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## Students learn to deal with ‘what if?’

### Reagan Library’s Situation Room asks students to solve fictional crisis

By Melissa Simon

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*Figure 1* **CONTROLLED CHAOS**—Students from Alta Loma High School in Rancho Cucamonga meet in the “situation room” Sept. 29 to handle a mock emergency involving an assassination attempt on the president. The Situation Room Experience is the Reagan Library’s newest interactive exhibit that pushes high school and college-age students to make tough decisions. **MICHAEL COONS/Acorn Newspapers**

News of an attempt on the president’s life has thrown the nation into chaos.

The stock market is crashing. Allegations abound as to who fired the shot, and countries are threatening to invade each other.

How should the U.S. respond?

A class of 33 high school seniors was tasked with determining what action, if any, to take from inside the new fast-paced Situation Room Experience at the [Reagan Library in Simi Valley](#).

The Situation Room Experience, which opened last month, places high school and college age students in the roles of top level government officials, like [White House](#) press correspondents, secretary of state and even head of the [FBI](#).

Up to 55 students can play at one time, but a minimum of 15 are needed in order for the simulation to work, said Mira Cohen, the Reagan Library’s director of education. “What’s really exciting is the face-to-face interaction between the students as they make 40 decisions amongst themselves over the course of the 90-minute game,” Cohen said. “But the real learning happens in the debrief afterward, where they talk about what happened during the game.”

The Situation Room Experience is the second exhibit of its kind for the Reagan Library. The first interactive gallery, the [Discovery Center](#), opened in 2008 with replicas of the [Oval Office](#), a pressroom, a command center and the [Air Force One](#) fuselage.

But the [Situation Room](#) is not a replica. It is the actual room from the White House where seven presidents handled some of the nation’s biggest crises, including the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the [Cold War](#) in the 1980s and the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

“When former president [George W. Bush](#) decided the situation room command center needed a technology upgrade in 2006, it was boxed up and crated here and literally reinstalled,” Cohen said. “The paneling, carpet, seal of the United States, microphones, everything, is the original stuff.”

### **Real-life inspiration**

Although the game is set in a modern-day fictional world, the inspiration for the Situation Room Experience was drawn from the 1981 attempted assassination of [President Ronald Reagan](#), said Trey Alsup, who wrote and designed the simulation.

“(The game) is based on how the press is doing with the information they get from sources and what government officials choose to share and the situation around the world,” Alsup said.

“The core educational question is whether to invoke the 25th Amendment,” he said. The amendment deals with whether the vice president should assume the role of president in an emergency.

Before students arrive at the Situation Room, they receive materials with the necessary background for their roles. At the exhibit the students are divided into three groups, each with particular assignments, and receive tablets loaded with information needed for the game.

Students assigned to playing the press are divided up among four news stations that must break the news while being accurate.

A second group assigned to the hospital room is responsible for relaying information about the president’s condition to those in the Situation Room, where the third group of students is stationed, including the head of the FBI and the secretaries of defense and state.

In each section, live footage plays in the background to help the participants make their decisions. The students must decide whether to invoke the 25th Amendment.

“Students are faced with balancing a constitutional issue in the face of a crisis . . . and it’s a great conversation-starter for what it’s like to be in the media and being ethical in the face of conflict,” Cohen said.

“The decisions they make have consequences and alter the course of the game. It’s different every single time.”

### **Mission debrief**

When the game is over, students gather in the pressroom to discuss their experiences.

Liz Ramos teaches the AP government class at Alta Loma High School. Her students tried out the simulation last month. She said the Situation Room is “the golden standard for bringing history and education to life.”

“The Situation Room . . . takes the students’ heads out of their books and helps them understand what it feels like to be making decisions in a time of crisis,” Ramos said. “The game is a great way to encourage students to engage with the material and then share that knowledge with others when we get to that part of the class.”