Southerner Searches Soul

By JOHN BARKHAM


Like his fellow Southerners, William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, Robert Penn Warren has been doing some intensive soul-searching on the issue of civil rights. Predictably, all three novelists reached the same conclusion: the South must abandon its traditional race attitudes.

Faulkner spoke out bluntly from his native Mississippi, the heart of Segregationland. Caldwell and Warren are transplanted Southerners who, like his fellow whites, are fearful of their inferiority. They express their fears in their recent books, "In Search of Bisco" and "Who Speaks for the Negro?" Warren's book is not a personal proclamation, but is cast in the form of interviews with Negro leaders. Nothing inherently new emerges from these interviews: they express viewpoints by now familiar, ranging from the passive resistance of the Rev. Martin Luther King to the threats of militants like playwright Le Roi Jones ("guerilla warfare is inevitable in the North and South").

It is in the peripheral answers that we sometimes get flashes of self-revelation. When, for example, Adam Clayton Powell says of Abraham Lincoln that "he is vastly overrated—he did nothing at all except that which he had to do, and did it in terms of winning a war," he is telling us more about Powell than about Lincoln.

Warren appears to have been favorably impressed by Whitney Young, whose approach to the Negro question struck him as genuinely realistic. Young is one of the few Negro leaders who faces up to the de facto inferiority of many Negroes (due to poverty and deprivation). Many white Southerners, notes Warren, suffer from a similar de facto inferiority. The irony of this lies in the fact that it is among these deprived, inferior whites—the ignorant and the indigent—that the most rabid racists are found.

Warren disagrees with James Baldwin's despairing statement that the white South, and North "merely have different ways of castrating you." He prefers his own formula: "In the South the Negro is recognized but his rights are not; in the North the rights of the Negro are recognized, but he is not." In their different ways both writers seem to me to be saying the same thing.

Most of the book consists of taped interviews with Negro leaders as well as followers. Nothing inherently new emerges from these interviews: they express viewpoints by now familiar, ranging from the passive resistance of the Rev. Martin Luther King to the threats of militants like playwright Le Roi Jones ("guerilla warfare is inevitable in the North and South").