

A GROUPTHINK PERSPECTIVE ON THE INVASION OF IRAQ^a

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The failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq has led many observers of international affairs to question why the Bush administration appeared so confident of the existence of these weapons prior to the war. This article suggests that a partial answer to this question can be found by applying Irving Janis's "groupthink" model, which examines pressures for concurrence-seeking in small groups. While Janis's model yields important insights into the case of U.S. decision-making leading up to the war in Iraq, this case illustrates some of the shortcomings of the groupthink theory. From a policy perspective, this analysis illustrates the necessity of supporting debate in the policy-making process and the perils of acting on worst-case thinking.

INTRODUCTION

From the Bay of Pigs invasion to the Iran-Contra affair, U.S. foreign policy in the post-WWII period has provided observers of international affairs numerous examples of faulty decision-making by small groups of well-educated policy-makers. In an effort to explain how competent, highly qualified public officials could make such poor decisions, social psychologist and professor Irving Janis proposed his now famous

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© *International Affairs Review*. Volume 14, No. 2. Fall 2005.

groupthink model. This theory suggests that pressures can arise for conformity and concurrence-seeking in small groups, leading to poor collective decisions. The seeds of Janis's model lie in an attempt to understand the defective decision-making of the Kennedy administration leading up to the Bay of Pigs invasion. Engaging in a cross-disciplinary analysis that marries the study of policy-making with the psychological examination of small group dynamics, Janis argues that flawed decision-making can be brought about through "subtle constraints, which the leader may reinforce inadvertently, prevent[ing] a [group] member from fully exercising his critical powers and from openly expressing doubts when most others in the group appear to have reached a consensus."^b

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The groupthink phenomenon tends to produce grossly misguided decisions that in retrospect leave much of the public—and even decision-makers themselves—baffled. Similar reactions have surfaced in response to the U.S. decision to initiate a war with Iraq because of the security threat posed by the latter's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). As is well-known, a thorough search after the war failed to uncover these alleged weapons, thereby bringing into question the stated reason for the invasion. Three questions therefore present themselves: (1) Why were high-level decision-makers within the U.S. government initially so convinced of the existence of Iraqi WMD? (2) Why did the Bush administration think that Iraq's possession of WMD was a serious, immediate threat? (3) Why did the administration see invasion as the best course of action?

This paper aims to use Janis's groupthink model in an effort to answer these questions. An analysis of public statements made by members of Bush's war cabinet and recent examinations of the deliberations leading up to the war in Iraq will reveal that although the groupthink model does contribute to an understanding of the pressures for concurrence-seeking within the Bush administration, it does not provide a complete explanation of the decision-making problems in this case. In order to retain its explanatory power in the case of the decision to invade Iraq,

the model would have to be expanded to account for a unique conception of situational stress and the effects of worst-case thinking.

THE GROUPTHINK MODEL

Janis uses a case study approach to examine the Bay of Pigs invasion, the escalation of the Korean War, Washington's inability to foresee the attack on Pearl Harbor, the intensification of the Vietnam War, and, in a later edition of his initial work, the Watergate cover-up.^e He sees all of these cases as "instances in which a defective decision was made in a series of meetings by a few policy-makers who constituted a cohesive group."^d Using mostly primary sources such as memoirs, published minutes of meetings and official statements by decision makers, Janis searches for "a consistent psychological pattern" in the cases that he examines.^e He also presents two additional cases—the Cuban missile crisis and the careful design and implementation of the Marshall Plan by the Truman administration—as examples of effective decision-making characterized by a relative absence of groupthink.

The findings that these cases yielded generate a model consisting of the causal antecedents and symptoms of groupthink, and the decision-making flaws to which the phenomenon gives rise (see Figure 1).

Janis posits that there are several causal factors, or *antecedents*, that can initiate the pressures for *concurrency-seeking* that characterize the groupthink phenomenon. The most important of these, according to Janis, is *group cohesiveness*. The potential for groupthink is proportional to the amiability, 'chumminess,' and solidarity among group members.^g Although Janis does not offer a definition of group cohesiveness, one may assume that he implies a conventional understanding of the term as the "forces which are acting on members to stay in a group."^h *Structural faults*, or deficiencies, within a group's organization can also contribute to the emergence of the groupthink phenomenon. The most important of these structural faults is the "absence of a potential source of organizational constraint that could help to prevent [group] members...from...indulging in uncritical conformity."ⁱ In oth-

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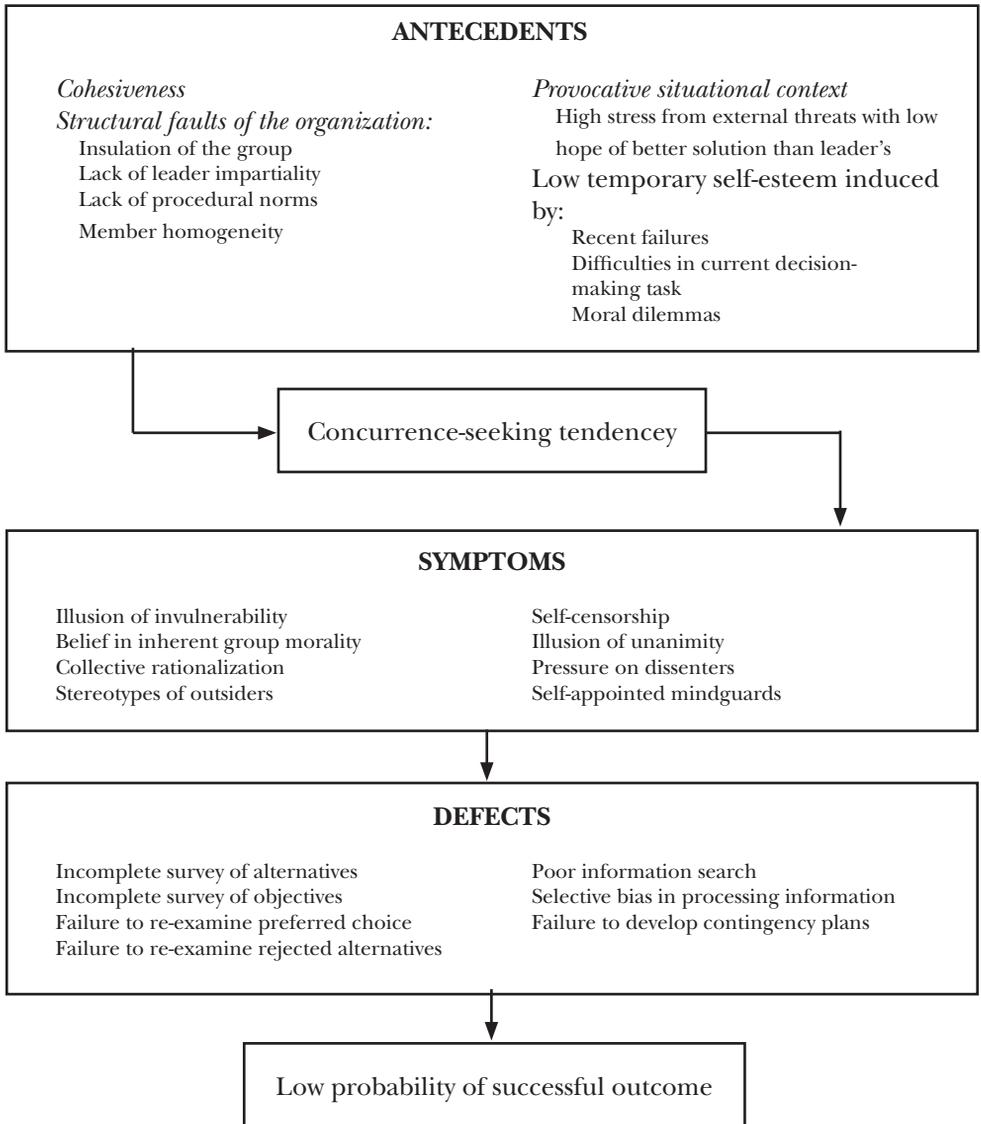


