INCIDENTAL PAPER

Intelligence Inside the White House: The Influence of Executive Style and Technology

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Executive Summary

This paper traces the history of on-site—inside the White House—intelligence support to the president of the United States. Although the need for an on-site, 24-hour watch function would seem obvious, such support was not institutionalized until the early 1960s.

Because its proximity to the president gives the Situation Room substantial power, its management presents a continuing organizational dilemma that reflects the intragovernmental struggle over formulation of national security policy. Nearly every aspect of the Situation Room's function—mission, staffing, technology, and information sources—has been a point of contention in the national security community.

In spite of the controversy, the Situation Room performs an essential and enduring service in the Executive branch by synthesizing vast amounts of information and intelligence for senior decisionmakers, during both routine and crisis operations.

The key to performing this mission is maintaining a balance between technology and the personalities and skills of the officeholders as well as among the types of information that flow into the watch.

Having himself been a watchstander in the White House Situation Room (1988–91), the author suggests that because the Situation Room must be adaptable to the styles of each president and national security advisor, its role may necessarily be "reinvented" with each administration.

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One

Introduction: The Situation Room

Most Americans-and most people around the world-believe that mechanisms have long been in place to ensure that the president of the United States is kept up to speed on world and domestic events better than any other human being. Having spent two and a half years involved in this effort, however, I can say that I found it amazing that a formalized structure to provide such support was institutionalized only in the early 1960s.

This paper examines the history of, and the controversy surrounding, on-site intelligence support to the president. The premise here is that presidents, national security advisors, and National Security Council (NSC) staff members require an on-site, 24-hour intelligence watch function to keep them apprised of international developments, but the management of this function presents an organizational dilemma that reflects a long-standing intergovernmental struggle over the making of national security policy. Every president must reinvent the system anew, striking balances among the roles played by the president and key national security advisors. Similarly, there is no easy way to determine the precise function of a president's Situation Room. Although I concluded that it, too, needs to be reinvented to suit the needs of each president, the Situation Room can help bridge the expertise gap that occurs with each presidential transition. Because Situation Room personnel are "nonpolitical," they can be carried over, thus helping to smooth the shakedown period for a new administration. Balances also must be struck between the uses of technology and the personalities and skills of the officeholders, as well as among the types of intelligence that flow into the watch. The role of information technologies is crucial, but technologies should complement, not override, a decisionmaker's personal style.

Since inception of the Situation Room in the summer of 1961, its role has been an issue for contention within the organs of government dealing with national security—and it will continue to be. The simplest reason is that the Situation Room has power as a conduit to the president. Often, junior intelligence personnel decide what analysis or judgment goes to the National Security Advisor or the President. This is especially true during crises. Thus, the Situation Room is central to many enduring national security dilemmas such as: Should the president and the president's staff assume central control of the national security process? Should the president be directly involved in crisis management? Should the White House be provided with finished or raw intelligence products? From which organizations should Situation Room watchstanders be drawn? This paper delves into these and other "balancing acts" involved in "intelligence inside the White House." In part **Two**, the paper looks at the mission and staffing of the Situation Room and in part **Three** examines the sources and types of reporting the Situation Room receives; the role of technology in managing the plethora of available intelligence and information; and the role of the Situation Room in both day-to-day and crisis operation.

1.1 The Early Years

An on-site intelligence watch at the White House was very slow in coming. It did not become a permanent entity until the establishment of the Situation Room in 1961. The absence of such a facility for so long is hard to explain, but the physical spatial confines of the White House, small executive staff, and long-time lack of a “central” intelligence organization all contributed to the delay.

President George Washington laid the cornerstone of what is now called the White House on October 13, 1792, but he and his wife never actually lived in the Mansion. Washington’s successor, John Adams, was the first occupant, in November 1800. It would be a mistake to confuse the sprawling eighteen-acre complex of the White House today with the Mansion of the late 1700s or even late 1800s. Until the building now called the Old Executive Office Building (OEOB), which has at different times housed the Departments of War, Navy, and State, was transferred to presidential use after World War II, the only structure directly supporting the president was the White House building itself. Today, the White House complex encompasses three separate structures. The first is the Executive Mansion, which most people associate with the words “White House,” which has undergone a great deal of renovation, planned and unplanned (such as burning by the British in 1814), in its two-hundred-year history, but basically remains the structure designed by James Hoban in 1792. The second is OEOB, immediately west of the Mansion, and the third is the New Executive Office Building, located a block northwest of the Mansion on 17th Street.

Two other structures play a huge role in the operation of the Executive Branch—the two wings of the White House added to the Mansion in the early 1900s (see the Diagram of the White House, **Appendix A**), within which the watch functions associated with national security are currently located. The Situation Room is in the West Wing, and the President’s Emergency Operations Center (PEOC), which exists principally to handle nuclear contingencies, is under the East Wing. Thomas Jefferson, the second occupant of the White House, felt the need for these wings, even before the Mansion was completed. Jefferson was not pleased with running the affairs of government from the same building that served as the family residence. In 1801, he himself drew the architectural plans for east and west extensions. Although these plans were eventually used, for over a hundred years they collected dust while residents continued to work and reside in the White House. In 1801, the first floor of the White House was, as it is today, the ceremonial part of the Mansion, consisting of the Blue, Green, and Red Rooms, the State Dining Room, and the East Room. The First Family actually resides on the second floor (with a third floor added in 1927, to provide more living space). During the White House’s first hundred and one years, the First Family occupied the western half of the second floor, while the president’s staff worked in the eastern half.

Such tight quarters were a major reason for the absence of any on-site intelligence or watch function in the White House for a century. In addition, the only intelligence services of that time

were part of the military, although permanent intelligence units did not become part of the Army and Navy until the 1880s. These entities served the president in the role of Commander-in-Chief, but not in the other two roles, Chief Executive and Head-of-State. An intelligence organization to support the president in those roles did not come into being until the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was created by the National Security Act of 1947.

Events of August 1814 clearly revealed the president's exposure in those early years. During the War of 1812, the Secretary of War, John Armstrong, convinced that the British would never attack Washington, prepared no serious defenses for the capital. Not until the British were sixteen miles away, in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, was the threat comprehended. President James Madison had so little warning of the British attack on August 24 that First Lady Dolley Madison barely had time to retrieve the original draft of the Declaration of Independence and Gilbert Stuart's famous portrait of Washington. The British forces found the Madisons' table set for dinner with "a supper all ready, which many of us speedily consumed...and drank some very good wine also."[1] After looting the Mansion, the troops set it on fire. Were it not for a two-hour rainstorm that night, the Mansion would have burned to the ground. The coats of white paint used to cover the Mansion's burn marks led to its new moniker—the White House.

