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White House Wins Delay In Tape Suit

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U.S. District Chief Judge John J. Sirica yesterday gave the White House until Sept. 24 to respond to a suit filed by the Senate Watergate committee in its attempts to get tapes of White House conversations concerning the Watergate incident.

The White House asked for the delay so it would have adequate time to prepare answers to issues raised in the suit.

The committee had asked that the case be expedited in the hope that it might reach the Supreme Court at the same time a similar legal effort by Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox to get the tapes reach that Court.

In ruling that the White House "is not dragging its feet," Sirica also indicated that he felt the courts may not even have the authority to rule on the committee's attempt to get the tapes.

It was the first time that Sirica had indicated the jurisdictional issue raised by the White House may be such a major issue in the case that it could result in the case being thrown out. Such attempts by a person or agency being sued to get the case thrown out because of lack of jurisdiction are routine in civil suits, and are usually ruled on quickly.

Committee counsel Samuel Dash said the schedule speed-up was even more necessary for the committee than for the special prosecutor, because it plans on ending its hearings by Nov. 1. The grand jury hearing the Watergate case does not go out of service until the first week in December.

Dash said the Senate committee has a legislative mandate to bring out all the facts related to the Watergate scandal before the public.

The tapes, the existence of which he pointed out was discovered during a Senate hearing, also are necessary to resolve major discrepancies in testimony.

Attorneys for the White House replied that the request for a delay until Sept. 24 from the committee-requested date of Sept. 12 was "not an attempt to weigh the balancing of urgencies" between the legislative and executive branches of government.

Instead, they said that White House attempts to focus its energies on the already-expedited schedule in the prosecutor's attempts to get the tapes are such that it could not give adequate time and manpower to answering the Senate committee's suit.

Judge Sirica agreed with the White House counsel, saying the Court "is determined not to be rushed into a half-baked job."