

House Panel Sidesteps Firing Issue

Washington

In a rebuff to Chairman Henry B. Gonzalez, (Dem-Tex.), the House assassinations committee refused yesterday even to discuss the chairman's effort to fire chief counsel Richard B. Sprague.

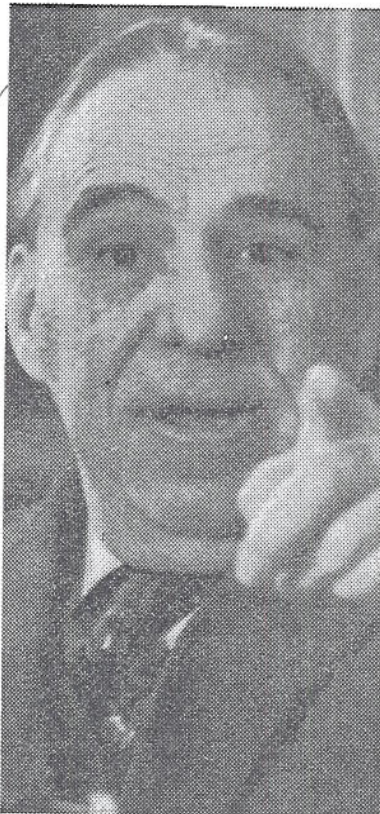
After six hours of inconclusive discussion, the committee adjourned without attempting to break a stalemate that threatens to scuttle the panel's planned investigation of the murders of President John F. Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

The committee is scheduled to meet again Monday, but there is no indication the impasse would be broken then.

The outcome yesterday left Sprague, the staff of lawyers and investigators he has assembled and the committee itself in limbo. Without the support of the other members, Gonzalez cannot get rid of Sprague; but without the approval of the chairman, the committee cannot spend any money for salaries or other expenses.

Gonzalez told reporters after the meeting that he would not resign as chairman and that under House rules he could only be removed by Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, not by a vote of the committee. A source said last night that committee members are considering asking O'Neill to remove Gonzalez.

The committee will automatically go out of business March 31 unless the House votes to extend its life. Gonzalez implied that he would



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HENRY GONZALEZ
Committee chairman

oppose continuation of the committee unless Sprague is ousted soon.

Gonzalez last week attempted to fire Sprague, a controversial Philadelphia lawyer who had planned a \$6.5 million-a-year probe intended to put to rest any questions about the Kennedy and King assassinations. But the other 11 committee members signed a letter countermanding Gonzalez order.

At its first meeting since the Sprague controversy began, Gonzalez demanded an immediate and public showdown. He said the committee should debate the charges of insubordination, which he has leveled at Sprague and vote on whether the chief counsel should remain on the payroll.

But at the suggestion of Representative Richardson Preyer (Dem-N.C.), the committee voted 8 to 1 to adjourn until Monday to provide time for private discussions of possible compromise. Gonzalez cast the only vote against the delay.

"I know we will have to resolve these matters," Preyer said. "If we can't do it as an internal matter we'll have to do it in this manner of charge and countercharge and we will have to make a choice. But I think we can take several days to see if we can resolve it."

"I would hate to see this discussed in camera (in private) when there is no need for it," Gonzalez said. "This is not a matter of national security."

Gonzalez also lashed out at Preyer personally.

"I know of your intense desire to be chairman, but for the present the speaker has appointed me as such," Gonzalez snapped.

Preyer responded, "I'm not seeking the chairmanship of this committee and I would not consider taking the chairmanship of this committee."

Following the meeting, Gonzalez read a statement accusing Sprague of fiscal mismanagement of hiring staff members at far higher salaries than they earned on previous jobs, and of attempting to usurp the authority of the committee's members.

"There were those who thought I acted precipitately last week," Gonzalez said. "All I can say is that when I found a rattlesnake on the threshold, I stomped it and answered questions later."

Sprague sat through the committee meeting without saying a word. He left before Gonzalez read the statement, but he notified reporters through an aide that he would have nothing to say about the matter.

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