

Ralph Bunche

1950

“The United Nations is our one great hope for a peaceful and free world”

Ralph Bunche was born in Michigan. His father was a barber in a whites-only shop. His mother was a musician, and his grandmother (who lived with them) had been born a slave. The family moved to New Mexico when Ralph was ten because both parents had serious health problems. Both died within two years leaving Ralph to be raised by his Grandmother. They moved to Los Angeles where Ralph worked selling newspapers, doing chores and odd jobs for rich people, and laying carpet.



courtesy nobelse.com

In elementary school Ralph won prizes in history and English for outstanding ability. He graduated first in his class in high school where he debated and was an athlete in football, basketball, baseball, and track.

He attended the University of California where he received an athletic scholarship and worked as a janitor. He played basketball, and joined the debate team and the college newspaper. He graduated in 1927 with high academic honors with a major in international relations.

- Lived 1904-1971
- Raised by his Grandmother who was born a slave
- Worked with President Roosevelt
- Negotiated Arab Israeli partition agreement 1948

“Hearts are the strongest when they beat in response to noble ideals.”

Ralph studied political science in graduate school. He attended Harvard University with a scholarship and a fund of a thousand dollars raised and contributed by the black community of Los Angeles. He graduated in 1928 and taught at Howard University while working toward his doctorate at Harvard.

In 1932-1933 he went to Africa to research and compare French rule in Togoland and Dahomey. In 1934 he completed this work and was awarded the Toppan Prize for outstanding research in social studies.

In 1936-1938 he did post doctorate work in London and South Africa. Dr. Bunche was chairman of the Department of Political Science at Howard University from 1928-1950. He had a strong commitment to

education. He served on the New York City Board of Education as well as many other educational boards.

At Howard University Bunche was considered a radical intellectual who was very critical of the American social system. He was highly criticized by both white and Negro organizations

Drawing on his personal experience he wrote "A World View of Race" in 1936. In it he wrote "And so class will some day supplant race in world affairs. Race war will then be merely a side-show to the gigantic class war which will be waged in the big tent we call the world".

In 1944 he wrote "An American Dilemma" in response to the Carnegie Corporation's survey of Negroes in America. This survey was about the racial divide between whites and Negroes.

Bunche joined the cabinet of President Roosevelt to work on minority problems in the United States. He was asked but refused to work with the President Truman as assistant secretary of state because of segregated housing conditions in Washington, DC. These conditions included failing schools and sub standard housing.

Bunche helped organize and lead the civil rights march organized by Martin Luther King, Jr. in Montgomery Alabama in 1965. He was a leader in the NAACP and the Urban League.

He supported and influenced civil rights organizations during 1945-1965 with speeches and attendance at gatherings and events.

In 1946 Bunche began to work with the UN. He worked to help nations who did not yet have self-government. He continued to work with the UN for the rest of his life.

In June 1947 Bunche began to work on the most important project of his career. He began to mediate between Arabs and Jews over land disputes. He was the assistant to the UN Special Committee on Palestine, then principal secretary of the UN Palestine Commission. This Commission was formed to work on a partition of Palestine to be approved by the UN general assembly.

In 1948 this plan was dropped and fighting between Arabs and Israelis intensified.

The UN appointed Count Folke Bernadotte as mediator and Ralph Bunche as his assistant. Four months later Bernadotte was assassinated and Bunche was named UN mediator on Palestine. After eleven months of negotiations and non stop travel Bunche got an agreement for peace between Israel and the Arab States.

Bunche returned to the United States and a hero's parade in New York City. Los Angeles declared a "Ralph Bunche Day". He was honored by the NAACP in 1949, received over thirty honorary degrees, and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950.

Some deeply held beliefs of Ralph Bunche were that racial prejudice is wrong because it has no basis in biology or anthropology. Segregation and democracy are incompatible. Black people should maintain the struggle for equal rights while accepting the responsibilities that come with freedom. Whites must demonstrate that "democracy is color blind."

Bunche worked for the UN from 1955 to 1967. In 1968 he was named undersecretary general. During this time he had many special assignments. In 1960 he went to the Congo when war erupted there

When interviewed about his time with the UN Bunche stated "the United Nations has had the courage that the League of Nations lacked. To step in and tackle the buzz saw".

Ralph Bunche was responsible for a great amount of that courage.

The United Nations document "Ralph Bunche, Visionary for Peace", stated about Bunche that he:

"...championed the principle of equal rights for everyone. Regardless of race or creed. He believed in the essential goodness of all people, and that no problem in human relations is insoluble"

Suggested Classroom Activities

Ralph Bunche

Introduction/Warm Up: Using these quotes, discuss or write about Ralph Bunche

“There are no warlike people, just warlike leaders.”

“If you want to get across an idea, wrap it up in person”

Discussion Questions

1. What childhood events may have caused Ralph Bunche to feel strongly about civil rights for Negroes? (level 1)
2. Why did Ralph Bunche feel that racial prejudice is wrong? (level 2)
3. What controversial civil rights activities did Bunche participate in? (level 2)
4. Compare Bunche’s view of the League of Nations and the UN. What was “the buzz saw”? (level 3)
5. Bunche won the Nobel Peace Prize after completing what task? How was this viewed by the world? (level 3)

Vocabulary

1. Radical
2. Supplant
3. Mediate
4. Partition
5. NAACP
6. “buzz saw”

Classroom Activities:

In this lesson, students will examine the factors that allowed Ralph Bunche, growing up as an African American in the early twentieth century, to overcome obstacles of economics and race, develop his ideas on peace and justice and become a top scholar and world leader. Students will demonstrate what they have learned through a variety of projects ranging from poetry and writing to art, music, speaking, and technology.

<http://www.pbs.org/ralphbunche/education/educational.html> This is a page of lesson plans on Ralph Bunche.

Technology Option: Create a web page on the life of Ralph Bunche. Use a time line format and illustrate with pictures.

Resources

<http://www.pbs.org/ralphbunche/credit.html> Ralph Bunche, an American Odyssey

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/ This is the official Nobel Laureate Site