INTERVIEW WITH MAX FRIEDERSDORF

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Knott: This is a Ronald Reagan Oral History project interview with Max Friedersdorf, and we’re delighted that you’re with us today. We’ve already talked a little bit about the ground rules and your right to edit the transcript and to put whatever stipulations that you see fit on the final product, so I think you understand. The point is to provide for the permanent record a deeper understanding of the Reagan Presidency and Ronald Reagan himself, and we know that you were a principal player in that administration. Whatever insights you can share with us would be greatly appreciated, not only by us but particularly by future generations, so that’s the reason we’re here today.

Friedersdorf: I thought that the list of questions that Darby put in the back of the book were right on the point of situations where I would be. We don’t want to talk about my career, we want to talk about Reagan’s career, and those were things where I had the most contact with him. I thought those were excellent questions.

Knott: Perhaps the best place to start is if we could take you back—one of the things we like to do is ask our respondents how they began their career in politics. We know that you initially started out as a journalist and then you ended up on the staff of Congressman—could you pronounce that name for us?

Friedersdorf: Roudebush. R-o-u-d-e-b-u-s-h, Richard L.

Knott: Tell us how you made that transition, how that came about, and how you began a very long and distinguished career in politics.

Friedersdorf: Well, I graduated from Franklin College in journalism and started working on newspapers, Franklin Evening Star in my home town of Franklin, Indiana. Then I went to the Louisville Times and I was a police reporter and started writing some politics at the Louisville Times. Then after a year I came back to the Indianapolis News. I was there for about five years, covering courthouse, the statehouse, and the legislature, and started covering politics, writing about the state legislature and the Governor’s race and the city races and all that, and I got very, very involved and interested in politics.
I went to the Chicago Daily News briefly and I was a night-beat reporter up there covering fires, triple-ax murders, and city morgue. I really wasn’t into Chicago that much so I had an offer to come back to the Indianapolis News covering exclusively politics, the statehouse, and that’s where I got my big opportunity. I was covering the statehouse during the election of 1960 when former Vice President [Richard] Nixon was defeated by John Kennedy and there was a freshman Congressman elected in the sixth Indiana district named Richard L. Roudebush. The Governor’s press secretary told me one day after the election that Congressman-elect Roudebush was looking for an administrative assistant to go to Washington.

I had wanted to get to Washington in a newspaper capacity and had written the Washington Post and at that time the Washington Star and there was a third tabloid there, I believe it was the Daily News, and got some nice letters back but no job offer. So I had an interview with Congressman-elect Roudebush. We had lunch and he called me the next day and offered me the job as administrative assistant on his staff and we went down to Washington on New Year’s Day, January 1961.

I worked for Congressman Roudebush for ten years and then he was defeated in a Senate race. But I had left during the campaign because of an attempt to get the nomination for his seat, which I lost in a 12-man race. Still regret that, but one door closes, another one opens. After I came back to Washington after that Senate race, I got a call from Don Rumsfeld. He was now head of OEO, Office of Economic Opportunity, under Nixon and wanted to know if I was interested in the congressional relations position at OEO and of course I was. I joined Rumsfeld at OEO. Frank Carlucci was the deputy, Dick Cheney was Rumsfeld’s personal assistant. It opened a lot of doors; I met a lot of people who went on to bigger and better things.

After about a year at OEO, I got a call from Bill Timmons at the White House to see if I was interested in a congressional relations job on the White House staff. I said, “When do I start?” and I went to work the next morning over at the White House. When I was in college I majored in journalism, minored in political science, so I’d always had an eye on politics, but it’s getting the right breaks and meeting the right people at the right time.

Riley: Franklin is where in Indiana?

Friedersdorf: Franklin, Indiana is 20 miles south of Indianapolis. It’s a small liberal arts college with very good journalism and pre-law, and at that time it had a good history department. Indiana is absolutely loaded with denominational schools. It was a Baptist school and I’m a Presbyterian, but they took me in. And the Baptists still had morning—I digress here—

Riley: That’s okay, this is interesting.

Friedersdorf: Franklin College at that time—those colleges were very religious and they still had morning chapel and we all had to go to chapel every morning. But you know, that doesn’t hurt you. It probably helped a little.

Riley: Maybe explains some of those breaks you got later.
Friedersdorf: I don’t think they do that any more, but Hanover College is Presbyterian, Indiana Central is Seventh Day Adventist, of course Notre Dame is Catholic. I think the schools were mostly started by religious groups in the Midwest.

Riley: Just out of curiosity, the papers that you’d worked for, were any of those [Eugene C.] Pulliam papers?

Friedersdorf: The Indianapolis News was the afternoon Pulliam paper. The Indianapolis Star was the morning paper, and I got to know Mr. Pulliam very well. He owned the papers. He owns the Phoenix Arizona Republic and the Phoenix, I think, Gazette. He owned the Fort Wayne papers, he owned papers all over Indiana and radio stations and television stations. He’d started out with a little paper in Lebanon, Indiana, and built that empire. During my career in Indianapolis and later on, some of the reporters would bounce back between Phoenix and Indianapolis and so forth, but I never chose to leave Indiana.

Also you know, Dan Quayle was his nephew and I got to know Dan. Dan was a student at, let me see, I think he went to DePauw University.

Riley: Yes.

Friedersdorf: And so I knew him when he was a young Republican.

Riley: Can you tell us a little bit about what it was like working for a Republican member of the House in the 1960s during a period of time when there was an awful lot of landmark legislation being introduced and passed, usually associated with [John] Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Anything that stands out in your mind?

Friedersdorf: Well, we were in the minority. Kennedy had come in, a very popular President, and Lyndon Johnson, and things were a little bit of a loggerhead. I think that Kennedy wasn’t so successful in moving his legislation. Southern Democrats and of course the majority of Republicans were opposing those programs. He did get some civil rights through, but when the assassination happened—you know, history is a funny thing. I think [Barry] Goldwater at the time was moving up in the polls. Goldwater would have been a formidable candidate for Kennedy, but once Kennedy was killed, the country was in such shock and trauma that Lyndon Johnson, you know whoever was in that office, everybody was going to support, and so he was able to get through all those Great Society programs which passed overwhelmingly. The ’64 Johnson push—I don’t think there was such a rush of legislation until really the first year of the Reagan administration, and Vietnam hadn’t started to bite yet. So he had really, really total control of Congress.

From a personal standpoint, we were very, very fortunate because as a freshman Congressman you really get the dregs of committee assignment, and we wanted Appropriations, we wanted this, we wanted that. We wanted Ways and Means. We couldn’t get any of that, being a Republican, a freshman. So they appointed my Congressman to the House Science and Astronautics Committee, Manned Space Flight Subcommittee.
Riley: How about that.

Friedersdorf: John Glenn, Alan Shepard—we were on the front page of the Indiana papers, standing next to the astronauts. We would go down to Cape Canaveral for every shot. The Congressman had fantastic entrée with the astronauts, so it helped us politically. And the Chairman of the committee was [Olin] “Tiger” Teague, the great World War II hero from Texas. Well, he was a Democrat of course, but my boss had been National Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars before he got into Congress, was a bosom buddy of Tiger Teague, even though—Tiger and he knew each other through Veterans’ Days and Tiger was a big rod in the VFW, so we got all these juicy assignments.

We got tickets to all of Mrs. [John] Kennedy’s soirees and it was a pretty heady time for a Republican.

Riley: I guess so, and a young Republican aide at the same time.

Friedersdorf: Yes, I got to meet Johnson, I got to meet Kennedy. They always had a “gym dinner” they called it. It wasn’t really a gym dinner, they had it in the House Longworth cafeteria, and they’d always invite the President up and all the House members would meet him. Roudebush was down there and his wife and family never came to Washington, so I was always his “spouse” and I got to go to all these things. He introduced me to Kennedy and Johnson. I almost—when I took that job in Washington, I went to see Mr. Pulliam. I was really afraid, physically afraid, mentally afraid, career afraid, to go with a freshman Congressman. But I knew it was the right thing to do. I went to see Mr. Pulliam to tell him I was leaving and going to Washington.

He said, “Why are you going to Washington?” I said, “Well, I have a job with a freshman Congressman, Dick Roudebush.” And Mr. Pulliam said, “Max, you’re making a terrible mistake. Those freshmen Congressmen down there—he’ll probably get beaten in two years and you’ll be back here looking for a job.” I said, “Well, if I do, Mr. Pulliam, I hope you’ll hire me back.”

Riley: Did you get any promises?

Friedersdorf: I never let him forget that. Whenever I saw him I’d say, “So I stayed in Washington the rest of my life.” But you’ve got to take the chance when you get it.

Knott: What kind of an atmosphere was there in Congress during the 1960s as far as collegiality, particularly across the aisle? Can you compare it to what you saw later in your career?

Friedersdorf: Stephen, I don’t think it was as near as partisan. I got angry one time at a Democratic colleague of my boss’ over a vote and Congressman Roudebush told me, “Max, we’re not running against anybody down here. We have to be reelected in Indiana. So these members are all voting their district. You cannot get upset when somebody doesn’t vote the way you think they should.”
I never forgot that. But we were next door, we were neighbors with a lot of Democrats, and I just don’t think there was a bitterness. I saw where L. [Lawrence] H. Fountain died the other day, the old Congressman from North Carolina. He was one of our closest friends, colleagues. There was, I’d say, more of a collegiality than there is now, and even when I was still there during the Nixon, Ford, Reagan years.

Riley: You think that was because of maybe a greater sense of community in Washington? My assumption is that you didn’t take every weekend and go back to the district then the way that they did later, and that you’re developing more of a community in Washington, apart from your district, than people do later.

Friedersdorf: One thing back then too, you have to remember, just a very few people ran Congress. Sam Rayburn was still Speaker. You had people like Senator [Robert] Byrd of Virginia on the Senate side. The old chairman system was still in effect. Remember Judge [Howard Worth] Smith from Virginia. I mean, he was the most power—he and Richard Russell, and people like that. They were revered by both Republicans and Democrats and they, probably ten or twelve people, ran the whole Congress.

Well, once they broke the committee system, and you started having chairmen elected by the committee, it seemed to splinter the cohesiveness. Everybody became an independent more or less. They trashed a lot of the old chairmen. At the time it was probably a good thing, there was too much power in the hands of too few people, but it destroyed—I think it made it more partisan. You had people bickering, even Democrats among Democrats, and of course when we got in power, among Republicans.

Washington was a smaller city, the sessions weren’t as long. My boss did start within a term or two going back practically every weekend. He would fly from National to Indianapolis on Thursday night or Friday morning, come back on Sunday night or Monday morning.

Riley: So this would have been by the mid-60s. Was he feeling vulnerable politically at the time?

Friedersdorf: We had a very marginal district and we were redistricted three times. We started out in the western part of Indiana. Our district ran from Indianapolis to Terre Haute and we won election and re-election twice there. Then the Democrats took over the Indiana legislature in the landslide of ’64. Johnson brought in the first Democratic legislature in Indiana since the Civil War. So they redistricted all the Republicans and they threw us into a district that instead of being from Indianapolis to the Illinois line, we were now Indianapolis to the Ohio line, with only one county left. Our opponent had nine counties. So we had to go back. We lived back there. And we won that in a very close primary. It was very bitter and we won.

Then two years later we were redistricted and they ran our district from Indianapolis north almost to Michigan. So we had to fight an entirely new district. And the Democrats were doing that all over our state. But see, Johnson brought in, if you recall, in that landslide of ’64, he brought in I think 60 or 70 new Democrats in the House—
Riley: Was Congressman Roudebush involved in presidential politics at all in terms of actively supporting Republican candidates? Did he back Nixon in '68 or was he supportive of somebody else? Was he a Goldwater supporter in '64 or somebody else, or was it that marginal to what he was doing?

Friedersdorf: He supported Goldwater in '64 and Goldwater—I’m trying to remember—I think Goldwater carried about two states and Indiana might have been one. I think he carried Arizona and one other state. But we worked hard for Goldwater. My wife was precinct committeeman in Alexandria, Virginia, and we lived in a very liberal neighborhood, Hollin Hills, which you may know, and a lot of federal workers there, and they used to tear the Goldwater stickers off our kids’ bicycles. She’d go knock on a door and try to leave Goldwater literature and they’d slam the door in her face, but—I digress again. But in Indiana, Goldwater, did run a good race even though it was hopeless after the assassination.

Then in ’68 Roudebush was a big supporter of Nixon, and Nixon came to Indiana a couple of times. He’d always been very popular in Indiana, Nixon. His mother came from southern Indiana. He had a soft spot for Indiana and he always carried Indiana by big margins.

Knott: Could you talk a little bit about your own race for Congress, in 1970, I believe? What did you learn from that experience, what may have surprised you?

Friedersdorf: What happened was that Roudebush announced for the Senate. He had been serving five terms, he was a very popular Congressman and the fact that we’d been redistricted all over the state, we had constituents built up by then. We had represented over a third of the state by then. He was a very logical candidate. He had opposition from the Lieutenant Governor and a couple of other politicians but Indiana chose its nominee by state convention—they still do.

We went to the state convention in Indianapolis, I think it was in June, and Congressman Roudebush was nominated on the Republican ticket for the United States Senate. His opponent would be incumbent Vance Hartke. That left a vacancy in the congressional nomination for his seat because he had already been nominated. Most states fill that by special election. Under Indiana election law, it’s filled by the 12 chairmen of the various counties, the Republican 12 chairmen, so it’s like a caucus. So I asked Congressman Roudebush, if I ran would he support me, and he said, “Yes, go for it.”

So I started going around to all the counties and calling on the county chairmen. Unbeknownst to me, Congressman Roudebush had been pressured by the district chairman and the state chairman to support Bud [Elwood] Hillis, who was a county chairman from Kokomo, Indiana. That sort of cut the ground out from under me and in the caucus I lost.

There were about 12 people in the race; it was wide open. So I was pretty bitter because Roudebush had promised me that he would support me and they forced him to switch in support of Hillis. We never had words over it or anything, but I just felt betrayed, and I told the Congressman and, of course, he was in the Senate race then. I said I didn’t think I could put my heart in his Senate race. The bond had been broken.
I came back to Washington and resigned from his staff, and I went over to Rehoboth Beach for about two weeks and I was pretty dejected of course. I came back and you know, things always work out for the best. I got back and another Congressman from Indiana, Earl Landgrebe, who was to the right of Attila the Hun and a real, real—I mean, I liked Earl, he voted right, but he was so conservative, a little far out even for me. I didn’t have a job and I told Earl I’d take it and within a few days I got a call from Don Rumsfeld and it was like, good morning America, would you come down to OEO? So I went down to OEO and started working for Rumsfeld.

Knott: Do you know how Rumsfeld found out about you?

Friedersdorf: Well, it’s the old boy network. When Rumsfeld came down as a freshman Congressman, I had been working for Roudebush and we had a congressional secretary softball team, which Rumsfeld played on because he had been a former staffer. We used him as a ringer even though he was a Congressman then.

Knott: He was that good?

Friedersdorf: He was a damn good shortstop. And we played the D.C. firemen, D.C. police. We played the Senate side. We really had a good team and Don and I were buddies on the softball team.

Riley: You didn’t tell us what position you played.

Friedersdorf: I played first base. And we had some really, really good ballplayers on there. We just kept Rumsfeld in the lineup because we needed him and he loved to play. So he knew me and he knew what was happening. He knew that I’d sort of been “acey duced” out in Indiana on that race and he knew that I was probably available. I went down there and talked to him and Cheney, and I started within a day or two in congressional relations. I really enjoyed that because Rumsfeld is a super guy to work for, so bright. And Cheney, you could see—Cheney had been a staff person too, I knew him on the Hill. He had worked for that young Congressman from Wisconsin who had a heart attack and died at a very young age. Bill Steiger, handsome young guy. But that’s how I knew Rumsfeld.

Morrisroe: Before we leave the discussion of Congress, maybe you could speak if you had any experience during your tenure as an administrative assistant with the then White House congressional liaison.

Friedersdorf: Well, I got to know Bryce Harlow very well. Bryce Harlow, of course, was President [Dwight] Eisenhower’s congressional relations majordomo, and then when Nixon came in, Bryce didn’t want to go back full-time. I think he did work full time for a while, but he had a job with Proctor and Gamble. President Nixon used him for special projects and he was connected with the White House. So I got to know him almost immediately when I went to Washington.
Morrisroe: What lessons were learned from their congressional liaison operation, either positive or negative, that you later—

Friedersdorf: Well Bryce Harlow is everybody’s hero. Bryce Harlow was the absolute epitome on congressional service, on following up on correspondence. He returned all calls the same day. He would give it the college try even if he couldn’t produce. I remember one time we were at a rally during a really tough campaign, probably in ’66 or ’68. We were in this auditorium, Congressman Roudebush was giving a speech that night and some issue came up at the table before and Roude bush said, “See if you can get a hold of Bryce, I need an answer for this.” This was at 8 o’clock at night in the cornfields of Indiana.

I got on the phone, got hold of the White House switchboard, they got Bryce and they called us back there, right in the middle of a campaign with an answer. And I thought, You know, I could see why the guy is so well respected. He’s a bulldog on things. Even when I was in the White House, Bryce, when he retired, moved up to Harper’s Ferry, but he was like an old fire horse. I remember whenever we’d have a tight vote during the Reagan years and during the Ford and Nixon years, and something really knotty would be going on, you’d get a call from Bryce and he’d say, “You know, maybe you ought to try this or that.” Or I would call him. I stayed in contact with him for the whole time I was in congressional relations.

Knott: We have done countless interviews where the name Bryce Harlow comes up. He seems to have had influence over so many different individuals.

Friedersdorf: Well he was just a great human being in addition to being—I think he is really the father of the modern congressional—I don’t think there was really a congressional relations operation formalized until Bryce Harlow came along.

Knott: So, when you go over to OEO and you’re working for Don Rumsfeld, my recollection was that the Nixon administration had originally wanted to shut this office down. Is that correct?

Friedersdorf: Yes.

Knott: Is this still simmering at this time, or has that been—

Friedersdorf: Big time. It was very, very controversial. Nixon did want to shut it down, couldn’t shut it down because he didn’t have the votes in Congress. Congress continued to authorize it, so he did the next best thing. He tried to get it under control, run it as he saw the best way to run it by putting—and when Don Rumseld took that job everybody said, you’re out of your mind, that’s like going to Siberia because the President is going to try and phase that whole operation out.

There were a lot of holdovers from Johnson still in there, even back to Kennedy and they were people who live, breathe, OEO. It was a cause for them. You couldn’t help going over there, even if you were a conservative and you didn’t agree with some of the programs, being caught up in the enthusiasm and dedication of those people at OEO. But they were contemptuous and
they were resentful of Rumsfeld, Cheney, Carlucci and myself. We had a lot of internal problems. We had to lock the safes because they were carrying documents out of there.

I remember Cheney and I went over—there was a big stink over the legal services program and Cheney and I had to go to the Washington Post and talk to a young reporter named [Bob] Woodward who later turned up as a star reporter. But the whole time was very, very contentious.

Knott: These documents were being leaked to the press?

Friedersdorf: Leaked to the press about things that were going on, programs that we were trying to shut down. It was a transition time for OEO and I think that after Rumsfeld left, it kind of leveled out and the programs that could stand on their merits, like Legal Services—it’s become a very traditional program, it’s well thought of.

I’m trying to recall the names of the programs we had so much trouble with—Community Action Programs. They were hiring people helter-skelter and paying huge salaries. A lot of that money wasn’t going to the poor people or to the proper recipients, it was being diverted. I think there was a lot of, say, illegality involved. The thing was started up by Johnson who wanted to help those people, and Sargeant Shriver set the whole thing up from scratch and there’s bound to be a lot of glitches. We walked right in the middle of that.

Knott: I think some of that money was actually supporting political activities.

Friedersdorf: That was the charge at the time.

Knott: And Dick Cheney’s responsibilities within this office?

Friedersdorf: He was a troubleshooter for Rumsfeld. I don’t remember his exact title, it was probably assistant to the director, but he was at Rumsfeld’s elbow all the time.

Knott: And so you receive a call from William Timmons and—

Friedersdorf: No, what happened there, after I was there almost a year, President Nixon appointed Rumsfeld to be head of the Cost of Living Council and moved over to the White House and Cheney went with him and I think they promoted Carlucci to be director. Carlucci asked me if I would stay, and I said, “I sure will.”

So, about that time I got a call from Tom Kleppe, a former Congressman who was head of the Small Business Administration, wanting to know if I would come over there to head congressional relations, and I accepted that and I told Carlucci I was going over there. Frankly, I was just anxious to get out of that environment at OEO. It was not a fun place to work after Rumsfeld left and things were just—I don’t know how to describe it, it was like trying to put out a fire all the time.
Riley: I was going to suggest that probably congressional relations for that office also would have been very complicated because my assumption is that the Democrats on the Hill were very eager to make sure you weren’t able to succeed in what you wanted to do. Is that a fair—

Friedersdorf: And the Republicans were beating on us to try to shut the thing down, you know. It was a hopeless situation. And I had a lot of trouble with the personnel. Senator [Hugh] Scott, he was Senate Minority Leader at the time, made me hire one of his staff that was pretty lazy that he wanted to get rid of, but the person had a constituency back home and I had to take this person on.

I had a small staff and every day after our staff meeting I wouldn’t see him again for maybe a day or two. Called him on the beeper, I couldn’t reach him. I think he was going to movies or somewhere. So I finally called him in and fired him and then all hell broke loose. Senator Scott called me up and chewed me out and then the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission filed a suit against me, said I was discriminating. This young man happened to be black. I had practically a whole black staff. I didn’t care what color he was, the guy never showed up.

So I got into all that and I had to go testify. I won because I had other witnesses that the man never worked. But anyway, to make a long story short, I took the SBA [Small Business Administration] job, and before I even got over there I got a call from Bill Timmons that they had an opening on the White House staff. They only had two people that covered the House and I think at that time two that covered the Senate, and I accepted that and went over to the White House.

Riley: That would have been 1971?

Friedersdorf: That would have been April first, 1971, April Fools’ Day. And I walked in the East Gate and was in the lobby waiting to go over to the West Wing and see Bill and who was sitting next to me? Tom Korologos. You’ve heard that name probably. Tom and I went to work, April 1, 1971. He was hired for the Senate; I was hired for the House.

Riley: That was just building up the operation? Or were you replacing somebody?

Friedersdorf: Building up the operation. Dick Cook was there, you’ve heard that name maybe. On the Senate side they had Gene Cowen who had worked for Senator Scott and Ken BeLieu, former Secretary of the Navy, and Tom Korologos. I think they were adding one there.

Knott: Could you describe the atmosphere in the Nixon White House during those years? I realize this is prior to Watergate. I’m sure things changed dramatically after the Watergate revelations, but what were your initial impressions?

Friedersdorf: In ’71, I think it was, for me it was very exciting of course, and we had fairly good support, even though the House and Senate were both Democrat. Nixon was still popular. The Vietnam war was still going on, although it hadn’t turned into the debacle that it would. I remember those days with a lot of—it was good times.
Knott: You were in the Old Executive Office Building?

Friedersdorf: No, we were in the East Wing. At that time congressional relations—Bill Timmons’ office was in the West Wing and we were all in the East Wing. As you go in the East Wing, the First Lady’s offices are on the right-hand side and congressional relations on the left-hand side.

Knott: Now, when the Watergate event comes along—

Riley: Maybe I can stop before we get there. I’m sure you’ll be happy to indulge that question in a minute, but I’m interested in how that office was set up when you first arrived. You said there were a certain number of people designated to work the Senate side and a certain number of people designated to work the House side. Was there a division of labor either on issue areas or geography in terms of how those of you who were working the House sliced up the workload? Or did you just handle things on a case-by-case basis?

Friedersdorf: It was like a fireman going to the fire and wherever the biggest flames were, that’s where you would go. It was not divided geographically, it was not divided by issues, it wasn’t divided by any other thing than—Dick Cook and I were it and Bill Casselman was there as kind of an office person, did the administrative and took the phone calls. But Dick and I would go up wherever the fires were. And we spent a lot of time in Wilbur Mills’ office, in the Speaker’s office. It was not nearly as sophisticated, not nearly as comprehensive, in my opinion, not nearly as well organized as it would become under Ford and Reagan and I’m sure as it is today.

It was very informal. Dick Cook was my boss. I was Special Assistant to the President and he was Deputy Assistant to the President, but we worked as equals and whenever, whatever program the President was pushing, whether it was domestic or whether it was foreign policy or military, the thing that was the top of his pile was the thing we would be working, and it was almost overwhelming because there was always something.

Then once we got into Vietnam with all of the anti-war amendments and everything, that pretty much dominated our time. Same way on the Senate. I think they were pretty much the same way we were, it was just kind of free-form.

Riley: Do you remember what was at the top of the agenda when you came in in 1971, what the first major things were that you—?

Friedersdorf: As I recall back then, it was economic, we were starting this cost of living thing. Inflation was high. I can’t really remember. I remember the SST [Supersonic Transport] was a big one we lost, but other than that, nothing sticks out in my mind right now.

Riley: Do you recall what a typical day was like for you then? We’ll probably ask you this question a couple of times as you go through. Maybe because of communication changes or other things, your routine day would differ, but did you spend most of your time on the Hill?
Friedersdorf: Yes, we would get in there about 7:30 and Dick and I would usually have breakfast together and talk about the day’s schedule and take a look at the Congressional Record, see what committees were meeting. That was kind of our Bible and we would look and see what was on the floor of course and then we would go after breakfast and meet with Timmons. The Senate guys would come in too, and we would tell Bill and the House what was going on and he would tell in the Senate and then we would go back to the office. I would always check correspondence and phone calls and I’d head out for the Hill by 10 o’clock.

