

# Revisiting the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam Decisions 25 Years Later: How Well Has the Groupthink Hypothesis Stood the Test of Time?

Roderick M. Kramer

*Graduate School of Business, Stanford University*

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**Even after a quarter of a century, the groupthink hypothesis remains an influential framework for understanding the origins of group decision making fiascoes. Much of the original empirical evidence for this hypothesis was derived from a series of incisive qualitative studies of major policy fiascoes, including the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion and U.S. military escalation of the Vietnam War. In the 25 years since the groupthink hypothesis was first formulated, new evidence, including recently declassified documents, rich oral histories, and informative memoirs by key participants in these decisions have become available to scholars, casting new light on the decision making process behind both the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam. Much of this new evidence does not support Janis's original characterization of these processes. In particular, it suggests that dysfunctional group dynamics stemming from group members' strivings to maintain group cohesiveness were not as prominent a causal factor in the deliberation process as Janis argued. Instead, the evidence suggests that the**

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Address reprint requests to Roderick M. Kramer at the Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305.

**decision making process was heavily influenced by how Presidents Kennedy and Johnson construed their options. Both Kennedy and Johnson tended to evaluate their alternatives primarily in terms of their political consequences, especially the desire to avoid what they construed as unacceptable political losses and potential damage to their reputations. Viewed in aggregate, this new evidence suggests that the groupthink hypothesis overstates the influence of small group dynamics, while understating the role political considerations played in these decisions. Thus, although both decisions may have been seriously flawed, the logic of this failure should be attributed to political psychological rather than social psychological processes.** © 1998 Academic Press

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*It was, after all, the Greeks who pioneered the writing of history as what it has so largely remained, an exercise in political ironics—an intelligible story of how men's actions produce results other than those they intended.* (J. G. A. Pocock, cited in Wills, 1981, p. 219)

*Historically, America as a nation has been uniquely successful, so much so that people have come to take success for granted. When failure occurs, scapegoats are sought and myths concocted to explain what is otherwise inexplicable.* (Herring, 1994, p. 178)

Twenty-five years after its conception, Irving Janis's (1972) groupthink hypothesis remains an enduring fixture in the social psychological and organizational literatures on group decision making. The resilience of the groupthink hypothesis is hardly surprising. Among its alluring features is that it appears to offer a set of plausible and coherent assumptions about the dynamics of dysfunctional decision making in small groups. It also identifies specific symptoms of defective decision making and prescribes a number of concrete and useful remedies for avoiding them. Perhaps most impressively, support for the theory is buttressed by a series of dramatic and compelling case studies. These include some of the most formative events in U.S. history, such as the military escalation of the Vietnam War during the Johnson presidency, the downfall of the Nixon presidency, and the ill-fated Bay of Pigs operation during the Kennedy administration. The conjunction of defining events in American history with a robust and parsimonious theory to explain them has proven a powerful lure to theorists and practitioners alike. As Tetlock (1995) aptly noted, "Janis's case studies represent the most sustained effort to apply work on group dynamics to elite political settings" (p. 46).

Although enjoying a half-life longer than many social psychological theories, the groupthink hypothesis has not been uncritically accepted, nor has it remained unchanged over the two and a half decades since its inception. Scholars have advanced important and thoughtful alternative frameworks, including perspectives grounded in social identity theory (Turner, Pratkanis, Probasco, & Luce, 1992), prospect theory (Whyte, 1989), social influence research (McCauley, 1989), and the social psychology of power (Raven, 1974).

To assess the merits of the groupthink hypothesis, social psychologists and organizational scholars have adopted a variety of approaches. Some researchers

have closely examined the internal coherence of the hypothesis and its theoretical assumptions (e.g., Aldag & Fuller, 1993; Long & Pruitt, 1980; Park, 1990). Others have used laboratory simulations to determine whether the theorized links between the antecedent conditions and predicted consequences of groupthink obtain (Kameda, 1993; Leana, 1985; Turner *et al.*, 1992). Still others have used innovative methodologies such as content analysis and the group dynamics *Q*-sort to creatively mine archival data in an effort to test critical components of the hypothesis (e.g., Neck, 1992; Tetlock, 1979; Tetlock, Peterson, McGuire, Chang, & Feld, 1992).

Another approach that a researcher might take in attempting to appraise the validity of the groupthink hypothesis is to reexamine the original case studies on which the hypothesis was predicated. There are a number of reasons why this strategy might prove fruitful at this time. First, Janis offered the qualitative studies as the core empirical foundation for the hypothesis. In his view, they constituted compelling evidence of its validity. Second, groupthink remains one of the most influential explanations for these fiascoes.<sup>1</sup> In fact, social psychological and organizational textbooks continue to routinely invoke groupthink, not only as an explanation for these particular fiascoes, but as an explanation of a host of other contemporary decision making fiascoes, including the launch of the space shuttle Challenger and the Iran–Contra scandal in the Reagan administration (Moorehead, 1991; t' Hart, 1990).

Reexamining Janis's original case studies seems particularly appropriate at this time for two other reasons. First, the scholarly literature on group and organizational decision making has made impressive theoretical strides in the 25 years since Janis originally articulated the groupthink hypothesis (see March 1995 for an overview). Thus, scholars today have a much richer set of theoretical lenses through which to view the hypothesis, and doing so has generated fresh insights into its merits and limitations. For example, Turner *et al.* (1992) have shown how insights from social identity theory contribute to our understanding of the role identity-maintenance processes play in defective group decision making. Similarly, Whyte (1989) has thoughtfully demonstrated how insights from prospect theory and group polarization research further our understanding of judgmental biases in group decision making. Such examples illustrate how advances in contemporary psychological research can provide fresh and powerful conceptual platforms from which to refine and rebuild the groupthink edifice.

Second, with the passage of time, a considerable amount of new archival material bearing on these fiascoes has become available to scholars. With respect to both the Bay of Pigs operation and escalation of the Vietnam War,

<sup>1</sup>It is important to emphasize that this observation applies to social psychology and organizational theory only, however. Outside the realm of social psychology and organizational theory, the groupthink hypothesis enjoys comparatively little status as a theory. Indeed, accounts of the Bay of Pigs fiasco and escalation of the Vietnam war found in political science often do not even mention groupthink as a viable explanation. Moreover, even within social psychology and organizational theory, alternative perspectives such as escalation of commitment (Staw, 1976; White, 1966) and psychological entrapment (Brockner & Rubin, 1985) offer power competing frameworks.

this material includes recently declassified records, such as presidential logs, internal memorandum, diplomatic and intelligence cables, and transcripts of crucial meetings. Comprehensive oral histories are also now available for both the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies. Additionally, we now possess a number of insightful memoirs from major participants in these decisions. Finally, scholarly reassessments by presidential historians and political scientists are plentiful, providing fresh perspectives on the decision making process behind both the Bay of Pigs and the Vietnam decisions. This wealth of detailed and highly relevant evidence was not available, of course, when Janis originally conceived the groupthink hypothesis. In fact, Janis himself was painfully aware of the fragmentary and inconclusive nature of the data with which he had to work, urging scholars to revisit the case studies as more data became available.

Despite Janis's urgings and the availability of this substantial new evidence, little effort has been made in recent years to systematically examine the emerging data, either to search for further evidence in support of the groupthink hypothesis or to develop alternative interpretations of it (McCauley, 1989; Raven, 1974; and Whyte, 1989, constitute noteworthy exceptions to this general observation). For all of these reasons, the time seems ripe to revisit the original case studies from which the groupthink hypothesis evolved. How well have Janis's interpretations of the decision making processes leading up to the fateful Bay of Pigs invasion and the tragic military escalation of the Vietnam War weathered two and a half decades of theoretical advances in decision making research, as well as a steady stream of new data pertaining to these cases? These are the central questions I engage in this paper.