Figure 1: The Groupthink Model^f

er words, any group that is insulated from external influences, and lacks leader impartiality, procedural norms, and member heterogeneity has a strong likelihood to succumb to pressures for concurrence-seeking. A final set of antecedent conditions that intensify the effects of group cohesiveness are encompassed within a *provocative situational context*. Janis

posits that *situational stress* results from the collective perception that there is little hope for finding an alternative solution to that proposed by the leader or other prominent group members and temporarily low self-esteem caused by recent failures or the challenge of the decision-making task.^j

These three sets of factors give rise to a concurrence-seeking tendency which has several symptoms: the *illusion of invulnerability*, a belief in the group's *inherent morality*, *collective rationalizations*, *stereotyping of out-groups*, *self-censorship*, the *illusion of unanimity*, *pressure applied to dissenters*, and *self-appointed mindguards*—individuals who protect the group from information that could break the existing consensus.^k The decisions that result from a group in which these symptoms exist contain several defects. Sally Riggs Fuller and Roman Aldag provide a useful summary of the characteristics of defective decisions resulting from groupthink:

[T]he group limits its discussion to just a few alternatives. After a course of action is initially selected, members ignore new information concerning its risks and drawbacks. At the same time, they avoid information concerning benefits of rejected alternatives. Members make little attempt to use experts to obtain more precise information. And, because they are so confident that things will turn out well, group members fail to consider what may go wrong and so do not develop contingency plans.^l

Ultimately, these decision-making flaws lower the likelihood of a successful outcome and increase the probability of a *fasco*, or a grossly miscalculated decision. In his case studies, Janis often begins by looking for some of the decision-making flaws discussed above and then works backwards to see whether the groupthink phenomenon can explain these defects. It is also important to note that the presence of these flaws alone is not enough to warrant a groupthink examination. It must also be evident that (1) the official explanation for the decision-making problems is incomplete and (2) core group members possess the skills necessary to make good decisions.^m

APPLYING THE MODEL

There are several reasons why the U.S. decision to invade Iraq is a good candidate for groupthink analysis. Most importantly, the Bush ad-

ministration made several major miscalculations consistent with Janis' notion of a foreign policy "fiasco."ⁿ

Assumption 1: Iraq possessed large stockpiles of WMD and advanced weapons programs. Statements made by members of the Bush administration prior to the military action taken against Iraq emphasized that Saddam Hussein had amassed a substantial stock of WMD and had highly developed weapons programs. However, the results of the extensive post-invasion search conducted by the administration's Iraq Survey Group (ISG) largely discredit these statements. Current intelligence regarding Iraq's nuclear capabilities, when compared to the administration's pre-war statements, provides the most compelling evidence of the war cabinet's overestimations. Three days prior to the war, Vice President Cheney asserted, "we know [Saddam Hussein] has been absolutely devoted to trying to acquire nuclear weapons. And we believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons."^o These assertions have been discredited by what is now known about Iraq's nuclear capabilities. In addition, they were also contradicted prior to the war by assessments made by the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research.^p It is therefore clear that the Bush war cabinet significantly miscalculated Iraq's WMD capabilities and the extent of its weapons programs

Assumption 2: Iraqi WMD posed an urgent and immediate threat to U.S. security. On October 2, 2002, President Bush stated that "the Iraqi regime is a threat of unique urgency... [I]t has developed weapons of mass death."^q One month prior to this, the Bush administration released the U.S. *National Security Strategy*, the cornerstone of which was the principle of preemptive action against imminent security threats.^r Yet, recent findings reveal that an immediate threat posed by Iraqi WMD did not exist. Rather, to the extent that a WMD threat was present, it involved the longer-term danger posed by Iraq's "determination to acquire such weapons, its scientific and technical resources...to make them, and its demonstrated willingness to use chemical weapons."^s Thus, from information gathered to date, it is clear that the Bush administration overestimated the imminence of the threat posed by Iraq's interest in obtaining WMD.

