

# Unknown Knowns: A Groupthink Model on the U.S. Decision to go to War In Iraq

Written by Vilde Rodin

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### Introduction

On March 19 2003 the United States, along with a coalition of willing states, launched a 'shock and awe' campaign against Iraq. The invading force quickly toppled Ba'athist dictator Saddam Hussein and the country fell into a lasting and widespread sectarian conflict (Goodman 2013). At the time, the decision to invade Iraq was highly controversial. Since, the Iraq War has been considered one of the worst foreign policy mistakes of the 21st century and has been subject to much inquiry (Clarke 2004). After it was discovered that there were no weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, many observers questioned why the Bush administration had been so insistent on invasion. How could such an experienced group of decision-makers be so wrong? This essay aims to investigate whether or not the decision to invade Iraq was caused by groupthink, as outlined by Janis (1972) and various other political psychology scholars. Further, it will examine the decision-making process of the Bush administration between 2001 and 2003 in light of Janis' three causal antecedent criteria and the eight concurrence-seeking manifestations.

### The Groupthink Model

William Whyte coined the term 'groupthink' in 1952, referring to the danger of what he called "rationalized conformity" (Whyte [1952] 2012). Yet, it was not developed as a comprehensive explanatory theory until 1972, when American psychologist Irving Janis published his *magnum opus Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. Groupthink, named after Orwellian 'doublethink' and 'crimethink', is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when actors in small groups set aside their personal motivations to reach consensus and achieve cohesiveness (Janis 1972:9). It typically occurs when group dynamics and pressure toward conformity leads to a weakening of "mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgement" (Janis 1972:9). This theory has been successfully used to retrospectively explain foreign policy failures, such as the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Iran-Contra affair, and even some domestic scandals, such as the Watergate cover-up (Janis 1972; Raven 1998; t'Hart 1994). Although it has been successful in these cases, it is not universally applicable. As groupthink stems from the positivist tradition, where symptoms can be measured empirically against correlative decision-making steps, it is mostly applicable to retrospective testing of well-known case studies, as opposed to broad scale empirical testing (Sunstein 2003:142). The narrowness of Janis' groupthink model leaves it ill suited to explain universal decision-making and it is unsuitable for making predictions, an important aspect of political theories. The theory is strongest when applied to homogenous administrations in open societies, and is as such unfit to explain decisions made in consensus-based governments, such as in Western Europe (T'Hart et al 1997:11). Despite groupthink being flawed as a universal theory, the case of Iraq is very suitable for the scope of the model. The decision to invade Iraq was made by a homogenous group in an open society characterised by unregulated mass media and the rule of law. Several miscalculations regarding Iraq were severe enough to be labelled fiascos of foreign policy.

Three key errors of judgement were made between 2001 and 2003, which are crucial to this essay's analysis. The first error was the public assertion that Iraq had large amounts of WMDs. The Bush administration declared that they *knew* that Hussein "[had] been absolutely devoted to trying to acquire nuclear weapons" and that he had, in fact,

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been successful in this endeavour (McQueen 2005:58). This was proven to be wrong shortly after the invasion. Hussein had disarmed the nuclear stock after the first Gulf War, information that was arguably available before the invasion. Consequently, internal failure to process available intelligence led to a major foreign policy fiasco. Second, President Bush stated that Iraq posed an *imminent threat* to U.S. security, a threat that, in fact, did not exist (Badie 2010). This misrepresentation arguably shows a basic miscomprehension of international relations. The third error of judgement was the Bush administration's belief that Saddam Hussein was linked to, and actively supported, Al-Qaeda. Many members of the administration were keen to pin the terror acts of 9/11 on Hussein, because there were simply "no good targets in Afghanistan" (Houghton 2008: 174). This is often called the 'drunkards search', where the drunkard looks for his lost keys in the wrong location because it has a convenient light post (McQueen 2008). Despite being told that there was absolutely no link between al-Qaeda and Iraq, President Bush asked his chief of Counter-Terrorism, on September 12 2001, to "[s]ee if Saddam did this. See if he's linked in anyway" (Clarke 2004: 30). Clarke argues that this was a result of 'hawks', Secretary Rumsfeld and his deputy Wolfowitz, "[getting] to [Bush], as they both loudly argued for invading Iraq (Clarke 2004: 30f). The conclusion to be drawn from these three errors is that something went wrong in the decision-making process leading up to the war. Through applying the groupthink model, this essay will analyse exactly what went wrong and enquire whether it was a result of concurrence seeking behaviour and groupthink.

