

## Inside The White House Situation Room

Michael Donley, Cornelius O'Leary, and John Montgomery

“  
Just remember that there  
are many important people  
who work in the White  
House, and you're not one  
of them.  
”

---

**Michael Donley** was Deputy Executive Secretary of the National Security Council, 1987-89.

**Cornelius O'Leary** is a former Director of the White House Situation Room. **John Montgomery** is a former intelligence analyst at the National Security Council.

Go to the southwest gate of the White House complex, present the guard with identification, and state your business. If you are on the appointment list, an escort will be called. Walk up West Executive Avenue and turn right into the West Basement entrance; another guard will check your pass for White House access. Take the first right, down a few stairs. To the left is the White House Mess; on the right is a locked door.

Behind these layers of security is the White House Situation Room (WHSR), a conference room surrounded on three sides by two small offices, multiple workstations, computers, and communications equipment. The conference room is soundproofed and well appointed but small and slightly cramped. The technical equipment is up to date, though not necessarily “leading edge”; every square foot of space is functional. Visitors typically are impressed by the location and technology, but they are often surprised at the small size.

While it is widely known that important meetings are held here, the importance of the WHSR in the daily life of the National Security Council (NSC) and White House staff and its critical role in Washington's network of key national security operations and intelligence centers are less understood. This paper is intended to fill that void. We believe there is a longstanding need within middle and senior levels of the Intelligence Community (IC) for a basic understanding of NSC and White House functions and how

current intelligence information is provided to key decisionmakers, including the President.

### Mission, Organization, Functions

The WHSR was established by President Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs disaster in 1961. That crisis revealed a need for rapid and secure presidential communications and for White House coordination of the many external communications channels of national security information which led to the President.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the mission of the “Sit Room” has been to provide current intelligence and crisis support to the NSC staff, the National Security Adviser, and the President. The Sit Room staff is composed of approximately 30 personnel, organized around five Watch Teams that provide 7-day, 24-hour monitoring of international events. A generic Watch Team includes three Duty Officers, a communications assistant, and an intelligence analyst. The number and composition of personnel varies, depending on shift requirements and workload.

Sit Room personnel are handpicked from nominations made by military and civilian intelligence agencies for approximately two-year tours. This is a close, high-visibility work environment. Egos are checked at the door, as captured in the admonition of a former Sit Room Director to incoming Duty Officers: “Just remember that there are many important people who work in the White House, and you're not one of them.” Personal characteristics count: an even



“

**This intimate knowledge of the President's schedule makes the Sit Room unique among Washington-area operations and intelligence centers.**

”

than nuclear war or physical threats against the President, the Sit Room is in effect the 24-hour, one-stop shop for the White House staff. It is also the funnel through which most communications, especially classified information, will pass when the President is not in residence. It is an essential link, providing the traveling White House with access to all the information available from Washington's national security community.

### Essential Relationships

There are two essential relationships that the Situation Room has to maintain if it is to be successful in providing timely information to the Oval Office. The most important relationship is with the NSC's Executive Secretary, who reports directly to the National Security Adviser and the Deputy.

As statutory head of the NSC staff, the Executive Secretary is the primary point of contact for the White House Staff Secretary and is the key player in moving national security information to and from the Oval Office.<sup>3</sup> National-security-related memorandums from departments and agencies to the President are transmitted through the NSC's Executive Secretary for staffing to the appropriate office. When staffing is complete, finished packages for the National Security Adviser or the President are sent back up the chain through the Executive Secretary. When the President makes a decision or approves a course of action, the Executive Secretary formally communicates the decision to affected departments and agencies. Thus, virtually all national security correspondence passes through the Executive Secretary.

For this reason, the Sit Room has often been administratively assigned to the Office of the Executive Secretary. With inclusion of the Sit Room, the Executive Secretary becomes the focal point for all information going to the National Security Adviser, from the deliberative ("slow paper") policy process to fast-moving perishable intelligence and crisis information. As coordinator of the President's national security schedule, the Office of the Executive Secretary also has an enormous reservoir of policy and operational information at its fingertips. It is through this key relationship that the Sit Room will first hear of a proposed Presidential trip abroad or a potential call to a foreign head of state.

A second essential connection for the WHSR is its relationship with the National Security Adviser, formally known as the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. He and the Deputy are the officials most "in the know," and they are in frequent and direct contact with NSC principals and key subordinates. Because of the Sit Room's role in the alert process, its position as the funnel for national security information when the President is traveling, and its 24-hour capability, a close working relationship with the National Security Adviser usually develops. For the system to work at its best, a special trust has to be

established among the National Security Adviser, the Executive Secretary, and the Sit Room Director.

