

SECOND EDITION

GROUPTHINK

Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes

A revised and enlarged edition of *Victims of Groupthink:
A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (1972)

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Introduction: Why So Many Miscalculations?

Nobody is perfect

Year after year newscasts and newspapers inform us of collective miscalculations—companies that have unexpectedly gone bankrupt because of misjudging their market, federal agencies that have mistakenly authorized the use of chemical insecticides that poison our environment, and White House executive committees that have made ill-conceived foreign policy decisions that inadvertently bring the major powers to the brink of war. Most people, when they hear about such fiascos, simply remind themselves that, after all, “organizations are run by human beings,” “to err is human,” and “nobody is perfect.” But platitudinous thoughts about human nature do not help us to understand how and why avoidable miscalculations are made.

Fiasco watchers who are unwilling to set the problem aside in this easy fashion will find that contemporary psychology has something to say (unfortunately not very much) about distortions of thinking and other sources of human error. The deficiencies about which we know the most pertain to disturbances in the behavior of each individual in a decision-making group—temporary states of elation, fear, or anger that reduce a person’s mental efficiency; chronic blind spots arising from a person’s social prejudices; shortcomings in information-processing that prevent a person from comprehending the complex consequences of a seemingly simple policy decision. One psychologist has suggested that because the information-processing capabilities of every individual are limited, no responsible leader of a large organization ought to make a policy decision without using a computer that is programmed to spell out all the probable benefits and costs of each alternative under consideration. The usual way of trying to counteract the limitations of individuals’ mental functioning, however, is to relegate important decisions to groups.

Imperfections of group decisions

Groups, like individuals, have shortcomings. Groups can bring out the worst as well as the best in man. Nietzsche went so far as to say that madness is the exception in individuals but the rule in groups. A considerable amount of social science literature shows that in circumstances of extreme crisis, group contagion occasionally gives rise to collective panic, violent acts of scapegoating, and other forms of what could be called group madness. Much more frequent, however, are instances of mindless conformity and collective misjudgment of serious risks, which are collectively laughed off in a clubby atmosphere of relaxed conviviality. Consider what happened a few days before disaster struck the small mining town of Pitcher, Oklahoma, in 1950. The local mining engineer had warned the inhabitants to leave at once because the town had been accidentally undermined and might cave in at any moment. At a Lion’s Club meeting of leading citizens, the day after the warning was issued, the members joked about the warning and laughed uproariously when someone arrived wearing a parachute. What the club members were communicating to each other by their collective laughter was that “sensible people like us know better than to take seriously those disaster warnings; we know it can’t happen here, to our fine little town.” Within a few days, this collective complacency cost some of these men and their families their lives.

Lack of vigilance and excessive risk-taking are forms of temporary group derangement to which decision-making groups made up of responsible executives are not at all immune. Sometimes the main trouble is that the chief executive manipulates his advisers to rubber-stamp his own ill-conceived proposals. In this book, however, I shall be dealing mainly with a different source of defective decision-making, which often involves a much more subtle form of faulty leadership: During the group’s deliberations, the leader does not deliberately try to get the group to tell him what he wants to hear but is quite sincere in asking for honest opinions. The group members are not transformed into sycophants. They are not afraid to speak their minds. Nevertheless, subtle constraints, which the leader may reinforce inadvertently, prevent a member from fully exercising his critical powers and from openly expressing doubts when most others in the group appear to have reached a consensus. In order to take account of what is known about the causes and consequences of such constraints we must briefly review some of the main findings of research on group dynamics.

Effects of group cohesiveness

In applying the concepts of group dynamics to recent historic policy decisions, I am extending the work of some pioneering social scientists. The power of a face-to-face group to set norms that influence members was emphasized

by two leading sociologists early in the twentieth century—Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead. During that same period, William Graham Sumner postulated that in-group solidarity increases when clashes arise with out-groups.

