

# The Groupthink Syndrome

## Symptoms of groupthink

The first step in developing a theory about the causes and consequences of groupthink is to anchor the concept of groupthink in observables by describing the symptoms to which it refers. Eight main symptoms run through the case studies of historic fiascoes (Chapters 2-5) and are seldom present in the case studies of the nongroupthink decisions (Chapters 6 and 7). Each symptom can be identified by a variety of indicators, derived from historical records, observers' accounts of conversations, and participants' memoirs. The eight symptoms of groupthink include group products and processes that reinforce each other, as can be seen most clearly in the case study of the Bay of Pigs invasion plan. The symptoms can be divided into three main types, which are familiar features of many (although not all) cohesive groups observed in research on group dynamics.

### *Type I: Overestimations of the group—its power and morality*

1. An illusion of invulnerability, shared by most or all the members, which creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks
2. An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality, inclining the members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions

### *Type II: Closed-mindedness*

3. Collective efforts to rationalize in order to discount warnings or other information that might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they recommit themselves to their past policy decisions
4. Stereotyped views of enemy leaders 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

### *Type III: Pressures toward uniformity*

5. 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
6. 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)
7. 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
8. 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

## Consequences

When a policy-making group displays most or all of the symptoms in each of the three categories, the members perform their collective tasks ineffectively and are likely to fail to attain their collective objectives as a result of *concurrency-seeking*. In rare instances, concurrency-seeking may have predominantly positive effects for their members and their enterprises. For example, it may make a crucial contribution to maintaining morale after a defeat and to muddling through a crisis when prospects for a successful outcome look bleak. But the positive effects are generally outweighed by the poor quality of the group's decision-making. My assumption is that the more frequently a group displays the symptoms, the worse will be the quality of its decisions, on the average. Even when some symptoms are absent, the others may be so pronounced that we can expect all the unfortunate consequences of groupthink.

To be more specific, whenever a policy-making group displays most of the symptoms of groupthink, we can expect to find that the group also displays symptoms of defective decision-making. Seven such symptoms were listed earlier (at the end of Chapter 1) on the basis of prior research on decision-making in government, industry, and other large organizations:

1. Incomplete survey of alternatives
2. Incomplete survey of objectives
3. Failure to examine risks of preferred choice
4. Failure to reappraise initially rejected alternatives
5. Poor information search
6. Selective bias in processing information at hand
7. Failure to work out contingency plans

A study by Philip Tetlock indicates that among the politically relevant consequences is the relatively poor quality of the thinking that goes into the public statements made by national leaders when they announce and try to explain policy decisions that are the products of groupthink. Tetlock did a comparative study of groupthink and nongroupthink decisions, using systematic content analysis techniques to assess the quality of thinking in public speeches made by the President of the United States or the Secretary of State. For the sample of groupthink decisions, he found significantly lower scores on cognitive complexity than for the nongroupthink decisions, indicating more simplistic thinking about the issues.<sup>1</sup>

### Antecedent conditions

In addition to stating the expected observable consequences, an adequate theory of groupthink must also specify the observable *causes*—that is, the antecedent conditions that produce, elicit, or facilitate the occurrence of the syndrome. A number of such antecedent conditions have been singled out by making inferences from the case studies presented in the preceding chapters, which take account of findings from prior research on group dynamics. One major condition that I have repeatedly mentioned has to do with the degree of cohesiveness of the group. We would not expect to find the groupthink syndrome if the members dislike each other and do not value their membership in the group. Any such group that lacks cohesiveness is likely to display symptoms of defective decision-making, especially if the members are engaging in internal warfare. But groupthink is not ever likely to be the cause of their poor decision-making. Only when a group of policy-makers is moderately or highly cohesive can we expect the groupthink syndrome to emerge as the members are working collectively on one or another of their important policy decisions. Even so, the symptoms of groupthink are unlikely to occur to such an extent that they interfere with effective decision-making unless certain *additional antecedent conditions are also present*.

What are those additional conditions? Two of them, described at the end of the preceding chapter, pertain to administrative or structural features of the policy-makers' organization. One condition involves *insulation of the policy-making group*, which provides no opportunity for the members to obtain expert information and critical evaluation from others within the organization. A second feature is *lack of a tradition of impartial leadership*. In the absence of appropriate leadership traditions, the leader of a policy-making group will find it all too easy to use his or her power and prestige to influence the members of the group to approve of the policy alternative he or she prefers instead of encouraging them to engage in open inquiry and critical evaluation. A third administrative or structural factor can also be inferred by comparing the conditions that prevailed during the groupthink decisions

(Chapters 2-5) with those during the nongroupthink decisions (Chapters 6 and 7): *the lack of norms requiring methodical procedures for dealing with the decision-making tasks*. (In Chapter 10, this antecedent condition, together with additional antecedent conditions involving psychological stress, which are suggested by the case study in Chapter 9, will be discussed in detail and examined in the light of prior research on group dynamics.)

All three of the administrative or structural conditions can be regarded as factors that facilitate the occurrence of the groupthink syndrome; they involve lack of constraints on collective uncritical thinking. Insofar as they are long-standing features of the organization, each of the three conditions can be ascertained *before* the members of a policy-making group start their deliberations on whatever policy decision is under investigation. I mention this because it is pertinent to the question of whether the groupthink syndrome can be predicted in advance. My answer is that by ascertaining the presence of one or more of the three structural conditions as well as the level of group cohesiveness of the policy-making group (which can also be rated *before* the deliberations begin), such predictions can be made. If the predictions are confirmed in future studies on policy-making groups, we shall be able to conclude that the foregoing analysis of causal factors that lead to the groupthink syndrome is substantiated by empirical evidence.

