

**GEORGE
STEPHANOPOULOS**

with Lisa Dickey

The Situation Room

THE INSIDE STORY
OF PRESIDENTS
IN CRISIS



THE SITUATION ROOM



*The Inside Story of
Presidents in Crisis*

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS
WITH LISA DICKEY



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New York Boston

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Prologue

CENTER OF THE STORM



DAWN HAD NOT yet broken when Mike Stiegler steered his blue Toyota Camry toward the White House on January 6, 2021. It was 4:20 a.m., and Stiegler was arriving early for his twelve-hour shift as a desk officer in the White House Situation Room.

Normally at this hour, downtown Washington, D.C., was deserted, its monuments and office buildings silent under the black night sky. But when Stiegler stepped out of his car, he sensed something strange. “All these people on the street that you don’t normally see, and a bunch of cars parked,” he told me. “I’ve tried to describe this many times to many people, but it just felt different.”

That afternoon, Congress was scheduled to certify the election of Joe Biden as the forty-sixth president of the United States. But the incumbent he defeated was doing everything he could to block the transfer of power. Thousands of his followers had come to Washington at his request to stop the certification, and no one knew for sure how the day would play out. The Situation Room staff was on alert, monitoring events, synthesizing public information and private intelligence, and preparing to report to the president—as they did with all crises, domestic or foreign, that might require his attention. But on this day, they never called him. He didn’t call them. The president himself was the cause of the crisis.

This doesn’t feel right, Stiegler thought as he began his shift. An intelligence analyst in his thirties, he had been thrilled in the summer of 2019 to get the call to serve in the Situation Room—a plum assignment for any intelligence professional. In the eighteen months

since then, "I witnessed two impeachments. I went through Covid. I went through the Black Lives Matter protests and the riots," he told me. "It was just one thing after another." Now, as the sun rose, he steeled himself for what might come.

All morning, protestors flocked to the Ellipse, the grassy oval expanse just south of the White House. At noon, President Donald Trump stood in front of his edgy and excited supporters and called on Vice President Mike Pence to send the vote back to the states. He claimed that "radical-left Democrats" had stolen the election. He urged the crowd to "fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore." And then he told them to march down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol.

Trump wanted to join them, but his Secret Service detail refused to take him, because pandemonium had erupted on the Capitol grounds. Protestors stormed police barriers, attacking multiple officers. "We have been flanked, and we've lost the line!" shouted D.C. police commander Robert Glover as the mob surged forward, smashing windows and flooding into the building. Secret Service agents hustled Vice President Pence to a secure location, and lawmakers huddled in terror as mobs charged the hallways, breaching the U.S. Senate chamber. Rioters emptied cabinets and upended furniture. Gunshots echoed through the hallowed corridors in the 228-year-old seat of our nation's legislature.

Back in the Oval Office, President Trump sipped Diet Coke as he watched the spectacle on television. Aides and allies implored him to condemn the riot and call off the mob. Instead, at 2:24, with the violence raging, he sent out a tweet calling out Mike Pence for lacking "the courage to do what should have been done."

With reports coming in from the Secret Service and other officials on Capitol Hill, the Situation Room scrambled into action. "Things got very chaotic," Stiegler told me. "We went into a continuity-of-government situation."

Stop there. Take that phrase in: "continuity-of-government situation." That bland bit of bureaucratic jargon masks a deadly serious set of policies and actions first ordered by President Eisenhower at the height of the Cold War. "COG" was designed to

ensure the government would still function after a disaster such as nuclear war. It involves secret command centers—the Sit Room being a critical one—elaborate chains of command, the relocation of Congress and the replacement of executive branch officials killed in attacks. It had been activated only once before, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks.

The situation was “surreal,” said Stiegler. But he was wary of disclosing more. “I have to be careful,” he told me. “I have been giving a lot of testimony, and I don’t know where the lines quite are.” I ventured that one of his points of contact must have been the Secret Service. He paused, then said, “That’s fair.” Which meant that he was getting real-time updates directly from the chaos in the Capitol building, as the mobs surged through the halls.

The most harrowing part?

