

House Showdown on Assassinations Inquiry Called Off

By George Lardner Jr.
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The House Select Committee on Assassinations was left without official status again yesterday when House Democratic leaders hurriedly withdrew a bill re-establishing the committee for the next two years.

House Majority Leader Jim Wright (D-Tex.) said there had been complaints from "a good many members" about the committee's proposed budget and methods.

"So we decided, instead of trying to cram it down their throats and push it through, to do it in an orderly way," Wright explained.

A resolution reconstituting the committee for the 95th Congress had been scheduled for floor consideration at noon under suspension-of-the-rules procedures. These would have limited debate, prohibited any amendments, and required two-thirds approval of those present and voting.

With the outcome highly uncertain, Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.), who is expected to become the committee's new chairman, signaled House leaders at 11:45 a.m. to call off the showdown.

"At 11:45, we got word that the Republican Conference had a big donnybrook on this. Our (Democratic) picture was cloudy," Gonzalez said later. "It looked like trouble . . . By 11:45, my firm recommendation was not to bring it up."

Backers of the committee, which was established last fall to investigate

the murders of President Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., will now take their resolution to the House Rules Committee. Approval there would send the bill to the House floor under normal procedures requiring only a simple majority. Wright said he doubted this could be done before next week.

A committee official said yesterday afternoon that the 73-member staff is facing a budgetary crisis in any event. Even if a new resolution reconstituting the inquiry is adopted this month, the committee will still have to wait until next month, or longer, to win a new budget.

Until that is approved, according to the official, the committee can spend no more than \$84,000 a month, the amount he said was paid out in December for salaries and other bills. However, he said, since many staffers were hired during the month of December, the staff payroll alone now amounts to \$115,000 a month.

Chief counsel Richard A. Sprague held a meeting with the staff yesterday afternoon to explain the situation.

Much of the rising congressional criticism has centered on Sprague's proposed \$6.5 million budget, which is certain to be cut back, and his plans for detective work such as having witnesses physically followed after they have been questioned. Rep. Tim Wirth (D-Colo.) also voiced concern yesterday about Sprague's judgment in light of some of his actions as a prosecutor in Philadelphia.

On top of all this, House Minority Leader John J. Rhodes (R-Ariz.) and Minority Whip Robert H. Michel (R-Ill.) warned GOP members at yesterday's Republican Conference to be wary of the resolution to re-establish the committee. The wording had been changed from the one adopted last

fall, considerably expanding the committee's legislative intent and broadening some powers. One new clause gives committee investigators the authority to take sworn statements.

Rep. Robert E. Bauman (R-Md.) first blocked adoption of the resolution last week when it was brought up under unanimous consent procedure. He told the House yesterday he hopes it will come back under an open rule so members can offer amendments to "circumscribe the activities of the staff and the scope of the investigation."

To a reporter, Bauman charged later that Sprague was turning the investigation into a "circus" and suggested that the controversy "might be" resolved if Sprague quit. Gonzalez told reporters he had heard "a few insinuations" along that line, but only a few.

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