

# 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.

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 also competed 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.

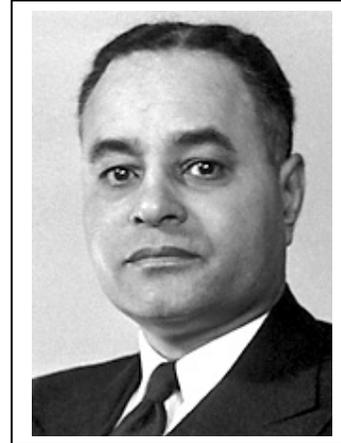
Ralph studied political science in graduate school. He attended Harvard University with a scholarship and a fund of a thousand dollars raised and contributed by the black

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. After that, 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 authored “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”.



- **Raised by his Grandmother who was born a slave**
- **Worked with President Roosevelt**
- **Negotiated Arab Israeli partition agreement 1948**
- **UN undersecretary general**

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

In 1944 he wrote “An American **Dilemma**” in response to the Carnegie Corporation’s survey of Blacks 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 President Truman as assistant secretary of state. He refused because of **segregated** housing conditions in Washington, DC. These conditions included failing schools and poor 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, two of the most important civil rights organizations at the time.

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

In 1946 Bunche began to work with the United Nations. 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 in Palestine. After eleven months of negotiations and nonstop travel Bunche helped create 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 was awarded 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 responsibility that comes 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.” Many believe that Ralph Bunche was responsible for a great amount of that courage.

The United Nations document “Ralph Bunche, Visionary for Peace,” stated about Bunche: (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**.”

## Classroom Activities

### Ralph Bunche

#### Introduction/Warm Up:

Discuss the history of the struggle against racism in the United States.

#### Discussion Questions

1. What personal experiences did Ralph Bunche have, as a child, with racism? (Level 1)
2. What demonstrates that Bunche had courage to enter into the peace-making process in the Middle East? (Level 1)
3. In which civil rights activities did Bunche participate in that also demonstrated his courage? (Level 2)
4. Bunche "...championed the principle of equal rights for everyone, regardless of race or creed." Do you believe in equal rights for everybody? EVERYBODY? Explain your answer. (Level 3)

#### Vocabulary Terms:

1. **Radical intellectual**
2. **Supplant**
3. **Dilemma**
4. **Segregated**
5. **Mediate**
6. **Partition**
7. **Anthropology**
8. **Insoluble**

#### Classroom Activities:

1. List all of the reasons why Ralph Bunche might have thought that mediation was the most important thing that he did in his life.
2. List all of the reasons why he might have thought that mediation was NOT the most important thing that he did in his life.
3. Write: What do YOU think was the most important thing that he did in his life? Explain your conclusion.

#### Technology Option:

Go to <http://search.comcast.net/?q=Ralph+Bimcje&cat=Images&con=net>. Select photos that represent several different important events in Ralph Bunche's life. Assemble these photos into a presentation board, including labels, explaining these events and their importance.

## Resources

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

[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/) This is the official Nobel

Laureate Site

<http://search.comcast.net/?q=Ralph+Bimcje&cat=Images&con=net>