### How widespread is the groupthink syndrome?

At present we do not know what percentage of all major 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. For example, a noncohesive committee may be made up of bickering factions so intent on fighting for political power within the government bureaucracy that the participants have little interest in examining the real issues posed by the foreign policy question they are debating; they may settle for a compromise that fails to take account of adverse effects on people outside their own political arena.

All that can be said from the historical case studies I have analyzed so far is that the groupthink syndrome sometimes plays a major role in producing large-scale fiascoes. In order to estimate how large the percentage might be for various types of decision-making groups, we need investigations of a variety of policy decisions made by groups of executives who have grossly miscalculated the unfavorable consequences of their chosen courses of action. Such investigations should also provide comparative results that are valuable for helping to determine the conditions that promote groupthink.

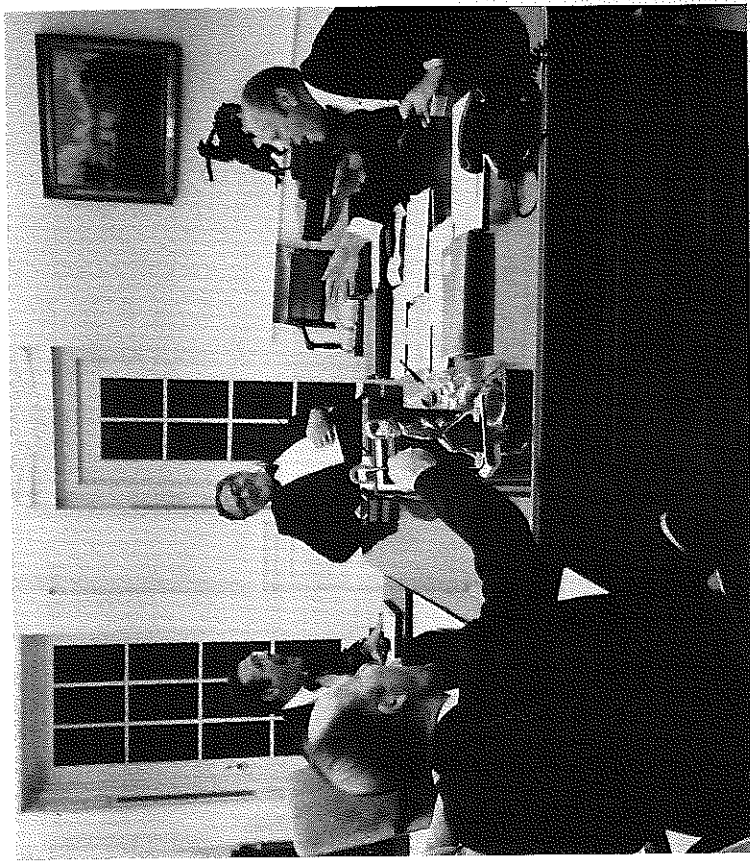
## Candidates for a casebook of miscalculations during the Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations

A selection of United States government decisions to be used in further research on the incidence and conditions of groupthink-dominated deliberations could include major and minor fiascos and near-fiascos since the time of the Johnson administration, including some that deal with domestic policies rather than foreign policies. One strong candidate is the Watergate cover-up fiasco that led to Nixon's forced resignation from the presidency. This candidate is the one I have selected for a fully detailed analysis, which is presented in Chapter 9. It provides a kind of test case with regard to the question, Does the theoretical analysis of the causes and consequences of the groupthink syndrome (as presented earlier in this chapter) help us to understand new instances of defective policy-making behavior that differ in many important respects from the foreign-policy decisions from which the analysis was originally developed?

A second candidate is the decision by President Ford and his close advisers in May 1975 to launch an attack against Cambodia to rescue the captured ship Mayaguez and its crew. Most people do not regard that relatively minor episode as a fiasco, especially because the military mission was successful. But a few well-informed political analysts do. They point out that forty-one members of the U.S. armed forces were killed and fifty were wounded in the successful rescue of the forty crewmen. Also, minutes before the United States launched its surprise attack, the Cambodian government had already started to announce that it was releasing the ship and crew. The General Accounting Office of the U.S. government released a report in October 1976 concluding that the Ford administration had made a serious error, that the entire mission was probably unnecessary because diplomatic negotiations with Cambodia might have attained the same outcome without bloodshed.

Although Ford was praised by many supporters for having demonstrated at long last that he really did possess a crucial part of the male anatomy, he was attacked by his political opponents for indulging in machismo diplomacy. The General Accounting Office's critical report was released and publicized at the height of the election campaign, on the eve of Ford's televised debate with Carter on foreign policy. It may have resulted in Ford's losing the support of a very small percentage of voters, but perhaps just enough to make a critical difference in the narrow margin of his defeat a few weeks later on election day.

On close examination, according to Roger Morris, a former member of the National Security Staff under Henry Kissinger, the Mayaguez rescue was far from the success it seemed at first. He concludes: "Running through the Mayaguez crisis was much of the muddled, impulsive policymaking that marked the worst and the most ineffectual of the U.S. intervention in South-



Groupthink? President Ford, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and two White House aides (Donald Rumsfeld and Brent Scowcroft) cheering their victory—the rescue of the Mayaguez and its crew of forty Americans. The cost was forty-one American servicemen killed and fifty injured.

east Asia over the last decade." Among the many observations and surmises that Morris offers to support his conclusion that the Mayaguez decision was muddled and impulsive are the following:

Washington operated in the Mayaguez seizure with almost no diplomatic intelligence on the possible intentions of the new Cambodian regime. Lower level State Department officers with long experience in Cambodia were excluded from the center of the crisis management, much as the handful of officials analyzing Hanoi or the Vietcong were absent from the critical decisions by President Johnson and Nixon on the war. Gerald Ford in 1975, as his predecessors had so often before him, seems to have struck in Southeast Asia not as a last resort after exhaustive diplomacy, not in some genuinely informed calculus of the adversary's intentions, but by what must have been a largely intuitive judgment that he had no other choice.

