

Ralph Bunche

the odyssey continues...

11

M O D U L E

The Man Behind the Myth

■ Synopsis



37 minutes

“The Man Behind the Myth” begins with an overview of the conflicting public views of Bunche. While most Americans saw Bunche as a “model Negro,” the Soviets saw him as an apologist for the United States, the McCarthyites saw him as an agent of the Soviets, and some black militants saw him as an international Uncle Tom. The module includes:

- excerpts from Bunche’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech;
- the important role Bunche played in the decolonization process that took place in the two decades following World War II;
- the media’s role in the creation of Bunche’s public persona and how Bunche used the media to advance the cause of civil rights and racial justice;
- Bunche’s personal experiences with racial segregation and discrimination and his response to it;
- his marriage and family life;
- the attack on his loyalty by McCarthyites and his successful rebuttal of these charges before the U.S. Loyalty Board;
- his life-long belief in the connection between human rights and civil rights in the United States and the rest of the world.

■ Historical Background

Ralph Bunche began his teaching career in the 1920s. It was a time of enormous change in the nation and the world. The Russian Revolution of 1917 had established communism as an ideology that would compete with capitalism for much of the rest of the century. World War I had essentially finished off what was left of the Ottoman Empire, and under the League of Nations, Great Britain and France were granted mandates to govern much of the Middle East. Meanwhile, European powers continued to exploit their colonial holdings in Africa and around the world.

While associated with Howard University, Ralph Bunche wrote *A World View of Race*, did field research on the impact of colonialism on colonized peoples, and was a major contributor to Gunnar Myrdal's unprecedented study of race in the United States, *An American Dilemma*. Determined to do what he could to fight Nazism, he left teaching to work for the United States government during World War II. But it was when Bunche went to work for the United Nations, and distinguished himself as an extraordinary mediator, that he gained international renown. The U.S. media, especially during the Cold War struggle between East and West, frequently cited Bunche as proof that American society treated all its citizens, black and white, with fairness and equality. Bunche, on the other hand, took every opportunity that his celebrity status gave him to remind Americans that they were not living up to their much-vaunted principles.

The nature of his job at the U.N., especially in times of crisis, demanded long hours of work and frequently took him away from family and home for protracted periods of time. Ultimately, Bunche's dedication to world peace, human rights and social justice took its toll on his health and on his family, as well.

In This Module (in order of appearance)

TERMS TO KNOW

crossover, witch-hunt, Palestine, McCarthyism, Cold War, *pater familias*, communist

PEOPLE REFERENCED

Eleanor Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Joseph McCarthy, Ruth Bunche, Dag Hammarskjöld

PLACES REFERENCED

Israel, Transjordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt

PEOPLE ON SCREEN

Dr. John A. Davis, Sir Brian Urquhart, Dr. Benjamin Rivlin, John H. Johnson, Dr. Ben Keppel, Dr. Herschelle Challenor, Jane Johnson Taylor, Dr. Charles Henry, Joan Bunche, Ralph Bunche, Jr., Ernest Gross, Dr. Edwin Smith, Dr. John Hope Franklin, Dr. Robert Hill

■ Relevant Standards

National Council for the Social Studies Strands

Strand IV. Individual Development & 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.

National Center for History in the Schools Standards

Standard 4. Historical Research Capabilities

The student conducts historical research:

Therefore the student is able to

- F. Support interpretations with historical evidence in order to construct closely reasoned arguments rather than facile opinions.

■ Map Connection

On a map of the world in the 1950s, locate areas considered to be under Western influence and areas considered to be under Soviet or Eastern Bloc influence.

■ 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 What criteria would you use to choose the “International Man of the Year”?

RECALL The title of this module is “The Man Behind the Myth.” What is a “myth” in this context? What is the “myth” of Bunche, as we’ve come to understand it so far? What questions do you have about what he might “really” be like behind that image?

