

House Panel Is Pressing Inquiries On Assassinations Amid Secrecy

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WASHINGTON, March 24—The sign on the police guard's desk reads "Restricted Area, SCA staff only."

Once the somewhat scruffy building near the Capitol housed millions of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's files and fingerprints.

Today in Wing 2, third floor, more than 100 staff members of the House Select Committee on Assassinations work on a hush-hush basis not unlike the F.B.I.'s own mode of operation in the days of J. Edgar Hoover.

Policemen guard the committee quarters 24 hours a day. There are special locks on files groaning with massive piles of secret material. Every staff member has been cleared by the bureau and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Created by the House in the fall of 1976 to investigate the assassinations of President Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the committee is very much alive despite the almost total silence in which it has enveloped itself in recent months.

Gonzalez-Sprague Dispute

It was scarcely a year ago when the committee was very much on view. A widely publicized dispute over staffing and spending between Representative Henry B. Gonzalez, Democrat of Texas, who was then the committee's chairman, and Richard A. Sprague, then the committee's chief counsel, threatened for a time to end the panel's effectiveness.

Mr. Sprague subsequently resigned and was replaced by G. Robert Blakey, a Cornell University law professor. Representative Gonzalez also stepped aside, and the committee is now headed by Representative Louis Stokes, Democrat of Ohio.

With its 115 staff members pledged to secrecy, the committee findings are not yet public. But the committee will unveil its findings in 40 days of public hearings this fall before officially going out of business.

Order of Hearings Undecided

One set of public hearings is scheduled for September, the other for November. It has not yet been decided which of the two assassinations will be dealt with first in the public hearings.

Until going public, the committee will continue holding closed hearings three times a week. With no hearing room of its own, sessions are held in various rooms in House office buildings, always with a policeman on duty at the door.

Actually, there are two staffs. One group of lawyers, researchers and investigators is assigned to the Kennedy assassination. The other, of equal size, is investigating the King assassination.

The two staffs have conducted more than 2,000 interviews and examined

mountains of documents furnished by Government agencies and departments.

The staffs have had access to 347 cubic feet of files housed in the National Archives; 998 volumes of F.B.I. material; 2,800 C.I.A. files and 1,400 other documents; 4,386 pages of reports by the Secret Service and numerous other files and reports by the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Defense Department and the Justice Department.

Field Inquiries and Interviews

Much of the staff work is done here in Washington, but the committee also has field investigators in New Orleans, Miami, Atlanta and St. Louis. Interviews have been conducted in many other parts of the nation, too, including several with James Earl Ray, who is serving a 99-year sentence at the Brushy Mountain State Prison in Tennessee for the 1968 slaying of Dr. King.

In addition to its regular staff of 115

people, the committee has 28 consultants assisting in analyzing medical evidence, ballistics tests, photographs and tape recordings.

Because of advanced technology and sophisticated computers, the committee believes that new analysis of old evidence can disclose much more than was available in 1964 when the Warren Commission investigated the Kennedy assassination.

That commission, headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren, concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, killed President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963.

Despite the findings of the Warren Commission and the conviction of James Earl Ray, the House committee was set up to answer the following questions:

¶Who killed John F. Kennedy?

¶Who killed Martin Luther King Jr.?

¶Did the assassins of the two men work alone or as part of conspiracies?

¶How well did the F.B.I., the Secret Service, police departments and other investigative agencies or departments perform in investigating the assassinations?

The committee investigation is expected to cost about \$4.5 million, including the \$2.5 million appropriated this month.