

# EXPLORING PAUL ROBESON *All-American*

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A N I R T S T U D Y G U I D E

Imagine how society would be different if the lives and work of Gandhi, Jonas Salk, or Albert Einstein were completely unknown? In the 1930s, Paul Robeson was one of the most famous people in the world, second only to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Athlete, singer, actor, scholar, and advocate for the civil rights of people around the world, African American Paul Robeson rose to prominence in a time when segregation was legal in the United States and black people were being lynched by racist mobs. He maintained a high-profile public life for three decades; but as a result of inquiries by the House Un-American Activities Committee, he was blacklisted and his public stature erased. By the height of the civil rights movement, few people knew even his name.

Born on April 9, 1898, in Princeton, New Jersey, Paul Robeson was the youngest of five children. His father was a runaway slave who went on to graduate from Lincoln University, and his mother came from an abolitionist Quaker family.

In 1915, Paul Robeson won a four-year academic scholarship to Rutgers College. Despite violence and racism from teammates, he won 15 varsity letters in sports (baseball, basketball, discus, shotput, and javelin) and was twice named to the All-American football team. He received the Phi Beta Kappa key in his junior year, belonged to the Cap & Skull Honor Society, and graduated as valedictorian. However, it wasn't until 1995, 19 years after his death, that he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame.

At Columbia Law School (1920–1923), Robeson met and married Eslanda Cordozo Goode, who was to become the first black woman to head a pathology laboratory. He took a job with a law firm, but left when a white secretary refused to take dictation from him. He left the practice of law to use his considerable artistic talents in an acting and singing career.

In the 1920s Robeson performed Eugene O'Neill's

*The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. In 1930 Robeson earned international acclaim for his performance in *Othello* on the London stage. Robeson played Joe in *Show Boat* in London and in the 1937 film. His 11 films included *Body and Soul* (1924), *Jericho* (1937), and *Proud Valley* (1939). Robeson's travels taught him that racism was not as virulent in Europe as in the United States. At home, it was difficult to find restaurants that would serve him; theaters in America would seat blacks only in the upper balconies.

Robeson used his deep bass-baritone voice to promote Negro spirituals, to interpret through song the cultures of



other countries, and on behalf of the labor and social movements of his time. He sang for peace and justice in 25 languages throughout the United States, Europe, the Soviet Union, Asia, and Africa. Known as a citizen of the world, he was equally comfortable with the people of Moscow, Nairobi, and Harlem. Among his friends were future African leader Jomo Kenyatta, India's Nehru, historian Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, anarchist Emma Goldman, and writers James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway.

During the 1940s, Robeson continued to perform and speak out against racism, in support of labor, and for peace. He was a champion of working people and organized labor, speaking and performing at strike rallies, con-

ferences, and labor festivals worldwide. As a passionate believer in international cooperation, he protested growing Cold War hostilities and worked tirelessly for friendship between the United States and the USSR. In 1946, he headed the American Crusade Against Lynching, challenging President Truman to support anti-lynching laws. In the late 1940s, when dissent was scarcely tolerated in the United States, Robeson in a speech in Paris openly questioned why African Americans would want to take up arms against anyone in the name of those who have oppressed them. Because of his outspokenness, he was accused by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) of being a Communist Party supporter. While he was indeed an advocate of socialism, he considered HUAC to have opposed the freedom of expression of those who worked for international friendship among nations and peoples.

The accusation nearly ended his career. Sixty of his concerts were cancelled, and in 1949, two interracial outdoor concerts in Peekskill, New York, were attacked by racist mobs while state police stood by. Robeson responded, "I'm going to sing wherever the people want me to sing ... and I won't be frightened by crosses burning in Peekskill or anywhere else."

In 1950, the United States revoked Robeson's passport, leading to an eight-year battle to resecure it so he could travel again. During those years, Robeson studied Chinese, met with Albert Einstein to discuss the prospects for world peace, published his autobiography, *Here I Stand*, and sang at Carnegie Hall. In 1960 he made his last concert tour to New Zealand and Australia. In ill health, Paul Robeson retired from public life in 1963. He died on January 23, 1976, at age 77, in Philadelphia.

