

Ivy Lee and Rockefeller Press Relations

By Ray Eldon Hiebert

► After establishing his own public relations agency in 1916, Ivy Lee considered the Rockefeller family his number one client and was acutely aware of carrying the full responsibility for their public relationships. "I do want you to feel," he wrote to John D. Rockefeller Jr., "that you can go away with full assurance that all your interests, insofar as I am watching out for them, are in good shape and receiving adequate attention."¹

Perhaps his most important contribution during his 20 years with the Rockefellers was his careful tending of the fertile Fourth Estate. He was an anxious gardener of the press, pruning and clipping, urging the growth of strong stories in one plot and stamping out poisonous news in another. A bad weed sprouted suddenly early in 1920 when the Hearst papers carried a story telling how the "stingy" Rockefeller paid slave wages to his servants at Pocantico Hills. Rockefeller suggested to Lee that he prepare a public statement refuting the Hearst story.

Lee immediately saw that such action would alienate the reporters and editors. He suggested instead that a memorandum be prepared and privately sent to Arthur Brisbane and the Hearst organization "as to exactly what the facts are so as to save them perhaps from referring to the matter again in this inaccurate way."² The press saved face, the story was not picked up by other papers, and it did not attract much attention.

In another episode of potentially bad publicity, the Teapot Dome affair in which the Rockefellers had become unwittingly entangled, the situation was so explosive that had only a part of the story been told, it would have damaged the Rockefeller reputation and perhaps

public interests. Lee advised that the press would get some of the facts sooner or later anyway, so he notified all the papers that Rockefeller had an important statement and they should send their best reporters. At this conference Rockefeller Jr. told the entire story. However, because of conditions in Standard Oil which he could not control, he could not yet make any public statement but said, "I am going to leave this entirely to your own sense of responsibility as to what is wise and in the public interest in this situation to be published." All the reporters treated the facts with discretion.³

Lee explained in the beginning that he must be fully and quickly informed of all developments concerning the Rockefellers and their activities. Although the family took Lee into their confidence, he sometimes was caught between the Rockefellers and rumors. Early in 1924, for instance, a report suddenly went over the nation that John D. Sr., then 85, had died at his home in Ormond. The newspapers could not confirm this and editors around the country kept Ivy Lee's telephone ringing most of the night. Lee was at a loss because he could not contact the Rockefellers himself to get confirmation of the report, but he felt sure that the family would have informed him had something happened, so he told the newspapers it was probably a rumor and nothing was published.

Lee later told John D. Jr. that newspapers did not publish the rumors only because the editors "were sufficiently sure of the likelihood of my knowing about it if it were true to accept my statement and let the matter drop." Such

► Dr. Hiebert is the chairman of the journalism department at The American University. This article is a revision of part of a biography of Ivy Lee, *Courtier to the Crowd*, which was published by the Iowa State University Press this spring. Material in the article was taken directly from the Rockefeller Archives in New York and the Ivy Lee papers at the Princeton University library.

situations, he said, came up constantly and could be handled effectively only if he had complete information so the press would come to trust his judgment. "I want," he said, "to be in a position to be very frank at all times with the newspapers," and he insisted therefore that he always be "one of the first to be advised" on all developments.⁴

Lee also insisted that Rockefeller meet with members of the press from time to time. He spent a great deal of his energy and ingenuity restraining the press, but he could keep the goodwill of reporters and editors only if on occasion Rockefeller acceded to their wishes. "I have kept a vast horde of people away from you for many months past," he wrote to J.D.R. Jr. "Hardly a day goes past but somebody wants to get an interview with you."⁵

On many occasions he urged Rockefeller to allocate some time to the press. "Both these people," he once wrote about two New York reporters, "are pressing me very hard to get this promptly, so if it is possible I would appreciate it if you could arrange to give a half hour, say, to each one. . . . If you cannot arrange a half hour, fifteen minutes would, I think, accomplish all that is necessary." Sometimes he soft-pedaled the demands of reporters and presented them to Rockefeller in a more palatable form. He told Rockefeller that one reporter wanted "to write a sort of character story and simply have contact with your personality . . . so you need have no anxiety about anything you say being quoted."⁶

Most of the reporters who were assigned to write about the Rockefellers came to depend upon Lee for accurate and complete statements of their subject's opinions. They frequently allowed Lee to review their work and check it for accuracy or taste, an indication of how far many of them had come to trust Lee's relationship with the press and the Rockefellers. In such cases Lee was most discreet in making suggestions about fact or taste, bending over back-

wards to avoid any implication of censorship or dictatorial methods.

