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Sirica Bars Release of Nixon Tapes

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U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica yesterday refused to release for public broadcast the White House tape recordings introduced as evidence in the Watergate cover-up trial.

Sirica said there were "no compelling reasons" to release the tapes while the convictions of four former White House and Nixon campaign aides were on appeal. His ruling does not block a request for release of the tapes from being made when the appeal of those convictions is completed.

"Absent some compelling reason, the court should not take any action which carries the risk of causing possible prejudice to the rights of the defendants should a retrial be necessary," Sirica said.

Several networks and at least one recording company had asked that the tapes introduced as evidence at the trial be made public. U.S. District court Judge Gerhard A. Gesell ruled in December there were no legal obstacles to making the tapes public, but early this year refused to accept a network plan for the release and transferred the case to Sirica.

Citing the "sensitive nature of the presidential tapes," Sirica said "marketing of the tapes would probably involve mass merchandising techniques designed to generate sales."

"It is further implied that the tape copies would be put to untold varieties of inappropriate and scandalous uses," Sirica added.

"Thus, it appears to the court that the rights of the appellants in the criminal case (and many others) might be seriously and permanently damaged as a result of granting the applicants' request for immediate release of the tapes," Sirica said.

None of the defendants had opposed the release of the tapes, nor did the Watergate special prosecutor's office. The only opposition came from former President Nixon's attorneys.