Around the centennial of the birth of Paul Robeson, April 9, 1998, hundreds of celebrations took place worldwide. Looking at Robeson's life provides an extraordinary view into the social, political, and cultural landscapes of the first half of the 20th century. ★

## 1898

- Paul Leroy Robeson is born on April 9.

## 1911

- Enters Somerville High School as one of two black students. During high school, plays title role in *Othello*, sings in glee club, and plays football.

## 1915

- Graduates as an honor student. Wins statewide competition for four-year scholarship to Rutgers College.
- Tries out for varsity football at Rutgers; players who do not want a Negro on the team dislocate his shoulder and break his nose. Nonetheless, he makes the team; Walter Camp, the finest football authority of the day, will call him “the greatest end that ever trod the gridiron.” ▶

## 1918

- Elected to Phi Beta Kappa honor society.
- Chosen for All-American college football team.

## 1919

- Graduates from Rutgers. Belongs to senior-class honor society and has won 15 varsity letters in football, basketball, baseball, discus, shotput, and javelin.
- Delivers a commencement address entitled “The New Idealism,” in which he says: **“I go out to do my little part in helping my untutored brother. We of this less favored race realize that our future lies chiefly in our own hands. We know that neither institutions nor friends can make a race stand, unless it has strength in its own foundations; that races like individuals must stand or fall by their own merit.”**

## 1920

- Enters Columbia Law School, tutors Latin, and for two years plays professional football on weekends.

## 1921

- Marries Eslanda Cardozo Goode, an analytical chemist for a hospital pathology lab. In later years, she will appear in some of Robeson’s films, manage his career, study for a Ph.D. in anthropology, and write a book about Africa.

## 1923

- Graduates from law school. Briefly works for New York City law firm. Quits when a white secretary refuses to take dictation from him.
- Sings occasionally in Harlem’s famed Cotton Club.

## 1924-25

- Stars in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* and *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*. O’Neill will inscribe a book of plays to him “In gratitude to Paul Robeson in whose interpretation of Brutus Jones I have found the most complete satisfaction an author can get: that of seeing his creation born into flesh and blood!”

## 1925

- Gives first concert of Negro spirituals and secular songs, accompanied by Lawrence Brown. The critic of the *New York World* writes: “All those who listened last night to the first concert made up entirely of Negro music ... may have been present at a turning point, one of those thin points of time a star is born.... [This was] the first appearance of this folk wealth made without deference or apology. Paul Robeson’s voice is difficult to describe. It is a voice in which deep bells ring.” Bringing the Negro spiritual to the concert stage is Robeson’s major contribution to the Harlem Renaissance.

## 1930

- Opens in *Othello* in London and has 20 curtain calls.



# PAUL ROBESON

## 1933

- Benefit performance of *All God’s Chillun* in London for Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany.
- Films *Emperor Jones* for Paramount in New York.
- Begins studying African languages.
- Becomes active in West African Student Union. Friends include Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah, future leaders of Kenya and Ghana, respectively.

## 1934

- Publishes “I Want to Be African,” perhaps his most brilliant essay. Draws attention to the degree to which the Jewish people, though suffering in the Diaspora, hark back to their heritage as a means of forwarding unity. He also asserts that blacks must understand their African heritage, much of which is

still alive in the United States, in order to achieve the unity that can bring them to real freedom.

- Visits Soviet Union to meet with filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. He is treated with respect never accorded to him in the U.S. and says, “I breathe freely for the first time in my life.” He is especially impressed by the presence of industry in the Moslem Republics, and the preservation of their culture, including mosques and the speaking of Arabic.