### **RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY FOR THE PRESENT STUDY**

To provide a road map for the major arguments this paper will advance, it may be helpful first to offer a brief overview of the groupthink hypothesis and the criteria Janis used when selecting case studies as candidates for groupthink. Janis (1972) defined groupthink as a "mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group [and] when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (p. 9). This definition highlights a critical presumption of the groupthink hypothesis: viz., that the defective search and appraisal process that Janis observed in his case studies could be attributed directly to group pressures acting on members and stemming from their desire to protect and maintain the group's cohesiveness.

In describing why he considered the Bay of Pigs decision and the decision to escalate the Vietnam War such compelling prototypes of the groupthink syndrome, Janis (1983) argued that "each of these decisions was a *group* product, issuing from a series of meetings of a small body of government officials and advisors who constituted a cohesive group" (p. viii, emphasis in original). He also argued there was ample evidence, in both instances, that many of the symptoms of groupthink were present in these groups. These included evidence

of self-censorship and suppression of personal doubts, illusions of invulnerability and overconfidence, and a tendency to ignore critical warning signs and advice from outside experts. Finally, Janis contended that these decisions could be classified as *avoidable* decision errors because sufficient evidence was available, he argued, that should have raised doubts about the wisdom of the group's chosen course of action. In support of these claims, he offered a set of beautifully argued briefs, skillfully weaving together the extant qualitative evidence with contemporary social psychological theory on group dynamics. The result was a seemingly coherent and compelling conceptual narrative.

In organizing his evidence for the groupthink hypothesis, Janis identified a set of critical questions that should be used as guidelines for deciding whether groupthink was a causal factor in these fiascoes. First, was the decision a *group* decision? For example, did the evidence show that an advisory group participated to a significant extent in the making of these decisions? Second, was the group a cohesive group, and did group members' strivings to maintain that cohesiveness override critical judgment and rational choice? Third, were the antecedent conditions and symptoms of groupthink discernible in the group's deliberations? Fourth, were the decisions *avoidable* errors? In other words, was there sufficient countervailing evidence available to the groups to indicate that their decisions entailed unacceptable risks or were in other ways seriously flawed?<sup>2</sup> Janis concluded that affirmative answers to these questions were warranted with respect to both the planning leading up to the Bay of Pigs operation under the Kennedy administration and the decision to escalate the Vietnam War during the Johnson administration.

In reassessing the adequacy of the groupthink hypothesis as an explanation for these fiascoes, it seems reasonable to revisit them from the standpoint of the same critical questions and evidentiary standards employed by Janis. In so doing, I will argue that much of the new evidence that has become available over the past 25 years suggests that Janis's original characterization of these policy fiascoes overstates the importance of some purported causal factors (especially the role of certain group dynamics), while obscuring others. In moving away from a groupthink-centered interpretation of these fiascoes, I will try to show that there exists an alternative conceptual story which more faithfully reflects the cumulative evidence and better captures the essence of the decision making process behind both decisions.

To foreshadow the major conclusions toward which this paper will advance, I argue that recent evidence suggests that Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, rather than their advisory groups, were the principal decision makers behind these fiascoes. Although their advisory groups unquestionably provided important inputs, both Kennedy and Johnson ultimately made their own decisions on the basis of what they regarded as a careful appraisal of the various options that had been presented to them. Second, I argue that Janis's portrayal of the group leader relying almost exclusively on—and being disproportionately influenced by—the deliberations of a small, isolated group of advisors does not

<sup>2</sup>If not, Janis pointed out, critique of these decisions reduces to hindsight bias.

stand the test of time. Instead, newly available evidence suggests the extent to which both Kennedy and Johnson energetically sought advice from a variety of sources outside these groups. In the end, both presidents forged their final judgment from a wider spectrum of opinions than suggested by the groupthink analysis. Relatedly, I argue that Kennedy's and Johnson's decisions were based upon a broader set of considerations than Janis invoked in explaining them—considerations that often transcended those issues that emerged in the advisory group meetings. Thus, I argue that there are strong empirical grounds for concluding that these decisions should not be characterized as products of defective deliberation by highly cohesive, overconfident groups.

Also contrary to Janis's conclusions, I argue there is little compelling evidence that these decisions were influenced by such things as group members' illusions of invulnerability and unrealistic optimism. Although there is evidence, as Janis noted, that a *general* mood of confidence and optimism pervaded the early days of both the Kennedy and the Johnson administrations, that optimism and confidence did not extend to either President Kennedy's deliberations about the Bay of Pigs operation or Lyndon Johnson's evaluation of the merits of escalating the Vietnam War. Instead, both leaders can better be described as reluctant warriors with respect to these decisions. Although both ultimately chose to proceed with their respective ventures, they were mindful of their drawbacks and entertained rather pessimistic expectations about them. However, as unattractive as their decisions were, both believed that more attractive alternatives were not available.

In large part, I suggest, this assessment reflected Kennedy's and Johnson's tendency to construe their options primarily in terms of their political repercussions. Thus, when deciding what to do about the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam, both Kennedy and Johnson afforded considerable weight to the prospective political consequences of the various actions and inactions available to them. In particular, both were quite concerned about the potential damage to their reputations and images. Moreover, I argue that the prospect of avoiding what they perceived as unacceptable political losses loomed very large in their decision calculus. Repeatedly, Kennedy and Johnson expressed the view that doing nothing in these situations would lead to unacceptable domestic political losses, including threatening their image as leaders and their legacy in history.

Drawing inspiration from the same Orwellian roots as Janis, I characterize this pattern of defective appraisal *politicothink*. The term *politicothink* is meant to be applied playfully, but with the serious, underlying point that the defective appraisal and choice illustrated by the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam escalation decisions should be understood not as a product of defective group dynamics, but rather the idiosyncratic way in which decision makers sometimes categorize and frame the choices available to them.

Along similar lines, I argue that Kennedy's and Johnson's advisors also tended to view their own roles in these decisions in fundamentally political terms. Like the masters they served, Kennedy's and Johnson's advisors were themselves often concerned about protecting their political capital and their reputational status. As experienced and savvy political actors, they had strong

conceptions of their role in policy making decisions and these conceptions, I argue, influenced their judgment and choice much more than group dynamics per se. Thus, many of the group behaviors that Janis regarded as symptoms of groupthink among Johnson's and Kennedy's advisors—such as self-censorship and the suppression of personal doubts—were influenced not so much by concerns about disrupting the group's cohesiveness or *esprit de corps*, but rather, and more simply, the fact that all of the participants shared—wittingly or unwittingly—a fundamentally political conception of the group decision making process.

In sum, I argue that the newly available evidence, when viewed in aggregate, converges on the conclusion that the groupthink hypothesis does not provide a very satisfactory account of the decision making dynamics in these cases. Although the collective deliberation processes with respect to both the Bay of Pigs and the escalation of the Vietnam War were undoubtedly flawed from the standpoint of high-quality decision quality, the logic of that failure should be attributed as much to *political* psychological as *social* psychological dynamics.

#### **REVISITING THE BAY OF PIGS: PERFECT FAILURE OR DRACONIAN CHOICE AMONG IMPERFECT ALTERNATIVES?**

Janis regarded the decision by President Kennedy and his advisors to approve a plan developed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to land a small brigade of CIA-trained Cuban exiles on the shores of Cuba in 1961 as a prototypic example of groupthink. In his view, this decision constituted a “perfect failure” because it was precisely the sort of avoidable decision error he had in mind when formulating the hypothesis. In fact, many of his initial intuitions about the role group dynamics play in decision fiascoes were inspired by this case.

