

Assassination Investigators Talk of Ousting Chairman

By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

The chairman of the House Assassinations Committee kept up his efforts yesterday to fire chief counsel Richard A. Sprague while some members of the committee began talking tentatively about trying to fire the chairman instead.

Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.), who was formally appointed chairman of the embattled investigating committee just last week, ordered Sprague's dismissal for "deceitful and divisive conduct" Thursday evening. But he was thwarted by nightfall when all 11 other members of the committee countermanded him and ordered Sprague to stay on the job.

Aides to Gonzalez said he is determined to get rid of Sprague, even to the point of refusing to sign salary

vouchers for him, no matter what the committee thinks.

At the same time, the aides said, Gonzalez is confident that once the other members "find out what the situation is, they will sustain his judgment."

According to informed sources, Gonzalez has compiled, among other things, a transcript of what he regards as insulting and misleading remarks Sprague made about him at a staff meeting Wednesday.

Ironically, it appears that Sprague, who has been roundly criticized for proposing the purchase of hidden transmitters and other questionable devices, was secretly tape-recorded as he described his disagreements with the chairman.

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A copy was obtained by Gonzalez. It apparently was the principal basis for his charge Thursday that, since their falling out earlier in the week, Sprague "has been making a consistent attempt to undermine my chairmanship and malign me personally with members of the committee staff."

"We're prepared to show that," declared Gonzalez legislative aide Kelsey Meek, who declared that Sprague has been promoting a siege mentality among the committee's 73 staffers, making himself out to be their protector and Gonzales as the villain who wants to fire them.

It was not clear just how insulting Sprague's remarks were, although one source close to Gonzalez said that the chief counsel criticized Gonzalez's plans to meet with Attorney General Griffin B. Bell without inviting Sprague himself. Gonzalez "is getting more and more out on a limb," Sprague was quoted as telling the staff.

Gonzalez met with Bell Thursday and apparently persuaded the Attorney General to cut off the committee staff's access to FBI files until a new arrangement can be worked out.

Sprague has refrained from public comment about the dispute, but it was

understood he feels justified in refusing a request by Gonzales Tuesday to prepare a list of least essential staffers who might be dismissed until a permanent budget can be obtained from the House. In refusing, Sprague told Gonzalez it would be "immoral" to fire people who have been working since January at voluntarily reduced pay.

In any case, Gonzalez will have to do some fast talking to win over his own committee. A potential showdown meeting has been scheduled for 9 a.m. Wednesday, but a member who asked not to be identified said yesterday that House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. may be asked to intervene before then.

The idea, this member said, would be to lay out the impasse with O'Neill explicitly enough to make it clear that Gonzalez—whom the Speaker appointed—ought to be removed. "If the Speaker has him (Gonzalez) continue as chairman," the member added, "there'll be serious consideration by a lot of other guys to getting off."

O'Neill spoke with Gonzalez by phone yesterday morning, but had no public comment. An aide said the Speaker still regards the dispute as "an internal committee matter."

The senior members of the commit-

tee, Richardson Preyer (D-N.C.), chairman of the President Kennedy assassination subcommittee; Del. Walter Fautroy (D-D.C.), chairman of the Martin Luther King inquiry, and Samuel Devine of Ohio, the ranking Republican, insisted in a joint public statement that "in our judgment, the committee is not in disarray."

"He knows it's stonewalling," said an aide to one of the three, "but he felt he had to put some dignity into what's going on."