

# Ralph Bunche

the odyssey continues...

# 1

MODULE

## Early Years/ Early Influences

### ■ Synopsis



24 minutes

“Early Years/Early Influences” follows Ralph Bunche from his birth in Detroit in 1903 to 1927 when he is offered a scholarship to do post-graduate study at Harvard. The module opens with a brief overview of Dr. Bunche’s career and achievements and goes on to chronicle his experiences growing up in America during the first decades of the twentieth century. It includes personal remembrances and accounts of family and friends describing:

- the Johnson family background;
- the tragic loss of his parents and the support he receives from a large, extended family;
- the important influence of his maternal grandmother, Lucy Taylor Johnson;
- his life-long love of sports and learning;
- overcoming the challenges of racism and poverty;
- graduating *summa cum laude* from UCLA;
- his decision to continue his studies at Harvard.

## ■ Historical Background

At the turn of the century, the nation was fewer than four decades from the end of the Civil War. The end of reconstruction in 1877 was followed by the reestablishment of white minority power throughout the South. These years saw the founding of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups whose agenda included suppressing the black vote and consolidating the white hold on economic and political power through a campaign of terror and passage of so-called Jim Crow laws. Like many other Americans in the decades following the Civil War, a significant number of African Americans went West looking for a better life. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the twentieth century, 9 out of 10 African Americans still lived in the south, most as sharecroppers or tenant farmers. By the early 1900s, however, African Americans by the thousands began to migrate to northern industrialized cities, looking for work and for an opportunity to escape grinding poverty, discrimination and segregation. During the same period, European immigrants were also flooding into these same cities, looking for jobs and better living conditions for themselves and their families.

In the world at large, powerful European nations continued to enlarge their colonial possessions overseas. The United States, having consolidated its hold on the continental mainland, turned its expansion outwards, acquiring Alaska, Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, and the Canal Zone. At the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, fourteen European powers, including England, France, Belgium, Germany and Portugal, divided up the remaining unclaimed areas of the African continent among themselves, with little or no regard to existing societies, languages or political boundaries, for the express purpose of exploiting the natural resources of the continent.

### In This Module (in order of appearance)

#### TERMS TO KNOW

armistice, negotiate, Nobel Peace Prize, Great Migration, League of Nations, Red Summer, valedictorian, summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, intellectual, spiritual

#### PEOPLE REFERENCED

Lucy Taylor Johnson (Nana),  
Olive Johnson Bunch, Fred Bunch

#### PLACES REFERENCED

Israel, Egypt, Transjordan,  
Syria, Lebanon, Texas, Detroit,  
Albuquerque, Los Angeles

#### PEOPLE ON SCREEN

Dr. John Hope Franklin,  
Dr. Jonathan Holloway,  
Jane Johnson Taylor,  
Dr. Robert C. Weaver

## ■ Family Background

Ralph Bunche's maternal grandmother, Lucy Taylor, had been born into slavery in Missouri in 1855. His maternal grandfather, Thomas Nelson Johnson, had graduated from Shurtleff, a small college in Alton, Illinois just 25 miles north of St. Louis. Johnson was a teacher, and one of his students was Lucy Taylor. They married and had five children, the second of whom was Olive, Ralph Bunche's mother. Little is known about the family background of his father, Fred Bunche, who was a barber by trade.

In 1914, when World War I broke out, Ralph Bunche was 10 years old. By the time it ended in 1918, the war claimed 9 million lives worldwide. The war was followed by a pandemic of influenza, which took the lives of an estimated 21 to 50 million more. African American soldiers served in segregated units, and when they came home from the war, many believed they had earned the right to be treated as first class citizens. Their efforts to claim their rights were met by violence, especially in the industrial cities of the north. During the first decade after the war, prosperity and consumerism were on the rise. African American migration to the cities of the north continued. In Harlem, a remarkable flowering of African American art and culture took place, which became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

## ■ Relevant Standards

### **National Council for the Social Studies Strands**

#### **Strand IV. Individual Development and Identity**

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of *individual development and identity*, so that the learner can: (c) describe the ways family, religion, gender, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, and other group and cultural influences contribute to the development of a sense of self; (f) analyze the role of perceptions, attitudes, values, and beliefs in the development of personal identity.

#### **Strand V. Individuals, Groups and 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. Historical Comprehension

The student thinks chronologically:

Therefore the student is able to

- F. Appreciate historical perspectives (a) describing the past through the eyes and experiences of those who were there and (b) considering the historical context in which the event unfolded.

### Standard 3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation

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;
- C. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships bearing in mind multiple causation including (a) the importance of the individual in history; (b) the influence of ideas, human interests, and beliefs; and (c) the role of chance, the accidental and the irrational.

### ■ **Map Connection**

On a map of the United States, locate Ralph Bunche's places of residence: Detroit, Albuquerque, and Los Angeles.