If they were going into session at noon, usually I’d like to get up there by 10 o’clock so I could make some of the committee meetings. I’d have lunch on the Hill. I’d stay up there until the last dog was dead that evening, until they finally adjourned, and then go back to the office and I’d have a mountain of phone calls. Remembering Bryce Harlow’s maxim I’d try to return all those and hope that some of them had gone home so I could leave a message that I’d called. I’d get home at 8 or 9 o’clock, if I did not have some fundraisers to go to. That’s a big part of it that I think a lot of people don’t understand, the social obligations. And I don’t mean social, things that you enjoy, they’re just obligatory, where you have to go to a cocktail party, or somebody’s having a fundraiser. You shoot back up to the Hill and you glad-hand. They want to see somebody from the White House there.

That’s what really wears you down, it’s not the work. I liked the work, I liked the congressional part of it. But when you have a hard day and you finish up at 7 o’clock and then go to a cocktail party, especially if you have a couple of glasses of wine and then you go home and you do that day after day, even when you’re as young as you are, it still wears you down. I used to have a pretty good constitution until I ruined my liver. No, when I was in the White House I made myself drink tonic water. Rumsfeld used to drink spritzers, he’d have a glass of wine with tonic water and an ice cube and lemon and that way you don’t damage yourself for the next day. Because the last thing you need is a headache.

Riley: You’ve got those coming from other directions.

Friedersdorf: But that would be a typical day. Then we would meet on Saturday morning. It would be a good time to catch our breath. We would come in on Saturday and really clean up the correspondence and try to lay out the schedule for the next week. On Sunday I’d take a lot of briefing stuff home to read. Sunday was really the only day you got a chance to read, to read without being interrupted.

Riley: Did you have much interaction with other people on the White House staff at this point or is it pretty much a very structured chain of command?

Friedersdorf: Well, after Dick left—once we got into Vietnam, guys started bailing out, and once we got into Watergate, more of them started bailing out. But I liked the job, I liked the President, and I decided I’m going to stick this out. Dick left to go with Lockheed, so I was promoted to the top job in congressional relations. Then I started going to the senior staff meetings in the morning, which added a big dimension to my day.

Riley: At what point were you promoted?
Friedersdorf: Dick resigned—let’s see—Watergate was June of ’74—

Knott: June ’72 was the actual—

Friedersdorf: June ’72, Nixon resigned in August of ’74.

Knott: Right.

Friedersdorf: Cook resigned, I think he resigned not too long after the 1972 election.

Riley: It was after the reelection, do you remember that?

Friedersdorf: Yes, he was still there re-election, I’m pretty sure, that was another thing.

Riley: That was what I was going to ask you. Maybe I should just let you tell—

Friedersdorf: Well, the morning after election we worked like crazy. We stayed up that night—you know the returns were late coming in and Nixon was not declared a winner until after midnight as I recall, and we were euphoric and tired and everybody went home and then they wanted us back in early for senior staff meeting. So we got in there—you know, I’m not sure whether Cook was still there or not because I just can’t remember exactly when he left—

Riley: That’s easy enough to check—

Friedersdorf: Anyway, we got in there the next morning and we were in the Cabinet—in the Roosevelt room. We all expected the President to come in and say something about the victory and how pleased he was, thank everybody, and we were all in a high state of excitement. I hadn’t slept, I couldn’t sleep I was so excited. So in walks [Harry/HR] Haldeman with this stern look on his face and—I shouldn’t speak ill of the dead—and he said he wanted everybody’s resignation, and he wanted it now. If we wanted to stay for the second term, we should include in our letter of resignation what we considered our qualities and assets and what we wanted to do, sort of a “show and tell” type of letter.

And I thought, What in the world is going on here? Everybody was pretty upset. So I just went out, got in the car and went back home and told Priscilla. My wife is this beautiful girl and she’s very political and she went out and tore the Nixon bumper strips off my car, she was so mad. That’s a little aside. I think other people did the same thing. So we all did write a big letter and—“Dear Mr. President, please accept my resignation as of immediately, I would like to stay in the second term”—Everybody worked and worked over those letters, that was a big project for about a week, and submitted the letters. And nobody ever said anything, “you’re hired, you’re not hired.” I just kept working and I went on—I was there the day he resigned and went out to the helicopter with him.

But it destroyed the morale of the White House.
Knott: What was that about? How do you explain that? Do you have any reflections on why?

Friedersdorf: I’ve heard a lot of theories about it, that it was Haldeman’s idea, I’ve heard it was [John] Ehrlichman’s idea. I’ve heard it came from the President. To this day I’ve never heard anybody that really knows. I’ve read that Nixon himself suggested it because he was very displeased with—not the staff itself but with the way it was going in so far as he was disgruntled about the war and about Watergate. He felt the staff had let him down on Watergate and that he, that they were discussing it one day and Haldeman or Ehrlichman said, “Well, you ought to just clean house.” And the President said, “By God, we will clean house.” And that sounds like him.

Knott: Yes.

Friedersdorf: That just to me sounds like him, and it was something they did precipitously and didn’t think through. But even, from the top to the bottom, from the National Security Advisor clear down to the secretaries, it caused a feeling of disappointment in the President and you didn’t feel the loyalty you’d felt before. You felt we worked very hard during that campaign. We did a lot of extra work on our own. Everybody put out maximum effort and this is the reward we get.

Riley: Could I get you to dial back just a little bit. By this point you’re elevated in the hierarchy so that you’re attending the senior staff meeting, so your promotion would have occurred before 1972. Could you paint a picture for us of what you’re seeing in the White House when you first are elevated, because then you’re beginning to see some of these other senior White House officials.

Friedersdorf: Yes, I got a different view of it. When I was working under Cook, my time was in the East Wing and on the Hill, but when I became the top congressional person for the House, I’d go to the morning staff meeting. There’d be people like [Al] Haig and [George] Shultz and all the heavy-hitters in there, Haldeman and Ehrlichman. Those meetings were usually chaired by Ehrlichman. He ran a good meeting. Haldeman was always more inconspicuous. He would not sit at the table. If you’ve ever been in the Roosevelt room, it’s a long—I’m sure Stephen has—there’s a long table there, very formal setting, beautiful room, and then there’s chairs around the edge like there are here. Well, Haldeman would sit back over here and you’d feel like he’s monitoring. You could just feel his eyes coming in the back of your head. Shultz would sit at the other end usually.

Ehrlichman would go around the table and everybody would have to report, and I’d report on the House situation. But I got the feeling that this was all really a show-and-tell for Haldeman sitting over here because none of us were ever invited to go in and talk to the President or see the President. Might get a glimpse of him. If I took Congressmen or Senators in to see him I would see him, but we never reported directly, it was all channeled through Haldeman.

Riley: Did you find that unusual at the time? I mean, you’d been in Washington for a dozen years.
Friedersdorf: I thought it was a little encapsulating. I didn’t think the President was exposed to enough people. That was Reagan’s forte; he was exposed. He wanted to see people. He didn’t want one person telling him what everybody else had said, he'd want to hear it directly. But they never had any senior staff meetings with the President. We would always meet and report to Ehrlichman and Haldeman and then that would be the end of it. So you just sort of felt like you were—I wouldn’t say out of the loop, but it was a very structured organization.

Riley: Everything was getting funneled through somebody who could put their own spin on it.

Friedersdorf: And finally, you know, it never benefited him because in the end when we were going down the tubes and I was counting impeachment votes, here comes Haldeman saying he wanted to go to the Hill and meet some people. And I took him up there at the point where the President was on the verge of being impeached and Haldeman was getting indicted and he wants to go meet some Congressmen. It’s about six years late. He was a great tactician and I’m sure he was a highly intelligent man, but he had a disdain for Congress. Ehrlichman too, only Erhlichman was not nearly as foreboding as Haldeman.

Riley: Sure. Nixon was a product of Congress.

Friedersdorf: Yes, that was always a mystery to me. But you know, I think, he went through the House, he went through the Senate, he’d been Vice President, he’d been President starting two terms, he had grown to the point where he was obsessed by foreign affairs. He was obsessed by world geopolitics, and things like a dam in Arizona or a wheat allotment in Indiana or a problem at any of the departments or agencies just bored him to death.

Plus, you had to remember that Watergate was an obsession, and he still had the Vietnam war on his hands. I think the man, to keep his sanity, probably couldn’t deal with much more than that.

Riley: Could you tell us a little bit about how he was? You said usually when you saw Nixon it was when you were escorting Congressmen in. How was he in dealing with members of Congress?

Friedersdorf: I was also included in Cabinet meetings. I sat right in back of him in Cabinet meetings, so I did see him there and he got so he knew who I was. But dealing with Congressmen?

Riley: In both instances, I guess I’m trying to get a portrait of your perceptions of how he dealt with individual members of Congress and also with members of his Cabinet.

Friedersdorf: He was very formal. He was always immaculately groomed. He was friendly, he would get up and come from around the desk as soon as we walked in and greet the Congressmen, shake their hands, and usher them over to the—there’s a little sitting arrangement in front of the fireplace—and sit down.

He would have a fire going there in the middle of August, believe it or not. He loved a fire. He’d have the air conditioning turned as high as it could go and he’d have a fire and he’d sit around
there. He did not excel at chitchat and small talk. And you know Congressmen, that’s their forte. That’s what they like to do, bore ass with the President. So he couldn’t do that really. He’d talk about the Redskins and things like that. But he didn’t have a good repartee with people, with Congressmen, and he hated to see them, I know he hated to see them.

Sometimes after they’d leave he’d say something like, “Why in the hell do I have to put up with that?” or “Why do I have to listen to that?” He’d say that to us, but he would be charming to them. With Reagan it was totally opposite. I could get anybody in there any time if I told him that I thought it was important. But with Nixon, some Congressman or Senator would want to see him, it might take weeks to get him in there and then very reluctantly. Then you might get up to the day before or even the morning before and he’d have a crisis and he couldn’t see him. So I think he liked to work more by memo. I think he read the memos, we’d send him a memo about this congressional vote coming up. He should call so-and-so and talking points and all that. He would do it, and he would send back a note.

He was not as reluctant to talk to them on the phone as in person. He’s a private person. Such a contradiction. To be a politician like that and not really be an extrovert. It’s a mystery that I don’t think anybody has ever answered, part of his personality. Although, when they opened the Nixon library at Yorba Linda, we were invited out for the dedication and we spent a couple days in Yorba Linda. The first day we went through the library. They’ve got the house he was born in and grew up in; they moved it to the grounds. And it’s fascinating, the piano and everything in there and all the exhibits from all of his years in the White House and Vice President and everything. It is a marvelous library if you ever get a chance.

Well, after the dedication that night, he had a little dinner and he had the former White House and Cabinet there. After it was over he got up and made a little talk, and Mrs. Nixon talked and each of the girls talked. Then the President said, “I’m going to have a receiving line,” and he said, “I don’t care how long it takes, I’m going to stay here, I want to see each one of you tonight.” It was the first time I’d ever seen him in that kind of a mood.

He formed a receiving line—there were probably 15 of us from the White House and probably half of the Cabinet there, so there were probably 25 or 30 people. Mrs. Nixon took the wives back to the hotel and entertained them, and he stayed there and we all went through the line and he talked—you couldn’t turn him off. When I came through he knew my name. He spoke about some of the big issues we’d had. I was amazed. There was a lot going on there in that mind. He had an intellect, and I really got a different side of him that night. It was after 10 o’clock when we got out of there and he was still talking to people. So I think he mellowed a little bit after he got out of office.

I don’t know if you remember, when Nixon was going down, one of the committees, I think it was a Congressman from California who was chairman of one of the committees, they got after him on his IRS taxes and then they charged that he had done some improvements at San Clemente that were personal for his property and not in line with the security. So, to make a long story short, the committee decided to send a delegation out to San Clemente and go through his house, accompanied by the Secret Service, to look at the improvements.
Riley: This is before he leaves office?

Friedersdorf: Before he leaves office, when we’re going through all of the impeachment—so President Nixon said, “Well, I want to have somebody from my staff there, too.” You know, it’s his house and he was in Washington. So I was selected to go out and I flew out in the plane with the Secret Service and the GSA [General Services Administration] people that manage presidential property. He had an office on the property, but they wanted to go through the house. The Secret Service agent and I and two Congressmen went through.

They went through every drawer in his bedroom, they went through his kitchen. Even had these little lights, they call them ground lights, around the sidewalk and they wanted to know why they were put in. His place was right on the water. He had a bulletproof glass by the swimming pool and kitchen. The Secret Service said a boat could come up close enough, a sniper could get him—they contested that. Every little thing. To me it was so disgusting, I couldn’t believe, I just almost became physically ill that day. They were pulling his shirts out of his closet, looking through his suits. Looking through Mrs. Nixon’s memos. So we went back on the Secret Service plane and GSA plane. We had a few shots after we got up in the air and these guys were letting down their hair, the Secret Service, and the guy said to me, “If you want to see some abuses, go down to Texas and look at what Johnson put in down there, he put in a whole hangar and he did all this and that.” He said, “You know, the things that President Nixon did to protect that place, every single thing that they’re complaining about, we recommended. He didn’t even know about it.” So that’s how petty they were getting toward the end of that deal.

Riley: I wonder if we could get you to dial back—

Friedersdorf: We’re getting off the subject here—

Riley: It’s not at all off the subject, in fact it’s fascinating and very rich information to get on the record. I keep dialing back because I want more of it though. I guess we got through the ’72 election, and by that time you were at the senior staff meetings and so forth. Before we get on
Watergate, you made several references to Vietnam and how all-consuming in effect Vietnam becomes for you and for the White House. Maybe now would be the time for you to elaborate a little bit on this and what was going on and how you were getting your instructions.

**Friedersdorf:** Yes, it was starting to creep in because I found myself dealing with Vietnam practically full-time and I really—you know the [Daniel] Ellsberg situation came up. I didn’t understand that. I remember being in the mess down at breakfast and hearing guys talk about the plumbers. I didn’t know what the hell the plumbers were, and these were people I worked with every day. I thank my lucky stars every day that I didn’t know.

I got a call from Jeb Magruder over at CREEP [Committee to Re-elect the President] saying, “Max, can you come over and work on the Committee to Re-elect the President, through the election—” that was in the spring “—and then go back to congressional relations?” I was astonished and shocked. I was really upset. I ran right over to Timmons’ office and I said, “Bill, I came over here to work on congressional relations, I will not go to CREEP.” He said, “You don’t have to go to CREEP. Forget about it, stay right here.”

Well, friends that I know who worked at the White House and went to CREEP went to prison, Magruder being one of them. So I think what a close call I had there, but I didn’t want any part of that. And then—

**Riley:** You didn’t want any part of it because you didn’t want to be involved in electoral politics—

**Friedersdorf:** I didn’t want to go over there and work for John Mitchell and those guys and sit around. We were ahead in the polls 42 to 29 over [George] McGovern. Those guys had too much money to spend. A lot of stories coming over from CREEP about what I call excesses, and I didn’t know what they were doing but I just had bad vibes about going over there.

**Riley:** And these were coming through internal channels, it’s not something you get from a newspaper—

**Friedersdorf:** Guys saying they’ve got a lot of inexperienced people running around over there, trying to run the President’s campaign, that don’t know what they’re doing. And Mitchell, he was a personal friend of Nixon’s and Nixon put him in there, but he was sort of a figurehead chairman. So underneath him you had a lot of people drafted out of the administration, out of the Cabinet offices, out of the White House. And they’re all running around over there trying to run the campaign. It looked like a Chinese fire drill and I did not want to go over there.

So Bill said, “Just forget about it.” and I never heard anything more about it. But I think, there for the grace of God—anybody that went over there and got involved with what they were doing could have had—and [Chuck] Colson was calling us over and even in the White House, Colson was calling us over to his office in the EOB and I’m getting a pretty good idea that I didn’t like what I was hearing.

**Riley:** Were you getting feedback from people on the Hill about this at the time or was it—
Friedersdorf: Mostly internal, Russ. I don’t think the Hill knew what was going on any more than I did.

Riley: So the President gets re-elected. Do you recall at what point you start hearing about—well, you said you’d heard mention of Daniel Ellsberg,

Friedersdorf: The plumbers.

Riley: And the plumbers.

Friedersdorf: You’d hear guys down in the mess mentioning plumbers, *wink-wink*, you know, and looking back on it, to me it seemed, I think my instincts were good. My theory on the whole thing is that I think they had an unlimited amount of funds that year, the contributions, because they were incumbents. The President had no difficulty. I mean the polls were so far ahead of McGovern it was pitiful, and I think guys were just looking over there trying to make an impression and figuring out ways to spend money. Whatever the genesis for going into the Watergate Hotel that night, apparently they’d been there before.

I don’t know what the purpose might have been, but I think once it happened, and it all hit the fan, I really think Nixon’s reaction to the whole thing was, “Well, that’s John Mitchell’s shop, and I’ve got to protect John.” I really think—I have no proof of that, no way of knowing for sure, but I always thought that Nixon was just not going to let Mitchell hang out to dry.

Riley: How was that?

Knott: I assume you spent a considerable amount of time in the last months of the Nixon administration working with House members and gauging their sentiments towards impeaching the President?

Friedersdorf: We were counting votes and Timmons stayed—people were jumping ship.

Riley: This is internal people—

Friedersdorf: This is internal, because of Vietnam and because it had become hellish and because of Watergate. Bill Timmons stuck and guys on the Senate side left. We were physically counting votes for an impeachment. Then the Vietnam thing, we were having meetings all the time on trying to fight off these troop reductions, the Mansfield amendments, the Boland amendment—I mean, they’re just constant. Bringing Congressmen and Senators down to brief them on Vietnam practically every day.
Riley: So you’re working directly with—

Friedersdorf: [Henry] Kissinger and his staff.

Riley: Foreign policy—

Friedersdorf: Absolutely. I knew quite a bit about Vietnam because I sat there and listened to it, and that situation was not good, the demonstrations that were going on in Washington. I remember driving into the—I had an office in the East Wing, but I parked on the West Wing—driving in there in the morning with people throwing stuff at your car. We had tanks parked on the West Executive Avenue. I bought a .38 caliber revolver, which I kept on the seat right next to me because I’d had people pound on my car, throw rocks at my car on the way in. I don’t think the public knew how bad it had gotten up there.

Then, on top of that, Watergate. So you know, it was really bad, bad. But I just made up my mind, he’s either going to be impeached or not impeached, and I’ve got to go to work every day. I didn’t have anything else to do, so I stayed there. The day he resigned, you know he came in and spoke in the East Room and went out to the helicopter and got on the plane. Ford had a receiving line immediately in the West Wing, and we went through the receiving line. I’d been very close to Ford because he was the Republican leader. I really knew him a lot better than I did Nixon because I dealt with him, spent more time with him than I did down at the White House. I went through the line and he said, “Max, I want you to stay. I’m going to need all the help I can get.” And my whole life changed. Sunshine came out, flowers came up. Everything, the cloud was gone, which lasted for about a month until he pardoned Nixon. Then the clouds came back. Oh, what a life. It just seemed like one thing after another when you’re in there.

Knott: The atmosphere on the Hill immediately turned sour on the Ford pardon of Nixon—

Friedersdorf: Well, you know, right after Ford was sworn in, first thing we did was take him back up to the Hill and he spoke from the Speaker’s rostrum where the President gives his State of the Union speech and then after he spoke he went down on the floor. They mobbed him. He was just instant hero. He had everything under control. But he had that decision to make and to this day I’m sure, I mean he still talks about it, he feels like it was the right decision.

President Nixon had opened up China, which I think was his greatest accomplishment. Right before he resigned, he had appointed a delegation to go to China. This was be the first delegation after the presidential visit, and he had appointed Peter Frelinghuysen to go, I believe Senator [Michael] Mansfield, Barbara Jordan, Hubert Humphrey, and I was appointed to go with them to be the White House escort because there were about 20 Congressmen and Senators. So, when he resigned, I think it was Senator Humphrey called me and said, “Is this trip on or off? Because we’re going into recess.” I went to President Ford and I said, “You know, President Nixon appointed this delegation to go to China.” And Ford had been there, he went on the first delegation. He said, “Max, that’s an important thing, I think that they ought to go.” And he said,
“You tell Hubert that that delegation stands, and I’m going to provide a presidential plane and they’re going to go.”

So we took off and we were over in China, deep in the heart. We were there going through some communist exhibit and the captain came in from the Air Force plane and said that they’d had radio communications from Washington that President Ford had pardoned President Nixon, unconditionally, forthwith. [chuckling] So I told Humphrey what happened and he spread the word, and Barbara Jordan was very, very upset. She said, “We’re going home, we’re going back.” I said, “Congresswoman, we have at least another week of appointments here. I don’t think we ought to go back until we finish our work.” She said, “Nope, this is it. I’ve had it. This is very, very serious, we’ve got to get back to Washington.”

Fortunately Humphrey was chairman of the delegation and I didn’t know where he’d come out on it so I went to see him. I said, “You know, Mrs. Jordan wants to go home, thinks we ought to get in the air right now.” He said, “We’re not going back. There’s nothing we can do about it. The President has signed the papers. We’re going to finish our work here.” So we stayed and finished our appointments.

Humphrey ended up supporting it. He thought that President Ford did the only thing he could. He said, “Otherwise, if you have a trial of an ex-President, can you imagine the partisanship, the bitterness?” And that’s the way a lot of them felt about it, but of course others didn’t and they still don’t. I’ll never forget when we got that, that captain walked in and said the President has been pardoned. That was pretty big news in central China.

[RISK]

**Riley:** I want to go back and pose just one more Watergate question. You referred to doing your headcounts. I wonder if you have any recollections about that process, about talking with members. Were you reporting directly back to the President at this point about what you were finding on the Hill? Where is Nixon getting his information about who is going to stay with him and who is not? I would imagine those would be difficult conversations to have.

**Friedersdorf:** Well, on the House side, we were going through John Rhodes and Les Arends and Jerry Ford. Ford had a good handle on it, but mostly the Republican leadership in the House. It was a very sensitive thing because you couldn’t ask a member how he would vote on impeachment. That’s almost a question that you couldn’t pose in those terms, but you could get a feel for it. And we’d keep lists and we’d speculate, how we felt they might vote. Then we would confer with Rhodes and Arends and how they read it, and we kept a running count.

**Riley:** You’re working just the Judiciary Committee at this point? Or—

**Friedersdorf:** Judiciary Committee, number one, but we were starting to think about the whole body because it looked pretty imminent if something didn’t happen to change it, and Tom and Timmons were doing the same things on the Senate side because that’s where the trial would
take place. And toward the end, every time a shoe would drop you would lose support. When we finally got the smoking gun, that’s when John Rhodes and Senator Scott and Barry Goldwater and those people came down to see the President and told him, “Mr. President, we don’t think you have the support to sustain you in office.”

**Riley:** Were you in that meeting?

**Friedersdorf:** I was. President Nixon, he really didn’t want to accept that and he said, “I think I have. I’ve got ties with people up there that go back so far that I don’t think that Rhodes and Goldwater and Scott know exactly—they’re listening to the Republicans, they don’t know how many Democrats I’ve got. Let’s get—” So we did. We got people like Joe Waggoner and Senator [James] Eastland and Senator [John] Stennis and the old guard from the Democrat side. We brought them down separately. Frankly, they were more supportive than the Republicans.

Otto Passman—some of those guys I think would have stuck with him to the really, really bitter—they would have. They never would have voted against him, no matter if they had a videotape of him breaking into Watergate, they wouldn’t. They loved him. But that wasn’t a majority by any means, and the Republicans were more honest with him I think than the Democrats in telling him what the real situation was.

So it just deteriorated to the point that we had to tell him that our vote counts weren’t that good. You just don’t have the support. And as I say, when the smoking gun fell out—so-called smoking gun—it became obvious at the end he was going to have to resign. The day before he did resign, he wanted those supporters down there to tell them he was going to resign. We had a meeting in the Cabinet Room late in the afternoon of the day he was going to go on television that night and resign. It was a mixture of people, the Republican diehards and the Democrat diehards. Nixon came in and sat down and he was very emotional. He said, “I think I’ve let you all down. I know that I can’t count on a majority in the Congress. I’m going to have to resign.” And he put his head down on the table and started sobbing.

Some of these old guys, tears were coming down their cheeks. He pulled himself together and sat up and he said, “I just want to thank you for all the support over the years. We’ve had a lot of good victories together, this thing has just gotten out of control. I want you to show the same support for the new President.” He was in a very, very emotional state and he finally just jumped up and walked rapidly out of the Cabinet Room back into the Oval Office, and everybody just sat there stunned.

Then he spoke to the nation. The next morning he spoke to the staff in the East Room and pretty well broke down then too, talking about his mother, went out to the helicopter, walked out with the Fords, and sayonara.

**Knott:** I’m assuming you had known President Ford fairly well. Could you perhaps give us a sense of what kind of person he was, and the contrast between Ford and Nixon?

**Friedersdorf:** Ford is a very forgiving person. My first encounter with Ford I was a young administrative assistant for Roudebush. After the election, I think this was in ’64, after we’d
taken that walloping in the congressional races, Charlie Halleck was the Minority Leader from Indiana. President Ford and Rumsfeld and Bob Griffin of Michigan, a group of young bucks like that decided to depose Charlie Halleck. We were out in Indiana over the holidays and we got a call from Charlie saying, “Get back to Washington. We’ve got to mount a campaign, Jerry Ford is going to try to defeat me for the House leadership.”

So we all came back to Washington, started working the phones. We were working against Jerry Ford, and Roudebush was one of the principal lieutenants making the calls. So that was my first, and Ford knows all that. But when I started working for Nixon, and he was the Minority Leader, we worked out of his office practically every day and I became very, very good friends with President Ford. I had entrée into his office, carte blanche, walk in whenever I wanted to. I depended on him—

**Knott:** That was a complete change from the way it had worked under President Nixon.

**Friedersdorf:** Yes, yes. So when Nixon resigned and Ford became President I just had a real—I’d known him much, much better than Nixon. Nixon was not a person that you could really become buddy-buddy with, you know. But with Ford I had—and Ford being a House person and being fresh from the Congress into the Presidency, he was such a congressional animal that congressional relations was really a pleasure to work because he understood the importance of it. And he was not reluctant to see members of Congress. He was always available if we needed to get some Senators or Congressmen in there. In fact, he encouraged it. So it was 360 degrees, it was a sea change.