Kurt Lewin, the social psychologist who began using empirical methods to study group dynamics during the 1940s, called attention to the prerequisites for effective group decisions. He described the typical dilemmas faced by executive committees, including wartime groups of military planners who select bomb targets and peacetime groups of policy-makers who try to improve relations between nations. Lewin emphasized the need for fact-finding and objective appraisal of alternatives to determine whether the chosen means will achieve a group's goals. He warned that the lack of objective standards for evaluating goal achievement allows many opportunities for errors of judgment and faulty decisions. Lewin's analysis of the behavior of small groups also emphasized the importance of group cohesiveness—that is, members' positive valuation of the group and their motivation to continue to belong to it. When group cohesiveness is high, all the members express solidarity, mutual liking, and positive feelings about attending meetings and carrying out the routine tasks of the group. Lewin was most interested in the positive effects of group cohesiveness and did not investigate instances when members of cohesive groups make gross errors and fail to correct their shared misjudgments.

The potentially detrimental effects of group cohesiveness were emphasized by another theorist, Wilfred Bion, an eminent group therapist. Bion described how the efficiency of all working groups can be adversely affected by the preconscious myths and misconceptions of their mutually dependent members—that is, by shared basic assumptions that tend to preserve the group without regard for the work at hand.

Under the influence of Kurt Lewin's pioneering work, Leon Festinger, Harold Kelley, Stanley Schachter, and other social psychologists have carried out experiments and field investigations on the consequences of group cohesiveness.¹ Summarizing a large body of research findings that had accumulated during the 1950s and 1960s on the ways members of cohesive groups influence each other, Dorwin Cartwright concluded that the evidence converges on three main types of effects:

Other things being equal, as cohesiveness increases there is an increase in a group's capacity to retain members and in the degree of participation by members in group activities. The greater a group's cohesiveness the more power it has to bring about conformity to its norms and to gain acceptance of its goals and assignment to tasks and roles. Finally, highly cohesive groups provide a source of security for members which serves to reduce anxiety and to heighten self-esteem.

Also under investigation are the causes of group cohesiveness—how and why group identification and feelings of solidarity develop. It has long been known that group solidarity increases markedly whenever a collection of in-

dividuals faces a common source of external stress, such as the threat of being injured or killed in military combat. Some researchers are beginning to consider the effects on group solidarity of subtler sources of stress, such as those that beset groups of harried policy-makers in large organizations.

Conformity to group norms

In studies of social clubs and other small groups, conformity pressures have frequently been observed. Whenever a member says something that sounds out of line with the group's norms, the other members at first increase their communication with the deviant. Attempts to influence the nonconformist member to revise or tone down his dissident ideas continue as long as most members of the group feel hopeful about talking him into changing his mind. But if they fail after repeated attempts, the amount of communication they direct toward the deviant decreases markedly. The members begin to exclude him, often quite subtly at first and later more obviously, in order to restore the unity of the group. A social psychological experiment conducted by Stanley Schachter with avocational clubs in an American university—and replicated by Schachter and his collaborators in seven European countries—showed that the more cohesive the group and the more relevant the issue to the goals of the group, the greater is the inclination of the members to reject a nonconformist. Just as the members insulate themselves from outside critics who threaten to disrupt the unity and esprit de corps of their group, they take steps, often without being aware of it, to counteract the disruptive influence of inside critics who are attacking the group's norms.

The norms to which the members of a cohesive group adhere, as Bion's analysis implies, do not always have a positive effect on the quality of the group's performance. Studies in industrial organizations indicate that while the norms of some work groups foster conscientiousness and high productivity, the norms of other, similar work groups foster slowdowns and socializing activities that reduce productivity. The same type of variation in norms that facilitate or interfere with the group's work objectives may be found among policy-making groups in large organizations.

Much of the current research on group dynamics is an effort to pinpoint the causes of the crucial differences in group norms that make for good or poor performance on group tasks, especially tasks pertaining to decision-making. Among the phenomena that have been intensively investigated in recent years are two detrimental tendencies arising under certain conditions not yet adequately understood—the tendency of groups to develop stereotyped images that dehumanize out-groups against whom they are engaged in competitive struggles and the tendency for the collective judgments arising out of group discussions to become polarized, sometimes shifting toward extreme conservatism and sometimes toward riskier courses of action than the individual members would otherwise be prepared to take.