There are three antecedent conditions that give rise to concurrence-seeking tendencies: (1) group cohesiveness, (2) structural faults of the organisation and (3) provocative situational context, in addition to occasional temporary low self esteem induced by recent failures, difficulties in current decision making task and moral dilemmas (McQueen 2005:56). The first three will be the main focus in this essay. These antecedent conditions are consequently followed by eight symptoms of groupthink, which infects the decision-making process. These include the illusion of invulnerability, collective rationalisations, beliefs in inherent morality, stereotyped views of out-groups, direct pressure on dissenters, self-censorship, the illusion of unanimity and self-appointed 'mind-guards' (Janis 1972). To discuss the eight symptoms we must first establish the presence of broad causal antecedent conditions.

## Causal Antecedent Conditions

One of the most important antecedents for concurrence seeking is the cohesiveness of the core decision-making group. The decision-makers, from now on referred to as the 'core group', consisted of President Bush and his key advisors, Vice President Cheney, VP Chief Aide Libby, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, NSC Advisor Rice, Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz, Undersecretary of Defense Policy Feith, Secretary of State Powell and CIA Director Tenet (Woodward 2004). The latter two, Powell and Tenet, disagreed with the former, 'hawkish', members of the group with regards to both intelligence and plans to invade. The hawks were cohesive among themselves, sharing a neo-conservative ideology and membership in the Project for a New America Century, a neo-conservative think-tank. However, the dissent of Tenet and Powell and the tension that followed, lends proof to a questionable degree of cohesiveness. Necessarily, the two next antecedents must be stronger to make up for (lack of) cohesiveness as a primary precondition (McQueen 2005; Badie 2010).

Structural faults in the organisation make up the next a condition, a multifaceted antecedent, within which we find (1) insulation of the group, (2) lack of leader impartiality, (3) lack of procedural norms and (4) member homogeneity (Janis 1972). Insulation from the "judgements of qualified external associates" is one of the most discernible factors identified in the case of Iraq (Janis 1972:197). The core group was not satisfied with the intelligence they received on Iraq, especially if it did not fit with their agenda. One former CIA agent stated that "[i]f it doesn't fit their theory, they don't want to accept it" (Hersh 2004). There was a basic mistrust in the CIA, which caused the core group to look inward for the intelligence they wanted (Badie 2010). Hence, Rumsfeld established the Office of Special Plans (OSP), led by Douglas Feith, to bypass the independence of the CIA (Houghton 2008). The ultra-secretive OSP, or 'the Cabal', was established in 2002 to locate evidence of two links: between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda, and between Saddam Hussein and WMDs. "Bent on creating a war with Iraq", the OSP caused threat inflation (Alexandrovna 2005; Kaufmann 2004). Powell claimed that Cheney, Libby and Feith had, through the OSP, established "what amounted to a separate government"; what Powell later called Feith's "Gestapo Office" (Hamilton 2004). In other words, the role of the OSP became legitimising the opinions of the core group. Legitimising pre-existing opinions rather than accepting unpopular intelligence arguably leads to a lack of debate, debate that would

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naturally take place if the core group were exposed to external views. It is clear that the decision-makers were insulated from outside influence.

Next, lack of leader impartiality is not difficult to demonstrate, as the views of President Bush regarding Iraq were an 'open secret' in the lead up to the war. Saddam Hussein had allegedly tried to assassinate his father, Bush Sr., following the first Gulf War. Moreover, the neo-conservative agenda, which influenced his election campaign, had clear goals of regime change in the Middle East (Clarke 2004). Yet, there was never a "serious debate" about whether Hussein posed a threat to the U.S. (Shane and Mazzetti 2007). Lastly, Bush's personal style of leadership, which proved to have little room for sincere and critical debate, indicated a lack of procedural norms, the third sub-criteria of structural faults (McQueen 2005). Identifying group homogeneity, the fourth and final sub-element under structural faults, proves to be more of a challenge than the other factors, and is arguably present to a lesser extent. The ideological differences between 'doves' or 'skeptics', namely Powell, his deputy Richard Armitage and Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, and the hawks, indicate that there were some heterogeneous elements in the core group. However, any homogeneity was 'created' rather than naturally present, as the eventual 'surrender' of Powell indicate that coherence was weak (McQueen 2005).

