

Panel Delays Action on Sprague; Rep. Gonzalez Calls Him 'Deceitful'

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 16—Overriding the objections of its chairman, the House Select Committee on Assassinations adjourned today without discussing what action should be taken regarding its controversial general counsel, Richard A. Sprague.

But following the 8-to-1 vote to cut short the public meeting, the committee chairman, Henry B. Gonzalez, read a prepared statement denouncing Mr. Sprague as "dishonest, deceitful and irresponsible in his conduct with the staff and toward the committee."

A spokesman for Mr. Sprague said that the former Philadelphia prosecutor would have no immediate comment on the charges of Mr. Gonzalez, a Texas Democrat.

The continuing bitter dispute between Mr. Gonzalez and Mr. Sprague and other members of the committee established to investigate the deaths of President Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. further raised the question whether the committee will survive.

Speculation on O'Neill Role

According to conversations with several senior House members, resolution of the continuing dispute can now be achieved only by House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. But because of the deep divisions that have developed, few are confident the rescue mission will be successful.

One possible solution being discussed was the removal of both Mr. Gonzalez and Mr. Sprague and a concentration of the investigation on the death of Dr. King. But some senior House members said that they were not sure that such a compromise would pass the House because of the disappointment of those primarily concerned about the death of President Kennedy.

Mr. Gonzalez, in his statement, accused Mr. Sprague of hiring 23 additional committee employees about the first of the year without the chairman's "knowledge, consent or approval." Mr. Gonzalez said

that this had resulted in the committee's monthly payroll being \$20,000 above the \$84,000 limit set by the House.

Even with a 35 percent cut in salaries imposed on the 73 staff members now working for the committee, Mr. Gonzalez said the addition of the unauthorized new employees meant that the committee had only about \$1,500 left in the January and February budgets to pay all of its expenses.

Mr. Gonzalez's public statement followed his attempt last Friday to dismiss Mr. Sprague. This move was countermanded in a letter signed by all the other members of the committee. It also came after the committee spent most of the day discussing and tentatively adopting a set of written rules.

In explaining his action to dismiss Mr. Sprague, Mr. Gonzalez said that some had felt he had acted too quickly. "Let me say simply that when I see a rattlesnake in the door, I don't hesitate, I stomp on it."