Janis's arguments regarding the role that groupthink played in this fiasco rested on several empirical claims regarding the nature of the deliberation process. In particular, the validity of his arguments turn on essentially two considerations: (1) the accuracy of his construal of the critical role Kennedy's advisory group played in the decision making process and (2) the psychological and social climate within the group as it deliberated the merits and drawbacks of the CIA plan.

#### *Role of Kennedy's Advisory Group in Deliberating the Merits of the Bay of Pigs Operation*

Janis asserted that planning for the Bay of Pigs operation occurred primarily within the context of a series of deliberations by a small, cohesive group consisting of a fixed and stable cast of characters. He further argued that these meetings contributed directly to Kennedy's final approval of the operation. Over the past two and a half decades, access to new archival materials including presidential logs and memos, records of meetings, and memoirs by key participants, including Richard Bissell (1996), the chief architect and enthusiastic

advocate of the operation, has provided contemporary scholars with a much richer and more complete portrait of these planning sessions than was possible during Janis's time.<sup>3</sup> We also possess a more panoramic view of the extent of Kennedy's efforts to decide what to do about the Cuban operation, including initiatives he took *outside* the context of these meetings (see e.g., Califano, 1991; Higgins, 1987; Neustadt & May, 1986; Reeves, 1993; Strober & Strober, 1993). These new sources of information provide a much more detailed chronology of the process surrounding Kennedy's decision to go forward with the Bay of Pigs, including with whom he discussed the operation and how often and for how long. They also provide valuable insights into the content of those discussions, as well as hint at the extent of Kennedy's personal ruminations about the proposed operation in the weeks preceding its final implementation.

This new material suggests that Kennedy did not rely exclusively on a single group of advisors in making his decision about the Bay of Pigs operation. Instead, he employed a broad and complex—even if somewhat idiosyncratic—advisory process when trying to decide what to do about Cuba (Bissell, 1996; Reeves, 1993). For example, he privately sought out the opinions of journalists and Senators he respected, as well as various individuals within the Central Intelligence Agency, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and State Department. To be sure, Kennedy was often vague during these probes, remaining secretive and cautious about revealing his own thoughts about the proposed operation. Kennedy also attempted to probe the full extent of President Eisenhower's commitment to the operation and his assessment of the plan's merits. Thus, there is little evidence that he failed to at least attempt to solicit useful information and expertise from diverse sources.<sup>4</sup>

This evidence also suggests that the relatively few group meetings devoted to the Bay of Pigs might better be characterized as a "series of *ad hoc* meetings" involving a "small but *shifting* set of advisers" (Neustadt & May, 1986, p. 142, emphases added), rather than sustained deliberations by a single, tightly knit group of advisors. Thus, there is evidence that Kennedy was not exclusively reliant on the deliberations of a small, isolated advisory group—at least to the extent that Janis argued and to the extent necessary to make the case that the decision was *primarily* a product of group deliberation. In the following sections, I elaborate on the empirical grounds for these assertions and their implications for assessing the validity of the groupthink hypothesis.

### *Unrealistic Optimism and the Illusion of Invulnerability*

In trying to assess why President Kennedy proceeded with what seemed, at least in hindsight, such an obviously flawed plan, Janis afforded considerable

<sup>3</sup>Even today many of the most important documents are still unavailable to scholars or the American public. For example, at least two major postmortem studies of the operation commissioned by Kennedy and the CIA remain classified (Bissell, 1996).

<sup>4</sup>What does seem consistent with Janis's account is that Kennedy "did not press many questions on the planners, the JCS, or, for that matter anyone. All accounts essentially agree on this" (Neustadt & May, 1986, p. 144).



attention to indications that overconfidence and unrealistic optimism may have played a role in the deliberation process surrounding the Bay of Pigs operation. As he aptly noted, several accounts by key insiders within the Kennedy administration hinted at a climate of buoyant optimism in the early months of his presidency. However, much of the evidence that Janis cites refers to what might be best characterized as a *general* mood of optimism in the White House regarding Kennedy's ambitious agenda for the New Frontier. There was, as several aides noted, a feeling that almost anything could be accomplished if the right intellectual talent and bureaucratic resources were thrown at the problem (Halberstam, 1972; Schlesinger, 1965). However, more recently available evidence indicates that these diffuse, generalized feelings of optimism and confidence did *not* extend to Kennedy's deliberations about the Bay of Pigs operation. These new accounts indicate instead that Kennedy privately entertained significant reservations about the plan from the outset and was, if anything, pessimistic about his options.

Kennedy recognized many of the defects of the original conception for the operation from the outset. For example, as soon as the operation had been presented to him, he immediately appreciated the serious political risks it posed and discerned the need to "turn down the noise" on it (Reeves, 1993, p. 70). He thus countered Bissell's ambitious proposed operation with a "scaled down" plan that included "no invasion, *just infiltration*" (p. 82, emphases added). He called for a change to a remote landing, and informed the CIA to make it a "quieter" landing, preferably even conducting the operation at night. He determined from the outset that there should be no U.S. military intervention. Also he insisted on having a call-off option up until the last minute if he was not satisfied with the confluence of emerging factors.

The original plan presented to Kennedy appeared far too risky—precisely the sort of action that the cautious young politician normally eschewed. All of his political instincts told him that the plan had too high a profile from the standpoint of potential political repercussions if the invasion failed or if U.S. involvement in its planning were to come to light. Thus, throughout the deliberations, Kennedy stated his concerns and the constraints he felt they mandated in clear and forceful terms: "I can't get the United States into a war, and then lose it, no matter what it takes," he told the group. "I'm not going to risk an American Hungary. And that's what it would be, a fucking slaughter . . . is that understood gentlemen?" (Goodwin, 1988, p. 174). Significantly, Bissell and the CIA disapproved of Kennedy's proposed changes, but said little.

It is also evident that Kennedy expressed his reservations about the Cuban operation to a number of individuals outside the context of his advisory group. To be sure, he often expressed these concerns in muted, equivocal terms, disclosing little about his own true thinking on the matter. However, the point remains that Kennedy's ruminations about the operation were, from the outset, neither unrealistically optimistic nor uncritical. Instead, he was clearly dysphoric about the "hot potato" that outgoing President Eisenhower had passed to him. In fact, when asked, "What do you think of this damned invasion idea," he quipped, "I think about it as little as possible" (Reeves, 1993, p. 76). Even up until the

last minute, Kennedy expressed significant skepticism about the merits of the plan or its prospects for success. As Higgins (1987) noted, "*Although profoundly doubtful about his first major presidential decision, two hours after Bissell's official deadline for the final Go-No Go deadline, Kennedy, with a heavy heart, released the invading fleet approaching the Bay of Pigs*" (p. 131, emphases added). Bissell (1996) himself supports this view, noting that "as [Kennedy] got farther into the Bay of Pigs operation, and closer to D day or D hour he had growing doubts" (p. 187). As much as Kennedy entertained doubts about the plan, he also felt, however, that it was impossible to avoid proceeding with some version of the operation if he was to avert a potentially greater—perhaps even catastrophic—blow to his reputation and credibility as a leader.