**Knott:** You had your work cut out for you because I believe in the fall of ’74 the Democrats just increased their majorities incredibly.

**Friedersdorf:** The Watergate babies came in. That was ’74, almost 28 years ago, and some of those people are still there. They won districts in that election that hadn’t gone Democrat in years and years and they just slaughtered the Republicans. They became the power brokers in the Democratic Party and they were not willing to remain back-benchers. They wanted power immediately.

**Knott:** So this is when things really begin to change on the Hill.

**Friedersdorf:** Well, we had to go into a total veto strategy because we couldn’t pass anything. Our only hope was that the Democrats would send something down the President didn’t want and we had to veto it and sustain the veto. I think we sustained about 40 vetoes—we governed by veto, which is sometimes the only way you can do it.

**Riley:** One of the issues that you dealt with at the time was the war powers resolution. I guess that would have been in ’73, before Nixon—do you have any recollections about working on that?

**Friedersdorf:** That was a big, critical issue, but they had the momentum because of the Vietnam War. It passed and became law and we abided by it and we used that, for example, under Reagan
in the Grenada situation. The main thing about war powers is that you have to get the notification out prior to the event. Some Presidents have ignored that in situations, and I wonder what Bush is going to do about it now, if he still knows it’s on the books. It has never been repealed and it works. I think, although we were opposed to it, it took away presidential authority that had been built up. I always felt that war powers, actually, was in compliance with the Constitution, which gives war powers to the Congress anyway. I’ve never understood where Presidents—and we get into something else there—Presidents can forthwith declare war without Congress. The war powers restored some of that strength, or some of that responsibility.

**Knott:** Did Congress start becoming institutionally a more difficult place to deal—

**Friedersdorf:** Those were very difficult times. [Tip] O’Neill was a very forceful speaker, and he had the troops. We just simply did not have the votes to pass anything. I had a lot of run-ins with Tip. I used to station myself on the veto votes at a point between the floor and the men’s restroom in the lobby. I could catch them all going through there and buttonhole them or try to twist their arm or persuade them. In that traditional place that you could always stand we won a veto vote.

We sustained a veto there one day by about three votes, and Tip came rushing off the floor, ran out there in the lobby and I was standing there celebrating, happy, and he said, “You are forthwith barred from this lobby.” And he kicked me out of there. After that, lobbyists could not go in that area because it was a key area. We turned votes there in that spot, because during a long debate, eventually everybody’s got to go to the bathroom. They wouldn’t come off the floor and talk to you if you sent somebody in to get them, but they had to go to the bathroom.

**Knott:** Can I ask how you would turn a vote? What would that entail at times? Would there be bargaining going on, or simple—

**Friedersdorf:** Well, you have to understand, Stephen, at that time I knew—this was not bragging, it’s just fact—I knew every member of Congress by their first name. I literally did. And I knew most of their wives because I traveled with them. On the Hill 24 hours a day, I called them, I mean it’s just immersion. You know what’s important to them. You know which ones you can say to them, “You don’t want to let the President down on this,” make them feel bad. Others don’t give a damn about the President. You can say, “I’m not sure that that project is going to go out there.” You did, you threatened them. Others, “Just give us a hand on this one vote and we’ll let you off the hook on the other one that you’re worrying about.” Others that have got a district that they win by 60-40, even though they’re a moderate or liberal Republican, you’ve got to have them too— “Vote with the party this time and you can show some daylight on another vote.” And the Southern Democrats, you try to appeal to their conservatism if it’s a conservative vote.

So it’s part political, part diplomatic, part psychological—it’s knowing exactly what their pressure point is. Even though they’re hopeless, you try to put pressure on them because if you put pressure—Sometimes they may call you and want some White House passes, or they want tickets to the Kennedy Center, or they want the President to come to their district.
A guy might say, “You know, I’d like to help you, but I’ve got a hell of a tight race this year. You think the President is going to get to Missouri?” I’d say, “Well, he might get to Missouri if you help him.” On our staff under Reagan I had people that had been handpicked that were very, very good lobbyists, who knew how to use those things. You played straight with them. Some of them say, “I just can’t do it on this vote. I just can’t help you. If I do this, my opponent next time, my district won’t support me.” You can’t get them. But you try everything you can.

Knott: Were they all approachable, or were there some members that were simply not approachable?

Friedersdorf: Well, there are friends. On the Republican side, for example, we had 191 when Reagan came in first time. You need 218 to win. So that means I’ve got to pick up 30 to 40 Democrats. But out of that 191 Republicans, I can only count on maybe 170 on a real tough vote because there are 20 that are moderate to liberal or from the northeast that might not be as conservative as Reagan, or they’re like Senator [John] Chafee or somebody like that who’s got a problem in Rhode Island, or somebody’s got a problem in Maine or New Jersey. Those states up there, you’ve got to really work them. The others, pretty much with Reagan. Then I’ve got to go on the Democrats’ side, and there were, as you know, probably about 40 Democrats at that time that were malleable, that were approachable, that might vote with the President.

I had to figure out how may Republicans I was going to lose for sure, then I knew how many Democrats I had to pick up. I never wrote anybody off, but at the extreme fringe, I wouldn’t go to Tip O’Neill and ask for his vote, although I might kid him about it. But way out there, say the Massachusetts delegation, the Barney Franks of this world—I like those guys and talk to them, but asking them for their vote is wasting my time. I don’t know how many out there that are way on the fringe of Democrats, but it’s amazing how many people, if you ask for their vote—they’re smart politicians. They know if they give you a vote, you owe them something. So when it comes down to something, you’re working on a budget and how much you’re going to put in for their district on this or that or some military base, they’ve got some chips that they can call in on you sometimes. It’s kind of a wheeling and dealing and auction.

Knott: You enjoy this type of work?

Friedersdorf: I did. It’s good if you like people and you like politics, and you know each district, what’s going on. I never had an enemy up there that I really knew about. I never tried to cajole anybody in a way that I couldn’t go back to them on the next vote. I’d bite my tongue a lot.

Sometimes the most upset I’d get would be with a Republican who I knew could vote with us but he had some pique or some trivial thing that he was upset with the President about—he’d been slighted, he didn’t get a ticket to the state dinner and would try to take it out on the President. I would say, “This is an issue of national importance, and maybe we should have been more sensitive to your needs on that, but don’t take it out on the President.”
Riley: I’ve read, people have speculated that although President Ford knew Capitol Hill very well, that in some instances there was almost an over familiarity between the President and the membership because he had come from their ranks and that in some ways complicated President Ford’s job because he didn’t have the kind of—the independent weight of the Presidency that some others might have had. I wonder if you had any observations about that.

Friedersdorf: Those observations are exactly right. There are a lot of members up there that all through his Presidency and to this day called him “good old Jerry.” They never called him “Mr. President.” You’ve got to respect the office. You’re a Congressman. You don’t say, “Bill Smith,” you say, “Congressman Smith.” We would go up there and they’d start slapping him on the back and, “Jerry this” and “Jerry that,” and a few of them understood—Bob Griffin of Michigan, a very astute politician.

The Michigan delegation was understandably the worst at this familiarity. They all felt a propriety to President Ford because he came out of the Michigan delegation, except Bob Griffin. He said, “You guys, call him ‘Mr. President.’ He’s not good old Jerry from Grand Rapids; he’s President.” But President Ford, to this day, every June, has a dinner at the Capitol Hill Club for his former White House staff and Cabinet and he always invites the delegation from Michigan. I still sit with those guys because I always migrate to the Congressmen. And we sit around. President Ford comes over during the dinner and goes around the table and shakes hands and BS’s with everybody, and every damn one of them says, “Jerry, good to see you, Jerry.” And you know, Bob Griffin says, “Mr. President, good to see you.” To this day, he calls him that. But it diminished his persona, it diminished his presidential aura, and I think it was detrimental.

Riley: Were you in a position at all to try to rectify this?

Friedersdorf: I don’t tell a member of Congress, Al Cederberg, “Al, you should say, ‘Mr. President.’” I didn’t do that. Maybe I should have. But I respect those guys enough and they know him, I mean, they come from Michigan; some of them went to the University of Michigan with him. Some of them have been his friends for 50 years and if they want to call him Jerry—President Ford doesn’t mind, he loves it. He had not been an elected President. He was an appointed President, and I think subconsciously they didn’t have the same respect for him as if he’d been elected. That’s the tragedy. If he’d been re-elected in that Carter election I think he would have overcome that and he would have had a marvelous second—well, he only had a little over two and a half years and that election was a dead heat. Except for one district in southern Ohio he would have won that race.

I think, not denigrating President Carter, who I admire, but from our partisan Republican standpoint, it’s a shame that a man of Ford’s caliber, probably the most unassuming, least egomaniac of any politician I ever met—and he was mimicked by Chevy Chase as being a clumsy oaf and not intellectual—the man was an All-American football player, true. He also was a graduate of Yale Law School, worked full-time, and coached football. He’s probably one of the most athletic Presidents. He was an expert skier, he swam a hundred laps a day. I mean, right now, he’s 87, and I wouldn’t want to tangle with him. And they made fun of him. So—that’s another story too, but it’s a shame that his image was skewed that way.
Knott: Unless there are any other questions about the Ford years.

Riley: Actually I do have one. This relates to the Ford years but not exclusively to the Ford Presidency. One of the things that people who study Washington politics focus on in this period is the extent to which there were major reforms in the way that Congress organized itself. You actually alluded to this a bit earlier. But I wonder if you’d care to comment.

The reforms that came after 1974 seemed to have the effect of democratizing the body in a way that some have felt was unhealthy in the sense that you didn’t have the strong committee chairs and things of that nature anymore that you could deal with. You didn’t have the powerful leadership centers in the body that you had before. Was this something that was on your mind at the time and is that general observation valid, that we were beginning to see some changes in Congress that were making the job of a White House congressional liaison more difficult?

Friedersdorf: Well, it was a lot easier when we only had to deal with the Stennis and Eastlands and Senator Byrd and a few of the old bulls. I mean, you could go to Wilbur Mills and if you could get him to agree, you could write a tax bill. But when the Phil Burton came in and the ’74 Watergate babies, they were impatient for power. They weren’t willing to sit there for 20 or 30 years to get a chairmanship or to control a committee.

And there were some of those old boys that were in their dotage running those committees. I’m a seniority person; I think you have to have maturity and seniority to do a good job. On the other hand, there’s a limit. I think when you get to be, God, 90 or 85 or even 80, in some cases, some of them are senile at 70. They’re sitting around there running the government. I can understand how Burton and those guys felt.

Then there was a series of scandals. You know Wilbur Mills went into the Tidal Basin with Fanny Fox and things that reflected poorly on some of those old boys, and then there was a scandal, Congressman [Wayne] Hays of Ohio, he was fooling around with some bimbo up there and a big scandal, and it just opened the door. These guys, these chairmen are inhibiting good legislation, they’re inhibiting the democratic process. So they had a case. And all they had to do was marshal a majority of votes and call for a roll call at the organization of the Congress and they started doing that.

Well, for us, from a selfish congressional relations standpoint at the White House, it shifted all the power centers. I remember when Burton was in his heyday he practically ran that House of Representatives. But it wasn’t easy because he didn’t have any past history or rules. He was just winging it out there and you couldn’t always depend on them. They’d say they’d deliver the votes and they couldn’t deliver the votes.

It was a really, really transitional time in the Congress, and I don’t think Congress has ever been the same since then. It’s a whole new breed of cat, and these freshmen still come in now and they’re still unresigned to sitting around, which in a way is good. I think the younger the members of Congress the better, as long as you mix it with some maturity and judgment, but the turnover in Congress since I’ve been there has been probably almost a hundred percent and I think the younger members—I haven’t seen statistics on age, but I would think that the average
age is much younger than it used to be. Although incumbents don’t lose very often anymore. They’ve got too many advantages if they use them right.

**Knott:** So after President Ford is defeated, you become staff director of the Senate Republican Policy Committee.

**Friedersdorf:** After he was defeated, yes, right.

**Knott:** Is it John Tower who hires you for that position? Had you known him well prior to this?

**Friedersdorf:** I’d known Senator Tower pretty well because he was chairman of the Armed Services Committee and he’d been very helpful to President Ford. I knew Tower well. The day after the election I got a call from him and he invited me to have lunch with him and one of his top administrative assistants on the Hill. I had lunch with Senator Tower and he wanted to know if I would be interested in the staff directorship for the policy committee. I said I would. So he hired me on the spot. But there was one catch. He had inherited that staff from another Senator. He had just become policy committee chairman. That was a new role for him and it was a very important role because the Democrats had recaptured the Senate and we were now in the minority. So he called. He said, “What I want you to do is fire everybody on the staff and hire all new staff.”

That meant firing about 25 or 30 people, and every one of them had a Republican mentor or sponsor: Senator Goldwater, Senator [Peter] Domenici, Senator Baker. I had to go up there and fire every one of those people. It was worse than anything I’d done at the White House. It was worse than Watergate almost and Vietnam put together. Because the Senators were calling and just raising bloody hell. I told Senator Tower. He said, “Tell them to call me.” Well, I’d tell them to call Senator Tower and sometimes he would say, “No, Max—I gave him free reign, I told him to fire.”

Some of them he wouldn’t back me up. So I had to keep some of the worst ones. And there was a lot of dead wood. Senator Tower was right. People had been sitting up there not doing anything for years. But we persevered and fired everybody except one—I think there was one or two that I was forced to keep who probably use my name in vain every day—and assembled a whole new staff, which wasn’t hard to do because we had just lost the White House and I had the whole exiting government to draw from. So I could go out and pick the crème de la crème of the White House, all the Cabinet departments, and I put together an incredible staff.

**Riley:** What’s the role of the Republican Policy Committee?

**Friedersdorf:** What we did, on every issue advanced by Carter—if you remember, President Carter put out a very heavy agenda—Senator Tower wanted us to develop a Republican position on that issue, across the board: military, economic, foreign policy, everything.

**Riley:** So it’s a response team to what the administration was doing.
Friedersdorf: And those would be used when the legislation came up to the Hill. We would use those as position papers to either support or oppose the Carter administration. We would use them during debate on the legislation. We would use them for press releases. And I hired specialists—therefore I really went into issues. I had to get somebody that knew the Finance Committee really well. I had to get somebody that knew the defense bill really well. I had to get somebody that knew the tax bill really well. I had to get experts. Tower was a former professor and he was very, very thorough. He was very detailed and very organized and when we got into the final preparations, he used to come down after the floor sessions and we would meet all day. He would have me keep the staff and he would work with us at night. He was an incredibly able person.

Knott: He ran into some difficulty later, when President Bush tried to make him Defense Secretary, from some of his former colleagues. Did you see any of the—

Friedersdorf: He was the most qualified person for Defense Secretary, one of the most qualified we have ever had. He had an incredible knowledge of the Pentagon, the defense bills, all of the military. He was a big supporter of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], he was very knowledgeable about NATO, but he had some enemies in the Senate.

Senator Tower liked the ladies. He was not a philanderer but he liked the ladies and he had a very good-looking staff, and they’re all incredibly competent. He married a lady who was very interested in his career, very ambitious for him—his second marriage. She had a career and agenda of her own. She stepped on some toes; she made some enemies up there.

I think some of the Senators resented—Tower divorced his first wife, they’d been married for a long time. That caused some resentment among some of the Senate Republican wives who then influenced, I think, their husbands. Some of them had their knives out for Tower. Tower did not suffer fools. He had a quick mind, a quick tongue, incredible wit. Some people didn’t like his style because he was outspoken and blunt.

So when his nomination came up, there were some people laying in the weeds and they used the charge that he was a drinker and a womanizer, both of which I know personally are not true. If you kicked every womanizer off the Hill you wouldn’t have a Senator or Congressman—I mean, there’s a lot of hanky-panky goes on up there, and Tower was not any better or worse than the average Senator. As far as drinking, it was ludicrous to charge him as being a heavy drinker when you’ve got the amount of drinking that goes on up there. The other thing that worked into this was Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia who was Chairman of the Armed Services Committee and who was beginning to mount a possible presidential bid.

Senator Nunn did some things that year. He belonged to Burning Tree Country Club, which doesn’t have any blacks. He made a big issue of that and resigned, but he continues to play golf out there. He did it, in my opinion, for presidential politics reasons. The Democrats wanted to bloody the administration’s nose and defeat one of their Cabinet nominees, in this case Senator Tower, and the way to do that was to take on Tower because they thought they saw some vulnerability there. Senator Nunn, because he was chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, he became sort of the ringleader in that.
I was disappointed in Senator Nunn because he and Tower had worked very closely on that committee when Tower was chairman and Nunn was ranking, and then it switched. But Nunn really did him in on that.

And the Democrats, Senator [Jim] Exon from Nebraska, he was another ringleader on that and he had a mad on at Tower about something. Tower had made some enemies, there’s no question about it. The timing was bad because he was the kind of symbol that the Democrats could beat. But to me it was a tragedy because I’d always thought Senator Tower would have been a great Secretary of Defense. He’d done his homework. He was very, very knowledgeable in the area he was being appointed for, but they did him in on personal charges. Not on merit, not on quality of his background or experience, but on personal.

Riley: That would have had a profound effect on Republican politics for a while because they go to Cheney, right? They elevated Cheney after that, which opens up a position for Newt Gingrich in the—

Friedersdorf: It changed the whole mix up there. Well, you know, one thing happens and then you get the domino effect.

Riley: Did you find the Republican membership during your two years on that committee to be receptive to the kinds of policy output that you were creating?

Friedersdorf: We did. My problem on that committee was reconciling the different philosophies, the Bob Staffords and the Barry Goldwaters. It was very hard to do. So I ran into trouble right away. So what I tried to do was, I asked Senator Tower if he thought it was a good idea if I made Senator Stafford’s AA [Administrative Assistant] and Senator Goldwater’s AA ad hoc members of my policy committee. I got them into the mix, so when we’d debate these issues in staff, I’d have somebody that I knew—if I put a policy up, no matter how good it was, and Senator Stafford is going to shoot it down when it comes out, that’s no good. So I bring him in on the take off and we start debating, and if he says, “That’s not going to work,” I find out right away, I don’t waste a lot of time. And it worked very well that way.

We did that on all the issues those two years. We brought in the diverse ends of our political spectrum, from Bill Cohen to [Samuel] Hayakawa, and sometimes we would come out with—sometimes you mix oatmeal and muesli you get porridge. We would have a mix. It wouldn’t be that strong a position, but it would accommodate everybody. We didn’t want to put something out there that our own membership couldn’t support. Senator Tower was good about that. He’d get those guys in there and we had the full support of Senator Baker. He was all for it.

Knott: Any more policy committee questions?

Riley: Maybe, but I’ll—ask this and I’ll tell you if I—

Knott: Jump to the FEC [Federal Election Commission].
Riley: Yes, let me dial back. Two things: one, I wonder if you have observations from your time at the policy committee about President Carter’s congressional liaison operation. You were on the Hill, having come out of a staff, and you had, I’m sure, a highly developed sense about how things ought to work. Now you’re on the receiving end of this, what are your observations about what you saw of Carter?

Friedersdorf: I had an inkling about how that was all going to go right after Carter defeated Ford, and we were cleaning out the White House to vacate it by January 20th. I got a call from a man named Frank Moore and he said he was going to be Carter’s congressional liaison and he wanted to come up from Georgia and talk to me about how we operated. So Frank came up and sat down in my office and this was before the holidays, after we’d lost, and put his feet up on the table and reared back. He’s a good old southern boy, I could tell right away, and I’m southern Indiana so I can’t complain. He said, “I want to talk to you about congressional—I want to know how you are organized.”

I went all through our organization with him and I gave him an organizational chart, tried to be as forthcoming as I could, and he said, “Well, I don’t know if we need all that. You know, Jimmy didn’t have that much trouble with the Georgia legislature, we’re going to run it like that.” I thought, This is not the Georgia legislature. He seemed so naïve and so confident.

Well, first thing that happened, they got in deep do-do with Speaker O’Neill and they never recovered the whole four years. Hamilton Jordan also got cross-wise with the Speaker. After a while, Moore hired Bill Cable and Dan Tate, who were Hill people. Great guys, perfect, but they should’ve been brought in at the start. He didn’t hire anybody. He was just going to do it himself. He didn’t return a phone call from Tip O’Neill and he didn’t get him all the tickets he wanted for the inaugural and Tip never ever let him off the hook. He couldn’t get in Tip O’Neill’s office; he was barred. Congressional relations barred! So when we got up there we never had any contact with him whatsoever, none. In the two years, I never saw Frank Moore. And I don’t think any of the Republican Senators or staff—I think they’d tell you the same thing. I don’t know where they were. But I think that was part of Carter’s problem, obviously.

Riley: So your sense was that they were understaffed all the way through and then to the extent that they had staff it was people who didn’t recognize—

Friedersdorf: Similar situation, here you’ve got Reagan coming in as a Governor from California, Carter coming in from Georgia. The first thing you do is, you go into the situation, you find people who are experienced, somebody that knows the territory. You don’t bring somebody up from Georgia that’s never—he didn’t even know where the Capitol Hill was—and expect him to run it? You know, it’s an impossible job. I think I read somewhere that they had boxes of letters that were still unanswered by the end of the administration.

Riley: I would think from a partisan perspective you must have found all of this—

Friedersdorf: Well, I did, but I felt sorry for them, because I’d been through that. I wanted Carter to succeed. I liked Carter and we had our partisan differences but he’s the President. I was willing to help him. If he’d have asked me who to hire out there on the Democrats side I could
have told him Bill Cable and Dan Tate, but it took him about two years to find that out. You’ve got to find that out in two weeks, not two years.

He could have gone to Tip O’Neill and said, “Mr. Speaker, who are the best staff people?” That would have given him entrée forever. Tip would have said, “Put this guy—”

**Riley:** But I guess for the Carter people the idea was that they were the outsiders and they were trying to maintain that image once they came in. Reagan did some of that too, but then once he got elected, it was no longer—The focus on the outside may have been there for public image purposes, but they understood if you’re going to work in this town you better bring some people in who know what they’re doing.

**Friedersdorf:** Carter brought in Bert Lance and Hamilton Jordan and Frank Moore. President Reagan, he brings in Dick Allen, who’d already been there, he brings in—

**Knott:** Jim Baker, who was king of the Hill.

**Riley:** Max Friedersdorf.

**Friedersdorf:** Reagan did not look at the Hill like he did the California legislature. He knew it was a different animal. Carter apparently thought that the legislatures are the same and maybe I can handle them like I did the—you know he came walking off the helicopter carrying his own suit bag.

He sold the presidential yacht. He was going to close Camp David there for a while. I mean, I never thought those were his to sell, I thought those belonged to the American people. The presidential yacht—we used that during the Nixon administration, we about wore the bottom out of the thing, we took so many Congressmen and Senators on Potomac River cruises. We staved off impeachment by six months by using the presidential yacht. We had people out there every night, believe me, and Nixon came out with us. We worked that thing—we’d serve them lobster tail—

**Riley:** Tell us about an evening on the *Sequoia* with Nixon, please.

**Friedersdorf:** Get into these war stories?

**Riley:** That’s what we’re here for. Tell us about a night on the presidential yacht with Nixon.

**Friedersdorf:** Well, we were trying to use every advantage we could. Things you do socially pay you back sometimes, and one of the assets we had was the presidential yacht. And President Nixon did not have any objection—he used it when he first came in, he would take foreign dignitaries. You go down, get on it south of Georgetown. You go down the river to Mt. Vernon. The White House stewards served a lovely dinner, candlelight, white tablecloth, lobster tail, filet mignon, champagne, vodka tonic, all you want.

**Riley:** How many people were on—
Friedersdorf: It was a table—we called it the state dining room—I’d say you could sit probably twenty-two, twenty-four. You could walk around the back of the fantail, stewards were bringing out drinks and everything. Nice crisp evening. You go down to Mt. Vernon and stand there and look at old Mt. Vernon, have a few drinks, go in and have a candlelight dinner, bring your wife if you want to—

Riley: At Mt. Vernon? You get off?

Friedersdorf: No, on the boat. Then leisurely go back up the Potomac and dock at the pier up there, have White House limousines waiting to take them all home. Very impressive evening.

Riley: Music?

Friedersdorf: We’d bring the strolling strings along. There were four of them and they’d play whatever the Congressman or Senator—we did that, I can’t tell you how many times, and it staved it off. You know, in retrospect those were all Band-Aids, but at the time, they were big deals. It probably was a foregone conclusion what happened, but members just really were very, very excited about being invited out there. Some of them were on the boat a number of times, and we’d go right down through the membership.

If they wanted to bring their wives, we’d get five or ten and the spouses. If we didn’t get the wives, we’d go for a group that we knew their families weren’t here with them. We’d keep the House members separate—one night we’d do the Senate and then we would do the House. And the President didn’t always go along, but sometimes we would get other Cabinet members to come along. Just an informal evening, very nice dinner, luxurious setting on the presidential yacht. Give them some cufflinks when they got off, or a presidential pin.

Knott: And President Carter gave away all these assets. He came up there—he sold the Sequoia.

Friedersdorf: Then there was talk he was going to sell Camp David. I never understood how he could sell it because it didn’t belong to him, it belonged to the people of the United States. And a few years later, a private concern bought that Sequoia and were running excursions on it. I was in Washington with my wife for some event and [Alan] Greenspan was dating Barbara Walters and they were out there on that. We had a crowd, big names, Washington names on that, and that’s the first time I’d been back on it. They didn’t change it around too much, it still looked like the old—we had a piano on it. President Nixon would play the piano and sing.

