

Groupthink in Washington

By Irving L. Janis

NEW HAVEN—Over and beyond all the familiar sources of human error is a powerful source of defective judgment that arises in cohesive groups of decision makers—the concurrence-seeking tendency, which fosters over-optimism, lack of vigilance and sloganistic thinking about the weakness and immorality of out-groups.

This tendency can take its toll even when the decisionmakers are conscientious statesmen trying to make the best possible decisions for their country. I use the term "groupthink" as a quick and easy way to refer to the mode of thinking that group members engage in when they are dominated by the concurrence-seeking tendency, when their strivings for unanimity override their motivation to appraise the consequences of their actions.

The groupthink hypothesis occurred to me while reading Arthur M. Schlesinger's chapters on the Bay of Pigs in "A Thousand Days." At first, I was puzzled: How could bright, shrewd men like John F. Kennedy and his advisers be taken in by the C.I.A.'s stupid, patchwork plan? I began to wonder whether some kind of psychological contagion, similar to social conformity phenomena observed in psychological studies of small groups, had interfered with their mental alertness.

When I examined other accounts, I was struck by many further observations that fit into exactly the pattern of concurrence-seeking that has impressed me in my research on other face-to-face groups when a "we" feeling of solidarity is running high. I concluded that a group process was subtly at work in Kennedy's team which prevented the members from debating the real issues posed by the C.I.A.'s plan and from carefully appraising its serious risks. Then I started to look into similar historic fiascoes that occurred during the administrations of three other American presidents: Franklin D. Roosevelt (failure to be prepared for Pearl Harbor), Harry S. Truman (the invasion of North Korea), and Lyndon B. Johnson (escalation of the Vietnam war). Each decision was a group product, issuing from a series of meetings held by a small and cohesive group of government officials and advisers. In each case I found the same kind of detrimental group process that was at work in the Bay of Pigs decision.

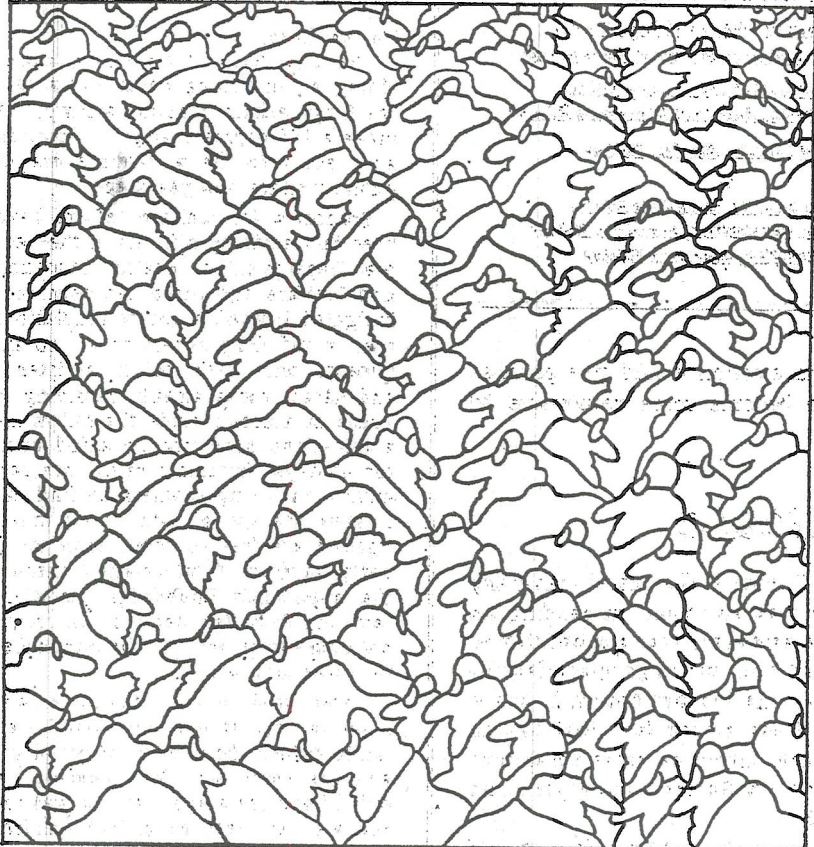
I was surprised by the extent to which the groups involved in these fiascoes adhered to group norms and pressures toward uniformity, even when their policy was working badly and had unintended consequences that disturbed the conscience of the members.

Eight main symptoms run through the case studies of historic fiascoes. Each symptom can be identified by a variety of indicators, derived from historical records, observer's accounts of conversations, and participants' memoirs:

- An illusion of invulnerability, shared by most or all the members, which creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks;

- Collective efforts to rationalize in order to discount warnings which might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they recommit themselves to their past policy decisions;

- An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality, inclining the members to ignore the ethical or



moral consequences of their decisions;

- Stereotyped views of rivals and enemies as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate, or as too weak and stupid to counter whatever risky attempts are made to defeat their purposes;

- Direct pressure on any member who expresses strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments, making clear that this type of dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members;

- Self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus, reflecting each member's inclination to minimize to himself the importance of his doubts and counterarguments;

- A shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view (partly resulting from self-censorship of deviations, augmented by the false assumption that silence means consent);

- The emergence of self-appointed mindguards — members who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions.

At present we do not know what percentage of all national fiascoes are attributable to groupthink. Some decisions of poor quality that turn out to be fiascoes might be ascribed primarily to mistakes made by just one man, the Chief Executive. Others arise because of a faulty policy formulated by a group of executives whose decision-making procedures were impaired by errors having little or nothing to do with groupthink. All that can be said from the historical case studies I have analyzed so far is that groupthink tendencies sometimes play a major role in producing large-scale fiascoes.

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.

I do not mean to imply that all cohesive groups suffer from groupthink, though all may display its symptoms from time to time. 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.

Although it is risky to make huge inferential leaps from theory to practice, we should not be inhibited from drawing tentative inferences from these fiascoes. Perhaps the worst mistakes can be prevented if we take steps to avoid the circumstances in which groupthink is most likely to flourish.

Irving L. Janis is professor of psychology at Yale University. This article is based on his recent book, "Victims of Groupthink."