When making a case for the argument that Kennedy and his advisors displayed symptoms of overconfidence and an "illusion of invulnerability" when deciding to proceed with implementation of the CIA operation, Janis did not have access, of course, to the classified records of top secret briefings and meetings. This evidence, now available to scholars, indicates that Kennedy's assessments were undoubtedly influenced not only by deliberately misleading intelligence assessments provided by the CIA, but also by disingenuous, and politically motivated, comments made by President Eisenhower to the new president during private, top-secret briefings. These meetings appear to have played an important role in Kennedy's deliberations. In particular, the fact that the proposed military operation, which entailed an amphibious landing of presumably highly trained operatives, had been developed under the leadership of President Eisenhower carried considerable weight in Kennedy's mind, and not unreasonably so. Dwight Eisenhower was, after all, the organizational genius behind the largest, most complex, and most successful amphibious military invasion in U.S. history—an operation that had led to the successful defeat of the enemy and one that had involved, moreover, successful use of deception of the enemy on a grand scale. According to insiders in the Kennedy administration, it was almost inconceivable to President Kennedy that a plan developed under Eisenhower's watchful eye—and which the former president seemed to endorse unconditionally during their two top-secret briefings together—could be so inherently flawed (see, e.g., Goodwin, 1988; Strober & Strober, 1993). Indeed, on first hearing the operational details of the proposed Cuban operation, Kennedy observed, "Just like D-day."

To further calibrate the extent to which Kennedy and his advisors may have suffered from unrealistic optimism and illusions of invulnerability about the proposed operation, it is important to note that Kennedy's assessment of the prospects for success of the significantly scaled down infiltration that he had envisioned and ordered reflected a not unreasonable reading of the history of U.S. covert operations up until that point. Prior to the Bay of Pigs, the CIA had engaged in a string of successful, top secret covert operations of a similar nature in several other countries, including Latin America (see Reeves, 1993, p. 70). Bissell and the CIA cleverly framed the proposed Cuban operation as just another operation of precisely this sort. Moreover, CIA Director Allen Dulles assured the president that the Cuban operation was even more likely

to succeed than these past actions.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when discussing the plan's prospects for success, he told Kennedy,

"Mr. President, I know you're doubtful about this . . . but I stood at this very desk and said to President Eisenhower about a similar operation in Guatemala, 'I believe it will work.' *And I say to you now, Mr. President, that the prospects for this plan are even better.*" (p. 73, emphases added)

"And you think they [the exiles] can make it on their own?" Kennedy asked. "Yes, Mr. President" responded the deputy director of the CIA. (Goodwin, 1988, p. 170)

With respect to forecasting the military risks of failure, therefore, there existed a number of precedents for Kennedy to believe that the scaled-down covert operation was unlikely to result in a catastrophic failure.

Perhaps even more importantly, Kennedy seems to have believed that the scaled down operation he approved and that he expected the CIA to implement faithfully constituted an acceptable political risk. U.S. presidents up until this time had been extraordinarily successful at maintaining "plausible deniability" regarding their role and that of the U.S. intelligence agencies in such covert operations. The pre-Watergate press and the American public were far more trusting of U.S. presidents and government institutions than today's press and public. Government employees were far less likely to leak secret information, and investigative journalists were less aggressive about probing such operations. Additionally, polls showed the American public was generally very supportive of aggressive action against communism in general and Cuba in particular (Neustadt & May, 1986). For example, when a top-secret U-2 plane was shot down over the Soviet Union only months before during the Eisenhower administration, there was little public clamor about the appropriateness of such covert actions. Because Kennedy was particularly concerned about the political risks of the venture, the fact that these previous operations had successfully remained covert and that presidential plausible deniability had held up rather well seems to have carried considerable weight in his final deliberations.

### *Failure to Detect Serious Flaws in the Proposed Plan's Assumptions and Logic*

Janis also argued that Kennedy and his advisors did not attend diligently to the details of the CIA plan and therefore had failed to discern serious flaws

<sup>5</sup>There is some evidence to indicate, ironically, that Dulles was himself ill-informed about the scope of the operation, that he may have paid little attention to the operational details, and that he himself may have been somewhat misled by Bissell. Although Kennedy assumed that Dulles was intimately involved with overseeing the operational details, in fact, he was poorly informed about the enlarging parameters of the Bissell plan. As Grose (1994) summarized the evidence, Dulles had "lost touch. . . [becoming] the Cuban operation's high level advocate even as he dropped the reins of the operation itself. When the Havana [CIA] station chief returned to Washington expecting to brief the director. . . he found Allen "pretty foggy about the whole thing." Angleton. . . remembers raising problems about the Cuban operation in a private meeting and being alarmed at how little Allen seemed to know about the activities of Bissell and his task force" (p. 515).

in its logic and assumptions. However, with fuller access to recently declassified documents, we are now in a better position to appreciate (1) the extent to which planning for this operation occurred during a period of what presidential scholar Reeves (1993) has aptly characterized as “an astonishing density of events” (pp. 74–75) and (2) the extent to which Kennedy’s assessment of the Cuban situation was influenced by intentionally misleading intelligence estimates from the CIA—estimates which Kennedy had no *prima facie* reason to doubt.

As organizational theorists and political scientists have often noted, the evaluation of new policies seldom occurs under conditions of leisurely contemplation or splendid isolation (George, 1980). Rather, the decision process is usually embedded in an environment in which multiple, competing claims on decision makers’ attention exist. Under such circumstances, competition for a decision maker’s attention can produce powerful “agenda framing” effects which create powerful *perceptual contrasts*, resulting in options being evaluated comparatively rather than in absolute terms (cf., Pfeffer, 1992). Thus, in trying to understand Kennedy and his advisor’s assessment of the proposed Cuban operation, it is important to note that, concurrent to evaluating its merits, they confronted a growing crisis in Southeast Asia, an extremely risky situation in Berlin, and a rapidly emerging “race” for space with the Soviet Union in which the United States appeared to be losing (Reeves, 1993, p. 85). Kennedy and his advisors regarded all of these situations as at least as urgent and potentially explosive as the problems in Cuba. Such contrasts in all likelihood made the proposed CIA operation—especially after it had been carefully scaled down under Kennedy’s directives—seem like a smaller and lower risk operation than many of the other perceived crises vying for the attention of the president and his advisors.

Along these lines, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (1995) recently confessed that his own attitude toward the planning for the Bay of Pigs had been that

I had entered the Pentagon with a limited grasp of military affairs and even less grasp of covert operations. This lack of understanding, *coupled with my preoccupation with other matters and my deference to the CIA on what I considered an agency operation*, led me to accept the [Bay of Pigs] plan uncritically. (p. 26, emphases added)

McNamara felt, and not unreasonably so, that Cuba was neither his “turf” nor a domain where his particular expertise had relevance. Thus, it was not his role to attend to the operational details of this operation, especially given the more urgent and critical tasks that President Kennedy had assigned to him (including reassessing the entire U.S. nuclear deterrent capability and re-vamping U.S. strategic policy toward its use).

Also implicit in Janis’s critique of the quality of the decision making process is the assumption that sufficient evidence was available to Kennedy and his advisors to indicate serious problems with the proposed CIA operation. Thus the decision to proceed with it reflected, in Janis’s view, an *avoidable* decision error. Janis uses JFK’s statement, “How could I have been so stupid to let this

thing go forward?" to suggest that this was Kennedy's own *ex post* assessment. As Neustadt and May (1986) recently noted, however, Kennedy was "scarcely stupid to think Castro a problem. *Most Americans thought so too, not least Eisenhower and Nixon*" (p. 270, emphases added). Declassified evidence indicates, moreover, that the outgoing President Eisenhower warned Kennedy at one of their early secret briefings that it was Kennedy's "responsibility to do whatever was necessary to overthrow Castro because the United States *could not let the present government go on there*" (Higgins, 1987, p. 76, emphases added). The former President communicated a sense of urgency for action to Kennedy, cautioning him in the strongest of terms against weakening U.S. commitment to the contest in Cuba. "Should we support guerrilla operations in Cuba?" Kennedy directly asked Eisenhower. "To the utmost," Eisenhower replied (Reeves, 1993, p. 32). Eisenhower further warned Kennedy to "avoid any reorganization *until he could become acquainted with the problems*" (p. 32).<sup>6</sup>

If Kennedy was not stupid to think Cuba a problem, Neustadt and May (1986) go on to note, he was also hardly stupid in his decision "to hold firm against the overt use of American Force [during the invasion itself]. Law and morality were buttressed by military considerations" (p. 270). As Kennedy himself noted, "The minute I land one marine, we are in this thing up to our necks" (Goodwin, 1988, p. 174). Thus, they conclude, "the stupidity for which [Kennedy] blamed himself comes down to a small handful of judgments and presumptions on a handful of particulars" (p. 270).

