

## Is 'groupthink' driving us to war?

By Karen J. Alter, 9/16/2002

Ten years from now, will we be looking back asking how the United States could have thought that an unprovoked, preventive war on Iraq could succeed when the signs of danger were so clear and ominous? How the impossibility of accomplishing the mission through air power would lead levels of American casualties not seen since the Vietnam war? How an oil shock and deficit spending for war would plunge the United States and world economies into a major recession? How an administration so focused on getting rid of Saddam failed to create a workable policy to shape a post-Saddam Iraq?

It may be that the most compelling way to answer these questions will be to apply the insights of the psychologist Irving Janis on what he called "groupthink." Looking back on the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in his 1972 book "Victims of Groupthink: A psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascos," Janis asked: "How could bright, shrewd men like John F. Kennedy and his advisers be taken by the CIA's stupid, patchwork plan" to invade Cuba?

Drawing on studies of group decision-making, Janis argued that the pressures of like-minded people deciding as a group lead to a deterioration of mental reasoning, reality testing, and moral judgment. In short, groupthink leads to a breakdown of critical thinking.

In his 1972 book Janis also examined the flawed decision making that went into the Korean War, Pearl Harbor, and Vietnam and presented in contrast the decision making process that occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the post-World War II Marshall Plan.

So far the Bush administration's foreign policy team has manifested all the symptoms of groupthink that Janis identified:

- \* Illusions of invulnerability leading to excessive optimism and the taking of extreme risks.
- \* Collective efforts to rationalize leading decision makers to discount warnings that might otherwise force them to reconsider.
- \* Stereotyped views of enemy leaders as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate and too weak or stupid to counter an attack against them, leading to miscalculations.
- \* An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality, inclining group members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.
- \* Advocates of the consensus view putting direct pressure on those who express strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments, making clear that dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members.
- \* Self-appointed mind guards emerging to protect the group from advice, information, and views that might shatter the shared complacency about the effectiveness or morality of their decisions.
- \* Self-censorship by people with views deviating from the apparent group consensus, creating an illusion of unanimity within the group.

Candidate Bush ran for office by arguing that America cannot be the world's policeman, that the United States must avoid entanglements in the world and most of all avoid anything that resembles nation-building. Bush's conversion to war with Iraq would obliterate all those arguments, with nation-building certain to follow.

Unfortunately, Bush has surrounded himself with advisers sharing ideological cohesiveness and radical views. How could the president decide not to go to war when his most trusted advisers -- National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Vice President Dick Cheney (himself a former secretary of defense) -- all say that the threat of nuclear proliferation makes removing Saddam Hussein unavoidable?

The drumbeat leading up to war has been steady and transparent. As soon as Bush himself starts making the case for war to the American public, the decision for war will have already been made.

It is time for those who are still thinking critically to ratchet up the rhetoric. An unprovoked preventive war with Iraq is insane.

Before the administration creates a flimsy pretext to go in, Congress must insist that Bush not wage war without its assent. It must fully debate whether this policy makes sense. Members of the administration who disagree with a war in Iraq must voice their opposition to lend support to those outside with serious reservations. The people who have supported Bush, and on whom he is counting for reelection, must also make it known that they do not support war with Iraq.

It is better to voice opposition now, when backing down is still relatively easy, than to reflect 10 years from now on how a fiasco could have happened.

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