

GSA Lists Plan To Release Most Of Nixon Tapes

By Douglas Watson

Washington Post Staff Writer

The General Services Administration proposed yesterday to make public "virtually all" of former President Nixon's Watergate tape recordings and papers within three years from the start of processing.

The GSA estimated in a report to Congress that the first group of Nixon tapes and papers can be made available for researchers by the spring of 1977.

It proposed a staff of 100 people to catalogue Nixon's presidential tapes and papers, which occupy 35,000 cubic feet of space and include 42 million pages of documents and 880 reels of tape.

The agency estimated that the cost for just the three-year initial period of processing Nixon's White House tapes and papers will be \$7 million.

Its report to Congress came, as required, within 90 days of congressional enactment in December of the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act that gave the federal government permanent custody and control of Nixon's presidential tapes and papers.

Nixon has sued seeking enforcement, instead, of a prior agreement that the GSA made with him allowing him to retain title to his tapes and papers. Under this agreement access to them could be blocked by either the GSA or Nixon.

The agency noted yesterday that pending final decisions regarding the Nixon suit and others that have been filed, it has been restrained by court order from taking full custody of the Nixon materials and sorting them.

GSA Administrator Arthur F. Sampson, whose agency includes the National Archives and Records Service, said: "To process the Nixon materials at the same pace as those of former Presidents with a small staff, say 25 people, would require perhaps 12 years. Clearly, that is unacceptable.

"On the other hand, to get the materials processed within a year would require more than 300 people and might compromise archival standards and individual rights."

Sampson said the GSA plans to process the most sensitive Nixon materials first.

"In that way, we estimate that soon after the start of processing, some of the most sensitive and well-known Watergate materials can be made available to the public and that virtually all of the Watergate materials can be made available to the public within three years from the start of processing," Sampson said.

Under the presidential papers law enacted by Congress and signed by President Ford, the GSA's proposed plan for preserving and making public Nixon's White House materials can be rejected wholly or in part by either the Senate or House if they act within 90 days. Otherwise, the plan goes into effect.

Under it, the agency would make available all Nixon White House tapes and papers relating to "abuses of power" except where the release would:

- "Jeopardize the nation's security."
- "Embarrass, damage or harass living persons, but the deletion of those portions will

not distort the substantive right to fair trial."

- "Jeopardize a person's right to fair trial."

- Be contrary to "a legal or constitutional right or privilege."

The GSA report did not say exactly what the guidelines would be in deciding whether material should be kept secret because it would jeopardize national security or embarrass living persons, presumably including Nixon and his former White House associates.

It said: "Minimal restrictions will be applied to abuses of powers and broader restrictions applied to historical materials not related to abuses of powers."

In regard to the second category, the GSA proposed as well to restrict access when disclosure would compromise trade secrets, confidential financial information or police investigations, or when disclosure would constitute "a clearly unwarranted invasion of privacy."

The agency proposed to appoint a "special archivist for Nixon materials" and a panel of senior archivists to help decide what materials will be released, with decisions appealable to a three-member "presidential materials review board."

The GSA said that according to the recently enacted law, it must separate the "presidential historical materials" that the federal government will retain from "private or personal" materials of Nixon not considered historically important and other non-historical items—both categories of which will not be retained but returned to Nixon and others.