Knott: Nixon would sing?

Friedersdorf: Yes he would. He had a good, deep, baritone voice. He would sing and play all those oldie-goldies that those old guys liked—

Riley: Even into ’74 he was singing?
**Friedersdorf:** Even into ’74. You wouldn’t know, when we got him on there—he’d have a couple of martinis and off we’d go.

**Riley:** Was there a tip jar on the piano?

**Friedersdorf:** There was Bob Michel. We’d always bring Bob if he was available. Because Michel was a great—he can sing “The Star Spangled Banner” better than anybody. I mean he’s got a voice like Mario Lanza or [Luciano] Pavarotti, great singer.

**Knott:** I’ve heard him sing.

**Friedersdorf:** And he would—the President would start playing the piano and he and Bob would sing duets or Bob would do a solo, I mean it was fantastic. So it wasn’t all bad. We had some highlights.

**Riley:** Sure. So Carter gets rid of that, and that’s a pretty good indication of the tin ear—

**Friedersdorf:** I’ve never forgiven him.

**Riley:** Of the tin ear of politics.

**Friedersdorf:** That’s crazy, isn’t it?

**Riley:** The other question I wanted to ask you before we went on to the FEC was about the state of Republican presidential politics from ’76 to ’80, because you get in a position where you’re at the FEC, presumably you’re not supposed to be thinking about those things, but Ford had a challenge in 1976.

**Friedersdorf:** We had almost a fatal challenge from President Reagan. It went down to the final delegation, to the Louisiana delegation at the convention. It was not resolved until 24 hours before the nomination.

**Riley:** Were you working that?

**Friedersdorf:** Oh yes.

**Riley:** By all means, we need to hear about that now.

**Friedersdorf:** I think that one really sneak ed up on Ford. By then, the start of ’76, Rumsfeld had gone to Defense and Cheney was Chief of Staff, and I don’t think any of us really understood the threat that Reagan posed to the President’s renomination. I mean, I know what my attitude was, another Republican challenging a sitting Republican to me didn’t make sense. But as you know, we got in January, February, March, the primaries and Reagan announced, and so we were in the soup. I think that probably President Reagan’s people thought, I know they did, the pardon made Ford vulnerable in the Fall election and there’s no use to nominate a loser. Of course, we saw it differently. We thought we could overcome it.
We started in New Hampshire and North Carolina. Those were incredibly close races and I think we all got involved in that, congressional relations, because we were fighting delegation by delegation. President Ford brought in Jim Baker from Commerce to run that, and Cheney, and I think Stu Spencer was over there then as I recall. We had a really good team. We started working. Most of the Congressmen were also delegates, you know. We were lobbying them constantly and the President was traveling—we did a lot of traveling at that time.

I went to most of the states where the primaries were and we’d take the Republican delegation from that state—if we were going down to North Carolina to campaign, we would get [Jesse] Helms and the whole North Carolina delegation on Air Force One. We’d go down to North Carolina and the President would appear with Jesse Helms. Although Helms was backing Reagan, he did go with us. He sat on the stage with President Ford. But those delegations were divided. I mean Reagan had incredible support for running against an incumbent. It was just amazing. So I think it all went down to the wire and we all went to the convention in Kansas City that year.

The Louisiana delegation, as I remember, was still on the fence, and Stu and Baker and those guys and President Ford turned them around and I think we made some deals down there and got that delegation. But it was neck-and-neck all the way. That’s one of the reasons why when President Reagan hired me I wondered if he knew what I’d been doing during that year. I never asked him if he did, but I’m sure he did. Senator [Paul] Laxalt—who was his major supporter in the Senate, in the Congress, because he and Reagan had served as Governors of Utah and California and they had been very close on the Governor’s association—he was Reagan’s chairman, and he fought my nomination. He knew I’d been a Ford person.

**Riley:** Did you find out some things about Reagan in that campaign, being on the opposite side of the fence, so to speak, that stuck with you?

**Friedersdorf:** Well, I remember thinking, *If we lose it won’t be all bad* because I thought he was a good man. He fought fairly; he was a good opponent. He never said anything negative about President Ford. I don’t think you’ll ever find a quote criticizing President Ford. I think his pitch was that we need new blood, we’ve got to win in the fall. It was subliminal that Ford can’t win, we’ve got to have a candidate that can win. It turned out he was right. Reagan probably would have won that fall and had been a younger President, four years younger.

You know I say from a partisan standpoint Ford should have beaten Carter and Reagan should have beaten Ford, but it didn’t turn out that way. No, I thought Reagan was a very formidable, worthy opponent. You’d think that being an incumbent President with somebody running against you from your own party you’d be very bitter, but I don’t think any of us felt that way.

**Riley:** And that includes Ford?

**Friedersdorf:** I never heard him say anything but good about President Reagan. Not anything negative. Said he’d been a good Governor. We all thought he’d been a good Governor. I think
they even used his age on him a little then and by gosh, he could have only been in the mid-60s then.

Riley: I want to go back and ask one more question and then I promise I’ll let Steve proceed to the FEC. The vice presidential business under Ford—I have some vague recollection was a little complicated, and I confess I don’t even remember how this was resolved when Ford acceded to the Presidency. This was Nelson Rockefeller, right?

Knott: Yes.

Riley: Were you at all involved—

Friedersdorf: He had to be confirmed by the Congress.

Riley: Right.

Friedersdorf: So we had to lobby the Senate and the House just like it was another issue, incredible background checks, every conceivable—we even found out that the Governor liked Oreo cookies.

Riley: That didn’t hurt him.

Friedersdorf: He always had to have Oreo cookies in his room, and what was it he drank, something weird, maybe a Sprite. Good God. They really checked him out, and you know, here’s a guy in public life, the Governor of New York, but it was the Watergate aftermath and they wanted to check out what you had for breakfast every day of your life. But he was nominated and—

Riley: I guess historically, a unique situation for you.

Friedersdorf: Yes, and I became very friendly with Governor Rockefeller and his wife, Happy, who I saw last June. She’s still doing well. I saw her at the Ford dinner. Cheney hosted the Ford dinner at the vice presidential residence and he invited Mrs. Rockefeller. But Rockefeller got an office over at the EOB and he wanted to be involved in everything, so we put him to work on congressional—he would call, go up there. And you know what happened, of course. You know what happened as far as his getting kicked off the ticket and everything.

Riley: I don’t want to be presumptuous. There may be a story there that we should hear.

Friedersdorf: There’s no secret about it. A lot of Republicans inside the White House felt we couldn’t win with Rockefeller on the ticket and they threw him overboard as a bone to the conservatives. I think it just alienated a lot of Republicans rather than pacifying them, and it was a real hatchet job. I don’t think Governor Rockefeller deserved that.

Riley: Who ultimately had to tell him, give him the news?
Friedersdorf: I presume Cheney did, but probably President Ford. I think in Ford’s biography I read where he called Rockefeller and Rockefeller was very understanding. I would have been livid, went through all the hell of a nomination and then you get into a race and who knows, he might have won if Rockefeller had stayed on there. There are a lot of maybes, ifs, can-bes in politics. It’s full of them.

Riley: No kidding.

Knott: There’s somewhat of a different career step here where you become chairman of the Federal Election Commission, you’re appointed by President Carter. Could you tell us a little bit about that, how that came about?

Friedersdorf: The Federal Election Commission as you know had become very controversial. It’s bipartisan, equally divided number of Republicans and Democrats, and they became very intrusive in the House races and the Senate races and they oversee the presidential race. There was a Republican vacancy there for a long time because anybody we sent up, the Democrats had vetoed. They could do that. You have to pass both House and the Senate to be confirmed. We wanted to get somebody on there for the upcoming presidential election that was a partisan Republican because the Democrats had Bob Tiernan, a former Congressman, very partisan. They had Tip O’Neill’s guy from Massachusetts, John McGarry, he’s partisan beyond partisan, he’s more partisan than I am, on their side.

Anyway, we had this big vacancy and Senator Baker kept sending up names and Tip O’Neill and Bob Byrd said thumbs down. So somebody dreamed it up, I think it was right after the ’78 congressional elections, Senator Baker called me one day and said, “Would you go take the nomination for the Federal Election Commission? The seat that’s open is going to be chairman in ’80 during the presidential race. We need to protect our turf over there. We can’t get anybody, we can’t get O’Neill or Bob Byrd to agree to anybody we’ve suggested. We’ve talked to Carter and he’ll submit your name. I think Bob Byrd and Tip O’Neill will give you the green light.”

And I said, “Well, I’d just as soon stay here,” because I had called Dean Burch who had been the first Republican Chairman of the FEC, and he said “Max, whatever you do, don’t go over to the Federal Election Commission. That’s the worst jungle. They’ve got all partisan lawyers on both sides over there. The law is so confusing, you’re going to get yourself just chewed up.” He said, “In this town you’ll be dead for the rest of your life.” He told me all that.

So I called Baker and he said, “We’re sending your name up.” I didn’t have any choice. So he sent my name up and sure enough O’Neill and Bob Byrd approved me so I went over there and Dean Burch was right. That was the worst job I have ever had.

Knott: Really?

Friedersdorf: Oh, tension city.

Knott: You just had partisan attorneys going at each other?
Friedersdorf: We’d get in there and the three Republicans, three Democrats, Republican lawyer, Democrat lawyer, and all they do is sit there five days a week and argue over the interpretation of the federal election laws, and that is not my idea of a good job.

There’s some benefit to everything. I did learn a lot about our election laws. And then we oversaw several elections. I went to Panama when [Manuel] Noriega was running, went down there with a delegation that Jimmy Carter sent down. That was exciting. And a couple of other Central American countries where they have really fractious elections, to try to put an imprimatur of legality on it. It was exciting to do that, and we were very honored to be asked to do that by the President. We reported back to Carter on what we’d seen down there, and I met a lot of interesting people through that.

But the work itself was dismal. And you had to rule on those things. Some Congressman would come in, the Republican committee in his state had filed a complaint that he had spent his money illegally or he had violated some section of the act, and we would have to debate that and then vote on it. A lot of the votes came out three to three so there’s no resolution. I did develop a good relationship with John McGarry. John was a Boston Democrat machine politician, but he and I had good chemistry. He was chairman when I went there.

We hit it off and we worked out a lot of compromises. I said, “We’ve got to make this damn law work. It’s the law, unless we get it amended.” And McGarry and I got along well. In fact, when I left there he was very upset that I was going because I had become chairman and he and I really had a good working relationship. Tiernan and I almost came to fisticuffs a couple of times. I asked him to step out in the hall. Bob and I are really good friends now, but we got into it one day over a picayune thing, over some interpretation, and he saw it one way and I saw it the other and we started calling each other names. And I said, “Bob, I think we’ve got to settle this outside.” He would have beat the hell out of me. He’s a pretty muscular Irishman, you know. We laughed about it later.

But it’s a kind of job that makes you—I had a lawyer, each one of us had our own lawyer. Sherrie Cooksey, who was on my staff at the White House under Reagan, wonderful brain. She knew the answer to everything and would try to keep me from—my blood pressure went up, I started getting hives and everything. The job just really bugged me. And I think that place is still operating now. But Reagan saved me.

Knott: How did the chair system work?

Friedersdorf: It rotated.

Knott: From one party to the other?

Friedersdorf: It rotated from party to party, year to year. And just by pure chance, the seat I had was chairman in ’80 and John had been chairman ’79. Mrs. [Joan] Aiken was chairman in ’78.

Knott: Did the chair have any real authority? Or—
Friedersdorf: You could control a little bit who you called on and you could call for votes and rule somebody out of order. You had the Rules of Roberts, you could do that. But it all eventually comes down to votes, and if you couldn’t—you know, like anything else, it evolves eventually. The three Republicans that I was working with, animosities would develop on our side. We wouldn’t always vote together.

Riley: So there were occasions when it wasn’t just a straight three to three vote.

Friedersdorf: Many times. I’d say the general rule was it could be three and three, that’s where you start from. But as it evolved, I tried not to be partisan on that thing because I was dealing with both Republican and Democratic Congressmen and their cases before us. It was not a thing that really should be decided—you should apply the law. They’re either in compliance or they’re not. And a lot of big names did not get in compliance, and the Democrats, if it was one of theirs, they would always vote for a continuance on it so that they wouldn’t get a negative vote before the election.

If we had a Republican, one of my people would offer a motion for continuance and we would usually continue. It’s supposed to be nonpartisan, even-steven, but it was partisan as it could be.

Riley: I suppose the intention was to create, for lack of a better word, a culture in the commission that would be consensual. You know from your time on the Hill that the way you get a committee to work is that they become kind of an institution among themselves and they understand if anything is going to get done, people are going to have to learn to work with one another—

Friedersdorf: Compromise.

Riley: Right, and you develop a sense of camaraderie. Why is it that that didn’t develop?

Friedersdorf: It became the flash point for the election. We doled out the money to the presidential candidates; we decided how much to give. We had the future of a Congressman in our hands. If we came out and said Congressman so-and-so has misused or violated campaign law, his opponent could use it against him in an election.

The whole act was a reaction to Watergate and all of its abuses. The Congress, well meaning as they were, set it up so neither side would have the majority. So it basically started out three to three. But, as you say, these things evolve and you’ve got people appointed. If the people are sincere and have integrity they’re not going to vote—I didn’t vote for the Republican—if I saw a violation, I voted for it, the guy was in violation.

We had the power to fine people and we did, so that’s putting a lot of power in a little Federal Election Commission to sit over there in a creepy building over there by “Narc Park” they called it. Right across from the park, they call it Narcotics Park. At that time, it was late ’70s, muggings happened all the time, narc needles and everything. An ugly part of town. We had these cramped little offices up there and I had come from a big, spacious, grandiose office on Capitol Hill with 35 employees, and I’m down there arguing over election law.
Riley: Not the highlight of your career, we take it.

Knott: Did you ever forgive—was it Senator Baker who put you forward?

Friedersdorf: Yes, he laughed about it. He always was saying, “It’s a great job and somebody has to do it.” The only reason was they could get me confirmed, I know that. And they knew I was partisan. They knew I was Republican.

Riley: Did you ever think about, or would there have been any utility in developing a legislative program from your experience there to try to rectify what you saw as the deficiencies? Or was it just such a lousy concept to begin with—

Friedersdorf: No, I don’t think it’s a lousy concept. I think that there needs to be—I used to be totally opposed to federal financing of campaigns. I used to be totally opposed to term limits and I turned around on those. I really think we need a turnover in Congress.

In some cases where you have a really outstanding Congressman or President or Senator, maybe there should be some way to except that, but I say as a general rule I would like to see the House turn over at least every four terms, maybe five, and the Senate every two terms. As far as federal financing, I’d like to get all financing out of the Senate and House races, give them each so much television time. Don’t give the incumbent the advantage of the franking privilege. Try to make it as competitive as possible. I really believe in that. So I think this law—they’ve refined a lot of it. It seems to be working much better than when I was there.

We were working with a new law, an entirely new concept. And the people who served on there, they were good people. I mean, naturally, the leadership is going to put Republicans and the leadership on the other side is going to put Democrats, but it worked as best it could. There had been amendments to it and refinements to it. And I’m not knowledgeable on the details anymore, but I know that people who are familiar with it tell me that it works a lot better than when we were over there.

Knott: So you just saw too many abuses of the power of incumbency during your years in Washington?

Friedersdorf: I think they give too much advantage to the incumbent. I think the incumbent has a built-in advantage. He speaks from the pedestal of the incumbency. So 99 percent of them are re-elected, which I don’t think that you need to have a congressional class of people. Senator Baker is big on this and I always thought he was on the right track, that the Founding Fathers saw the Congress as a job that ordinary citizens would do and represent their area and not make a lifetime out of it, and that quickly dissipated. You know it’s been in our history that we have career politicians but I think as much as you can break that up—there are going to be times when, as I said earlier, a member should be left in, but I think, on the whole, turnover is healthy.

Knott: Even though that would probably complicate the job of a congressional liaison.
Friedersdorf: Well, you’ve got these young guys with plenty of energy and enthusiasm. They’ll always overcome that. To be honest with you, when I worked for Roudebush, we were in exactly five terms, ten years. In some ways that seems like a long time, in some ways it doesn’t seem very long, but frankly, we were getting a little stale in there. I think you can be in a job too long. Especially in Congress. First of all, they’re given a huge staff, which helps with the incumbency. And I think they should have a good staff. But I think that every ten years, that’s enough for anybody.

Knott: Judging from the fact that you were at the Federal Election Commission—I shouldn’t assume this, but did you play any role in the 1980 campaign? When did you leave the FEC?

Friedersdorf: I was chairman of the Federal Election Commission and we oversaw the election as far as the expenditures, but I had no role in the Reagan campaign of course. I was prohibited from partisan politics. So I was kind of neutered during that campaign.

Riley: I’m trying to remember if there was debate current in 1980 about the possibility of Reagan doing what George W. Bush did in 2000, and that is to privately finance the campaign rather than going through federal—

Friedersdorf: I think that was discussed. I think that was considered.

Riley: But that was not something that you had any—

Friedersdorf: No, that would have been up to him. Under the law, he has the right to decline it. He can spend as much as he wants to or he can take the amount—each of them got $12 million. It was a very modest amount. But in the end, as I recall, they opted not to do that for some reason. They thought they might be criticized for spending too much money.

Riley: I think the sense also was that at the time because the rules had been set up this way, there was a fear that given the fact that Watergate was only six years behind the Republicans, that it would have been seen as maybe dirty pool not to have locked it in, but I don’t know whether you might have had some independent knowledge of that.

Friedersdorf: I don’t.

Knott: So you left the FEC late in 1980 after—

Friedersdorf: 1980, after the election was over, first Tuesday in November, or second Tuesday after the first. About three weeks later, first week in December, I was at my desk at the FEC. I got a call from California; Jim Baker was on the line. He said he was with the President-elect and he wanted to talk to me. Reagan came on the line, introduced himself, and I introduced myself and I congratulated him on his victory. He said that he was starting to fill his White House staff and I had been recommended for the position of Assistant to the President for Congressional Relations. He said I had good recommendations and would I be interested.
I told him that I thought the job would be something I would be interested in doing. He mentioned that he had been to Washington once since the election, just briefly, perfunctorily, but he was coming back in a few days and staying at Blair House, and what he wanted to do was start meeting members of Congress. He said, “I don’t know many members of Congress at this point. I want to get acquainted with more of the leadership and the rank and file prior to the inauguration.” Then he said, his hope was, “I want to have my Cabinet and staff appointed and the Cabinet nominated and confirmed by inauguration. Do you think that’s possible?”

I told him I thought with a Republican Senate—the Senate had just been elected Republican and the Congress would reconvene on January 3rd and he would be inaugurated the 20th, that gave us two and a half weeks—I thought it might be possible. He said, “I hope you’ll give this offer consideration.” I said, “Mr. President-elect, I accept.” And he said, “When can you start?” I said, “When would you like for me to start?” He said, “We have transition headquarters set up on F Street and the staff is up and running over there. Could you start as soon as possible?” I said, “Would tomorrow morning be okay?” He said, “That would be fine. I’ll see you in a few days.”

So he hung up the phone and I about fell off the chair and called my secretary in and dictated a letter of resignation to President Carter, which she typed and I signed, and I had a messenger take it over to the White House making the resignation effective immediately, that date, I think December 5th or 4th. I cleaned out my desk and went over to transition headquarters the next morning.

Riley: Did you talk to your wife at any time?

Friedersdorf: Not until I got home that evening. I didn’t call anybody. I just took the job. Quite frankly, I was anxious to get out of FEC, and of course going with Reagan was a dream come true. So the next morning I went over there and they were up and running. He had some of his California people there and they gave me an office and first thing I started doing was selecting my congressional relations staff. I had to find out how many slots they would give me. His personnel people, [Pendleton] Pen James and Helene Von Damm, were already there, and they had already set up how many slots they were going to give each office. I think I had 27 altogether, 12 professionals and whatever the rest, support staff. So I started drawing up some charts about who I wanted.

I never called anybody. I never started hiring until a couple of days later. President Reagan and Baker and [Edwin] Meese and [Michael] Deaver all came to town, and the President was over at Blair House. They had a meeting and I went over there and instructions were to hire the best congressional relations staff you can find. They wanted people of experience, maturity, and all that and gave me carte blanche.

I started phoning around the Hill. I had a pretty good idea who the best people were. By Christmas, New Year’s, pretty much had everybody on board. Congress was coming in January 3rd so it was imperative I get everybody. The only glitch there was that, like it always happens, just as soon as the word came out in the paper that I was going to be the congressional relations guy, I got a call from Laxalt and he wanted Paul Russo, and Senator Goldwater called and he wanted his girl Jody Baldwin, and I started getting a lot of Senator and House calls and they
were very insistent of course. I called Jim in California. He went back there with the President and I said, “Jim, I have a problem,” and I told him. He said, “Max, don’t worry about that. Hire the best people.” And I said, “What do I do if I get Goldwater and Laxalt calling me?” which they all were. He said, “Tell them to call the President if they’ve got a problem.” I told them to call the President. I never heard another word. And nobody ever forced anybody on me.

President Reagan stood behind the filling of that staff. Because Jim knew, and I knew, we couldn’t do the job with a bunch of staff that was not the best, people that were forced on you because somebody either wanted—Bob Dole, he had somebody—they either wanted somebody on the staff so they would have an “in,” or else they had somebody, a dog they wanted to get rid of or a constituent on their back. It wasn’t in the best interest of the President, it was the best interest of them. Fortunately we had people who knew that so we got a good staff together. I put [Kenneth] Duberstein, in charge of the House and Powell Moore the Senate and hired Nancy Kennedy as my administrative assistant. She’d been with me in the Ford/Nixon White House and on the Senate side. Bill Gribbin, who was my deputy, came from the Senate, former Senator [James] Buckley. We added up the experience one day of everybody that was in there and it was close to 100 years of Hill experience.

Riley: A little better than the Carter record.

Friedersdorf: Yes, I’d say so.

Riley: A hundred to nothing, if I recall correctly.

Friedersdorf: I hired quite a few women too. I’ve always thought that women—I had a woman deputy at the OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity], I had women on my staff when I ran the White House congressional relations for Ford. I’m very, very high on women in congressional relations. They’re very thorough, they’re very professional. Pam Turner came from Senator Tower’s office and Nancy Risque came from the Hill. Those girls were just first class. No gender problems, no race problems, no—I mean, whoever is the best comes in. [Alan] Kranowitz and MB Oglesby and John Dressendorfer, every one of them top-notch.

Knott: Any other impressions from your first face-to-face meeting with President Reagan at Blair House?

Friedersdorf: At Blair House he was very cordial, very friendly. He said that he wanted to meet the leadership and then he wanted to start meeting the committee chairmen and start setting up meetings. We did take him to the Hill during that particular trip, as I recall. He said he would like to have a one-on-one sit-down dinner in the President’s residence with Tip O’Neill and his wife, just as soon as he was sworn in. That was the first social event he wanted to have.

I got a date for that and invited Speaker and Mrs. [Millie] O’Neill. We had a dinner in the private residence, in the White House upstairs, in the living quarters with the President and Mrs. Reagan and the Speaker and his wife and Jim Baker and Baker’s wife and my wife and me. There were eight of us. That’s the type of thing he wanted to do. Then we started bringing the committee chairmen in for breakfasts. He had a private dining room downstairs off of the state dining room.
that faces the front lawn of the Capitol, very nice room, high chandeliers and all that. We would
do about three or four of them at a time, very intimate. We just set up a schedule and tried to do
at least two of those a week until we ran through the whole Congress. He wanted to get on a
first-name basis with them as soon as possible.

Impressions of him? I thought him extremely charming, well groomed, courteous to almost the
point of—a really well-mannered man. Take anybody into the office, he would get up, come
around and shake hands and start—Nixon was very courteous, but Nixon did not have the gift for
conversation that Reagan did. He’d always find something interesting to talk about.

Knott: We’ve heard stories that he was a great storyteller and joke teller?

Friedersdorf: Oh God, the first—we had Tip O’Neill up there that evening, I was kind of on
pins and needles because Tip O’Neill was pretty brusque—he’s a strong personality and a gruff
old guy, like a big bear of a man. His wife, Millie, sweet as she can be, but it was kind of a tense
situation for me. So I met the Speaker at the elevator, took him up. My wife and Jim and his wife
were already up there, and of course Mrs. Reagan. Took the Speaker into the President’s sitting
room. He has a couch, he sat at one end of it and O’Neill at the other, and the Speaker ordered up
a martini and the President ordered up a martini and we were all sitting around looking at them.
The first thing they started doing was telling each other Irish jokes. I got so tickled—you know,
O’Neill had such an Irish brogue and he’s so charming when he—He had a real repertoire of
jokes, but each one he would tell, Reagan would come right back—just two old Irishman—and
top his story. It was just hilarious.

Mrs. Reagan was like, “I’ve heard this a million times.” She said to Millie, “Would you like to
see the Lincoln bedroom and the sleeping quarters?” She dragged Mrs. O’Neill and my wife and
Jim’s wife off to get them out of there, and Jim and I were just sitting there and listened to that.
Then we went into dinner and the President proposed a toast to O’Neill and told him how much
he admired his career. He had followed him in Congress. He was in the tradition of the great
politicians from Boston and, aw gee, the Speaker was just eating that up.

By the time O’Neill left that night I said, “This is going to be a little easier than I thought.” He
could charm the socks off of you. He got on the elevator, went all the way down the elevator and
walked out to the portico with the O’Neills and practically ushered them in the car, “Night,
Tip.” After that it was “Ron.” O’Neill called him “Ron,” never called him “Mr. President,” Got
on a first-name basis the first night. Then whenever Reagan would call him up on the phone, I
never heard him say “Mr. Speaker” again. He’d say, “Tip.” “Tip, you know, I’ve got this—.”