## 1935

- The Chicago *Defender* reports that he wants to see a world striving for deep spiritual and cultural values that transcend “narrow national, racial, or religious boundaries.” For Negroes to contribute to such a world, they must not deny their heritage, he argues; he warns against the impulse of those born to inequality to cloak their real value “under a false foreign culture, ... when, instead, natural growth comes from within.”

- Films *Show Boat*.

## 1937

- Co-founds, with Max Yergan, the Council on African Affairs, which will lead the protest against colonialism in black Africa and apartheid in South Africa.
- At benefit concert for Spanish Civil War refugees, declares his opposition to fascist forces of Francisco Franco. He says: **“Every artist, every scientist, must decide *now* where he stands. He has no alternative. There is no standing above the conflict on Olympian heights. There are no impartial observers. Through the destruction—in certain countries—of the greatest of man’s literary heritages, through the propagation of false ideas of racial and national superiority, the artist, the scientist, the writer is challenged. The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear. The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative. The history of the capitalist era is characterized by the degradation of my people: despoiled of their lands, their culture destroyed, they are in every country, save one, denied equal protection of the law, and deprived of their rightful place in the respect of their fellows. Not through blind faith or coercion, but conscious of my course, I take my place with you.”**

## 1938

- Goes to Spain and sings to Loyalist soldiers, including Americans in the Lincoln Brigade. Later will call the trip “a major turning point in my life.”

- Sings at many political rallies in London, including ones for International Peace Campaign, Save China, and India’s independence. He and Eslanda become friends with India’s future prime minister, Jawarhalal Nehru.
- Polls rate him among top ten British film and recording stars.

## 1939

- Sings “Ballad for Americans” by John LaTouche and Earl Robinson over CBS radio and later to 30,000 at the Hollywood Bowl.
- Is refused service in a New York City restaurant.

## 1940

- Appears in stage revival of *Show Boat* in Los Angeles, where he has trouble finding a hotel that will house him.
- Collier’s magazine calls him “America’s No. 1 Negro entertainer.”

## 1941

- Speaks at rally in Detroit for United Auto Workers, saying, **“The Negro problem cannot be solved by a few of us getting to be doctors and lawyers. The best way my race can win justice is by sticking together in progressive labor unions. It would be unpardonable for Negro workers to fail to join the CIO.”**
- Performs at Madison Square Garden rally for Russian War Relief, the beginning of his support for Allied war efforts against the Nazis.
- Performs at rally to free Earl Browder, imprisoned leader of U.S. Communist Party.
- FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover begins collecting reports about Robeson’s activities

## 1942

- Speaks and sings all over U.S. on behalf of the war effort and calls for end to discrimination in armed forces and defense industry.
- Makes first trip to the Deep South, where he addresses international students at Tuskegee and a non-segregated audience in New Orleans, to whom he says: **“We must come south to understand in their starkest presentation the common problems that beset us everywhere. We must breathe the smoke of battle. We must taste the bitterness, see the ugliness.... We must expose ourselves unremittingly to the source of strength that makes the black South strong!”**

## 1943

- Opens in *Othello*, which will run for 296 performances, a record for a Shakespeare play on Broadway, followed by nine-month tour. ▶



## 1945

- USO tour to Europe. Is moved by visits to sites of Nazi concentration camps and disturbed by Allies’ hostility to the Soviet Union.
- Receives NAACP’s Spingarn Medal and calls for democracy for the peoples of Asia, China, and India as well as for black Americans.

# America's Forgotten Hero

## 1945-46

- During U.S. concert tour, learns first-hand of shrinking job opportunities for blacks and increasing numbers of lynchings in the South.

## 1946

- Appears with singer Marian Anderson at rally for South African famine relief.
- Co-founds American Council Against Lynching. Leads delegation to ask President Truman to support anti-lynching legislation. Truman says the time is not ripe. In a radio address that day, Robeson speaks of the urgent need to end the wave of lynchings that started a year ago. He declares: "Democracy is the birthright of every Negro American. The defense of that birthright is the defense of every American's right to join a trade union, to practice any faith of his choice, to join any club, or fraternal organization, to exercise his voting franchise, to enjoy the privileges of the Bill of Rights and the United States Constitution."