Whatever the timing and motivation for the raids, the tactical military planning turned out to be as questionable as the diplomacy.

All this must be fairly weighed, of course, against the administration's perspective on the crisis. The President and his advisers were no doubt in the grip of the Pueblo tragedy, whatever the differences between the two cases. They were anxious to avoid further "defeat" in Indochina.

If Morris's analysis is correct, the decision to use military force to rescue the Mayaguez crew is a strong candidate for a groupthink analysis.

Another is the decision by President Carter and his advisers in April 1980 that led to the ill-fated attempt to use military force to rescue the American hostages in Iran. The news media called it a fiasco comparable to the Bay of Pigs. Government spokesmen claimed that it was all a matter of unforeseeable accidents and bad luck that helicopter failures forced the military commander to abort the entire mission on the desert sands of Iran hundreds of miles from Teheran. Informed critics, however, said that it was probably lucky that the risky mission had to be called off at an early stage with the loss of only eight American lives, because if it had proceeded to Teheran, it still would have failed badly and the losses would have been enormous.

Drew Middleton's military analysis in the *New York Times* concluded that:

Even if the militants had been overcome and the hostages freed, the noise of the operation would surely have awakened the neighborhood. Iranian reinforcements could have brought the hostages and their rescuers under fire, and attacks on the helicopters flying in from Damavand might have made this crucial part of the planned operation unworkable.

A report prepared by the staff of the Senate Armed Services Committee, released in June 1980, concluded that "major errors" were made in the planning as well as the execution of the military operation. Poor contingency planning and inadequate intelligence were among the specific criticisms. A similar conclusion was reached in a less controversial report by a high-level military review panel for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The report, released in August 1980, concluded that although the concept of a small clandestine operation



President Jimmy Carter and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance leaving the White House. Both became deeply perturbed in April 1980 when the military mission to rescue the American hostages in Iran ended in a fiasco. All the President's advisers had met and concurred on the military rescue mission while Vance—who had favored a diplomatic solution through negotiation—was away from Washington. When Vance returned, he opposed the decision as "ill conceived," but no one took his cogent arguments seriously and he resigned in protest.



was sound, there were many flaws and misjudgments in the planning, attributable at least in part to overzealous secrecy: The Joint Chiefs of Staff never had a written plan "to study and review in the privacy of their own offices," and "the hostage rescue plan was never subjected to rigorous testing and evaluation by qualified independent observers."

More fundamental criticisms of the military plan were put forth by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance who regarded it as "ill-conceived" and resigned in protest when the mission was launched. One of his objections was that even if the military mission succeeded in rescuing all fifty American hostages held in the U.S. Embassy and the three others held at a distant building in the Foreign Ministry, Iranian militants could retaliate by capturing and perhaps harming over two hundred other Americans still in Iran. Another of his major concerns was that the secret military mission would drastically impair the United States' relations not only with Moslem nations but also with America's European allies, who had just agreed to cooperate on a boycott of Iran to prevent the United States from endangering world peace by resorting to a dangerous military solution.

Vance opposed a military solution in favor of trying to work out a diplomatic solution through negotiations (which, in fact, turned out to be quite possible). Roger Fisher, an expert on international conflict, concluded in his analysis in the *New York Times* that if President Carter was led to believe diplomatic possibilities had been exhausted, his assumption was just plain "wrong."

Evidently, all the President's advisers except Secretary of State Vance concurred on the military rescue plan. Agreement was reached at a meeting held, without Vance's knowledge, on the day after his long-planned departure on vacation. When he returned, after the decision had already been made, Vance was permitted to present his objections at a meeting of the President and his national security advisers. "When he finished, he was greeted by 'deafening silence' [but afterwards] when it was too late, some of its participants conceded privately that he had raised serious questions."

Was Secretary Vance excluded from the crucial meeting in which the final decision was made because, as a lone dissenter who would not give in, he was being "treated as a deviant who was violating the group's norms"? Had those who admitted—after it was too late—that he was raising important objections been suppressing their own doubts, as loyal members of an in-group often do when they are prematurely striving for concurrence rather than for a critical evaluation of the available options? Were other symptoms of groupthink also manifested? These are not intended as rhetorical but as genuine questions that might profitably be pursued along with other key questions essential for a complete examination of the groupthink hypothesis in a detailed case study.

A fourth candidate is a minor and much less dramatic decision that marred the early months of President Reagan's administration and that has all the earmarks of gross miscalculation. It was the administration's decision in May 1981 to propose to Congress a drastic reduction in Social Security



Another potential candidate for groupthink analysis? President Ronald Reagan and his group of key economic advisers at the White House—on his right, Murray Weidenbaum, Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, and on his left, Secretary of Treasury Donald T. Regan and Budget Director David Stockman. In May 1981, Reagan and his advisers decided to present a proposal that Congress should make drastic cuts in Social Security benefits. The proposal evoked a "firestorm" of protest and was overwhelmingly defeated by a unanimous vote in the Senate. This decision has been described by political commentators as a serious blunder that resulted from overconfidence, insufficient concern about reactions in Congress, and failure to consider the full range of consequences.

benefits, which would affect everyone who entered the system after January 1, 1982. The proposal included substantial cuts in benefits for the disabled, for people who retire before the age of sixty-five, for retired federal workers, and for surviving spouses of retirees.