A large part of his work for the Rockefellers consisted of analyzing editorial sentiment and news coverage and sending the clippings to the Rockefellers. This was handled by Lee's office staff, but he would make the reports to the Rockefellers himself. Lee got them to adopt a policy of answering editorials with a letter of acknowledgment. If the editorial was good, John D. Jr. would thank the editors for their courtesy. If it was unfavorable, he would acknowledge the expression and make a courteous but firm statement of whatever he felt the true facts were. These letters were prepared in Lee's office but signed by John D. Jr. himself.

Perhaps the chief reason why Lee was able to keep the goodwill of the press was that he persuaded Rockefeller to play absolutely no favorites and give out no exclusives. If one newspaper got a story, all newspapers should get the story. This appealed to the newsman's sense of fair play and allayed his fear of being scooped by the opposition. And it was always a good rationalization for not allowing a lone reporter to interview the boss. Instead, when the demands were great enough, a press conference was held with representatives of all the papers.

At times, however, this policy backfired and Lee was criticized for spoiling exclusives. The most vehement criticism of this sort came during the Abby Rockefeller courtship in 1925. Miss Abby had been arrested on a traffic charge and the family hired a young attorney, David Milton, to handle her case. He won a suspended sentence for her and the story was printed in all the newspapers. A few months later Hearst's New York *American* received a tip that Miss Abby, after an apparently secret romance, was to be married to Milton. The Hearst paper sent its best reporter, Henry Doherty, to the Rockefeller home to check on the rumor. When Doherty arrived, Mrs.

Rockefeller was giving a reception and could not see him; instead, she apparently sent a message scribbled on the back of a letter telling the reporter to go to 111 Broadway and see Ivy Lee.

Doherty caught a cab back downtown to the Lee office and, on his way, examined the letter on which Mrs. Rockefeller had written the note. To his surprise, so the story goes, he found that the letter was from a family friend congratulating Miss Abby on her pending marriage to Milton. That should have been proof enough, but Doherty continued to the Lee office where he demanded confirmation from the publicist. As soon as Lee saw that Doherty had the facts of the Abby-Milton courtship, he immediately called all other papers and gave them the news so it would not appear that the Rockefellers had played favorites. The cry of foul went up from Doherty and the Hearst papers for spoiling a scoop.

The story has several versions, but in any circumstance it is a bit suspect.⁷ It seems unlikely that Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr. would have given a reporter a letter from a friend, and it is equally unlikely that a Hearst reporter would have sought further confirmation if he had had such a letter. Nevertheless, it was true that Lee frequently spoiled an exclusive about the Rockefellers by insisting on equal treatment of the press.

The entire matter of the Abby Rockefeller wedding was a difficult exercise in press and public relations. Every reporter and every photographer wanted a front row seat, as did thousands of those listed in the Social Register to whom an invitation was a symbol of social approval. Lee made elaborate arrangements with the press, handing out one invitation to each newspaper, assigning reporters a separate section in the church, and providing them with a logical and careful explanation of the family's reasons for imposing detailed restrictions on the activities of the press. Most newsmen accepted the explanations, understood the problems,

and abided by the rules. Lee later told J.D.R. Jr. that he was "perfectly delighted with the way in which the newspapers have handled this matter."⁸

Lee was of course greatly concerned with the reaction of the general public to the wedding and he devoted considerable attention to the effect the stories of the wedding could have on the reader in the street. He felt it was of the greatest importance to avoid any show of "gorgeousness" or give any impression which would suggest "regality." For this reason he refused to let the photographers take pictures of Abby in her wedding gown and he refused to give the press details about gifts. He was able to achieve his purposes, he explained afterwards to Rockefeller, because he had given the newspapers names of prominent people and other substantial material "in such quantities and of such quality that they could not be ignored — thus absorbing the space that would otherwise be occupied by embellishments that we did not want."⁹