Assumption 3: Iraq would not hesitate to provide WMD to terrorist organizations. Further miscalculations were made concerning the links between Iraq's WMD and terrorist organizations. The argument that Iraq

would provide WMD to terrorists presumed both that a link between Saddam Hussein's regime and al Qaeda existed and that the Iraqi ruler was inclined to share weapons with terrorist organizations. Several Bush administration statements referred to the "sinister nexus between Iraq and the al Qaeda terrorist network."^t Yet, both prewar intelligence and postwar analyses have failed to demonstrate the existence of such a link.^u As Cirincione et al. conclude, "although there have been periodic meetings between Iraqi and al Qaeda agents, the most intensive searching over the last two years has produced no solid evidence of a cooperative relationship between Saddam's government and [al Qaeda]."^v In addition, the notion that Iraq would be inclined to equip terrorists with WMD is suspect at best.^w Given the territorially-based interests of states, it is questionable whether a government would transfer WMD to groups that could later use these very weapons against it. Furthermore, given the realities of the post-9/11 security environment, "terrorists would not even have to use the weapons but merely allow the transfer to become known to U.S. intelligence to call down the full wrath of the United States on the donor state."^x This flawed assumption, along with the others outlined above, suggests the existence of a "grossly miscalculated policy [decision]"^y that is similar to those chosen by Janis in his initial formulation of the groupthink model.

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While these miscalculations indicate a decision-making failure at a general level, three particular defects are consistent with the predictions of the groupthink model. First, the core group conducted at best an *incomplete survey of the alternatives* to war. For instance, one option that France and Germany favored but the United States rejected fairly quickly "would have been a tougher program of 'coercive inspections' entailing a specifically designed international force."^z Another option would have been to allow renewed UN inspections until either there was certainty that Saddam Hussein had dismantled his weapons programs or inspectors were obstructed.^{aa}

Second, with the notable exception of Colin Powell, group members failed to seriously *re-examine the rejected alternative* of structured changes to the economic sanctions regime against Iraq.^{ab} The Bush administra-

tion did, at least nominally, support the creation of ‘smarter’ sanctions against Iraq, which “could be dropped if Iraq first accepted a renewal of United Nations inspections of its suspected nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons sites. [However], the American plan, [UN] officials agreed, was to make so many demands—complete access to palaces, for example—that it would be almost impossible for Saddam to agree.”^{ac} In effect, the administration made ‘smarter sanctions’ and renewed inspections non-options.

Third, Kenneth Pollack—a former National Security Council Iraq specialist, whose book *The Threatening Storm* provided support for a U.S. war in Iraq—suggests that there existed a *selective bias* in the way in which members of the war cabinet interpreted and processed intelligence in-

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formation. This tendency is clear in the group’s aggressively negative reaction to information that contradicted its stance on Iraq. Intelligence officials who interpreted information in a way that did not support the administration’s stance were “subjected to barrages of questions and requests for additional information... [T]he worst fights were those over sources.”^{ad} At times, newspaper articles by columnists supportive of the Bush administration’s stance, such as George F. Will and William Safire, were viewed as more important to the decision-making process than the reports of trained

intelligence professionals.^{ae} Thus, the presence of significant miscalculations and several decisional defects consistent with Janis’s model suggest that the deliberative process prior to the war in Iraq is a strong candidate for groupthink analysis.

However, in order to demonstrate the applicability of this model to the case of U.S. decision-making surrounding Iraqi WMD, one must demonstrate that the picture provided by the official explanation for defective deliberations is incomplete. To the extent that Bush administration officials have acknowledged defective decision-making regarding Iraqi WMD capabilities, they have blamed it on intelligence failures. In response to a growing number of questions about the truth of official

statements made regarding WMD in Iraq, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz asserted, “No one was lying. People were saying what we believed was the best information we had from intelligence.”^{af} This statement suggests that any error in judgment that occurred in the decisions leading up to the war in Iraq rests with the intelligence community.

However, several recent analyses have suggested that while available intelligence may have overstated the threat posed by Iraqi WMD, responsibility for poor decision-making extended beyond the intelligence community. It is now clear that members of Bush’s core group consistently misrepresented the threat posed by Iraqi WMD in their public statements. For example, the declassified excerpts of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that were released in July 2003 “contained forty distinct caveats or conditions on the intelligence judgments—including fifteen uses of the adverb ‘probably’—that other publications and [official] statements usually dropped.”^{ag} In addition, Greg Thielmann, a former director at the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), has suggested that high-level political decision-makers selectively used and misrepresented intelligence information in order to support the administration’s stance on Iraq.^{ah} For example, the administration gave credibility to intelligence that suggested that the Iraqis had attempted to purchase uranium from Niger, even though many within the intelligence community, including Thielmann, viewed these reports as extremely suspect.^{ai} These problems garnered sufficient attention to warrant a decision on the part of the Senate Intelligence Committee to investigate the issue further.^{aj} The official explanation for defective decisions leading up to the war in Iraq is therefore incomplete. A groupthink analysis has the potential to supplement official explanations.

The final criterion for applying the groupthink model is the experience level of core group members.^{ak} If group members lacked experience in political decision-making, it would be likely that errors could “be attributed to lack of intellectual capability for making policy judgments” and an inability to evaluate alternative courses of action.^{al} In a case of shared political inexperience, lack of tested ability, rather than pressures for concurrence-seeking, would be the most likely explanation for poor decisions. However, the members of Bush’s core group

had both public and private sector experience; with the exception of the president, all the members of the group had held senior positions in previous administrations. In addition, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Powell all had previous experience dealing specifically with Saddam Hussein and Iraq. This suggests that a lack of policy-making experience is not likely to be the source of defective decision-making in discussions leading up to the war in Iraq. The presence of several major miscalculations, the inadequacy of official explanations, and the collective experience of core group members leave open the possibility that the overestimation of the threat posed by Iraqi WMD could have resulted from pressures for concurrence-seeking.

CAUSAL ANTECEDENTS

GROUP COHESIVENESS

One of the most important contributors to the pressures for concurrence-seeking characteristic of groupthink is group cohesiveness. For example, in the case of the lack of U.S. vigilance prior to Pearl Harbor, Janis notes that the

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core group surrounding commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, was particularly cohesive. Janis relates that “face-to-face contact among the members of the Navy group was not limited to business meetings. All the men were part of the naval enclave in Honolulu and frequently spent time together off duty as well as on duty.”^{am} At first blush, there seems to be little doubt that the Bush administration was similarly cohesive. The President’s election campaign was focused on the idea that voters would be choosing a team.^{an} After the departure of Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill in 2002, one commentator remarked that the core group surrounding Bush was more tightly-knit than that in any

recent administration.^{ao} The presence of some degree of cohesiveness is also evident in the administration’s statements on the threat posed by Iraq. For

instance, on October 9, 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell explained: “We are knitted together as a team...on this issue...The President has given us clear guidance...We know what we have to do. We have to be firm at this moment in history. We have to be united as a cabinet.”^{ap} Based on the statements above, it is clear that Bush’s core group was at least somewhat cohesive.