This trust is especially important in establishing the thresholds for warning and alert after hours and providing advance notice of future events. Upon the death of a foreign head of state, for example, it may not be necessary to awaken the National Security Adviser or the President in the middle of the night. If there are no threats to American citizens involved and no action for the President to take, perhaps a "wake-up" notification at 5 a.m. would suffice. Similarly, it is not unusual for the Sit Room Director to be included in sensitive interagency meetings before initiation of military operations or for the National Security Adviser to instruct the Sit Room that a special "Eyes Only" message should be brought directly upstairs. Establishing such trust can be developed only through close and routine personal interactions.

Through daily interaction with the Executive Secretary and National Security Adviser (including the Deputy), and routine access to the schedules and agendas of interagency meetings, the Sit Room Director is able to provide effective operational guidance to Watch Teams. The teams are then in a better position to assess the value and importance of incoming cables and newswires in the context of long-range policy issues under discussion at the highest levels, as well as fast-breaking crises that will demand Presidential attention. This intimate knowledge of the President's schedule makes the Sit Room unique among Washington-area operations and intelligence centers.

### **Support to the NSC Staff**

The NSC staff is organized into regional and functional directorates located in the Old Executive Office Building (OEOB). A directorate is headed by a Senior Director, who is appointed by the President to coordinate and oversee Presidential policy in a particular area. A Senior Director's counterpart at State or Defense would be at the Assistant Secretary level. The Senior Director supports the National Security Adviser, in effect coordinating the interagency policy agenda in a given area. The directorates are best described as a mile wide and an inch deep because they usually consist only of a Senior Director assisted by two to four directors. On a day-to-day basis, the Sit Room supports the NSC directorates by electronically routing nearly 1,000 messages to staff members; scanning cables, newswires, and press reports; and monitoring CNN for fast-breaking events.

It is important that the NSC's Directorate for Intelligence Programs not be confused with Sit Room operations. The Intelligence Directorate oversees interagency intelligence policies and programs such as covert action Findings, counterintelligence, major procurement projects, and the interagency intelligence budget; it has no responsibility for production, dissemination, or coordination of current intelligence.<sup>4</sup>

Direct Sit Room contact with the NSC staff increases markedly during crises. In some cases, such as Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the 1991 coup attempt against President Gorbachev, it is not unusual for the Senior Director to move into the Sit Room to be closer to the crisis and

take advantage of the on-duty staff and its communications services. This approach, however, has limitations: Sit Room Watch Teams may lack the specific regional expertise appropriate to the crisis; Sit Room spaces are cramped and not suited physically to accommodate longer term crisis operations; and Watch Teams have a continuing responsibility to monitor other global events.

### **Intelligence Support to Policymakers**

Efforts to strengthen intelligence support to policymakers have a long history. Every administration seems to reach its own *modus vivendi*, squaring expectations with realities between the policy and intelligence communities. As in the creation of the Sit Room itself, postcrisis evaluations often are catalysts for change. Many adjustments in organization, process, and personnel have been made over the years in response to the problems perceived at the time. We describe below a model that was used successfully in the late 1980s to strengthen intelligence support at the NSC Senior Director and Interagency Working Group level.

In the late 1980s, the connectivity of the Sit Room to the NSC staff benefited from the assignment of several regional and functional intelligence analysts to the Sit Room staff. These analysts worked for the Sit Room Director but had offices in the OEOB and were assigned to the NSC's regional and functional directorates. Their job was to provide tailored current intelligence support to the staff and to serve as a focal point for Sit Room support in the directorates. Though a recent casu-

ality of personnel cutbacks, this approach was developed after several years of trial and error focused on improving internal and external intelligence support for the National Security Adviser and the NSC staff.

Use of intelligence analysts to provide daily intelligence augmentation to NSC directorates was previously considered necessary to keep up with even the normal volume of relevant intelligence and cable traffic. At the same time, resulting from their close association with the policy staff, intelligence analysts also garnered an insider's perspective on interagency policy deliberations. This perspective strengthened the Sit Room's ability to anticipate specific intelligence requirements. During crises, the Senior Director would have a familiar face who would coordinate intelligence support in the Sit Room and who would know where to find key information in the IC. In turn, the Sit Room Watch Team would be augmented by appropriate functional or regional expertise from an intelligence analyst familiar with current interagency policy deliberations. It proved on many occasions to be a useful marriage.