Janis suggested, based upon the evidence then available, that the CIA had been at most naive and overly optimistic in its assessments of the prospects of the planned operation. Recently declassified records suggest, however, that Bissell and the CIA actively misled the president about the political situation in Cuba and the chances of success for the program. For example, the evidence suggests that Bissell, acting largely on his own, transformed the operation from an initially small, covert infiltration into a substantial invasion, once it had become clear to him that the smaller operation was unlikely to achieve its objectives (Neustadt & May, 1986). It is also clearer today that the proposed CIA operation was only one part of a much larger program of covert action aimed at toppling the Cuban regime, including top-secret plans to assassinate Castro himself. To achieve these ends, the CIA was perfectly willing, if necessary, to provide bogus or inflated accounts of anti-Castro activities, civilian unrest, and lack of popular support for Castro to the President and his advisors, if doing so would help win his support (p. 79). Thus, the CIA said little when President Kennedy expressed reservations about the original parameters for

<sup>6</sup>Presidential scholars now have a better insight into at least some of the concealed, political motives that may have led Eisenhower to urge Kennedy forward. Throughout his 1960 presidential campaign, then-Senator Kennedy had been highly critical of the Republican administration's loss of Cuba. Kennedy frequently alluded to the failure of the Eisenhower administration to manage the communist menace that festered only 90 miles off the shore of Florida. Eisenhower was privately furious at Kennedy and, according to many accounts, disliked him intensely. Thus, it has been suggested, Eisenhower may have relished the opportunity to even the score a bit by handing the young, inexperienced president such a "hot potato." (see, e.g., Goodwin, 1986).

the operation, and it failed to act in good faith in complying with Kennedy's directives for modifying them (Reeves, 1993). Instead, as Reeves (1993) nicely put it, Bissell and the CIA simply started "making it up as they went along" (p. 263).

In so doing, Bissell and the CIA operatives involved in the plan seem to have believed that, once it had become clear to Kennedy that U.S. military intervention was essential to averting a full-fledged disaster, the young and inexperienced president would escalate U.S. commitment to the much larger operation Bissell had in mind. In other words, "when push came to shove," Kennedy would do whatever was necessary to avoid an embarrassing military defeat and loss of face (Reeves, 1993, p. 72). Their belief in this regard seemed to hinge on the assumption—which was not incorrect—that Kennedy was quite concerned about the charge of appearing weak on communism and indecisive in conducting foreign policy.

In framing the trade-offs between going forward with the operation or "turning it off" completely, Bissell and the CIA were very adept at reading Kennedy's concerns and responding effectively to them. For example, as soon as Kennedy revealed his proclivity toward viewing acceptance or rejection of the Cuban plan in terms of its political ramifications and risks (e.g., potential damage to his image), the CIA and Bissell were quick to reframe the options available to him in similar terms. Thus, detecting that the new President was sensitive to possible domestic political repercussions of the venture's failure, CIA Director Allen Dulles skillfully positioned the trade-offs associated with going forward versus calling off the operation in precisely such terms: "There would be a *political* price, as well as a military one for calling off the invasion," he shrewdly reminded the President" (Reeves, 1993, p. 71, emphasis added). Moreover, Dulles knew how to prick Kennedy's anxieties about being compared to Eisenhower as a leader and coming up short in that comparison. "Mr. Kennedy, are you going to be less anticommunist than President Eisenhower was?" asked Dulles (Strober & Strober, 1993, p. 336). They also skillfully framed the decision as a rapidly vanishing opportunity for decisive resolution of the problem in Cuba. As Goodwin noted (1988), Kennedy and his advisors were led to believe, "If we did not act swiftly, we would lose not only the brigade, but our last chance to overthrow Castro quickly, easily, and without direct military intervention" (p. 172).

### *Kennedy's Failure to Heed Critical Advice*

According to Janis, other evidence that groupthink was operating in this case includes the tendency for Kennedy and his group to discount or ignore outside expertise and advice. Janis argued such advice should have been factored into the deliberation process. The tendency to ignore such advice constituted, in his view, significant evidence that the Bay of Pigs was an *avoidable* decision error. As evidence of this, Janis afforded particular attention to the fact that Kennedy gave little weight to Chester Bowles' reservations about the logistics of the operation—reservations which in hindsight turned out to be

quite prescient. However, recent documents indicate that President Kennedy had little confidence in Bowles' political judgment or his military acumen. Bowles had acquired a reputation within the Kennedy administration and the State Department for gloomy, fatalistic analyses. "Chet was just telling me there are four revolutions [going on around the world] that we need to worry about," Kennedy humorously quipped after one encounter with Bowles (Reeves, 1993, p. 53). Moreover, as revealed in a recent oral history of this period, at least some insiders (Robert Kennedy among them) felt Bowles' policy recommendations often contained serious strategic flaws (Kennedy, 1988). As a consequence, Bowles had "slipped in the President's esteem" (Higgins, 1987, p. 107). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Kennedy chose to discount Bowles' advice in this particular instance. Significantly, Kennedy was not alone in doing so. Dean Rusk and others also chose to give little credence to Bowles' forebodings about the Bay of Pigs. The general perception was that he cried wolf too many times.

In contrast, Kennedy had tremendous confidence in Richard Bissell's judgment and abilities. Kennedy greatly admired Bissell's intelligence and his proven operational talents—and he was far from alone in his admiration. By all accounts, Bissell was a brilliant speaker and had built a well-deserved reputation for daring and successful covert operations. As Neustadt and May (1986) recount, Bissell's "audacity and follow-through were thought to have been demonstrated brilliantly when he brought to fruition the new aerial reconnaissance capacity of the United States, the U-2 planes and pilots, [known as] 'Richard Bissell's air force'" (p. 141). Moreover, Bissell displayed a deft grasp of strategic issues, and conveyed a confident command of operational details. Whenever doubts were expressed about the wisdom of the Bay of Pigs operation or the logic of its assumptions, Bissell was able to provide compelling answers and reassuring responses. Whenever questions arose about the feasibility of some thorny facet of the plan, Bissell was always ready with the reassuring backup plan. All of Bissell's answers, moreover, appeared to be amply supported by the CIA's seemingly objective and independent assessments. Even the numerous and highly experienced military advisors in the room, whom Kennedy scrutinized closely for signs of reservation or doubt, signaled little ambivalence or concern about the operation as Bissell described it. Of them, Kennedy later said—and with some justifiable bitterness—"Those sons-of-bitches with all the fruit salad just sat there nodding, saying it would work" (Reeves, 1993, p. 103).

These points merit emphasis because Janis concluded that the deferential treatment accorded Bissell reflected a "taboo against antagonizing new members of the group" (p. 45). This construal of the motive underlying the seemingly passive acquiescence of Kennedy and his advisors is of critical importance to the logic and validity of the groupthink argument. The new evidence suggests, contrary to Janis's argument, that Kennedy and his advisors accepted Bissell's judgment not because Bissell was a trusted "in-group" member, but rather, and more simply, because Bissell consistently offered the keenest and most

persuasive arguments regarding going forward with the proposed CIA operation—especially after Kennedy had been convinced some of the thornier “noise” problems associated with the plan had been successfully resolved.

