

Ramsey Clark: why does he ^{FPout} ^{12/11/79} 'limit' himself to \$50,000?

By MARGARET GENTRY

NEW YORK (AP) — A skilled lawyer, former attorney general, son of a Supreme Court justice, Democrat with political ties a mile wide — such a man could clean up \$200,000 a year without breathing hard.

So what is Ramsey Clark doing in Greenwich Village practicing one-third of his law for free and hewing to a selfimposed income limit of roughly \$50,000?

He offers a supremely simple explanation: "I like it."

In fact, he says, he's having so much fun it's almost embarrassing. Work, after all, is supposed to be work but this job provides the sheer fun of doing what one believes in and getting paid for it.

"We will extend our practice to any area of law we find interesting, any cause which is just, any principle we see imperiled, any worthy enterprise needing our skills. We will not appear on behalf of any cause which we believe is wrong," wrote Clark and his two partners in the "Dear Friend" letter announcing formation of their firm last February.

"Needless to say," the letter went on, "we intend to have a good time. We love our work. We hope to practice important law."

Clark and veteran civil liberties lawyers Melvin L. Wulf and Alan H. Levine formed the partnership with the agreement that a third of their cases will be billed at the going rates ranging from \$75 to \$150 an hour, a third will be billed at reduced rates from \$25 to \$75 an hour, and a third will be handled free.

They're trying to keep office costs down wherever possible ("we haven't even bought a Xerox machine"), and they're limiting their personal income to the salary level of judges, roughly \$50,000.

Paying clients include publishers and writers fighting for First Amendment rights and urban developers needing help with government contracts. Non-paying clients include three prison inmates facing death sentences.

Clark wears jeans to work — with a button-down white shirt and a tie much too narrow to be stylish. He works in an antique cane-bottomed swivel chair, one his father used at the Supreme Court, and it looks too delicate for his lanky frame.

Sun streams through the uncurtained windows, and plants flourish on the sills. It is not an office to impress clients, but a comfortable room for working.

"Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of

money," he says. "A lot of money." Most Americans would agree. But in the world of lawyer-politicians and ex-Cabinet officers, it's hardly more than pocket change. Joseph Califano, a Johnson administration veteran like Clark, was making more than a halfmillion dollars a year when he left his Washington law firm to become Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare.

The current attorney general, Griffin Bell, longs to return to his Atlanta law firm where he was making nearly \$140,000 a year.

And in New York, where hotels charge \$1.10 for breakfast orange juice and tiny apartments are considered a bargain at \$500 a month, \$50,000 doesn't look like nearly so much as it might in the small towns of the South and Midwest.

Back in hometown Dallas 17 years ago, Clark was pulling down almost \$50,000 a year practicing corporate law in partnership with his uncle. "It was Easy Street as far as making money goes and in my standing in the bar," he recalls.

"But I found I was working awfully hard to protect other people's money." John F. Kennedy was taking office as president, and his vice president was Lyndon B. Johnson, an old friend of Clark and his father, Tom C. Clark.

Ramsey Clark came to Washington to become an assistant attorney general at \$20,000 a year. In 1967, Johnson chose Clark as his attorney general. The job then paid \$35,000.

He quickly became one of the most controversial attorneys general in recent history. He spoke out against the death penalty, he opposed wiretapping, he defended the free speech rights of protesters. Republicans, notably Richard M. Nixon in his law-and-order campaign of 1968, swore that Clark must go.

After leaving the Justice Department, Clark wrote a bestseller called "Crime in America," taught at Howard University and then joined one of the leading New York law firms which paid \$150,000 for his services but left him generally free to handle the cases he liked — representing native Alaskans, war protesters, and others he saw as deprived of their rights.

Finally in 1973, he walked away from the \$150,000 salary, won the Democratic

nomination for the Senate in New York, lost to Sen. Jacob Javits, and continued to devote "far more than one-third of my time to without-charge cases."

Clark, at 50, talks about money in the abstract, as it affects society, not as it affects him.

"I do believe that materialism is a great failing of the American people. Our whole value patterns are based on greed. We measure success in terms of accumulation of wealth. It's very destructive."

Clark says some of his lawyer acquaintances seem almost envious of his readiness to sacrifice wealth to practice the public interest law he enjoys. "But a lot of them are trapped," he says sadly.

In the 1960s, when poverty law was a fad, top law graduates swarmed off campuses with a fever for taking on poor clients for free. Conventional law firms set up programs to represent indigent clients as a way of luring the most talented young lawyers into their fold.

"That has changed dramatically," Clark says. The market is glutted with lawyers. Many can't get a legal job at all. They're in no position to demand anything from the big firms, and it's not at all clear that they would demand free service for poor people even if they could."

Clark acknowledges that he and his

partners are far better equipped than most lawyers to battle poverty cases and win. "We're older lawyers. We have the experience and the contacts that many of the younger people don't have."

And because they are in such demand, they have a certain luxury in choosing only those cases which intrigue them and which serve their principles.

"I'm interested in using the law to achieve social change," Clark said. "Non-paying clients find me in numbers greater than I can handle. One has to choose wisely, to choose cases which can establish a principle or clients who most need representation and cannot get it elsewhere."

Clark laments that "a vast population is underserved" by lawyers with "only 2 percent of the bar in public interest law."

Although federal and local governments and private philanthropy have supported some public interest law projects, those sources remain vulnerable to political pressures, he maintains.