Use of on-scene intelligence analysts was also a valuable means for the IC to enhance its support to the White House. With insights gained through daily interaction with the NSC directors, the analysts communicated the precise current needs of the directorates to the IC's production elements. The analysts served as a sounding-board for IC-initiated studies and would discuss with NSC directors the gist of draft or just-published studies, often resulting in requests for deskside briefings. Finally, the analysts were responsible for framing

“

**Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the Sit Room is its proximity to the President. As in real estate, the operative principles are location, location, and location.**

”

the bulk of the issues included in the Sit Room's *Weekly Emphasis List*, which was often exchanged with other agencies.

Again, it is important not to confuse the role of the Sit Room Watch Team or intelligence analysts with the role of other, more senior players in the interagency intelligence process. The interagency process includes National Intelligence Officers (NIOs), who are responsible for coordinating the preparation and adjudication of formal interagency National Intelligence Estimates in support of the policy community. NIOs are often included in senior-level interagency meetings and provide feedback and tasking to the IC. Whereas the NIO is focused on *future* (although sometimes near-term) requirements for collection, production, and analysis, the Sit Room analyst was focused on ensuring access to *today's* information already available in the Community, and on effecting close coordination at the working level.

This model worked for several reasons: It supported (rather than competed with) the senior policy-makers' role as crisis managers; the Sit Room's role as the NSC focal point for current intelligence was reinforced; midcareer analysts were careful not to intrude on NIO responsibilities; and the process worked the same way with the same people in both routine and crisis environments.

### Interagency Connections

In addition to providing current intelligence support to the NSC staff in important regional and functional

areas, the Sit Room has a more independent role to play as an operations and intelligence center. There is a constant need for daily coordination on current issues with other centers, especially at the Defense and State Departments and CIA. This coordination takes place largely out of view of the NSC staff and leadership, but is nonetheless critical to the effectiveness of the interagency system. When less formal coordination has been found inadequate, formal interagency groups have been chartered by the President or National Security Adviser to strengthen connectivity among operations and intelligence centers, improve the flow of information, develop common practices and procedures where possible, and coordinate hardware and software decisions concerning interagency communications systems.

Sit Room responsibilities sometimes extend beyond intelligence and national security functions. Maintaining connectivity with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Departments of Justice, Transportation, Commerce, and other agencies, the Sit Room is frequently the initial point of White House notification for domestic disasters, including everything from earthquakes, fires, and floods to Haitian refugees and Federal prison riots.

The periodic inclusion of Coast Guard and other Federal agency personnel as Sit Room Duty Officers has sometimes proved helpful in these crises, because the Sit Room may be called upon to facilitate initial coordination of crisis response within the White House until an appropriate interagency task force is formed.

### Comparisons With Other Washington-Area Centers

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the Sit Room is its proximity to the President. As in real estate, the operative principles are location, location, and location. To be sure, the President gets most important intelligence advice and inputs from the Director of Central Intelligence, NIOs, and other key officials. But these officials cannot be at the White House 24 hours a day. The Sit Room often is the "first phone call" when senior White House officials are looking for the latest intelligence information, and it plays a key role in synthesizing cables and intelligence products originated by other agencies.<sup>5</sup>

A second feature is that the Sit Room is both an operations and intelligence center for the White House. These activities are divided in most departments and agencies. In the Department of Defense, for example, the National Military Command Center is colocated but separate from the National Military Joint Intelligence Center. Likewise, in the State Department and at CIA headquarters, operations and intelligence activities are separated. In the White House, this means that the relationship between policy

development and current intelligence can be extremely close.

The close connectivity between intelligence and policy also means that the White House is not a passive consumer of intelligence. Even at the national level, information has an “operational” and sometimes “tactical” dimension. Diplomatic and intelligence cables may be closely correlated with Presidential events, perhaps allowing a glimpse of the talking points of a foreign head of state only hours or minutes before he meets with the President.

A third feature is the small size of the Sit Room staff. By all measures, the Sit Room is the smallest of the Washington-area operations and intelligence centers. This has come to mean a relatively junior staff. Senior Duty Officers are perhaps O-3, or GS-12 or 13 equivalents, as compared to O-6 or GS-15 equivalents elsewhere. Limitations of size and depth, however, can in part be offset by quality personnel, high standards of performance, the Sit Room’s interagency character, excellent technical support, and the motivation that comes with working inside the White House.