“How close we came to losing the vice president,” he told me. He paused, then looked up at the ceiling, struggling to compose himself. “The screams, the yelling. The different things that we heard that day.” Stiegler is a young man with a cheerful disposition, but when he talked about January 6 he seemed to age before my eyes.

“It was horrific,” he said quietly. “There’s a group of us that were on duty that day, and we don’t know how to process it still... We don’t know how to talk about it. And we don’t know who to talk about it with. There are a lot of things we witnessed that day that we can’t talk about. And how do you deal with that?”

In the six decades since the creation of the Situation Room, it has been the crisis center during America’s catastrophes. The men and women of the Sit Room have dealt with nuclear scares, the assassination of a president and attempts on two others. They stayed at their posts on 9/11, when the White House itself was the target of terrorists. And they tracked and analyzed American wars that cost hundreds of thousands of lives and billions upon billions of dollars. But never before had they dealt with an insurrection against our own government, inspired by the president of the United States.

If the election certification hadn’t gone through, Stiegler told me, “I think we would have possibly seen an institution just crack, crumble. I think a lot of us would have walked out.” These staffers

serve the person who lives in the White House, but they work for the *presidency*, not the president. “Your allegiance to your country supersedes your allegiance to your role,” said Stiegler. Those dueling loyalties had never been tested like this.



VOLUMES HAVE BEEN written about the twelve U.S. presidents who’ve served since the Situation Room was created in 1961—but few accounts have chronicled the history and inner workings of the site itself, despite its vital place in America’s story.

It’s located in the White House basement, just off the mess where staffers go for coffee and meals. For most of its history the Sit Room wasn’t much to look at—nothing like the vast war room in the movie *Dr. Strangelove* or the comfortable and coolly lit spaces of *The West Wing* and *24*.



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Hollywood's idea of a Situation Room: the ridiculously vast War Room in
Dr. Strangelove. | *Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images*

The reality for decades was much more modest: a cramped conference room, three smaller ones off to the side, and a watchstanders' office where Sit Room staff collect and analyze information for the president and his aides. Even for those like me who've worked in the White House, it's hard to reconcile the flow of sensitive and sometimes scary information, the mysteries being uncovered and the earth-shaking matters being discussed and debated, with such a mundane place.

In the course of researching this book, I interviewed more than a hundred people, most of whom worked in the Situation Room—from cabinet secretaries and top White House aides to desk officers and

Sit Room directors. Their most common reaction to seeing the space for the first time is... “This is *it?*” The word I heard most often echoes my own reaction when I first walked in: “underwhelming.”

Henry Kissinger called it “a tiny, uncomfortable, low-ceilinged, windowless room” that was “unaesthetic and essentially oppressive.” And diplomat Richard Holbrooke memorably described it as “a room that, to me, symbolizes the problem; a windowless below-ground room in which the distance from real knowledge to people is at its very greatest.”

Yet while the physical space was unimpressive, the work performed by the professionals who staff the Sit Room is unparalleled. “It’s the communications nerve center of the United States government,” President Obama’s national security adviser Tom Donilon told me. “If there’s one geographic spot in the world that could fairly be called the nerve center operationally, in terms of intelligence and information, it’s the five thousand square feet right in the basement of the White House.” As former NATO ambassador Doug Lute adds, “It’s a place, but it’s also a set of people and a process”—the three Ps. “They’ve got to come together.” When they do come together, wars are won, terrorists taken down and disasters forestalled. When they don’t, the crises cripple presidencies.

In the chapters that follow, you’ll learn about the place, and how it’s transformed over time. You’ll learn about the people who have served there, and how they performed under enormous pressure. You’ll learn about secret meetings, presidential foibles, shocking security breaches and MacGyver-style technological improvisation. But most important, you’ll see presidents and their teams managing the crises that have defined the modern presidency, wrestling with the tough calls that can make or break their legacies. This is the room where their character and resolve were tested. Some rose to the test, others failed.

The history of the Situation Room is a largely hidden history of our country over the past six decades. Many of the stories you’re about to read have never been told before. Some were under wraps for decades, known only by people with the highest security clearances. I’ve studied all the presidents and spent many hours in

the Sit Room—but even I was surprised to learn so many never-revealed details of what has happened within those walls. In this book, you'll hear them from the people who lived them.

It all began with JFK.