Brian I understood that he prefers to be known as a Negro, and Black –American, had won the Nobel Prize, and not only that he won the Nobel Peace Prize but that he was an intellectual, an academic. So he was, for us, a legend; somebody that we should emulate. And I will never forget the first time I met with him face to face. Of course, I joined the UN in '63 and I had seen him at a distance. Of course, he does not look as Black as I thought, you know, living in Africa. But, so he was sort of a – I felt that he's a man you cannot approach. And for some reason somebody had talked to him about me and I was asked to go to his office, some time in 1965. I was very nervous, wondering what had I done that was

wrong. And I walked into his office on the 38th floor and he made me feel so welcome and I was very much surprised that such an eminent man could be so simple. And he was more concerned in putting me at ease than making me uncomfortable. So, he was a good teacher. He taught me a lot of lessons. Between Ralph Bunche and Brian Urquhart – you know, the two were living side by side on the 38th floor and I would go from one to the other so they were really good teachers for me and a good person who inspired me to do well. And he always said, “You always try to do your best. Do not worry about credit, it will come”.

LITTLEJOHNS: Sir Brian, you were involved with...

URQUHART: Could I just mention in reference to Africa, James, that one of Bunche’s greatest purposes was decolonization? He was the dynamo of decolonization and he was actually, one way or another, the teacher and mentor of quite a number of the first generation of liberation leaders in Africa. I think it was something which was very, very close to his heart so he would have been happy to hear what you said.

JONAH: And then I learned from you, Brian, that a man who actually asked me to come to the United States, George Padmore, was a good friend of Ralph Bunche.

URQUHART: He was a pupil.

JONAH: And he had come to Freetown and encouraged me to come to the United States.

URQUHART: That’s right. That’s right.

LITTLEJOHNS: Sir Brian, you were involved with Ralph Bunche in peacekeeping. The first UN peacekeeping operation in 1956 after the invasion at Suez was put together in just a matter of days and the Congo operation also rather quickly. Nowadays, it seems to take forever. Why does it take so long now and why was it so rapid in those days?

URQUHART: You know, I’ve often asked that question but I don’t really get much of an answer. Well, I think one of the reasons was it was new. People wanted to do it. Nobody had really tried peacekeeping before and Hammarskjold and Bunche were extremely persuasive leaders. I mean they could ring up a head of state and say, “Look, we need a battalion on the airport at three o’clock tomorrow afternoon and then we’ll get...”

LITTLEJOHNS: And Kofi Annan can’t do that?

URQUHART: Well, people are quite used to it now. There are too many demands and peacekeeping is no longer – the dew is off the rose on peacekeeping, no question. In 1956, it was an adventure. Nobody had ever done it. And also Bunche had an extremely strong sense about timing. He believed that the sooner you got into a total mess like the Suez crisis, or the Congo, the less bad it would be to deal with but if you let it bleed for three or four weeks by the time you got there it would be virtually impossible to do anything about it. We got

the first troops to the Congo – they were all African – in three days from the decision to send a force there and we got 10,000 more in another 10 days. And it did well and it did make a huge difference. I mean not much blood had been spilled and it was just very important to do that. And that was Bunche. He was a person who believed you stayed up all night and got things going and made sure that you don't make any stupid obvious mistakes. And he inspired other people that way.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tom, you are running this UN Intellectual History project. What is that exactly and how does Ralph Bunche fit into it?

WEISS: Well, actually the Intellectual History project is about economic and social ideas. The proposition here is that after all is said and done one of the most important legacies of the United Nations will be the ideas, the norms, the principles, that are then picked up by governments, picked up by NGO's, picked up by the media, and people do something with them. So it seems to me that Bunche's legacy is really on the security side, except for the point that Brian already mentioned which was the dynamo of decolonization. This is certainly one of the biggest ideas that set off the wave, actually, of independent countries that changed the agenda of the United Nations, that moved it in the direction of economic and social development away from a more exclusive concern with international peace and security.

URQUHART: I think there is one thing you ought to perhaps deal with in your next volume actually Tom. Bunche really liked people. I mean he was not at all a stuffy man. He really liked people and he believed that there was no problem of human relations which should be insoluble and that you could have the worst situation in the world – and we've got plenty of those now – but if you keep hammering at it sooner or later you would find that you can make some progress. And that's what he did. I mean that's why he was so successful in the early days of the Palestine problem because he just didn't take no for an answer and we went on and on. And since he had far greater intellectual and physical stamina than any of the envoys – I mean they were all practically dead with exhaustion by the end of the armistice negotiations but they produced an agreement.

LITTLEJOHNS: James Jonah, you've spoken of your pride, as an African, in the memory of Ralph Bunche, is he recognized in Africa, as he deserves to be?

