

Ralph Bunche

the odyssey continues...

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MODULE

The Making of a Scholar/Activist

■ Synopsis



40 minutes

“The Making of a Scholar/Activist” follows Bunche from his graduation at UCLA in 1927 and his decision to enter Harvard, to the eve of World War II. The module includes:

- his appeal to W.E.B. Du Bois for help in obtaining a summer job;
- his experience at Harvard graduate school;
- his academic career at Howard University where he reorganizes and expands the political science department and is appointed special assistant to the president of the college;
- his marriage to Ruth Harris;
- the evolution of his political activism and his ideas about race and class;
- his quarrel with Du Bois who characterizes Bunche and his radical associates at Howard as the “Young Turks;”
- the response of the black intellectual to the rise of fascism in Europe and in America.

■ Historical Background

The Treaty of Versailles, which officially ended World War I, imposed harsh terms on Germany. Reparations payments exacerbated by the economic hardships of the Great Depression helped create a political climate in which Hitler was able to rise to power. In 1917, the Bolsheviks had gained control of the Russian Revolution and communism as an ideology was gaining adherents among the intellectual and working classes in Europe and, to a lesser degree, in the United States. Others saw Bolshevism as a distinct and grave threat to the status quo. The Ku Klux Klan experienced a major resurgence in the United States during the 1920s. The economic boom of the 1920s came to an abrupt halt with the crash of the New York Stock Market in 1929, and by the early 1930s, the Great Depression had the world locked in its vise. By 1937, the unemployment rate among black males was as high as 26%.

In This Module (in order of appearance)

TERMS TO KNOW

summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, intellectual, spiritual, Talented Tenth, Ku Klux Klan, Marxism, NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), economic depression, Young Turks, New Deal, League of Nations, mandate system, colonialism, fascism, racism

PEOPLE REFERENCED

W.E.B. Du Bois, William Hastie, John P. Davis, Robert Weaver, Mordecai Johnson, Thomas Nelson Johnson, Ruth Ethel Harris, Mary McLeod Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt, Alain Locke, Abram Harris, William Leo Hansberry, E. Franklin Frazier, Franklin D. Roosevelt, A. Philip Randolph

PLACES REFERENCED

Howard University, Soviet Union, Great Britain, Germany, Paris, Geneva, West Africa, Dahomey, Harvard University

PEOPLE ON SCREEN

Dr. Herschelle Challenor, Dr. David Levering Lewis, Dr. Robert C. Weaver, Todd Duncan, Dr. John Hope Franklin, Dr. Vincent Browne, Dr. Kenneth Clark, Hyland Lewis, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dr. John Henrick Clarke, Dr. Charles Henry, Dr. Doxey Wilkerson, Dr. Jonathan Holloway, Dr. Ronald Walters, Dr. Ben Keppel, Judge William Bryant, Sir Brian Urquhart

■ Relevant Standards

National Council for the Social Studies Strands

Strand II. Time, Continuity, & Change

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of *the ways human beings view themselves in and over time*, so that the learner can: (f) Apply ideas, theories, and modes of historical inquiry to analyze historical and contemporary developments.

Strand V. Individuals, Groups, & Institutions

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of *interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions*, so that the learner can: (a) apply concepts such as role, status, and social class in describing the connections and interactions of individuals, groups, and institutions in society.

National Center for History in the Schools Standards

Standard 2. The student thinks chronologically:

Therefore the student is able to

- C. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses and the purpose, perspective, or point of view from which it has been constructed;
- F. Appreciate historical perspectives — (a) describing the past on its own terms, through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through their literature, diaries, letters, debates, arts, artifacts, and the like; (b) considering the historical context in which the event unfolded — the values, outlook, options, and contingencies of that time and place; (c) avoiding “present-mindedness,” judging the past solely in terms of present-day norms and values.

Standard 3. The student engages in historical analysis and interpretation:

Therefore the student is able to

- A. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions by identifying likenesses and differences;
- B. Consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.

**Standard 5. The student engages in historical issues —
analysis and decision-making:**

Therefore the student is able to

- B. Marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances and current factors contributing to contemporary problems and alternative courses of action;
- E. Formulate a position or course of action on an issue by identifying the nature of the problem, analyzing the underlying factors contributing to the problem, and choosing a plausible solution from a choice of carefully evaluated options.

■ **Map Connection**

On a map of Europe and North Africa, locate areas invaded by Germany and Italy during World War II.

■ **Before You Watch**

For suggested preview strategies and activities, see page 4 of the general reference section of the *Guide*.

If this is the first module screened, ask the students: Have you ever heard of Ralph Bunche? What do you know or think you know about Ralph Bunche? What do you predict you might find out about him in the video you are about to watch?

OPINION Which do you feel is more important to you in terms of how you see yourself, race or social class? Which do you feel is more important to others in terms of how they view you, race or social class?

