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Southerner Searches Soul

By JOHN BARKHAM

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

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 have lived in the North for long periods, but their conclusions are similar. Caldwell made his known in his recent book, "In Search of Bisco." Now Warren says his piece in "Who Speaks for the Negro?"

Warren's book is not a personal proclamation, but is cast in the form of interviews with fighters in the Negro cause. Yet his own feelings emerge clearly enough. He urges the white Southerner to free himself of fear of his fellow whites, presumably those in the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens' Councils. In this he echoes the words of the Southern historian, C. Vann Woodward, who said: "The big trouble down here is fear—the fear the white folks have of each other."

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 Negroes, followers as well as 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.