However, the groupthink model, as originally proposed by Janis, demands more than the mere presence of group cohesiveness. Groups are, by their very nature, cohesive. It is the *degree* of cohesiveness that must be assessed. While there were notable signs of cohesiveness in the core group, as outlined above, there also existed forces of division that prevented the group from being as tightly-knit as was Kimmel’s, for instance. The most pronounced example of divisiveness regarding Iraq was the ongoing tensions between Colin Powell and other members of the group. These tensions began almost as soon as the administration first turned its attention to Iraq in early 2001. Powell’s moderate stance directly opposed those of “hard-liners like Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Wolfowitz, who were already planning the next war in Iraq and the shape of a post-Saddam country.”^{aq} As the prospect of an invasion of Iraq grew increasingly likely, Powell sought to use existing tensions in order to reveal an alternate perspective. Bob Woodward reveals,

He decided he had to come down very hard, state his convictions and conclusions so there would be no doubt as to where he stood. The president had been hearing from Cheney and Rumsfeld, a kind of A-team inside the war cabinet. Powell wanted to present the B-team, the alternative view that he believed had not been aired.^{ar}

Despite Powell’s limited overall success, it is clear that the disagreements between him and other members of the war cabinet prevented the core group from being highly cohesive. The degree to which group cohesiveness can be treated as a primary causal antecedent in this case must be questioned.

While Janis’s early work presumes group cohesiveness to be the primary causal antecedent of the concurrence-seeking tendencies characteristic of groupthink, his later articulations of the model broaden this initial conception by including a wider variety of antecedent conditions—most notably, structural faults within the organization of the group and a stressful decision-making context. Nevertheless, he still conceptualizes group cohesiveness as the primary causal variable

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contributing to the presence of groupthink symptoms.^{as} However, empirical studies have found that group cohesion was a poor predictor of groupthink.^{at} Given that previous empirical research suggests that group cohesiveness may not be one of the primary causal antecedents leading to symptoms of groupthink, it is necessary to give stronger consideration to other contributing variables.

STRUCTURAL FAULTS IN THE ORGANIZATION

One such contributing variable is the structural faults, or deficiencies, in a group's organization. Such structural faults may include insulation of the group, lack of impartiality on the part of the leader, the absence of procedural norms requiring methodical consideration of options, and group member homogeneity. All of these flaws can be found—to varying degrees—in the case of U.S. decision-making surrounding the threat posed by Iraqi WMD.

First, the core group largely chose to insulate itself “from the judgments of qualified [external] associates.”^{au} Pollack explains that members of the core group expressed an aggressively negative reaction to information that contradicted the administration's own stance on Iraq.^{av} The Department of Defense promptly established another intelligence operation—the Office of Special Plans (OSP)—“reportedly out of dissatisfaction with the caveated judgments [of] intelligence professionals.”^{aw} While the establishment of ad hoc intelligence operations in the Pentagon is not unprecedented, two unique factors were present in this case: the reasons for its creation, and its tendency to accept intelligence information that many trained professionals would have considered dubious.^{ax} The OSP therefore seems to have been created merely to legitimize the views that the core group members already possessed. Unfortunately, it also led to the absence of the critical debate that may be fostered through a canvassing of external opinions.

This desire for insulation was fueled by the second element of faulty organizational structure, the *lack of impartiality* on the part of Bush and several core group members. Paul O'Neill describes how Bush and several of his principal advisors were focused on the threat posed by Iraq even before the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In the first meeting of the National Security Council, on January 30, 2001, the following exchange took place:

[Bush] turned to Rice. ‘So, Condi, what are we going to talk about today? What’s on the agenda?’

‘How Iraq is destabilizing the region, Mr. President,’ Rice said, in what several observers understood was a scripted exchange. She noted that Iraq might be the key to reshaping the entire [Middle East].^{ay}

Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet then presented several grainy photographs of factories assumed by Tenet and the core group members to be weapons production facilities. The premise from which the president and his advisors began to shape U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East was thus that the Iraqi regime was a destabilizing force in the region and possessed weapons of mass destruction.^{az} Similarly, the July 2002 Downing Street Memo reveals that British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s administration was convinced that Bush had already made up his mind to invade Iraq and was just waiting for an appropriate time to do so.^{ba} The bias of Bush and several of his advisors toward military action in Iraq was thus evident in the earliest days of the administration.

A third structural problem, the *lack of procedural norms* in core group decision-making, allowed this unflinching stance to take firm root. During early deliberations over the direction of foreign policy, O’Neill was struck by the almost total absence of methodical decision-making procedures. The procedures were either broken or non-existent and “there seemed to be no apparatus to assess policy and deliberate effectively.”^{bb} While President Bush did entertain and act upon some alternate views—most notably, Colin Powell’s argument that the United States should seek a United Nations Security Council resolution on Iraq before embarking on military intervention—there was little procedural room for debate over the threat posed by Iraqi WMD. Rather, as Pfiffner explains, “President Bush’s approach to his advisory system was personal rather than procedural or structural. He used his national security team effectively for his purposes”—to support a war in Iraq.^{bc} Procedural norms for evaluating particular courses of actions appear to have been absent.

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While the first three elements of flawed organizational structure can be observed in the decision-making processes leading up to the war in Iraq, the final element—*homogeneity of group members*—is present to a lesser degree.^{bd} While virtually any administration exhibits some degree of ideological homogeneity by virtue of party affiliation, the potential nonetheless exists for differences of outlook on important issues. Such differences in outlook were present in Bush's core group. As discussed above, Powell's moderate position often came into conflict with the 'hard-line' approach of several other members of the core group. While these conflicts seem to suggest a relative absence of ideological homogeneity, O'Neill offers an intriguing alternative explanation:

What became clear to me [was] that the presence of me and Colin... helped convince people that this would, actually, be an administration that would look hard for the best solutions... That's what [we] were kind of known for, for being non-ideological... Thinking back about how all of us started to be banged up so early on, from the inside, it now seems like we inadvertently may have been there, in large part, as cover.^{be}

This interpretation suggests that Powell and O'Neill were selected as cabinet members in order to give the impression of ideological diversity, while being denied real decision-making influence. However, such an understanding is brought into question when one considers that Powell did successfully convince President Bush to seek a UN resolution on Iraq, in spite of arguments made by 'hard-liners' such as Rumsfeld and Cheney that such an approach would allow Saddam Hussein to stall and delay.^{bf} Thus, while other structural flaws are evident in this case, the question of the degree of homogeneity of the core group members is open to significant debate.

