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Ford Tells Justice Department To Abide by Ruling on Wiretaps

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WASHINGTON, July 1 — President Ford has directed the Department of Justice to abide by a Federal court ruling that bars warrantless wiretaps of domestic organizations, even if foreign affairs or national security matters are involved, the White House said today.

Ron Nessen, the White House press secretary, said that Mr. Ford had instructed Attorney General Edward H. Levi to "undertake no wiretaps" that violate a decision handed down June 24 by the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia.

The court, acting in a case involving the wiretapping of headquarters of the Jewish Defense League in New York in 1970 and 1971, ruled that the executive branch must get a warrant to wiretap domestic groups that were neither agents of nor collaborators with a foreign power.

The Justice Department is still considering an appeal of the ruling to the Supreme Court. Although the Attorney General is technically bound to comply with the decision of the appellate court only in the District of Columbia, Mr. Nessen said that the President had instructed that the ruling be generally followed while the question of an appeal was pending.

The Government has asserted for years an inherent power to conduct electronic eavesdropping without a court order. The Supreme Court ruled in 1972 that court orders were needed for wiretaps involving purely domestic security matters, but left open the issue of warrantless wiretaps arising out of foreign affairs.

The effect of the ruling by the court of appeals was to require judicial approval of taps installed on domestic groups with no ties to foreign powers, even if foreign affairs were involved. The eavesdropping on the offices of the Jewish Defense League stemmed from protests by the Soviet Union over the league's activities against Soviet emigration policies.

The appeals court did not rule on warrantless wiretaps of groups or individuals suspected of spying on the United States or of being a foreign agent, but the court majority said it would have applied the ruling to such cases had the matter before it been broader in application.

Mr. Nessen told questioners at a White House news briefing that Mr. Ford would also consider the possibility of supporting legislative proposals that would require a court order for any electronic eavesdropping.