By the Civil War, the War Department had established itself in a building adjacent to the west side of the Mansion (the current site of OEOB). During the war, President Lincoln reportedly spent a great deal of time in the telegraph office and cipher section of the Department. There, Lincoln pored over incoming telegraphs from the field and was particularly impressed by the codebreaking operation used to decipher Confederate communications. One cryptanalyst wrote that "outside the members of his cabinet and his private secretaries, none were brought into closer or more confidential relations with Lincoln than the cipher-operators."[2]

The first actual intelligence watch inside the Mansion appears to have been an improvised "war room" fashioned on the second floor during the Spanish-American War in 1898, to support President McKinley.[3] Thus, the first balance to be struck on the issue of on-site intelligence support was over the not insignificant division of physical space between the First Family and the White House staff. This "war room" vanished after the conflict ended, and no successor was fashioned until World War II.

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[1]Account of British attack on Washington from Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only* (N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1995), 13.

[2]Ibid., 19, quoting David Homer Bates. In the military it seems that the term used most frequently is "cryptologist," while in civilian works on this subject the one used most frequently is "cryptanalyst."

[3]Ibid., 26.

1.2 FDR's Map Room

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated in 1933, the entire White House staff consisted of fewer than fifty people. Handling of intelligence information in FDR's White House prior to Pearl Harbor bordered on the absurd. Although naval intelligence scored a huge coup by breaking Japan's codes,[4] efforts to provide the intelligence to the president reflected the bitter interservice rivalry over control of the information. Secretary of War Henry Stimson was insistent that the President see the "Magic" intercepts, because they revealed the wide gap between Tokyo's public declarations and its private aims. A plan was developed according to which the naval aide would show the reports to FDR during even-numbered months while the army aide would perform this function in odd months,[5] an arrangement that mirrored of that of Magic intercepts, in which the Army and Navy alternated days each intercepted, deciphered, and reported the messages of the Japanese. No plan existed, however, for getting the reports to FDR during evening hours or on Sundays. To make matters worse, in May 1941 one report was lost, only to be found eventually in the waste basket of the army aide.

This interservice turf war over Magic was not resolved until mid-1942, when the Army was given sole responsibility for diplomatic and military signals intelligence (SIGINT) while the Navy was forced to concentrate on only naval SIGINT. In yet another interservice compromise, intended to assuage the Navy, the President's naval aide was tasked with delivering the intercepts to FDR. This job fell to Navy Captain John McCrea, who normally took the messages to FDR twice daily. The morning delivery typically occurred while the President was either working in bed or in the bathroom. If he was in his bath, McCrea would sit on the closed toilet and read the intercepts aloud to him![6] In the afternoon, FDR usually read the reports in the Map Room, a room McCrea converted to this purpose in January 1942.

To control and organize intelligence better as well as to provide a means to follow developments of the war, Captain McCrea converted what had been a women's cloakroom on the ground floor of the Mansion into the "Map Room." Initially, McCrea only had a single filing cabinet and a desk.[7] To plot the war's developments, McCrea used grease pencils on clear plastic overlays, hung on the walls, over land maps obtained from the National Geographic Society and charts of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans supplied by the Navy Hydrographic Office.[8] Eventually he brought in additional navy officers, so that the facility could be staffed around the clock, and a

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[4]See J. M. McConnell, "The Evolution of Intelligence and the Public Policy Debate on Encryption," *Seminar on Intelligence, Command, and Control, Guest Presentations, Spring* 1996 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Program on Information Resources Policy, January 1997, I-97-1).

[5]Description of provision of Magic reports to FDR from Andrew, 108-111.

[6]Ibid., 123-4.

[7]John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys* (N.Y.: Morrow, 1991), 105.

[8]George M. Elsey, "Blueprints for Victory," *National Geographic Magazine* (May 1995), 56-59.

communications capability was added so that the Map Room could receive cables directly from the Allies.[9] Typically, FDR stopped by to read the intercepts and be briefed in the morning, on his way to the Oval Office, and again late in the afternoon, while en route to the doctor's office nearby, to have his legs massaged. In addition to the Map Room, a number of other private sources provided FDR with intelligence during the war, including a small team he maintained at the White House led by the journalist John Franklin Carter.[10]

The conclusion of the war in 1945 ended this watch function. Soon after V-J Day, the Map Room was dismantled, and more than sixteen years passed until a like facility came into being. President Truman monitored the Korean War largely through weekly briefings from the Director of the CIA and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Only with the crisis in Lebanon in 1958 was serious thought was given to reestablishing a full-time watch center in the White House. Soon after ordering U.S. Marines into Lebanon, President Eisenhower asked his Staff Secretary (and confidant), Brigadier General Andrew Goodpaster, how the force was doing, and Goodpaster replied that he would have to call the Joint Chiefs to find out. Eisenhower reportedly countered, "You know, Andy, I think I might need a little watch office or something over here if something like this comes up again."[11]

1.3 Establishment of the Situation Room

That exchange started a slow process that eventually resulted in the Situation Room. Instead of immediate action to establish this "little watch office," a study was ordered and a committee formed. Eighteen months later, in 1960, the findings went to President Eisenhower with the recommendation that he give up either the West Wing bowling alley or the indoor swimming pool between the Mansion and West Wing. Eisenhower left office before a decision was made.

The study was quickly dusted off in the spring of 1961, following the Bay of Pigs fiasco. As one of many NSC organizational changes ordered in its wake, President Kennedy personally directed National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy to establish a watch facility in the West Wing bowling alley that would fall within Bundy's purview (see **Appendixes B** and **C**). Kennedy and his staff were determined not to rely entirely on the established bureaucracy and system for

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[9]For the communications capability of the Map Room, see the description in Elsey, 56.

[10]Andrew, 132; see also Anthony G. Oettinger, "Compunications in the National Decision-Making Process," in *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, edited by Martin Greenberger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 18.