PROVOCATIVE SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

A provocative situational context provides a final set of factors that can initiate groupthink. In Janis's case studies, these pressures were exacerbated by both actual and perceived time constraints. For instance, the decision-making leading up to the Bay of Pigs invasion was rendered stressful in part due to the Kennedy administration's perceived need to act quickly to implement a plan that had already been initiated during the last months of Dwight Eisenhower's presidency and that, if successful, could set an important precedent for the administration's stance on communist regimes. In addition, the CIA was applying tremendous pressure on Kennedy's core group to implement the invasion plan quickly.^{bg} The Bay of Pigs invasion thus adhered to

the traditional conception of a ‘crisis,’ or time-bound moment of decision. However, in the case of U.S. decision-making prior to the war in Iraq, no such time constraint existed. Deliberations on the issue began as early as January 2001, more than two years before any military action was taken.

Nonetheless, the decision-making in this case took place within the context of a *protracted* crisis that originated from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and endured until the initiation of war with Iraq on March 19, 2003. The source of situational stress in this case was the vulnerability and heightened sensitivity to external threats felt by U.S. decision-makers in the wake of devastating terrorist attacks. A speech by President Bush outlining the threat posed by Iraqi WMD reveals both the sense of crisis faced by the administration and the perceived need to act quickly.

We...must never forget the most vivid events of recent history. On September the 11th, 2001, America felt its vulnerability—even to threats that gather on the other side of the earth. We resolved then, and we are resolved today, to confront every threat, from any source, that could bring sudden terror and suffering to America... Knowing these realities, America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.^{bh}

Thus, while this case does not have the characteristics of the briefer moments of crisis in Janis’s case studies, situational stress nonetheless emerged as a result of feelings of vulnerability and sensitivity to threats. This situational stress created the perceived need to act even before all available information had been thoroughly assessed.

President Bush’s speech also reveals another potential source of situational stress: the influence of worst-case thinking. The statement that the final proof of Iraq’s WMD capabilities “could come in the form of a mushroom cloud” indicates that the Bush administration believed that it had “every reason to assume the worst, and...an urgent duty to prevent the worst from occurring.”^{bi} Similarly, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz also referred to worst-case scenarios in order to demonstrate the necessity for action:

This situational stress created the perceived need to act even before all available information had been thoroughly assessed.

We cannot afford to wait until Saddam Hussein or some terrorist supplied by him attacks us with a chemical or biological, or, worst of all, a nuclear weapon, to rec-

ognize the danger that we face. If that terrible event happens and we look back to examine why we weren't warned, the answer will clearly be that we were. The dots are there for all to see. We must not wait for some terrible event that connects the dots for us.^{bj}

Worst-case thinking therefore reinforced the perceived need to act quickly that emerged as a result of a heightened sense of vulnerability and sensitivity to threats.

SYMPTOMS OF GROUPTHINK

Given that the causal antecedents of the groupthink phenomenon were present to varying degrees in the case of U.S. decision-making leading up to the war in Iraq, it is appropriate to take the next step through the model and assess the degree to which concurrence-seeking tendencies were present in this case. For Janis, concurrence-seeking is “a form of striving for mutual support based on a powerful motivation in all group members to cope with the stresses of decision-making.”^{bk} Concurrence-seeking tendencies manifest themselves in the eight symptoms of groupthink (see Figure 1). These symptoms can be grouped into three categories: faith in the power of the group, obstinate tendencies, and a drive toward uniformity.

FAITH IN THE POWER OF THE GROUP

In the case of U.S. decision-making surrounding Iraqi WMD, the faith in the power of the core group manifested itself both in an *illusion of invulnerability* and a *belief in the group's inherent morality*. First, the deliberations within the core group took on a euphoric kind of collective optimism. In

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January 2002, after U.S. forces had achieved what they and the administration perceived as a victory in Afghanistan, “the administration’s focus was returning to Iraq—with Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz pointing to the ease with which the Taliban had fallen as evidence of how doable Iraq would be.”^{bl} The shared confidence in the existence of Iraqi WMD and the relative

ease with which Saddam Hussein could be ousted meant that any debate that occurred “was mostly about logistics. Not the *why*, but the *how* and *how quickly*” [emphasis in original].^{bm} This collective optimism even spread be-

yond the core group to those who were assigned the task of finding WMD in Iraq. David Kay—head of the ISG, the entity assigned to find Iraq’s alleged WMD—notes that all of those working with him expected that the task of uncovering WMD would be relatively easy.^{bn}

Second, this sense of optimism was bolstered by a belief in the *inherent morality* of the core group. The decision to take action against Iraq based on the presumed presence of WMD was seen to be grounded in sound moral principles. In President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address, Bush referred to Iraq as part of an “axis of evil,” while he classified the United States as “a moral nation.”^{bo} Later, in 2003, he referred to the ‘liberation’ of Iraq as a “great moral cause.”^{bp} While Janis argues that this kind of moral tone may lead group members to disregard the ethical consequences of their decision, the effect in this case may have been somewhat different. The perceived morality of the group may have contributed to the failure to question the *means* by which this end would be achieved and justified. Such a process of questioning was largely bypassed, as the presumed existence of WMD was “the one reason everyone could agree on” for going to war with Iraq.^{bq} Thus, a belief in the inherent morality of the group, combined with the illusion of invulnerability, contributed to a sense of collective optimism about the prospect of justifying military engagement with Iraq on the basis of the presumed existence of WMD.

In the deliberations surrounding Iraqi WMD, the core group sought to collectively rationalize its decision based on the perceived uniqueness of the threat.