The final antecedent condition needed to confirm an environment conducive to groupthink is a provocative situational context. In Janis' case study on the Cuban Missile Crisis, this was a key factor. In the case of Iraq however, there was no 'ticking bomb' time pressure. Yet, there was an overhanging sense of threat and urgency to act after 9/11, which made the American people feel incredibly vulnerable. There was a general "perception of grave danger", as illustrated by polls from late 2002, which showed that "70-90 per cent of the American public believed that Hussein would sooner or later attack the United States with [WMDs]" (Badie 2010:291; Kaufmann 2004:30). Despite not being under direct pressure of time, there was a sensation of protracted crisis. It is therefore safe to say that a stressful situational context was present. In sum, antecedent conditions are present to the degree that groupthink symptoms can be investigated in the next section.

## Symptoms of Groupthink

This section will examine the direct manifestations of the causal antecedent elements above, through Janis' symptoms of groupthink. For the purpose of this essay these symptoms will be organised into two categories (see table 1). These categories represent two questions respectively. First, to what extent did the administration fail to evaluate operational risks, and second, did the decision makers exclude deviants and tend towards unanimity?

Category I can be divided further into two sub-groups. The first subgroup is the faith in the power of the group, which includes the illusion of invulnerability and a belief in the inherent morality. The second subgroup contains what McQueen calls positive tendencies, including collective rationalisation and stereotyping of out-groups (2008). Whether the administration failed to evaluate the information to fully understand the operational risk of invasion will be investigated below.

## Failure to Evaluate Risk

Before the invasion of Iraq the U.S. had relative success in Afghanistan, and had they achieved most of what they wanted. This led to a sense of optimism and the belief that the fall of Baghdad would come as easy as the fall of Kabul (Suskind 2007). Along with a long tradition of American global military hegemony, this created an illusion of invulnerability in the White House. The Bush administration was also under the impression that uncovering weapons of mass destruction would be relatively easy (McQueen 2005). This illusion of invulnerability, which consecutively encourages taking extreme risks (Janis 1972) led to three components of defective policy: “failure to manage [1] objectives, [2] risks and [3] contingency plans” (Badie 2010:291). Despite the Bush administration being given several reports about the risks of a potential invasion of Iraq, the White House failed to seriously consider the implication of regime change, which it had been aiming for from early 2001 (Kaufmann 2004). The reported risks included factional violence, reversion to authoritarian rule, surge of global terrorism, territorial breakup, major oil disruptions, strains in the Atlantic alliances, boosting political Islam and making Iraq a future magnet for extremism (Badie 2010; Hersh 2004; Clarke 2004; Suskind 2007). Notwithstanding, President Bush dismissed most of these reports, claiming that their authors were “just guessing” (Jehl & Sanger 2004). Reckless optimism and refusal to accept external advice (as a result of insulation) was amplified by a belief in the inherent morality of both the United States in general and the core group in particular. There was an underlying belief that the U.S. would be saving the Iraqi people by dethroning Hussein. Vice President Cheney famously remarked that they would, in fact, “be greeted as liberators” (Dionne 2014). Further, Bush sincerely believed that the U.S. had a “duty to free people”, regardless of the means through which it was done, stating, “I would hope we wouldn’t have to do it militarily, but we have a duty” (Woodward 2004:89). This belief in the superior power and morality of America was made even more clear in the 2002 State of the Union address, in which Bush announced that the U.S. was ‘defending liberty and justice’ against an ‘axis of evil’ (BBC 2002). In May 2003 the administration had plans to “revolutionise Muslim thinking in the role of Islam in the state”, intending to “[revise] the religious basis on which the Iraqi state was constituted”, after they had ‘liberated’ the people (Halper & Clarke 2004:21). These plans clearly show that the administrations’ understanding was fairly removed from the realities of the Middle East, and miscalculated their own global role. A combination of an illusion of invulnerability and a belief in an inherent morality of the core group may have contributed to a failure to accurately assess and question both the intelligence reports and the means by which ‘justice’ ought to be achieved. A debate where little real evaluation occurs “because those in power ignore or suppress assessment from sources that might contradict their preferred policy” is called a failure of “non-evaluation” (Kaufmann 2004:6; Van Evera 1988). In point of fact, non-evaluation serves to illustrate an underlying trend in the White House between 2001 and 2003, lending proof to the existence of both aforementioned symptoms of groupthink.

