

(Headline) A Welter of Voices from a Shifting Scene
Who Speaks for the Negro?

INTERVIEWS AND COMMENTARY
 BY ROBERT PENN WARREN

Reviewed by Francis Coughlin

AS THE CIVIL RIGHTS movement goes into the second decade since the Supreme court's school decision of 1954, the "Bull" Connors, the police dogs, the cattle prods, the fire hoses—not to speak of bigoted governors, county seat bullies, and jury-approved assassins—have failed to break the disciplined will and valor of southern black communities committed to a cause. From that base of all but unanimous Negro consensus and cohesion the movement draws present strength and future promise. It is, let it be plainly understood, a Negro movement. However aided by white collaboration under various aspects and at various levels it remains a Negro movement under Negro leadership seeking goals passionately desired by 20 million black-skinned Americans.

In "Who Speaks for the Negro?" Robert Penn Warren, a white southerner, transcribes and comments upon views advanced by Negroes prominent in and peripheral to the struggle. His method embodies a notable technical advance in interviewing and reportage. He gets down face-to-face conversations on tape recordings. The bulk recordings are edited to manageable length. Written transcriptions are reviewed by the speakers. Conflicting viewpoints are isolated and compared. Thus, broad spectra of Negro opinion are examined. Personalities, motivations, and ideologies come into clear focus. Warren's own background sketches are star shells that illuminate the terrain.

Francis Coughlin is on the staff of W-G-N.



THIS IS SUPERB documentation, possibly unique in historiography. It is as if the leaders of the French, or the American, or the Russian revolutions had undergone close questioning during the stress of events and their responses embalmed in formal studies before the outcomes were decided. It is true that history may restate or revise the significance of concepts advanced and measures advocated. Yet tapes and transcripts reflect the heat of the confrontation. The actors in the current drama voice their own lines. And the speakers, above all, are men—not myths. [South

and north alike, the nation strangles under a poisonous thicket of racial myths.]

Martin Luther King Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Roy Wilkins of the N. A. A. C. P., Whitney Young of the Urban League, James Farmer of CORE, James Forman of SNCC, members of COFO—they and other participants in the major rights forays speak directly to Warren's questions. The late Malcolm X [murdered] responds for the Black Muslims. Among the veterans, Robert Moses, Aaron Henry, Charles Evers, brother and successor of Medgar Evers [assassinated] tell of the tensions of battle. Carl Rowan, Ralph Ellison, Judge Hastie, Kenneth Clark, and Stokely Carmichael—and many more—add to a dialog of candor and compassion. Nor are the fringe groups and the dissidents unrecorded.

NEGRO LEADERS and would-be leaders are exceedingly frank in discussing programs and personalities at variance with the broad consensus. The Rev. Galamison, who would abolish New York's public schools, thereby proscribing de facto segregation, is judged with something like pity. The Black Muslims are viewed with alarm and embarrassment. James Baldwin's extravagant rhetoric gets short shrift. His passage dismissing the lynch deaths of two white CORE workers as lacking "resonance" [whatever that means] is noted with contempt.

A turbulent and wide-ranging book, a study in depth of men and measures, "Who Speaks for the Negro?" records a confusion of voices reflecting a swiftly-changing scene. Perhaps confusion is inescapable. It may be that Warren's prose—however vividly and skillfully fashioned—intrudes upon the essential material. But those are minor caveats. The work is timely, impressive and important. Tape and typewriter brilliantly record the horror and heroism of the Negro movement as it is. The rest, in time, will be history. [Random House, 444 pages, \$5.95]

[For comment about other civil rights books, see page 6]

VOICES FROM "WHO SPEAKS FOR THE NEGRO?"

CHARLES EVERS

ON SENATOR BILBO AND THE FUNERAL OF MEDGAR EVERS:

When Medgar's body was carried to Washington, after he was assassinated, it didn't bother me too much. I had never broken down until . . . I sat in the limousine waiting for them to bring his body out of the church. They rolled him out of the church and put him in the hearse, and as we began to pursue to the cemetery, it all came back so clear, that many years ago Bilbo had predicted this, and now here we are, representing all the people, in Washington. And that was the time I broke down.

MALCOLM X

ON ABRAHAM LINCOLN:

He probably did more to trick Negroes than any other man in history.

ON KENNEDY:

Kennedy I relate right along with Lincoln.

ON ROOSEVELT:

The same thing.

ON ELEANOR ROOSEVELT:

The same thing.

ON JAMES BALDWIN

EVEN AS BALDWIN, sitting there before me, enters upon the words which, suddenly, have that inner vibrance, his eyes widen slightly, a glint comes in them. . . . He is talking of the change that would have to come over American life: "It is simply not possible for the church, for example, to accept me into it without becoming a different institution, and I would be deluded not to realize that."

It is *me*—the drama of James Baldwin, again. The drama goes on: "In order to accommodate *me*, in order to overcome so many centuries of cruelty and bad faith and genocide and fear—simple fear—all the American institutions and all the American values, public and private, will have to change."

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