OBSTINATE TENDENCIES

The capacity of this sense of collective optimism to generate pressures for concurrence-seeking was further buttressed by the closed-minded tendencies of the group. These inclinations took the form of attempts at *collective rationalizations* and *stereotyping of out-groups*. Janis explains that collective efforts to rationalize the group’s decision may serve “to discount warnings which might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they commit themselves to policy decisions.”^{br} In the deliberations surrounding Iraqi WMD, the core group sought to collectively rationalize its decision based on the perceived uniqueness of the threat. As Bush explained in 2002, “by its past and present actions, by its technological capabilities, by the merciless nature of its regime, Iraq is unique.”^{bs} Furthermore, there was a sense

within the group that every other option to deal with Iraq had been tried. In a public statement in which he contrasted the threat posed by North Korea with that embodied by Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld explained that diplomacy, sanctions, positive inducements, and weapons inspections had all failed to deal with the threat posed by Iraq.^{bt} There was therefore a sense within the core group that the decision to engage militarily with Iraq was justified, given the exceptional nature of the threat and the failure of previous efforts to deal with the problem.

The *stereotyping of out-groups* is a second manifestation of the closed-mindedness of the core group in this case. Such tendencies were marked in the decision-making surrounding the Bay of Pigs invasion, Janis's most compelling case study of groupthink. Group members within the Kennedy administration tended to see Fidel Castro as "too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate, [and] as too weak or stupid to counter whatever risky attempts [were] made to defeat [his] purposes."^{bu} Similarly, Saddam Hussein was portrayed as a tyrant with whom negotiation attempts would necessarily be futile.^{bv} However, there also existed an internal manifestation of out-group stereotyping in the interactions between core group decision-makers and CIA analysts. As Pollack explains, just as many group members "believed that Saddam Hussein was the source of virtually all the problems in the Middle East," so too did they believe "that CIA analysts tended to be left-leaning cultural relativists who consistently downplayed threats to the United States. They believed that the Agency, not the administration, was biased."^{bw} The perceived need to correct this bias thus provided a similar pressure for concurrence-seeking.

A DRIVE TOWARD UNIFORMITY

The remaining symptoms that can be discerned in this case are characteristic of the presence of pressures for uniformity with the core group. First, there was an *illusion of unanimity*. This tendency was fostered through the scripted nature of many of Bush's cabinet meetings. Paul O'Neill found this method of conducting meetings surprising.

Before most meetings, a cabinet secretary's chief of staff would receive a note from someone of the senior staff in the White House. The note instructed the cabinet secretary when he was supposed to speak, about what, and how long. When O'Neill received his first such note, he was amazed. The idea of a cabinet meeting or any significant meeting between the President and his seniormost officials being scripted seemed to kill of the whole purpose of bringing people together.^{bx}

However, such scripting would have helped to create the illusion of unanimity. Another way in which this illusion was fostered was through the marginalization of dissenting voices. Colin Powell, for instance, was often excluded from the private meetings with the president that other group members such as Rice and Rumsfeld enjoyed.^{by}

Finally, administration officials serving as *self-appointed mindguards* may also have solidified the drive toward uniformity within the group. In the decision-making surrounding the Bay of Pigs invasion, Attorney General Robert Kennedy took on the role of mindguard, pressuring Special Assistant to the President for Latin American Affairs Arthur Schlesinger to suppress his doubt about the plan, thereby preserving the group consensus.^{bz} In the case of the Bush administration's

decision-making leading up to the war in Iraq, Vice President Richard Cheney performed the function of a mindguard. By making repeated journeys to CIA headquarters and demanding to see raw, unanalyzed intelligence, Cheney had the opportunity to effectively select the information that would eventually reach the core group before the source and validity of the information had been evaluated.^{ca} However, there is little available evidence to suggest that Cheney exercised any direct *pressure on dissenting group members*. Nonetheless, Cheney's self-appointed role as an information filter for the core group that he is a strong candidate for the role of mindguard in this case.

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THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The application of Janis's groupthink model to the case of U.S. decision-making surrounding Iraqi WMD yields several important insights into both the case and the model itself. First, the case exhibits many of the causal antecedents, symptoms, and decision-making defects proposed by the groupthink model. However, the presence of many—but not all—of the model's components may not be enough to declare the existence of the groupthink phenomenon in this case. Janis himself provides little guidance on the matter, instead

suggesting rather vaguely that “most or all” of the antecedents and symptoms of groupthink must exist in order for the phenomenon to be seen as present in a particular decision-making process.^{cb}

In response to this problem, Fuller and Aldag differentiate between the two ways in which the groupthink model can be applied. While a rigorous application of the theory suggests that groupthink characteristics are necessarily clustered and must therefore be present *en masse*, a weak understanding posits that the phenomenon may exist if some subset of its elements is present.^{cc} On the other hand, an application of the more general ‘spirit’ of the theory leads one to be quite certain that the groupthink phenomenon was present in the case of the decision-making surrounding Iraqi WMD. However, a strong understanding suggests that in the absence of all the symptoms and decision-making defects predicted by the model, one cannot confirm the existence of groupthink in this case.

Second, regardless of how one chooses to interpret the requirements of Janis’s theory, this case study provides two possible areas in which the groupthink model may be expanded. Broadening the definition of situational stress in order to include the effects of feelings of vulnerability and heightened awareness of threats may allow the model to be applied to situations in which no time-bound crisis of decision-making exists. In addition, further analysis of the effects of worst-case thinking on pressures for concurrence-seeking may provide the model with another possible means of expansion to include a wider variety of decision-making situations. Finally, the absence of strong group cohesion in this case, especially when considered in light of several other empirical studies which have found the proposed causal antecedent to be a weak predictor of the groupthink phenomenon,^{cd} leads one to question whether this element must be present in order for pressures for concurrence-seeking to arise. The evidence presented in this case study suggests that such pressures may exist even in the absence of a highly cohesive core group. The application of the groupthink model to the case of U.S. decision-making leading up to the war in Iraq thus highlights several elements of Janis’s theory that require further analysis and perhaps even re-evaluation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This case study also raises several important policy implications. In his February 2004 article in *The Atlantic*, Kenneth Pollack concludes that “the U.S.

government must admit to the world that it was wrong about Iraq's WMD."^{ce} While such a public admission may be called for, the most important changes that should be made are ones that are more private and less visible. The above analysis has illustrated the dangers of avoiding disagreement. This warning has particular relevance now that Colin Powell has left the Bush administration and the core group around the President has become tighter and more ideologically homogeneous. In such a situation, it is worth considering a procedural means of introducing disagreement. Janis suggests several ways that this can be done: the leader's encouragement (or even requirement) that group members voice any doubts; the establishment of several independent policy groups for a given issue, each of which supervised by a different leader; and assigning the role of devil's advocate to at least one group member in meetings designed to consider policy alternatives.^{cf} If taken seriously, these recommendations have the potential to introduce debate into a relatively homogeneous and cohesive group.

