

Books of The Times

Who Speaks for the Negro Speaks for Mankind

By CHARLES POORE

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE NEGRO? By Robert Penn Warren. 454 pages. Random House. \$5.95.

ROBERT PENN WARREN has been pursuing a valuable teach-out. He is the pupil. The United States citizens whose skin is dark are his teachers and their leaders are his special lecturers.

Mr. Warren has learned a lot. In elemental matters concerning Americans faced by cattle prods, tear gas, beating, jailing, death—when they go to vote, to eat, to travel, to find room at an inn—his learning seems to come a trifle late in the day.

Let those among us who are miraculously without sin in those brutally bigoted fields be allowed stones to cast at him for that. The great majority in the huge readership this superbly candid book deserves will be glad to share his enlightenment.

Individualism always stands out. What James Baldwin tells Mr. Warren in his magnificent teach-out cannot wholly agree with what he hears from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Nor can we expect textual unanimity in what he—and we—learn from conversations with Ralph Ellison, Roy Wilkins, Stokely Carmichael, Bayard Rustin, Carl T. Rowan, James Farmer, Whitney Young, the late Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Judge William Henry Hastie. Or from the young in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Congress of Racial Equality and the other organizations whose members risk their lives to validate truths declared self-evident in our Declaration of Independence.

"Who Speaks for the Negro?" is a long book and a fascinating one. You must read it slowly and carefully to get the full values it offers, its brilliant play in contrasting lights, its developments, its searches for that elusive contemporary target—a national consensus. By any measure, it is one of the year's outstanding books.

It is a mystery story. It is a fugue. The mystery lies in trying to make sense within the barbarously insensible things supposedly sensible men and women have perpetrated to give injustice its desperate longevity. The fugue owes much to Mr. Warren's skill as a distinguished novelist.

Myrdal's Theory

If we read slowly and alertly, we sometimes seem to know what turn Mr. Warren is going to give his conversations long before the given point is reached. Again and again, for example, he brings up in his teach-out Gunnar Myrdal's rather retroactive idea toward solving the American dilemma, bypassed by the Founding Fathers.

In Mr. Warren's view, this is Myrdal's "outline of what would have been an ideal plan for a Reconstruction policy—especially on the matter of compensation to Confederate slaveholders for the slaves emancipated, and payment to Confederate planters for land which would be redistributed to the freedmen."

"Would that policy make sense to her?" he asked. He was talking to Mrs. Martin

Harvey in Jackson, Miss. "Very good sense," she replied. Then Mr. Warren asked: "You find no emotional resistance?" The answer: "No." Soon he is asking others. Some reply by pointing out that the slave owners got an awful lot free. Representative Powell endorses the economic aspects; Dr. King says: "I wouldn't revolt against that [the compensation] as much as over the fact that slavery had existed for all those years."

And so it goes. One can almost imagine Negro leaders phoning one another: "When Warren comes to see you he's going to want your opinion on Myrdal's pensions for Civil War slaveowners plan."

Another subject very fully explored in Mr. Warren's teach-out is the white liberal's place in Civil War II, or the new American Revolution, in its Southern—and Northern—manifestations.

That liberal is treated briskly and gently by turns. Using quotations is perilous, even when choosing a rubric for the New York Post Office, and remarks removed from context may be deplored. But here are a few:

Whitney Young of the Urban League told Mr. Warren that as long as some people could "express liberalism in terms of indignation about a lynching in Mississippi," that was one thing; "when it comes to having somebody move next door to them, this is something entirely different."

White Liberals Scorned

James Farmer frankly said that "white liberal" has become a bad word—like "Uncle Tom."—I think the white liberal does have a role, but his role cannot be top leader of any organizations—if those organizations are to have any impact in the Negro community. White liberals must be willing to work in roles of secondary leadership and as technicians." After all, who speaks for the Negro speaks for mankind.

Stokely Carmichael was cool about white-to-black social climbing: "They say things without realizing what they're saying. You know—'Yeah, man, I really dig that,' and dig can be used in two ways, sarcastically a lot of times.... They want to be accepted right away, without being accepted for their work."

Mr. Warren is good at dramatizing a tension, not merely labeling it in banality's faded ink. He likes to explore paradoxes. Thus he shows us that the servility associated with Uncle Tomism is by no means confined to persons with dark skins. Every human organization yields persons who may be hellroarers in their little bailiwicks yet bow like willows when the boss comes around.

A boon this book confers is to remind us that a main thrust in civilization can never cease to be toward decency and courtesy and justice for all. And in our planet's present fix, that requires everyone's best efforts. It is the individual who counts. At a Southern college for Negroes, William Lucky, an undergraduate, was asked which Negro leader he'd most like to be. After a long, thoughtful interval, he said: "I'd rather just be William Lucky."