

New Counsel Altering Slayings Panel Image

By Ron Sarro

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Until now, the House committee investigating the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. has been embroiled in controversy, operated in a circus-like atmosphere, and been called names like "the Gong Show of Capitol Hill."

The first priority of the House Assassination Committee's new chief counsel, Professor G. Robert Blakey of Cornell University, apparently is to change that image dramatically, eliminate committee showboating, and get the job done — in near grand jury secrecy — during the life of this 95th Congress.

"The purpose of this news conference," said the new chief counsel upon his appointment by the committee yesterday, "is to announce that there will not be any more news conferences."

"I hope you members of the press will leave us alone for a while and let us do our work quietly and professionally," Blakey told a surprised press corps, which has become used to committee dramatics employed to assure the public its existence is justified.

DURING A CLOSED meeting before Blakey's appointment was announced yesterday afternoon, the committee made clear that the new investigative tone Blakey is trying to establish has the committee's strong support.

The committee adopted a resolution, explained Chairman Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, establishing a new policy requiring the legislators and staff members "to safeguard all information in a confidential nature" and "not to comment" about the probe until the staff investigation is complete.

That's quite a shift in emphasis for a committee that held a dubious public hearing to display Miami racketeer Santos Trafficante Jr., refusing to answer questions about an alleged Castro plot to kill Kennedy, and paraded Dutch journalist William Oltman in public to explore second-hand, uncorroborated reports about Kennedy's murder.

And it seemed a different committee from the one that publicly opened Tennessee's evidence against King's convicted killer, James Earl Ray, for the first time before television cameras, advertised Ray's cooperation and five visits by committee investigators to question him in jail and openly discussed ballistics tests and other information.

BLAKEY, A LOW-KEY, experi-

enced investigator, appeared to contrast sharply with his predecessor, Richard Sprague — the fiery, unorthodox former Philadelphia prosecutor who resigned in March because he was so controversial the House might not have approved the committee's \$2.8 million budget, if Sprague had stayed on.

Besides their styles, there is another key difference between Blakey and Sprague. Blakey has extensive Washington investigation experience with both the Justice Department and Congress that Sprague didn't have. He is not likely to have the clashes with congressmen Sprague had.

And Blakey seemed to be directing the committee toward a firm, no-nonsense course — precision. For example, until now, committee members were emphasizing the importance of their work by saying they were involved in a murder investigation. Not so, Blakey said, although he hoped unanswered questions about the Kennedy and King killings would be resolved.

"Congress has no authority to investigate homicides," he said. The committee's work has to have a legislative purpose, and after the investigation is complete it will "come back to Congress with legislative and other recommendations."

BLAKEY, WHO will be paid 47,500 in his new job (a cut in pay, he emphasized), has been a law professor at Cornell since 1973, also serving there as director of the Cornell Institute on Organized Crime, a sort of crash course on rackets prosecutions.

He served as a lawyer in the Justice Department's organized crime section in 1960-64, was chief counsel to the McClellan Senate subcommittee on criminal laws and procedures in 1969-73, was a consultant to the National Crime Commission in 1966-67, and was a consultant on conspiracy law for the Commission on the Reform of Federal Penal Law in 1968. He also has done other consulting work.

Selected by an Assassinations Committee task force from among 115 persons considered, Blakey said he refused the job when it was first offered him, but later was persuaded by the committee that the investigation is something "important to be done."

"I have no prejudgments," Blakey said, adding that "I have a tremendous amount of reading to do." Public hearings will be held — and the public informed about the committee investigation's findings — when the staff's investigative process is complete, he said.



—United Press International

House Assassinations Committee Chairman Louis Stokes (left) chats with G. Robert Blakey, a Cornell University law professor, who was hired to replace Richard Sprague as the chief counsel.