It is worth considering a procedural means of introducing disagreement.

Another recommendation of Janis's that could have helped to prevent some of the pressures for concurrence-seeking that occurred in this case is the holding of a 'second chance' meeting after a preliminary consensus has been reached. "To encourage members to reveal vague forebodings, it might not be a bad idea for the second-chance meeting to take place in a more relaxed atmosphere far from the executive suite."^{cg} Such a tactic fits nicely with Bush's more personal leadership style and his already existing tendency to hold small, informal meetings away from the formal halls of power. Provided that all group members had access to these deliberations, such a procedure could allow for the expression of doubts that may not have been fully formed when the initial consensus was reached. Again, explicitly giving group members the task of formulating and sharing solid objections to the initial decision could be useful in such a situation.

Finally, this case raises a policy concern that Janis did not anticipate—worst-case thinking. Entertaining worst-case scenarios and planning for the worst can be a useful exercise in any decision-making setting. Indeed, considering all alternatives is a central means of preventing the occurrence of groupthink. However, the dangers of *acting* upon worst-case thinking—a prospect that the United States is uniquely able to contemplate due to its unparalleled status on the world stage—are extremely serious. By basing plans of action

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upon worst-case scenarios, decision-makers undermine the role of the intelligence community, whose task it is not only to gather information but also to assess the relative likelihood of various threats. When combined with the self-imposed insulation from various elements of the intelligence community observed in this case, such a tendency may significantly distort the threat assessment. Also, if it is known that a country both entertains and acts on worst-case scenarios, adversaries might be encouraged to attempt to gain an advantage by overstating their capabilities in order to initiate a confrontation.^{ch} Finally, acting on worst-case assumptions, can lead policy-makers to overlook more serious threats. As Cirincione et al. explain,

In the run-up to the Iraq war, the United States was engaged in a difficult campaign with Afghanistan, was in a struggle against Al Qaeda and its like around the world, and faced unambiguous nuclear proliferation threats from North Korean and Iran... Clearly, sound strategy demanded priorities, which can only be based on the best available intelligence—not the worst possible nightmare.^{ci}

Therefore, not only does the tendency for worst-case thinking present a form of situational stress not originally recognized by Janis, but it also poses wider implications for the success of foreign policy decisions reached through entertaining such scenarios.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this paper reveals that strong pressures for concurrence-seeking were present in the deliberations of the Bush war cabinet regarding Iraqi WMD. Yet, for reasons outlined above, the application of the groupthink model is not entirely unproblematic. Whether or not one may conclude that groupthink led to the decision-making failures in this case is largely dependent on the chosen rigor with which the model is applied. Nevertheless, the groupthink model possesses a powerful array of explanatory resources that can be used to understand why members of the core decision-making group within the Bush administration were so convinced of the existence of and threat posed by

Iraqi WMD. The case also yields important policy lessons that may help prevent future occurrences of the kind of poor decision-making that plagued the deliberations prior to the invasion of Iraq. 

NOTES

^a I would like to acknowledge the guidance and support provided by Professor Wesley Wark in the Department of History at the University of Toronto, whose graduate seminar on the Post-9/11 Security Environment inspired this paper.

^b Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1982), 3.

^c The Watergate cover-up is not included in the 1972 edition of Janis's book. He added this case to the heavily revised 1982 edition.

^d Janis, 9.

^e *Ibid.*, 9.

^f Sally Riggs Fuller and Roman J. Aldag, "Challenging the Mindguards: Moving Small Group Analysis Beyond Groupthink," in *Beyond Groupthink: Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-Making*, eds. Paul 't Hart, Eric K. Stern, and Bengt Sundelius (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 60; Janis, 244

^g Janis, 8.

^h L. Festinger, "Informal Social Communication," *Psychological Review* 57 (1950), 271-282.

ⁱ Janis, 249.

^j Janis, 250-254.

^k Janis, 244.

^l Fuller and Aldag, 59.

^m See: Janis' case study of the Bay of Pigs invasion, 14-47.

ⁿ Janis, 9-10.

^o Vice President Richard Cheney, "Meet the Press," NBC, March 16, 2003, <[\[trel/bush/cheneymeetthepress.htm\]\(http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/in-trel/bush/cheneymeetthepress.htm\)> \(1 April 2004\).](http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/in-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

^p National Intelligence Council, *Iraq's Continuing Program for Weapons of Mass Destruction: Key Judgments from October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate* (2002), 8-9. The CIA and the Department of Energy also disagreed with several claims made by members of the Bush administration prior to the invasion of Iraq.

^q George W. Bush, "President, House Leadership Agree on Iraq Resolution," October 2, 2002, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021002-7.html>> (16 March 2004).

^r *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: The White House, September, 2002).

^s Joseph Cirincione et al, *WMD in Iraq: Evidence and Implications* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004), p. 47. See also: David Kay's testimony in response to questions posed by Senator Warner, Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee on Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs, Senator John Warner (Chair), David Kay (Witness) (Washington: January 28, 2004); Kenneth M. Pollack, "Spies, Lies, and Weapons: What Went Wrong," *The Atlantic* (January/February, 2004), 81.

^t Colin Powell, "Remarks to the UN Security Council," February 5, 2003, <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/17300.htm>> (12 February 2004). See also: George W. Bush, "President Outlines Priorities," November 7, 2002, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/11/20021107-2.html>> (16 March 2004); George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," Janu-

ary 28, 2003, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html>> (16 March 2004).

^u The National Intelligence Estimate assigned expressed a low level of confidence regarding the question of “whether in desperation Saddam would share chemical or biological weapons with al-Qa’ida.” See: National Intelligence Council, p. 9; Cirincione et al, 48-49.

^v Cirincione et al, 48.

^w Ibid, 49.

^x Ibid, 49.

^y Janis, 10.

^z Cirincione et al, 59.