RECALL What influences or experiences in Ralph Bunche's childhood do you think best prepared him to succeed in college?

**HISTORICAL
CONTEXT** What issues remained unresolved at the end of the First World War? Did the Treaty of Versailles create conditions that would cause problems later? What was the main purpose of the League of Nations?

■ **While You Watch** (with teacher's answer key)

For suggestions on how to use these questions, see pages 4-5 of the general reference section of the *Guide*.

1. After he graduates from UCLA, to whom does Ralph Bunche write for help in obtaining a summer job that will allow him to be of some benefit to his people, and what response does he get?

W.E.B. Du Bois, editor of The Crisis; Du Bois writes that there is no opening at the magazine but he will keep Bunche in mind; The Crisis monitors Bunche's progress and reports on it to its readers.]

2. How was Ralph Bunche characterized by other graduate students at Harvard?

[Answers may include the following: his capacity to do a tremendous amount of work in short time; his flow of speech; powers of concentration; flow of writing]

3. Upon graduating from Harvard with a masters degree, Bunche receives an offer of a fellowship to continue his studies. What does he decide to do?

[He turns down the offer, and accepts a job teaching political science at Howard University.]

4. In addition to teaching, what roles or positions does Bunche assume at Howard?

[He is appointed special assistant to the President of Howard; reorganizes and expands the political science department; is a member of the discipline committee; encourages students to protest against lynching and race discrimination.]

5. Whom does Bunche marry?

[Ruth Ethel Harris, one of his students]

6. What methods does Bunche employ to fight specific discriminatory and racist practices?

[He works behind the scenes to stop the National Theater from enforcing its policy of segregated seating for performances of "Porgy and Bess." When the university considers expelling students who protest against lynching by marching around the Capitol with ropes around their necks, he supports the students.]

7. What organization did Bunche help to found? What was its mission? What did some members of the establishment, including a black member of Congress, think of it?

[National Negro Congress; to provide a platform for black and white organizations with common interests to push for comprehensive social change; they feared that it was a Communist Party undercover organization.]

8. What was one of the issues debated by black intellectuals at the 1933 conference of the NAACP?

[Du Bois, who has been an integrationist, switches to supporting separatism; Ralph Bunche and the Young Turks believe that economic interests transcend differences of race and that black and white working class Americans will come together in order to achieve their common goal of a more democratic society.]

9. When Bunche takes a leave of absence from Howard to pursue a doctorate at Harvard, what topic does he choose for his doctoral dissertation?

[He compares the League of Nations mandated rule of French Togo with the colonial administration of Dahomey.]

10. What are some of the suggestions Bunche makes in the report he prepares for the Republicans on how their party can win the votes of the Negro electorate?

[They should offer national health insurance, and support affirmative action in employment, housing, education.]

11. What do Bunche, A. Philip Randolph and other black leaders, along with the NAACP, demand of President Roosevelt and what do they threaten to do if their demand is not met?

[They demand equality in defense industry hiring and they threaten to march on Washington if their demand is not met.]

■ After You Watch

For suggestions on how to structure post-viewing discussions or activities, see page 5 of the general reference section of the *Guide*.

1. Ralph Bunche recognized the value of having mentors, individuals who can guide and help us as we embark on a career path. Can you identify some successful people in the field you are interested in? What would you like to learn from them?
2. Social activists often produce strong feelings and opinions in others, both positive and negative. This was true of the National Negro Congress, founded by Ralph Bunche and John P. Davis, and later denounced by Bunche and A. Philip Randolph. What other organizations can you think of that produce strong reactions, either pro or con, in some people? What is the role of such organizations in a democratic society?
3. How did fascism shape Ralph Bunche's thinking about racism? How did it affect his sympathies toward communism?

4. At one point Ralph Bunche believed that common economic interests would suffice to overcome racism. Later, he came to believe that racism was powerful enough to distort people's thinking even if there were no underlying economic issues. What evidence is there today of race having greater importance than economic considerations? What evidence can you find of economic interests transcending race? Cite examples to support each point of view.

■ Digging Deeper: Activities and Research Projects

1. Have students read *A World View of Race* and write a book review summarizing Bunche's main arguments and comparing these with contemporary issues in race relations.
2. Ask students to research the causes of the Great Depression and the impact it had on politics in the United States and to prepare a visual display that illustrates their findings.
3. Explain to students that W.E.B. Du Bois and Ralph Bunche differed on the question of whether the black American minority would make more progress by becoming socially and economically independent of the dominant white society or by integrating into it. The same issue is raised today, among other places, in the debate over whether children learn better in schools segregated by gender, ethnicity or race. Choose one of these three attributes and conduct a class debate on whether separate schools or integrated schools create a climate that is more conducive to learning.