The financial problem facing the administration was a serious one. "No one disputes that something has to be done; without Congressional action, the old-age trust fund could be exhausted by fall of next year [1982]." But the drastic solution proposed by the Reagan administration, which was presented without adequately preparing the Congress and the public, evoked a "firestorm" of protest that was followed by a "stunning" defeat (96-0) in the Senate. Even Republicans admitted it was a "blunder" to confront the nation suddenly with such a proposal. Months later, Republican Congressmen were still worried that President Reagan's proposals to cut Social Security benefits drastically could have an adverse effect on the congressional elections in 1982, even though the President had responded to political pressures by not pushing for those proposals. Public opinion polls indicated that President Reagan's "once solid grip on public support appears to be loosening." A *New York Times*—CBS News Poll in September 1981 attributed the "slippage" (a 6 percent decline in approval of Reagan's handling of the presidency) partly to "unhappiness over Mr. Reagan's handling of Social Security."

Essential facts about how the decision was arrived at are not yet available but if the stories and analyses in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* turn out to be at least roughly correct, the Social Security "blunder" could be regarded as a minor political fiasco resulting from, as Hugh Sidey put it, a "premature and ill-considered" plan.

A *Washington Post* Service news story by Art Pine on May 25, 1981 presented a relatively favorable view by suggesting that perhaps in the long run the "Social Security flap" might benefit Reagan by allowing him "to get much larger cuts in Social Security than anyone believed," but asserted that "it is easy to recite the negatives." Pine's recitation of those negatives is representative of the way in which the "ill-considered" decision has been described in the press:

Ronald Reagan plainly made the first serious political *blunder* of his presidency in proposing large cuts in Social Security. . . .

The White House, fresh from its budget victories, was *too confident*. The plan was put together *too hastily*. Strategists were too preoccupied with assuaging the financial markets, *too little concerned* with likely reaction in Congress. Mr. Reagan lost momentum; the Democrats were able to regroup. . . .

As Murray L. Weidenbaum, Mr. Reagan's chief economist, conceded, "Hindsight tells us that we would have been better advised to spend more time discussing our views" with Congress.

How did an administration that was credited with being so politically savvy get into this bind?

The short answer—obtained from a series of interviews with White House officials and other strategists—is that even savvy administrations can



"Now let's hear it for good old Al, whose idea this Group Think was in the first place."

"DRAWING BY WHITNEY DARROW, JR.; © 1972  
THE NEW YORKER MAGAZINE, INC."

get into trouble, particularly when they are so caught up in other issues they *fail to look at their proposals realistically*.

In addition to political blunders of this kind committed by policy-makers in the White House, the sample of potential candidates for groupthink analysis could also include instances of national and local governmental decisions made by executive groups below the top level—comparable to the decisions of Admiral Kimmel's naval group in Hawaii in 1941. Serious miscalculations made by business firms and public welfare institutions might also be examined in order to investigate groupthink tendencies in organizations outside of governmental bureaucracies.

### Only in America?

Is groupthink essentially an American phenomenon? American public administrators and corporation executives are well known for their peculiar eagerness to invest time and money in brainstorming groups, T-groups, executive training workshops in group relations, and the like. Does something unique in the national character incline American executives to rely excessively on group support? If so, perhaps groupthink tendencies are to be found among policy-makers only in America. Is there reason to believe that groupthink is not limited to just one country?

Actually, it is simply a matter of happenstance that all the examples of groupthink presented so far have involved American political and military leaders. If I had been more familiar with European, Asian, and African history, or if I had first consulted specialists other than American political scientists, I might have selected non-American decisions that perhaps would reveal the symptoms of groupthink. From recent discussions with specialists in European history, I have the strong impression that I could find excellent candidates for an analysis of groupthink tendencies in many times and places—in ancient Rome and the city-states of Renaissance Italy, as well as in the capitals of post-Renaissance Europe—if records of decision-making meetings, memoirs, diaries, and other evidence of the deliberations and interactions of participants are available.

Studies of national differences might some day show that executives in America are more inclined than those elsewhere to rely on group judgments and to indulge in groupthink. In a large series of policy decisions by government committees in America, groupthink tendencies might be sufficiently strong to have a noticeably adverse effect on the quality of decision-making. In, let us say, one out of every three decisions on the average; whereas in European countries the average rate might be just half as great, about one out of six. Still, such a relatively low rate for Europe would be far from negligible and would be a matter of grave concern whenever a policy decision affected the lives of millions of people. Of course, we are a long way from being able to

make reliable quantitative estimates. So, for the present, we shall have to be satisfied with qualitative evidence that furnishes answers to a simpler question: Can we point to a European fiasco that makes it plausible to assume that policy-making committees in nations other than the United States at least occasionally suffer from the symptoms of groupthink?

### Candidates for a casebook of European fiascoes

In accounts of how the major powers of Europe in 1914 stumbled into the first world war, I recognized some familiar signs of group processes at work and noted several excellent candidates for case studies that might prove to be prime examples of groupthink. For example, in 1914 the French military high command ignored repeated warnings that Germany had adopted the Schlieffen Plan, which called for a rapid assault through Belgium and then southward to Paris in order to outflank France's defenses in the west. With high esprit de corps, French government officials and military leaders supported each other in ignoring the danger of being outflanked. Their reliance on simplistic slogans about French élan and shared illusions about France's invulnerability bolstered their decision to adopt an unrealistic military plan to launch a frontal assault against Germany's most heavily fortified frontiers in the west. They apparently continued to ignore all warnings about France's vulnerability until their illusions were shattered when the Germans broke through France's weakly fortified Belgian frontier in the first few weeks of the war and approached the gates of Paris.