The next pair of symptoms is close-mindedness in the form of collective rationalisations and stereotyping of out-groups. Collective endeavours to rationalise the decisions of the group can lead to warnings, “which might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they commit themselves to policy decisions”, being discounted (Janis 1972:198). One of the key rationalisations within the core group was the exceptionality of the Iraqi threat; another was that all other measures, such as sanctions, had failed. In their view, there were simply no other options left on the table (Woodward 2004; McQueen 2005). In his declaration of war against Iraq, President Bush stated that “[b]efore the day of horror [a nuclear attack] can come, before it is too late to act, this danger will be removed” (The Guardian 2003). This is a crucial example of collective rationalisation with regards to the imminence of the threat. A second way to establish whether the group was close-minded is to investigate whether stereotyping out-groups was prominent (Janis 1972). This will traditionally manifest itself in caricatured depictions of the enemy as extremely stupid, reckless or evil (Janis 1972). Saddam Hussein was portrayed to be a “uniquely un-deterrable aggressor who would seek any opportunity to kill Americans”; he was told to be cooperating with Al-Qaeda, to have played a part in 9/11, and to be developing nuclear weapons meant to kill Americans (Kaufmann 2004:6). Because this depiction was believed to be accurate by many decision-makers, and because of the collective rationalisation of Iraq as uniquely dangerous, important information was largely ignored (Jehl and Sanger 2004). Just as much as the core group stereotyped Hussein as a tyrant, they believed that the CIA consisted of left-leaning cultural relativists who did not see the real threat to America (McQueen 2005). This stereotyping of the CIA, along with a collective rationalisation as to why they were doing it, led to even more insulation, and more internal pressure to act, to counteract perceived intelligence-bias (Badie 2010). In sum, there is evidence of failure to evaluate risk, due to an illusion of invulnerability, belief in inherent morality, collective rationalisation and stereotyping of the perceived enemy.

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## Tending Toward Conformity

This final category of groupthink symptoms includes illusion of unanimity, direct pressure on dissenters, self-censorship and self-appointed mind-guards. An illusion of unanimity arises if there are few or no voices of dissent and a belief that everyone is in agreement. The memoirs of Bush, Cheney and Rice offer no concrete explanation of *when* the decision to invade Iraq was made. However, in their discussions on *how* it was made, there is little evidence or indication of a deliberative policy process in which all views were allowed to be heard (Goodman 2013). Senior White House staff would send a memo to the cabinet members ahead of every meeting, outlining when they could speak, the topic they were meant to address and how long they had to do it (Suskind 2007:147f). This kind of structure would arguably play up “areas of convergence” at the expense of “fully exploring divergences that might disrupt the apparent unity of the group” (Janis 1972:39). Cabinet meetings lacked the liberty to freely debate concerns, which would in turn create an illusion of unanimity.