## 1947

- Cited by House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) as a Communist Party supporter.

## 1948

- Campaigns for Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party's presidential candidate, and speaks about civil rights.
- Testifies against Mundt-Nixon bill, which would require Communist Party members to register with the government.
- Triumphant concert tour of Jamaica and Trinidad. Says he has his "first breath of fresh air for many years" in the West Indies.

## 1949

- J. Edgar Hoover requests update of files on Robeson.
- Successful European concert tour; in the U.S., at least 60 concert dates are cancelled during the year.
- Addresses Welcome Home rally in Harlem and tells the crowd that "to fulfill our responsibilities as Americans, we must unite, especially we Negro people. We must know our strength. We are the decisive force. That's why they terrorize us. That's why they fear us. And if we unite with all our might, this world can fast be changed. Let us create that unity now. And this important, historic role of the Negro people, our white allies here must fully comprehend. This means increasing understanding of the Negro, his tremendous struggle, his great contributions, his potential for leadership at all levels in the common task of liberation. It means courage to stand by our side whatever the consequences, as we the Negro people fulfill our historic duty in Freedom's struggle. We must have the courage to shout at the top of our voices about our injustices, and we must lay the blame where it belongs and where it has belonged for over three hundred years of slavery and misery—right here on our own doorstep, not in any faraway place. This is the very time when we can win our struggle."
- A violent mob disrupts concert in Peekskill, New York, turning with fury against blacks and shouting Nazi-like, anti-Semitic slogans as well. At a second concert a week later, Robeson sings surrounded by a security guard of union members. Afterwards, the audience is again attacked, while state troopers stand and watch.
- FBI begins keeping Robeson under constant surveillance.

## 1950

- At Progressive Party's national convention, is elected co-chairman.

- At Civil Rights Congress rally, speaks out against U.S. involvement in Korean War. He says: "Least of all will the meaning of the President's order [to send troops to Korea] be lost to the Negro people. They will know that if we don't stop our armed adventure in Korea today—tomorrow it will be Africa. For the maw of the warmakers is insatiable. They aim to rule the world or ruin it. Their slogan is all or none. It has already meant our intervention not only in Korea, but in Formosa, the Philippines, and Indo-China with arms, ships, aircraft, and men. I have said before, and say it again, that the place for the Negro people to fight for their freedom is here at home—in Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas—in the Chicago ghetto, and right here in New York's Stuyvesant Town."

- State Department demands his passport, revoking his right to travel abroad. Cancels planned trip to Europe but refuses to hand in passport.

## 1952

- Receives Stalin Peace Prize from Soviet Union.



In 1956, Paul Robeson appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee. He was asked if he wrote, "Moscow is very dear to me and very close to my heart. I want to emphasize that only here, in the Soviet Union, did I feel that I was a real man with a capital M."

Robeson answered: "I would say in Russia I felt for the first time like a full human being, and no colored prejudice like in Mississippi and no colored prejudice like in Washington, and it was the first time I felt like a human being, where I did not feel the pressure of colored as I feel in this committee today."

Rep. Scherer: "Why do you not stay in Russia?"

Robeson: "Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay here and have a part of it just like you. And no Fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear? I am for peace with the Soviet Union and I am for peace with China, and I am not for peace or friendship with the Fascist Franco, and I am not for peace with Fascist Nazi Germans, and I am for peace with decent people in the world."

Scherer: "The reason you are here is because you are promoting the Communist cause in this country."

Robeson: "I am here because I am opposing the neo-Fascist cause which I see arising in this committee. You are like the Alien [and] Sedition Act, and Jefferson could be sitting here, and Frederick Douglass could be sitting here, and Eugene Debs could be here."

When asked about Communist connections, he refused to answer, saying later to the press that "I have made it a matter of principle to refuse to comply with any demand that infringes upon the Constitutional rights of all Americans."