So it was really a ten-strike as far as getting on good footing. And no matter how bitter the
political issues got and the fights—and they were bitter, and sometimes Tip became overly
critical of President Reagan and made some personal remarks—Reagan never struck back. Every
time he’d say something really nasty, and I would say, “Did you see that, Mr. President?” He’d
say, “Oh, that’s just Tip.”

But you know, here was an Irishman, grew up in Illinois, from a very poor family, with an
alcoholic father, was a really self-made man, the most conservative Republican you’ll ever run
across. Here was O’Neill, from a poor Irish family in Boston. Pulled himself up by the 
bootstraps, became Speaker of the House, the most liberal Democrat you’ll ever run across.

Similar backgrounds and both extreme opposites of their parties, yet when you got them together 
you could see they were just like brothers. It was amazing to me that they could go different 
directions. But I think it’s environment. Reagan came from a conservative part of the Midwest, 
central Illinois, and Tip came from liberal Boston. And they both had different ideas of 
government. Tip thought that government should do everything, and the President thought that 
the government should get the hell out of the way and let people do what they wanted to.

Riley: Who else, among the membership at the time, did the President get along with extremely 
well and come to rely on? We were talking over lunch about Paul Laxalt.

Friedersdorf: Well of course, Laxalt would be number one.

Riley: Maybe you should tell us a little bit about his relationship with Laxalt.

Friedersdorf: Well, as I mentioned, I think that it went back so far that there’s nobody that 
could be any closer politically. I think that Laxalt got well acquainted with him when they were 
both Governors of their respective states. I know that they both served and were quite close in 
the Governors’ association. I don’t know this for sure but I suppose Laxalt talked about it, that he 
may be one of the first persons to urge Reagan to run for President, I don’t know that, but I have 
a feeling he did.

Reagan had a kitchen cabinet in California, Justin Dart and Joe Coors and all those people that 
were very instrumental in getting him elected Governor, but I think Laxalt may have been critical 
in him setting his sights higher. So he had an entrée, he had a lot to do with staffing. He had a lot 
to say about who goes in the Cabinet. I think that at first, for example, when the President was 
selecting Cabinet members and there were names bouncing around, they would always be run by 
Laxalt. The President just seemed to automatically say, “See what Paul thinks about this.” I 
would say that Laxalt was his majordomo.

As far as the Congress was concerned, he really didn’t know the players that well. That’s what 
we were trying to do. I think he had had a relationship through politics—he knew Howard Baker 
fairly well.

In the House, he knew the California delegation, obviously. He knew [Robert] Lagomarsino and 
John Rousselot and names like that that he had run with in California, Bob Dornan, the 
California delegation, he was close to. But other than that it really was almost starting from 
ground zero.

Riley: Was there anybody else in particular that he seemed to hit it off really well with?

Friedersdorf: Well, he and Bob Michel had good chemistry. Let’s see—

Knott: Bob Dole?
Friedersdorf: Always felt there was a good, solid relationship, but not as strong as with some others. Dole, not the easiest person to get close to. Dole always had his own agenda. Dole always had presidential aspirations.

Knott: What about Barry Goldwater? Obviously Reagan had sort of cut his teeth in the ’64—Did you ever—?

Friedersdorf: You know, that was a strange thing. I never had the feeling that Senator Goldwater was that enamored of President Reagan. I don’t know whether that was jealousy that he had made it and Barry hadn’t, or whether he didn’t think he had the ability or whether he had been lucky. A little bit of all that. You know Reagan gave that great speech during the Goldwater campaign, which really not only catapulted Goldwater, but was the start of the Reagan boom.

I can’t put my finger on it, Stephen, but there was something there that they were not—I thought they would just be great chums. President Reagan went way, way back with Goldwater, but there was something in that relationship that was not as close as I would have expected it to be. Goldwater was beginning to get into the twilight of his career too at that point and he wasn’t the power on the Hill he had been at one time.

Riley: Were there others on the flip side of the coin that the President, for whatever reason, didn’t hit it off well, that he just couldn’t stand to see darken his door?

Friedersdorf: No, he wasn’t like that. He was either close to you or warm, or—he never had any animosity. The worst he would say about somebody was “he’s hopeless.” I would have him call somebody who was marginal or was on the fence and we were trying to get his vote, and he would send me back a memo saying, “Why do you have me call people like this?” or “He’s totally hopeless.”

A lot of the calls he would make when I was in there. I didn’t listen in on the other line, but after it was over he’d give me a recap and he would say, “Well, you know, I don’t think we’re going to be able to get him,” or “I don’t think he can help us this time.” But he never dumped on anybody, even the liberal Democrats. I think they respected his political clout and his ability to get votes. But he didn’t seem to have any bitter enemies. That was a side of him that I admired, that he was not a vindictive type person, which is unusual in politics.

Riley: Can you tell us a little bit about how you organized the staff? You’re dealing with a lot more people than you were when you first came into the office.

Friedersdorf: I wanted to set up a system where nobody on the Hill was neglected or overlooked or taken for granted. A lot of the complaints from Republicans when we were in power under Nixon, and Ford too, were that we were taking them for granted. We always figured that they would be voting with us, so we didn’t need to do anything for them. I wanted six professionals on the House side and the professionals on the Senate side to make sure that they contacted, at least once a week, physically, in their office, every Senator on the Hill, Republican and Democrat, and all the members of the House, 435, which is a big task.
Riley: Sure. So you had the same number of people serving both chambers?

Friedersdorf: I had six and six, as I recall. I told them I didn’t want them sitting in the office all morning and going to the Hill at noon. I wanted them to get there as soon as our staff meeting was over, no later than 9:30 or 10 o’clock. And if the Senate or House wasn’t going in ’til noon, that gave them two hours to make calls, which they did.

And if the Congressman or Senator weren’t there, to make sure you leave your card and talk to the AA or whoever is the highest ranking person while you’re there, to know that they’ve been there. And don’t ask them for anything, just say we’re coming by to see if there’s anything that the White House congressional office can do. Is there anything that you need? Democrat and Republican, once a week. You know, you do that every week, before long, you’ve got a very good rapport going with those offices, and we knew the big votes weren’t going to start coming until March or April.

The President had a limited program. That was the beauty of it. We only had budget cuts and tax cuts. We were working two issues, we weren’t working anything else. The budget wouldn’t be voted upon until the appropriations and budget committees were through with our work and the reconciliation, so we had plenty of time to do that groundwork.

And we were organized not by states, not by issues. I told Ken [Duberstein], this is what I want you to do, but if you want to break it up and give John Dressendorfer the states that he comes from and his region, or if you want to give Dave Wright the southern states—he was from Alabama, he could do southern states—but just make sure you do it. Same way on the Senate side. Powell Moore was from Georgia so he naturally took the sunbelt, and Pam [Turner] was from Indiana, she took the Midwest and we just broke it up. They had discretion on that, just so they got the job done.

It started at the top because Reagan always said, “There’s no limit to what you can do if you don’t care who gets credit.” That was his motto. It’s on his desk on a little wooden thing. Hire good people, give them responsibility, and turn them loose. But they have the responsibility, they’re accountable, and Ken and Powell did that. So that was our general organization. Of course, once you get into a vote, then the whole team concentrates on that issue. They also had to cover—somebody had to be at the budget hearings all the time. So if they were having a committee meeting in the morning, I didn’t care who Ken sent there but he better send somebody there who knows what’s going on.

Our staff was sort of interchangeable. I wouldn’t be afraid to send any of the six to the toughest issue or the toughest meeting there is because they were all very able people. It wasn’t a real rigid organization, but everybody knew what their job was.

Morrisroe: Did you have responsibility for picking the congressional relations in the departments?
Friedersdorf: I had authority. That was crucial, Darby, because in the Ford administration, of course, we had inherited the congressional relations people from the Nixon administration and we didn’t have time to clean house and get new people. So everybody was going off the reservation doing their own thing. This was true of the Nixon administration. Nixon appointed Cabinet members and then let them pick their own congressional relations people. Well, who is your loyalty to? Your loyalty is to who hires you. So if I’m with the Department of Interior and Rogers Morton has hired me, my loyalty is Rogers Morton. President Nixon comes second. We were not going to permit that.

Every congressional relations director, in every Cabinet office, had to be cleared by the White House, by me. And I interviewed lots of them. I got into a lot of quarrels over that, with people like Don Regan and others who might want their own person. And you turn some of them down and we’d get calls, “By God, I don’t want to have so-and-so, I want him.” “Well, we don’t think he’s qualified, we don’t think she’s qualified. We think there’s somebody better out there. We sent you a list of names. Interview them and send us back another name.” That happened a number of times.

So finally the bottom line was, when they were all in place, every one of them owed their allegiance to President Reagan, not to Don Regan or whoever they were working for. And that made for a world of difference because we weren’t having people running off the reservation. When they went up to the Hill, the position they were putting out was not the department position, it was the White House position. And that’s another reason for his success. We were all pulling in the same harness.

Morrisroe: How did you maintain that unity? Did you have regular meetings with the departmental congressional liaison staff, or how did that work out in practice?

Friedersdorf: We started out having a Friday afternoon meeting at the White House to give them their marching orders. Once in a while we’d have it on Saturday morning. Then when we got really, really busy, we couldn’t take the time to get everybody together, and what it developed into was you’d have all the Cabinet offices there, 10 or 12 of them, and it would turn into a show-and-tell. You’d go around the room, each one would tell what they’d been doing all week. But it would be wasting the time of the other 11. So what we would do, on Saturday, I’d have a conference call with one of them and then have my House and Senate people participate and we would just go over them individually. I wasn’t tying up the whole Cabinet.

We took them up to Camp David occasionally. That was a rarity but we tried that. And you try to build a team esprit de corps. But mass meetings I find, while they’re good for me and the person I’m talking to, I’m not making a good expenditure of time for everybody else. But I think we maintained pretty good discipline. I think everybody felt they were part of the team. They also had to submit a written report, due on Friday, close of business, on what they’d done that week, what the prospects were the next week.

Then, when we were into the budget reconciliation and the tax cuts, we would bring in the people from Treasury and whatever other departments were involved in the actual lobbying of that, make them almost a part of our staff. But if you get the right people there, you don’t have to
worry about them being disloyal. If you start out wrong and somebody gets entrenched—I always found it’s easier to hire somebody than to remove somebody.

**Knott:** You mentioned earlier that you preferred that your staff head up to the Hill as soon as your morning staff meeting was completed, get up there by 9:30 or 10 o’clock in the morning. How often would you venture up there? Were you sort of held in reserve for more momentous occasions, or was this something that you were regularly doing as well?

**Friedersdorf:** No, my attitude was that I didn’t want to get chained to the White House. I had seen this happen. This is not a criticism, but during the Nixon administration, Bill Timmons never got out of the White House, and so consequently he was never seen on the Hill that much and it diminished his visibility. The members really didn’t know who he was. They knew the name, but he lost a lot of opportunity up there. I always thought it was best for the head person to be seen up there, so I would stay in the office until noon trying to get my paperwork done and my phone calls returned, and then I would go up around 12 o’clock and hang out up there until 3 or 4 in the afternoon on an average day.

The temptation is to sit there and shuffle paper because the paper flow is endless. And if you get caught up in that, you never get out from under. So I just made it a rule that 12 noon I’m out of there. So they would see me around the House lobby and they’d see me around in the Senate lobby and Senate dining room or the House dining room. They’d see me off the floor. I might go up in the gallery sometimes. And I think it paid off. You can’t stay in touch by telephone. You’ve got to press the flesh up there.

It’s harder to do that because people are going to come up to you and lay all their wish lists on you. I’d go back with a whole pocketful of memos, things people wanted. But that wasn’t bad, because the next morning I would just shuffle them off to Duberstein and Powell Moore and say “Jim Abdnor said he wants this.” Their staff would go to work on it. So getting up there was crucial.

Jim Baker went up there a lot; we went up there together. Jim liked to go to the Hill, and Jim knew the Hill. Sometimes he’d come over to the office, stick his head in the door and say, “Let’s go, I’ve got the limo.” And I’d say, “What are you doing?” “Well, I want to go up and see so-and-so.” We’d go up there and run around, and it created a lot of good will. People would say, “There’s Baker and Friedersdorf running around up there.” It just gave you the appearance of being interested and not isolated.

If Haldeman had done a little of that in his time and Don Regan had done a little bit of that in his time, things would have been a lot different. During the Ford administration, I stayed in the office too much, but we were overtaken by events there because we didn’t have time for a transition; we didn’t have time to get a staff. We had inherited everything and the avalanche broke after Nixon resigned, and it was just overwhelming. I just couldn’t get out of there. But I made up my mind, I had a golden opportunity with Reagan, we’re starting from scratch, we have a full transition. He’s given me carte blanche on how to run it and I’m going to do it the way I think it should be run.
Riley: You mentioned the transition. Did you have any contact with the outgoing Carter people in terms of transitioning into the White House in 1981?

Friedersdorf: The only thing I did is that I went down to the White House to look at my new office, which had been the old office I had under Ford, and which Frank—I don’t want to be—they did a lot of things to the furniture and that surprised me. I mean, the desk had scratches on it, and there’s been a lot of talk about that. I really don’t understand that, but I was just going down to check my office because I’d been in the same office. I don’t know how all that happened, but it just looked so tacky, I couldn’t believe it.

They started wearing T-shirts to work and casual Fridays, when casual Fridays weren’t even popular. From the full-time usher’s office and the full-time staff we heard a lot of horror stories about the way they treated things there. I was disappointed in that. But other than that, I had no contact with them. I didn’t even see Frank that day. I don’t know where he was. But GSA [Government Services Administration] took me in and showed me the office. And it was a mess.

Riley: I’ve asked you about the internal organization of your operation, but the White House itself had a kind of unusual organization structure at this time.

Friedersdorf: It did.

Riley: Can you tell us about that and your perceptions of how well it worked and of each of the principals and what their roles were in this so-called “troika”?

Friedersdorf: Well, it was a triumvirate of Bush, Meese, and Baker, an organization that nobody would have ever thought would have worked, but there was a confluence there, maybe it was written in the stars that it worked perfectly, absolutely perfectly. Of all the Chiefs of Staffs I worked for, including Rumsfeld and Cheney, Baker was head and shoulders above all—he was so organized, not a bit of ego, nothing, total loyalty, absolute dedication to the President, wanted him to have all sides of every issue. As Chief of Staff he ran the shop.

Meese concentrated on clearances and appointments, trying to get the judges, selective judicial appointments. He was in charge of all the clearances vis-à-vis the FBI, that kind of thing. Then of course Deaver had the care and feeding of Mrs. Reagan and PR, public image of the White House, general trouble shooter, hand holder, wine connoisseur, just an incredible talent—all three of them. And all three were doing the jobs that God created them for and they were doing it in an atmosphere of all wanting to help the President. There was no jealousy, no rivalry that first year.

You knew it couldn’t last forever, but while it was in place it was absolutely astounding what they did. The staff meetings in the morning, the senior staff meetings, Jim presided but there was no trace of any jealousy or resentment from Deaver or Meese, who were much closer personally to the President, going way back for years. They did exactly what Baker suggested. They all had their niche and they did it. It was a wonder to behold. I just marvel in retrospect at the way that worked.

Riley: Do you know why it ultimately collapsed?
Friedersdorf: Well, it ultimately collapsed because Meese as Counsellor to the President, once all the appointments were made and the clearances were made, Ed is the kind of person—he was like Jack Marsh in the Ford administration, he’s a generalist, his mind is like a sponge. So I think after about six months we had things rolling pretty good. I think maybe he was looking for the Attorney Generalship back then. Deaver started to think about his own PR firm eventually, and Baker burned out after four years, and that job’s a killer. I don’t know how he stood it for four years.

I think Baker wanted to stay in government, preferably at State, Secretary of State or Secretary of Defense, which were closed off because of [George] Shultz and [Caspar] Weinberger, and he worked out this cockamamy idea to exchange jobs because Treasury was the next most visible powerful position outside the White House. But I think Jim, just like I did, finally burned out, and he had to get out of the White House. So it was doomed. Three individuals and their responsibilities, it could not continue like that indefinitely.

The variables changed too, after the President’s program was through. That first big year after we’d passed the budget and the taxes, we were over the hump legislatively. I think the cohesiveness suffered because we were not all in this great cause together. All three went their separate ways, in a manner of speaking.

Knott: And you, within this structure, reported essentially to Baker, or to Meese? What was the chain?

Friedersdorf: Jim gave me walk-in access to the President, but I never took advantage of that unless I checked with Baker. I never reported to Meese or Deaver. You didn’t feel like you reported to anybody. They made you feel like you reported to the President. Many times I would go to see Baker on something and he’d say, “Let’s go talk to the President about it.” That is the way he operated. If one of my staff had a very tricky problem on the Hill, I would bring it to the attention of Baker and we would go in and discuss it with the President. Jim wanted the President to hear from the front-line troops, from the guys on the battle line. He didn’t strain everything through himself on what the rest of us were reporting.

Of course, Meese was in contact with the President whenever he wanted to. Deaver was also. The National Security Advisor had access anytime. There were about four or five of us. But the thing that really worked was that every morning after our senior staff meeting, Baker, Meese, Deaver and early in the year, Dick Allen, as National Security Advisor, and Jim Brady before he was shot, those five or six of us would go in and meet with Reagan at 10 o’clock for about 30-45 minutes. And that’s where you really get your marching orders. During the legislative battle over the budget and the reconciliation and the taxes, we would—I’m sure you know about the Legislative Strategy Group, it’s in here. That was stopped when Darman, myself, [David] Gergen and Baker, we would meet in Baker’s office at the close of business, whenever that might be: six, seven, eight o’clock.

Knott: Every day?
**Friedersdorf:** Every day. And talk about what had happened, go over the vote counts, go over strategy, and by then the President, of course, had gone back to his quarters and we couldn’t fill him in on that until the next morning. But the President was personally involved in all that. We kept him very well advised. I mean the triumvirate worked well, the LSG [Legislative Strategy Group] worked well.

Darman was a very good strategist. He had no congressional experience that I knew about. He loved to tag along with Baker and myself when we went to the Hill and we practically had to tell him, “You’re not coming.” Or he’d jump in the car and we didn’t want to overwhelm them with three bodies and Darman was not the most tactful person you’ll ever meet—a little bit on the arrogant side. Incredible intellect, brainy, bright and he figured a lot of these things out and we’d just carry out the plan he had devised, I’ll give him credit. But we didn’t want him up there selling it, because he’s the worst salesman in the world, he’ll alienate you the first minute you talk to him. And I’d get so mad at him I could spit, but the little twerp was smart as hell.

He made one fatal mistake. He was the one who advised Bush to break his promise on “read my lips.” He’s a poor politician, and why Bush would listen to him on that—Soon as I heard that I thought, *there goes the Presidency.* You can’t do that. But that was the way Darman—Darman’s attitude was, “This is what we need, it’s what the country needs, this is what we decided on, by God Congress has got to buy it.” Well, maybe it does have to buy it, but that’s not the way you get it. You have to go up and sell it. But we had a good combination, as long as we kept him out of the limousine.

**Riley:** What about [David] Stockman?

**Friedersdorf:** Stockman, he was always in there, and being a former Congressman understood the political side of it. Being a financial genius he understood the budget side of it. Being an economics major and former professor he understood the economics of it. I mean, the guy is an incredible brain, so we had him going for us. He didn’t care to lobby that much.

He would talk to Phil Gramm or [Trent] Lott or whoever called about the deal and about the plan and about the legislation, but he really didn’t—sometimes Baker and I would drag him along because we needed somebody. There were a lot of guys up there knowledgeable on the budget, Pete Domenici and some of those. They’d start asking specific questions about outlays and out years and all that intricate stuff. We needed a walking computer sitting there to tell them the answer and Stockman would do that, but he did not like to ask for votes or interfere with the congressional side of it. He had his hands full with all of the details of the budget. But it was a great combination.

**Knott:** One of the things you decided to do, I think fairly early on, was to try to win over the votes of some particularly southern Democrats, conservative Democrats wherever they might be. Could you talk a little bit about that strategy and any costs associated with it? Did you get some objections from Republican members? Because I think at one point the administration went as far as saying that they really wouldn’t challenge these conservative Democrats in the electoral process.
Friedersdorf: We did. We had 191 Republicans, as I recall, when—Reagan coattails were pretty long, and that was a pretty high number for Republicans. That meant to get 218 you needed about 30 votes, 35 votes to be safe. So even if we got every Republican, we still needed 30-35 Democrats. And we could always count on losing maybe 10 to 15 Republicans, so that meant you had to get up to 40 Democrats. That’s how it came about.

We started looking down the list of Democrats even before the inaugural to see who, in what districts, Reagan had run better than the incumbent Democrat. If we would get 62 percent for Reagan and a Democrat only won by 54 percent, we got some leverage on him because if he understands that Reagan is going to announce against him next election—that was the pure and simple of it. We didn’t make it that specific, but that’s what we were talking about. And generally most of those 40 that we had targeted were from conservative districts, conservative Democrats that were more conservative than a lot of Republicans anyway. So they would be natural allies of Reagan. They’d have to go against their party, but there would be some temptation there. So we really concentrated on those.

And, as it is well known, we brought them down in droves to see the President in the Oval Office. He entertained them for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We took them to the Kennedy Center presidential box and wined them and dined them. We took them up to Camp David for a weekend, and it wasn’t a real hard sell to be honest with you. [Charles] Stenholm and Kent Hance and Phil Gramm were natural leaders in that group, Sonny Montgomery, they had a large following. [Wilbert] Billy Tauzin, that group was really philosophically in tune with Reagan and they loved him. I mean they just literally loved the man. They could just see him float on air when they came in there. And asking them to vote with him, it just drove Tip O’Neill nuts. He started seeing those votes rolling out. But that was our strategy. It wasn’t a complicated strategy, but again, it was the right place at the right time. We had enough Republican base and there were enough Democrat targets that if we could get from A to B, we could win a lot of those votes.

Knott: Did you get any objections from Republicans who—

Friedersdorf: Not until the fall. Fortunately, they didn’t come up until we had the vote on the budget in the spring or early summer and we didn’t vote on the taxes until late summer and they were getting into the campaign by then. Some of these guys who had voted with us on budget and with us on taxes, Democrats, we just started getting feedback that, hey, “We voted for President Reagan on two big votes, you’re not going to campaign against us down there.” “Well, no, we’re not going to campaign against you.”

Then what’s the next step— “You’re not going to run anybody against us, are you?” Then the next step, “You’re going to support us, aren’t you?” And President Reagan being a very accommodating fellow, he had established some very good rapport and a first-name basis with quite a few of these people. They were hitting him up personally not to let the Republicans run anybody against them. So that got back to the Republican National Committee and the Republican Congressional Committee and to Bob Michel who hoped to be Speaker of the House one day, and that caused a lot of trouble.
I don’t know that we ever finessed that really well, but we just kept putting them off until the election came, and Reagan never ran against those guys. I mean he just couldn’t do it after the way they had supported him. And most of them were in pretty good districts anyway. There were a few of them that were in districts that Republicans could have hopes of winning. We couldn’t tell the Republican National Committee or Congressional Committee, “Don’t put up a Republican.” God!

**Knott:** I’m sure you witnessed these exchanges many times between the President and these conservative Democrats. What would he say to them? What was the Reagan treatment as opposed to the Johnson treatment, which was considered to be sort of heavy-handed and almost intimidating?

**Friedersdorf:** He had a pretty set pitch. He would tell them that he felt that the country was in a situation, we had double-digit inflation, we had double-digit unemployment, we had double-digit interest rates at that time. In fact, I think unemployment was almost as high—maybe higher—as any time since the depression.

Congress recognized all that. When Carter went out, the economy was really in the tank, and he’d say, “You know, I think we’ve got to do something about this. My recommendation is to get the economy moving again, we need to get inflation down, and to do that we need to get spending down, we need to get taxes down, so people have more disposable income, and we need to create more jobs.” He said, “That’s what I’m trying to do, and the way I think we can do this is to cut the federal budget. I’m not after particular programs necessarily, although a lot of them I disagree with. I want an across the board cut. We’re not talking about actually cutting the budget, we’re talking about cutting the rate of increase.”

They could never get that. The papers always said we were cutting the budget. We didn’t cut the budget, we cut the rate of increase. And he said, as far as taxes, “I want my”—I think it was—“10, 10, 10 and that’s going to give people more money to spend.” And there was one other thing he always talked about and this appealed to the southerners, that we want to restore the military. Those were the three big things he talked about, Stephen, and he harped on those and that was music to those southerners’ ears.

**Knott:** So it was a pure policy pitch?

**Friedersdorf:** There was no “you guys are Democrats, I’m Republican.” It was all helping the country, restoring the economy, creating jobs, getting inflation down. I think inflation was around 12 percent, unemployment was 11 or 12, and interest rates were over 10. All three things were just beating the economy down. It was a hard argument at that particular time to rebut. As the votes later reflected. We did much better than we expected. We got some votes from even middle-of-the-road Democrats and even moderate Democrats because many of them represented districts where this unemployment was really biting by then.

**Knott:** Were there particular leaders of this, I think they were called the Boll Weevils?

**Friedersdorf:** The Boll Weevils.
Knott: Were there certain individuals who carried weight within that group? Is it fair to characterize them as a group?

Friedersdorf: Yes, they were a group. There was [chuckling], I don’t think they ever formally organized, but there was some rivalry. That was another thing we had to be careful about, who we dealt with. We tried not to pick out a leader for them because whenever we had a policy message or a presidential statement, we tried to contact all 40 of them, however many there happened to be—always between 35 and 45.