In historical analyses of the origins of World War II, another candidate for a casebook of European fiascoes appears, and it might even be a more instructive example of groupthink than any of the others: The British government's attempt to appease Nazi Germany during 1938 and early 1939, which has been called "the most discreditable episode in modern English history." The attempt was carried out by an anti-war group of British policy-makers—Neville Chamberlain's "inner circle"—whose unrealistic policy of appeasing the unappeasable Nazis contributed unintentionally to the outbreak of the second world war. Authoritative accounts of Britain's appeasement policy contain suggestive indications that the groupthink hypothesis may apply even when the intent of a group's decision is to avoid war, rather than moving toward war as in all the examples of groupthink I have discussed so far.

Popular accounts of the events leading up to World War II present Chamberlain as a lone old man with an umbrella who imposed his own will upon the British government. But those who knew him well and those who have studied his personal diary, his correspondence, and his political actions have come to the conclusion that his decisions were constantly influenced by

his inner circle of close associates—Sir Horace Wilson, the Prime Minister's closest adviser on foreign affairs; Sir John Simon, Chancellor of the Exchequer; Sir Samuel Hoare, Home Secretary; Viscount Halifax, who became Foreign Secretary in February 1938 (after Anthony Eden resigned in protest against the British government's acquiescence to Mussolini's conquests); and Sir Neville Henderson, Britain's ambassador to Germany.

William R. Rock, in a well-documented study of the political consequences of the inner circle's appeasement policy, asserts that the gap between good intentions and unjustifiable practices was enormous. Although starting out as a high-minded attempt to redress justifiable grievances, Rock says, the British government's policy of appeasement degenerated into passive "surrender to aggressive and unscrupulous powers, mainly from motives of fear, indolence, or simple indifference. Invariably the concessions were made at the expense of some weaker nation."

All the members of the inner circle supported Chamberlain's view of his special mission to save Europe from war. They pressured him to avoid creating a collective-security alliance with Russia, Czechoslovakia, and other anti-Nazi countries. Time and again, they urged him to give in to Hitler's demands for territory from neighboring countries in exchange for nothing more than promises that he would make no further demands. Indeed, it was one of Chamberlain's closest associates in the inner circle, Sir Horace Wilson, who suggested to him the plan of unilaterally resolving the Czechoslovak crisis in September 1938 by flying to Germany for a summit conference with Hitler without consulting any of England's military allies. Despite his initial doubts about the plan, the Prime Minister by-passed all the experts in the Foreign Office and elsewhere in the government, consulting only his inner circle before he publicly announced his arrangements for a personal conference with Hitler. Chamberlain and his fellow appeasers were gratified to receive widespread approval of the announcement from the nation's press. They did not take account of the fact that "much of the initial support from the press was based on the belief that the visit would provide an opportunity for Chamberlain to impress upon Hitler Britain's determination to stand firm against German demands."

Commenting on the amazing inflexibility displayed by the members of the inner circle in pursuit of their fallacious policy, as they allowed Nazi Germany to make one bloodless conquest after another during the period from 1937 to 1939, Rock describes a historical puzzle:

the historian is left to wonder how any government could have deliberately closed its eyes and those of the nation to so clear and imminent a peril. The magnitude of German preparations for war, the ruthless speed with which they were pushed ahead, and the vast scope of German ambitions were all well known to those in positions of leadership. They seemed to leave the government largely unmoved.

The groupthink syndrome may provide a large part of the solution to this puzzle. There are many indications that the group developed a shared illusion



Members of Neville Chamberlain's War Cabinet with the ministers who formed his "inner circle" sitting in the front row. Seated, left to right, are: Viscount Halifax, the Foreign Secretary; Sir John Simon, the Chancellor of the Exchequer; Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister; and Sir Samuel Hoare, Home Secretary. Also seated, on the far right, is Lord Chatfield, Minister for the Coordination of Defence. Standing, left to right, are: Sir John Anderson, Minister for Home Security; Lord Hankey, Minister without portfolio; Leslie Hoare Belisha, War Minister; Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty; Sir Kingsley Wood, Air Minister; Anthony Eden, Dominions Minister; and Sir Edward Bridges, permanent secretary and secretary of the War Cabinet. Two other members of Chamberlain's inner circle were not members of the Cabinet: Sir Horace Wilson, permanent secretary (in the Civil Service) and the Prime Minister's closest adviser on foreign affairs, and Sir Neville Henderson, Britain's ambassador to Germany.



of keeping the peaceful status quo in Europe—if he were properly appeased. For them, the real villains were the Communists and all those who stood in the way of appeasement, including Winston Churchill and other politicians at home who were willing to risk war in order to oppose the Nazis' demands. Throughout the Czechoslovak crisis, the Czechs were castigated for threatening the peace because they were refusing to accept the concessions that the British policy-makers were prepared to give in order to appease Hitler. "The Czechs," Henderson wrote to a fellow appeaser, "are incorrigibly pigheaded people." "It is morally unjust," he admonished in another letter, "to compel this solid Teuton minority [the German Sudetens] to remain subjected to a Slav central government at Prague." "The moment has come," he concluded in yet another letter, "for Prague to get a real twist of the screw."

