

# The Dallas Morning News

Dallas Morning News, The (TX)

May 17, 2012

## Putting students in the same Situation Room

Author: TOM BENNING

Edition: 1

Section: NEWS

Page: A01

Index Terms:

EDUCATION

Estimated printed pages: 4

Article Text:

A reconstruction of George W. Bush's actual White House Situation Room has long been planned as a signature, interactive element of his presidential center set to open on Southern Methodist University's campus next spring. But officials with the National Archives and Records Administration are now revealing that the center's version of the famed crisis management complex - key to all presidential calamities since the days of John F. Kennedy - will have a reach well beyond Dallas.

The Bush library is loaning part of its Situation Room, obtained and preserved when Bush completely renovated the White House facility in 2006 and 2007, to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, Calif. And in a first for presidential libraries, officials are working to make the cross-country exhibits connected in real time, so that visiting students in Dallas can team up with their peers in California to handle some of the country's most famous predicaments.

"We're creating that primary experience of the presidency," said Heather Nice, an education specialist at the Bush library. "Rather than giving the students a textbook and telling them, 'Here's what happened,' you're actually putting them in history."

The Situation Room - which, contrary to popular belief, is actually a group of rooms - is a White House institution that dates to the aftermath of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion into Cuba in 1961. Kennedy was furious about the lack of up-to-date information available to him during the ordeal and demanded an easier way to access data from different branches and agencies, said Michael Bohn, author of *Nerve Center: Inside the White House Situation Room*. The solution was a communications complex in the White House's West Wing basement. The facility, staffed 24/7 and filled with teletypes and modern Swedish-style furniture, forever changed how presidents dealt with crises.

"It was a turning point in the presidency. He took control of the ship," said Bohn, director of the Situation Room during the Reagan years. Subsequent administrations updated the Situation Room, bringing in new technology and adding space. But the complex remained, in many ways, unchanged and outmoded until Bush, during his second term, directed an overhaul that stripped

the facility to its frame. The removed pieces - walls, fixtures, furniture and everything else - were given to the archives administration, and they now sit in mammoth crates at the Bush library's storage warehouse in Lewisville.

Officials with the Bush and Reagan libraries hope the old Situation Room will soon come alive again with debate and discussion. The Bush library will feature the Situation Room's conference room, the focus of most photos and Hollywood depictions. Officials plan to use the room, replete with wood-paneled walls and a 10-person conference table, primarily as a high-tech classroom for school groups touring the George W. Bush Presidential Center. One wall will be movable so instructors can lead even larger classes through history lessons and scenarios.

"The thought from the beginning was always, 'How do we best use these in our educational efforts?'" said Alan Lowe, the Bush library director. That's where the relationship with the Reagan Library could take the learning experience to the next level. The Bush library is loaning the Situation Room's secure video transmission site, a room added during the Reagan administration to improve department coordination via video teleconferencing, so its California counterpart can offer similar education programs. And the Command Room, as library officials are calling it, will eventually connect to the Bush library's Situation Room in real time, likely through a combination of video links, online classrooms and other technology. Officials envision giving students a crisis scenario - such as 9/11 or the Reagan assassination attempt - and letting them work together from the remote locations to make instant decisions based on information that was available to leaders at that time.

"You don't give the answer to the students," said Duke Blackwood, the Reagan Library director. "They have to, with critical thinking, experience what happened in real time." Officials are still developing a curriculum expected to be based heavily on primary documents housed at the libraries. They caution that the long-distance, interactive element might not be ready when the Bush library opens. Even when it becomes active, the time difference between Texas and California will limit how often students can participate together in the scenarios. Still, library officials are excited about the potential learning opportunities. "Could you imagine as an 11th- or 12th-grader coming in and actually sitting in the chairs at the table in the room where some major presidential decisions were made?" Blackwood said. "You capture them right off the bat."

Caption:

PHOTO(S): 1. (Yoichi Okamoto/Lyndon B. Johnson Library) Lyndon Johnson (third from right) led Situation Room meetings on the 1967 Six-Day War in the Mideast. The walls, fixtures and furniture from the room in George W. Bush's early years will be restored at his library, where students may link to California peers. 2. (George W. Bush Presidential Library) In 1989, the conference room remained essentially unchanged from the Ford, Carter and Reagan years. The door at left led to the front door of the complex of rooms. 3. (Robert Knudsen, The White House/John F. Kennedy Library) In 1962, the conference room, built at the behest of President John F. Kennedy, held Swedish modern furniture and was filled with Teletypes. 4. (Eric Draper/The White House) President George W. Bush met with his national security advisers in the weeks after 9/11. The Situation Room was redone during his term after becoming outmoded.

CHART(S): (Staff graphic) Inside the White House.

(c) Copyright, 2012, The Dallas Morning News

Record Number: 25079517