Those Nixon Tapes

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THE PUBLIC has the mistaken impression that Jimmy Carter, once he's installed in the White House, will be able to release Richard Nixon's tapes and records. They contain many dark secrets that still hang over the Nixon years.

But our sources say it will take at least five years, even with favorable court rulings, to break loose the controversial tapes and letters. Carter will have little, if anything, to say about it.

Some 900 rolls of tapes, containing the conversations of Nixon and his aides inside the Oval Office, remain under court seal.

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CONGRESS has already enacted special legislation, giving the government control of the Nixon material. But the former President has successfully tied up their release in the courts.

The most sensitive papers and all the tapes, meanwhile, are stored in the Executive Office Building adjoining the White House. The bulk of the material is kept under guard in the General Services Administration's warehouse in Suitland, Md.

The Supreme Court, if it agrees with a lower court ruling, could uphold Congress in a few weeks. Or the Supreme Court may ask for oral arguments and hold off a ruling until next year.

Even if the Supreme Court rules against Nixon, he can file a second suit on constitutional grounds and start the whole process over. This would extend the secrecy at least until the fall of 1978.

Once the courts clear the way, GSA is drafting regulations that would permit the release of almost everything contained in the tapes and some 36 million pieces of papers. The Archives plans to assign 100 workers to do the cataloguing. But this exhaustive chore would take until about 1981.

Eventually, the Nixon papers and tapes will be open to the public, the courts willing, in 11 different cities.

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WATCH ON WASTE: The Defense Department could save hundreds of thousands of dollars simply by consolidating its data processing systems in the Far East. This is the conclusion of the General Accounting Office, which has just submitted its unpublished findings to the Pentagon.

Consolidating the computer facilities in Hawaii alone, states the report, would save an estimated $110,600.

The Navy operates two separate data systems for security reasons. One handles classified data from Top Secret on down; the other handles data more sensitive than Top Secret. Apparently, all it would take to combine the two would be to issue a few more security clearances.