The basic leadership was Kent Hance and Phil Gramm. Charlie Stenholm from Texas and Sonny Montgomery from Mississippi were crucial on military matters. I’m sure you know the background of Phil Gramm, Professor of economics I believe at the University of Texas, incredibly able person, and he didn’t start out as a leader. The leader this galvanized around first I think was Charlie Stenholm from Texas. Charlie is a natural-born leader and we sort of focused on him.

Then, as we got into the nitty-gritty of it, the actual committee work, Kent Hance and Phil Gramm made their presence known because they were on the committee.

Riley: The stories at the time, or maybe slightly thereafter, indicated that Gramm was actually going to the meetings on Capitol Hill and then coming back and reporting to the White House what was developing.

Friedersdorf: We had a pipeline. He was playing—you know he later switched parties from Democratic to Republican, and ran for Senate. He was our most open channel, let’s say.

Riley: But you were relying on other channels—

Friedersdorf: We were relying on other channels. We didn’t rely totally on him. Although he became absolutely crucial during the negotiations because he understood the mechanics of it and he was on the committee and probably smarter than any of the rest of them. I don’t know if you ever met him, but he’s a real brain. He became a student of the budget. Stenholm was more of the political type. Stenholm was the one who corralled these guys. Stenholm was the one we would talk to about who we should go after. Give us a list of who you think is vulnerable—that’s where Charlie was good.

Riley: And then you would start working the people on the list?

Friedersdorf: Oh yes, we’d contact them, bring them down and make disciples out of them, lead them to the river.

Morrisroe: What about the so-called Gypsy Moths? What was the White House’s relationship with the more liberal, northeastern Republicans?
Friedersdorf: Well, we were trying to keep them on board all the time and as I said, Darby, we did not want to lose them, and we did not want to offend them or alienate them, because they really were the backbone of the Republican party, the eastern wing, the Rockefeller wing, and they were very important to us.

Some conservatives would write them off. Reagan did not want to write them off because there were certain votes that they could help us with and they were in important committee positions. So we worked them very, very hard. Members like Bob Stafford and John Chafee, you could just go down the list. We did not want them to say, “Well, Reagan’s written us off.” They could not say that. And if they didn’t vote for us on a bill, there was no recrimination, no retaliation, no revenge. We took it and we figured we’d go after them next time. So I don’t think we ever got the President in a position where he had a hard-core enemy group up there.

Knott: One of the documents you sent us was from a television interview that you gave a few years back, and I’m curious, there’s some story in here about peanut subsidies. Do you recall what that was about, making a concession to I guess one member of Congress about peanuts? It’s described in this document as a major setback for the administration because it meant a sacrifice of big money and an important—

Friedersdorf: You know, I forget who the member was on that.

Knott: Is it possible it’s Glen English of Oklahoma?

Friedersdorf: Yes. Well, you know that some of those southerners down there in Louisiana we had to sacrifice some sugar allotments and stuff like that. We’re not as pure as angels, we had to—Glen English, I think he had his peanut farms down there. I thought Glen English was from Texas, maybe I’m wrong. I don’t remember the details of that, but if we’re accused of it, we’re probably guilty. [laughter] I would never deny it.

Knott: Was that kind of concession to a very particular interest a common thing that you had to engage in, or was it the exception?

Friedersdorf: I’d say it was more of an exception, because we would appeal to them on grounds of the issue and the merits of it, like on the Boll Weevils when we were trying to sell it, to help the economy get back on its feet. Well, naturally, being politicians, they saw an opportunity. “Reagan wants my vote, I need some peanut subsidies, and if the vote became really crucial, they might give me those peanut subsidies.” So they would hold their fire, they would stay on the fence. They would not declare.

Then, when the day of the vote came, 24 hours before, and you’re always down to the finite time when you’ve either got the votes or you don’t, and you need five or six, seven or eight, sometimes ten. Then you start dealing. And you know that Glen English will jump your way if he gets some peanut subsidies. I mean, are you going to let the peanut subsidies rule your life? Or are you going to let the budget rule your life? So we’d call Stockman and we’d say, “Houston, we’ve got a problem. We need a little sugar in Louisiana, some peanuts in Georgia,” whatever it was. “Can you get a line in the budget bill, appropriations bill, reconciliation, that
will set Glen up with this?” That’s the way it worked. You don’t deal those kinds of cards until you have to.

And sometimes you can’t. It might be something that we just wouldn’t do—keeping a military base open, or a dam project. Sometimes you can’t do it, it just won’t work, and you tell a member that. You be honest with him and say, “We cannot do that. We don’t have the money.” Or “The President is opposed to that project. We’ve already designated it as a base to be closed.” That post office has to be closed, whatever the project is. Then the member understands that you’ve tried and you did your best and you still owe him one, so he still might come with you. Even if he votes against you, he knows you tried, and then the next time maybe he’ll be able to help you.

**Knott:** Did Speaker O’Neill attempt to retaliate against these Democrats who had defected on some of these key votes?

**Friedersdorf:** He would stomp and rave and snort against those 40; I don’t know what he ever did to them. I think there are stories that came back to us from them, that he was threatening to run opponents against them in their districts, threatening to withhold congressional campaign money, things like that.

**Riley:** And in Gramm’s case that’s actually—

**Knott:** They stripped him—

**Riley:** He’s denied a committee seat that prompts his resignation. I guess that happens after you’re gone. I think it happens in ’90, when they reorganized.

**Friedersdorf:** Yes, that came out—

**Riley:** In ’83.

**Friedersdorf:** Yes, he had a big hammer on the committee appointments. There were things he could do to hurt them very badly, and that was a big affront to him to have those 40 jump ship.

**Knott:** Did he ever complain specifically to you about any of the tactics that you used?

**Friedersdorf:** Yes, I’d see him up there—

**Knott:** Was he bitter about this?

**Friedersdorf:** I always went to see the Speaker about once or twice a week. Right in the middle of the worst battles, I still went to see him. Always wanted to make sure that he knew that I wasn’t ignoring him, to see if there was anything mundane that we could do for him. And he’d jump on me. He’d say, “You’re lobbying my people. You’re messing up the Democratic side,” and all that, just generally raise hell.
He could make you feel like two cents. He was a very fearsome person to tangle with, I can assure you of that. Great big, burly bear of a man and he had a voice like the growl of a bear and he’d glare at you. I imagine he was probably like Johnson, had that kind of a forceful personality that could really stand your hair on end. But when I was nominated for an ambassadorship, or whenever my name came up, he always said good things about me. I never read a bad comment he ever made about me, and I was scared to death of him. Maybe he knew that.

[BREAK]

Knott: President Reagan was the victim of an assassination attempt at the end of March that first year. Can you give us your own account of that day, if you were at the White House that day, and also the impact of that assassination attempt in terms of, to put it crassly, moving the President’s legislative agenda forward?

Friedersdorf: Horrible event, but it did help his prestige on the Hill because of the way he reacted. He took a bullet in the chest, and he was very seriously injured and recovered. But the day it happened, I was in my office and Nancy Kennedy ran in and said, “Turn on the television, Max, the President’s been shot.” I turned it on and the TV was there at the hotel. There was Jim Brady on the ground and the whole thing was just playing out in front of our eyes and two minutes later I got a call from, I think it was Al Haig, said to come to the situation room immediately.

I went down to the situation room. I think the Vice President was traveling that day as I recall, but there was Weinberger, Haig, and Bill Clark might have been there, myself, Dick Allen. Stockman came over there. We didn’t know whether it was an attack on the government, an attack on the country, or what. Of course they wanted everybody down there in the situation room, which is bomb-proof, and we started getting calls from the hospital, from Baker, he was with the President and he said that he thought that the President was in surgery, he wasn’t sure whether he would survive or not, for everybody to stay there in the situation room and he would keep us posted. That day was kind of a blur, but I remember Haig and Weinberger having some dispute that day about what should be done. I think that was the day that Haig went out and said, “I’m the vicar. I’m in charge.”

We got a call from the hospital that Jim Brady had died. They told me to call Senator Baker on the floor and tell him that, to make sure he knew it. I called Baker in the Capitol and said that we had a report from the hospital that Jim Brady had died and Baker went out on the floor to make the announcement and before the announcement was over, they called back from the hospital and recanted on that. It got on the networks and everything. We called back and told Baker that the report on Brady was not factual and he was very upset of course, that he had made that mis-announcement.

And all this time we were getting reports the President was going to make it, he wasn’t going to make it, and so by the end of the day it looked pretty good that he was going to make it. I think we stayed there pretty late that night but then we went home and next day came in it was as
normal. About the middle of the day I got a call from Jim Baker over at the hospital and he said, “Get over here.”

I went over to GW hospital, and went up to the President’s room, and Jim was outside the room with Mrs. 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—

Riley: He probably said, when President Lincoln was shot—

Friedersdorf: Well they took him across the street, laid him on a bed. I bet you anything that people were in there getting pictures of him. Did they have cameras? Sure they had cameras.

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—

Knott: Were there others who came to see him?

Friedersdorf: He stayed in the hospital about ten days. Other members came later, a very, very few. Howard Baker came. I think Mrs. Reagan made an exception with Tip and probably Howard Baker—those are the only two I can remember when I was there.

Then I think he went home after ten days, but he couldn’t come downstairs in the White House. He stayed up in the residence for a long time recuperating. So we’d have to have meetings up there. Bless his heart, he’d be riding an exercise machine trying to get his strength back. He’d have a pair of jeans on with a T-shirt. He was about 70 then, maybe 71. He had a physique like a 30-year-old muscle builder—he really had big shoulders and chest, and I think his physical condition saved his life. He was up there lifting weights and riding the bike, trying to get built back up. Incredible constitution. It wasn’t too long before he was back in the office, going about his business. I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it.

Knott: The speech that President Reagan gave to Congress not too long after, a month after he was shot—

Friedersdorf: A month, it was almost a month to the day.

Knott: Were you in the chamber that evening?

Friedersdorf: Yes I was. I was in the presidential box with Mrs. Reagan. That’s something else he always did, he said he wanted to give the congressional relations office visibility and he would have me sit next to her. The Congressmen and Senators would see me sitting with Mrs. Reagan, so that showed I had clout, he understood that. Yes, that was a magnificent speech and I think you’ve got that in here.

Knott: The speech that President Reagan gave to Congress not too long after, a month after he was shot—

Friedersdorf: And the ovation he got that night was just phenomenal. A month after being shot in the chest, and then that gave him the superman image, as far as Congress was concerned. And that helped us on the—it was a hell of a way to do it, but that sort of worked out in his favor, that he was able to fully recover and also to capitalize on the fact of the assassination attempt on his life.
Knott: Were you wrestling—I realize the tax cuts and the budget cuts were the primary issues during that first year, I believe that’s what you said earlier. But I believe there were other smaller events that occurred along the way, one of which was the Supreme Court nomination of Sandra Day O’Connor. Do you have any recollections from that particular—?

Friedersdorf: Yes, she was nominated on my birthday, July 7th 1981, I believe.

Knott: I suppose there wasn’t any significant opposition to that?

Friedersdorf: You know, it was a real slam-dunk from day one. She was in the White House, came up to my office, and we took her around all the Senate offices, the very first day, as many as we could, and she stayed there two or three days. She got nothing but warm reception every place we went. She was such a qualified candidate and such a lovely lady with tremendous experience and background, and the first woman on the Supreme Court. That was really historic. If they’d all been like that we’d not have had any trouble.

Riley: Were there others who made the rounds of Senate offices with you?

Friedersdorf: I think the first day, Powell Moore and I took her around. We were looking at Senate confirmation. Powell Moore and I took her around to the Senate leaders and of course the Judiciary Committee chairmen, and others, Laxalt, Goldwater, the big movers and shakers. Then I think we decided she should see all hundred Senators, and she was willing to do that. As I recall, Pam Turner—Pam really was the key person on her nomination as far as escorting her around and rounding up the votes and everything.

Riley: Was that the first time you’d worked a Supreme Court nomination?

Friedersdorf: No, I’d lost a few, [Harold] Carswell during the Nixon administration, if you remember that.

Riley: I do, and I wonder—Is it out of bounds for me to ask you to go back and—?

Friedersdorf: You know, I don’t remember that much about him because I was working on the House side, and Supreme Court nominations go to the Senate. But I was in the Nixon White House when [Clement] Haynsworth and Carswell were nominated and it was such a contentious—both of them were controversial and Timmons pulled out all the stops, and I went up and tried to work the Indiana Senators. A few of the midwestern Senators. We all pitched in, and of course we lost.

I’m trying to think of the other ones that I worked. I can’t remember who was nominated during Ford, if anybody.

Knott: John Paul Stevens.

Friedersdorf: Stevens, right. I worked on that.
Riley: That was a fairly simple process?

Friedersdorf: John Paul Stevens was fairly noncontroversial, as I recall. I think he carried, I think he only lost a couple of votes as I remember. Very well qualified.

Morrisroe: Do you recall any difficulties with the nominations and confirmation of lower court appointees, since it was such a priority for Reagan to have—

Friedersdorf: Oh, the court appointees? Yes, we had a lot of trouble. Meese was the point man on that and after all the day’s trouble, all the day’s work was over, Meese would always want to meet and go over the judicial nominee [laughter]. It was a perfect end to a perfect day.

Frankly, some of those nominees were pretty far out in right field, I’ve got to admit it. And some of them were very well qualified but they were conservatives, and liberals didn’t like them. So we had a lot of trouble on some of those. I don’t remember, Darby, I can’t be specific on that, but it was a troubling time and Meese really had his hands full. Because Meese had marching orders from the President that he wanted—the President is entitled to appoint members of the judiciary that are philosophically compatible with him, and that’s what we tried to do.

Then we run into—just like when Clinton puts liberals on there, why, the conservatives are going to fight it. And a big job for Meese was getting the FBI clearance. The clearances now for a federal appointment, even at a district attorney’s level, are incredibly minute, they take months, literally months. And Meese worked on that the whole first year, trying to get just the FBI clearances. And he’d get a bad FBI clearance back and he’d have to start all over again.

And it wouldn’t necessarily be a bad FBI clearance in that the guy was not qualified or the guy was a triple ax murderer or rapist, it would be that the American Bar Association wouldn’t clear on him. So then we’ve got to go and try and get the American Bar Association, but they’re very, very hard to deal with. And up until that time—I think there have been some exceptions to this—but at this time the Senate would not approve a judicial appointee that hadn’t been cleared by the American Bar Association, which I always thought was maybe a little high of a bar to clear, because they’re not infallible.

Morrisroe: Right.

Friedersdorf: Justice [Louis] Brandeis might not have gotten clearance by the American Bar Association—I don’t know.

Knott: Probably not.

Riley: At the point that Meese was consulting with you, were these done deals in terms of his being willing to go forward with them, or was he sort of pre-clearing these things with you?

Friedersdorf: Pre-clearance, mostly.
Riley: So you were being asked to give your impression about whether this was a marketable candidate.

Friedersdorf: The FBI cleared them as far as no misconduct. They had to be cleared by American Bar as far as qualifications. They had to be cleared by their two Senators and their congressional delegations for political purposes. We couldn’t appoint a person in Tennessee that Howard Baker didn’t like. You know, the guy could be the greatest justice in the world, but if Howard Baker had something against him—so we had to run all that down, even to the point of checking with the Congressmen, because the Congressmen could cause you a lot of trouble on a nomination.

So we would come in there and old Meese would have somebody that he had scoped out, he’s going to be a good judge, the President likes him, he’s conservative, he’d moderate, FBI has cleared him, American Bar has cleared him. The last people we would go to really would be the Senators and Congressmen because if you go to them first, they’re going to spill the beans and call the guy and say, “You’re going to be the next judge” and all this and that, and get you in a lot of trouble. So we would then go out to them and tell them—it’d probably leaked by then. They had a hint of it, in most cases I’m sure they did. But still they hadn’t been formally contacted and we wanted a formal clearance so that when the President sent their name up and they were nominated, Senator so-and-so couldn’t say, “Hey, wait a minute, I don’t like this guy.”

Then of course, the Congressmen, Senators, sometimes were wishy-washy. They’d want to go back and check with their state chairmen, or they’d want to go back and see what the local bar thought about this guy, or find out if he had cut classes when he was in high school, or just any little thing. So, very tedious work. But Meese really loved that kind of stuff. And we’d be all strung out, we’d been up there for 12 hours and everybody was starting to get like this—it was dark outside and you know your poor wife was waiting on you and you had a couple of fundraisers to go to and Meese would be in there talking about judicial nominees.

Riley: Seems to me like good timing on his part. You’ve got a bunch of folks that are ready to get out of there, and pull a stamp out and—

Knott: Maybe that was it.

Friedersdorf: Meese was tireless. The President had a really good staff, because those guys were sincere. He was trying to get some very good nominees for the President.

Riley: We’ve asked you about the staffing arrangements. What about the Cabinet officials? Can you give us some of your observations on working with members of the Cabinet or your perceptions about their relative standing within the Cabinet?

Friedersdorf: Well, we had contact initially—my contact with them—the President wanted them all confirmed by inauguration. So that meant that he had to nominate them, we had to get them physically by the collar, take them up to their committees. If you’re going to be nominated for Secretary of Agriculture, you’ve got to go up and kowtow to the Agricultural Committee,
meet all the members of the Agriculture Committee, get their support. You’ve got to go see the leadership, you’ve got to make all those courtesy calls.

Then your nomination has to be sent up and we’ve got to get a vote on it. And that’s all got to be done by January 20th. So you get very intimate with those guys real quick. We were running them around, it was like a Chinese fire drill for the first three weeks of January, and we got, I think, every one of them. The one that we were nervous about, the one that we got hung up on was Haig for Secretary of State. A lot of people still had heartburn over him when he was Chief of Staff for Nixon and the cover-up and the pardon and all that. But we got him confirmed before inauguration.

**Knott:** You had some trouble with Jim Watt I think too? Was that accurate or did that all come later?

**Friedersdorf:** [chuckling] Jim Watt, we had trouble on the nomination, because Jim Watt was—the environmental community already knew Jim Watt and his track record and what they were getting. They knew what the package was. We just had a candidate. I didn’t know Jim Watt from a bale of hay, but he was our man, and we took him around and got him confirmed with some difficulty. He wasn’t a slam-dunk, but he got confirmed. Then he immediately got into dutch with the Congress because of his policies. But it was a pretty good Cabinet actually. We had some trouble with the Secretary of Labor—

**Knott:** It was Ray Donovan.

**Friedersdorf:** Ray Donovan. He was a little spacey—he had had some trouble with the unions up there, and as a contractor he had been into some—I think he was from New Jersey or somewhere up there—it was a little messy. We got him confirmed and he later got indicted, as I recall.

**Knott:** That’s right.

**Friedersdorf:** And finally, after his reputation was destroyed, he was acquitted. You remember that one, Darby?

**Morrisroe:** Um-um.

**Knott:** The was the one with the famous line, “Which office do I go to to clear my name?”

**Friedersdorf:** Yes, Donovan and Haig and Watt. Those were the three problem children. But the rest of them as I recall were pretty smooth.

**Knott:** There was a pretty serious fight that first year over the sale of the AWACs [Airborne Early Warning and Control Systems] aircraft [laughter]. Should I save that one?

**Riley:** Let the tape reflect that the respondent shivered when that word was mentioned.
Friedersdorf: Yes, let the record show that—it’s like my wife, she used to be a court reporter for the U.S. Tax Court and they were having a trial and the judge fell asleep on the bench and one of the lawyers said, “Let the record show that His Honor is asleep on the bench.” [laughter]

Knott: If that’s a bit much, we can hold off until tomorrow.

Friedersdorf: It’s ten to four, we can talk about it for ten minutes, and we’ll see. If we don’t finish it we’ll do it tomorrow.

Riley: That sounds great.

Friedersdorf: AWACs was a stone that came down the hill on top of us that we really weren’t anticipating because we’d been concentrating all year on the budget cuts and the taxes. We got the budget cuts passed and the taxes in late summer. It wasn’t until then that we woke up that the AWACs was in trouble, and the reason it was in trouble was because of that law—the Congress has the right to veto military sales. AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] had been working on it all year, we found out later, from early spring all the time that we were going through the trauma of the budget and the taxes. AIPAC was lobbying the Hill against it.

Knott: AIPAC is the—

Friedersdorf: AIPAC is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the most powerful lobby on Capitol Hill. So they had really inoculated the Congress against that thing as a danger to Israel, and it was early October before we woke up.

Riley: Now would you under normal circumstances have thought that your counterpart in the Defense Department or in the State Department might have been at the switch monitoring these things?

Friedersdorf: They were asleep at the switch. We didn’t know this was going on. If I did, it was periphery, because we were concentrating on those other two issues, but it turns out that State and Defense had really let that one slip through the cracks. They wanted the sale, they knew it was controversial, but they’d not done anything about it as far as lobbying that we were aware of. By the time we caught up with it—I think it’s in the book. The first time I looked at it, we were down like 92 to 3 in the Senate, and we had to have 50 percent to prevail. It looked absolutely hopeless.

There was some agitation to withdraw the sale, but we couldn’t with the Saudis. In that timeframe, the Saudis were our best friend in the Middle East, in the Arab world, not counting the Israelis. The Saudis were very concerned that the Iran-Iraq war had broken out and they were worried about the war spreading and their oil fields getting bombed, which we depend upon. The percentage escapes me, but this country would stop without Saudi oil at that time.

So the President felt that we had to go forward with it. As I recall, State was a little bit ambivalent—Defense was gung-ho, they wanted to sell them the five, I think there were five aircraft involved, AWACs. Well, we immediately found out that we were way behind the power
curve and that AIPAC had practically sewn up the vote. They had in the House, it was totally hopeless, but to defeat it you have to beat it in both houses, so we decided to concentrate on the Senate because we controlled it. We had a Republican Senate, so that was obvious, we had to go there, couldn’t beat Tip O’Neill.

The President said he didn’t see AIPAC’s objection militarily because this is a defensive system. AWACs is not an offensive system. AWACs is a plane that detects incoming aircraft or missiles into your territory, and he felt that giving them five of those was not endangering Israel. Israel has those planes, and I’m sure if Reagan had felt it would imbalance the Middle East or threaten Israel, I know he wouldn’t have done it. He was a very strong supporter of Israel. But anyway, that’s where we were. This was late September, early October, and we had to have a vote before they adjourned. They were talking about going out by Thanksgiving, so we knew we’d have a vote either in October or November. We started lobbying on it in the Senate and bringing Senators down and the President calling them and everything.

We immediately found that the President’s clout was still pretty good. We went up real quick to 30, 40 votes because the commitments to AIPAC were soft, they didn’t have them in black and white or blood. They had them, they had made a case, Senators had listened to them, but they did not have the votes locked up. So we got up to about 40 votes and there were about 10 votes, 11 votes we needed. We had a hit list there that we had to have and the President worked it very, very hard. He was not feeling well for some reason. I remember going up to his living quarters every morning, and he was still in his jeans and Mrs. Reagan would be in her bathrobe, and Patty was running around up there. The President would want me to bring the list up. He’d call them every day and he would have me get them on the phone and he would talk to them and beg them for their vote on AWACs.

I found out then how important Mrs. Reagan was to his political being. Mrs. Reagan knew every one of those Senators he was calling. She would sit there and listen to the conversation, or when he would tell me to call somebody she would say, “Now Ronnie, you remember—” A call like Mark Andrews of North Dakota. “You remember, you went up there to Bismarck and campaigned for him. Now you remind him of that, Ronnie.”

President Reagan would say, “Well? Mark? We’ve got a big vote coming up on the AWACs. I need you. I need you bad. We’re short.” Andrews was saying something, crawfishing or something, and the President said, “Mark, I really, I’ve really got to have you on this. I remember that time we were up in Bismarck—” He’d remind him of that, and she did that on half a dozen of them. She has a memory like an elephant’s. And the President, I know he would never raise that. And I didn’t know he’d ever campaigned in Bismarck for Mark Andrews. I’d give him talking points, why the Saudis needed the AWACs and so forth.

When President Reagan got through, he said, “I’m glad you told me about Bismarck, I’ve forgotten we were up there.” And Mrs. Reagan said, “Well, you went up there in a snow storm, campaigned for him.” She really deserves a lot of credit for that vote.

But the problem was [Robert] Packwood. He was chairman of the Republican Campaign Committee, which means the fundraising committee, which raises money for the candidates.
Packwood would never admit this, but he had been inoculated by AIPAC that if you don’t support AIPAC’s position on this, your contributions from our community are going to dry up from the big donors. Packwood was one of our biggest opponents. He was just fighting us tooth and nail. And it really got bitter. They started accusing us of anti-Semitism, and I was very upset because Alan Kranowitz on my staff, who I selected, was lobbying like crazy for that bill. Duberstein we pulled over there, and they were still calling us anti-Semitic.

I’ll tell you how bitter it got. One day I was in the office, I got a call from Senator [Warren] Rudman, who is Jewish. Senator Rudman, Republican, New Hampshire, said, “Max, I want to see you immediately.” I got up there and he was so upset he could hardly talk—he said, “I want you to tell the President that we’re going to win that AWACs vote over my dead body. You know what happened up here this afternoon? I had four rabbis come in this afternoon and they told me in so many words, if I didn’t vote against that sale of AWACs to Saudi Arabia that I was going back on my religion. I threw them out of the office.”

I said, “What?” He said, “I threw them out of the office. They’re using religion in this vote. I’m a good member of my faith, and I resent that. AIPAC is making all sort of religious bigotry remarks up here.” He was really upset. I went back and told Reagan.

I said, “You know, Mr. President, this is worse than anything we’ve had all year, including the budget and the taxes, we are in the middle of a to-the-death fight.” He said, “We’re going to win it. We know it’s right. I don’t believe any foreign country should dictate the foreign policy of the United States. We’re going to work night and day.”

We finally won that vote by 52 to 48. Within two to three hours before the vote, we switched about three votes that won it. Of all the battles we ever fought up there, for me that was the most debilitating. They made it into an “either you’re with Israel or against Israel,” and it wasn’t that at all. It was trying to help an ally, like the Saudis. So that’s the story on AWACs.