The committee cited him for contempt, but the House of Representatives did not take any action against him. ★

## 1953

- Five-month nationwide concert tour.
- Speaks at the Peace Arch on U.S.-Canadian border and says that: "There's a lot of America that belongs to me and to my people. And we have struggled too long ever to give it up. My people are determined in America to be not second-class citizens, to be full citizens, to be first-class citizens, and that is the rock upon which I stand. From that rock, I reach out, as I say, across the world, to my forefathers in Africa, to Canada, all around the world, because I know that there is one humanity, that there is no basic difference of race or color, no basic difference of culture, but that all human beings can live in friendship and in peace."
- Eslanda is summoned before Joseph McCarthy's Senate Investigating Committee. She invokes the 1st and 15th Amendments.
- Because he still does not have passport, has to turn down invitations to perform *Othello* in London and sing in Wales.

## 1954

- Visits Albert Einstein at Princeton to talk about prospects for world peace.

## 1956

- State Department restores his right to travel to Canada. Receives standing ovation at Toronto concert.

## 1958

- Publication of *Here I Stand*, a collection of autobiographical essays.
- 60th birthday celebrations held on every continent.
- Supreme Court rules that State Department does not have right to revoke any citizen's passport because of political beliefs. Robeson gets his passport back.
- Concerts in England, Wales, Soviet Union, German Democratic Republic.

## 1959

- Performs *Othello* at Stratford-on-Avon for seven months.

## 1960

- Last concert tour, to Australia and New Zealand.

## 1965

- Eslanda dies of cancer at the age of 69.

## 1972

- *Ebony* magazine calls him one of the "ten greats of black history."

## 1973

- 75th birthday "Salute to Paul Robeson" fills Carnegie Hall. Sends a message: "Though I have not been able to be active for several years, I want you to know that I am the same Paul, dedicated as ever to the worldwide cause of humanity for freedom, peace and brotherhood. Here at home my heart is with the continuing struggle of my own people to achieve complete liberation from racist domination, and to gain for all black Americans and other minority groups not only equal rights but an equal share. In the same spirit, I salute the colonial liberation movements of Africa, Latin America and Asia, which have gained new inspiration and understanding from the heroic example of the Vietnamese people, who have once again turned back an imperialist aggressor."

## 1976

- Paul Robeson dies at the age of 77 on January 23. ★

# DISCUSSION & Activities

1. Why not launch a contest in your classroom or your school, to design a stamp honoring Mr. Robeson? A campaign for a Paul Robeson postage stamp has seen underway since 1996. Letters or petitions could be sent to: Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee  
Room 4474  
475 L'Enfant Street South West  
Washington, DC 20260
2. Name other African American actors in the 1930s. How did their roles differ from Paul Robeson's? Would it be possible to view some of these films? What was it about the film industry that determined the role of African Americans?
3. Is Paul Robeson a role model? What do you think a role model is? Would Paul Robeson be a good role model? Are there issues that Paul Robeson advocated for that continue today? What are these issues?
4. Locate nations on a world map that Paul Robeson visited. Research which year(s) he was in each country. Did he speak or sing in the language spoken in that country? How many languages was he fluent in and how did he study these languages? What does it say about a person who addresses an audience in their own language?
5. Was Paul Robeson in your city for a concert, or play, or to address a meeting? Is there any documentation on that event: photos, recordings, newspaper articles, an individual who could be interviewed? Could you construct a timeline of Robeson's history in your city?
6. Describe the activities of the 1950s National Negro Labor Council. How did they differ from the 1960s Civil Rights Movement? Who were some of the members in the trade union movement who worked with Paul Robeson? Which unions did Robeson work with in Canada and in other nations?
7. Describe two of the valuable lessons that Paul Robeson learned from his father. How did his father escape from slavery? Discuss Paul Robeson's father's education and his work.
8. Eslanda Robeson was a very educated woman. Learn

about her family background, her education, her profession, and her writing. How did she improve the situation for other women who were seeking careers in the sciences? What roles did she play in her husband's career?