Taken together, this new evidence suggests why President Kennedy may have felt *ex ante* that he had little reason to reflect upon the possibility of a catastrophic failure, either militarily or political, of the sort that subsequently unfolded. This is not to assert that Kennedy’s assessments of the plan reflected vigilant, high quality decision making. As Neustadt and May (1986) noted, Kennedy failed to test a number of important presumptions about the plan, any one of which might have turned him decisively away from endorsement. What is disputed here is the validity of Janis’s attribution that the poor quality of the assessment process reflected such things as unrealistic optimism, illusions of invulnerability, or irrational strivings to maintain group cohesiveness.

### *An Alternative View of the Decision Making Process*

I have suggested that much of the new evidence regarding the Bay of Pigs that has emerged over the last 20-give years does not support Janis’s conclusion that this decision can be explained primarily as a product of defective group dynamics. If not leaning toward groupthink, what, if anything, do these data suggest? Several conclusions seem warranted when all of the information now available is placed on the table.

### *Kennedy’s Own Decision Calculus*

First, from the outset, Kennedy’s evaluation of the merits of the CIA proposal seem to have been dominated largely by political considerations. Although he recognized the foreign policy implications of successfully routing Castro and restoring Cuba to the western orbit, Kennedy’s deliberations indicate that he was keenly cognizant of the political implications of the operation’s success or failure, especially coming so early in his new administration. As Reeves (1993) succinctly put it, Kennedy was “concerned about the politics of the invasion—*he wanted the least possible political risks—even though that meant military risks would be greatest*” (p. 134, emphases added). Bissell (1996) came to the same conclusion.

In evaluating the merits of this argument, it is critical to keep in mind the fact that Kennedy faced an acute dilemma with respect to the Bay of Pigs. Throughout his campaign, he had campaigned vigorously on the theme that the country had drifted—indeed, had even been lulled—into a false sense of security by a passive Republican leadership. The world was fraught with emerging threats and peril, Kennedy asserted, and a complacent and indecisive Republican administration had allowed a communist regime to gain a toehold in the Western hemisphere, festering only 90 miles off the shores of Florida.

To meet the challenges of this dangerous new world, Kennedy argued, required a new breed of cold warrior who, as he put it in his inaugural, “would



not shrink” from the responsibility of dealing with the communist menace. Kennedy was also acutely appreciative of the fact that he was under close scrutiny by both the American public and the international community. Impressions were still being formed of this young and inexperienced leader. There was little doubt in Kennedy’s mind—or his advisors—that international adversaries such as Khrushchev, as well as domestic rivals such as Nixon, would construe any evidence of indecisiveness, inexperience, or lack of resolve as ammunition that could be used to potentially devastating effect (Strober & Strober, 1993). As Roger Hilsman noted, “Kennedy realized that Nixon knew all about the plan and that if he turned it down out of hand, Nixon would use this against him on everything else he tried to do. *So Kennedy was boxed in*” (in Strober & Strober, p. 334, emphases added). Thus, from Kennedy’s perspective, the political costs of *undoing* a bold military action conceived during the Eisenhower administration would be much worse than letting it go forward in an appropriately scaled-down form.<sup>7</sup> As Kennedy himself put it, although “Ike’s approval was not necessary, *his disapproval would be devastating*” (Reeves, 1993, p. 33, emphases added). The distinguished historian Arthur Schlesinger aptly noted in this regard that, “the notion that a fellow who had been a lieutenant JG in the Second World War would overrule a plan agreed to by the commander of the greatest amphibious invasion in history would not have gone down” (quoted in Strober & Strober, 1993, p. 336).

Kennedy thus strongly believed—and not unrealistically so—that his decision in this matter would be viewed by the American public and the international community as a pivotal test of his commitment and resolve. He thus faced the difficult choice between continuing with a covert operation about which he had serious reservations and yet which already enjoyed considerable institutional momentum and “turning it off,” thereby risking enormous scorn and imperiling his fragile and still forming image as a world leader. It is important to note, in this regard, that all of the other possibilities that Kennedy envisioned seemed to entail equally or more unacceptable political costs: As Dulles grimly painted the picture for the new president, “if they [the brigade] failed to go to Cuba, they would end up back in Miami, talkative and angry at the fate of *Eisenhower’s project (which, if untried, was sure to have been successful by their account)*” (Neustadt & May, 1986, p. 143, emphases added).

<sup>7</sup>Such political calculations undoubtedly influenced Kennedy’s assessment of the so-called “disposal problem” (i.e., what to do with the fully trained guerrillas if they were not used). Janis viewed Kennedy’s assessment of this issue as a major example of defective appraisal. The disposal problem, however, had a number of significant political ramifications in Kennedy’s political calculus. Once it became public knowledge that the young president had failed to carry through on an invasion plan designed by the master of invasion plans—four star General Eisenhower—he would appear weak and inexperienced, just as Nixon had repeatedly asserted during the presidential campaign. It should be noted that Janis (1983) himself was mindful of the possible role that political factors might have played in the Bay of Pigs decision (see, e.g., his discussion of the four-factor model, pp. 30–32). However, his analysis summarily dismisses such considerations. Similarly, he is quick to discount Ellsberg’s analysis of the political considerations behind Johnson’s decision to escalate the Vietnam war. In both instances, Janis articulated a fairly narrow political model, however.

In evaluating this alternative interpretation of the pressures driving Kennedy's decision to go forward with the Cuban operation, it is important also to consider this decision relative to evidence regarding Kennedy's posture on other, similar kinds of dilemmas he had faced. Throughout his political career, Kennedy—despite his rhetoric to the contrary—was a reluctant political warrior. He believed in cautious appraisal and conservative action. Thus, when it came to controversial or costly political issues such as civil rights, Southeast Asia, or Berlin, he consistently avoided needlessly provocative actions when he thought inaction or a lesser course was possible and prudent. Even during his most dramatic crisis—the confrontation with the Soviet Union during the Cuban Missile Crisis—Kennedy displayed a keen sense of political pragmatism.

Kennedy's decision with respect to Cuba was also consistent with the lessons he derived from his own reading of American history and from the careers of political leaders. Kennedy believed, as Schlesinger (1965) once noted [and quoting one of Kennedy's own conclusions from *Profiles in Courage*], that those who go down to defeat in vain defense of a principle "will not be on hand to fight for that or any other principle in the future" (p. 110). Kennedy was at heart a political pragmatist.<sup>8</sup>

As I try to show in the next section, there is evidence that Kennedy's advisors also tended to evaluate the Cuban operation, as well as the choice dilemmas *they* confronted in serving their president, in similarly pragmatic and essentially political terms.

#### *The Role of Kennedy's Advisory Group in Planning for the Bay of Pigs Operation*

According to the groupthink hypothesis, there existed a specific pattern of dysfunctional group dynamics within Kennedy's advisory group that contributed directly to a defective process of collective deliberation. To buttress this argument, Janis identified several important dimensions of the psychological and social climate within the meetings between Kennedy and his advisors which directly contributed, he argued, to its flawed judgment. For example, Janis argued that although Kennedy's advisors entertained private doubts about the wisdom of the operation, and its prospects for success, they nonetheless suppressed these personal doubts *because* of their desire to maintain the group's cohesiveness. To be sure, there is no doubt that several members of Kennedy's group entertained serious reservations about going forward with the CIA operation. There also seems to be no doubt that some individuals opted to not fully express their concerns during the planning sessions, especially when the CIA representatives and military advisors were present. Nor, as far as we know, did they energetically express their doubts to President Kennedy on a private basis.

