

Sirica Sets Hearing on Tapes Offer

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U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica will hold a hearing today on the White House's offer to produce the tapes of 20 conversations that have been subpoenaed for the Watergate cover-up trial.

White House special counsel James D. St. Clair offered to produce the recordings during Monday's hearing before the Supreme Court on Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski's attempts to obtain the tapes of 64 conversations, all but one of them involving President Nixon.

St. Clair said the White House was willing to turn over 20 of the tapes since it has already made edited transcripts of them public in connection with the House impeachment inquiry. The President's lawyer said these recordings could be turned over as soon as Judge Sirica "approves some method of validating the accuracy of the tapes."

The judge scheduled a hearing for 8:30 a.m. today in open court to determine the next step. He said the attorneys for the six Watergate cover-up defendants as well as White House lawyers and Watergate prosecutors have been invited to attend.

Even if agreement is reached, the Supreme Court will still have to resolve the dispute over President Nixon's claims of executive privilege for the remaining 44 conversations that Jaworski says are needed for the cover-up trial.

The trial has been set for Sept. 9. However, St. Clair has said that even if the Supreme Court upholds Judge Sirica's order calling for the tapes of all 64 conversations, it could take two months to screen them for legally privileged material and prepare them for trial. In addition, the White House has said Mr. Nixon has not yet decided whether he would comply with a Supreme Court decision requiring him to surrender the recordings still in dispute.