

The JFK Panel's Plot To Improve Its Image

Washington

The House Assassinations Committee spent much of its time at a secret meeting two weeks ago discussing the "choreography" and "scenario" for winning congressional and public support of its inquiry.

"This, of course, is not the way to conduct an investigation," Representative Samuel L. Devine (Rep-Ohio) observed at one point, according to a transcript of the session that was released by mistake. "But what we are talking about today is survival."

At another point, committee chairman Louis L. Stokes (Dem-

Ohio) was reminded of the members of the press waiting outside the meeting room and was asked what he might tell "these wolves outside the door."

"I think you should keep them right where you have them now, champing at the bit and not tell them anything," advised Representative Floyd Fithian (Dem-Ind.).

The March 17 meeting came when the committee was still struggling to survive after weeks of acrimony over the efforts of former chairman Henry B. Gonzalez (Dem-Tex.) to fire the committee's

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chief counsel, Richard A. Sprague. House leaders, already unhappy with the committee's slow pace in investigating the murders of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., were predicting its downfall.

With Stokes as their new chairman, committee members seemed to have been heartened by the publicity stemming from the public hearing of the day before, March 16, at which gangland leader Santo Trafficante Jr. refused to testify by invoking the Fifth Amendment and other constitutional rights.

Representative Robert W. Edgar (Dem-Pa.) proposed another public hearing that might include "something like what we did yesterday" when "we had Mr. Trafficante there and he was pleading the Fifth Amendment.

"I think we did more yesterday, even without getting factual information, simply because it focused again on the fact that we are looking into the issue," Edgar said enthusiastically.

"... I realize that, in terms of the investigative technique and issues, that is not the way to go," the Pennsylvania Democrat added, "but I guess I have some concern about the scenario and the choreography and I realize that while we do not want a circus atmosphere, we want it to be as content-filled as possible..."

In the continuing discussion, Fithian cautioned against placing too much reliance on press coverage of public hearings by the committee.

Suggestions were made for secret briefings of the House Democratic leadership and other influential members of Congress such as the members of the Rules Committee. Edgar kept suggesting a follow-up public hearing that might include a discussion of the budget

and other matters.

He said the meeting could begin with a 45-minute segment, "split between the Kennedy and King assassinations as to what direction we are going and what evidence and information we can share publicly."

Deputy Chief Counsel Robert J. Lehner, the man in charge of the King investigation, said later in the meeting he would really be hard put to hold forth in public for that long.

"I think when you talk about 45 minutes, I would have to do a little soft shoe dance in the middle of it," Lehner told the committee.

Sprague agreed that a public session on the fruits of the investigation wouldn't work because the staff would be forced to serve up "almost a rehash" of what has long been public.

That, Sprague emphasized, would amount to "not saying anything." He said that "the only things that they (the staff) can say of significance" are "things that are too raw and uncorroborated for us to be stating publicly."

It was at this point that Edgar suggested another Trafficante-style production. Moments later, Devine proposed picking out some of the "literally hundreds of undeveloped leads" and making those public in bowdlerized form.

"So we get maybe as many as ten undeveloped leads that you could get enough of it not to reveal the identify and not to distrust the

investigation," Devine said, "but let people know that, 'My God, they are onto something that is new stuff'..."

In the end, the committee, which survived its House test narrowly this week but only after Sprague resigned, simply issued a report listing some of the uncorroborated leads it is pursuing.

At the March 17 meeting, committee members also agreed that the report should say nothing "of the impediments and the financial limitations and the problem of the previous chairman (Gonzalez)."

The March 17 transcript was inadvertently released late Wednesday after the committee had authorized release of another hitherto secret transcript containing Sprague's rebuttal of various charges against him.

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