Whether or not all members of the inner circle shared Henderson's extreme views of the leaders of the Czechoslovak government, all agreed to exclude them from the negotiations with Hitler and to "twist the screw" to get them to accept the harsh terms of the Munich agreement. Five weeks before the Munich agreement, Horace Wilson had assured a member of the German embassy, according to a document found in the files of the former Nazi ambassador to Britain, that "if we two, Great Britain and Germany, can come to agreement regarding the settlement of the Czech problem, we shall simply brush aside the resistance that France or Czechoslovakia herself may offer to the decision." That is precisely what Wilson and his associates in the inner circle succeeded in doing.

Many historians and political scientists try to explain the gross miscalculations made by Chamberlain and his fellow appeasers in terms of their personality traits. Trevor-Roper, for example, highlights Chamberlain's personality defects—his vanity, his self-confidence in being able to triumph over any opponent, his capacity for self-deception, and his inability to tolerate dissent. Gilbert, in *The Roots of Appeasement*, ascribes similar negative attributes to Chamberlain and refers to the chronic indecisiveness, muddle-headedness, and other personal defects of his principal associates.

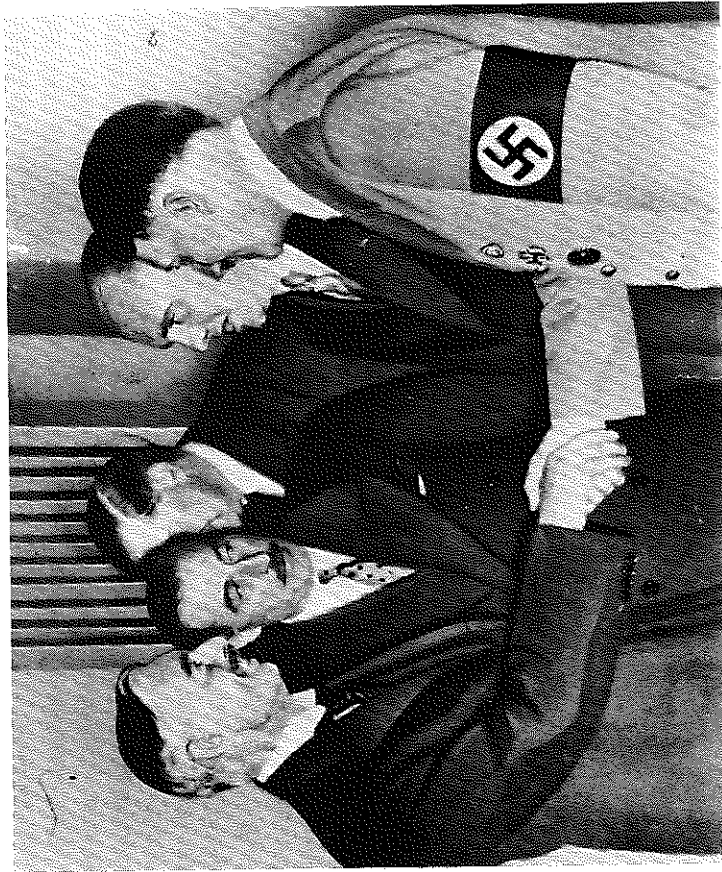
The groupthink hypothesis does not necessarily contradict this type of explanation. But instead of placing all the blame on the policy-makers' personal deficiencies, the groupthink hypothesis adds that these defects are augmented when a leader participates in a cohesive decision-making group in which loyalty to group norms takes precedence over independent, critical judgment. Chamberlain may have been chronically self-confident and obstinate; he may have enjoyed the opportunity to display his capacity to out-debate his critics in Parliament and to win points in the political game. But he was, nevertheless, quite amenable to influence on occasions when members of his inner group raised objections and urged him to change his plans. The groupthink hypothesis highlights the importance of the social support received from close associates. Such support bolsters any personality traits that incline a leader to overlook the unfavorable consequences of his pet plans and of his preferred ways of doing things. The case material bearing on Chamberlain and the

of invulnerability. Most historians and political analysts who have discussed the gross miscalculations of Chamberlain and his close advisers have emphasized their overoptimism and their unresponsiveness to impressive warnings from inside and outside their government. Chamberlain, in his private letters and diary, repeatedly mentioned his supreme confidence that the appeasement policy would preserve England from the dangers of war. On rare occasions when he expressed his doubts, he would dismiss them by mentioning the reassurances he had received from one or another of his inner circle.<sup>2</sup>

The appeasers' complacency appears to have been based on their assumption that Britain could assert itself as the arbiter of Europe and, if forced to fight a war, would certainly be successful. The members of the inner circle acknowledged and sometimes for propaganda purposes exaggerated the military weakness of Britain, but they apparently were convinced of their capacity to win diplomatic victories through their political astuteness and moral influence. They had no interest in information that might challenge the soundness of their assumptions. They encouraged Chamberlain to by-pass the Foreign Office and to ignore government experts who were aware of the risks of giving in to Hitler's demands. "As early as January, 1938," according to Rock, "Chamberlain had branded the Foreign Office 'not sincere' in its approach to the dictators, and all its expert knowledge was cast aside because the knowledge seemed in conflict with hope." Every political or military analyst in the government who called attention to defects in the appeasers' plans was labeled by the inner circle as a biased anti-Nazi who could not be trusted.