Conceptions of political decision-making

Group dynamics is still in the early stages of scientific development, and much remains to be learned. At present there are only a few concepts and generalizations in which we can have confidence when we are trying to understand the behavior of policy-making groups. Nevertheless, social scientists concerned with policy-making in the government—most notably, Karl Deutsch, Alexander George, and Joseph de Rivera—have started to use group dynamics concepts that hold the promise of enriching political science. The rapprochement between the two fields, however, is still mainly a perspective for the future rather than a current reality. My hope is that the case studies in the present book will help to concretize and give added impetus to this new development within the social sciences.

The use of theory and research on group dynamics is intended to supplement, not to replace, the standard approaches to the study of political decision-making. Three conceptual frameworks have been described and applied by Graham T. Allison in his analysis of the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis. First is the classical approach—Allison refers to it as the rational actor model or The Theory of International Relations, with a capital "T"—which is rooted in the work of well-known scholars such as Hans Morgenthau, Arnold Wolfers, and Raymond Aron. Analysts using this approach construct a set of objectives that the statesman responsible for a policy is intending to achieve, "presuming always," as Morgenthau puts it, "that he acts in a rational manner." The aim of this type of analysis is to determine the ends the political actor is trying to attain by means of the policy he has chosen.

The second framework described by Allison grows largely out of the work of Herbert Simon, James March, and their collaborators. The organizational process model emphasizes factors that limit rationality in decision-making by individuals and organizations. These factors include the limitations of man's capacity to process information, constraints on attempts to obtain the information necessary for calculating maximal gains, and the tendency to find a course of action that will satisfy the most minimal goals instead of seeking for the action with the best consequences (this is known as a satisficing strategy). This approach takes account of "organizational rigidities" such as routines and procedures of bureaucratic organizations that grind out platitudes about what can be done to attain objectives.

The third framework, called by Allison the governmental politics model, derives from the work of Gabriel Almond, Charles E. Lindblom, Richard Neustadt, and other political scientists. It focuses on the intrusions of the games of domestic and local bureaucratic politics into the dangerous competitive games of international relations. In Lindblom's variant of this approach, governmental policy-making is a matter of "muddling through": Policy-makers take one little step after another and gradually change the old policy into a new one, all the while making compromises that keep every

politically powerful group that enters the bargaining reasonably satisfied, or at least not dissatisfied enough to obstruct or sabotage the new trend.

Allison presents the three approaches as conceptual models to help social scientists generate hypotheses and discern important features that might otherwise be overlooked when they are trying to explain how and why a new foreign policy decision came about. He points out, "The best analysts of foreign policy manage to weave strands of each of the three conceptual models into their explanations." At the very least, according to Allison, these conceptual models can pose the questions to be answered in a systematic way in case studies of foreign policy decision-making.

Most theorists have little respect for "case studies"—in large part because of the atheoretical character of case studies of the past. . . . What we need is a new kind of "case study" done with theoretical alertness to the range of factors identified by Models I, II, and III (and others) on the basis of which to begin refining and testing propositions and models.

In order to use the three conceptual models, analysts must take as the unit of analysis either the individual decision-maker or a large group such as the State Department, the government's intelligence community, or the various coalitions within the bureaucracy that participate in bargaining. The group dynamics approach—which should be considered a fourth conceptual model—uses a different unit of analysis. When we are trying to understand how certain avoidable policy errors happen to be made, we should look into the behavior of the small group of decision-makers, because all the well-known errors stemming from limitations of an individual and of a large organization can be greatly augmented by group processes that produce shared miscalculations.

What is groupthink?

