

THE BIRTH OF THE WHITE HOUSE SITUATION ROOM

By Captain Sidney E. Wood, Jr., U.S. Navy (Retired)

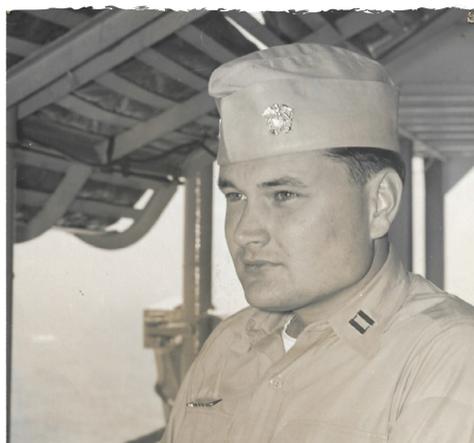
Sometimes major advances in the intelligence world take place simply through luck of the draw — in this case the creation of the White House Situation Room in the spring of 1961. The whole evolution took place over just a few months, thanks largely to then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh Burke and the Navy Seabees.

In late Winter/early Spring of 1961, Admiral Burke invited Dr. Walt Whitman Rostow, Deputy National Security Advisor to President John F. Kennedy, to the Pentagon for a briefing. The briefing was on worldwide current intelligence events, in the CNO Intelligence Plot (IP), and the resulting U.S. Navy operations designed to keep track of and deal with those events.

In the IP, there were three intelligence briefing officers for the CNO and the Secretary of the Navy (SECNAV, who was then John Connally). I was one of the three, and we rotated on a three-week cycle. As the “off-duty” briefer, we were assigned to attend a multitude of multi-service/multi-department meetings to discuss current intelligence items of interest to the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, the Intelligence Community, and the military services.

The second week in the cycle consisted of serving as the “back-up” briefer for the CNO and SECNAV, assisting the primary briefer in preparing for the daily morning briefing for the CNO and his staff and the weekly briefing for the Secretary of the Navy. Obviously, if the primary briefer was not available because of illness or otherwise, the backup-briefer had to step up and fill the gap. It happened to be my week as primary briefer, so I was on tap to brief Dr. Rostow. I was a lieutenant (junior grade) at the time. I gave the brief, and it went well. There was also a briefing, as there was on a daily basis, of U.S. Navy operations and movements around the world, given by the briefers from the operations side of the CNO Flag Plot.

After the briefings were concluded, Admiral Burke invited Dr. Rostow to see the new IP, which had just been completed in the D Ring of the Pentagon. As the “host” briefer, I was invited along to answer any questions Dr. Rostow might have. Once inside the IP, Admiral Burke asked me to describe what Dr. Rostow was seeing. I did so, explaining what we had done to make things as clear and as clean as we could so anyone walking into the IP could quickly and easily see where the red and blue players of the world were deployed and/or arrayed against each other.



Then-Lieutenant Sid Wood at sea (1962).

On one long roughly 30-foot wall (bulkhead in Navy parlance) was a map of the world in a Miller projection, with the Soviet Union at the center and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans on its flanks. (A Miller projection provides a more realistic space/distance projection of the earth on “flat” maps than the more popular Mercator projection, which elongates, stretches, or enlarges terrain the further north or south one looks.) On the opposite wall was a map of North and South America in the center and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans on the flanks. At the entrance to the room there was a space for briefings composed of several rows of sliding boards about six to seven feet high by four feet across, with two of them sliding together at the center. These boards could be covered by large scale maps and charts of whatever “hot spots” existed in our world of that era — Laos, Taiwan Straits, Congo, Cuba, Berlin, etc. Several rows of folding chairs, for those being briefed, faced these maps/charts.

At the far end of the room, there were desks for the intelligence watch officer, the enlisted intelligence assistant and the quartermaster, who was charged with keeping the Soviet Navy ship positions tracked and plotted as reports arrived. Real-time press machines from AP, UP, and Reuters were located in one corner. Classified intelligence messages from around the world were picked up hourly by the intelligence yeoman. He brought them back to the IP where the watch officer read them, sorted them by geographic areas of interest, made his notes for his own end-of-watch

briefing, and placed them on geographic area clipboards for the CNO briefers' review upon their arrival about 0400 daily. On arrival, the watch officer would review the important ones with them in their preparation for the 0800 CNO and OPNAV Staff briefing.

After seeing and hearing about CNO IP, Dr. Rostow simply said to Admiral Burke, "I wish we had something like this in the White House." Without a second's hesitation, Admiral Burke said "Well, we'll build one for you." And we did. My operations counterpart, Commander Harry Allendorfer, and I were offered up on the spot by Admiral Burke to assist in the building of what became the White House Situation Room. I was photographed and provided a White House badge and spent several days a week there monitoring (not supervising) the Navy Seabees who did the actual construction work based on the design of the CNO IP. It was a single room, slightly smaller than the CNO IP, but with all the capabilities of the IP. There was a small room off the Situation Room with a cot for the watch officer.

Upon near completion, I spent the first overnight watch ever in the Situation Room — although there was no classified message capability yet, only the press machines noted above in the CNO

IP. There were no others present for this "dry run," just the watch officer. It was a lonely night, but nevertheless very exciting for a young officer. I considered it an historic event. By the way, I saw not a soul — no President, no First Lady, no National Security Advisor, nor any military aides. The next morning, I had breakfast in the White House mess, returned to duty in the CNO IP, and never saw the Situation Room again.

In the meantime, interservice rivalry had set in. Admiral Burke had offered to man the Situation Room exactly as the CNO IP was manned — a rotating three-man watch team, providing 7 x 24 hour coverage, 365 days a year, consisting of a watch officer, an intelligence yeoman for typing the intelligence reports, and a quartermaster for plotting positions of important units/ events. The Army and Air Force each offered up larger watch teams, but ultimately President Kennedy decided to bypass the military competition by using Central Intelligence Agency and State Department personnel. The Situation Room expanded considerably over the years, and the military services were eventually invited back in as participants. But the whole thing started with one room, built by Navy Seabees, because of a single serendipitous two-sentence conversation between Admiral Burke and Dr. Rostow.

Author's note: If there are any questions about the authenticity of this recollection, I have my fitness report of June 1961 to confirm it. It does not capture it accurately, but the above is exactly as it happened. As a 25-year-old Navy lieutenant it is indelible in my memory.

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