



## The Control Room: How Television News Calls the Shots in Presidential Elections

By Martin Plissner  
The Free Press, 1999

When Martin Plissner joined CBS News 40 years ago to help shape the television network's presidential election coverage, the general public had little influence in deciding who would earn the major parties' nominations to run for the White House. The state-by-state primaries that today draw so much media attention hardly mattered in the early 1960s, when backroom dealings at the Democratic and Republican conventions largely determined who would be on the national tickets in November.

Plissner and his counterparts at rival network news divisions forever changed the insider-driven political system that reigned when television news first came on the scene more than a half-century ago. During the 1964 election season, his first at CBS, Plissner skirted the central party machines and gauged each candidate's support in the primaries by independently canvassing local election officials. The result was that six weeks before the Republican convention that year, CBS triumphantly—and correctly—declared that Barry Goldwater would be that party's choice for president, reducing the Republican convention of 1964 to little more than a formality.

In his 1999 book, "The Control Room: How Television News Calls the Shots in Presidential Elections," Plissner details how television went from a sideshow that scarcely mattered in national politics to virtually controlling the behavior of candidates and their handlers. From the unique vantage point afforded by his decades of experience as a CBS News insider, Plissner offers readers a behind-the-scenes account of how network executives worked to take advantage of their power and dominate coverage of presidential campaigns in the United States.

"The Control Room" is filled with fascinating anecdotes about how TV news executives fought bitterly to report election results first and attract the most viewers. Early on in the book, Plissner—who rose through the ranks to become CBS News' political director—explains that the national political conventions held every four years had the power to create TV news stars. He notes that Chet Huntley and David Brinkley of NBC News built their nightly newscast into the top network news program of much of the 1960s on the strength of their 1956 convention coverage. Plissner puts it succinctly: "The viewer appeal they displayed at the conventions traveled well to weekdays at dinnertime."

The desire by top CBS brass to snatch back the top spot in the ratings from NBC sparked Plissner's career at CBS News. Burned by NBC's ratings dominance, CBS officials decided to use the 1964 presidential campaign to try to regain control of the evening news ratings race, a goal they achieved in 1967. Plissner writes that this decision led CBS to create a unit just to cover primaries, campaigns and elections. The new CBS

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*Plissner conveys plenty of in-depth knowledge about the evolving relationship between TV news and politicians. But he could have done a better job telling his story, says reviewer Marilyn Harris.*

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*"The Control Room" misses the mark because Plissner fails to adequately back up his assertions with evidence from his experience at CBS News, writes Carl Sessions Stepp.*

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### The Price of Caution

Martin Plissner spends much of "The Control Room" describing how CBS worked to establish the network as America's top TV news operation, yet struggled in its election coverage by refusing to take chances.

By 1967, when the "CBS Evening News" was once again on top, CBS, NBC and ABC had created computer-based systems to parse sample election results and project winners using statistical models, he writes. But CBS decided to declare winners only when it felt sure of its projections, while NBC and ABC were willing to risk being wrong, Plissner writes.

News Election Unit got five times the money CBS spent on the 1960 elections, according to Plissner.

As he does throughout “The Control Room,” Plissner makes what could be rather drab stories into compelling reading by drawing on his first-hand experience at CBS. Rather than just assert that CBS was prepared to do whatever was necessary to outfox the other networks, he attempts to prove it with tales that may otherwise have gone untold. For example, Plissner says that CBS producer Don Hewitt swiped an NBC planning book at a meeting between CBS, NBC and ABC to coordinate logistics for coverage of the 1964 conventions. Hewitt returned the book only after the NBC producer to whom it belonged said he could lose his job if it remained missing. “There also appears to have been some talk...about pitching Hewitt...out the window—ten floors up,” Plissner adds.

While “The Control Room” does a fine job plying the reader with backstage stories about sometimes-questionable network tactics, Plissner’s book is difficult to follow because it packs in too many details. The author talks about so many aspects of the impact of TV news on politics—and the resulting competition among the networks for viewers and bragging rights—that he fails to fully make some of his points. Plissner certainly has the qualifications to address delegate-counting operations, election projections, convention coverage and many other facets of the interplay between national politics and network news. But he would have been better off concentrating on just a few of those topics instead of throwing so many anecdotes into a single book.

The book also falls short because of its disorganization—perhaps a result of Plissner’s overly ambitious agenda in writing “The Control Room.” Plissner jumps too often between elections that are years apart as he lays out his points, a disorienting technique that makes it difficult to follow the author’s train of thought.

Plissner’s best observations pertain to the Internet, a political force that was just gathering steam as “The Control Room” went to press. As the book concludes, Plissner offers a prescient glimpse into how he thought politics would evolve in the age of the World Wide Web. He correctly predicts that the Web would transform presidential contests in the early 21st century just as television had rerouted the road to the White House 50 years before. Elections beyond 2000 are “likely to be defined by the Web,” he writes.

Even as campaign Web sites and Web-based election coverage began to appear in the 1990s, television was still dominant as the decade closed, Plissner asserts. “That unique franchise would have to be in jeopardy before the control rooms of network television news...were ruled a spent force...in presidential politics,” Plissner writes. Yet with network TV viewership clearly on the decline even as Internet connections multiplied, he says, the Internet was quickly making its mark on American politics. Given these shifts, he says, “there may eventually be little off-line politics for the soon-to-be-dinosaurs of network television to cover.”

—Sam Silverstein

The strategy paid off in 1976, when CBS would not say who won the Democratic presidential primary in Wisconsin until the polls closed because the race between Jimmy Carter and Morris Udall was too close to call. But even as Walter Cronkite said the race was undecided, NBC and ABC showed Udall celebrating victory. When the returns came in and Carter won the most votes, CBS gloated as its competitors looked foolish.

Later that year, however, CBS’ caution led Cronkite to remain on the sidelines as the other networks correctly declared Carter the next president based on their assessments of the tight vote in Mississippi. CBS was also behind in 1980, when Ronald Reagan beat Carter to become president.

Plissner quotes the creator of the CBS Election Unit, Bill Leonard, who in 1980 bemoaned CBS’ defeat because of its unwillingness to take chances. “I felt like a damn fool when the president of the United States gets on television and congratulates the next president and we are still droning along implying that the election has not been decided.”