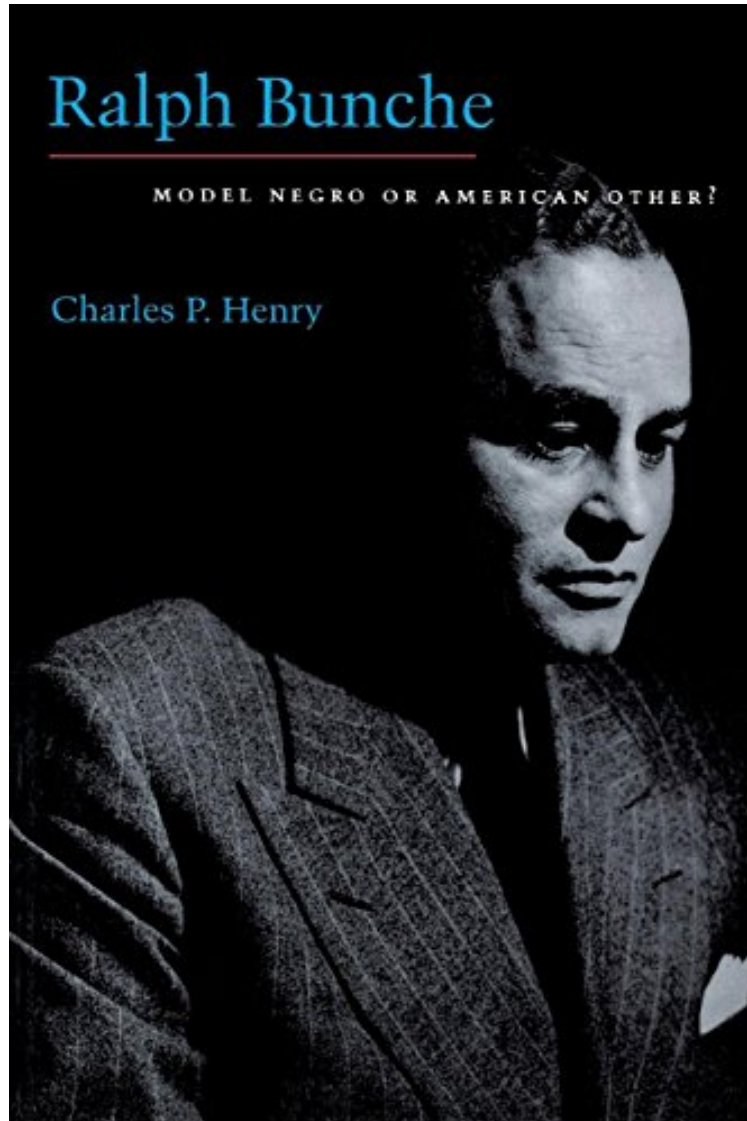


(Free) Ralph Bunche: Model Negro or American Other?

Ralph Bunche: Model Negro or American Other?

Charles P. Henry

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that Ralph Bunche is little known on university campuses nowadays just proves that white male patriarchal systems of 'scholarship' are making it almost impossible to learn about all the great African American figures in the twentieth century. Why are we not told about him? Because we are supposed to care about conservative white males like Churchill and Teddy Roosevelt! As a feminist and a white woman, I side completely with African Americans as they try to access their glorious past, including celebrated people like Ralph Bunche, who, until now, was hardly known outside the postage stamp that featured his portrait. Not any more!

Activist, international statesman, reluctant black leader, scholar, icon, father and husband, Ralph Bunche is one of the most complicated and fascinating figures in the history of twentieth-century America. Bunche played a central role in shaping international relations from the 1940s through the 1960s, first as chief of the Africa section of the Office of Strategic Services and then as part of the State Department group working to establish the United Nations. After moving to the U.N. as Director of Trusteeship, he became the first black Nobel Laureate in 1950 and was subsequently named Undersecretary of the U.N. For nearly a decade, he was the most celebrated contemporary African American both domestically and abroad. Today he is virtually forgotten. Charles Henry's penetrating biography counters this historical tragedy, recapturing the essence of Bunche's service to America and the world. Moreover, Henry ably demonstrates how Bunche's rise and fall as a public symbol tells us as much about America as it does about Bunche. His iconic status, like that of other prominent, mainstream black figures like Colin Powell, required a constant struggle over the relative importance of his racial identity and his national identity. Henry's biography shines as both the recovered story of a classic American, and as a case study in the racial politics of public service.

From Publishers Weekly Henry's book is much broader and better than its precious subtitle suggests. It's a sweeping history of mid-century America mixed with a close analysis of the life and work of Ralph Bunche (1903-1971), the African-American scholar and statesman who, according to Henry, was much more of a "race man" than his establishment career would lead people to suspect. In 1934, Bunche became the first African-American to earn a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard, and he later established the political science department at Howard University. Bunche is best known for his work in various positions at the UN, and he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 as director of that institution's Trusteeship Division, which was responsible for putting together and administering the first UN peacekeeping forces. In the ensuing years, he was vocal in his criticism of American racism, declaring the Civil Rights Act of 1957 "disappointingly weak," and surprised those who had pegged him as an "accommodationist" when he declared that he "did not rule out violence as a means of revolutionary change" in the U.S. Henry, a professor of African-American studies at UC-Berkeley, doesn't give readers a personal portrait of Bunche. Instead, he concentrates on how race affected the way this highly accomplished man was viewed, by himself and by other Americans. Some felt Bunche wasn't "Negro" enough; others thought him too black by half. "I've been the token Negro at too many parties for too many years," Bunche once said. Henry does a fine job of illuminating how Bunche flourished, despite the unfair demands made on him by both black and white Americans because of his race. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal Bunche (1903-1971), who helped mediate the 1948-49 Arab-Israeli conflict, was the first African American to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In this work, Henry (African American studies, Univ. of California) offers a revealing portrait of a man he feels is "virtually forgotten" despite his accomplishments. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Kirkus sA quirky biographical sketch of the sometimes forgotten Nobel laureate. Though in his youth during the 1930s, as a political science professor and administrator at Howard University in Washington, D.C., Bunche gained a reputation as something of an armchair radical, he became in later life an enduring symbol of moderation. It was Bunche the research scholar, for example, who helped to guide and write Gunnar Myrdal's mammoth study of black Americans following the 1935 Harlem riots. On the international front, Bunche was called on as a troubleshooter with the United Nations (where he was director of trusteeship and then undersecretary) to quell warring factions in the Middle East, the Congo, and Cyprus. In light of those and other accomplishments, which included a 1950 Nobel Prize for his Middle East peacemaking role, Henry (African American Studies/Univ. of Calif., Berkeley) wonders why, close to half a century later, most Americans, including blacks, don't seem to know who Bunche was. Perhaps this was partly Bunche's own fault. Reserved and even staid, he was unaccustomed to calling attention to himself as either a diplomat or an academic. In fact, his first government job was with the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, where it was assumed that reticence is golden and instrumental. But Henry wants instead to cast Bunche as a controversial and charismatic figure, cut to fit the mold of a W.E.B. DuBois. His explorations in search of this Bunche lead to digressions that would have the reader believe his book is an excursion into black intellectual history, with Bunche as an incidental stop along the way. A basic statement of Bunche's racial views, for instance, becomes a dissertation on slavery; a movie made about him yields to a long discourse about the role of African-Americans in the movies. These digressions cloud our view of the man. (25 bw photos) -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.