After the war, captured German documents showed that the alternative policy of presenting a united military front to guarantee the independence of each country threatened by Hitler would have met with strong support from the German generals in command of the German army, many of whom were strongly opposed to risking war against the armies of England, France, and Czechoslovakia. The combined military strength of these armies, they realized, was far greater than that of Germany. We might think that if only Chamberlain's group had known about internal German opposition to Hitler's war moves, the members would at least have debated the pros and cons of a modified policy combining concessions with a firm deterrent, in order to achieve their goal of preventing the outbreak of world war. The fact is that Chamberlain and leading members of the group were informed more than once about Hitler's war plans and the German generals' opposition to it. There is documentary evidence that the German generals sent at least three separate messages to the British government urging a firm stand against Hitler. But the members of the inner circle who received the information were content to rely on what their colleague Neville Henderson told them about the situation in Berlin. Acting as a mindguard, Henderson repeatedly advised the others to ignore all the inside information they were receiving from emissaries of the German general staff as untrustworthy and irrelevant.

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, all members of the inner circle thought Hitler a sincere nationalist who could be won over to the cause



In Munich, September 1938, Chancellor Hitler and Prime Minister Chamberlain shake hands after concluding the "Peace of Munich." Next to Chamberlain is Sir Neville Henderson, Britain's ambassador to Germany.

members of his inner circle suggests that a detailed analysis of all available historical records will show that their policy decisions were just as badly impaired by groupthink tendencies as those made by policy-making groups in the American government. Only one such case is required to indicate that America has no monopoly on groupthink.

The "only-in-America" question could be pursued further in an examination of a substantial number of other ill-considered decisions made by various European and other foreign governments, including some from earlier centuries. Among the fiascoes of recent decades to be considered would be the Nasser government's provocations in 1967 that led to the outbreak of the six-day Israeli-Arab War, the Pakistan government's provocations in 1971 that led to the outbreak of the thirteen-day Indian-Pakistani War, and the Israeli government's failure to be prepared for the Egyptian invasion at the outset of the devastating Yom Kippur War in 1973.

Before looking into any such decisions for symptoms of groupthink, we first must check the facts in detail to make sure that each decision in the sample was a group product and not simply based on the judgment of one powerful leader who induced the others to go along with him regardless of whether they thought his decision was good, bad, or indifferent. This consideration has kept me from nominating as candidates a number of fiascoes caused by totalitarian governments—Mussolini's decision to enter the war in 1940 when Italy was completely unprepared, Stalin's failure to anticipate a German invasion while implementing the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1941, Hitler's fatal decision to invade Russia in 1941—although it is conceivable that in some of these decisions the dictator's advisers participated as genuine policy-makers, not merely as sycophants.

### Groupthink versus other causes of miscalculation

When carrying out an analysis of any defective policy decision—including the Watergate cover-up and each of the other examples that I have mentioned as candidates in this chapter—one has to examine the available evidence carefully in order to answer a series of key questions before drawing any conclusion as to whether the groupthink syndrome provides at least part of the explanation for whatever errors were made. Obviously, one cannot assume that groupthink is the cause of practically all policy miscalculations and fiascoes. Anyone who relies on that naive assumption in preparing a case study would be carrying out a worthless exercise in unadulterated hindsight. A groupthink analysis of the Watergate cover-up or any other policy that has ended up as a fiasco could be discarded on the basis of the following devastating criticism: Knowing in advance how bad the outcome was, the author simply assumed that it must be because the policy-makers did a poor job; he also assumed that any poorly made decision (if more than one person

was involved) must have been due to groupthink. So the author searched selectively for anecdotes that could be construed as illustrating the symptoms of groupthink. And behold!—he detected groupthink as the cause of the fiasco.

There is, however, a genuine problem of hindsight in analyzing case studies. Research by Baruch Fischhoff and others shows that "people consistently overestimate the predictability of past events once they know how they turned out." When one looks at fiascoes of the past, as Dostoyevsky pithily put it, "everything seems stupid when it fails." That is why I believe that one must examine all the available evidence bearing on each fiasco to see if it really was the product of stupidity, and if so, whether groupthink contributed to it.

In order to minimize psychological tendencies to indulge in hindsight and to find what one is looking for in case study material, I propose that the investigator should go through the somewhat tedious process of structuring the inquiry. It requires examining the facts carefully in order to answer the following series of four key questions before concluding that groupthink was a contributory cause of any fiasco:

1. Who made the policy decisions? Was it essentially the leader alone or did group members participate to a significant degree? If the members participated, were they in a cohesive group?
2. To what extent was the policy a result of defective decision-making procedures on the part of those who were responsible?
3. Can symptoms of groupthink be discerned in the group's deliberations? (Do the prime symptoms pervade the planning discussions?)
4. Were the conditions that foster the groupthink syndrome present?

There is also another question, which is intended to see if something new can be learned: If the answers to the four questions above are positive, can any leads be detected that suggest new hypotheses concerning the conditions that promote groupthink?

In examining case material for the purpose of answering the key questions, it is essential to seek evidence enabling one to make discriminations that separate facts from myths about how decisions are actually made. In America, according to traditional political doctrine, the President has sole responsibility for every decision authorized by the executive branch. This doctrine pertains to the accountability of the President, but it is often misunderstood as describing who actually made the decision. The doctrine places responsibility on President Eisenhower for the erroneous decision to send U-2 spy planes over the Soviet Union even though he was not even informed about them by the Pentagon until after he had publicly denied that the United States had launched any such flights. President Truman, according to the doctrine, had sole responsibility for the Korean War decisions even though he was highly responsive to his advisers' recommendations and on at least one important decision was induced to change his mind completely. (It

will be recalled that Truman had wanted to accept Chiang Kai-shek's offer to send Chinese Nationalist troops to Korea but was talked out of it by members of his inner circle.) John F. Kennedy reinforced the traditional doctrine by publicly assuming full responsibility for the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Nevertheless, his advisers knew that they shared the responsibility, and some of them acknowledged feeling personally humiliated. The known facts about how these decisions were arrived at certainly do not correspond to the myth stemming from the traditional doctrine of accountability.