Both press relations and public relations of the wedding turned out to be harmonious, giving, as Lee said, "Abby and David a happy public atmosphere in which to start their married life." He insisted that the wedding also provided "a further revelation to the public of the attitude of John D. and Mrs. Rockefeller toward life itself."¹⁰ The Rockefellers greatly appreciated Lee's work and sent him a warm note of thanks. "We do not see how a more accurate and favorable public impression could have been given," J.D.R. Jr. wrote. He said that many of their friends had the highest praise for Lee's careful planning and wise handling of the wedding.¹¹

As J.D.R. Sr. grew older, the newspapers pressed him even more for interviews and exclusives. Photographers especially wanted his picture and gathered around him every time he appeared in public. "On arrival of our train in Ormond," he complained to his son, "we were greatly annoyed by having a

large number of photographers and movie cameramen taking pictures as we alighted, with none of whom we had had acquaintance or special relations."¹² The same was true, he said, at the Pennsylvania Station in New York. But if photographers did not get a good picture, the press grumbled. Lee solved the problem by hiring a professional photographer, Brown Brothers in New York, to come in and take pictures, then making reproductions available simultaneously to all newspapers and other media.

At times the elderly gentleman must have chafed under Ivy Lee's strict advice that he play no favorites. Most of the time, however, he saw the wisdom of the counsel and agreed with Lee. Once, for instance, he played golf at his winter home in Ormond with an Associated Press correspondent. The A.P. man wanted to write something about the game, but Rockefeller told him that in order to guard his commitments to other newspapers, he could not allow anything to be written without Ivy Lee's approval.¹³

In the end the policy of playing no favorites and giving the press all reasonable cooperation in getting stories paid handsome dividends to the Rockefellers. Sometimes, of course, Lee was exasperated with the press. Sending a clipping of a sarcastic article from the New York *Herald* to Rockefeller, he commented that "it was written by some rattle-brained reporter who thought to write along old lines would be effective."¹⁴ But for the most part the press stopped writing along old lines. The reporters and editors came to respect the Lee-Rockefeller relationship and to re-

spect Lee and the Rockefellers as individuals.

By 1925 the president of the United Press, Karl A. Bickel, could in good journalistic conscience turn directly to Ivy Lee for advice about the Rockefellers. Bickel was to give the commencement address at Marquette University on "Opportunity Today," and he wanted to get some apt Rockefeller quotations that he could pass along to the graduating students. Expressing the judgment of many of his fellow newsmen, Bickel wrote to Lee: "Mr. Rockefeller's success in life both materially and otherwise has been established."¹⁵ Ten years earlier that attitude would have been widely mocked and derided, and no newsman would have made such a statement.

¹ Ivy Lee to John D. Rockefeller Jr., Sept. 29, 1925, Rockefeller Archives, New York.

² Ivy Lee to Starr J. Murphy, May 17, 1920, Rockefeller Archives, New York.

³ Recounted by Ivy Lee in a speech given at the Columbia University School of Journalism, 1932, Ivy Lee Papers, Princeton University.

⁴ Ivy Lee to John D. Rockefeller Jr., Jan. 23, 1924, Rockefeller Archives, New York.

⁵ Ivy Lee to John D. Rockefeller Jr., Nov. 17, 1926, Rockefeller Archives, New York.

⁶ Ivy Lee to John D. Rockefeller Jr., Feb. 15, 1928, Rockefeller Archives, New York.

⁷ For one version of the story, see Henry Pringle, "His Master's Voice," *American Mercury*, Oct. 1926, p. 151.

⁸ Ivy Lee to John D. Rockefeller Jr., May 21, 1926, Rockefeller Archives, New York.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ John D. Rockefeller Jr. to Ivy Lee, May 20, 1925, Rockefeller Archives, New York.

¹² John D. Rockefeller Sr. to John D. Rockefeller Jr., Feb. 6, 1930, Rockefeller Archives, New York.

¹³ John D. Rockefeller Sr. to John D. Rockefeller Jr., Feb. 6, 1930, Rockefeller Archives, New York.

¹⁴ Ivy Lee to John D. Rockefeller Jr., Aug. 13, 1923, Rockefeller Archives, New York.

¹⁵ Karl A. Bickel to Ivy Lee, May 29, 1925, Rockefeller Archives, New York.