

# 'Groupthink' and US Foreign Policy

Written by Jean-Baptiste Tai-Sheng Jacquet

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Groupthink, defined by Janis, is “a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgement that results from in-group pressures.”[1] Since Janis’s conception of groupthink in the early 1970s, various approaches have taken root, critiquing and presenting alternative views on his theory. Scholars such as Kowert, T’hart and Yetiv have all developed different approaches regarding groupthink and its working in the realm of US foreign policy. This essay will evaluate Janis’s concept of groupthink through the lens of its various critiques and alternatives to determine its overall intellectual value when it comes to explaining the formulation of US foreign policy. In order to provide a rational answer, we will first look into Janis’s initial analysis of the Bay of Pigs, seen as the perfect example of a failure elicited by groupthink. We will then look into different approaches such that of ‘T Hart’s and Kowert’s groupthink inspired concepts; especially focusing on the latter scholar’s explanation of Eisenhower’s mishandling of the United States economy. This will finally lead us to a more contemporary examination of groupthink’s utility in explaining America’s war on Iraq and the Gulf War. The analysis of both military involvements will shed light into how different groupthink approaches can very well be used in conjunction to grasp more recent US foreign policy decisions.

Described as groupthink’s ‘Perfect Failure’, the Bay of Pigs fiasco of April 1961 is the best way to introduce the attributes of groupthink elaborated by Janis. The official explanation behind the Bay of Pigs failure provided by the White House was based around four points. These were: political miscalculations, a new administration set in an old bureaucracy, secrecy to the point of excluding experts and threats to personal reputation and status. Although these factors were present, Janis deemed this an incomplete explanation, it “would be plausible if the policy advisers had met hurriedly only once or twice”[2] but this was not the case as Kennedy’s administration had over three months of preparations. In Janis’s explanation of groupthink, he describes eight symptoms divided into three type categories; as the presences of symptoms augments, possibility of foreign policy failures does too. Janis identified five of these symptoms and argues they are the important reason behind the Bay of Pigs failure.

The first one identified was the ‘illusion of invulnerability’ (type one symptom), admittedly, several advisers from the Kennedy cabinet confessed to this. Robert Kennedy remembered, “It seemed that, with John Kennedy leading us [...] nothing could stop us.”[3] Alongside of this came an illusion of unanimity (type three symptom), this was likewise admitted by advisers such as Schlesinger: “In the months after the Bay of Pigs I bitterly reproached myself for having kept so silent during those crucial discussions in the cabinet room.”[4] The third symptom identified was the suppression of personal doubts falling under Janis’s type three category as ‘self-censorship.’ Advisers “felt reluctant to raise questions that might cast doubt on a plan that they thought was accepted [...] for fear of evoking disapproval from their associates.”[5] Although this symptom impaired the group considerably, the hopes of making judicious decisions were ruined by the self-appointment of mindguards. This category three symptom became a major obstacle to the expression of dissenting views as direct pressure was exerted on them. “President Kennedy, Rusk and [...] Robert Kennedy all acted as mindguards. Kennedy [...] withheld memorandums condemning the plan from both Schlesinger and Fulbright.”[6]

The president’s role as a mindguard was supplemented by the pressure he exerted on the group to foster “docility and uncritical acceptance of the defective arguments.”[7] Janis sees this as yet an additional attribute that lead to groupthink. The final groupthink symptom identified, ‘taboo against antagonizing valuable new members’, can be linked to Janis’s third category of groupthink symptoms. Kennedy had developed a strong bond with the CIA and

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subsequently created a group “desire to avoid saying anything that could be construed as an attack on the CIA’s plans.”[8] This is an unconcealed example of ‘direct pressure on members expressing strong arguments’ and greatly contributed in creating a reclusive group. Janis’s use of groupthink to explain this fiasco provides very credible roots to the problem, and the overall groupthink theory has now become a necessary aspect to consider in the analysis of foreign policy failures. Nevertheless, various scholars have advanced diverse theories and built on Janis’s initial concept, namely ‘t Hart and Kowert.

Although not entirely dissimilar to Janis’s Groupthink, Paul ‘t Hart provided an alternative view on the causes of small-group foreign policy failures. He argues that even though “crucial choices were arrived at in a small group setting [this] does not imply that the decisions made can be fully explained by small group factors. On the contrary, small groups in politics are always embedded in a web of institutional forces and environments [...] shaping their behaviour.”[9] Instead of attempting to disprove the theory, ‘t Hart attempts to build on it and explain that different factors can lead to the same outcome; moreover he highlights how US politics are more inclined to groupthink with a “lack of continuity in U.S presidential staff, [...] more homogenous American presidency”[10] and few coalition governments. While this aspect may be a limiting factor in certain case studies, in our analysis, it is a positive one as ‘t Hart’s argument works towards proving groupthink’s greater utility in the study of US foreign policy.

Similar to ‘t Hart, Paul Kowert scrutinizes groupthink through a different lens, but instead, puts greater emphasis on the leader’s learning process and its possible link to groupthink. Kowert’s definition of learning is twofold; the first is of procedural nature “to gain knowledge about [...] something through experience”[11] while the other is more evaluative “to learn is a synonym to know.”[12] A relevant example Kowert uses is Eisenhower’s failure to manage the balance of payments deficit as it describes how both, groupthink and failure to learn from the leader brought about economic trauma. In 1955, Treasury Secretary George Humphrey attempted to highlight the begins of a decline in the monetary reserves of the United States and “repeatedly emphasized the necessity of changing the trend. [...] The balance of payments problem [...] was the expense of American foreign aid programs and of maintaining a military presence abroad.”[13] Nonetheless, Eisenhower ignored this advice and in 1958, Humphrey’s prediction materialized with a \$2 billion decline in gold reserves. By then Humphrey had left (1957) and in his second term, Eisenhower “allowed his economic advisers to forge a tightly knit [...] group that rapidly reached consensus on a series of stopgap measures. [And] carefully regulated information on the balance of payments and gold outflow.”[14] Eisenhower had well over three years to focus on the deficit problem, but he instead chose to concentrate on American foreign involvement, it is here that Kowert attempts to grasp what the predominant problem was.

