The Chain of Command After Reagan Was Shot

NBC's Doug Kiker recreates what happened inside the White House in the chaotic moments after President Ronald Reagan was shot by a would-be assassin. Secretary of State Alexander Haig raises eyebrows when he claims, "I am in control here at the White House pending return of the vice president," even though under the Constitution he is supposed to be fifth, not third, in the line of presidential succession.

Keywords
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DAVID BRINKLEY, anchor:

The shooting in Washington this week occurred in front of about ten television cameras as everyone has seen. What everyone has not seen is what went on in the White House after the President was rushed to a hospital. Doug Kiker, tell us what you can about that.

DOUG KIKER reporting:

Well David, as you say, that in the beginning there was some shock and confusion. But then everyone pretty much got his act together. What we tried to do tonight using videotape and sketches based on eyewitness reports, is recreate what happened inside the White House and the Administration.

2:25 PM Monday: President Reagan is wounded, pushed into his limousine by Secret Service agents, and is rushed to George Washington University Hospital for emergency surgery. We’ve all seen these pictures a dozen times by now, and our grandchildren will look at them in history books. He is the most powerful political leader on earth, but who assumed and exercised that power for him between the time the President was shot, operated on, and regained consciousness? Who ran the country? If a sudden crisis had developed, who would have made the life or death decisions? In other words, was anybody in charge?

2:59 PM White House Chief of Staff James Baker and White House Counselor Ed Meese arrive at the hospital only a few blocks away from the White House. These two senior staff officers are the men usually most responsible for transforming Presidential orders and directives into action. Mr. Reagan, about to be wheeled into the operating room asks them, perhaps not entirely facetiously, “Who’s minding the store?” Meanwhile, responding to the game plan, members of the Cabinet rush to the White House,
and take their position in the Situation Room, a highly secure crisis management center. Among them, Secretary of State Alexander Haig and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger. At 3PM, Vice President Bush is flying over Texas on his way to Austin to make a speech. He’s been told of the attack, but not that the President has been hit.

Mr. JIM WRIGHT (House Democratic Leader): I suppose we had not been in the air but for a very few minutes.

KIKER: House Democratic Leader Jim Wright of Texas accompanied Bush on the flight. He says at that point, they were continuing to Austin.

Mr. WRIGHT: We believed at that time that the President had not been stricken by gunfire.

KIKER: 3:04 PM: Haig calls Bush on a radio telephone and tells him only that he’d better head home, and more information is coming in code on a teletype. 3:20PM: Moments before doctors begin surgery on the President. The teletype message reaches Bush. The President has been wounded. Bush says, “We’re going straight home.” So they do, after a brief refueling stop in Austin.

Mr. WRIGHT: The Vice President was very calm throughout it all. Not for one moment did he show hesitation or indecisiveness.

KIKER: According to one member of the party, the Vice President sweated it out as the President went into surgery.

Mr. LARRY SPEAKES (Deputy Press Secretary): Earlier when I was out here, our initial report said that the President was not hit, ah, that’s what we run into when we try to give information when we aren’t 100 percent sure of or that we don’t have from the source.

KIKER: A little after 4PM : Deputy Press Secretary Larry Speakes holds a televised news conference and in trying to answer some questions about the chain of command, appears ill informed and unsure of himself. At least he appears that way to Secretary of State Haig, who at 4:15, rushes out to the newsroom and gives a statement of his own, one which was destined to raise eyebrows and provoke controversy.

Mr. ALEXANDER HAIG (Secretary of State): Constitutionally, gentlemen, you have the President, the Vice President, and the Secretary of State in that order, and should the President decide he wants to transfer the helm to the Vice President he will do so. As of now, I am in control here at the White House, pending the return of the Vice President, and in close touch with him. If something came up I would check with him of course.

KIKER: As Secretary of State, Haig was the senior officer in the situation room. But under the Constitution he is fifth, not third, in the line of succession. Besides, this is a matter of possible, temporary incapacity, not succession-- and what about the Vice President? Aboard Air Force Two, the Vice President watches Haig on television, although Haig had not notified him about it in advance. Those on board say that he was neither surprised or angered, but agreed that it would have a stabilizing effect. Back in the White House Situation Room, Defense Secretary Weinberger is surprised and more than a little angry. Because Haig had said on television that absolutely no military alert measures are necessary at this time. Weinberger, acting under the authority and instructions of the National Security Act, had just ordered a limited number of low-level measures increasing the readiness of some units to go into action. Sources say the two men had a brief and bitter spitting match.
6:30 PM: The President’s surgery is successfully completed, and aboard the Vice President’s plane Bush gets the good news over the phone from Meese. Bush says, “Well that is wonderful. That’s great news.” 7 PM: Bush arrives at the White House and meets with the Cabinet, and even though the President is still in the recovery room, they decide there is no need to vote to invoke the 25th Amendment and make Bush acting President, they decide the President is still capable of command. 7:30 PM: For the first time the nation and the world is told the President came through the operation with flying colors. The word comes from hospital spokesman Dr. Dennis O’Leary.

Dr. DENNIS O’LEARY (Hospital Spokesman): The President is in the recovery room, he is in stable condition and he is awake.

KIKER: When White House political aide Lyn Nofziger talks to reporters, he’s asked, who’s in charge?

Mr. SAM DONALDSON, reporter: There is a report of which I believe the White House said that General Haig said that he was in charge.

Mr. LYN NOFZIGER (White House political aide): I don’t think I want to comment on that. The… the President will be fully capable of making decisions tomorrow, according to the doctors. In the meantime, the business of government is going on normally, and we expect it to continue to. And Vice President Bush is here, and the ..the rest of the government is functioning normally, and we expect that it will continue to do so.

KIKER: But at 8:30 PM, an hour later, with the President now apparently safe but still in no shape to make decisions-- Larry Speakes appears again, and draws a barrage of questions on the same subject.

Mr. BILL PLANTE (Reporter): Larry, when you talk about command authority-- are you talking about what, specifically? Military command? Specifically, what?

Mr. SPEAKES (White House spokesman): Yes.

KIKER: So who’s in charge? The answer appears to be, that except for the flap caused by Haig, a lot of people. A lot of people who managed to work together and keep their cool, in one of the most tense and frantic situations any of them will ever experience.