

The Story of Ralph Bunche Through William Greaves

Jacqueline Di Chiara

William Greaves is one of today's leading black documentary filmmakers. With over 70 international film festival awards for documentaries such as *From These Roots* and *Ida B. Wells: A Passion For Justice* and an Emmy for his work as executive producer and co-host of the television series, *Black Journal*, Greaves was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame. He was recently honored by the National Black Theater and Film Festival with the first award for Lifelong Achievement in Film and for Contributions to Black Theater.

Aside from such accomplishments, Greaves also has a fascination with one of the most inspiring black leaders in history: Ralph Bunche.

Producer, director, and writer of the recently completed award-winning documentary, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*, Greaves' 2 hour film—shown at the Sundance festival and on prime-time PBS—tells of Bunche's incredibly legacy as legendary African-American Nobel Peace Prize Winner, his inspiring work as a United Nations statesman, and of his efforts to negotiate international peace by supporting the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In a telephone interview conducted on March 9, 2004, Greaves describes his reasons to make the documentary and on how Bunche has impacted the advancement of black American.

What was it about Bunche that inspired you in such a way that you decided to make a documentary on him?

Well, I was very much impressed with his extremely passionate commitment to

human rights and humanity in general. I was intrigued by his scholarship, his intellectual gifts, and his activism in the struggle for human rights. He was very much aware that excellence in scholarship plus commitment to humanity was a very good combination in the battle of ideas with the various forces that are against humanity—against human rights. I found that to be very attractive. And also, the fact that he was a very modest man—he was not arrogant. He was not egotistical about his intellectual gifts. He simply wanted to get a job done rather than get a whole lot of credit for it.

What was Bunche's main commitment concerning his work?

He said in his valedictory address in college at UCLA that there is a gap between the American creed and practice and

the ideas of the American creed on the ground. His commitment was to close that gap, making sure that when one says "human rights," one really means the human rights of all people and that one is willing to put one's energies and activities on the line to make sure that everyone gets their just dues as human beings.

How do you think that he tried to close this gap?

In several ways. He took advantage of the opportunity to join the United Nations. He was invited to be a member of the United Nations Secretariat and accepted that invitation. Before that, he wrote those sections of the United Nations Charter that deal with the decolonization of the world, which helped to facilitate the self-determination movements that were taking place in the world after the Second World War was over.

He became the head of the



Ralph Bunche
Congo Press Conference in 1963

Trusteeship Department of the United Nations. He had won the Nobel Prize for Peace, with respect to the Arab nations and Israel signing an armistice agreement in 1949. This gave him worldwide recognition as a very important mediator—a master of conflict resolution. And, that was one of the chief reasons as a very important mediator—a master of conflict resolution. And, that was one of the chief reasons why he was appointed to second highest office in the United Nations—the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Special Affairs—because of the work that he was doing for special political affairs as a figure who was so astute, so intellectually gifted, and so adept at conflict resolution, negotiations, and mediation between warring parties. It was clear that he was the best person to be named the second-in-command of the United Nations.

Through all of his achievements as the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Special Affairs, do you feel that there is anyone in modern society who exemplifies Bunche's ideals and accomplishments?

Yes. I think Kofi Annan is an excellent example. He is very much like Ralph Bunche. He is a very modest man and is excellent at mediation and negotiating conflicts. He is also a very intelligent man and a very easy person to deal with. When you meet him, you feel you have met a friend. Frankly, I met him as a result of my work on the *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* film. We had several opportunities to meet and to talk and we become more or less friendly, as it was very easy to be with him. I think that in itself is a very outstanding quality.

I understand that Ralph Bunche was a similar person to Kofi Annan. In all the research that we did in preparation for making the movie, it was pretty obvious that was precisely the kind of person that he was—one that you could easily talk with. One who was not puffed up, conceited, or egotistical. He was a very modest person and yet he was a very effective fighter for the welfare of humanity.

What do you feel are Bunche's most vital contributions to our society and to our current generation?

I think he is an excellent role model for young people entering high school and college who are figuring out what to do with themselves. He is a marvelous role model, because he spent his time studying hard, absorbing information, and putting it together in terms of how the information that he was absorbing could be put into service of human kind.

He was an excellent student. He was at the top of his class in high school, vale-

dictorian in college, and then at Harvard, he was at the top of his class in political science, and so on. And, at the age of twenty-five, he set up the political science department of Howard University, which is quite an achievement. He became something of an intellectual athlete, a leader in the various arguments and discussions that would take place on campus. He also was ready to provide the necessary information to bolster his arguments that were developing between different groups of people.

How did Bunche challenge already established notions of black leadership?

He felt that some black leaders were very loud or articulate in their positions, but they weren't effectively doing things that would help to change the quality of life in the black community. That is to say, it's one thing to criticize but it's another to get in the middle of a particular situation and make policy changes within that situation, because of one's intellectual gifts and one's understanding of what the right solutions should be.

For example, the chapters of the United Nations Charter—which he wrote—laid the ground work for these various countries that gained their independence from colonial powers. He worked, for example, with Eleanor Roosevelt who admired his insight and understanding, his genius and they worked very closely together to get the Universal Declaration of Human Rights accepted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. He was very effective according to the American Ambassador to the UN, Ernest Gross, who said that if it were not for the team of Ralph Bunche and Eleanor Roosevelt, there would be no Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He said Bunche lobbied the various delega-



Williams Greaves



tions to support Eleanor Roosevelt's presentation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And that was a very important act, because it helped create a climate and a feeling for human rights—not only in America—but throughout the world and it provided a climate in which the Civil Rights movement in America was able to function and gain strength, because Black Americans had the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to back up the people who petitioning for human rights.

Do you feel that his work affects the portrayal of blacks today in the media?

Well, yes. I think that to some degree it does. Black people today are more and more depicted in less stereotypical terms than they were some years ago, although there are still problems in the American media where very stereotypical concepts are accented. One can say that while there is progress in the portrayal of black people in the media, there still is a long way to go. You still get a lot of negative stereotypical portrayals which don't help the perception of the African-American in the wider thinking of people who are not African-American.

What do you feel that some of these negative portrayals are in the media?

Well, you get a lot of these television shows that make fools out of black people and that really don't show the other side of the black experience. It is one thing to focus only on those parts of a particular group that are laughable. They are not seriously taken when they are depicted in other areas of American life. You don't see as many judges, as many doctors, as many lawyers, and so on, portrayed by black people on television than you see of white professionals. In percentage term, black people make up 10-12 percent of the population of this country. Those demographics don't play out on the daily American screen. You certainly don't see them in 10-12 percent of the serious programming on the American screen.

How do you see Bunche in relation to someone like Martin Luther King?

Martin Luther King was said to be a very important spokesperson for human rights in America. But, because of this Universal Declaration of Human Rights that Bunche worked so closely with Eleanor Roosevelt on, he helped create the worldwide climate for human rights that enabled Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and various other black leaders and other white leaders to gain increasing support.

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in South Hadley, Massachusetts*