

NIXON TAPE SHIFT MAY BRING CLASH

White House Confirms That Release of Recordings to Public Is Now in Doubt

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LAGUNA BEACH, Calif., Dec. 28 — The White House confirmed today that the release of the Presidential Watergate tapes was in doubt, and officials said privately that the tapes would not be made available to the public.

President Nixon thus appeared to be headed toward a collision with Republican officeholders who had strongly urged that he issue either the transcripts or summaries of the seven key tapes he has supplied to the special Watergate prosecutor in the hope of restoring voter confidence.

Gerald L. Warren, the deputy White House press secretary, said this morning at a news briefing that Mr. Nixon had previously made but no announced a decision to release summaries of the tapes—something the President had all but promised to do in meetings last month with Senators and Governors.

But now, Mr. Warren said, the whole subject is being "re-evaluated" by the President's staff, largely because of the playing of another tape at a Georgetown cocktail party and because of the scope of the Senate Watergate committee's recent subpoena of more than 500 tapes and documents.

Explanation Is Refused

The spokesman refused to respond when reporters pressed him to explain what connection there was between publicly releasing seven tapes that are already in the hands of the courts and the handling of material that might be given to the Senate Committee.

Unauthorized release of the material in the seven tapes, Mr. Warren insisted, "could lead to confusion in the minds of the American public and further distortion in this matter."

Why, then, he was asked several times, did the White House not release the summaries itself, and thereby make it pointless and counterproductive for enemies of the White House to leak distorted versions of their contents?

Mr. Warren repeatedly balked at answering.

Other sources said that, despite nothing in the tapes would contradict Mr. Nixon's statement that he first learned of

the Watergate cover-up last March 21, there was substantial concern at the top levels of the White House staff on that very point.

These sources suggested that the incident in which William A. Dobrovir, a lawyer, associated with Ralph Nader, played an unrelated tape at a party on Dec. 17 was being used as a cover for the decision to withhold the seven principal tapes from public scrutiny.

Secret Talks Reported

Still other sources said that the final decision to withhold theme was made Dec. 14 at a secret meeting in the Roosevelt Room at the White House attended by 10 members of the White House staff, headed by Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., the White House staff chief.

Other at the meeting were identified as Leonard Garment, the acting White House counsel; J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., a special counsel; Samuel Powers, another counsel; Patrick J. Buchanan, a speechwriter; Richard A. Moore, a troubleshooter; Bryce N. Harlow, one of the counselors; Ronald L. Ziegler, the press secretary; Diane Sawyer, one of his assistants; and Kenneth W. Clawson, the deputy director of communications for the executive branch.

No decision was made at that meeting as to how to respond to the Senate committee's subpoenas, White House officials said, although they continued to ridicule what one called "a grotesque fishing expedition." The subpoenas are not returnable until Jan. 4.

Both Mr. Warren and Melvin R. Laird, another counselor, who spoke to reporters in Washington, emphasized that there had been no decision to withhold from public release documents dealing with Mr. Nixon's role in the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation antitrust case and with political contributions by milk producers.

Leaders to Be Briefed

They will be made public, Mr. Laird said, after a briefing for Republican Congressional leaders after Mr. Nixon's return to Washington from his post-Christmas holiday at his San Clemente estate, 10 miles south of Laguna Beach.

Mr. Laird also said that he personally had grave doubts about releasing summaries of the tapes — still another indication that the negative decision had already been made.

Both Mr. Warren and Mr. Laird also denied a report, published this morning in The Washington Post, that two of Mr. Nixon's senior aides, who were not named, had lost faith in the President as a result of Watergate. Mr. Laird said that the senior staff had complete faith in the integrity of Mr. Nixon.

Mr. Laird said that he had personally talked with the 15 or so top staff members and had found no defection.