The group dynamics approach is based on the working assumption that the members of policy-making groups, no matter how mindful they may be of their exalted national status and of their heavy responsibilities, are subjected to the pressures widely observed in groups of ordinary citizens. In my earlier research on group dynamics, I was impressed by repeated manifestations of the effects—both unfavorable and favorable—of the social pressures that typically develop in cohesive groups—in infantry platoons, air crews, therapy groups, seminars, and self-study or encounter groups of executives receiving leadership training.² In all these groups, just as in the industrial work groups described by other investigators, members tend to evolve informal norms to preserve friendly intragroup relations and these become part of the hidden agenda at their meetings. When conducting research on groups of heavy smokers at a clinic set up to help people stop smoking, I noticed a seemingly irrational tendency for the members to exert pressure on each other to increase

their smoking as the time for the final meeting approached. This appeared to be a collusive effort to display mutual dependence and resistance to the termination of the group sessions.

Sometimes, even long before members become concerned about the final separation, clear-cut signs of pressures toward uniformity subvert the fundamental purpose of group meetings. At the second meeting of one group of smokers, consisting of twelve middle-class American men and women, two of the most dominant members took the position that heavy smoking was an almost incurable addiction. The majority of the others soon agreed that no one could be expected to cut down drastically. One heavy smoker, a middle-aged business executive, took issue with this consensus, arguing that by using will power he had stopped smoking since joining the group and that everyone else could do the same. His declaration was followed by a heated discussion, which continued in the halls of the building after the formal meeting adjourned. Most of the others ganged up against the man who was deviating from the group consensus. Then, at the beginning of the next meeting, the deviant announced that he had made an important decision. "When I joined," he said, "I agreed to follow the two main rules required by the clinic—to make a conscientious effort to stop smoking and to attend every meeting. But I have learned from experience in this group that you can only follow one of the rules, you can't follow both. And so, I have decided that I will continue to attend every meeting but I have gone back to smoking two packs a day and I will not make any effort to stop smoking again until after the last meeting." Whereupon, the other members beamed at him and applauded enthusiastically, welcoming him back to the fold. No one commented on the fact that the whole point of the meetings was to help each individual to cut down on smoking as rapidly as possible. As a psychological consultant to the group, I tried to call this to the members' attention, and so did my collaborator, Dr. Michael Kahn. But during that meeting the members managed to ignore our comments and reiterated their consensus that heavy smoking was an addiction from which no one would be cured except by cutting down very gradually over a long period of time.

This episode—an extreme form of groupthink—was only one manifestation of a general pattern that the group displayed. At every meeting, the members were amiable, reasserted their warm feelings of solidarity, and sought complete concurrence on every important topic, with no reappearance of the unpleasant bickering that would spoil the cozy atmosphere. The concurrence-seeking tendency could be maintained, however, only at the expense of ignoring realistic challenges (like those posed by the psychological consultants) and distorting members' observations of individual differences that would call into question the shared assumption that everyone in the group had the same type of addiction problem. It seemed that in this smoking group I was observing another instance of the groupthink pattern I had encountered in observations of widely contrasting groups whose members came from diverse sectors

of society and were meeting together for social, educational, vocational, or other purposes. Just like the group in the smoking clinic, all these different types of groups had shown signs of high cohesiveness and of an accompanying concurrence-seeking tendency that interfered with critical thinking—the central features of groupthink.

I use the term "groupthink" as a quick and easy way to refer to a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action. "Groupthink" is a term of the same order as the words in the newspeak vocabulary George Orwell presents in his dismaying *1984*—a vocabulary with terms such as "doublethink" and "crimethink." By putting groupthink with those Orwellian words, I realize that groupthink takes on an invidious connotation. The invidiousness is intentional: Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.

Selection of the fiascoes

When I began to investigate the Bay of Pigs invasion, the decision to escalate the Korean War, and other fiascoes, for purposes of studying sources of error in foreign policy decision-making, I was initially surprised to discover the pervasiveness of symptoms of groupthink. Although the symptoms that could be discerned from published accounts of the deliberations did not seem as obtrusive as in the face-to-face groups I had observed directly, nevertheless signs of poor decision-making as a result of concurrence-seeking were unmistakable.