The reverse situation must also be expected, perhaps even more often: The myth that is likely to be promoted by a leader and his followers is that an entire group participated in arriving at a decision, whereas, in fact, the choice was made only by the leader. The problem of discerning whether advisers participated as policy-makers arises in connection with the major decisions made by any government, business firm, educational institution, or any other large organization, whenever a leader has nominal responsibility for the organization's policies. Only decisions in which the consensus of a stable in-group plays a crucial role in determining the chosen policy are relevant to investigations of the groupthink hypothesis. Thus the list of potential candidates presented earlier in this chapter will have to be cut by eliminating those that cannot properly be classified as group decisions.

The second and third key questions require most of the work that goes into the search for and appraisal of the available evidence used in case study reports like those presented in Chapters 2 through 7. Throughout this book, I repeatedly emphasize (and here I am doing it again) that *just because a policy turns out to have a bad outcome does not enable us to conclude that the group responsible for working out that policy did a poor job*. A disastrous outcome can be the result of unforeseeable sabotage, poor implementation by people outside the decision-making group, or unexpected accidents beyond the control of the policy-makers, some of which have to be chalked up to just plain bad luck. There is also such a thing as good luck whereby poorly made decisions end up being undeservedly successful. Like many other social scientists, however, I assume that the more defects there are in making a decision (as specified by the seven criteria listed earlier in this chapter), the greater the chances that unanticipated setbacks will occur and that the long-term outcome will fail to meet the decision-makers' objectives.

Even when the members of a decision-making group select a defective course of action as a result of their own miscalculations, the main cause of their errors may prove to be misinformation from seemingly trustworthy experts, bolstered by seemingly sound supportive evidence from other sources of intelligence, which could lead even the most vigilant policy-makers to draw the wrong conclusions. Unfavorable outcomes can result from such errors, even though the decision-makers have made a fairly careful information search. In such instances, the miscalculations are not attributable to defective decision-making procedures and therefore are not candidates for an explanation in terms of groupthink. Nor are they candidates for explanation in terms

of any other psychological causes involving emotional reactions, such as guilt, anger, or anxiety, which can reduce the cognitive efficiency of members of a decision-making group.

There are, in addition, as Leon Mann and I point out in our book *Decision Making*,

[various] flaws and limitations in human information processing, such as the propensity of decision makers to be distracted by irrelevant aspects of the alternatives, which leads to loose predictions about outcomes (Abelson, 1976); the tendency of decision makers to be swayed by the form in which information about risks is packaged and presented (Slovic et al., 1976); their reliance on faulty categories and stereotypes, which leads to erroneous decisions relating to social groups and ethnic minorities (Hamilton, 1976); and their illusion of control, which makes for overoptimistic estimates of outcomes that are a matter of chance or luck (Langer, 1975).

Tversky and Kahnemann (1974) describe various other illusions, some notorious and others not yet well known, that arise from intuitive assessments of probabilities that may incline all but the most statistically sophisticated of decision makers to make biased miscalculations in using evidence about the consequences of alternative courses of action.

All sorts of people, including experts trained in statistics, make mistakes in drawing inferences from the information available to them when they are making vital decisions—"overestimating the likelihood of events that can be easily and vividly imagined, giving too much weight to information about representativeness, ignoring information about base rates, relying too much on evidence from small samples, and failing to discount evidence from biased samples." Even without all these sources of miscalculation, the mere fact that a huge overload of complicated information has to be processed in order to arrive at an optimal choice is sufficient to induce competent and highly efficient decision-makers to resort to simple decision rules that fail to take account of the full complexity of the issues at hand. Then, too, there are ego-defensive tendencies and all sorts of self-serving biases that incline a person to lapse into wishful thinking rather than expending the effort to obtain the best available realistic information and to evaluate it critically.

Most of the sources of error I have just mentioned enter into a kind of "feedback loop" with groupthink. Informational overload, for example, contributes to groupthink tendencies which, in turn, greatly aggravate the detrimental effects of the overload on the mental efficiency of decision-makers. But the main point is that *blunders have all sorts of causes*—some, like informational overload, being magnified by groupthink; others, like sheer incompetence or ignorance, having nothing at all to do with groupthink. When one is analyzing any ill-conceived decision to find out whether the groupthink syndrome was a probable cause, it is essential to examine the evidence carefully to see if any alternative causal sequence, involving some other known sources of error, could account adequately for the decision-makers' failure.

Now let us return for a moment to the unanswered question: How widespread is groupthink? Although nongroupthink sources of error may account for the majority of fiascoes that deserve to be fiascoes, I expect that investigations of a wide variety of group decisions on vital issues will probably show that clear-cut symptoms of groupthink are present in at least a substantial percentage of all miscalculated executive decisions—governmental and nongovernmental, American and foreign. Often, the groupthink syndrome is likely to be only a contributing cause that augments the influence of other sources of error, such as overestimating the probability of the threats that are most vividly presented and other such faulty inferences about possible outcomes. The groupthink syndrome, however, can sometimes turn out to be diagnosed as one of the *primary* causes, as we shall see in the case study of the Watergate cover-up in the next chapter. That diagnosis is made when there are numerous indications that groupthink played a crucial role, in the sense that if the group members had been less intent upon seeking for concurrence within the group they would have been able to correct their initial errors of judgment, curtail collective wishful thinking, and arrive at a much sounder decision.