



Wally McNamee—Newsweek

Gonzalez and Sprague: Was it too late to save a controversial committee?

Self-inflicted Wounds

The House of Representatives' Select Committee on Assassinations has done everything short of assassinating itself, and its most recent self-inflicted wound may well prove fatal. Last week, the committee's chairman, Texas Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez, fired chief counsel Richard Sprague and ordered him to clean out his office by evening. Those orders were countermanded hours later by the eleven other committee members, and Sprague, whose abrasive ways had infuriated Gonzalez, stayed put. But the escalating dispute raised new doubts whether a full-scale Congressional investigation of the murders of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. would ever be completed. Said Illinois Republican John Anderson: "I think the life of the committee is in great jeopardy."

This was only the last in a series of stumbles by the committee. It was conceived last year in election fever, largely at the insistence of the Congressional Black Caucus which wanted a new inquiry into whether King's convicted killer, James Earl Ray, had acted alone. It proceeded to hire Sprague, an aggressive Philadelphia prosecutor, who demanded complete autonomy, an enormous budget (\$6.5 million for one year alone) and secret surveillance techniques that alarmed a good many congressmen. Last month, the House, put off by Sprague's high-handedness and increasingly skeptical of the need for new Kennedy-King investigations, voted to end the committee's life on March 31 unless it came up

with a trimmed-down budget and solid evidence that the renewed investigations would be productive (NEWSWEEK, Feb. 14).*

It was a battle between Gonzalez and Sprague over cost-cutting that probably did most to ignite last week's controversy. First, the chairman refused to sign pay vouchers for the 73 staffers Sprague had hired "until I get a complete list of employees and their salary ranges." Then Sprague's deputy, Kenneth Bruton, requested the congressman's franked envelopes for committee correspondence. Incensed, Gonzalez scheduled a meeting at which Sprague would have to specify all the reductions in personnel or expenses that might enable the panel to live within its temporary budget of \$84,000 a month.

Confidence: Gonzalez, it turned out, had already lost patience with Sprague. Early last week, Sprague, back from a vacation in Acapulco, saw Gonzalez alone. "Do you have confidence in me?" Sprague asked. "I do not," Gonzalez replied. "If I had known in September what I know now, I would never have affirmed your appointment." With that, Sprague stormed out of the office and won support for his no-cuts policy from two key committee members. District of

*The committee claims to have interviewed a new witness in the King case—a "man from the northeastern United States" with "pertinent information" regarding Ray's escape through Canada. Sprague also reports having turned up witnesses in the Kennedy killing who were never formally questioned, and he has looked into contacts—allegedly kept secret by the CIA—between Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald and Russian and Cuban emissaries in Mexico.

Columbia delegate Walter Fauntroy and North Carolina's Rep. Richardson Preyer. When the panel finally met on the matter, Gonzalez warned against Sprague's "namby-pamby assurances" of frugality, but the counsel stood firm against winnowing the staff, all of whom had already agreed to have their pay reduced 35 per cent on a temporary basis. "You are not a member of Congress," Gonzalez raged. "You can't set policy, and that's what you're doing. I resent the usurpation of our role."

'Out on a Limb': Next day, Gonzalez again refused to sign staff vouchers, and ordered Sprague not to make any expenditures without his written authorization. The counsel, meanwhile, was assuring his staff that no one would be fired and that Gonzalez himself was "getting more and more out on a limb." Darkly, he added: "Corrective measures will be taken." But, after hearing of Sprague's threats, it was Gonzalez who took action. First the chairman met with Attorney General Griffin Bell and got him to suspend the staff's access to FBI files. Then he sent a letter firing Sprague, with copies to all committee members and the House leadership. "This man is berserk," Gonzalez told one aide. He also charged Sprague with improperly continuing his Philadelphia legal practice and with failing to provide statements of outside income and other background information.

This time it was Gonzalez who had stepped out of bounds because House rules require that any such firing be approved by vote of the committee. Fauntroy conferred with the House parliamentarian and Speaker Thomas (Tip) O'Neill (who has the power to replace Gonzalez), then contacted other committee members in their home districts and got them to endorse a letter repudiating the chairman's action. Afterward, however, many of the members said they had gone along simply to maintain the status quo until they could return to Washington for the panel's meeting this week—at which Gonzalez may call for a vote dismissing Sprague. "I'm concerned about the committee continuing the investigations, which are more important than any personalities involved," said Tennessee Rep. Harold E. Ford. "If [Gonzalez and Sprague] can't get together, maybe we don't need either of them." But even such a dramatic house cleaning as that may come too late to save the controversial committee.

—DAVID M. ALPERN with STEPHAN LESHER and HENRY W. HUBBARD in Washington