[11]James W. Lucas, "The Information Needs of Presidents," *Seminar on Intelligence, Command and Control, Guest Presentations, Spring 1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Program on Information Resources Policy, I-91-3, December 1991) 23.

selection and analysis of information.[12] Instead, he was resolved to be an active participant in such crises, and this fiasco had revealed that he lacked both timely intelligence reporting, and fast, secure communications with the various departments and agencies carrying out his orders.[13] For instance, orders to move Navy ships and Air Force planes during the Bay of Pigs operation were relayed from the Cabinet Room to the Pentagon over unclassified telephone lines.[14]

The NSC's Executive Secretary in 1961 has written that this new facility was deliberately called the "Situation" room rather than a command post,[15] in order to convey its purpose as a clearinghouse for classified national security information coming from the departments and then present it to the president and NSC staff in an orderly fashion. Navy Seabees began converting the bowling alley to a watch facility in May 1961. According to then Deputy National Security Advisor Carl Kaysen, the facility was operating by the end of the summer.[16] Watchstanders for the 24-hour operation were provided exclusively by the CIA. Kennedy rejected a plan drawn up by the military for a staff of a hundred officers.[17] Initially, message traffic from the departments and agencies was transmitted through existing communications links to the "Crown" bomb shelter, built under the East Wing in 1942. These lines and teleprinters had been used only for test purposes, to ensure they could function in case of war. In 1961, the White House Communications Agency installed separate lines and teleprinters in the Situation Room.

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[12]Keith C. Clark and Laurence J. Legere, eds., *The President and the Management of National Security: A Report by the Institute for Defense Analysis* (N.Y.: Praeger, 1969), 73.

[13]Bromley K. Smith, *Organizational History of the National Security Council During the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations* (Washington, D.C.: NSC, Sept. 1, 1988), 37.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Interview by the author with Dr. Carl Kaysen. at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, March 13, 1996.

[17]Smith, 37.

In the summer of 1961, the president was finally able to receive in a timely manner the information or intelligence available to almost everyone else in government. The establishment of the Situation Room came as the direct result of a policy debacle, but it also was a response to the Kennedy style of business. He was impatient with “regular” channels of information and preferred to immerse himself in the details of his problems.[18] Not incidentally, from this time on, national security advisors have played a much larger role in national security.

[18]Clark and Legere, 73.

Two

Situation Room Operations

The Situation Room in 1996 is considerably different from its 1961 incarnation, yet its public image—as some kind of "world command post"—is belied by reality. Henry Kissinger described it as a "tiny, uncomfortable, low-ceilinged, windowless room."[1] Some of the changes over the years reflect advances in communications and information technology, while others result from the personalities and operating styles of various presidents and National Security Advisors.

2.1 Mission

A single word is the best way to describe the mission of the Situation Room—synthesis: synthesis of intelligence, diplomatic, military, and press reporting. The Situation Room is an entity of the NSC staff, whose mission is simply a reflection of its charter. The National Security Act of 1947, creating the NSC, specified that:

> The function of the Council shall be to advise the president with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies....[2]

For Situation Room personnel, the challenge is to synthesize the enormous amount classified and unclassified reporting that floods the message queues into a coherent, usable form for the president, national security advisor, and NSC professional staff (senior directors and directors). Synthesis implies condensing, which in most cases is precisely what decisionmakers want. The sheer volume of information flowing into the White House, most of which the senders want to reach the president, is staggering. More than two hundred agencies seek the president's attention to their papers and proposals.[3] Yet there are few instances (mainly crises) when policymakers, at least in the initial stages, want the deluge of raw reporting. The balancing of raw and finished reporting is examined in more detail in part **Three**, but here I would say that my own experience in the Situation Room during crises suggested that after as little as only a few hours, but always within a matter of days, those who asked for the faucet to be turned on invariably were swamped and needed the Situation Room as filter. Although in its half-century existence the size of the NSC professional staff has fluctuated, from a mere dozen, for example, during the Kennedy administration to roughly fifty in recent administrations, the one constant has been its heavy work load—the "mile wide, inch deep" syndrome. On a day-to-day basis,

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[1]Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 315.

[2]Text of National Security Act of 1947 taken from Clark and Legere, 258.

[3]Robert M. Gates, "An Opportunity Unfulfilled: The Use and Perceptions of Intelligence at the White House," *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 1989), 36.

Situation Room watchstanders perform the invaluable task of filtering huge amounts of incoming information so that individual directors are forwarded only information pertinent to them.

But to call this mere filtering is to miss the mark. The process was best described by Richard S. Beal, a former special assistant to President Reagan, as the need to "synthesize at the macro level" for senior decisionmakers.[4] Beal said he could "go through the length and breadth of this land and not find twenty people who have that capacity by virtue of training."[5] Yet this ability is precisely what is required of a Situation Room watchstander. Technology has enabled the government and the intelligence community to collect and transmit vast amounts of information, but it takes a special skill to refine that mountain of data into usable form. In short, the basic keys to success are recognition of a developing situation, rapid communication with other agencies for verification and amplification, followed by timely notification of key decisionmakers.

In examining the mission of the Situation Room, the role and needs of the National Security Advisor must be taken into account. Here I may break a little china by claiming that for most of the past nearly fifty years the National Security Advisor, not the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), has been the president's intelligence officer. This has been true especially since the tenure of McGeorge Bundy. For instance, John McCone resigned as DCI in 1965, largely because he could not gain the president's ear.[6] The only exception was the early years of the Reagan administration, when the position of National Security Advisor was downgraded, a change in which CIA Director William Casey had a large hand (to the extent of having an office in the OEOB). Since the National Security Act of 1947, the National Security Advisor has usually had the ear of the president on a daily basis and kept the president up to speed on the world. During Operation Desert Storm, for example, President Bush managed the war with his "Gang of Eight," but the DCI was not among them. Interestingly, the position of National Security Advisor is not mentioned in the 1947 Act. It was created in 1953, by President Eisenhower. But it is generally agreed that the NSC and the Advisor are personal instruments of the president and that their roles reflect a president's operating style. In the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal, the Tower Commission Report (1987) reaffirmed this and identified the proper role of the Advisor as that of an "honest broker" for the NSC process—assuring that issues, reasonable options, and analyses are presented to the president.[7]

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[4]Richard S. Beal, "Decision Making, Crisis Management, Information, and Technology," *Seminar on Intelligence, Command, and Control, Guest Presentations Spring 1984* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Program on Information Resources Policy, I-85-2, February 1985), 6.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Andrew, 4, 321.

[7]*Report of the President's Special Review Board* (Washington, D.C.: National Security Council, Feb. 26, 1987), II-3.