In his explanation, he states it is both ‘learning’ and groupthink; “Eisenhower began with a marginally open group of advisors. As the problem became more serious, however, this group simultaneously became much more closed. [...] Eisenhower never conducted a serious review of administration, nor did he seek the views of external critics. [...] He gave no evidence of learning.”[15] With two distinct variations explaining the implication of groupthink and its utility in the analysis of US foreign policy we can better understand the utility. These analysts may not have fully accepted it as the unique reason behind certain failures, but instead, used it alongside the analysis of other factors to complement their scrutiny. The concept of groupthink has gradually become a crucial stepping-stone in the analysis of US foreign policy failures even for analysts such as ‘t Hart and Kowert who deem it as being only an aspect of their analysis, one that nevertheless should not be omitted. To reinforce the argument that groupthink is now of irreplaceable importance to US foreign policy analysis we will now shift our study to more contemporary events by looking into this concept’s implication in the Gulf war and the 2003 Iraq invasion.

The decision for both US military deployments in the Gulf region helps to prove that groupthink is not confined to a presidential era and can very well transcend the boundaries of time so long the needed antecedents exist. Steve Yetiv attempts to explain this in an analysis of the 1990 decision to deploy troops to the Gulf region to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait. He argues that the antecedents of groupthink present in George H. W. Bush’s administration heavily influenced this path to war. To begin with, Yetiv identifies four structural antecedents to groupthink, the first one being strong group cohesiveness: “the whole inner circle was composed of old friends [...] some meetings seemed like a convivial card game, with feet kicked up.”[16] Alongside of this he also highlights group insulation: “The group of eight was [...] insulated from outside sources [...] because it was structurally exclusive.”[17] He continues by identifying a lack of a tradition of impartial leadership: “[Bush’s] approach did not place a high priority on

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each member airing doubts and raising objections.”[18] And a lack of norms for methodical procedures: “the group [...] lacked procedures for evaluating alternatives.”[19] All of these elements accompanied with high levels of stress resulted in Bush’s administration to “advance the war option in a setting where key military officials, core members of congress, foreign leaders [...] and members of Bush’s inner circle believed that other alternatives should be given greater consideration.”[20] While groupthink may not have been the only influence behind Bush’s actions, it must be acknowledged that it stands as one of the major decisional driving forces and is an indispensable point of analysis to factor in.

Ironically, George W. Bush’s 2003 decision to invade Iraq was also greatly corrupted by elements of groupthink. Dina Badie argues “the decision to incorporate Iraq into the War on Terror was pathologically driven by groupthink in the post-9/11 environment.”[21] In her scrutiny of the Bush administration Badie identifies two groups: the ‘hawks’ and the ‘sceptics’ and whilst using Janis’s concept of groupthink she also uses ‘T Hart’s concept of internal stress to complement her work. “Consistent with ‘T Hart’s analysis, the post-9/11 stress resulted in a search for leadership and resulted in tensions [...] The core group recognized the CIA’s failure to ‘connect the dots’ [...] Thus, intergroup conflict [...] combined with promotional leadership and the stress of 9/11 led to groupthink.”[22]

With the hawks (Cheney) exerting pressure on the sceptics (Powell, Tenet) to conform, dissent was eradicated and an illusion of unanimity prevailed, since once the Bush doctrine was internalised, the hawks’ did well to mindguard it. This is why advisors “accept[ed] the policy of military retribution against Iraq although individual members of the group had historically advocated different [...] methods to oust Saddam from power.”[23] It is also possible to draw a link here with Kowert’s concept of learning as Bush failed to learn from warnings addressed to him at intervals by the National Intelligence Council who submitted two reports in 2003. “The first recognized the possibility that increased factional violence could “encourage terrorists groups to take advantage of a volatile security environment. The second warned that establishing democracy could take years of turbulence [...] and even then, Iraq could revert back to authoritarian rule. Bush dismissed the warnings as ‘guess-work’.”[24] This failure to learn on Bush’s behalf may have been triggered by Janis’s type one symptom: unquestionable belief in the group’s inherent morality. Thus, “by incorporating Iraq into the “war on terror,” the Bush administration defined clear moral boundaries between the US and its ‘enemies.’”[25] With Bush’s failure to learn, the hawks pressurizing voices of dissent and an illusion of unanimity settling in, America was on its way for another foreign policy failure in Iraq.

Throughout its analysis, this essay has shown that groupthink represents a crucial aspect of US foreign policy and is a concept that scholars must not neglect when analysing this topic. Its utility is not confined to Janis’s original concepts, but instead, as demonstrated in the analysis of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, analysts may obtain a clearer picture when using a variety of groupthink methods such as ‘T Hart’s or Kowert’s. It is argued that Groupthink’s utility in US foreign policy analysis is of great importance also due to the fact that “vulnerability to groupthink is presumably determined by the amount of political heterogeneity within government. Coalition governments, common in many Western European states [...] will be less likely to suffer from groupthink than the more homogenous American presidency.”[26] Thus, although groupthink may be less relevant in analyses outside of US foreign policy, its utility there and its diverse approaches make it very useful and at times an indispensable step in obtaining a well-founded answer to the formulation of decisions in the realm of US foreign policy.

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