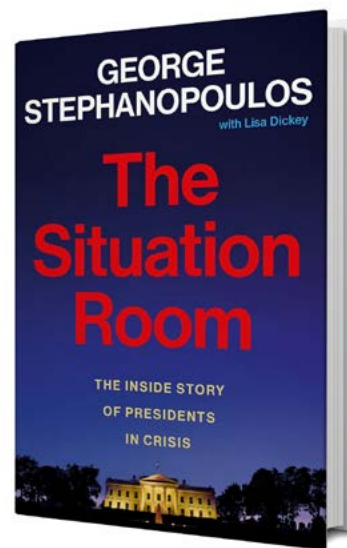


# intelligence in public media

## *The Situation Room: The Inside Story of Presidents in Crisis*

Reviewed by Shelby Robertson



**Author:** George Stephanopoulos with Lisa Dickey  
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**Reviewer:** The reviewer is a team chief in the Office of Intelligence and Counterintelligence, Department of Energy

George Stephanopoulos's *The Situation Room* is the first book featuring the famed White House room (actually a collection of rooms) since Nerve Center in 2004. The sitroom, as it's commonly known, has been through two renovations since that publication so an updated history seems appropriate. Of course, the sitroom is often mentioned in other national security related histories and memoirs, but Stephanopoulos aims to make the sitroom itself the center of the narrative. The book is broken down by presidential administration from the sitroom's inception during the Kennedy administration through the first two years of the Biden administration. Stephanopoulos tracks how each president used the room, especially during notable events like President Obama's deliberations with

staff leading up to the raid that killed Osama bin Ladin, but he also shifts the narrative frequently from presidents and policymakers to focus on the professionals who staff the sitroom. Stories of the Abbottabad raid have been told many times, but this latter feature provides the book's uniqueness.

*The Situation Room* is Stephanopoulos's second book. He published *All Too Human* in 1999 about his time working for President Clinton. Stephanopoulos adds some credibility to the new book as a journalist and former White House communications director. He is clearly passionate about the subject and reveres the duty officers whose story he committed to tell, which he proves by tracking down and interviewing more than 120 former sitroom staffers.

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Yet, he does fall victim to some of the trappings of the situation room, which, unfortunately results in some likely unintended hyperbole that a more experienced national security official could have avoided. An awkward section on artificial intelligence at the end of the book is the only other minor criticism, but neither of these compromises the integrity or readability of the narrative. One notable fact Stephanopoulos captures perfectly is the apolitical commitment of the duty officers who work there. Staffers serve the office of the president, not the president himself. It cannot work any other way.

The most stirring portion comes early in the book. If the reader elects to read just one section, it should be this one. Chapter one focuses on the Kennedy administration and the sitroom's beginning. Toward the end of the chapter, Stephanopoulos recounts a conversation between duty officer Oliver Hallett and White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger after President Kennedy was shot in November 1963. Salinger was calling for updates while enroute to Japan with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and five other cabinet members. As Stephanopoulos notes, call transcripts are rare except for presidential calls, so it is remarkable that such a document exists. Salinger calls the sitroom several times throughout the day to get updates from Hallett on Kennedy's condition, which culminates with Hallett informing Salinger that "the president is dead." Stephanopoulos shrewdly provides just enough commentary for context and publishes several excerpts of the transcript verbatim letting the conversation's text provoke the reader's emotion. This section alone is worth the price of the book.

Of course, there are many other notable stories woven throughout the text. Serious reporting on the Iran-Contra Affair details how Oliver North and John Poindexter deleted thousands of emails pertaining to the illegal operation. Turns out email has caused national security officials problems from its inception, with the first administration to use email also being the first to experience an email scandal. More light-hearted stories are also included like when President George H.W. Bush and Mrs. Bush would call the sitroom on Sunday afternoons to see if any staffers wanted to watch a movie with them, or when President Bush would call down and ask a duty officer to

send him some funny cables because he knew he had "appointed some ambassadors who are funny as hell." Lastly, there are truly inspiring moments captured. Stephanopoulos interviews Rob Hargis, senior duty officer on September 11, 2001, and details how sitroom staffers refused evacuation orders in the uncertain hours after the attacks while knowing the White House could be a target.

Perhaps there is one missed opportunity. The sitroom is a series of conference rooms and a 24/7 watch-floor staffed by duty officers from around the government. As anyone who has ever worked a watch can attest, there are stretches of seemingly endless time when it appears nothing is happening in the whole world. This is generally when antics ensue that produce some genuine, sometimes outrageous comedy. Such a chapter does not exist in the book, although understandably. It is hard to imagine former officers wanting such shenanigans on record in a popular history written by one of America's best-known journalists. Still, those would be some entertaining anecdotes and reveal how closely bonded duty officers become through moments both light and solemn.

In all, *The Situation Room* hits its target and provides those little-known accounts from sitroom staffers that make the book a unique and worthwhile contribution to both popular history and the national security literature. ■