Knott: I think we’ll stop here for today.

October 25, 2002

Riley: One way that we sometimes start the second day is to ask you if anything occurred to you that you wanted to elaborate on or if there was a subject that we didn’t cover that wanted to get out.

Friedersdorf: Nothing yesterday, there’s always a few things that will come back to you, but nothing significant. I did want to ask Darby—My wife reminded me that when I retired, the paper in Florida did a lengthy series of interviews, when I was still closer to the events. She has copies of those. They did individual series on the Ford, Nixon, and Reagan years. They were
very good interviews by a young reporter from Washington, D.C. who was working in Florida. I was wondering if, when I get home, if I sent you those, if you just want to incorporate those.

Morrisroe: Absolutely.

Friedersdorf: For the record. There’s probably some material in there that was covered, 99 percent, probably, but they would make a more complete, they sort of tie the three administrations together. The Reagan was the most lengthy and probably the most detailed, because it was the most recent. But I will get copies of those and mail them up to you.

Morrisroe: I will make certain of that, yes, that would be most helpful, especially since one of the sections of the briefing book we wanted to beef up was your own personal writings and public statements that you made.

Friedersdorf: When I first sent you those papers after I first talked to Stephen, I just gathered up things and I don’t know why I didn’t think about those. Somehow I’d forgotten about that series. They were really well done. The young man had done some good research and we had some good interviews.

Riley: I don’t know if there were any of your other personal papers that you haven’t yet submitted to the library that you’re holding on to, but that’s another thing. If you happen to find things that you’d like to have deposited as a record of this history—

Friedersdorf: There’s one thing that I did think of last night. It’s an incident that happened between President Reagan and President [John] Kennedy’s children. Can I tell you about this?

Riley: By all means, go ahead.

Friedersdorf: I was in the office one day and I got a call from Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, who is a good friend. He said that there was going to be a dedication of the Kennedy Library in Boston and that the family would like for President Reagan to come up and be the speaker for that and would I mention that to the President. He said, “If he was interested, and his schedule permitted, John [Kennedy] Jr., and Caroline [Kennedy] would like to come to the White House and formally invite him, give him a letter of invitation, and meet the President.” I said I thought that was really great.

So I told President Reagan about it and he was just so excited, enthused about it. He said, “By all means, have them come down as soon as possible.” So I called Kennedy back and told him. Then I got a call from John Jr., and we set up a date for it, and they came down, Caroline and John, Jr. When they came in the lobby of the White House, East Wing lobby, the receptionist sent them up to my office because the President was in a meeting with some foreign dignitaries. So the meeting ran a little long so I had a chance to really talk to Caroline and John, Jr. They were charming children and reminisced. John Jr. said he’d been back to the White House since his father had been killed but he had never been in the Oval Office since then, so this was something he was looking forward to.
Anyway, it was a nice meeting and I got a call to bring them down and I took them in to see the President. They had a very, very nice meeting. It was going on a little bit long and the secretary knocked on the door and came in and said the President was running way over. Well, I couldn’t break it up, they were just having a real nice visit, and John Jr. kept looking at the President’s desk, because he had taken them over and sat them by the fireplace and talked. He kept looking at the desk and he said, “Mr. President, can I look at your desk?” He went over and said, “Is this the same one that my dad had?” He said, “You know, I remember crawling under here.” Remember those pictures, when he would sit under the desk of the President? And it was the same desk. President Reagan used the same desk that President Kennedy had.

President Reagan said, “Do you mind if we get some pictures?” So a photographer came in, took some pictures of them all standing around the President’s desk, and President Reagan ended up going to Boston for that event. A little later, I got a handwritten letter from John Jr. and a handwritten letter from Caroline, one to me personally thanking me and one to the President. I took them in to show them to the President and he looked at them. “Send a nice acknowledgment and I’ll sign it,” he said. So I did. “Do you want to keep these letters?” I said. “No, Max, why don’t you just keep those.” So, I was torn about sending them to central files or keeping them, so I kept them. I still have those letters that were written to me and to the President.

So when I got ready to send my papers out to the Reagan Library, I sent every scrap I could find. I had three or four cardboard boxes of stuff I’d taken out of there, but I held on to those letters and I still have those. I like to show them to people because they have a lot of significance, and they’re so beautifully written. But I thought rather than put them in the Reagan Library, what I would eventually do is send them to Boston for the Kennedy Library.

**Knott:** I was working at the Kennedy Library Foundation when this was going on. President Reagan gave a beautiful speech. He just completely won this crowd over, which was all Kennedys.

**Friedersdorf:** People like Ford and Nixon could never, ever hope to have any kind of entrée with the Kennedys or with the Boston Democrats, and Reagan was at home with those people, got along with them real well.

**Knott:** He carried Massachusetts both times, which is amazing, a solid Democratic state.

**Riley:** How do you explain the comfort level?

**Friedersdorf:** Well, I think a lot of it is Irish, I really do. I think he and Ted Kennedy hit it off from the start. Even though I don’t think we ever got Ted Kennedy on a vote, they liked each other. Reagan’s assessment of people was never based on their politics. He was a very warm person and he was such a people person that he always took people for the best, that they had the best motivations and everything. He was so likable. I think Kennedy picked up on that; this guy is not here to cut our throat, he’s a politician like I am but he doesn’t have any personal animosities or negativism towards me.
Riley: That gave some of the true believers fits though, didn’t it? I mean, weren’t there some of the conservatives—

Friedersdorf: I’m sure a lot of them stood around and frowned and thought—but you know the rank and file union members, construction workers, the working class Democrats, how they flocked to Reagan. I think he attracted people across party lines. They forgot he was a Republican or Democrat, they just liked the man and what he stood for and his personality, the great communicator.

Knott: He did something very early on that endeared him to the Kennedy family. There was a medal that Congress had authorized to be issued in memory of Robert Kennedy, and it was authorized during the Carter years, but Carter sat on it when Ted Kennedy challenged him for the 1980 nomination and never held any sort of ceremony to present it to Ethel Kennedy and her family. Ronald Reagan presented it within two or three months of coming into office. He had a ceremony at the White House and all the Kennedy family was invited for this medal presentation. And that small gesture really resonated with the family.

Friedersdorf: I wasn’t aware of it.

Riley: I wanted to ask you a general question. This isn’t directed only to the first year, but about the differences in lobbying on domestic issues like the budget or other policies, as opposed to foreign policy issues. Is there something inherently different about working on those two sets of policies when you’re the President’s representative?

Friedersdorf: I considered the basic job to be to pass the President’s program, whether it’s economic, domestic, or foreign, whether it’s military or environmental, whatever the issue is, and it all boiled down to getting the votes. I think on the foreign policy of course you relied very heavily on the State Department lobbyist and the lobbyist at the Pentagon for your backup, but once it became crunch time we were expected to take the lead.

I was trying to get a rounded staff—and I had people who really had a lot of strength in those areas, like John Dressendorfer. John had worked for Mel Laird when he was Secretary of Defense, and I had John on my staff. I knew John knew the issues at the Pentagon. This is partly my fault, maybe all my fault—we had a fairly weak congressional relations staff at the Pentagon the first year. The person that I had selected I was disappointed in because all he did was travel with congressional groups, and it became almost a joke at the White House that he was traveling so much, even during AWACs. I remember that we could hardly find him, that he was on some damn trip.

But I had John, who knew the Pentagon inside and out. On the Senate side, Powell Moore had worked for Richard Russell, who had been chairman of the Armed Services Committee, so Powell was very knowledgeable and right now is Don Rumsfeld’s congressional liaison, whom I recommended. Rumsfeld called me after the last election, and I recommended Powell Moore among three guys I thought could do the job, but Powell got the job and he’s still there as far as I know. That’s the kind of strength we had over there, so I didn’t worry about whether it was
domestic or foreign. I just felt that if this was the President’s program, we would plow ahead on it. We had a good man at the State Department, so we were really strong there.

State Department is a little bit different breed of cat. You’ve got to make sure that you get all the diplomatic nuances when you go into those issues. But we were strong in foreign policy. The short answer to your question is that we really did not differentiate that much.

**Riley:** Did you notice any difference in the level of receptivity on the Hill if you were approaching them on—AWACs may not be a good example because as you indicated, AIPAC is such an extraordinary force there that when you’re dealing with a question related to Israel, it’s kind of a different case. Maybe it’s naïve to suggest that there’s any such thing as a routine foreign policy issue, but I suppose the question is whether the President is more likely to get the benefit of the doubt on a foreign policy issue as opposed to a domestic issue.

**Friedersdorf:** No question about it. I always felt that we had easier time on foreign policy because the Congresses tend, unless it’s an extreme case like AWACs—that was an aberration—they’re likely to stick with the President on foreign policy, unless it’s something so controversial that it becomes a really contentious issue. Even if you look back on AWACs, we were so far behind, but the fact that it was a foreign policy issue and the Congress in the end thought, *Well, if the President wants to make this sale, he probably knows better than we do what the country needs militarily.*

What helped us too was that he had made it very clear, in statement after statement and speech after speech that his top three priorities for the year were the budget, the tax cut, and restoring the military. So you’re talking military, they knew it was a real hot point with him. Again, we got the benefit of the doubt or we would have never been able to overcome the tremendous deficit that we had at the start on that issue. But on the average foreign policy issue, they’re not nearly as tough as the economic or domestic issues.

**Riley:** Were there other foreign affairs issues from that first year?

**Knott:** Do you recall any battles? I’m pretty sure at some point you were already dealing with this question of aid to the Contras in Nicaragua. Any recollections from that first year, or later?

**Friedersdorf:** Well, Ollie North and Bud [Robert] McFarlane and the President’s National Security Advisor, that issue. Another one almost like AWACs. Our office never really focused on that, or took the lead on it until after we’d gotten through the budget, taxes, and AWACs. But that was boiling up and I didn’t realize it. Probably was one that I hadn’t kept close watch on. But I know that Ollie North was in and out of our office constantly because it was beginning to become a big issue and, as you know, it really exploded during the second year.

The Boland amendment came up, of course, and banned all of that aid to the Contras and we were very, very involved in that effort to defeat the Boland amendment. Tip O’Neill and Eddie Boland had become fierce opponents of our efforts to help the Contras and the genesis of that was, I believe, that Eddie, and maybe Tip too, had some relatives, maybe even sisters, who had been nuns in Central America and were very opposed to the Contras.
As you recall, there had been some murders down there and Boland and O’Neill were just livid on that issue. The Boland amendment finally passed, despite our efforts. But all that so-called scandal broke after I had gone and I never got involved in that, thank God.

Knott: Do you recall any of the struggles over the MX missile?

Friedersdorf: Yes. We’d been thwarted on the MX missile, and the President wanted that program. It became very high on his agenda after the budget, tax, and AWACS, and in January of that second year I had resigned and taken the job as Consul General in Bermuda. About the middle of the year, I hadn’t been out there very long, when Mike Deaver called me and said the President was going to revive the MX issue, that he wanted to make a full-court press on it and would I come back to Washington on temporary leave and work that project?

I took an apartment at one of those residence hotels down on Pennsylvania Avenue and moved back to Washington by myself, commuted to Bermuda on weekends and took that issue on. We could not get anything done that year, we couldn’t even get Congress really to take up the issue. I think it was about a year later, we finally got ten MXs approved, as I recall. But that was a long term, tedious, pulling teeth issue. But we finally did get some MXs approved after countless struggles.

Knott: Why did you decide to leave the position after about a year?

Friedersdorf: I didn’t want to, but during the summer and late summer, after the budget vote, it was August, and we hadn’t had the tax cut vote, and we were lobbying fiercely on the tax cut. I had severe allergies and I was getting allergy shots once a week from I think the President’s doctor, Dr. [Daniel] Ruge. I was over there one day and I told him I was so tired I could hardly get up in the morning. He said, “You’re spending too many days and nights down here. You’ve got to slow down.” He put me on a massive dose of vitamin C and said, “Now I don’t want you working on Saturdays and Sundays.” Well I couldn’t do that, we were going 16 hours a day and it was frantic and I ignored him and kept going, and one day I had an asthma attack when I was on the Hill. I thought I was going to suffocate. I ignored that and had a second attack, and I ignored that.

Then one night it felt like somebody was putting an ice pick between my ribs. It was the most painful thing I ever had. So my wife drove me to the emergency room at Alexandria Hospital and they thought I was having a heart attack. They sedated me and I went to bed. The next morning the doctor came in and said, “Your heart’s fine, you have a collapsed lung.” So I stayed in the hospital about a week and I went right back to work. The President called me every day in the hospital. “You stay there as long as you need to. You’re not going to—”

Well I did, I went right back to work. Then we had the big vote on the tax cut. Then we had AWACs. After we won that it was early November and Jim Baker and I were up on the Hill, making our rounds.
We were walking across the parking lot and I said, “Jim, I’ve got to leave after the end of this year, after Congress quits. I cannot go on, I think I’m ruining my health. I can’t get my strength back, my energy’s down, I just can’t do it.” He said, “What are you talking about? You can’t leave.” I said, “I’ve got to or I’m going to die.” He said, “Well, I’ll tell you what. Don’t tell anybody. I won’t tell the President. You don’t tell the President, don’t tell any of your staff, because if you do, you’ll immediately become a lame duck and you’ll lose your clout up here.” That’s the way Baker thinks. So we didn’t tell anybody.

Then after Congress adjourned, went home for the holidays, we spoke to the President, and he understood. He’s very understanding. In fact, he had a big farewell party for me, which I have some wonderful pictures of. He said, “What are you going to do?” “I don’t know, Mr. President, I think I’m going into the private sector, I have about 20 years in government. I had a good offer from Proctor and Gamble, from Philip Morris, from Burson-Marsteller public relations in New York. Bill Timmons and Tom Korologos wanted me to come over and join their lobby firm. I had a standing offer from them. I didn’t tell him all this. I said, “I have some chances in the private sector.”

He said, “Was there anything else you would ever want to do in government that isn’t as strenuous?” I thought, What? I always wanted to be a diplomat or an ambassador. I said that to him. He said, “Well, let me think about that.” So about a day later I got a call from Bill Clark, Judge Clark, and I’m trying to remember whether Clark was still National Security Advisor or whether he had gone over as Deputy Secretary of State. I think he may have still been in the White House. He said he wanted me to talk to him. Went down, talked to Judge Clark, and he said, “Max, I know you’re leaving, and there’s a couple of things that we’d like you to consider.” He said, “The ambassadorship’s open in Jamaica, the President hasn’t filled that one. Dominican Republic, Bahamas, Belize, those four.” And I said, “What about Bermuda?” He said, “Let me look into that.”

So he came back in a day. “You know, there’s a Consul General over there, but the President could appoint you if that would be your preference. But why don’t you get on a plane and go down and check out these other countries and meet with the ambassadors, the holdovers that are there, or talk to the chief of station, see what’s going on.” So I did. I got on the plane and I went down to Kingston, and the ambassador, a Carter appointee, met me, very nice gentleman, and he took me to the residence and to downtown Kingston. But the problem—in the front seat with the driver, there was a guy sitting there with a shotgun between his legs and we got to the residence there was a perimeter of barbed wire around it. It looked like Beirut, and I asked the ambassador, “What’s that guy with the shotgun doing there?” and he said, “Well, we have a lot of death threats down here. Would you like to go downtown?”

We went downtown, we parked in the heart of Kingston, along the sidewalk with the big ambassador’s limousine with the American flag on it. We got out and stood on the sidewalk and when I started to walk around, he said, “We don’t want to walk around here.” You could feel the hatred raised from the locals. I thought, Man, I don’t want to live down here. And the same thing in the Bahamas, I got bad vibes there, too. Belize I had always thought was the mosquito coast, so I didn’t want to go down there, and Dominican Republic is such an impoverished place. I was looking at it selfishly, where I wanted to go.
So I went back and told Clark, “I think I’d like to go to Bermuda.” But the State Department was a little bit upset about that because they said that that was a post that had traditionally been reserved for a career appointment, and they didn’t want any political appointees going over there. So I went up to see Senator [Claiborne] Pell, who was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and he said I could get confirmed for any post in the world, but I couldn’t get Bermuda, that he would block it.

President Reagan and Clark said, “I don’t think he can block it if we sent your name up.” So they sent my name up and I got confirmed and I went to Bermuda. But within six months they brought me back to work on the MX missile, so I really didn’t get much of a rest out there. So that’s the story behind why I left. I didn’t want to leave, and if I hadn’t had those health problems, I would like to have stayed for the entire first term.

Riley: Were there other occasions when they brought you back to lobby on things?

Friedersdorf: There were. I was bouncing back and forth, you know, I really would’ve been just as well off to stay there because it seemed like I was commuting between Bermuda—there was a good flight from Washington National to Hamilton. It was more trying commuting back and forth than staying there in Washington. But we liked it out there, we had a wonderful time, and a lot of Congressmen and Senators came out, and Vice President Bush came out and stayed with us at our residence.

Shultz came out several times when he was Secretary of State, and that really opened another door too because Shultz came out there for a meeting with the foreign minister of Great Britain and they were having a conference at the Mid Ocean Club. I played some golf with Shultz and we spent a lot of time together that weekend and he was asking me how I liked it out there. I told him that I’d been back and forth and I said maybe there’s not enough substance in this job and I was beginning to get a little bored. He said, “Well, I’ll keep that in mind.”

I forgot about it and maybe a year later I got a call to come back, they wanted to talk to me. Our ambassador in Geneva had died of a heart attack suddenly—Don Lowitz, who had been general counsel at OEO. He was a Rumsfeld protégée and a man that I knew very well, a friend of mine—he had died very suddenly and they were in the closing stages of concluding the chemical weapons treaty and they wanted to know if I was interested in that. I flew over to Geneva and met the staff and—

Riley: This would have been about when?

Friedersdorf: We’re getting into about 1986, that was after my second tour at the White House, so I’m jumping a little, but those years in my mind are sort of a blur at this point.

Knott: ’87 to ’91?

Friedersdorf: Yes.
Knott: Is there anything in particular about your service in Geneva that stands out?

Riley: In Geneva, or—?

Knott: Geneva. Did Bermuda generate—

Friedersdorf: It was a very interesting time to be in Bermuda because we had a U.S. naval base there, the Brits had a naval base there, and I didn’t know all this. Before I went out there I was briefed by the CIA and State Department. I didn’t know the strategic importance of Bermuda, but it sits in the middle of the Atlantic, off the North Carolina coast, and just east of Bermuda is the great Atlantic trough, which is like a mountain underneath the Atlantic Ocean. That’s where the Russian nuclear subs would sit, the ones that are targeted on the east coast cities.

This was still a Cold War and we had the naval base there. Their responsibility was flying surveillance with AWACs and SONAR. They would drop SONAR buoys into the water and they’d pick up the pings from the Russian subs. Bermudians were a little anxious at that time to get income tax credit from the United States for deposits in Bermuda, and we were also nearing the end of our lease on that property, which had been negotiated by [Winston] Churchill and [Franklin] Roosevelt at the start of World War II. So there were a lot of things going on diplomatically and militarily. There were a lot of conferences held there between NATO, European countries, and U.S. officials. So I found it a really exciting place to be. I had not anticipated that much activity.

The thing that happens out there though, after you live there a while, you get a little cabin or island fever because you are isolated. I mean, you’re stuck in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, you can’t drive too far in any direction. It’s a wonderful place to visit and I think it’s probably the most beautiful place in the world, physically, that I have ever been, but for somebody who had been doing what I had been doing, the difference in pace was a little—at a couple of years it got a little bit on my nerves. It opened up another door, on the Geneva thing.

We still have friends in Bermuda that we see both there and in the U.S. and Bermuda has a British Governor, it still is a colony. It still has very strong ties with Great Britain and I got involved. Because it was a British colony and we had all those bases there, Shultz would include me in NATO meetings in Germany and in Britain during that period. So I got a lot of nice travel to Europe and was involved—that was when Mrs. [Margaret] Thatcher and Reagan were trying to put in the cruise missiles. I got away from domestic lobbying into a lot of foreign policy and diplomatic work.

Knott: Were you still in Bermuda at the time of the Grenada invasion, or had you come back to join, what was it, Pepsico?

Friedersdorf: Do you remember the date of the—

Knott: It was October of ’83.
Friedersdorf: I was still in Bermuda during the Falkland War and we were getting a lot of pressure from British naval people out there for the U.S. to get into that. I remember very specifically being castigated by the commander of the British base there, quite a vitriol attack. We didn’t want to get involved in that war. We were there then, we were also there during Grenada.

Knott: Did you have to intensify? I guess Bermuda is not a Caribbean nation—

Friedersdorf: People think it’s in the Caribbean, but it’s not, it’s an Atlantic—people come out there in the middle of winter and think they’re going to Jamaica or the Bahamas and it’s north Atlantic weather. The gulf stream flows between U.S. and Bermuda and it keeps them from having extreme weather, but they still have the seasonal—I mean, in the winter time out there they’re wearing sweaters, it doesn’t get below freezing but it’s not a Caribbean resort climate.

Knott: As far as your tenure in Geneva, anything that particularly comes to mind in terms of dealing with the Soviets?

Friedersdorf: The conference on disarmament, as I mentioned, we were in the final stages of the chemical weapons treaty. The final debate was over on-site inspections and the Russians were finally admitting that they had a stockpile of chemical weapons. We admitted we had a stockpile of chemical weapons at a number of locations around the United States.

I took the Russian delegation to Tooele, Utah, and took them through our chemical weapons facility there, which is still there to this day. They took me to Volgograd, which was formerly Stalingrad, where they have most of their chemical weapons buried. They’re trying to show transparency and openness and we hosted them in Salt Lake and took them to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir rehearsal, took them to Ben and Jerry’s, got them a chocolate fudge sundae, showed them all of our chemical weapons.

In Volgograd they took us on a boat trip down the Volga and were great hosts. There were 40 nations there, and I think about the time we were there we got the treaty to the point that it was not concluded before I left but for all intents and purposes it was concluded. Of course, it has been concluded now and it’s being administered through the chemical weapons enforcement system in Brussels. That was an exciting time to be in Geneva because it was in the closing days of the Soviet Empire and we were beginning to get rumbles from the Eastern Block nations—I mean [Mikhail] Gorbachev and [Eduard] Shevardnadze all came to Geneva and spoke to the conference while I was there. I got a chance to meet them.

On the day the Berlin Wall fell and the reunification, October 7, 1989, I told Priscilla, “I want to go to Berlin and be there. This is going to be a historic day.” We flew up to Berlin and couldn’t get a room in the western sector. Some Germans told us of a hotel and we took a train over to the eastern sector. We finally found a room in what had been a Communist vacation spa which was the most—it was an old World War II barracks, where they let people go to stay, spend a weekend in Berlin.
We stayed there that night, communal showers, communal bathrooms. Then took the train back into Berlin and they had the final chipping of the Berlin wall that day. They had set up bratwurst and beer stands all up and down the Unter den Linden and millions of people from all over Germany were there, East Germany, West Germany. At some of the tables where we sat and ate we saw some reunions between relatives who had never met since 1945.

It was really an exciting time to be there. The most unbelievable thing happened the night before we had taken the train back into Berlin. We went to the Kurfürstendamm shopping street. We were walking down the street and I grabbed my wife’s arm and said, “That’s Chancellor [Helmut] Kohl ahead of us. She looked up, and looking in this window at these fur coats, with nobody else around was Chancellor Kohl and his wife, Hannelore.

I said, “They couldn’t be, on the night of reunification, walking down the street by themselves.” Well, they were. Then other people recognized them and you could see them come up to them and start talking and then I noticed at the curb there was security. So they had let them out of the car to look at these stores. Things like that happened to us while we were in Geneva. And Geneva is an exciting city because it’s French-speaking, part of Switzerland. France is within ten minutes, you can cross into Italy within a few minutes and you can get to Germany in probably an hour, up to Lake Constance, in Freiberg in that area. So every weekend we would get a car if there was anything going on and we would just explore Central Europe.

I got invited to a lot of meetings in London, and Berlin, and of course Zurich. And then these trips into the Soviet Union. There was always someone visiting from the Senate foreign relations committee, or the House foreign relations would come through. Of course the Secretary of State would be there quite a bit. So it was an exciting time to be in Europe during the closing days of the Cold War.

I made good friends with the East German ambassador. I made good friends with some of the Eastern bloc countries. They would come in just before the whole thing broke when people started fleeing from the Eastern zones and ask for an appointment, come in and talk to me about how do you set up a democracy. Simplistic questions. I thought, What is going on here? Some were saying, what about chances of jobs in the United States? And I thought, Something big is happening here.

I was sending cables back to the State Department saying, “I don’t know what’s going on, but there seems to be a big fracture in the solidarity of the Eastern bloc.” Because they had always just supported, totally, every vote that came up in the conference, the Soviet Union. That wasn’t happening anymore.

In retrospect, what was really happening was that these ambassadors saw this demise coming and were thinking ahead, what’s going to happen to our country? Countries like Rumania and Hungary and the Baltic states, they all had representatives there. It was an incredible time to be there, to see that just fall apart. They were talking glasnost and perestroika and Russians were trying to stave it off. I wouldn’t have traded those years, it just happened that that was the right place at the right time.
Knott: Your experience in congressional liaison had prepared you well for this kind of diplomacy, so that was good training, somewhat similar?

Friedersdorf: Yes, you dealt with the delegations like you would the Congress. But it was funny how they would vote there, 40 nations. We had the Western bloc and there would be the NATO countries. Then we would have always the Eastern bloc, the Soviet Union and their satellites, and then what we called the unaligned, which would be countries like China, Pakistan, and some of those countries.

Some of the things that happened while we were there were still having ramifications, like using chemical weapons in Iraq and that type of thing. We also did some work on nuclear disarmament, but 99 percent of it was chemical weapons.