Given this model for the National Security Advisor, the Situation Room must ensure that this very busy individual receives intelligence that reflects the sometimes diverse and contradictory opinions of the community. Such a need leads to the issue of staffing the Situation Room.

2.2 Staffing

As indicated in section **1.3**, in 1961 the Situation Room was originally staffed exclusively by CIA personnel. This continued to be personnel policy for more than twenty years. The strength of this arrangement was that many watchstanders remained assigned to the Situation Room for extended periods; seven-year tours of duty were not unusual. The continuity provided many benefits. Because many of the skills needed for synthesizing the particular kinds and the massive amounts of data required on-the-job training, the slow rate of turnover allowed the level of expertise of the watchstanders to be kept high. Yet a CIA-only operation is not in keeping with the nature of the NSC staff and process.

The decision near the end of the first Reagan administration to have the personnel of the Situation Room reflect that of the professional staff was wise. Since the mid-1980s, the professional NSC staff has typically consisted of an eclectic mix of academics, State Department officials and foreign service officers, Department of Defense (DOD) civilians, military officers, and CIA personnel. This mixture offers the best insurance that the staffers and the National Security Advisor will see reporting that reflects the views of the various entities of the national security community. It is also in keeping with the “honest broker” charter of the Advisor. My experience was that opinions and estimates often varied among the various departments and agencies, and seldom was the CIA analysis or prediction precisely in line with that of State or the DOD. The best solution, thus, is to staff the Situation Room with personnel from the key national security agencies.

Although this has proved a sound policy, it has a downside that affects the balancing act. Instead of having watchstanders onboard for seven-year assignments, the length of most tours is now two years or less, even though, in my experience, it takes the better part of six months to develop reasonable familiarity and expertise with the multitude of cables and reports. For instance, as a military intelligence officer reporting to the Situation Room, I had little prior exposure to the wide variety of cables routinely sent from U.S. embassies and from CIA entities. Similarly, my CIA and State colleagues were generally unfamiliar with military reporting. Diversifying the composition of the watch teams brought a lot to the operation, but, given that most detailees are fast-track, mid-level professionals, they need to return to their parent organizations within at most a few years.

Reduced tours complicate the persistent White House problem of personnel turnover, which occurs wholesale with changes of administrations. Experienced personnel in the Situation Room can be extremely beneficial, especially while a new team learns how to play their

positions. A former director of the White House Military Office aptly described the arrival of a new team: “Ironically, these able professionals in their own fields become instant amateurs when they enter the White House and begin what is arguably the most important job in the world: running the American Presidency. They’re amateurs because there is no training ground for the job, there is nothing like it anywhere, and there is no apprenticeship for the exercise of that kind of power.”[8]

Since the mid-1980s, fifteen watch officers (five teams of three) have been assigned to the Situation Room. The Situation Room is now routinely assigned six CIA officers, four military intelligence officers (Navy, Army, Air Force, and Marine), two State Department foreign service officers, two NSA employees, and one Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) employee (civilian or military). Thus, the typical watch team consists of one military intelligence officer, one CIA officer, and one other. In addition, each team is assigned a military enlisted communicator from the White House Communications Agency (WHCA). With extensive experience in WHCA, these communicators are nothing short of magicians in their ability to provide uninterrupted links with the president and National Security Advisor. I had the good fortune to head what may have an “ideal” team: one member from the military (myself); one from CIA; and one from State. The importance of this “balance” was most evident during a crisis, when the team could be briefed not only on the initial reporting concerning the particular crisis but also on the initial analysis of the key agencies or departments. Whether the initial cueing came from a CRITIC[9] message, a NOIWON (National Operational Intelligence Watch Officers Network) call, or a Cable News Network (CNN)/wire service report, each member of my team could rapidly contact a parent agency for its assessment.[10] As a result, briefings to the National Security Advisor, staffers responsible for the particular area involved, and often the president included some value-added analysis.

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[8]Bill Gulley with Mary Ellen Reese, *Breaking Cover* (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 11-12.

[9]CRITIC messages are the highest-precedence messages in the national security arena and are used to report developments deemed vital to our national security.

[10]NOIWON is a secure telephone conference-call system that the major Washington national security watch centers (National Military Command Center, National Military Joint Intelligence Center, State Department Operations Center, State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, CIA Operations Center, NSA Operations Center, and the Situation Room) use for rapid evaluation of breaking crises.

Three

Sources and Types of Intelligence

One important issue for the Situation Room since inception is the types of reporting it should receive. Although it may appear obvious that the president should have access to any intelligence, military, or diplomatic reporting he desires, departments and agencies would prefer to decide what the president and the president's staff should see, and when they should see it. The tension involved in this turf war was vivid immediately after the passage of the National Security Act. President Truman, tired of wading through the daily stack of cables and reports dealing with national security issues, directed the first DCI, Rear Admiral Sidney Souers, to develop a daily "digest" of these messages. When Souers asked Secretary of State James Byrnes for State Department cables to incorporate into the digest, Byrnes refused, on the grounds that it was his job alone to inform the president of the content of the cables.[1] President Truman had to intercede and force Byrnes to comply. Such was the bumpy birth of the President's Daily Brief (PDB). Similar difficulties were encountered in the early days of the Situation Room. According to Arthur Schlesinger, although McGeorge Bundy insisted that the Situation Room should receive the flow of raw reporting from CIA, State, and Defense,[2] when he found out that some reporting was not being forwarded, the personal intercession of the president was needed to make the various departments and agencies to comply.[3] These natural tensions reflect yet one more of the balances that must be struck between the Situation Room and the departments.

Another critical balance is that between the amounts of the types of "raw" and "finished" intelligence the Situation Room should receive. Although some selected intelligence received is raw, most of the reporting that comes into the Situation Room is finished, that is, evaluated intelligence. Even with this filtering, the Situation Room received roughly a thousand electronic messages daily in 1991, and an equivalent number of wire service reports also needed to be scanned.[4] An obvious pitfall of over-reliance on raw reporting is the chance that dramatic raw reports—which may later prove incorrect—may be rushed to the National Security Advisor or the president. Professional discipline on the part of the watchstander, typically through quick phone calls to other watch centers or through initiation of a NOIWON conference, can prevent embarrassment. A second pitfall is the potential problem—primarily for the other bureaucracies—of having the president ahead of them on a crisis. For noncrisis monitoring of developments, however, a mix of raw and evaluated generally suffices for White House consumers.