9. Paul Robeson declared "I Want to Be African." What does he mean by this statement? Which nations did he visit in Africa? How many African languages did Robeson learn? Discuss the roles he played in films relating to Africa.
10. Why did Paul Robeson choose to sing Negro spirituals in settings other than the black church? What are the "hidden messages" in some of these songs?

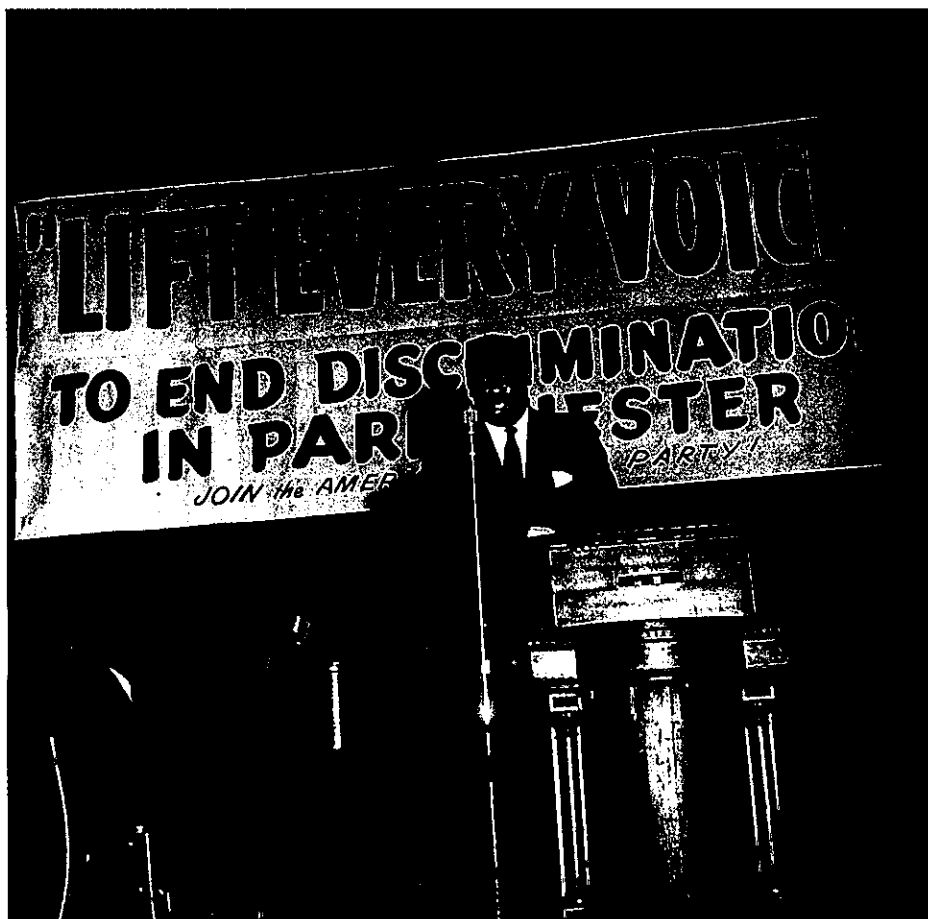
14. Create a glossary of terms from the Robeson timeline, with their definitions. Included in this glossary could be: *All-American*, *spirituals*, *genocide*, *discrimination*, *bass-baritone*, *lynching*, *separate-but-equal*, *colonialism*, *internationalism*, *Jim Crow*, and *picket line*.
15. Many of the events and organizations mentioned in the timeline could be great material for classroom discussion, research projects, plays, and more. Topics might include: Harlem Renaissance, Spanish Civil War, House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Peekskill Riots, American Crusade Against Lynching, and Council on African Affairs.
16. To honor Paul Robeson's love for culture and lan-

guage, memorize a quote, song, or dance from the heritage of your family and make a presentation in your classroom. Describe the significance of your choice to your classmates.

