

“You Stay Here Until I Tell You to Leave”

Interviewee: Max Friedersdorf

Interviewer: Russell L. Riley

Interview Date: October 24, 2002

Project: Ronald Reagan Oral History Project

President Ronald Reagan was the victim of an assassination attempt on March 30, 1981. Max Friedersdorf, Reagan’s assistant for legislative affairs, recalls that day and his role at the hospital managing congresspeople who wanted to see the President. Reagan was in the intensive care unit (ICU) for several days, and Friedersdorf stayed until Reagan left the ICU.

Max Friedersdorf: About the middle of the day I got a call from [James A.] Jim Baker [III] over at the hospital and he said, “Get over here.”

I went over to GW Hospital [George Washington University Hospital], and went up to the President’s [Ronald Reagan’s] room, and Jim was outside the room with Mrs. [Nancy] Reagan and her Secret Service agent there and Jim said, “Max, I want you to stay here until I tell you to leave.” I didn’t understand. Mrs. Reagan was all upset, of course. He said that Senator [Strom] Thurmond had come over to the hospital and had talked his way in, past the lobby, up to the President’s room—he’s in intensive care, tubes coming out of his nose and his throat, tubes in his arms and everything— and said that Strom Thurmond had talked his way past the Secret Service into his room and Mrs. Reagan was outraged, distraught. She couldn’t believe her eyes.

He said, “You know, those guys are crazy. They come over here trying to get a picture in front of the hospital and trying to talk to the President when he may be on his deathbed. You stay here until I tell you to leave. If any Congressman or Senator comes around here, make sure the Secret Service doesn’t let anybody up, even on this floor.” So I stayed there for about three days, four days, until he came out of intensive care.

Riley: Stayed there around the clock?

Friedersdorf: No, I went home and went to bed about nine or ten o’clock at night and came back—

Riley: Did somebody take your post while you were asleep?

Friedersdorf: I don’t know what happened then, nobody came from the White House, but I think they lock down the place. I’d come back in the morning and stay during the day, and

after about the third or fourth day Jim called and said, “Max, the doctors think that he could have visitors now. The first one we’re going to honor is Tip O’Neill. So Tip will be down there this morning. Disregard my orders, you let him in.”

Riley: Did you have to ward anybody else off during those three days?

Friedersdorf: Nobody got to the second floor that I know of after that. I think the Secret Service was properly chastised and I don’t think my presence was necessary, but Jim Baker was not taking any chances, because some of those guys are pretty persuasive. They come down there and flash their Senate credentials—that’s what Thurmond did. So anyway, Tip came down—

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So Tip came down, he did go in, and it was rather poignant. I stayed in the room. Mrs. Reagan, I think she slipped out. I don’t think she was in there. But Tip got down on his knees next to the bed and said a prayer for the President and he held his hand and kissed him and they said a prayer together. One about, what is it? Walking by still waters, the psalm—

Riley: The 23rd Psalm.

Friedersdorf: The 23rd Psalm. The Speaker stayed there quite a while. They never talked too much. I just heard him say the prayer, then I heard him say, “God bless you, Mr. President. We’re all praying for you.” The Speaker was crying. The President still, I think, was a little, he was obviously sedated, but I think he knew it was the Speaker, because he said, “I appreciate you coming down, Tip.” He held his hand, sat there by the bed and held his hand for a long—

End of excerpt.

Interview with Max Friedersdorf, October 24–25, 2002, Ronald Reagan Presidential Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia. URL: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/max-friedersdorf-oral-history>