JONAH: Well, not widely known these days. I would say in East Africa, yes. In Kenya – for example, he's revered in Kenya. Increasingly, I would say also in West Africa but many of our new leaders really don't know who he was. People like Nkrumah, Azikwe, they know him because they were able to interact with him. But I think now, for example when I go to Africa – I just came from Gaborone and I was introduced as a senior fellow of Ralph Bunche and they want to know more about who is this Ralph Bunche. And so they are getting to – they

are very much – and they wonder why it's not possible to have people of his type anymore in the UN. That's a question they always ask. I say, "Well, one, Ralph Bunche was a man who believed in the international civil service. He was a great defender of the – in the time of the great tragedy in the UN, or the McCarthy period, Ralph Bunche was a fearless defender". Despite all what people have said about the Congo, the Congo club, Ralph Bunche never took any suggestion from the United States. In fact, in many instances he was reacting against U.S. policy in the Congo. So these are the kinds of people that we need today and, as you know, it's a different world we live in today.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is the outstanding incident in your long association with Ralph Bunche that you can point to?

URQUHART: You know, the trouble with it is that watching someone like that work and working with him is a sort of ongoing experience which you look forward to every day. I mean I remember Bunche best, I think, in our first days in the Congo in 1960. I mean it was a complete shambles. There was total anarchy and it was quite dangerous and Bunche just sat there day and night just keeping the lid on and telling people what to do, and occasionally going off on some reasonably risky mission of his own. And he never got excited and he never, never lost his sort of intellectual judgement so that he didn't sort of react to all the incidents that happened, literally, every minute. He just kept steadily on and he was an example to me of how you should deal with a crisis like that. I mean he did it with a complete lack of interest in what the press was saying about him. Either the press was saying that he micromanaged things and we hadn't taken the American and British line – well, of course we hadn't – about who we backed and who we didn't back, and why were we helping Patrice Lumumba. Patrice Lumumba was the elected prime minister. It was rather difficult for an organization devoted to democracy to sort of work against him. But he was there but he didn't ever lose his sort of level judgement and he also never lost his sense of humour, because one of the nicest things about working for Bunche was once you were safely behind closed doors, late in the evening, we would have jokes about people and things. He never would do this in public and he never made jokes about anybody but he greatly enjoyed the human scene and observing the way people behaved. And that was one of the sort of great pleasures about working with him.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. We're talking to Brian Urquhart, Thomas Weiss and James Jonah about the legacy of Ralph Bunche. Here's a clip from a documentary called, "Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey".

VIDEO ROLL IN:

NARRATION: 1949. Ralph Johnson Bunche, an African-American mediator, successfully negotiates an armistice agreement between Israel and four Arab nations: Trans-Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. The only time in the long history of the Arab-Israeli conflict that all four Arab nations signed a peace treaty with Israel. Throughout the world there is great hope for lasting peace in the Holy Land. [APPLAUSE]

For this unprecedented feat, Ralph Bunche is awarded a Nobel Prize for peace and is catapulted into worldwide celebrity. Less well known but more significant and longer lasting, is the role he played behind the scenes in the historic struggle for self-determination after World War II. A struggle in which over a billion people of colour gained national independence. How did a Black man in America, in the 1950's, attain such an important level of influence in global affairs?

JOHNSON: ...“We ran a story in *Ebony* saying that Ralph Bunche was the most honoured Black man – we said Negro – the most honoured Black man in the world. I think he was the first Black man to become a crossover in something other than entertainment. We probably have a bigger file on Ralph Bunche than we have on Michael Jackson (laughter).”

NEWSEEL NARRATOR: “And back in New York, a testimonial dinner is given for Dr. Ralph Bunche, United Nations Mediator in Palestine. Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt is among the hundreds who paid tribute to his efforts in bringing about the truce in the Holy Land”.

BUNCHE: ...“It was a problem which ran the full gamut – racial and religious antagonisms, political and economic conflict, foreign influences, international concern, and finally armed hostility. And in this regard, as an American and a Negro, I cannot avoid reminding my fellow Americans that all of us who have a sense of justice and fair play must contribute to the solution of a problem on our own doorstep, which is perhaps more complex and baffling even than the Palestine problem.”

VIDEO OUT

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Jonah, I'm sorry I had to interrupt you a few minutes ago. What were you about to say?

JONAH: I'm trying to follow up what Brian was saying about Bunche, about his humanity. It was Prem Chand who once when I was working with him told me a story which Brian did in fact record in his spectacular biography of Bunche. That in the battle for Kolwezi...

URQUHART: In Katanga, in the Congo.

JONAH: ...I think in Katanga.

LITTLEJOHNS: Prem Chand was the general?

JONAH: The general. And I think he took a chance and Bunche had to go there. And I think Prem Chand was so frightened that he was going to be reprimanded or removed and I think Bunche took a letter to Prem Chand, which was a letter of mild reprimand...

URQUHART: No, no.

JONAH: ...and he gave him a reply, that he should-- (laughter)

URQUHART: Yeah, that's right.

JONAH: I mean it shows you – it gave to Prem Chand what he should reply to the Secretary-General. I mean it just shows you the kind of man....

