

New Tactic

Nixon May Ask Sirica to Issue Tape Summary

Washington

President Nixon's attorneys may try to persuade Judge John J. Sirica to make public the substance of the seven White House Watergate tapes, rather than just passing them on to the grand jury, White House officials said last night.

That tactic — which the officials admitted involves serious legal problems — is apparently going to be Mr. Nixon's response to rising demands from his fellow-Republicans for complete disclosure of his role in the Watergate case.

Amid demands that Mr. Nixon take steps to halt the erosion of public confidence in his leadership, the White House said the President has no plans for speeches, news conferences or appearances before congressional investigating committees.

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Deputy White House press secretary Gerald L. Warren implied that the Nixon response would come in court, and other White House sources said the preferred tactic was to ask Judge Sirica to make public the information on the tapes.

They acknowledged, however, that there are unresolved legal questions in such a procedure. Under the court of appeals ruling, Sirica is permitted to hear the tapes in private and to pass on to the grand jury such portions as he deems essential to its work.

One of the key features in the court order was that this procedure would protect the secrecy of the material on the tapes. Whether the White House could waive that secrecy unilaterally is not certain.

In essence, the new White House plan is to ask Sirica to play the role envisaged for Senator John Stennis (Dem-Miss.) in the abortive compromise the President proposed before bowing to the court order to turn over the tapes.

TAPES

Under the "Stennis compromise," a summary of the tapes, including verbatim transcripts of relevant passages, would have been authenticated by Stennis and then made public.

But, under the appellate court order which Mr. Nixon finally accepted, Sirica is empowered only to screen the tapes for the Watergate grand jury.

White House officials noted that, under this procedure, the information in the tapes — which they said would support the President's assertions of innocence in the coverup — would not be available to the public for months.

Not until after the grand jury has handed down its indictments and those named are brought to trial would prosecutors and defense attorneys be able to refer publicly to the conversations recorded on the tapes.

White House officials said that making public the substance of the tapes now would answer public suspicions about the President more effectively than any testimony he might give himself to the Senate Watergate committee — the tactic that a number of Republican and Democratic senators have suggested in recent days.

The officials did not, however, rule out such an appearance if Sirica declines to adopt the White House proposal.

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