In addition to little free debate, there is also evidence of indirect and direct pressure on dissenters. Here t’Hart distinguishes between ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ pressure (1990:49). Horizontal pressures were those originating from the President, experienced by the hawks in the core group. Vertical pressure in turn originated from the hawks themselves, lay unto other ‘weak’ members of the group who were either against the plan or on the fence. There are indications of skeptics being vertically pressured to conform by their peers, which expressed itself through policy-internalisation and self-censorship (Badie 2010). Internalisation of agreed policy occurred in the case of Secretary Powell. As a result of the “battle royal between State and Defense”, the core group was frustrated and angry with Powell for dissenting, and they often spoke badly of him (Halper & Clarke 2004:153; Cooper 2004). He was, as a result of not being on the ‘team’, often excluded from private meetings and lost much of his access to the President (Woodward 2004). Powell and his deputy Armitage often felt pressured to remain silent, and on one occasion an NSC advisor even protested to Armitage’s hesitant body language in a meeting (Houghton 2008). After months of attempted persuasion, pressure and protest, the president appealed to the good soldier in Powell and told him “[t]ime to put your war uniform on” (Woodward 2006:106). The journey from Powell stating in his autobiography that “[e]very organization should tolerate rebels who tell the emperor he has no clothes” to publicly and unwillingly defending the invasion in front of the United Nations, begun that day (Harari 2003:95). As an example of vertical pressure manifesting as self-censorship, George Tenet of the CIA admits to holding his tongue on the matter of Saddam Hussein, despite disagreeing with the White House. In order to keep his standing and his influence he gave into hawkish pressure to conform and did things ‘their’ way (Badie 2010; Hersh 2004). In his controversial memoir, Tenet expresses regret, stating that he should not have let “silence imply agreement” (2007:317). Although Tenet is the highest-ranking official to admit to self-censorship, there are indications that several members of the CIA disagreed with Cheney and Rumsfeld without having the opportunity or courage to speak out. The presence of self-censorship brings us to the last symptom of groupthink, namely the keepers of the silence – self-appointed mind guards.

Mind-guards protect the group from “adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency” and “[urge] dissident member[s] to remain silent if [they] cannot match up [their] own beliefs with those of the rest of the group” (Janis 1972: 198,41). One member of the administration has been particularly highlighted in the media for performing this task, namely Vice President Cheney. Some have even gone as far as to say that he formed a “praetorian guard that [encircled] the president” to hinder any opposing view to reach him (Levine 2004; Suskin 2004:293). Withal he was not the only one. Rumsfeld and the OSP also served such a function. It filtered unwanted information and fed desired policy to the White House. Accordingly, the OSP in general and Rumsfeld in particular became what t’Hart identifies as *de facto* leaders, and so their influence on the skeptics resulted in the internalisation of information and self-censorship (t’Hart 1990; Badie 2010; Packer 2006:42). For the mind guards, implementation of the Bush doctrine was the highest priority, and they did not mind ‘stepping over bodies’ to do so. By pressuring their peers and their subordinates, mind guards made sure that the flow of information was under their control. The OSP and the hawks carefully screened the information going into the White House before it was brought up for discussion both internally or in the media. This selected information led to press conferences that boldly iterated the aforementioned three key errors of judgement: first, that the administration and the CIA were sure of the existence of WMDs; second, Hussein’s intention to use them on Americans; and third, that there was a connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda. None of these assertions would have been made without mind guards (McQueen 2005; Houghton 2008).

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As shown above, the criteria and symptoms are clearly evident in the case of Iraq. Yet, this does not necessarily lend credit to the groupthink model. Because groupthink is an explanatory theory, unfit to make predictions, the model gains nothing from proving the existence of symptoms. That being said, analysis made by Badie, McQueen, Houghton and Kaufmann indicates the clear presence of many of the indicators of groupthink. The importance of each of the antecedents and symptoms varies with each of the authors. However, they all support the value of the model in framing and explaining the case of Iraq. Despite not completely fulfilling the criteria of cohesiveness and homogeneity, the strong evidence of the rest conditions demonstrates that the model is not only useful, but also accurate in this instance.

The conclusion is twofold. First, there were certainly serious errors of judgement, which consequently led to a failure in important decision-making. Secretary Rumsfeld famously said that in policymaking there are unknown knowns, things you think you know that it turns out you did not (Morris 2013). However, the 'unknown knowns' of the Bush administration ought to have been 'known knowns', things you know that you know. Information was buried, manufactured and selectively gathered to lead to a desired and politically convenient conclusion. The choices and decisions that were made ultimately led to a foreign policy failure. The second point to be made is that there are clear indications that the decision making process was influenced by groupthink, which ultimately, and predictably, led to a poor outcome. The Janis model of groupthink held up against empirical testing in this case. Yet, the model is not broad enough, and cannot be universally applied or unequivocally endorsed. That being said, the model offers a useful vocabulary and frame to better understand the intricate workings of the White House in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq.

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