

An Inquisitive Counsel

J. Lee Rankin

WHEN J. Lee Rankin accepted his post as New York City's Corporation Counsel in December, 1965, he said that one of the factors influencing him was the urgency of demonstrating that urban areas could be governed. Now, after four and a half years in the job, he is "more convinced than ever" of the necessity.

Man in the News

Mr. Rankin, who was named by Mayor Lindsay to head the five-man panel that will investigate corruption in the Police Department, said that he believed the Mayor has demonstrated that governing the city was possible, "but that it is dependent in considerable degree on the cooperation and active participation of the citizens."

The 62-year-old lawyer, a former Assistant United States Attorney General, United States Solicitor General and General Counsel to the Warren Commission, says of his present position: "It's a fabulous job. The range of things we do is so far-reaching not only municipal law, but state and Federal law."

As Corporation Counsel, he has 378 lawyers working under him; his department is responsible for giving legal opinions, when necessary, on the validity of any action taken by a city department—from the legality of a New York City policeman's belonging to the John Birch Society to the legal status of the public school system's three demonstration districts—and for "all of the litigation the city has to prosecute or defend."

Legal Field Is Vast

The Law Department, the largest law office in the country "under one roof," is also responsible for supervising legislation for submission to the City Council, the State Legislature and, when required, the Federal Government.

When there is time, Mr. Rankin and his wife, the former Gertrude Carpenter, spend weekends at their country place in Weston, Conn., where they are enthusiastic gardeners. Mr. Rankin concentrates on roses: "We get some that are six inches across, beautiful thing."

What there is almost no time for now is the 14,000-acre ranch in Fort Pierre, S. D., where the Rankins used to raise Morgan horses; he was vacationing there in 1957 when the late President Dwight D. Eisenhower announced his appointment as Solicitor General.

The Rankins' two sons reflect, occupationally, their father's dual enthusiasms for the law and the outdoor life: Roger Carpenter is a rancher in Nebraska, and James Lee Jr. is County Counsel in Santa Cruz, Calif. Their daughter, Mrs. Sara Stadler, is married to an architect. The Rankins have three grandchildren.

James Lee Rankin was born in Hartington, Neb., July 8, 1907, the son of a job printer. He received his Bachelor of Laws degree at the University of Nebraska in 1930, and practiced law in Lincoln until joining the Justice Department in January, 1953, as Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Office of Legal Counsel.

Mr. Rankin had been active in organizing the 1948 campaign for Thomas E. Dewey in 1948 (Mr. Dewey, the Republican candidate, lost the election to Harry S. Truman but carried Nebraska), and in 1952, he managed the Eisenhower campaign in Nebraska.

In August, 1956, he was appointed Solicitor General,

in charge of handling the Government's legal business before the Supreme Court. As Assistant Attorney General he had argued the case that forced the desegregation of the Little Rock, Ark., schools; later he called the Supreme Court's desegregation decision the reflection of the "conscience of a great people," taking a moral position that the Administration itself was generally less eager to delineate.

When the Democrats came to power in Washington in January, 1961, Mr. Rankin moved to New York to practice law, winning admission to the state's bar without the usual examination, on the basis of his record. He and his wife moved into the Sutton Place apartment overlooking the East River where they still live.

Named by Warren Panel

In December, 1963, he was



The New York Times

MAYOR'S PANEL ON POLICE MEETS: J. Lee Rankin, the chairman of the group named by Mr. Lindsay to investigate charges of police corruption, sits between Manhattan District Attorney Frank S. Hogan, left, and Bronx District Attorney Burton B. Roberts. Standing: Investigation Commissioner Robert K. Ruskin, left, and Police Commissioner Howard R. Leary. Mr. Rankin is the Corporation Counsel.

the unanimous choice of the members of the Warren Commission, set up to investigate the November, 1963, assassination of President Kennedy, to serve as the commission's general counsel. He is reported to have done much of the rewriting that gave the report a consistent style.

A man of quietly friendly manner, straightforward and apparently willing to see the humor in a situation, Mr. Rankin said he had been "surprised at the range" of his job representing the city. He has had a grab-bag of legal chores to perform on behalf of his single client: telling the Board of Education to open its school facilities for meetings of the National Renaissance Party, for example, or advising that Greenwich Village should be a single historic district, and charging the automobile industry with suppressing the development of pollution-control devices.