

Excerpt from "A BRIEF HISTORY OF GROUPTHINK"

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Thirty-five years ago, Yale psychologist Irving Janis published an essay in the *Yale Alumni Magazine* explaining how a group of intelligent people working together to solve a problem can sometimes arrive at the worst possible answer. He called his radical new theory "groupthink"; it changed the way we think about decision making. The idea remains so influential, says Yale political scientist Donald Green, that "the term 'groupthink' must come up once a day in common conversation." Janis's essay is still the alumni magazine's most requested reprint. His book on the subject went into a second edition that is still in print as a college textbook. (Janis died in 1990.)

Janis came up with the idea of groupthink during a Yale seminar on the psychology of small groups. His reading about the Bay of Pigs fiasco had led him to wonder how intelligent people like John F. Kennedy and his advisers could have been "taken in by such a stupid, patchwork plan as the one presented to them by the CIA representatives." During his seminar, he found himself suggesting that what had happened in the White House might be similar to what happened among ordinary citizens in the groups he studied for his research: they often developed a "pattern of concurrence-seeking . . . when a 'we' feeling of solidarity is running high."

To investigate further, Janis studied several policy fiascoes, including the Bay of Pigs, the failure to protect Pearl Harbor, and the escalation of the Vietnam War. In each case, the participants "adhered to group norms and pressures toward uniformity, even when their policy was working badly and had unintended consequences that disturbed the conscience of the members," he wrote. "Members consider loyalty to the group the highest form of morality."

Participants in those critical decisions, Janis found, had failed to consider the full range of alternatives or consult experts who could offer different perspectives. They rejected outside information and opinion unless it supported their preferred policy. And the harsher the preferred policy -- the more likely it was to involve moral dilemma -- the more zealously members clung to their consensus: "Each member is likely to become more dependent than ever on the in-group for maintaining his self-image as a decent human being and will therefore be more strongly motivated to maintain group unity."

Janis suggested several steps for preventing groupthink, though he cautioned that they were hypothetical. His recommendations include careful impartiality on the part of the leader as to what decision the group should make; formation of competing teams to study the same problem; and giving "high priority to airing objections and doubts."

Today, groupthink is studied in military colleges, business schools, the management training industry, and academe. It also influences real-time national policies. In 2005, the presidential commission on U.S. intelligence about weapons of mass destruction (Yale president Richard C. Levin was a member of the commission) released a lengthy study; it included the finding that "'groupthink' on an international scale" was one of the reasons Western intelligence services all agreed that Iraq was a genuine WMD threat.

In response, the CIA, for one, changed its ways. In April 2006, John A. Kringen, head of the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence, published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* entitled "How We've Improved Intelligence: Minimizing the Risk of 'Groupthink.'" He outlined a dozen new procedures, including routinely consulting academics and outside experts and setting up "alternative analysis" teams.

Was groupthink responsible for the 2005 National Intelligence Estimate finding -- since reversed -- that Iran was working to produce a nuclear weapon? Kringen didn't respond directly when asked by the *Yale Alumni Magazine*. The directorate "has been diligent in integrating fresh thinking and new perspectives into our analysis," he wrote in an e-mail, and he listed several more "structured analytic techniques" the CIA now uses to test hypotheses.

What about the decision to invade Iraq? Histories and analyses both pro and con will surely be written in bulk as to whether groupthink in the Bush administration led the nation into war. That is already a favorite charge of left-leaning pundits, especially so after the release of *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* by Bob Woodward '65. Woodward wrote that in moments when the president "had someone from the field there in the chair beside him, he did not press, did not try to open the door himself and ask what the visitor had seen and thought."

Added References/Suggestions by Nolan (website editor) – 2008

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/blik.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/certitude-faith.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/facts.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/mathematics.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/pluralism.htm> See the section *The "Blik" and Philosophy of Religious Education*

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/reality.htm>

<http://www.philosophy-religion.org/criticism/toxicfaith.htm>