In addition to the Sit Room’s inherent limitations stemming from the small size of its staff, it lacks many advantages of a large intelligence agency. But the Sit Room does not need such advantages to fulfill its mission, and it should not be considered a peer competitor for influence in the IC. The implications of the Sit Room’s proximity to the President, moreover, should not be underrated. Despite its limitations, the Sit Room by virtue of its location has greater access and potential impact on White House officials than any of

“

**Sit Room personnel provide some of what little continuity exists within the NSC staff, and they are often able to observe potential gaps in the complex, fast-moving crisis management process.**

”

Washington’s other operations and intelligence centers.

#### **Implications for Leadership**

A better understanding of the role of the WHSR has important implications for NSC leadership and for the intelligence agencies which supply both information and personnel to the NSC staff, including the Sit Room.

There is a need within the NSC for continuing education and dialogue among staff and leadership about the role and potential of the Sit Room in support of NSC activities. An orientation to Sit Room operations should be mandatory for incoming NSC staff officers. Likewise, an orientation to the NSC and interagency process should be mandatory for incoming Sit Room Duty Officers.

In addition, the National Security Adviser, Executive Secretary, and Sit Room Director should nurture in their personal interactions a routine concept of operations for crisis management. The enemy in crises is confusion and “ad hococracy”; responsibilities and expectations need to be as clear as possible. Sit Room personnel provide some of what little continuity exists within the NSC staff, and they

are often able to observe potential gaps in the complex, fast-moving crisis management process. Routine and open dialogue with key NSC officials is essential for getting the most from the Sit Room staff.

The messages for the IC are equally clear. First, departmental and agency Watch Teams should be better educated about who works at the Sit Room and what they do. Operations and intelligence center personnel need to know that access is sometimes more important than rank. When a Sit Room Duty Officer phones, even though he or she may be junior in rank or grade, take the call and get the answer. Do not view the Sit Room as an institutional threat; support the White House in any attempt to find information and accept that the deadlines imposed, however unreasonable, will be for good reason. The IC should be confident that Sit Room information requests are for legitimate purposes and will not be mishandled.

Second, send your best people and treat them well when they return. Personnel nominated to serve as Sit Room duty officers should have operations/intelligence center experience. These are junior-to-midlevel personnel going to an outside assignment—not always regarded as a career-enhancing move. But the destination is crucial; these junior personnel may have more contact with senior officials than certain agency directors. Personal screening of nominations by the leadership of supporting agencies is called for, as well as personal debriefings. In addition, look for opportunities to augment the Sit Room staff or NSC directorates with mid- to senior-level intelligence analysts during periods of intense activity or crisis.

When Sit Room Duty Officers return to your agency for their next assignment, ensure that the personnel system makes the most of their experience. Promotion boards do not always recognize the signature of the National Security Adviser or his Deputy on personnel evaluation or promotion recommendation forms. Take a close look at planned career progression, and concentrate on placement that takes advantage of the White House experience and enlarges the individual's Sit Room-attained knowledge of the IC.

### Conclusion

Greater knowledge about the role of the WHSR has the potential for several beneficial effects within the IC. These include strengthening current intelligence support within the NSC staff and the White House; improving the timeliness of intelligence support during crises; enhancing the quality of individual agency products in support of national leadership; and better internal use of department and agency personnel with White House experience. In current intelligence and crisis support, the Situation Room is well positioned at the working level to assist in bridging the needs of the policy and intelligence communities. IC effectiveness would be improved with better understanding of how the

White House works, how the President gets information, and how decisions are made.

### NOTES

1. Bromley Smith, "Organizational History of the National Security Council During the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations," p. 51. Unpublished monograph, courtesy of the NSC staff.
2. Further unclassified background on the *President's Daily Brief* can be found in: "PDB, the Only News Not Fit for Anyone Else To Read," *The Washington Post*, 27 August 94, p. 7.
3. 50 U.S.C. 402, Sec. 101(c)
4. An example of the coordination and oversight functions performed by the NSC's Intelligence Directorate may be found in David G. Major's article, "Operation 'Famish': The Integration of Counterintelligence into the National Strategic Decisionmaking Process," *Defense Intelligence Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, spring 1995.
5. For a broader and fuller treatment of the White House-CIA relationship, see Robert M. Gates, "An Opportunity Unfulfilled: The Use and Perceptions of Intelligence at the White House," *Washington Quarterly*, winter 1989.