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Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): News Article 07

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Peace Corps’ Ruppe and the bugging of Curran

No sooner had the White House ordered that Peace Corps’ Ruppe to reinstate her deputy director to his full powers than the feisty Peace Corps director was in serious trouble again — this time over an illegal bugging incident.

For Edward A. Curran, the agency’s scholarly, soft-spoken deputy, the secret taping episode represented one more example of Mrs. Ruppe’s repeated attempts to get him kicked out of the Peace Corps.

The latest twist in the Ruppe-Curran power struggle began after Ruppe was summoned to the White House and was bluntly ordered to restore Curran’s full responsibilities as the agency’s No. 2 official.

Ruppe was given her marching orders at a July 8 meeting with Craig Fuller, President Reagan’s secretary to the Cabinet, and John S. Herrington, White House personnel director.

As I first disclosed on June 20, Ruppe wrongly blamed Curran for a rash of agency leaks to the media and angrily stripped him of his office staff, job duties, and even his responsibility as acting director in her absence.

With a Justice Department memorandum before them which concluded that she had acted illegally, Fuller and Herrington told Ruppe she had no choice but to get along with her deputy director.

Curran was away on vacation at the time, but when he returned to work the following week, he and Ruppe held a reconciliation meeting on Tuesday, July 12, in her office.

Ruppe told Curran that she was in the process of redrafting his job description. She called their reconciliation “our new beginning.”

Curran thought there was something strange, however, about some of the remarks Ruppe repeatedly made during their bury-the-hatchet meeting. At several points in the meeting she criticized Curran’s “lack of loyalty” and his “insubordination” — charges that Curran quickly denied, saying he was guilty of neither.

Shortly after the meeting, Curran returned unexpectedly to Ruppe’s office. As he approached her office with a secretary, he was surprised to hear his own voice coming from the room. He knocked, immediately entered, and saw Ruppe with her executive assistant, David Scotton, and a tape recorder.

Momentarily speechless, Ruppe and Scotton didn’t know what to say. Curran, incredulous that Ruppe would covertly tape her conversation with him, grabbed the recorder and walked out of the office.

Later, he took out the cassette and returned the empty machine to her office. On the tape, according to knowledgeable sources, were at least 10 minutes of the conversation he had had just minutes earlier with Ruppe.

A legal opinion from the Peace Corps’ general counsel, which Curran demanded, flatly states that agency officials cannot record conversations they have with anyone in the course of their duties.

In fact, Peace Corps regulations published in the Federal Register on Oct. 5, 1978, say, “No regular or special employee may record by electronic or other device any telephone or other conversation."

The regulation also specifies that any violation of this prohibition “may be cause for disciplinary action” and “may also entail penalties provided by law.”

Whether Curran will press charges against Ruppe for the illicit tape recording of their meeting is uncertain at this point.

What is clear to Curran and to his supporters is that Ruppe seems willing to go to any length to trap Curran into saying or doing something that will get him removed from the agency.

From the beginning, the Ruppe-Curran struggle has been a clash between two sharply different political philosophies:

Ruppe, liberal and distinctly non-Reaganite in her political views, has worked closely with Democrats who oppose Ronald Reagan’s foreign-policy agenda.

Curran, deeply conservative and a veteran Reaganite, thinks the president’s philosophy should be reflected in the Peace Corps programs.

Meanwhile, insiders say that Ruppe has still not fully restored Curran’s duties as deputy director, suggesting that she continues to stubbornly defy the White House and the president’s will.