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Peace Corps Director Taped Talk With Her Deputy Last Summer

By Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer

Peace Corps Director Loret M. Ruppe secretly tape-recorded her deputy, Edward A. Curran, during a meeting last summer in which Ruppe repeatedly questioned Curran about their continuing difficulties in getting along.

Agency employes on both sides of the personal and ideological dispute say that Ruppe apparently was trying to trap Curran into making embarrassing or disloyal statements that Ruppe could use to convince her allies in the White House that Curran should be fired.

A Peace Corps spokesman acknowledged that it was a violation of agency rules for Ruppe to have taped her conversation secretly with Curran last July 12. Ruppe recorded the discussion by using a dictating machine that was inside or on top of her desk, and later had part of the tape erased, according to agency sources.

The incident was reviewed by White House counsel Fred F. Fielding. His office reportedly found that the taping violated agency regulations but was not illegal and should be handled as a personnel dispute.

This is the second recent controversy over taping in the Reagan administration. Charles Z. Wick, director of the U.S. Information Agency, has acknowledged that he recorded telephone conversations with a number of friends and public officials, sometimes without telling his callers he was doing so.

Ruppe requested the July meeting after she stripped Curran of most of his responsibilities—including the right to serve as acting director in her absence—only to be told in writing by the White House that she had no authority to do that to Curran, a presidential appointee.

Ruppe declined to answer questions about the

incident, but Peace Corps spokesman Stanley Schrager issued the following statement.

"A single taping occurrence took place last July as Mrs. Ruppe was leaving the country for an extended time and felt it advisable to ensure a record of the final meeting with her deputy prior to her departure. This taping occurrence dealt with a complicated internal personnel matter.

"This incident was reviewed by agency counsel, who determined that there was no violation of federal law. Upon Mrs. Ruppe's return, however, she was apprised that it was against agency policy."

Curran declined to comment on the matter.

The taping incident brought to a head the increasing tensions between Ruppe, a moderate Republican and former Michigan chairman of George Bush's 1980 presidential campaign, and Curran, a conservative and former headmaster at Washington's National Cathedral School.

Ruppe, the wife of former representative Philip Ruppe (R-Mich.), had no previous professional experience when she took over the Peace Corps in early 1981. The White House personnel office pushed Curran for the agency's No. 2 job when it became vacant in mid-1982, although he clearly was not Ruppe's choice.

Curran resigned as director of the National Institute of Education in June, 1982. He had a falling out with Education Secretary T.H. Bell after writing to President Reagan to urge that the institute be abolished as a waste of money.

Several Peace Corps officials privately questioned whether Ruppe may have taped additional conversations with Curran or other employes. At one time, sources said, both Curran and the White House had tapes made by Ruppe, but it is not clear whether these were copies of the same conversation.

The July 12 taping incident was first reported

by The Washington Times last summer, but attracted little attention.

According to Peace Corps sources, Ruppe summoned Curran to the meeting after Curran's White House supporters forced her to rescind the order that delegated most of Curran's duties to another aide. With the dictating machine running, Ruppe told Curran she wanted to air their differences and pressed him to outline his complaints, the sources said.

Later that morning, according to sources, Curran and an aide heard Curran's voice emanating from behind Ruppe's closed office door. They said Curran stormed in, discovered that he had been taped and demanded and received the tape, which had been partly erased.

"It's like the old Nixon days around here," one agency official said.

Another Peace Corps official noted that Ruppe and Curran both "have friends at the White House. Ruppe felt it necessary to document something about where her deputy stood on these issues and whether he was cooperating or not."

Ruppe has given Curran few assignments and has excluded him from most key meetings since the White House ordered his authority restored, officials said.

In one case, sources said, Ruppe ordered her inter-American regional director, Luis del Rio, not to give Curran information on the agency's policy toward the eastern Caribbean island of Grenada or to notify him of meetings about whether the agency should send volunteers back to Grenada, which was invaded by U.S. forces on Oct. 25. Sources said del Rio acknowledged the order to Curran while Curran was serving as acting director.

Ruppe also has fired or tried to fire several agency employes viewed as loyal to Curran, sources said.



LORET M. RUPPE

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