After noting the first few examples of grossly miscalculated policy decisions that seemed at least partly attributable to group processes, I began collecting instances of similar fiascoes from a variety of sources, such as Harold Wilensky's *Organizational Intelligence* and Barton Whaley's *Stratagem*. In a short time, with the help of suggestions from colleagues in political science and library research by students in my seminars on group dynamics, I compiled a list of several dozen fiascoes. I cut the list to about two dozen that appeared appropriate for an analysis of group processes. I was looking for instances in which a defective decision was made in a series of meetings by a few policy-makers who constituted a cohesive group. By a defective decision, I mean one that results from decision-making practices of extremely poor quality. In other words, the fiascoes that I selected for analysis *deserved* to be fiascoes because of the grossly inadequate way the policy-makers carried out their decision-making tasks.

At least seven major defects in decision-making contribute to failures to

solve problems adequately. First, the group's discussions are limited to a few alternative courses of action (often only two) without a survey of the full range of alternatives. Second, the group does not survey the objectives to be fulfilled and the values implicated by the choice. Third, the group fails to reexamine the course of action initially preferred by the majority of members from the standpoint of nonobvious risks and drawbacks that had not been considered when it was originally evaluated. Fourth, the members neglect courses of action initially evaluated as unsatisfactory by the majority of the group: They spend little or no time discussing whether they have overlooked nonobvious gains or whether there are ways of reducing the seemingly prohibitive costs that had made the alternatives seem undesirable. Fifth, the members make little or no attempt to obtain information from experts who can supply sound estimates of losses and gains to be expected from alternative courses of actions. Sixth, selective bias is shown in the way the group reacts to factual information and relevant judgments from experts, the mass media, and outside critics. The members show interest in facts and opinions that support their initially preferred policy and take up time in their meetings to discuss them, but they tend to ignore facts and opinions that do not support their initially preferred policy. Seventh, the members spend little time deliberating about how the chosen policy might be hindered by bureaucratic inertia, sabotaged by political opponents, or temporarily derailed by the common accidents that happen to the best of well-laid plans. Consequently, they fail to work out contingency plans to cope with foreseeable setbacks that could endanger the overall success of the chosen course of action.

I assume that these seven defects and some related features of inadequate decision-making result from groupthink. But, of course, each of the seven can arise from other common causes of human stupidity as well—erroneous intelligence, information overload, fatigue, blinding prejudice, and ignorance. Whether produced by groupthink or by other causes, a decision suffering from most of these defects has relatively little chance of success.

The five major policy fiascoes I have selected for intensive case studies are the ones of greatest historical importance among the defective decisions by the United States government I have examined. Each clearly meets two important criteria for classifying a decision as a candidate for psychological analysis in terms of group dynamics: Each presents numerous indications that (1) the decision-making group was cohesive and that (2) decision-making was extremely defective. (Other fiascoes in my original list also meet these criteria and are discussed briefly in the last part of the book, where I talk about candidates for subsequent investigations bearing on the generality of groupthink phenomena.)

When the conditions specified by these two criteria are met, according to the groupthink hypothesis there is a better-than-chance likelihood that one of the causes of the defective decision was a strong concurrence-seeking tendency, which is the motivation that gives rise to all the symptoms of groupthink.

The imperfect link between groupthink and fiascoes

Simply because the outcome of a group decision has turned out to be a fiasco, I do not assume that it must have been the result of groupthink or even that it was the result of defective decision-making. Nor do I expect that every defective decision, whether arising from groupthink or from other causes, will produce a fiasco. Defective decisions based on misinformation and poor judgment sometimes lead to successful outcomes. We do not necessarily have to accept at face value the well-known thesis—eloquently put forth by Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace* and elaborated by Norman Mailer in *The Naked and the Dead*—that the decisions made by military commanders have nothing to do with military success. But we must acknowledge that chance and the stupidity of the enemy can sometimes give a silk-purse ending to a command decision worth less than a sow's ear. At the outset of World War I, the French high command made incredible errors, repeatedly ignoring warnings from their military intelligence officers about the Schlieffen plan. But the German high command made even grosser errors while executing the plan, preventing the Germans from capitalizing on the French rout and depriving them of the quick victory that was within their grasp.

