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Assassination Panel Asks Funds

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Newhouse News Service

WASHINGTON — The House Select Committee on Assassinations isn't rewriting history yet. But the panel is seeking more money to continue investigating the slayings of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for another 12 months.

"I don't think we'll have any trouble getting the funds," said Chairman Louis B. Stokes (D-Ohio), who is preparing a detailed budget proposal to submit to the full House for approval after Congress reconvenes Jan. 19.

Stokes refuses to discuss what progress, if any, his staff of investigators has made since the House gave the panel \$2.5 million to spend last March 28.

At that time the panel reported it had received "new information" in both cases and had located "new witnesses" never before questioned by authorities.

Since then the panel has imposed strict new rules of secrecy on members and staff, but there has been no indication that the investigations might seriously challenge the official versions of both national tragedies: That Lee Harvey Oswald,

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acting alone, killed Kennedy, and that James Earl Ray murdered King.

Despite Stokes' optimism about continued funding for the investigations, there has always been vocal opposition in the House to the probes.

The committee had a stormy early history. The panel first was created by a vote of the House on Sept. 17, 1976, and given a lame duck chairman, Rep. Thomas Downing (D-Va.), who served only four months before retiring.

Downing named as chief counsel for the probes Richard A. Sprague, a veteran Philadelphia homicide prosecutor whose blunt and independent

style irritated members of Congress almost as much as his initial demands that the House commit \$6.5 million a year to the investigation.

When Downing retired he was replaced by Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Texas) who attempted to fire Sprague only to be blocked by a unanimous decision of all other members of the committee.

The House refused to provide funds for the committee for three months as the infighting grew bitter, and finally both Gonzalez and Sprague resigned from the committee.

Stokes was elevated to the chairmanship; a new chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, took over.