### ■ **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** Are there any buildings named after people in your school, school district, or neighborhood? What are some of the reasons people might have buildings named after them? What qualities, opportunities, and kinds of support do you think people need in order to be successful? What lessons did you learn from your parents, guardians, caregivers, and/or friends about how to succeed?

**RECALL** Who are some of the people you know of who have changed history in some way for the better?

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT** 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?

### ■ **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. According to Jane Johnson Taylor, Ralph's cousin, Bunche enjoyed an advantage growing up in the Johnson family. What was that advantage?  
*[He grew up surrounded by adults who loved to talk and used wonderful vocabulary.]*
2. What incident shows how Ralph's mother Olive stands up for her rights? What does Ralph learn from it?  
*[She refuses to be moved to the back of a movie theater, telling the manager that her money was the same color as anyone else's. Ralph learns "You stand up, you have dignity, and you resist when people want to discriminate."]*
3. How does Nana succeed in obtaining a good education for her grandson, Ralph?  
*[When the high school places him in the non-academic track, she insists that the school transfer him into academic courses such as algebra and French that will prepare him for college.]*
4. Why does James Weldon Johnson characterize the summer of 1919 as the Red Summer?  
*[Because of the racial riots that took place in many cities across the country, especially in the North.]*
5. Why does Ralph feel like dropping out of school? How does Nana respond?  
*[Although he is at the top of his high school graduating class, he is excluded from the city-wide honor society because of race. Nana won't let him drop out. She tells him "Always protect your self-respect and your dignity. Never pick a fight but never run away from one either."]*

6. How does Ralph Bunche describe Nana's feelings about race?

*[Answers may include the following: She was proud of being black and chose to be considered black even though she could have passed for white; "Nana could be regarded as an 'optional Negro.' She was entirely Caucasian in appearance. Her twin brother passed as white, but Nana was all black pride inside. Everyone got the race pride message very early in life."]*

7. What achievements and honors does Ralph earn at U.C.L.A.?

*[Answers may include the following: He is a key player on the basketball team; participates in a debating society; graduates summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa; gives the valedictory address; wins a scholarship to Harvard.]*

8. What personality traits do people ascribe to Ralph Bunche?

*[Answers may include the following: competitive; determined; hard working; sociable; outgoing; affable; fun to be with.]*

9. In his U.C.L.A. valedictory address, what does Bunche say is needed in the world?

*[Answer should include at least one of the following: for the world to live in peace; we need to love more and hate less; we need to be more spiritual, not to be more intellectual; not to think less, but to feel more; we need to act on our principles and beliefs.]*

10. How is Ralph Bunche able to attend graduate school at Harvard?

*[He wins a scholarship to cover his tuition, and a local black women's club raises money to cover his living expenses.]*

## ■ After You Watch

### Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

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

1. What were some of Ralph Bunche's accomplishments?
2. From events recounted in the video, what did we learn about racial attitudes in the U.S. in the first decades of the twentieth century?
3. What was Ralph Bunche's family life like?
4. If Ralph Bunche were to ask you to write a letter of recommendation for him in connection with his application for admission to UCLA as a freshman (or to Harvard as a graduate student) what would your letter say about him?

## ■ Digging Deeper — Activities and Research Projects

1. Ask students to identify a building, a park or an institution in their community named after someone they know very little about. Ask them to research the history of that person to find out why he or she was honored this way. Ask the students to prepare a poster board display that will communicate what they learned. The board might include pictures of the building and the person, headlines, timelines, copies of newspaper clippings, or other items they find or create that will help to illustrate what they've learned about that person's life.
2. Give students the following quotation from Ralph Bunche's college commencement speech, "The Fourth Dimension of Personality:"

*"Man professes strict moral codes; promulgates them through great educational systems; and solidifies them in his law. But invariably his subsequent deeds belie and pervert his original intent. He conjures up bitter prejudices, petty jealousies and hatreds against his fellow-men. The world is periodically scourged and scarred by fiendish wars. Man learns and knows but he does not do as well as he knows. This is his weakness. The future peace and harmony of the world are contingent upon the ability — yours and mine — to effect a remedy."*

Ask the students to consider whether Bunche's remarks are relevant to what is happening in the world today. Have students adapt the speech to reflect their own views and solutions to conditions in the world today. Ask them to deliver the speech as if they were giving a valedictory address.

3. Ask students to research the childhood of one or more prominent individuals in history, and then compare and contrast that person's childhood experiences with those of Dr. Bunche's. What hypotheses, if any, can they form based on this comparison? Can they identify any specific qualities of family life that help or hinder success in later life? How does the historical period in which the person lives affect their future life? How do personal values affect the way the individual lives and what they achieve?
4. Ask students to research the conditions and events that led up to the race riots during the Red Summer of 1919. In which cities or parts of the country did the riots occur? What changes, if any, took place in black-white relations after that summer?





Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

8. What personality traits do people ascribe to Ralph Bunche?

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10. How is Ralph Bunche able to attend graduate school at Harvard?