

Inquiry on Assassinations Losing Favor in House

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 31 — Growing doubts that the House Committee on Assassinations can resolve the questions surrounding the deaths of President Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have led to a substantial loss of support for the committee in the House of Representatives.

The doubts, according to statements by more than a dozen House members of both parties, have been compounded by the record of Richard A. Sprague both before and after he became the committee's chief counsel and director.

The extent of the loss of support for the committee since it was initially established by a vote of 280 to 65 last September is expected to be tested tomorrow and later this week as a resolution re-establishing the panel moves from the Rules Committee to the floor of the House.

Content Public Disapproves

The reasons given for the increasing opposition included shock at the committee's proposed \$13-million two-year investigation; dismay at initial plans to use secret recording devices and stress evaluators; doubts about the record of Mr. Sprague while he was a prosecutor in Philadelphia and the belief of some representatives that the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency have been investigated enough.

But several members suggested a broader explanation of the opposition. "I

guess there is a general feeling in the House, based partly on public attitudes, that with the inauguration many people want to turn the page, get on with new challenges," Representative Bob Eckhardt, Democrat of Texas, said.

"The people don't seem to want to mull over Vietnam, Watergate or the assassinations any more," Mr. Eckhardt added during an interview.

A second objection raised by several members was expressed by Representative Otis G. Pike, Democrat of Suffolk County, who said that he voted against the committee last fall because "no matter what conclusions the committee reaches, there will always be a segment of the American people who will be dissatisfied."

But it was Mr. Sprague who appeared to catalyze the increasing opposition to the committee. He offended many House members when he challenged the unwritten rule that staff should serve but not be heard by going before the Democratic Caucus and the Republican Conference to insist that the proposed investigation required a minimum of \$13 million.

Electronic Surveillance Opposed

His proposal to use hidden radio transmitters, stress evaluators and polygraph machines to test the credibility of the committee's witnesses also stirred opposition. This plan has now been abandoned.

Questions have also been raised about Mr. Sprague's earlier career. In 1973, for example, the Attorney General of Penn-

sylvania issued a critical report concerning Mr. Sprague's handling of a homicide case in which the son of a friend was involved.

Representatives Timothy E. Wirth, Democrat of Colorado, Trent Lott, Republican of Mississippi, and others have questioned whether Mr. Sprague was fit for his sensitive position.

One of Mr. Sprague's strongest talking points, the conviction of W.A. Boyle for murder in the slaying of a rival for the leadership of the United Mine Workers union, Joseph A. Yablonski, and Mr. Yablonski's wife and daughter, was weakened somewhat late last week when the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ordered a new trial of the case.

But a number of representatives still support the investigation. Chief among them is Henry B. Gonzalez, the Texas Democrat in line to become the committee's chairman if it is re-established.

Mr. Gonzalez, noting that surveys indicate four out of every five Americans do not believe the official explanations of the assassinations, argues that it is essential to undertake the investigation.

Another source of support is the Congressional Black Caucus, which last week repeated its earlier strong endorsement of the committee.

House members hesitated to predict the vote on the committee resolution reached the floor.

"It's going to be very very close," said a committee member who asked not to be quoted by name.