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[1]Discussion of this event from Andrew, 165.

[2]Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 422.

[3]Prados, 105.

[4]Based on traffic analysis done during my tenure in the Situation Room in 1991.

One possible shortcoming of reliance on finished intelligence is the influence, deliberate or not, that one agency's analysis may have on the decisionmaker. Given that most nations and most international events are reported on by many sources, exclusive reliance on analysis by any one agency is unlikely. To offer just one example, in the mid-1990s, developments in Chechnya triggered reporting from military, diplomatic, intelligence, and press sources.

A crisis will typically elicit a rather natural request from staffers responsible in that area to see all the reporting. In the mid-1990s, technology enables manipulating this faucet with such ease that raw intercepts and other real- and near real-time reporting can flow into the West Wing in minutes. In many cases, the results can surprise an NSC staffer unfamiliar with the intelligence arena, and before long until he or she will cry "uncle." As an historical example, even in the case of the vital "Magic" intercepts, FDR usually was content to read summaries.[5]

Invariably a filtering process is required, which is carried out by the Situation Room. The intervention of the watchstander as filters increases the potential for conscious or unconscious manipulation, because each person brings particular biases to the tasks of filtering and synthesis.[6] The tendency to favor the analysis by one's own agency is alleviated by the multiagency composition of the watch teams, and, in my experience, the Situation Room was especially keen to highlight the differences in opinion among the agencies and bring them to the attention of the National Security Advisor and staff.

The table seems tilted therefore toward finished reporting, rather than raw, for the simple reason that modern communications technologies encourage flows of information that can overwhelm an entire watch team, let alone a single staffer. Some analysis and filtering are necessary before information is sent to the White House and is needed once again when it arrives in the Situation Room. The risk is sacrificing vital pieces of intelligence, but the balance must be struck or a decisionmaker overwhelmed with information may end by rejecting all of it, a response that clearly must be avoided.

The key to maintaining a balance is an understanding on the part of the watchstander of the often changing intelligence needs of the decisionmakers—a situation analogous to the military's need for cooperation between intelligence and operations. The relatively small size of the NSC staff is an advantage here, often permitting the development of rapport between Situation Room personnel and White House staffers, and, of course, idiosyncratic factors of personalities and personal relationships play vital roles. The better the relationships, the better intelligence will support the process of national security decisionmaking. In my experience, rapport was critical in

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[5]Andrew, 124.

[6]Thomas P. Coakley, *Command and Control for Peace and War* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1991), 79, 156.

the Situation Room, because it enabled young watchstanders to be, as needed, both bold and confident enough to establish dialogue with busy staffers.

3.1 The Role of New Technologies

On a macro level, information and communications technologies have altered the role of the White House during crises in ways unimaginable only decades ago. The revolution began with the telegraph, then progressed to the telephone, and now to the computer-to-computer network often linked by satellites. New technologies have enabled the president to override the on-scene commander—the phenomenon of the "8,000-mile screwdriver." For example, in 1962, President Kennedy could talk to Navy captains during the Cuban Missile Crisis, while in 1968 President Johnson could talk to the tailgunner in a bomber during the *Pueblo* incident. According to Henry Kissinger, President Nixon entered office determined not to fall into the "Situation Room syndrome."[7] He thought Johnson had "succumbed to the melodramatic idea that the world could be managed, in crisis, from this room in the basement of the White House."[8] As unnerving as this "syndrome" may seem to many, the ability of the commander in chief to bypass the chain of command, including the on-scene commander, is a Constitutional right of the president. The advent of the NSC staff, coupled with the amount and depth of information the new technologies make available, has substantially increased presidential involvement in national security matters.

In the operations of the Situation Room the role of technology has been huge, and largely positive, particularly in three major areas: message handling and intrastaff communications; crisis management support; and video-teleconferencing. Technology has enabled significant advances in these areas, but, again, the personal work habits of the two individuals at the top of the hierarchy—the president and National Security Advisor—are the keys to how much technology is employed. The first steps toward a paperless environment were taken in the mid-1970s, with the installation of rudimentary computers, which permitted watchstanders to forward cables electronically to printers in the NSC Secretariat office in the OEOB. From there, hard-copy cables were delivered to the individual directors. By the early 1980s, upgrades permitted cable traffic to be handled almost exclusively electronically. This change accelerates screening and reduces backlogs that slow recognition of key developments. Watchstanders read incoming messages and electronically forward them to staffers located across West Executive Drive in the OEOB. Since the first Reagan administration, e-mail has been used to link most, but not all, NSC staff. The last four National Security Advisors—Carlucci, Powell, Scowcroft, and Lake—have eschewed the use of computers either to read traffic or communicate with their staffs. Of the four, only Lake has even had a computer in his office. Instead, all of them preferred to have the Situation Room provide hard-copy of the messages watchstanders believe warrant attention. It

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[7]Kissinger, 315.

[8]Ibid.

could be argued that the "old-fashioned" operating styles of these men represent a cautious attitude toward new technologies compared with the styles of their predecessors in the mid-1980s. Bud MacFarlane was a frequent user of e-mail and database, and "stayed on [his computer] hours a day and late in the evening."[9] His successor as Advisor, Vice Admiral John Poindexter, was an even greater user of the computer. On the basis of the preferences of these two, the entire staff took on their character and became automated. In the mid-1980s, a member of the NSC staff predicted that "from here on out...it will be a question of people knowing how to manipulate the technology."[10] True, but only to a degree. Although a case can be made that Poindexter's successors are the tail end of a generation that did not grow up on the computer and that future Advisors will return to the MacFarlane-Poindexter model, the real lesson may be that technology must be adapted to the leadership and management styles of the Advisor and president, not vice versa.

3.2 The Once and Future Crisis Management

Also during the MacFarlane-Poindexter years, the Crisis Management Center (CMC) nearly came to fruition. President Reagan and his closest advisors were widely reported to have been stunned on their arrival at the White House in 1981 by the inadequacy of the information systems in the Situation Room. The impression of a cramped space lacking the latest computers and display technology, coupled with Reagan's decision that not he but Vice President Bush would act as the administration's senior crisis manager, led to a study of White House crisis management operations.[11] In the spring of 1982 it was decided that, rather than expand the existing Situation Room, a second, high-tech Situation Room would be built in Room 208 of the OEOB. In earlier days this room had been the ornate office of the Secretary of State. "Running the crisis" from the OEOB, instead of the West Wing, would make the crisis "invisible" to the White House press corps and "create an impression that everything was calm at the center."[12] The location had the added benefit of being in same building as the vice president's office. Although the Vice president has a small, ceremonial office in the West Wing, he and his staff actually work in the OEOB. Spearheading the effort to create the CMC was Rear Admiral Poindexter, then the military aide to National Security Advisor Richard Allen, and Richard Beal. Their concept was that the CMC would handle the crises, so that the Situation Room could continue to monitor all other developments.

