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Dems Embarrassed

Life Short For House Slay Panel

By TIM WYNGAARD

Scripps-Howard Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — The Gong Show of Congress — the House Assassination Committee — is about to get the hook.

Minority Republicans, angry at what some call a "doublecross" by committee Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez, D-Texas, and mercurial Chief Counsel Richard A. Sprague, now hold the power to kill the panel assigned to probe the killings of President Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

And top Democratic leaders, blistered and embarrassed by what they consider the amateurish performance of the committee, are openly predicting it will be abolished.

"I wouldn't give it one chance in 10" of surviving, snapped House Democratic Leader James C. Wright Jr., of Texas, yesterday.

"The chances are slim," agreed Rep. Richardson Preyer, D-N.C., due to become chairman if Gonzalez's



SPRAGUE



GONZALEZ

At loggerheads over probe.

resignation is accepted by House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill or the full House.

Faced with loss of Democratic leadership support, backers of the committee needed bipartisan help from the Republican side of the aisle to win approval of continuation beyond a scheduled March 31 termination.

"There won't be anything for them from us — we've had it," said a member of the Republican leadership.

He pointed to a promise by Gonzalez that Sprague and his staff would give the GOP leaders a secret briefing on "new leads" they have uncovered in their investigation, which began last fall.

Gonzalez repeatedly made the promise in public in seeking bipartisan support for continuation of the committee, mired in financial problems and facing extinction in January.

He got the Republican support he needed — and temporary authority to continue his probe until the end of March. He was due then to come back to the House floor to again justify the committee's work and to seek authority to continue the investigation two or more years.

"We've asked them for that briefing several times," said a Republican leader. "As soon as they got approval to continue until March, they forgot about us. We can't get a word out of them."

The committee needed GOP help after it was discovered Sprague had loaded the staff with almost 80 aides and far overspent the budget. Gonzalez promised a cutback, offered the Republicans a briefing and won the temporary continuance for the committee.

Speaker O'Neill said he's been told the committee has three witnesses "who want to testify" about the King murder but he can't find out who they are.

One reason he can't is that Gonzalez, who has been at home in Texas for the past 10 days, is refusing to accept phone calls from O'Neill — and O'Neill says he won't accept Gonzalez's resignation letter until they talk.

Sprague is holed up in the committee offices, talking to no one and not getting paid. Gonzalez has refused to sign his pay vouchers, and no one else on the committee can sign them until Gonzalez's resignation is accepted.