

Rick Ahearn, savvy advance man of Republican presidents, dies at 74

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By [Emily Langer](#)

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Rick Ahearn, who spent half a century as a behind-the-scenes figure in Republican presidential politics, a savvy advance man on the campaign trail and in the White House who was by President Ronald Reagan's side during an assassination attempt in 1981, died Nov. 14 at a hospital in New Bedford, Mass. He was 74.

The cause was cardiac arrest following several surgeries in recent weeks, said his partner, Maria Mastorakos.

The son of a Boston City Council president — with an accent to show for his Massachusetts upbringing — Mr. Ahearn started his political life as a Democrat but changed his party allegiance in 1972, when U.S. Sen. [George S. McGovern](#) of South Dakota won the Democratic presidential nomination as a standard-bearer of the party's liberal wing.

Mr. Ahearn joined the reelection campaign of President [Richard M. Nixon](#) that year and, in the decades that followed, worked for every Republican president, whether as a campaign staffer or in the White House or both, through the 2016 and 2020 presidential bids of Donald Trump.

Mr. Ahearn was perhaps best known as an aide to Reagan, whom he served beginning in the 1980 campaign that propelled the former California governor and Hollywood actor to office. "Rick Ahearn doesn't exactly tuck the Reagans into bed at night," a reporter for the Boston Globe observed in 1980. "But he is one of the first people they see in the morning and the last they see at night."

He had a broad portfolio of assignments over the years but was especially valued for his work on the staff that helps prepare for and execute appearances by presidents and presidential candidates.

As an advance man, Mr. Ahearn combined the skills of an event planner, travel agent, bouncer, booster, theatrical director and traffic cop — even those of an oracle as he attempted to provide for every contingency.

Advance staffers have no part in setting policy. But they provide critical support to an administration through the orchestration of events designed to enhance the president's image and agenda.

Mr. Ahearn, who was Catholic, helped oversee Reagan's meetings with Pope John Paul II. An Irishman by heritage, he arranged for the president to have a pint of beer at a pub in Ballyporeen, Reagan's ancestral home, during a [diplomatic trip](#) to Ireland in 1984.

"The images of his visit to the pub got more coverage and have endured a lot longer than just remarks he would make to the Irish legislature," said Frederick J. Ryan Jr., the chairman of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute and former publisher of The Washington Post, who met Mr. Ahearn while doing volunteer advance work on Reagan's 1980 campaign.

Mr. Ahearn was the lead advance representative for Reagan at perhaps the most traumatic moment of his presidency, on March 30, 1981, when a gunman, John Hinckley Jr., fired six shots as Reagan exited the Washington Hilton hotel after delivering a speech to members of the AFL-CIO.

Secret Service pushed Reagan into a waiting limousine. Mr. Ahearn, who said he initially mistook the shots for firecrackers, was struck in the eye and cheek by glass when a bullet hit a car window.

The president was shot, as were a Secret Service agent, Timothy McCarthy, and a D.C. police officer, Thomas Delahanty. But White House press secretary James S. Brady, who took a bullet in the head, was the most seriously wounded. Mr. Ahearn saw Brady "go down like a sack of potatoes," he recalled, and immediately began administering first aid.

"When I ran over to him and knelt down next to him, he was face down on the sidewalk next to a grate and he was trying to get up," Mr. Ahearn [told the London Guardian](#) years later. "He was trying to speak and, as he turned his head, I could see that the bullet had entered his left forehead and pretty much devastated his head, so I immediately pulled out my pocket handkerchief and tried to stanch the bleeding and hold his head together."

Mr. Ahearn was credited with helping to save Brady's life when he challenged an ambulance driver who at first said that Brady was to be transported to Washington Hospital Center — with traffic, a 20-minute drive away. Mr. Ahearn insisted that they instead rush to George Washington University Hospital, which was much closer, and which they later learned was the facility where Reagan was taken.

"Jim Brady would not have survived the trip to Washington Hospital Center," Arthur I. Kobrine, a neurosurgeon who cared for him, later told the Kansas City Star. "He was getting ready to die when they wheeled him into the emergency room."

After the shooting, Mr. Ahearn was a near-constant presence at the hospital from morning until night, assisting Brady, his wife, [Sarah Brady](#), Reagan and [Nancy Reagan](#). He said he heard Reagan's oft-quoted quip to his doctors, "I hope you're all Republicans," and his remark to the first

lady: "Honey, I forgot to duck."

Brady was partially paralyzed but remained active in public life for years as an advocate for gun control. He died in 2014 at 73.

Frederick Leonard Ahearn was born in Boston on Nov. 6, 1949. His father, after serving on the Boston City Council in the 1950s, became first deputy secretary of state for Massachusetts. Mr. Ahearn's mother was a homemaker.

Through his father, Mr. Ahearn became involved in politics from a young age, handing out leaflets for Boston Democrats as early as age 7.

He worked for Boston mayor John F. Collins and as a student at Boston College rallied young voters to the unsuccessful 1968 Democratic presidential campaign of Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. Mr. Ahearn did his first advance work for Humphrey.

Mr. Ahearn graduated from college in 1971. After McGovern won the presidential nomination the following year, Mr. Ahearn told a reporter that "at this point ... I consider myself a Democrat without a home, and unless I see some distinct changes in the Democratic Party, I will become a Republican."

Mr. Ahearn worked on the 1976 campaign of President Gerald Ford. In the Reagan administration, he rose to the position of deputy director of the presidential advance office.

In subsequent elections, he worked for the campaigns of George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush and Trump, for whom he helped negotiate the terms of presidential debates, according to Bill Dal Col, his longtime business partner at Potomac Communications Strategies, a political consulting firm.

Mr. Ahearn joined the unsuccessful presidential campaigns of candidates including Jack Kemp in 1988, Steve Forbes in 2000 and Rudy Giuliani in 2008. The Republican vice presidents and vice-presidential nominees he served included, most recently, Mike Pence.

Mr. Ahearn was married to Pamela Gardner Ahearn, who held several top government protocol positions, from 1990 until her death in 2007. Besides Mastorakos, his partner of 11 years, of Falmouth, Mass., and Alexandria, Va., survivors include a brother.

Just as he had attended to Reagan in life, Mr. Ahearn guarded the president's legacy after his death. When Reagan died in 2004, Mr. Ahearn helped oversee his funeral rites from coast to coast, a mission that aides had dubbed "Operation Serenade."

In particular, according to the Reagan foundation and institute, it was Mr. Ahearn who asked that the boots hanging from the riderless horse in the caisson procession to the U.S. Capitol be left "scuffed, but not dusty," because "that is how Ronald Reagan would have worn them."