URQUHART: Well, it has to be said that Prem Chand had advanced matters tremendously.

LITTLEJOHNS: He was an Indian general, right?

URQUHART: Yes. He was the Indian General in Katanga. He solved the secession of Katanga by actually going much beyond his orders because he saw a chance to do it. And it was very successful. And so Bunche had this letter of reprimand, which was demanded by the fact that he had exceeded his orders, and then he had rather carefully written the reply as well because he thought that Prem Chand had actually done a very good job.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tom, are your students sufficiently cognizant of the role of Ralph Bunche in the events of the last part of the 20th century?

WEISS: Absolutely not. That's one of the reasons why Brian and some of his other colleagues, Ben Rivlin and Larry Finkelstein, wanted to have this centenary. I gave a talk recently to a group of master students from a decent M.A. programme in International Relations and I just began with the kind of thing you did in Gaborone. And I looked around the room, there wasn't – out of the 30 masters students at a decent university, not one could tell me who he was and what he had done. This included people of lots of colours – about a third of them were from countries other than United States so ignorance is not a monopoly we have in United States. We have plenty of it, but it went beyond. And so one of the roles of this year is, in fact, to boost the image and I would say I'm glad to hear -- I'm sure that James thought that he was an African but it seems to me that his example, the integrity, the intellectual honesty, the sense of humour provides a model for people and youngsters of any colour frankly.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ralph Bunche was the first UN person to win a Nobel Peace Prize and, as you mentioned, he didn't want to accept it. Kofi Annan, of course, is the latest recipient. How do you relate the two periods of the UN that accounted for the award of this great honour?

URQUHART: Well, I think Bunche was lucky in one way, as were we all who were in at the beginning. We were actually creating the organization as we went along. I mean

Bunche created this whole technique of mediation, which he used in getting the armistice agreement between the Israelis and the Arabs, and then he created actually from scratch peacekeeping. It didn't exist in the UN Charter at all. It was an idea which had never been mentioned. And I think that was much easier in a way, but on the other hand you couldn't have got any of those things done if we hadn't had a person of enormous gifts. I mean, not only gifts of intellect but gifts of personality and gifts of honesty and understanding. And Bunche, when he was negotiating, had taken the trouble to find out all about the politics of the country he was dealing with, all about the fears of that country, all about their capacity. He knew more – I mean the Israelis -- Rhodes complained that he knew more about Israeli politics and the military situation than they did and it was perfectly true. And he did that in order to get into people's heads to see what he could persuade them to do. I mean it was an intellectual process, apart from one of sympathy and understanding. Kofi Annan, I think, is very much the heir of Bunche. He has a lot of similarities with him and, indeed, he's said himself that the great thing about the Bunche-Hammarskjold period was that if you're faced with a really sticky problem you automatically ask yourself what they would have done. And it is a sort of a model in a way but, you know, life – I have to say the world was simpler then. We were divided into the Cold War, it was a relatively small organization, yet people hadn't got tired of the UN. People were still fascinated by the UN, which I'm sorry is now far from the truth, and I think it was a different period. And I think Kofi Annan is a very creditable sort of heir to Bunche in the way he's tackled the job.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tom Weiss, can you tell us a bit more about the Intellectual History project in relation to Ralph Bunche? I'm not quite clear what association is there.

WEISS: The project is an effort to trace which ideas have arisen, have been massaged, have been distorted, or have been used within the United Nations system and we're focusing on economic and social ideas – so human rights, poverty alleviation, the role of women, and the like – so that we're focusing on economic and social issues rather than peace and security ones.

LITTLEJOHNS: But how does Ralph Bunche and his legacy fit into that?

WEISS: The Bunche legacy fits in on the decolonization side having drafted into charter provisions and the fact that – in fact I think Brian says in one of the interviews for the project that this notion which folks had in mind is taking perhaps 50, 75, a hundred years to play itself out, actually occurred within a 20-year period. So things that were set in train in the Second World War were far ahead of their time and the Charter's provisions and the whole Trusteeship Council was far ahead of his time. My sense is we may be coming back to

trusteeship in contemporary international relations in terms of problem solving in failed or weak states.

LITTLEJOHNS: Gentlemen, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guests have been Brian Urquhart, former UN Under-Secretary-General and author of the biography, "Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey", Thomas Weiss, Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies and Co-Director of the UN Intellectual History Project, and James Jonah, Senior Fellow at the Ralph Bunche Institute and former UN Under-Secretary-General.

I'm Michael Littlejohns, thank you for joining us; we invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

ANNOUNCER: Electronic transcripts of this programme may be obtained free of charge by contacting World Chronicle at the address on your screen:

World Chronicle

United Nations, Room S-827

New York, N.Y., 10017.

Or by email at: besa@un.org

This programme is a Public Affairs Presentation from United Nations Television.

The views and opinions expressed on this programme are those of the participants, and do not necessarily reflect the official statements or views of the United Nations.