^{aa} Ibid, 59.

^{ab} Suskind, 97.

^{ac} Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 188-189.

^{ad} Pollack, 88.

^{ae} Pollack, 88.

^{af} Paul Wolfowitz, “News Transcript: Regional Radio Interviews with Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz,” March 16, 2004, <<http://www.dod.mil/transcripts/2004/tr20040316-depsecdef0547.html>> (August 28, 2005).

^{ag} Cirincione et al, 17.

^{ah} Greg Thielmann, as quoted in an interview with PBS *Frontline*, August 12, 2003, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/truth/interviews/thielmann.html>> (13 February 2004).

^{ai} Ibid. For a particularly clear and concise account of the unfolding of the Iraq-Niger uranium episode, see: Hersh, 225-247.

^{aj} The New York Times (editorial), “Distorting the Intelligence,” *The New York Times* (Online), February 17, 2004, <www.nytimes.com> (17 February 2004).

^{ak} In addition to the president, the core group included Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet, National Security Advisor to the President Condoleeza Rice, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, chairman of the Defense Policy Board Richard Perle, and Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton.

^{al} Janis, 16.

^{am} Ibid, 77.

^{an} Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 12.

^{ao} Christopher DeMuth, quoted in: Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 321.

^{ap} Colin Powell, “Interview on CNN’s ‘Larry King Live,’” October 9, 2002, <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2002/14255.htm>> (28 March 2004).

^{aq} Suskind, 96.

^{ar} Woodward, 332.

^{as} Janis.

^{at} McCauley, 1989; Tetlock et al, 1992. Symptoms of groupthink have been found to exist in groups that lack the cohesion of those studied by Janis.

^{au} Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions*

and *Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1972), 197.

^{av} Pollack, 88.

^{aw} Cirincione et al, 50-51. See also: Eric Schmitt, "Aide Denies Shaping Data to Justify War," *New York Times* (June 5, 2003), A20; Greg Miller, "Pentagon Defends Role of Intelligence Unit on Iraq," *Los Angeles Times* (June 5, 2003), s. 1, 8; Michael Duffy et al, "Weapons of Mass Disappearance," *Time Magazine* (June 9, 2003), 28.

^{ax} Pollack, 88.

^{ay} Suskind, 72.

^{az} Ibid, 72-73.

^{ba} Matthew Roycroft, "The Downing Street Memo," July 23, 2002 < http://www.time-sonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-1593607_1,00.html > (August 28, 2005).

^{bb} Suskind, 97. This was a problem that O'Neill observed on many subsequent occasions, most notably in the meetings surrounding the National Energy Policy Development (NEPD), in which alternate opinions, such as those of environmentalists or former policy officials, were apparently not entertained. Decisions were made informally by a few high-level officials in consultation with energy sector lobbyists. See: Suskind, 145.

^{bc} James P. Pfiffner, "President George W. Bush and His War Cabinet," paper presented at the conference *The Presidency, Congress, and the War on Terrorism* (University of Florida, 2003), 14.

^{bd} Janis' distinction between cohesive and homogeneity is not always clear. He takes cohesiveness to mean esprit-de-corps and 'chumminess,' while he understands homogeneity as similar backgrounds and/or ideological stances.

be Paul O'Neill, as quoted in Suskind, 130.

^{bf} Pfiffner, 11.

^{bg} Janis, (1972), 14.

^{bh} President George W. Bush, "Address on Iraq," October 7, 2002, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/10/200210007-8.html>> (2 February 2004).

^{bi} Ibid.

^{bj} Paul Wolfowitz, "Remarks at the Fletcher Conference," October 16, 2002, <<http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2002/s20021016-depsecdef.html>> (16 March 2004).

^{bk} Janis, (1972), 202.

^{bl} Suskind, 204.

^{bm} Ibid, 96.

^{bn} Pollack, 79.

^{bo} President George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," January 29, 2002, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>> (August 28, 2005).

^{bp} President George W. Bush, "Remarks to the UN General Assembly," September 12, 2002, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/>> (10 February 2004).

^{bq} Paul Wolfowitz, "Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz Interview with Sam Tannenhaus, Vanity Fair," May 9, 2003, <<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2003/tr20030509-depsecdef0223.html>> (August 28, 2005).

^{br} Janis, (1972), 198.

^{bs} President George W. Bush, "Address on Iraq," October 7, 2002, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/>

es/2002/10/200210007-8.html> (2 February 2004).

^{bt} Donald Rumsfeld, “Secretary Rumsfeld Contrasts Iraq and North Korea,” January 20, 2003, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jan2003/b01202003_bt027-03.html> (16 March 2004). Interestingly, by Rumsfeld’s own criteria, the U.S. has also failed to deal with the threat posed by North Korea, which has announced that it possesses WMD.

^{bu} Janis, (1972), 198.

^{bv} See, for example: Paul Wolfowitz, “Remarks at the Association of Old Crows Annual Symposium and Convention,” October 28, 2002, <<http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2002/s20021028-deps-ecdef.html>> (16 March 2004).

^{bw} Pollack, 88.

^{bx} Suskind, 147-148.

^{by} Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 79, 149.

^{bz} Janis, (1972), 41-42.

^{ca} Cirincione et al, 50. See also: John Aloysius Farrell, “Cheney’s Intelligence Role Scrutinized,” *Denver Post* (July 23, 2003), A1; Walter Pincus and Dana Priest, “Some Iraq Analysts Felt Pressure from Cheney Visits,” *Washington Post* (June 5, 2003), A1; Greg Miller, “CIA May Have Been Out of the Loop,” *Los Angeles Times*, (October 25, 2003), s. 1, 1.

^{cb} Janis, (1972), 198. Janis strengthened his symptom requirements somewhat in 1989, suggesting that “it is necessary to see if practically all the symptoms were manifested and also to see if the antecedent conditions and the expected immediate consequences—the symptoms of defective decision-making were also

present.” See: Irving L. Janis, *Crucial Decisions: Leadership in Policymaking and Crisis Management* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 60.

^{cc} Fuller and Aldag, 72.

^{cd} McCauley, 1989; Tetlock et al, 1992.

^{ce} Pollack (2002), 92.

^{cf} Janis (1982), 262-267.

^{cg} Ibid, 271.

^{ch} Cirincione et al, 54.

^{ci} Ibid, 54.
