

# House Cools on Assassinations Probe

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When the House Select Committee on Assassinations was handed its proposed \$5 million budget last month, it was done with a professional flair suggesting that every penny's worth had been painstakingly studied and justified.

In fact, it hadn't even been added up until a day and a half before it was presented to committee members Dec. 9 for their ritual approval. "Any cut, in my opinion, would make the task impossible," chief counsel Richard A. Sprague informed at the hearing that morning when Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio) pressed him for

a hint of where a few dollars might be saved. "No one need coax Sprague for any more hints. His budget is going to be not only willing, perhaps by more than 50 per cent. The more immediate question is whether the committee's

## News Analysis

The committee's sponsors will ask the House Rules Committee today to clear for floor action later this week a broadly worded resolution re-creating the committee. Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.), the chairman-designate, said yesterday that he simply hopes to see the resolution survive without any "crippling amendments."

Some restrictions in the name of due process seem likely. There is also talk among some members of requiring the committee to examine the existing evidence first. Its investigators have been sent to Mexico City. It has talked of leads in Portugal. But just a few blocks away, See INQUIRY, A6, Col. 5

# House Turns Cool To Proposed Probe Of Assassinations

At another point, the study said that the office's investigative work occasionally constituted "a search for targets of opportunity, rather than an opening blitz of public statements." He quickly asserted himself in an assassinations committee. "The report was highly critical of other qualities." "I'm not sure about the most skilled prosecutors in the country," but was less enthusiastic about the report's "primitiveness" and its weak and attacked its "primitive approach to budgeting practices" and its weak office was described as "chaos."

The center of contention is Sprague's methods, his judgment, his temperament. An unsettling catalogue of many of the problems involved can be found in a 2 1/2-year-old report to the Citizens Crime Commission from Sprague's Law Enforcement Assistance Administration Charles H. Rogovin under a newly elected incoming DA by congressional assistant Charles H. Rogovin under a

But despite the spreading skepticism and other gaffes. Edwards, whose subcommittee took sworn testimony in 1976 on the FBI's destruction of evidence in the Kennedy assassination case, was one of the first to express concern about the current investigation in light of Sprague's plans to buy hidden radio transmitters, polygraphs, psychological stress evaluations and other gadgets. "I think I'll go through in some modified form."

The prevailing wisdom, which could abruptly, seems to be that it is too late for the House to try to put the gap back on the bottle of conspuratorial rumors and theories about the two assassinations which were promised congressional scrutiny last September. To squelch the inquiry now, even for the best of motives, might seem a blatant cover-up.

At this point, the committee, which built up a staff of 73 before it had to stop hiring, has no official existence. The House Rules Committee is scheduled to consider the assassination panel's re-establishment Tuesday, with floor action expected later in the week. The proposed \$6.5 million budget, which is certain to be slashed, poses other questions. Described by Sprague as an exercise in sheer futility, a "bare-bones" bare-bottom minimal figure, it calls for \$1.24 million in domestic travel by its attorneys and investigators alone and \$42,900 for bringing witnesses to Washington.

Put another way, that suggests a total of 24 trips to outlying precincts by House sleuths for every witness brought back to the nation's capital to enlighten the electorate at public hearings. The budget also includes \$180,000 for overseas travel, but before traveling abroad, Weisberg and others (such as former Warren Commission lawyer David Belin) contend, "You've got to establish the basic facts of each homicide first. They haven't done it yet. They don't know what they're investigating yet."

Chapman-designate Gonzalez professes now to be fully aware that the budget he and the rest of his members endorsed just last month is unrealistic. He says he is fully prepared, once the committee is re-established, to cut the spending proposal back to the "irreducible minimum" of the changing mood. Adaptable to the changing mood, Gonzalez even scoffs at the \$1.8 million in proposed overall travel expenses. "It's inconceivable to me that I would go to anybody and say I need \$1.8 million for future travel without saying where I'm going," Gonzalez says now.

But the real question, he maintains, is the basic re-establishment of the committee, the issue expected to come before the House this week. On that score, there is suddenly a widespread ambivalence. Rep. Richard Bollin (D-Mo.) reflects the uncertainty as well as anyone. A key member of the House Rules Committee, Bolling was responsible for acquiescing the inquiry when it first came up for a hearing last spring. He opposed it in the name of the Kennedy family.

But then he was "converted" last summer on the basis of information about the King assassination process (D-D.C.) and the Congressional Black Caucus. Now Bolling says candidly, he doesn't know what to think. At this point, he said last week, I don't know what I'm going to do. I haven't had a chance to read enough to be sure of some things that may seem obvious to others."

None is being paid at present. Not the staff with a staff of 73. The year with a staff of 73. Amounts to \$84,000. According to a committee officials say that more than it spent in December. It gets a new budget to spending no first, but even then, under the rules of the House, it will be limited, until the committee must be re-established. Is any of the committee's creditors. Sprague is being paid as usual and staff director, spent himself into trouble. It got \$150,000 for a protected staff of 23 persons—shortly after it was created in September. But it wound up the year with a staff of 73.

At the national archives, there is some 40 feet of steel space loaded down with the physical evidence of the Kennedy assassination—clothing, bullet fragments, a rifle—still waiting to be tested and analyzed by the committee. "We're worse off now than if no investigation had been authorized," said author Harold Weisberg, a longstanding critic of the government's investigating both the Kennedy and King assassinations.

This committee hasn't been conducting an investigation, Weisberg charged. "It's been engaged in proving itself. It's been engaged in trying to justify an appropriation which is not only unjustified but if granted, would have been counterproductive."