

Ralph Bunche: Civil and Human Rights

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Why is Bunche an important historical figure?

- Discuss the status of race relations in the U.S. in 1950 when Bunche wins the Nobel Peace Prize, Truman has begun the integration of the Armed Services and Jackie Robinson has integrated baseball. However, much of America remains segregated.
- Discuss the status of international relations in 1950 as the "Cold War" heats up and as Bunche's fame is used as a weapon in the battle for the allegiance of one billion emerging colonial subjects.

John H. Johnson states that Bunche is the first crossover in a field other than entertainment. What does he mean? How is this term used today to describe people like Tiger Woods and Colin Powell?

- Discuss the issues of racial stereotyping and racial profiling. How was Bunche stereotyped? Note that he won an athletic scholarship to UCLA even though he was class valedictorian in high school and that his high school principal did not view Ralph as a Negro.
- Discuss the issue of positive racial identity. His grandmother refused to pass (explain the concept of passing) and instilled a sense of racial pride and achievement in her grandson.

What does the narrator mean when he says Bunche was the "model Negro?"

-- Discuss the issue of model minorities. What characteristics make an individual or a group a "model?"

-- Can you think of examples of model "Negroes" today? Does the term seem pejorative? Why?

How did the "Cold War" contribute to domestic racial progress?

- While the U.S. used Bunche's fame to praise American democracy, the reality of widespread segregation was used to embarrass the U.S. Pressure by the Soviet Union and newly emerging colonial subjects influenced government actions like the Supreme Court's Brown decision.

What was Bunche's intellectual contribution to civil rights?

-- As a political scientist, Bunche examined the failure of American democracy to deliver voting rights and political power to African Americans. He was a key critic of the early New Deal social programs that neglected or hurt African Americans such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). He was also the principal Black social scientist working on Gunnar Myrdal's classic *An American Dilemma*. Bunche was critical of Black protest organizations, which he felt were too elitist in their policies and too passive in their actions.

What was Bunche's intellectual contribution to human rights?

- Americans in general, tend to focus only on civil and political rights. Bunche saw these rights as part of a much broader conception of human rights that include social, economic and cultural rights as well. From his early commencement address at UCLA to his very last public speeches, Bunche linked the domestic civil rights struggle to the broader worldwide struggle for human rights and dignity.

What contributions did Bunche make to these struggles as an activist?

-- Bunche was a co-founder of the National Negro Congress (NNC) in 1935. Contrast the focus on labor coalitions and economic rights with the NAACP's emphasis on civil rights.

-- Bunche was an early supporter of the Montgomery bus boycott and Martin Luther King. Despite his declining health, Bunche spoke just before King at the March on Washington and joined King for the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965.

-- In Montgomery, Bunche responds to Governor Wallace's critique of "outside agitators" by saying that no American is an "outsider." Compare the doctrine of states rights in the civil rights struggle to that of national sovereignty in the human rights struggle.

In what ways does Bunche work to make sure that the United Nations is more effective than its predecessor, the League of Nations?

- Discuss his role in drafting key parts of the UN Charter. How does he overcome the unwillingness of the U.S. government to support crucial language in the Charter?
- If the League of Nations had supported Ethiopia against fascist Italy in 1935, could World War II have been prevented? Compare to current U.S. foreign policy in Eastern Europe vs. Africa.

What is the relationship between "peacekeeping" and human rights?

- Discuss the relationship between "peace" and "justice." Can or should the UN intervene to promote justice as well as peace? Why did Bunche dictate that UN blue helmets must act only in defense of themselves?

What were Bunche's views on the rights of women?

-- Discuss the impact of local women's groups such as the Iroquois Friday Morning Civic and Social Club on race relations.

-- What does Bunche's daughter mean when she says he was a traditional "paterfamilias? Discuss the gender views of leaders such as Bunche, King, and Malcolm X.

Would Bunche have been as successful career-wise had he chosen to remain at the U.S. State Department?

-- Discuss the opportunities opened up by the UN for international civil service.

-- Contrast with the very limited opportunities for Black diplomats in the U.S.

-- Discuss the indignities even African ambassadors faced in the U.S. in the fifties and sixties.

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