

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE NEGRO?

In May of 1957, with its school desegregation decision, the U.S. Supreme Court popped the cork on a cauldron that had been seething at the very heart of the American social structure. It flowed out and across the nation, straining against visible and invisible barriers alike and — at least in the South — tearing hard at the roots of a way of life ingrained in the people of the region for hundreds of years.

Today, 11 years later, Pulitzer-Prize-winner Robert Penn Warren has ladeled up portions of the mixture for inspection. In his own words, *Who Speaks For The Negro?* is the result of his desire to "find out something, first hand, about the people, some of them anyway, who are making the Negro revolution what it is — one of the dramatic events of the American story."

To do it Warren traveled thousands of miles in all parts of the country, tape recording interviews with those driving or driven by the Negro movement. Verbatim reproductions of significant portions of those conversations form the framework of his book. Within them lie the words of men of every conceivable stature — from the Martin Luther Kings to the Louisiana share croppers who can neither pronounce nor fully understand the word "register;" from men on the periphery, the Ralph Ellisons and the James Baldwins to the young Negroes who take to the streets daily.

In the end he found himself left with the makings of paradox. The answer to his rather imposing title question is that there is no answer. In one sense, as he points out in a brief summary, there is no Negro leader — only "a number of Negroes who happen to occupy positions of leadership . . . The whirl of history created a vacuum, and they were sucked in." Not only do many of them not agree on the direction of the Negro movement, many harbor different conceptions of what the Negro himself is about, or even of what he is. Warren seems to imply in some places, and to say outright in others, that whatever guidance, whatever direction the movement has seems to derive from something inherent, even inevitable in its historical and social context.

Which leads again to the element of paradox, for it is out of that context that these

same "Negroes in positions of leadership" draw a measure of substantial unanimity. They are united in their will to be recognized and respected, and to face whoever or whatever is necessary to achieve it. They are united in their determination that the movement shall be independently theirs — that social change come at their hands, not as in the past, not as "a by-blow of the white man's history." Warren says, "They are riding the tide of history, and they know it. And part of that tide is their own conviction of strength."

About his kernels of conversation Warren has woven a complementary tapestry of personal comment. In it he alternately argues, agrees, shades in background, history or a description of his subject, summarizes unquoted portions of the conversation, or thinks aloud on some tangential subject the talk has called to mind. Throughout Warren's comment is leavened with that peculiar sensitivity, even sorrow, to which only a native southerner can be privy. And yet the total report is delivered with a certain unmistakable objectivity, a detachment that may be rooted in Warren's stature as a professional artist, in his long absence from the South, or in some fortunate admixture of the two.

Along these lines, and not unexpectedly so, his approach sometimes turns back on itself. His searching look at the Negro movement becomes a searching look at the white man and his world — and, by inevitable extension, a searching look at Robert Penn Warren. This, finally, may be what gives the book its special dimension. "What makes you think," someone once asked Mr. Warren of his tape-recorded interviews, "that Negroes will tell you the truth?" He replied, "Even a lie is a kind of truth."

At best, then, *Who Speaks For the Negro?* is an intimate look at social revolution — at the face of American life and the movement that is changing it. At the very least it is comment on the revolutionaries by a gifted and perceptive native southerner — one who has lived and wrestled with the origins of their revolution. And that, in itself, is the germ of important truth.

—STEWART SPENCER

Received

8/18/65

b