However, the evidence suggests that political considerations, more than

<sup>8</sup>Moreover, his tendency to construe the Bay of Pigs decision primarily in political terms, it is essential to note, was consistent with all of the political instincts that had helped propel him, against great odds, into the White House in the first place.

group dynamics *per se*, contributed to the reticence of Kennedy's advisors to reveal their private doubts and concerns. For example, McGeorge Bundy, who was President Kennedy's national security adviser, admitted to having a number of reservations about the operation, as it was originally proposed. Significantly, most of these paralleled President Kennedy's political concerns, including whether or not U. S. involvement could remain concealed. Bundy, like Kennedy, was attuned primarily to the political risks that exposure of U.S. complicity in the covert operation posed. When reassured, as had been Kennedy, that those risks were reasonably "contained" in the revised scaled-down operation, he opted for going forward. Thus, his eventual acceptance of the plan apparently was not the result of group pressures operating on individuals, but rather were based on his perception, which was shared by Kennedy, that its "noise level" had been reduced sufficiently to overcome his initial skepticism (Neustadt & May, 1986).

Moreover, there is evidence that Bundy's tendency to suppress some of his doubts was not the result of a desire to maintain the group's cohesiveness or esprit de corps, but rather the way he construed his role as a presidential advisor. Bundy felt the best role for a presidential advisor was *not* that of a person who should necessarily express every personal reservation or doubt.

Bundy possessed instead a well-developed—and in many regards quite astute—sense of the role of a presidential advisor. As he himself once put it, he saw his role as that of a

*staff officer who knows the big decision is made and is working to help in its execution. Obviously I have had my own views on what ought to be done and how, but since on balance I am in favor of trying harder, not heading for the exit, I am ready to help the president do it his way. He's the boss.*" (p. 123, emphases added)

Other accounts also cast doubt on the accuracy of Janis's construal of Bundy's behavior as a form of self-censorship motivated by group pressures. These accounts suggest that Bundy was always ready to express and defend his doubts when he felt that doing so was essential or prudent (see, e.g., Valenti, 1975). Even Kennedy had "made it plain to Bundy that he wanted an advisor, not a clerk; and if he had wanted a clerk, he would never have chosen Bundy" (Just, 1996).

Similarly, there is evidence that Secretary of State Dean Rusk's decision not to voice his reservations about the operation more vociferously at the time did not reflect group dynamics so much as a carefully considered political calculus. As Frankel (1994) noted recently, Dean Rusk had a "formula" for political resilience in the competitive bureaucracy in which he worked, and that formula "was to endure and survive, to keep playing a mediocre hand rather than risk all for a better one, and to stand around for greater achievement another day." This was a heuristic, it should be noted, that had served Rusk remarkably well—he enjoyed the reins of power as Secretary of State longer than anyone had before him.

Presidential adviser Arthur Schlesinger also noted the importance of preserving one's political and reputational capital in such situations. Although he

admitted to feeling badly *ex post* about having remained so silent during the planning meetings, “my feelings of guilt were tempered by the knowledge that a course of objection *would have accomplished little save to gain me a name as a nuisance*” (Schlesinger, 1965, p. 144, emphases added).

In aggregate, such accounts suggest that group members’ tendency to engage in self-censorship and suppression of personal doubts were motivated not by a group dynamic, but rather a shared—and quite shrewd—political calculus. When in doubt, each independently reasoned, conserve your political options; don’t draw attention to one’s self; and, above all, don’t squander political capital for a cause that, after all, really wasn’t one’s own. Better to save political capital for later, more personally relevant issues. (This was, incidentally, Bissell’s (1996) own conclusion about why so many of Kennedy’s advisors remained relatively silent during the planning sessions.) As Thomson (1968) astutely observed about the utility of such a calculus in the White House (or any highly competitive, political setting). “The inclination to remain silent or to acquiesce . . . to live to fight another day, to give on this issue so that you can be ‘effective’ on later issues—is overwhelming” in such situations (p. 49).

In some respects, the very visible exit of Chester Bowles—who had been the most vocal critic of the invasion plan—suggests the heuristic value of such a calculus. Bowles was ceremoniously “hung out to dry” by Kennedy after the fiasco. His departure may well have been viewed by the survivors as evidence that that self-censorship in a highly competitive bureaucracy is neither imprudent nor maladaptive. Although a “profile in courage” may be very desirable from the standpoint of high quality decision making, it may be fatal to one’s long-term political effectiveness and even one’s survival in the group.

### *Summary*

Scholars enjoy today a much more complete picture of the diverse network of advice and the various strands of evidence that moved Kennedy and his advisors toward continuing with, rather than abandoning, the Bay of Pigs operation. We also have a richer appreciation of the motives that affected how Kennedy and his advisors processed the information available to them. In aggregate, such evidence suggests very little of the sort of insidious and pervasive group dynamic that Janis had postulated. This is not to suggest that Kennedy’s decision to proceed with the Bay of Pigs decision was a high quality one (presidential scholars, historians, and political scientists still uniformly agree it was not). However, it is to suggest that there is a different cautionary tale implicit in it—a cautionary tale that flows from *political* rather than *group folly*.

Janis (1983) characterized the Bay of Pigs invasion as “one of the worst fiascoes ever perpetrated by a responsible government” (p. 14). In retrospect, this assessment seems hyperbolic. The Bay of Pigs was just one of a series of covert operations undertaken by the CIA in the early years of the cold war. It failed, but its failure was neither catastrophic nor completely foreseeable. Revisited today, the Bay of Pigs seems, at best, an *imperfect* failure that entailed

imperfect choice among imperfect alternatives. Most importantly, it emerges as a far from perfect example of groupthink.

### **LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON AND HIS VIETNAM ADVISORS: FOOLISH WARRIORS OR RELUCTANT WARRIORS?**

Janis regarded the decision by Lyndon Johnson and his advisers to escalate U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam as another major example of groupthink. After carefully surveying the extant evidence, he concluded that there was ample evidence of “gross miscalculations” and “blatant symptoms of groupthink” (p. 97) in the decision making process underlying that escalation. Among the major factors that Janis identified as evidence of groupthink were indications of (1) a homogenization of viewpoints among group members involved in these decisions, (2) concurrence-seeking tendencies among group members that overrode critical search and appraisal, and (3) the operation of strong group norms that inhibited dissent and fostered an irrational commitment to earlier decisions. He argued that, in some instances, group conformity pressures were so great that they hastened the exit of key dissenting ingroup members. Finally, Janis argued there were signs of unrealistic optimism among the group members, causing them to minimize the perceived risks of their policies or overlook the unattractive consequences of their decisions. As with the Bay of Pigs decision, scholars now have available a considerable body of fresh evidence with which to reexamine these claims (e.g., Anderson, 1993; Barrett, 1993; Berman, 1982, 1988, 1989; Burke & Greenstein, 1989; Gardner, 1990; McNamara, 1995). Much of that evidence suggests a deliberative process that is quite different from that originally described by Janis.

#### *The Role of Johnson's Advisory Group*

The influence of Lyndon Johnson's advisory group on his decision making has been the focus of intense scholarly scrutiny over the past 20-give years (see Barrett, 1993, and Berman, 1982, 1988, for comprehensive overviews). This evidence provides little indication of the sort of intense, dysfunctional group dynamic posited by Janis. For example, there is little compelling evidence that group members' self-censorship or suppression of personal doubts were motivated by their desire to protect or maintain the group's cohesiveness or *esprit de corps*. For example, George Ball commented, “I never felt that I was inhibited in any way from going to the President and making to him any proposal that I had on my mind” (Barrett, 1993, p. 186). Along similar lines, Secretary of State Dean Rusk noted, “The President never, never objected to people putting forward views that were contrary to his own inclinations in the course of making a decision” (Barrett, 1993, p. 174).