**HISTORICAL
CONTEXT** What was McCarthyism?

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

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

1. What are some of the differing, even opposing, views of Ralph Bunche?
[Answers may include: tool of the West, agent for the Soviets, international Uncle Tom, model Negro]
2. What does Bunche achieve that raises him to a “mythic” level?
[He succeeds in getting four separate Middle East armistice agreements signed, ending the 1948 war between the new state of Israel and four Arab nations.]
3. In 1950, Bunche is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. What is the story behind the award that reveals his essential modesty in spite of this towering achievement?
[He tries to turn it down because he feels he was only doing his job, is ordered to accept it by the Secretary-General of the U.N. as an honor to the U.N.]
4. How does Bunche adhere to his principles when traveling or speaking in the racially segregated southern states?
[He won't speak unless it is to an integrated audience.]
5. How does Bunche's reaction to his picture on the cover of Ebony Magazine show his awareness of his status as a role model?
[He is upset that it shows him with a cigarette, although he has since quit smoking.]
6. Bunche's daughter Joan says he was the classic *pater familias* at home. What details does she give of this?
[Answers may include: He was a dominating force, supervised everything, was chief disciplinarian, demanded a lot of his children; she and her sister called him “the dictator” behind his back; everybody got busy when they knew he was due home.]
7. Bunche's son tells a story that illustrates Bunche's high standards. What does he quote his father as saying when he finds out his son was out at a party on a Saturday night?
[“You don't have straight A's. What are you doing out at a party?”]
8. When Bunche is accused of being a communist and is about to be investigated by a Senate subcommittee, what advice does Eleanor Roosevelt give him?
[She advises that he cooperate fully, because if he doesn't, people will think he has something to hide.]
9. What finally clears him of accusations of disloyalty?
[Former communist John Davis testifies that not only did he never see Bunche at the meeting he is accused of attending, but that, from the point of view of the communists, “he was the enemy.”]

10. What position is he promoted to at the U.N.?

[Undersecretary-General, second in command only to Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary-General.]

11. Cite examples of how Bunche participates in the civil rights struggle even though his job as an international civil servant at the U.N. prohibits him from becoming involved in the political affairs of any member nation, including his own.

[Answers may include: He talks about race relations in the U.S. by speaking about the human rights sections of the United Nations, relating human rights struggles abroad to civil rights struggles here; he speaks at the March on Washington in 1963; he refuses to speak to non-integrated audiences in the South; he increases pressure on the U.S. by facilitating freedom for people of color elsewhere in the world.]

12. Though Bunche was a man of extraordinary accomplishments, he is not well remembered today. What personal qualities may have contributed to this?

[Answers may include: He disliked celebrity, he was interested in getting results rather than publicity, he was selfless in his devotion to public service.]

■ 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. Before viewing the video, you brainstormed some criteria for being named “International Man of the Year.” In what ways did Dr. Bunche meet these criteria? Are there criteria he did not meet?
2. Compare Dr. Bunche’s public life with his private life. How was he different at home than he was in public? How was he the same?
3. What does it mean to be a myth, or of mythic stature? Does Dr. Bunche deserve mythic status? Why or why not? Cite evidence from this video and previous ones (if you’ve watched them) to support your point of view. Who are other “mythic” men and women in our history? Why do you consider them mythic?
4. What would you do if you were called to testify before a Senate committee or the Department of Homeland Security because someone had accused you of being anti-American and therefore of giving aid and comfort to terrorists? Would you cooperate? Would you refuse to answer based on the Bill of Rights? Would you be afraid? Would you be angry? Would you be indifferent? Would you be happy they are really checking up on people?
5. What factors, other than personal modesty, do you think might explain why Bunche is not well known today?

■ Digging Deeper—Activities and Research Projects

1. Remind students that one of Bunche's extraordinary achievements, for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize, was mediating separate armistice agreements between Israel and four Arab nations in 1949. Ask students to find the texts of those armistice agreements and read their provisions. (Main points are summarized at <http://www.mideastweb.org/isrsyrmistice1949.htm>.) Compare to a text of the Oslo Accords signed in 1993 between the Israelis and Palestinians (main points can be found at http://www.palestinefacts.org/pf_1991to_now_oslo_accords.php). How are the terms the same? How are they different? Have students prepare a chart that summarizes the similarities and differences, and present to the class.
2. Lead the class in brainstorming a list of other "mythic" men and women in our history. Have students work individually, in pairs, or in small groups to choose one to research and write about. Ask them to compare the achievements or actions that made them "mythic" with what they can find out about what they were like "behind the myth."
3. Ask students to write a speech nominating someone for American Father of the Year, American Mother of the Year, or American Family Person of the Year. Ask them to include those qualities that they think justify such an award, as well as particulars that tell why their nominee is worthy of the award.
4. Have each student research a Nobel Peace Prize winner. (For a complete list and biographical notes on each, visit the website of the Nobel Prize Committee at <http://www.nobel.se/peace/laureates/>.) Convene a "Peace Prize Winners' Forum," in which students discuss contemporary problems of conflict in the world, each playing the role of the person he or she has researched. In speaking to the problems of today, students should make reference to how the Nobel winner they are portraying helped bring about peaceful resolutions in their own time and place, and what insight that gives them about today's problems. Depending upon the size of the class, you might do this in two or three different sessions, with part of each class being audience for another part.

Name: _____ Date: _____

While You Watch “The Man Behind the Myth”

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