

WXPost
AUG 3 1973

Postponement Of Democrats' Civil Suit Eyed

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U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica strongly hinted yesterday that he will order an indefinite postponement of the Democrats' civil suit if, as expected, more indictments are returned in the Watergate case.

Such a ruling could delay the civil suit proceedings as much as two years, according to Maurice R. Dunie, a lawyer for the Democratic National Committee, but probably not prohibit an out-of-court settlement of the \$6.4 million invasion-of-privacy suit against the Watergate conspirators and officials of the Committee to Re-elect the President.

Dunie said there are no current negotiations on a possible settlement of the suit. He said a Washington Post report this week that a settlement is being considered again is not true.

Sirica, the Watergate trial judge, made the suggestion about the civil suit delay at a hearing in which he also refused to turn over grand jury testimony on the Watergate case and related investigations to the Democrats so that they could collect information for their suit.

Later, in his chambers, Sirica told a reporter, "I think it would be the only fair thing to wait (for the civil trial) if there is a criminal trial. We don't know whether there will be one yet."

Sirica said that to hold the civil trial before any criminal case would create more publicity and thus might damage the rights of defendants to a fair trial.

The civil case is being heard by U.S. District Court Judge Charles R. Richey, but Sirica said that as chief judge he thinks he has the power to order the halt in the civil proceedings.

The Democrats have taken depositions from a number of important Watergate figures and their state-



JOHN J. SIRICA
... hints trial delay

ments have helped fill information gaps in the puzzle, surrounding the burglary and bugging of Democratic headquarters at the Watergate in June, 1972.

Dunie told a reporter that perhaps Democratic lawyers could continue to take depositions in the case if they were sealed by the court.

Sirica said Dunie had not shown any "compelling necessity" for release of the grand jury testimony. Sirica did rule that the Democrats could go ahead and take depositions from convicted Watergate conspirators Virgilio R. Gonzalez, Eugenio R. Martinez, Bernard L. Barker, Frank A. Sturgis, E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, if they are willing. The seventh conspirator, James W. McCord, has already given a deposition.

Hunt's lawyer, William O. Bittman, told Sirica he opposed Hunt's giving a deposition because he would not have immunity from prosecution concerning civil suit testimony, unlike testimony Hunt gave before the Watergate grand jury, the Senate Watergate committee and a Los Angeles grand jury.