

Yesterday I clipped a Book World ad for Janis' Victims of Groupthink. The ad impressed me. Recognizing that judging a book from a review may be as harardous as from its cover, I note strong disagreements with some of the quotes, strong enough to make me wonder a bit about Janis, who is so wrong. There seems to be admitted from consideration the noble motive of selfish, career interests which do figure in the advice given the Great. Then he is ~~all~~ wrong on the Cuba Missile Crisis, where one adviser was instinctively and immediately right, Stevenson. McCord went along to a degree but was talked out of it by his own. Now, had JFK kistend to Adlai instead of doghousing him, from selfish JFK interests he'd have had a better solution or deal. They were forced by Khrushchev, not their actis or Groupthinking, to go back to and grab at Kh's first offer, to which they added what he hadn't really demanded. Actually, it can be alleged that the tinking in Janis book is Groupthink. HW 2/26/73

# Groupthink and the Fraternity

Reviewed by  
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When a President asks his close advisers to contribute to a decision on foreign policy, they will:

- (a) say what they think?
- (b) remain silent because they disagree with him?
- (c) agree because they know what he wants?

Irving Janis, a professor of psychology at Yale, finds explanations for some foreign policy decisions in the tight cohesiveness of policy groups. "Groupthink," he says, can lead a fraternity of close-knit policy-makers into decisions that may lead to fiascoes.

He cites four examples: approval of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion; allowing Mac-

Arthur to pursue the enemy into North Korea in 1951; failure in 1941 to prepare Pearl Harbor for possible attack; and escalation of the Vietnam war in the year 1964-67. By contrast, he cites the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and preparations for the Marshall Plan in 1947 to show how the dangers of groupthink can be avoided.

A moderate amount of cohesiveness, the prime condition of groupthink, can build morale and eliminate destructive and time consuming debates over trivia. Too much of it, however, can open the door to groupthink — as it may have done in the 1965 Dominican Republic decision. Groupthink, Janis maintains, increases the probability of defective decisions, and thereby the chances of failures although he is careful to point out that group decisions, in contrast to groupthink, are likely to be better than those any one member of

## Book World

**VICTIMS OF GROUPTHINK: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascoes.** By Irving L. Janis.

(Houghton Mifflin. 277 pp \$7.95; paper, \$4.50)

the group would make on his own. Not all policy-making fiascoes can be blamed on poor decisions, any more than sound choices will assure success: Chance being what it is, even defective decisions do not guarantee fiascoes.

Janis does not claim to have built a complete theory; he speaks consistently of the groupthink hypothesis and admits he can't state precisely how often it occurs in a series of decisions or even the degree to which it is responsible for a given mistake. How, then, does anyone recognize it, much less work against it?

According to Janis, groupthink is most easily identi-

fied by its symptoms: a shared illusion of invulnerability to failure; rationalization of decisions to discount warnings; belief in the group's inherent morality; stereotypes that belittle the opposition abroad; pressure against dissenters, within the group; self-censorship of doubts and counter-arguments; the assumption of unanimity within the group; and exclusion of adverse information by self-appointed "mindguards." The more numerous the symptoms, "the worse will be the quality of its decisions." Janis offers several prescriptions for preventing groupthink. For instance:

"1. The leader of a policy-forming group should assign

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the role of critical evaluator to each member . . . [and accept] criticism of his own judgments. . . .

"2. The leaders . . . should be impartial instead of stating preferences and expectations at the outset. . . . This allows conferees the opportunity to develop an atmosphere of open inquiry. . . .

"3. The organization should . . . [set up] several independent policy-planning and evaluation groups to work on the same policy question. . . ."

"Victims of Groupthink" is undeniably ambitious, bridging social psychology, political science and history, but it is not a comprehensive treatment of decision-making. Janis deals slightly

with bureaucratic environments, in which by far the most decisions are made and in which achieving group cohesiveness across organizational lines can be a more intractable problem than combating it. Furthermore, within a group, the author

sees a degree of unselfish devotion to reason that other analysts have generally found wanting, particularly in the high levels of foreign policy. One is left wondering if the phenomenon of groupthink operates mainly at the top levels, when experience says that the herd instinct is even more dominant on lower organizational levels.

While Janis doesn't fall into the trap of simplified explanations of policy failures he doesn't provide many solid answers. Groupthink, he states, is a danger "over and beyond all the familiar sources of human error." The real benefits of his hypothesis will emerge only from further studies combined with broader approaches to policy analysis.