

Assassination Panel Chief Stirs Concern

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WASHINGTON — Quiet congressional concern about the competency of Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez, D-Tex., may kill the House Assassination Investigating Committee.

While public attention has focused on controversial staff director Richard A. Sprague as the center of the fight over continuation of the committee, a major part of the battle revolves in private over Gonzalez' leadership of the investigation.

Leader of the House drive to reopen the probes into the killings of President John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Gonzalez was not expected to move to the chairmanship of the investigating committee when it was created last year.

But he has, due to the retirement of the initial chairman, and his performance since taking over the reins at the start of the year worries some House members who would otherwise back such an investigation.

What worries House members most about Gonzalez is his flare for the dramatic, combined with what some feel is his inattention to detail.

A 60-year-old lawmaker now in his seventh term, Gonzalez was in the Dallas motorcade in 1963 when Kennedy was killed. He says he pushed for the reinvestigation when illicit FBI and CIA activities came to light in the wake of Watergate.

The House Rules Committee, considering the resolution needed to continue the investigating committee and provide it funds for another year, was stunned recently to hear Gonzalez claim he had been told two "contracts" had been put out on his life.

When reporters pushed him for details, he said one "contract" supposedly was issued by two men—both dead for at least six months before the deal supposedly was made.

The second stemmed from a claim by a 17-year-old last New Year's Eve—the day the assassination committee got national publicity by saying it had uncovered new King and Kennedy leads. The youth later admitted making up the tale, Gonzalez admitted.

Rules committee members were equally surprised to hear Gonzalez admit he had no idea Sprague had added 23 staff members—almost a 50 per cent increase—to the payroll two days before Downing retired and funding was to expire. No one told him about it, Gonzalez said.

That boost almost doubled the committee's payroll but was not his responsibility, Gonzalez told the unhappy rules committee.