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Blank Checks and Fearful Fantasies

In principle, there are now sound reasons for the House of Representatives to go forward with its investigation of the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King. The murder in Dallas has generated a whole folklore of blurred figures and shadowy conspiracies. Disclosure last fall that the F.B.I. and C.I.A. withheld information from the Warren Commission has raised new questions. In the case of the King assassination, there has been no public investigation at all.

It will never be possible to settle every troubling question or to puncture every balloon of eager suspicion. But it remains important to try, in the most rigorous and credible fashion. That is why, in practice, the House should now be cautious as it moves to re-establish the investigative committee it created last fall. For there have been disquieting portents.

One cause for disquiet concerns Richard A. Sprague, the committee's chief counsel and staff director. This newspaper recently disclosed that, while a Philadelphia prosecutor, Mr. Sprague was subjected to repeated formal criticisms from Pennsylvania legal bodies for legal and administrative deficiencies. He contests these criticisms. In any event, they reflect on the committee that chose him. It knew nothing of the criticisms before hiring him. That ignorance does not evidence the painstaking concern for thoroughness and impeccability that should be mandatory in such an undertaking. The House should carefully review Mr. Sprague's credentials and the membership of the reconstituted committee.

A second cause for question is the committee's appetite. It has asked for an extraordinarily large budget of $13 million for two years. (By comparison, that would be five times the total spent by the House Impeachment Committee.) The budget includes requests for sophisticated eavesdropping equipment and other electronic devices.

It may be, as the committee's work proceeds, that the need for such methods or funds can be demonstrated. But without such a showing, the suggestion of a fishing expedition is unavoidable. The House should refuse to write blank checks lest the necessary and well-intended turn perverse. An investigation interested in fact and intended to puncture fearful fantasies should not end up inflating them.