Groupthink is conducive to errors in decision-making, and such errors increase the likelihood of a poor outcome. Often the result is a fiasco, but not always. Suppose that because of lucky accidents fostered by absurd command decisions by the Cuban military leaders, the Kennedy administration's Bay of Pigs invasion had been successful in provoking a civil war in Cuba and led to the overthrow of the Castro regime. Analysis of the decision to invade Cuba would still support the groupthink hypothesis, for the evidence shows that Kennedy's White House group was highly cohesive, clearly displayed symptoms of defective decision-making, and exhibited all the major symptoms of groupthink. Thus, even if the Bay of Pigs decision had produced a triumph rather than a defeat, it would still be an example of the potentially adverse effects of groupthink (even though the invasion would not, in that case, be classified as a fiasco).

Hardhearted actions by softheaded groups

At first I was surprised by the extent to which the groups in the fiascoes I have examined adhered to group norms and pressures toward uniformity. Just as in groups of ordinary citizens, a dominant characteristic appears to be remaining loyal to the group by sticking with the decisions to which the group has committed itself, even when the policy is working badly and has unintended consequences that disturb the conscience of the members. In a sense, members consider loyalty to the group the highest form of morality. That

loyalty requires each member to avoid raising controversial issues, questioning weak arguments, or calling a halt to softheaded thinking.

Paradoxically, softheaded groups are likely to be extremely hardhearted toward out-groups and enemies. In dealing with a rival nation, policy-makers comprising an amiable group find it relatively easy to authorize dehumanizing solutions such as large-scale bombings. An affable group of government officials is unlikely to pursue the difficult and controversial issues that arise when alternatives to a harsh military solution come up for discussion. Nor are the members inclined to raise ethical issues that imply that this "fine group of ours, with its humanitarianism and its high-minded principles, might be capable of adopting a course of action that is inhumane and immoral."

Many other sources of human error can prevent government leaders from arriving at well worked out decisions, resulting in failures to achieve their practical objectives and violations of their own standards of ethical conduct. But, unlike groupthink, these other sources of error do not typically entail increases in hardheartedness along with softheadedness. Some errors involve blind spots that stem from the personality of the decision-makers. Special circumstances produce unusual fatigue and emotional stresses that interfere with efficient decision-making. Numerous institutional features of the social structure in which the group is located may also cause inefficiency and prevent adequate communication with experts. In addition, well-known interferences with sound thinking arise when the decision-makers comprise a noncohesive group. For example, when the members have no sense of loyalty to the group and regard themselves merely as representatives of different departments, with clashing interests, the meetings may become bitter power struggles, at the expense of effective decision-making.

The concept of groupthink pinpoints an entirely different source of trouble, residing neither in the individual nor in the organizational setting. Over and beyond all the familiar sources of human error is a powerful source of defective judgment that arises in cohesive groups—the concurrence-seeking tendency, which fosters overoptimism, lack of vigilance, and sloganistic thinking about the weakness and immorality of out-groups. This tendency can take its toll even when the decision-makers are conscientious statesmen trying to make the best possible decisions for their country and for all mankind.

I do not mean to imply that all cohesive groups suffer from groupthink, though all may display its symptoms from time to time. Nor should we infer from the term "groupthink" that group decisions are typically inefficient or harmful. On the contrary, a group whose members have properly defined roles, with traditions and standard operating procedures that facilitate critical inquiry, is probably capable of making better decisions than any individual in the group who works on the problem alone. And yet the advantages of having decisions made by groups are often lost because of psychological pressures that arise when the members work closely together, share the same values, and above all face a crisis situation in which everyone is

subjected to stresses that generate a strong need for affiliation. In these circumstances, as conformity pressures begin to dominate, groupthink and the attendant deterioration of decision-making set in.

The central theme of my analysis can be summarized in this generalization, which I offer in the spirit of Parkinson's laws: *The more amiability and esprit de corps among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out-groups.*