

Assassination Panel Is Given Right to Bypass House

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 16—The House of Representatives has given its Select Committee on Assassinations a strong demonstration of support by granting the committee the right to bypass the full House, and apply directly to the courts to compel witnesses to testify about their knowledge of events surrounding the deaths of President Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

That decision, taken by the House last month in an overwhelmingly favorable vote, is considered the most significant recent development in the yearlong history of the embattled committee.

After struggling for the better part of its first year to obtain Congressional support and public credibility, the committee hired G. Robert Blakey as staff director and chief counsel last July 1, and since then has enlarged its staff from 56 to 114.

The number of field investigators rose from five to 28 in the same period, and the staff has opened a branch office in St. Louis, according to sources close to the committee.

Researchers are accumulating "immense stacks" of documents and are computerizing the information they contain, the sources said, and investigators are interviewing "hundreds" of witnesses.

At the same time, the sources said,

the committee is hearing testimony in executive session from Government agents and from people allegedly linked to the events in Dallas, where President Kennedy was shot in 1963, and in Memphis, where Dr. King was killed in 1968.

However, the sources said that House passage of the request by the committee on what is called "use immunity" was especially important because it carried as much symbolic as practical significance. The committee and its subcommittees are now allowed to bypass the normal procedure of going to the floor of the House each time they want to go to court for an order of use immunity for a witness.

Use immunity protects a witness by

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prohibiting the prosecutorial authorities from using the compelled testimony in any respect against him. Therefore, it insures that the testimony cannot lead to criminal penalties against the witness.

However, under a grant of use immunity, which the Senate Watergate committee gave to John W. Dean and Jeb Stuart McGrunder, the witness must testify or face charges of civil contempt of Congress or possibly charges of criminal contempt of court.

If a witness refuses to testify, the committee could sentence him to jail in the basement of the Capitol for the life of the committee (until Dec. 31, 1978), or take him to court in the District of Columbia, which could sentence him to three years in the District jail. If the witness testified falsely, he could face possible perjury charges.

The symbolic significance, the sources

said, lies in the favorable vote rolled up on the House floor and in the fact that only the House committee investigating the Korean payoff scandal now shares such authority to go to the courts without full House approval in advance.

The 290-to-112 vote favoring the committee's request contrasts with the much narrower 223-to-195 vote last March that extended the life of the committee through the end of the 95th Congress.

The members of the committee seem to be adhering to a gag rule requested by Mr. Blakey, its chief counsel and staff director, and imposed by its chairman, Representative Louis Stokes, Democrat of Ohio. But Mr. Stokes said in a speech on the House floor that the committee was receiving "excellent cooperation from all the agencies from whom we have sought any type of testimony of evidence of any type."

A well-placed source said that the panel had already heard testimony under a grant of use immunity from Loran Hall, described as a soldier of fortune who allegedly had links to organized crime figures, right-wing extremists and Lee Harvey Oswald, the man the Warren Commission determined acted alone to shoot President Kennedy. In an appearance before the committee in open session last June, Mr. Hall invoked his Fifth Amendment right not to testify.

The St. Louis office was opened to facilitate the investigation of James Earl Ray's escape from a Missouri prison about a year before Dr. King was murdered in Memphis. Mr. Ray pleaded guilty to charges that he killed Dr. King, but he later maintained his innocence and said he had been unwittingly duped by others who had conspired to assassinate the civil rights leader.