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[9]John Grimes, "Information Technologies and Multinational Corporations," *Seminar on Intelligence, Command, and Control, Guest Presentations, Spring 1986.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Program on Information Resources Policy, I-87-1, February 1987), 141.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Prados, 452; Lucas, 23-24.

[12]Lucas, 25.

In 1985 the CMC was given its own budget ($10 million) and a thirty-person operating staff.[13] It was equipped with new Digital Equipment VAX computers designed to tap into the databases of State, CIA, and Defense, and state-of-the-art audiovisual equipment, including, for example, large-screen displays on which to project movies, still photography, or slides. The CMC concept has been widely criticized, but pundits often overlook the environment of the Reagan administration. Visually displayed information was its boss's preference; President Reagan preferred visual media to reading cables, and he routinely watched videotaped intelligence briefings before meeting heads of state or embarking on foreign trips. Where the CMC was flawed was in the bureaucratic sense.[14] State, Defense, and CIA were, not surprisingly, uncomfortable with having relatively low-level White House detailees tap into their databases. The real *coup de grace* for the CMC was Iran-Contra. Once Room 208 was equated with the operations run by Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, it was a political hot potato. By the time of the Bush inauguration, virtually all vestiges of CMC were gone. Significantly, Bush did *not* tap his own vice president to be the senior crisis manager. Room 208 reverted to an elegant room for holding meetings, albeit one with one wall of large blank screens.

There were, however, positive spin-offs from the CMC efforts. The biggest was that Poindexter and company were able to computerize the Situation Room and network the entire NSC staff. Another was the continuing emphasis in post-CMC days on videoteleconferencing (VTC). A link had existed for decades with the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon, but, by the end of the first year of the Bush administration, construction had been completed of a VTC room added to the rear of the Situation Room. The VTC system can link by video all the departments and agencies involved in national security as well as many at remote sites, such as the Unified Military Commands and even afloat command ships. Proponents of VTC believed it would enable the White House to be involved in crisis management without any tell-tale signs to the press corps—mainly, the procession of limousines arriving at the West Wing. But to the surprise of those pushing the technology, the VTC room did not become a favorite toy of either the president or the National Security Advisor. Instead, it quickly turned into a comfortable dining facility for Situation Room personnel! The reason, once again, is that force of personality regularly overrides technology or procedures. Eventually, the VTC capability was put to extensive use in the Bush years by the Deputies Committee, which became the principal Bush mechanism for daily crisis management. NSC Principals continued to prefer to meet face to face.

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[13]Prados, 492; Lucas, 25.

[14]I draw heavily upon the insights of Rodney B. McDaniel, "C^3I: A National Security Council Perspective," *Seminar on Intelligence, Command and Control, Guest Presentations, Spring 1987* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Program on Information Resource Policy, I-87-1, February 1987), 108.

3.3 Day-to-Day and Crisis Operations

Fortunately, most of the time the Situation Room is engaged in noncrisis operations. This is the bread-and-butter chore of examining incoming cable traffic and press reporting, deciding what needs the attention of the decisionmakers, and twice daily synthesizing the key reporting into a summary. Kept to two pages maximum, the summary is distributed first thing in the morning and at again about 6 P.M. Printed on blue paper, and therefore affectionately referred to as the "Blue Thing" (a moniker given it by then-Vice President Bush), it is designed to be a "quick read"—the Chief Executive's "Executive Summary." For example, brief, incomplete sentences connected by ellipses are used. The Morning Summary—along with copies of the PDB, State INR ([Bureau of] Intelligence and Research, of the Department of State) Summary, White House Press Office press clippings, and various newspapers—goes out every day with the drivers of the vice president, National Security Advisor, and chief of staff. A copy for the president is placed in a briefing book that is delivered by the National Security Advisor. At the end of the work day, the Evening Summary is routinely the only intelligence or diplomatic product that goes to the president, National Security Advisor, and other senior White House and NSC staff. The feedback during my tenure was that the "Blue Thing" was invaluable, because, unlike other summaries, its brevity made it "user-friendly," illuminating once again the value of synthesis for the senior decisionmaker.

During crisis operations the Situation Room, in my view, plays its most valuable role. Richard Beal described such times as "organized anarchy" and I am convinced that the Situation Room helps keep those moments more organized than anarchic.[15] As described earlier, any crisis inevitably increases the flow of reporting. It also triggers a spate of meetings. As a result, the National Security Advisor and the NSC staffers with the responsibility for handling the crisis have even less time than usual to digest message traffic. The Situation Room watchstander is critical at these times, because the watchstander has the most experience in screening all the reporting—diplomatic, military, press—not just intelligence reports, and thus can prevent the now very busy staffers from wasting time reading superfluous cables.

In crises, personalities can have a potent effect. During the numerous crises observed in two and a half years in the Situation Room, as a watchstander I had immediate, almost unimpeded access to the National Security Advisor—not because I was in a position to demand it, but, I believe, largely owing to the confidence Brent Scowcroft had in the watchstanders' judgment: the certainty that we would check our sources before running erroneous intelligence into him. Further, we enjoyed the same support from the Executive Secretary of the NSC, the Director of the Situation Room, and from their deputies. None of these officials desired the "face time" for themselves and only insisted on being briefed as soon as possible. Similarly, President Bush often called the Situation Room directly. Obviously, we took this as the ultimate

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[15]Beal, 7.

compliment. General Scowcroft was comfortable with this arrangement, asking only that we update him on what the president was after. In contrast to this streamlined approach, a watchstander in the Clinton administration told me that Situation Room personnel seldom have personal contact with the National Security Advisor. Instead, information from the watch must pass through several hands before going to the Advisor. Although each administration must mold the Situation Room to fit its own needs, I believe the inherent slowness of this process could prove problematic during a crisis.

