The Inward and the Outward Ear

Who Speaks for the Negro?, by Robert Penn Warren (Random House, 454 pp. $5.95), and This Is My Country, Too, by John A. Williams (World, 199 pp. $4.50), reflect the apprehensions and ambivalences among colored people with respect to their identity and goals as Americans. Bruce Galphin, a Nieman Fellow in 1962-63, is an editorial writer and columnist for the Atlanta Constitution in Georgia.

By BRUCE GALPHIN

W H O S PEAK S for the Negro? Robert Penn Warren has interviewed more than a score of Negro leaders and dozens of lesser-known participants in the civil rights movement, and the only single answer is: no white man.

From the late Malcolm X's fiery anti-Caucasianisms to the somewhat pleading insistence of CORE's James Farmer that "I don't want any reporter to call me 'responsible,'" to a young Mississippian's resentment of Northern white volunteers, it is clear that Negroes have their own ideas and their own leadership. Beyond that point, and unanimity is believing that Negroes do not get a fair shake in America, there is little agreement.

There is even wide divergence of opinion about the ultimate goals of the movement. The Black Muslims preach separatism, and if they are not significant numerically, their doctrine of a separate culture may well have emotional appeal to at least a part of most Negroes. Mr. Warren indeed finds, half a century after W. E. B. Du Bois first wrote of it, an embalmer: a conflict between the desire to find identity as an American and the desire to find it as a Negro. Some Negroes have achieved recognition on "white" terms, thus delighting the naive good will of white liberals who believed that all Negroes wanted was a key to the clubhouse.

But while consensus emerges from Warren's interviews, at least among those who attempt to describe goals, it is that of pluralism or of a new culture that lies beyond black and white. The Negro is "now conceiving of integration more as a synthesis than as a complete dropping of all that is Negro," says the Urban League's Whitney Young. Mississippi rights worker Robert Moses finds the "middle-class white culture in vital need of some kind of renewal." And author (Incredible Man) Ralph Ellison believes the thrust is "to achieve on the socio-political level something of the same pluralism which exists on the level of culture." Perhaps it is even more basic than either the larger bitterness or frustration, CORE lawyer Lolis Elle in New Orleans demands: "... when it be possible for white people to look at black people as human beings?"

Even were there no argument over aims, though, there would be a crisis of leadership.

The fact that there are two distinct civil rights theaters of operation and two kinds of war has caused confusion among Negroes no less than whites. In the South, the struggle is clearcut and easily defined: It centers on legal equality, voting, and public accommodation. But winning these victories will only bring Southern Negroes up to a battlefield already occupied by their brothers elsewhere in the country. Bayard Rustin puts it well in Warren's book. In the South says Rustin, demonstrations can serve the dual purpose of calling attention to the evil of segregation and also of achieving the goal of desegregation. "In the North, however, dealing with jobs, schools, and housing, you cannot simultaneously prick the conscience and solve the problem."

This fact--that the last steps toward justice are more complex and time-consuming--is a source of enormous frustration for American Negroes. This frustration in turn is a temptation to demagoguery and, in extreme cases, aimless rioting. Thus there is danger that Negro leaders can no longer lead but rather must follow crowds stirred by a demagogue posing dramatic, if pointless, protest. James Farmer, for instance, questions the value of the World's Fair stall-ins and then has to recoil from being called a demagogue by his co-workers.

What is interesting is not the events themselves but the author's perception of events. Though little unpleasant actually occurs, he is always on the raw edge of apprehension. When he kisses a white woman friend on the street, he expects to have to do battle with the white man waiting for a bus nearby. He is keenly aware that people are looking at him. He believes that a Negro, traveling alone, is putting his "life on the line by asking for a single for the night." In a white man, this attitude might be considered paranoid. For a Negro, the threat is more real than any white man likes to think.

This is an internal journey, in the end, that gives impact to the book.