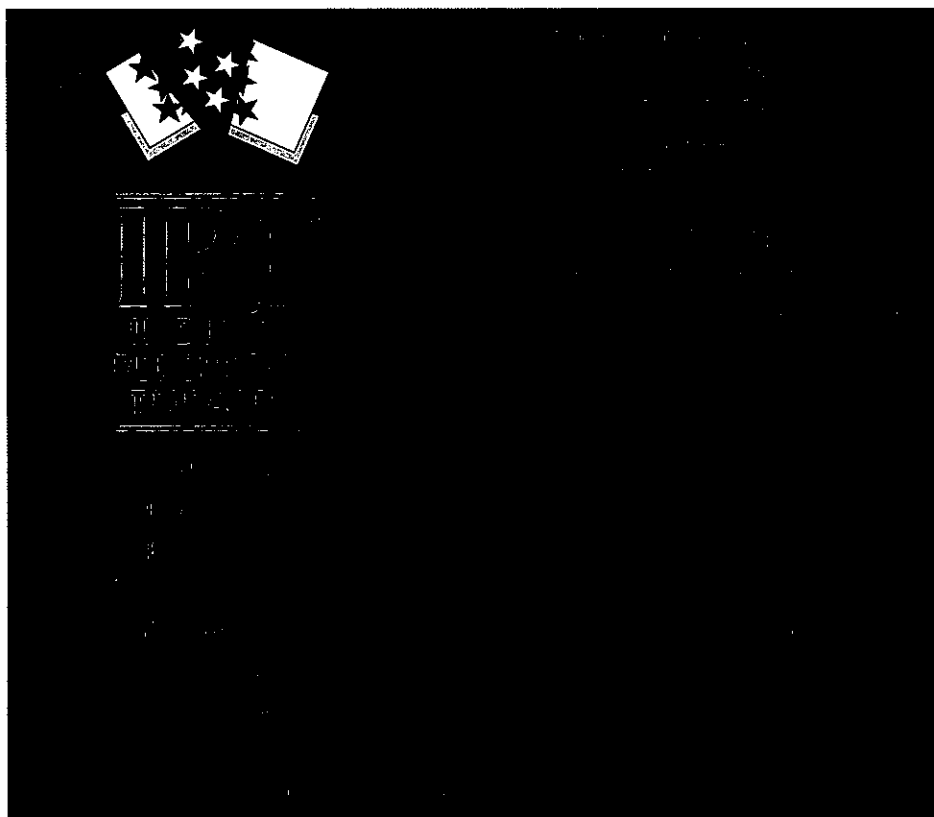
17. Study a few of Paul Robeson's favorite songs, such as "John Henry," "Ballad for Americans," "Jacob's Ladder," or "Joe Hill." Describe the themes that run through the songs. Make use of CDs and tapes to learn the songs—possibly to perform them at a school event.
18. One of the most famous songs Paul Robeson sang was "Ballad for Americans." It was written and first performed in 1939, and celebrated a nation of many cultures. Do some of the lyrics sound strange to you? Would they have been strange in the 1930s? How would you update the lyrics? Perhaps you might perform this version at a school concert.
19. List other Americans who were targeted by the State Department and

by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) during the 1950s. Why were they called to testify? What were they asked to do when they testified? What happened to the people who did not cooperate? Describe how this experience affected their lives and Paul Robeson's.

20. Select three social issues that Paul Robeson would be involved with if he were alive today. Write the speech he would give for the press conference. ★



11. Discuss or write about special events that occurred during Paul Robeson's school years. How did *they* affect his character?
12. Research the stage or film career of Paul Robeson. Discuss one character he portrayed.
13. Review the material in your social studies textbook about Paul Robeson. Develop an essay on Robeson and send it to the publisher of your textbook and suggest that Robeson be included in the next edition.



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