

Assassinations probes quietly, secretly active

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WASHINGTON — Every so often a scrap of information about the investigation filters out of the heavily guarded offices in an old FBI annex building near Capitol Hill as evidence of the somewhat startling fact that the House Assassinations Committee still exists.

Almost one year to the day after the bitter resignation of Chief Counsel Richard Sprague climaxed his sensational public feuding with Texas Democrat Henry B. Gonzalez, the panel's chairman, the once highly visible and embarrassing probes into the deaths of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. have gone virtually underground, largely forgotten.

The heavy secrecy that has surrounded the assassinations committee's work since the controversial Sprague exited last March 30, however, appears to have obscured an expansion of the probes in both money and manpower in the past few months. While little is known about the thrust of the panel's efforts, it is clear they are still very active behind the locked doors of the former FBI quarters.

Under its new chief counsel, Cornell law professor G. Robert Blakey, the staff has been increased from less than 60 when Sprague left to more than 115 attorneys, investigators and clerical workers. One of the biggest staffs of any congressional committee, all members have been cleared by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and sworn to secrecy on panel business.

The committee also has one of the largest budgets. More than \$2.1 million already has been spent on salaries, travel and expenses since the probes began in late 1976. Last month the House, with little debate, authorized another \$2.5 million to continue the assassination inquiries through 1978.

In return for this sizeable allocation of personnel and funds the committee, headed by Ohio Democrat Louis Stokes since Gonzalez himself resigned in the Sprague quarrel, has furnished little or nothing in the way of information about the probes, a matter which angers some members of Congress.

"We do not even know the direction this committee is taking," remarked Rep. Robert Bauman, R-Md., a long-time opponent of the investigations. "The only thing we are told is that significant issues have been discovered, and that a process of evaluation is not complete, but will be eventually."

So far, at any rate, the staff has conducted more than 1,400 interviews in the Kennedy and King cases. Investigators have been assigned to scrutinize thousands of documents obtained from government agencies. The FBI has made more than 990 volumes of data available to the panel, and the CIA another 2,800 files and 1,400 draft memos on the Kennedy assassination. The Secret Service has allowed the examination of reports on 1,462 interviews it conducted after the Nov. 22, 1963 assassination in Dallas.

Files in the Defense Department, State Department and Internal Revenue Service, as well as those of the Dallas Police Department, also have been turned over to the committee. All this has gone in to the committee offices, and very little has come out.

This is mainly because Blakey, who took over the staff when the committee's prestige was almost nonexistent, is intent on keeping committee business secret until all findings can be made public at once. The current plan is to hold three days of closed hearings each week until late summer or early fall, when 20 days of public hearings on the Kennedy case will be held. The panel will then write its final report and go out of business.

So far, Blakey's success in preventing leaks from the staff has been extraordinary. In addition to security clearances from the CIA for all members, sensitive documents are stored in safes, file cabinets are fitted with special locks, a police officer guards the office 24 hours a day and investigators have been broken down into groups that prevent access to more than one facet of a particular project.

The primary question, however, appears to be whether the committee is making any progress in

what many observers feel is its primary mission and only real justification — uncovering a raft of faceless co-conspirators that private assassination researchers are certain assisted Lee Harvey Oswald, President Kennedy's accused assassin.

Some of the committee's newer leads have surfaced publicly in recent weeks. A former low-ranking CIA officer, James B. Wilcott, has told investigators that while stationed in Japan during the early 1960s, other intelligence officers convinced him that Oswald had been recruited by the agency when the assassin was a marine in the Far East. Recurrent speculation that Oswald was a secret CIA operative has been repeatedly denied by the agency, and Wilcott acknowledged his memory of the events were more than a little hazy.

Last week former Dallas police officer Paul McCaghren, who once headed the department's intelligence division, appeared before the panel for nearly eight hours of questioning about certain tapes records and documents. They allegedly contained "sensitive" information about the slaying of Oswald in the basement of the police station Nov. 24, 1963.