Knott: President Bush and Secretary of State Baker asked you to stay on. You were appointed by Ronald Reagan and George Shultz, is that correct? And then to the Geneva conference?

Friedersdorf: Yes, I was appointed by President Reagan and confirmed by the Senate. Then after Reagan retired and President Bush was elected, I stayed for another year into his term. We had been in Geneva then I think for three years and we were a little anxious to come back to the United States. I had about 28, 29 years with government. I sent my resignation into Bush and I stayed there until they filled the post and then we moved back. I took a consultancy in Washington. We had a home in Washington D.C. and a home in Florida, and we spent our time between Washington and Florida.

Riley: I was going to dial back if I may and ask just a couple of questions about the time that you went back to the White House, which was in 1985, right? At the beginning of the second term. You were given a slightly different set of responsibilities as I understand it at that time?

Friedersdorf: That’s putting it mildly. But there’s a story there.

Riley: Can you tell us that story?

Friedersdorf: I was in Bermuda. I’d gotten an offer from Pepsico to be Vice President for Public Affairs in New York and we had left Bermuda and we were living in Greenwich, Connecticut, and working in New York. I did quite a bit in the campaign because I was a civilian now. Don Kendall was CEO of Pepsico; he was a very strong supporter of President Reagan and we raised money and hosted fundraisers in the New York City area, Westchester County.

Riley: That was pretty easy going at that point I would think, against [Walter] Mondale?

Friedersdorf: And Kendall had been a confidant of Nixon and Ford. He was a good friend of George Bush. He had really great contacts in the Republican Party. So I spent most of that year working, in fact, I went down—I’d forgotten this—he’d given me a leave of absence, and I went down and worked out of Republican headquarters in Washington. I set up shop down there and I was helping the advance teams, basically on getting speakers. We’d get a call from the
Republican chairman here, they wanted some Cabinet member to come out, and I was working on that and flying back to New York on weekends.

We were very happy in New York, we had a nice home up there, a good salary, and we were getting along fine. So I got a call after the election from Jim Baker. He said “Max, Don Regan and I are going to swap jobs and I’m going to be Treasury Secretary and Don’s going to be the new Chief of Staff and he’s going to have a rough time for a while because he doesn’t know congressional relations. Will you come back to the White House?” I said, “Jim, I’d like to think that over.”

That meant another move and back to Washington. It meant giving up a job in New York at maybe three times the salary. It meant my poor wife would probably divorce me. So I thought, I’d just let that ride. Then Don Regan called and he was giving me this pitch that I had to come back and help the President out, even if it was just for a year, because he didn’t have the expertise on congressional relations. I told Don the same thing, I said, “I’d like to think it over, I’ll get back to you.”

Well, they did a very dirty trick on me. They had the President call me. President Reagan caught me, I was coming through the lobby of our apartment in Washington and the lady said, “The President is on the phone,” and she was about to faint. There he was, “Well, Max, how are you? I’ve got some staff changes over here and we’re going to need you for a while.” We talked and talked and by the end of the conversation I had agreed to go back.

I mean, how do you say, “Mr. President, I can’t do it.” Some guys can, I couldn’t do it. But it was a horrible, horrible mistake. I mean, that was the worst—you make a lot of career decisions in your life and you look back. Some are good, some are bad. I was never reluctant to change jobs, because I always thought—but that was a terrible mistake. See, Baker wanted to be Secretary of State or Secretary of Defense and that wasn’t open, so he thought, well I’ll talk to Don Regan and maybe I can get that job and get him to come over here. I don’t think Mrs. Reagan or the President really focused on the ramifications of it.

Don Regan convinced me when we got there that it was going to be just like it had been in the first administration, total access to the President, I was running congressional relations. I was going to be “legislative coordinator,” and he was bringing in Ed Rollins, who was going to run the political office, and Pat Buchanan was going to do communications. Both those guys are top notch and I thought, Well, that’s going to be a really great setup. I could just envision that. I was enthused about that. I knew, the first week I was there, probably the first day, that I had made a horrible mistake because he put us in a room, Buchanan—

Riley: He being Regan?

Friedersdorf: Regan put Buchanan and Ed and me in a room and told us to come up with a strategy, a blueprint for the administration from a communications, political, legislative standpoint. We met and met and met, but he wasn’t interested in what we were doing. I mean, he had set it up so we never saw the President. Everything was funneled through him. He was dictatorial. He brought his staff over from Treasury. We called them the “three mice,” and they
became in effect my boss because I couldn’t even get to Regan after a while, I’d have to go through these former staff people at the Treasury Department who he had now brought into the White House.

Ed Rollins, Buchanan, and I, all three, became very frustrated very early. From a congressional relations standpoint, I knew it was a disaster because the first time I took him up to the Hill, he wanted to meet the leadership. Regan set up a meeting with the congressional Republican leadership, the Bakers and Doles and [Pete] Domenicis of this world. And we did, we met in the Majority Leader’s office. So what happens? Regan spends an hour lecturing these guys. You do not lecture members of the United States Senate. I was aghast. It was so embarrassing. I mean, he’d sit there like he’s a CEO telling these guys how it’s going to be. You imagine telling Bob Dole how it’s going to be, or Howard Baker how it’s going to be?

I got back down to the White House and the phone started ringing and Baker and Dole and those guys were calling saying, “Who does that SOB think he is?” They were mad as hell. So I knew that was bad.

The senior staff meetings went like this. We’d sit in there; he was at the head of the table. We were all sitting around, then Bud McFarland was at the other end. Bud McFarland was the only one designated to have personal access to the President. None of us was supposed to do anything, see the President, except through him. We reported to him in the morning and he channeled everything through his mind in a presentation to the President.

And of course, in the first administration, we all got to talk to the President and he got to question us. Jim Baker saw that everybody’s views were represented. In the second term it was nobody but Don Regan’s views. I know this is the way it works on Wall Street, and he was probably a great CEO. But he would sit at the table and chew people out. He would pound on the table.

Bud McFarland was breaking out in hives after about six weeks because he was chewing Bud out. Here’s the President’s National Security Advisor. He would embarrass him right in front of us by some remark. He chewed me out all the time. He hung up on the telephone, slammed the receiver down when I’d give him a vote count. I was honest with him, I don’t have the votes on that, bam. So I knew right then. I’ve agreed to stay for a year, I’m going to do it, I’m not going to walk out. I’ve never walked out of any job in my life, but this administration is not going to work.

Then Mrs. Reagan started calling me once in a while and saying what was going on the Hill with this or that. Then I’d get a call—

Riley: Was that different from the first term? Was it common for Mrs. Reagan to call you during the first term?

Friedersdorf: No, Mrs. Reagan never called me the whole first term because Mike Deaver was taking care of her, keeping her posted. She called me up about something she had heard about—we were having trouble on the Hill about this or that and I would talk to her and tell her what I
knew. Then Don Regan would call me and say, “What are you doing talking to Mrs. Reagan?” I said, “Don, she’s the First Lady of the United States. When she calls me I talk to her.” He said, “You’re not supposed to talk to her. I’m taking care of Mrs. Reagan. You just stay out of this.” I said, “Okay.”

A little bit later of course, before he left, he hung up on her in a conversation, and that sealed his doom.

I don’t know who the hell this guy thinks he is, but I know who he thought he was. He thought he was a CEO. I read his mind, he disdained the President as kind of a Chairman of the Board emeritus. I’m a CEO, Friedersdorf and Buchanan and these other guys, they’re my lackeys. That’s the way he ran the thing, and it was disgusting. I am just so sorry about the way that second term turned out.

The President came back in with a bigger majority the second time, huge majority. We had good prospects on the Hill. But I don’t think we ever had a chance the way he ran the thing. So I am not a fan of Don Regan. If there’s any misunderstanding about that, I want to make that clear.

Riley: Okay. Jim Baker is somebody who is widely respected as having exceptionally fine-tuned political antennae. How do you explain this kind of mistake? Is it the case that Baker is just looking out for himself in this instance?

Friedersdorf: Oh, I think Jim had a great loyalty to the President. I think that he thought that Don could adjust over there. Hindsight is always better, of course. But when you look back on it you realize that Baker had been campaign manager for Ford, he’d been Secretary of Commerce, he had run for office in Texas, he had been campaign manager for George Bush. His political credentials were impeccable.

Regan did respect the President because the President had the power. So he would jolly him up with Irish stories and be charming around him, but what was happening to the President was he was not being served well because he was not getting all sides of the issue. So I don’t know where the blame lies. I think that Jim was burned out. I think that if he had to do it all over again, he wouldn’t in a million years—he could have walked out on Pennsylvania Avenue and grabbed the first person that walked by, would have been a better Chief of Staff than Don Regan was. It was just a tragedy, in my opinion. And from my personal standpoint, I made a horrible mistake by doing that. I have never forgiven myself.

I let them reinsert me as Congressional Affairs Director over B. Oglesby, who had been promoted to that job. That created immediate tension between B. and me. To this day our friendship has been ruptured because I was brought back and inserted over him, and I don’t blame B. I would have felt the same way. That was a terrible thing to do and I was irresponsible to do it. So the whole situation in my mind is just a major disaster, and Regan created such chaos. Everybody was on pins and needles around there.
Bless her heart, Mrs. Reagan was the one who finally flushed him out. She just put her foot down and made the President fire him, and the President, with his heart of gold, I’d been told by Meese and Deaver that he never fired anybody in his life, he’s not constitutionally able to fire anybody.

But this situation finally got through to Mrs. Reagan and she got rid of him. Then he comes up with Howard Baker and Duberstein. If he had had those kinds of people at the start, it would have been a whole different story. So I think Baker probably thought, Regan being a former CEO, he’d had some experience as Secretary of Treasury, he knew the budget, he was a forceful person, command-type personality. I think Jim probably saw some positives there that he could live with. Obviously he did.

**Riley:** You said that you were denied access to the President. It wasn’t possible for you in any way to communicate to the President that this arrangement that has been created is not serving him well, because your experience with Reagan went back beyond Don Regan?

**Friedersdorf:** I thought about talking to him and telling him that, but I didn’t. It was an overt, deliberate denial of access for people that should have had access. Regan would not even let the cleaning lady go in there unless he was there. Bud McFarland could not give his daily security briefing without Regan being in there and when we were there, that was done by the National Security Advisor. Jim Baker didn’t feel like he had to be in there sitting on the President’s lap every time somebody reported to him.

I’d go see Jim, say we were working a bill. I’d say, “You know, I think the President needs to call five or six people before Friday, get them before the weekend.” He’d say, “Well, do some talking points, get them all together and go tell Helene [von Damm] you need to see him and when he schedules breaks during the day—Helene would call me and say, “Max, the President is available now.” I’d run down there, go in and talk to him. Jim Baker wasn’t there. But Regan—I can’t ever remember going in there when Regan wasn’t there. So when are you going to tell the President?

When we’d get on the chopper, on Air Force One, to go somewhere, you were never even permitted to approach him. Regan sealed him off, isolated him, and, I think that it was a detriment to the President. The only person who had any kind of access, could go around Regan, was Cap Weinberger. Cap went so far back that even Regan could not keep him out. But as far as the White House staff, we were blocked.

**Riley:** Pat Buchanan I don’t know, but he doesn’t strike me as the kind of person who would suffer very easily under these kinds of conditions.

**Friedersdorf:** Oh, he was P.O.-ed the first week. I mean, we realized immediately what was happening. He had hired a paper staff that looked good in the press because of my experience, Pat Buchanan had a good reputation among the Republicans, and Ed Rollins was at that time considered a top political advisor. So the paper looked great but it didn’t work that way. Rollins left. I think within a year we were all gone, I can’t remember the sequence. Then it was totally run by Regan. He didn’t even have to fool with us. He had his own staff and—
Knott: Why did Regan call you and ask you to come back? Was that all just an act? I mean why did he even have to go through that?

Friedersdorf: I think Jim Baker had probably said to him—the way they probably sold it to the President probably was, “We’re going to change here.” And if President Reagan had any qualms—President Reagan, he’s pretty shrewd—“Don Regan, how’s he going to run this operation?” I could imagine Baker saying, “Don’s going to have plenty of help. He’s going to get Max back down here and he’s going to get Ed over here”—who the President liked—“and he’s going to have Buchanan do communications. So he’s going to have a real crackerjack set-up here, plenty of help.” So that’s why Regan called me.

But just as soon as I signed on, within a few days, the whole atmosphere had changed. As soon as I had made my resignation with PepsiCo [REDACTEDTEXT], then he started treating me like he does everybody else.

Knott: You mentioned earlier that you thought Regan had a certain disdain for Reagan—

Friedersdorf: I did.

Knott: Are you just inferring that or did you ever actually hear him—

Friedersdorf: No, it was body language, nothing he ever said, but I could just tell that he thought he was President himself, and he was smarter than anyone else [REDACTEDTEXT] and by God I’m going to run this operation. That was just the way he came across to me. You know, at the start, we would be in a meeting with Regan and somebody would say, “When are we going to report to the President?” He’d say, “I’ll get to the President. I’ll take care of the President.” That’s just the way he’d say it. He’d go in there and I’m sure, I had the feeling, I don’t know this for a fact because I wasn’t in there, that he would tell the President what the President wanted to hear. He was a person that could not deliver bad news too. That was another fault. Regan did not want to tell the President anything that the President didn’t want to hear. But you can’t do that.

When we had Baker there and we had access to the President, we would give it to him unvarnished, because the President had to make his decision based on the facts, not what he wanted to hear. But I think Regan would go in there and just pump him full of sunshine, everything is great, everybody’s fine. The Hill’s in great shape. And things were just going to Hell everywhere. But that wasn’t Regan’s style. The only person he had to please in the world was President Reagan. The rest of it, he could be himself with the rest of us. Dual personality.

Knott: Did this alter your view of President Reagan at all in terms of “why can’t he see this?”

Friedersdorf: Yes, a little bit. I was disappointed. I thought that President Reagan should have exhibited more control over his Chief of Staff, which is the most critical, more important than any person he puts on his staff. It’s more important than the Cabinet. It’s the person that runs his operation. It was so great with Baker there, and there were other people he could have called upon that would have been very, very good appointments. But why he let Jim Baker make this
decision for him is beyond me. I don’t know how they got around Mrs. Reagan to start with. Maybe she didn’t even know about it. Quite possibly she didn’t, or else Jim, who is a real charmer, may have sold Mrs. Reagan on it.

But Mrs. Reagan is so astute it didn’t take her long to realize that things were not going well. She started seeing people talking about leaving after a very short time. I would have quit the first week if I could have. The day that really—I was on the Hill. I had come out of a meeting with Bob Michel and we had a bad vote count. I don’t even remember the issue. Regan had said he wanted to know how we stood on that. I called him. Got through to him and said “Don, I just talked to Bob and the committee chairmen and we don’t have the votes yet on this. We’ve got a lot of work to do.” And he said, “Well, get the damn votes.” And he hung up the phone like that.

I thought, 

I don’t take that off anybody. I’m going to do my job because I love the President. But my loyalty to Don Regan as the Chief of Staff is just not—Because I don’t treat people like that and I’ve never been treated like that, and I wouldn’t work for people that treat me like that. But I wasn’t by myself. As I say, that’s the way he treated everybody.

Riley: The administration got in a lot of trouble during the second term related to the Iran-Contra situation. I know you weren’t there, but I’m curious about your interpretation, as somebody who saw the inside of this White House, as to what might have gone on.

Friedersdorf: I think it was another case of overzealousness, would be my interpretation of it. The administration was so anxious to help the Contras and to help them regain their country and defeat the Sandinistas that we were trying to figure out ways to get around—Congress would not appropriate any money for us to give them aid; they blocked it through amendments. So somebody in the National Security Office had a brainstorm, “We can do it through Iran. We can do a third-country transfer.”

I thought it was pretty bright myself, to be honest with you. I may have a blind spot on this, but I have always thought, if that is your position to help them, and you don’t violate the law, and the President can do it administratively, why not do it. But there are different interpretations that we did violate the law. I think the President probably was not tuned in to the details on it. I think [John] Poindexter and Bud McFarland and Ollie North ran the operation and the President was just probably aware—he was very pro Contra, of course—that he was telling them get it done and spare me the details. But there was so much heat from the Hill that about anything you did to help them was going to be controversial.

Knott: We’ll just take a little break and then we’ll engage in some Reagan Presidency in retrospect, some of the bigger internal questions.

[BREAK]

Friedersdorf: Before we move on, I just want to say in conclusion about Don Regan, I think one of the reasons for his leadership style was his former service in the Marine Corps. He had been a
Marine and I think he was more tuned to Marine-type command than perhaps diplomatic or political type leadership.

Knott: I was wondering if you might discuss some of the parallels and differences that you saw. You served in three different administrations, in a somewhat similar capacity throughout. Is there any way you could give us an overview, a comparison of the Nixon, Ford, and Reagan operations and the various strengths and weaknesses of each? It’s a lot to ask, I guess.

Friedersdorf: Well I’d characterize them—Organizational differences in all three of course, but I think the environment, the political situation, the world situation, and the domestic situation dictated the tenor of the administration. The Nixon administration, the years that I was there, were almost totally consumed with the Vietnam war and Watergate. I went there in April of ’71 and he had served, I think he was elected first in ’68. So I think the first two years of his first term were fairly normal in the congressional relations function, on the normal domestic and foreign issues. But by the time I’d reached there in ’71, we were getting into an era where he was thinking about re-election, and of course Watergate happened and the Vietnam war was still raging. So I think you’d say that it was totally dominated by those issues.

As far as style, Nixon had an entirely different style than Ford or certainly President Reagan. He was not a President that really wanted to get involved in the details of congressional relations. He preferred to deal with the leadership. He didn’t become familiar with many members of the rank and file, the back-benchers. Even as far as the leadership, I think he preferred to deal with them by telephone rather than person. I found that as we got deeper and deeper into Vietnam and the congressional situation became very anti-war, he retreated more and more into the cocoon of the White House. I don’t recall him going to the Hill other than the State of the Union messages, so it was pretty much a congressional relations nightmare toward the end.

As far as Ford, Ford was the unelected President as we talked about, and one that came in fresh from the Congress so to speak, so his congressional style was very hands-on. He wanted to see Congressmen and Senators and he did see Congressmen and Senators. He picked up the phone at the merest need to. He didn’t have to be coaxed or cajoled into calling or seeing Congressmen.

Reagan came to town with an attitude that he wanted to excel at congressional relations. He wanted to open up communications with Congress, to become familiar with Congress. He considered Congress a partner, that his programs would rise or fall with his ability to work with Congress, and he was very willing to. Even though he didn’t have the background of either Ford or Nixon, having never served in Congress, he still understood, in some respects better than either of them, the necessity of congressional relations.

So I think of the three Presidents, and of course he came in in the convergence of the situation, the assassination attempt, the first time we had a majority in the Senate for a while, the fact the country was in economic distress and he had a program that appealed to the people. All of these things converged at a time that made congressional relations somewhat easier.

Knott: What would you consider to be the highlight of your career? Is there one particular event or particular position you held that you view as the—
Friedersdorf: Well, I’d say that the lowest day I ever had, the bad news day, was when President Nixon resigned. Not that I saw any other avenue for him, other than going through with the impeachment, but it was a very sad day when he spoke to the staff in the East Room and made his soliloquy to his mother and sort of apologized for everything that had happened. That was a very emotional thing and we had been through a lot, had been spending practically every day since the last election in preserving that Presidency, to see all that slip away. I had become very attached, even despite all the trouble he had, you become very attached when you’re working for a President. It becomes a very traumatic thing.

I think the most exciting thing of course, for me, was the first year of the Reagan administration when he was passing his budget cut, his tax cut, and the AWACs victory. He was on a high and it was almost like being on adrenalin for 24 hours a day. I mean, it was just so exciting and he was so popular. There’s nothing that feels better than victory. That’s what I like about politics, there are no ties. You either win or lose the election. Then when it comes to congressional relations you either win or lose the vote and there’s no sugar-coating defeats, no denying the thrill of victory. Nothing in my life can ever match that first year with Reagan.

Knott: Darby and I were talking about this the other day when she was putting your briefing book together. I don’t think she found a single criticism of you anywhere, which is—

Morrisroe: Not that I was eagerly looking.

Knott: But it is almost unheard of when we prepare these briefing books. How do you explain that? We found nothing but tremendous praise from both sides of the aisle.

Friedersdorf: I had good mentors and good teachers. It all started in Indiana when I first got into political writing. Indiana is a very political state. It’s almost a way of life in Indiana, and working around the Governor’s office and seeing Herb Hill, the old Governor’s press secretary, I saw how he operated. First of all he was honest with everybody, he didn’t try to mislead you or give you false facts. Then I was very fortunate in getting with Congressman Roudebush of Indiana, who for the ten years I worked for him was almost like a brother.

He was ten years older than I was, and I admired him so much. He was a decorated veteran of World War II. He had been a farmer, but he was highly educated. He had achieved a lot from very humble beginnings, elected to Congress when nobody said he could win. We were redistricted three times and each time we were able to win. He was an indefatigable campaigner. But he never ever made an enemy of a Democrat. The Democrats liked him because he was straight up and I just learned a lot from him in my ten years.

I think I mentioned I was a very partisan person. He told me that in Washington everyone had their own job to do and we should worry about our own district and not other districts, and things that really stuck with you.

Then when I went to work for Don Rumsfeld, of course, then I really got in the big leagues and he was a terrific mentor. And being exposed to people like that at a very young age, when you’re
still under 30 and seeing how they operate—To this day, I still have contact with him and Cheney. And working for Senator Tower, I learned a great deal from Senator Tower.

Then working for President Nixon I learned a great deal, about some things not to do in some cases, and that taught me you can be a very good President, but you can get in trouble so easily from what people that work for you do. And that taught me a good lesson, that you cannot ever hire people that you don’t have total faith in, and to find people that are loyal. I think that was one of President Nixon’s problems. He didn’t pay enough attention to his staff, although he was overwhelmed with issues, like the war, that maybe if he had been a little more careful in some of his staff decisions—

Then of course working for President Ford, again, there was a mentor, I mean when you work for people like that, you’re working for the cream of the crop. Then having a chance to work for President Reagan and with Jim Baker, who I admire so much. I’ve just been very lucky. I’ve always been associated with people that are high caliber, and I think that’s just the luck of the draw sometimes.

You could get a nasty boss or a crooked boss and you might go down the wrong trail. The people I worked for always were people that were partisan in the finest sense of the word. But they always looked at the higher goal, which was serving the country. That’s the reason I didn’t really get in any trouble up there or make enemies. I’d learned from the people I’d worked for that you treat people like you want to be treated yourself, and that way is the way to succeed.

**Knott:** The purpose of these interviews is to provide a resource for generations who aren’t even here yet, so this is your opportunity to speak to folks fifty or a hundred years from now who may be interested in learning more about Ronald Reagan. Is there anything that we haven’t touched on? I think Russell already asked this in a sense, but do you have any final comments about Ronald Reagan, the Reagan that you knew?

**Friedersdorf:** I think that you should never prejudge people, regardless of their age, their race, their religion, or their background. When I was working for President Ford and we found out that President Reagan was running against us for that nomination back in ’76, my exposure had been to listen to a few speeches and I had met him a couple of times, but nothing significant. And I thought, number one, that he was too old to be President. That was a foolish concept. I thought he was not qualified because he had been an actor and maybe he didn’t understand government that well. I thought that he was probably a Hollywood type that would not be a good leader for the country. I overlooked his record as Governor of California. By all reports, he was a great Governor of California. And I had taken all those misconceptions and misjudged him. Then in ’80 when he ran and I was Chairman of the Federal Election Commission, even at that point, I thought, **This man is too old to be the President of the United States.**

The day I was contacted and talked to him, then when I met him and started working for him, I changed my opinion so quickly. I could see that he’d really thought about the country and went into the issues with more depth than I would ever have conceived. He had a plan for the country. He didn’t just want to be President because it would be an honor to be in that office. He really had a plan to correct the situation that existed at that time as far as our domestic tranquility and
our economy, and our military had been depleted because of reaction to the Vietnam war. All these things he saw, and he had an idea how to correct them and a way of selling them. One thing is to have an idea what to do, the other is to be able to sell people.

But as soon as you heard him speak and heard his plan and saw him interact with other people, you realized that this person—The United States has always been very fortunate. When it gets in deep trouble, the right person comes along. It’s amazing how many times in our history, through all the trouble in the states and everything, we’ve somehow come up with a person who can lead. I just look back through history. Think about [George] Washington, if we hadn’t had him, or if [Thomas] Jefferson hadn’t decided to explore the rest of the continent, that might have all been Spanish or French or English by now. If President [Abraham] Lincoln hadn’t been here, we probably would have been divided into four or five countries, we’d have been Balkanized by now, no question about it, although I still think that war could have been avoided and I can never accept the number of casualties in the Civil War to save the union. Still, the results of it have been good.

President Roosevelt saved us. Probably we’d all be speaking German or Japanese by now. And then [Harry] Truman came along at the right time, with the right judgment. You just go on and on. I just think that President Reagan emerged at a time that the history of the country was ready for somebody who had the foresight that he did. And I think the future generations, if they keep putting the right people in that job, at the right time, the country will survive for a long time.

Riley: I don’t have any other questions. This has been for us an extraordinary interview. It’s not often that we get to somebody who has had the breadth of experience that you have across administrations.

Friedersdorf: Thank you.

Riley: It is illuminating not just for the Reagan project but for those of us who study the Presidency about a good slice of 20th century history, so we’re deeply in your debt for doing this.

Friedersdorf: Well I appreciate being invited up here. This is better than writing a book, it’s easier.

Riley: Well, we’ll leave somebody else to write the book.

Knott: It’s been a real pleasure. I’m going to miss our phone calls, you’ve been a joy to deal with, seriously, and it has been a real honor to meet you. Thank you very much.