Technology is critical in crises in a number of ways. Most important, modern communications technologies have vastly expanded the "crisis pool." For example, CNN and other news services now cover events in Rwanda and Somalia in real time. In many cases, technology appears to force the United States to engage in events that it would probably have marginalized a few years ago. Its other major contribution is in enabling the president to play a central role in crises. For the most part, this option was not possible until recently.

Presidential involvement led to what is arguably the most critical balancing act. When and to what extent should the president and the president's staff be involved in crisis management. Richard Beal, once the architect of the CMC, claimed—and he said his view mirrored that of the Washington bureaucracies—that the White House should have "comparatively low participation in many if not most crises."[16] Yet the Cuban missile crisis, in my view, heralded the end of minimal involvement in crises by the White House. Although a president must have confidence in the chain of command, a president's demand to be a participant is wholly justified because the president alone will ultimately be held responsible for U.S. actions. As an advisory body to the president, the NSC staff is crucially important in handling the often rapid pace of crises. Supported by the Situation Room, the NSC staff brings together "the separate, usually frenetic efforts" of the departments and agencies.[17] It is not unreasonable for the president to use technologies resident in the Situation Room as a "directed telescope." In a crisis they permit the president to receive intelligence and information not exclusively dependent upon what has been sent up (and possibly finessed) by the chain of command.[18] Crisis management is probably the most stressful and highest risk responsibility of the presidency, especially when it involves American citizens and the possible use of the military. The president should be involved in these decisions. In lesser crises, a balance must be struck so that uninformed White House micromanagement is avoided. The proper balance will largely on the advice the president receives from the National Security Advisor.

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[16]Beal, 5.

[17]Christopher C. Shoemaker, *The NSC Staff: Counseling the Council* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 37.

[18]My thinking on the use of the Napoleonic "directed telescope" has been influenced by the insights of C. Kenneth Allard in *Command, Control, an the Common Defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 250.

A final factor to be considered in an examination of the operations of the Situation Room in the mid-1990s is role of mass media. In my initial days of training in the Situation Room I was told that the watchstanders were vitally important, because we were the "eyes and ears" of the president. Although this may not have been true in the early years of the Situation Room, I believe it can now only claim to be one of many "eyes and ears" for the president. It would be naive and potentially dangerous for either the intelligence community or the national security community to believe one or the other has a monopoly on the president's attention, but it is a safe assumption that all United States presidents have, at various times, called on friends and advisors outside government for advice on national security matters.

Since the mid-1980s, the "CNN factor" has come to play a central part in both day-to-day operations and crisis management. During my years in the Situation Room, I knew CNN was turned on during most of the time President Bush was in the Oval Office. Thus, watchstanders always felt pressured to stay ahead of "them." So, too, with policymakers, as the Tiananmen massacre showed me within six months of my being assigned to the Situation Room. According to former Secretary of State James Baker, live coverage of Tiananmen signaled a "powerful new phenomenon: the ability of the global communications revolution to drive policy" and to "create a powerful new imperative for prompt action that was not present in a less frenetic time."[19] CNN's coverage of this and subsequent tragedies (Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia) have forced an involvement in situations that may or may not be in the vital national interest of the United States. The expanded "crisis pool" and the resultant pressure on policymakers are fallout from the "CNN factor." Intelligence agencies and personnel might do well to view—and exploit—CNN and other media as additional sources of information, rather than as threats to the very existence of the intelligence community.

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[19]James A. Baker III, with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (N.Y.: G.P. Putnam, 1995), 103.

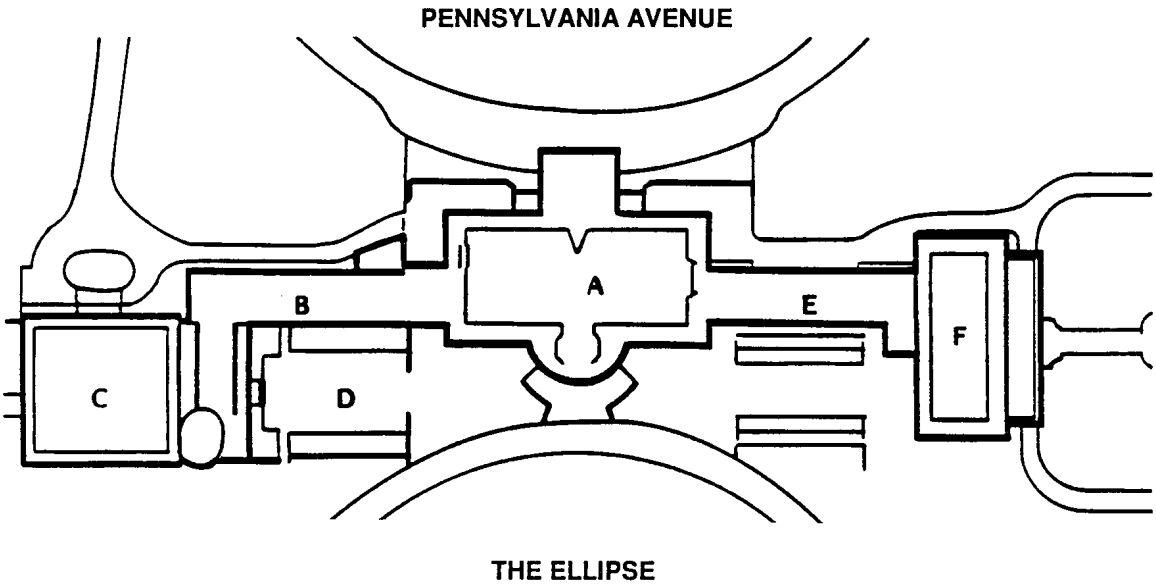
3.4 Conclusions

Prior to the founding of the Situation Room, the president and the NSC staff were at the mercy of the national security bureaucracies for information and intelligence. This predicament resulted in considerable redundancy and fierce competition for the president's attention. The development of the Situation Room enabled the White House to receive timely, all-source information. Nearly every aspect of the Situation Room's function—mission, staffing, technology, and information sources—has been a source of contention, because each has been viewed, correctly or not, as infringing on the prerogatives of various departments or agencies. Nonetheless, the Situation Room provides an essential and enduring service by synthesizing vast amounts of information and intelligence for senior decisionmakers, during both routine and crisis operations. For this reason, the Situation Room is the first White House intelligence watch to have survived. Its predecessors—McKinley's "War Room" and FDR's "Map Room"—were disbanded after the wars they had tracked were ended.

