

Carl Rowan, 1925-2000: First Black Director of US Information Agency

He was also a respected newspaper reporter, columnist and author. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*
31 October 2009

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

I'm Shirley Griffith.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Doug Johnson with the VOA Special English program PEOPLE IN AMERICA. Today, we tell about the life of writer and reporter, Carl Rowan. He was one of the most honored reporters in the United States.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Carl Rowan was known for the powerful stories that he wrote for major newspapers. His columns were published in more than one hundred newspapers across the United States. He was the first black newspaper columnist to have his work appear in major newspapers.

Carl Rowan called himself a newspaperman. Yet, he was also a writer of best-selling books. He wrote about the lives of African-American civil rights leader Reverend Martin Luther King Junior and United States Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

Carl Rowan also was a radio broadcaster and a popular public speaker. For thirty years, he appeared on a weekly television show about American politics.

VOICE TWO:



Carl Rowan

Carl Rowan won praise over the years for his reports about race relations in America. He provided a public voice for poor people and minorities in America. He influenced people in positions of power.

Mister Rowan opened many doors for African Americans. He was the first black deputy Secretary of State in the administration of President John F. Kennedy. And he was the first black director of the United States Information Agency which at the

time supervised the Voice of America.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Carl Rowan was born in nineteen twenty-five in the southern city of Ravenscroft, Tennessee. He grew up during the Great Depression, one of the worst economic times in the United States. His family was very poor. His father stacked wood used for building, when he had work. His mother worked cleaning the homes of white people when she could. The Rowan family had no electricity, no running water, no telephone and no radio. Carl said he would sometimes steal food or drink warm milk from the cows on nearby farms.

The Rowans did not even have a clock. As a boy, Carl said he knew if it was time to go to school by the sound of a train. He said if the train was late, he was late.

VOICE TWO:

Growing up, Carl had very little hope for any change. There were not many jobs for blacks in the South. The schools were not good. Racial tensions were high. Laws were enforced to keep blacks and whites separate.

It was a teacher who urged Carl to make something of himself. Bessie Taylor Gwynn taught him to believe he could be a poet or a writer. She urged him to write as much as possible. She would even get books for him because blacks were banned from public libraries.

Bessie Taylor Gwynn made sure that Carl finished high school. And he did. He graduated at the top of his class.

VOICE ONE:

Carl entered Tennessee State College in nineteen forty-two. He almost had to leave college after the first few months because he did not have enough money. But on the way to catch a bus, his luck changed. He found the twenty dollars he needed to stay in college.

Carl Rowan did so well in college that he was chosen by the United States Navy to become one of the first fifteen black Navy officers. He said that experience changed his life.

Carl served on ships during World War Two. Afterward, he returned to college and graduated from Oberlin College in Ohio. He went on to receive his master's degree in journalism from the University of Minnesota.

VOICE TWO:

In nineteen forty-eight, Carl Rowan became a reporter for the Minneapolis Tribune newspaper in Minnesota. He was one of the first black reporters to write for a major daily newspaper.

As a young reporter, he covered racial tensions in the South during the civil rights movement. In nineteen fifty-six, he traveled to the Middle East to cover the war over the Suez Canal. He also reported from Europe, India and other parts of Asia. He won several major reporting awards.



VOICE ONE:

Mister Rowan's reports on race relations in the South interested President John F. Kennedy. In nineteen sixty-one, President Kennedy appointed Mister Rowan deputy assistant Secretary of State. He served as a delegate to the United Nations during the Cuban missile crisis in nineteen sixty-two. Mister Rowan later was appointed ambassador to Finland.

During his years in President Kennedy's administration, Carl Rowan got to know Lyndon B. Johnson. Lyndon Johnson became president after President Kennedy was assassinated in nineteen sixty-three.

In nineteen sixty-four, President Johnson named Carl Rowan director of the United States Information Agency. The position made him the highest level African American in the United States government. Mister Rowan said being chosen to head the United States Information Agency and the Voice of America was one of the great honors of his life.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

In nineteen sixty-five, Carl Rowan left the government and started writing for newspapers. He wrote a column that told his opinions about important social, economic and political issues. It appeared several times a week in a number of newspapers. Radio and television jobs followed.

Mister Rowan often wrote intensely about race relations. Yet, he wrote with more feeling about one subject than any other: that education and hard work will help young African Americans move forward.

Carl Rowan was angered by the ideas of some young blacks. He said they believed that to study hard and perform well in school was "acting white." He deplored the idea that excellence is for whites only.

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen eighty-seven, Mister Rowan created a program called "Project Excellence." The program rewards black students who do well in school. Over the years, the program has provided millions of dollars to help African American students get money for college.

VOICE ONE:

Throughout his life, Carl Rowan was a strong voice for racial justice in America. Yet, he also demanded excellence from other black Americans. He wrote about wrongdoing within the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The NAACP fights for the civil rights of African Americans. Mister Rowan's columns led to the resignation of its chairman and helped speed the organization's financial recovery.

VOICE TWO:

Carl Rowan lived with his wife, Vivien Murphy, in a large house in Washington, D.C. They had three children and four grandchildren.

He had been a strong supporter of gun control laws. But in nineteen eighty-eight, he was charged for firing a gun that he did not legally own. He shot and wounded a teenager who was on his property illegally. Rowan was arrested and tried. During the trial, he argued that he had the right to use whatever means necessary to protect himself and his family.

The jury failed to reach a decision in the case.

In nineteen ninety-one, Carl Rowan wrote a book about his life called "Breaking Barriers." Several years later, he wrote a book called "The Coming Race War in America." The book describes the exploding anger between blacks and whites and the possibility of a future race war. Some people praised the book. Others thought it was harmful and irresponsible.

VOICE ONE:



Carl Rowan was the first black president of an organization of top reporters in Washington called the Gridiron Club. The group does a show every year that makes fun of the American political process. Mister Rowan often performed by singing or leading a comedy act.

Carl Rowan used simple words when he spoke, yet he was very direct. He was criticized sometimes for that. Some people thought that his ideas were too liberal. Others thought he was too moderate. But most people thought his stories generally were very fair.

Mister Rowan talks about his life in his book, "Breaking Barriers":

CARL ROWAN: "The barriers that were up against blacks getting into the field of communications. When I went in you could count on the fingers of one hand the number of blacks with full-fledged jobs on daily newspapers. Today you've got blacks not only on all kinds of newspapers but on TV screens and on radio, public relations jobs in great corporations, and that is an area of progress that I think I helped to open up a little bit."

VOICE TWO:

Carl Rowan died September twenty-third, two thousand, in Washington, D.C. He was seventy-five years old. During the last years of his life, he suffered from diabetes and heart problems. But he never failed to write his newspaper column. He never let bad things slow him down.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

This Special English program was written by Cynthia Kirk. I'm Shirley Griffith.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Doug Johnson. Listen again next week for another PEOPLE IN AMERICA program on the Voice of America.