This paper has highlighted key balancing acts involved in providing on-site intelligence support to the president. Perhaps the main conclusion my experience rendered was the functions and technologies of a "Situation Room" must be adaptable to the styles of the president and National Security Advisor, a truism of accommodating the style of the boss. But in the case of the president of the United States, the stakes in getting it right—or wrong—are much higher!

Appendix A

Diagram of the White House



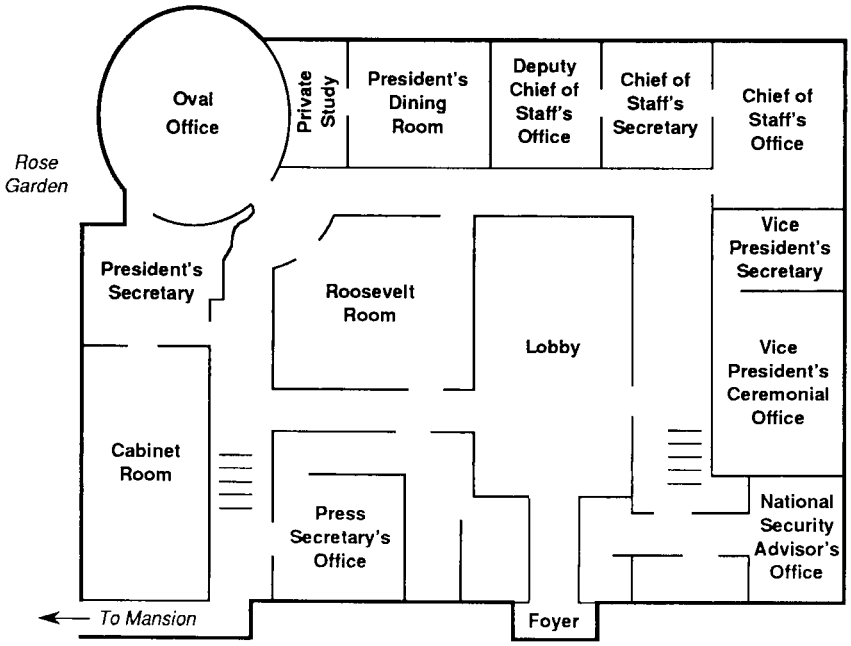
A. Residence
B. West Terrace
C. West Wing
D. Rose Garden
E. East Terrace
F. East Wing

Source: *The West Wing: A Brief History* (Washington D.C.: Executive Office of the President, Office of the Administration, 1983), 2.

Appendix B

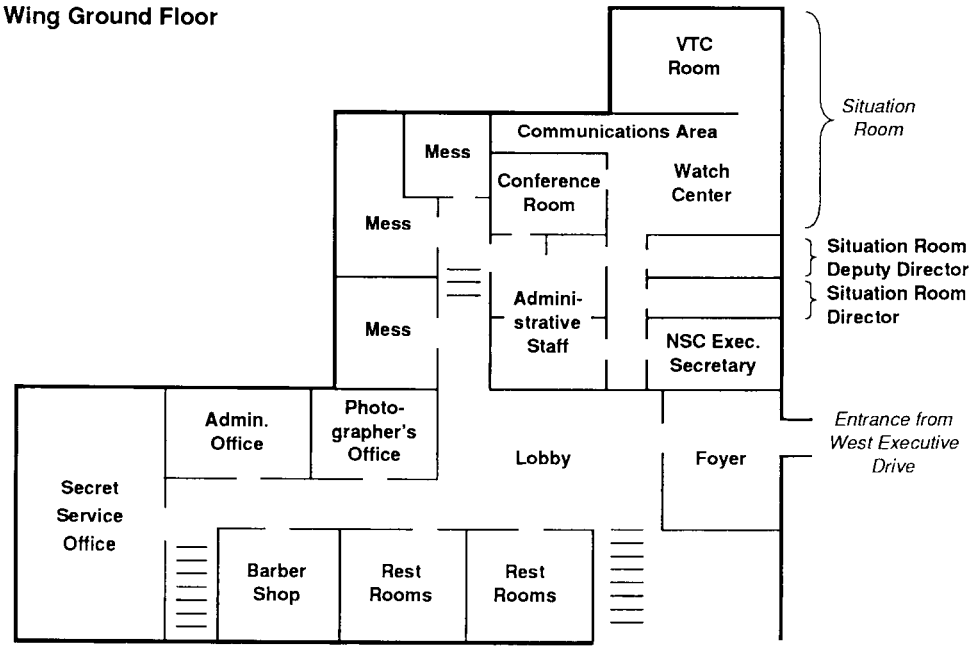
Sketch of the Ground Floor of the White House

West Wing First Floor



Source: Adapted from *The West Wing: A Brief History*, 5.

West Wing Ground Floor

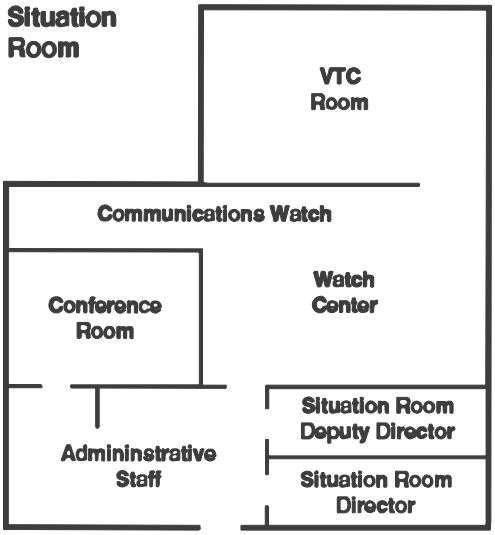


Mess = White House Mess, run by the military
NSC = National Security Council
VTC = Videoteleconferencing Center

Source: Based on the author's recollection of the floor plan, 1988–91.

Appendix C

Depiction of the Situation Room



VTC = Videoteleconferencing Room
Source: Based on the author's recollection of the floor plan, 1988–91.

Acronyms

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMC	Crisis Management Center
CNN	Cable News Network
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DOD	Department of Defense
INR	[Bureau of] Intelligence and Research (Department of State)
NOIWON	National Operational Intelligence Watch Officers
NSA	National Security Agency
NSC	National Security Council
OEOB	Old Executive Office Building
PDB	President's Daily Brief
SIGINT	Signals Intelligence
VTC	videoteleconferencing
WHCA	White House Communications Agency

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