To be sure, there is no doubt that Lyndon Johnson expressed his own views about what should be done in Vietnam and why it had to be done in the most forceful of terms. Moreover, there is little doubt that there *was* a “formidable consensus at the top” (DiLeo, 1991, p. 95) with respect to Lyndon Johnson and

his advisors' views about the most attractive (or, perhaps more accurately, the *least unattractive*) course of action available to them. However, the data suggest that this consensus was hewn, not out of groupthink-like dynamics, but rather from the fact that Johnson and his advisors read the same messages in the situation they confronted in Vietnam. That common understanding of the historical and strategic role of the Vietnam conflict informed their construal of the importance of America's symbolic commitment to Southeast Asia and the dangers of failing to live up to that commitment. As Dileo (1991) has aptly noted,

Rusk, McNamara, and Bundy and the President [all] axiomatically accepted that the United States was legally and morally obligated to maintain South Vietnam's independence and believed that the political, psychological, and strategic implications of withdrawal were unacceptable. Though they did not desire war, they would accept it. (p. 94)

To further support the groupthink argument, Janis proposed that group pressures were the primary factor in driving dissenters away (p. 117). For example, Janis suggested that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's exit from the group was the result of group pressures that were brought to bear on him as his personal doubts and reservations became more vocal. At the time Janis ventured this interpretation, he appreciated the fact that the evidence on this point was rather equivocal. However, it now seems clear that McNamara's exit was not the result of group pressures, but rather was personally engineered by Johnson himself and was politically motivated. As McNamara's personal doubts about the administration's Vietnam policy grew, Johnson felt he had lost his objectivity and his effectiveness. He concluded that McNamara had to go, and to get rid of him he resorted to his oft-used ploy of "promoting out of the way" individuals who opposed his policies or compromised pursuit of his objectives (see Caro, 1982, and Kearns-Goodwin, 1976). Johnson was so superb at disguising his behind-the-scenes handiwork in this instance that McNamara commented ruefully, "To this day, I don't know whether I resigned or was fired" (Gardner, 1990, p. 404 and McNamara, 1995, p. 311).

### *Johnson's Use of the Advisory Process*

Closely related to assessing the role Johnson's advisory group played in the decision making process is understanding how Johnson used the advisory process and the style of leadership he exerted over it. Contrary to Janis's depiction, Johnson was a vigilant group leader who was attuned to the doubts, strengths, and weaknesses of his advisors. As former aide Valenti (1976) noted generally, Johnson always "appreciated the spacious dimension of intelligence coupled with a resolution capable of enduring (indeed, savoring) tedium and detail, knowing to the tiniest jot of accuracy, all that was possible to know of the problem or the issue involved" (p. 258). Moreover, he adopted a vigorous style of interrogation when working with his advisors (see Barrett (1993), Gardner, (1990), and Kramer (1995, 1996) for more extensive reviews of this evidence). Valenti (1975) also documents the extraordinary degree to which Johnson pressed his advisors for their own views, describing how, after listening

to one of McNamara's recommendations, Johnson queried McNamara and the rest of the group,

What I would like to know is what has happened in recent months that requires this kind of decision on my part. What are the alternatives? *I want this discussed in full detail, from everyone around this table.* . . . What are the compelling reasons [for this decision]. What results can we expect? Again, I ask you what are the alternatives? *I don't want us to make snap judgments. I want us to consider all our options.* . . . Should we try other [approaches].” (p. 259–260, emphases added)

Thus, rather than uncritically accepting dubious assumptions, Johnson was a cautious and discerning decision maker—if anything prone to pessimistic appraisal of the risks of his Vietnam policy (see Kearns-Goodwin, 1976; Kramer, 1996). Moreover, he was willing to commit U.S. forces only after “vigorous and extended debate” (see Barrett, 1993, p. 3).

Recent evidence also indicates more fully the extent to which Johnson, like Kennedy, privately sought expert advice and counsel *outside* the small circle of advisors on which Janis focused his attention. As Barrett (1993) concluded in a recent assessment of this evidence, the picture of Johnson that emerges is that of “a president who. . . reached widely for advisory (and bargaining) encounters with diverse actors in the political system” (p. 194).

#### *Uncritical Acceptance of Faulty Assumptions*

As further evidence that the group was suffering from groupthink, Janis argued that Lyndon Johnson and his advisors failed to probe adequately the validity of their major assumptions regarding U.S. policy in Vietnam. He suggested, for example, that they uncritically applied lessons from previous American conflicts in a simplistic and inappropriate fashion. Importantly, he argued that this defective appraisal emerged from, and was therefore the result of, group dynamics. However, there is little evidence in recent data describing the group meetings that Johnson and his advisors' deliberations were shaped by such dysfunctional group dynamics (Barrett, 1993; Berman, 1988). Instead, Johnson and his advisers believed strongly that Vietnam *had* to be construed in terms of a broader historical and political context and had consistently felt this way all along, justifying their conclusions on both pragmatic and ideological grounds.

Johnson's thinking in this regard was influenced by the way in which he categorized the conflict in Vietnam relative to other threats that U.S. presidents had faced.<sup>9</sup> Several analogies loomed particularly large in his deliberations about the Vietnam conflict and his role in it. As he himself observed,

<sup>9</sup>With the advantage of hindsight, it has become fashionable to assert the absurdity of the domino theory and related analogies. However, as Valenti noted (1976), at the time Johnson and his advisors grappled with Vietnam, “the moorings of the domino theory were still tautly held and LBJ felt its pull” (p. 286)—as had Eisenhower and Kennedy before him. Moreover, current assessments about belief in the validity of the theory are less harsh, especially in consideration of some of the intelligence estimates and other data to which Johnson and his advisors had access (and all of which were highly classified at the time when Janis formulated the groupthink hypothesis).

You see, I deeply believe we are quarantining aggressors over there . . . *Just like FDR and Hitler, just like Wilson and Kaiser. You've simply got to see this thing in historical perspective. . .* I firmly believe we wouldn't have been involved in World War II if it hadn't been for all the vacillation. (quoted in Kearns-Goodwin, 1976, p. 313)

In responding to internal dissenters and critics outside his administration who argued that a less aggressive, more conciliatory course of action might be preferable Johnson argued,

*. . . everything I know about history proves this absolutely wrong.* It was our lack of strength and failure to show stamina, our hesitancy, vacillation, and love of peace being paraded so much that caused all our problems before World War I, World War II, and Korea. (p. 313).

Finally, Johnson drew solace from a comforting comparison between his difficulties and those encountered by Abraham Lincoln: "I read about all the troubles Lincoln had in conducting the Civil War. *Yet he persevered and history rewarded him for the perseverance*" (Kearns-Goodwin, p. 314, emphases added).

Thus, it seems clear that Johnson viewed himself as a leader who was engaged in an historic but recurring struggle of precisely the same sort that other U.S. presidents had encountered. Significantly, Johnson was not alone in drawing such lessons from history. As Clark Clifford (1991) noted in describing the climate within Johnson's advisory group, ". . . the communist menace was palpable [and] memories of Munich and appeasement were also still fresh, especially in the minds of Dean Rusk and Lyndon Johnson" (p. 403).

Such remarks indicate the powerful role that the "lessons of history" played in Johnson and his advisors' thinking about the necessity of not giving ground, let alone losing in South Vietnam. In their view, the political stakes were enormous, both domestically and internationally. This is not to say that the weight afforded such analogies, and the inferences that flowed from them, reflect vigilant appraisal and high quality decision making. As Janis correctly noted, there was a distressing failure to sufficiently probe the validity of such assumptions. However, and importantly, there is little evidence that such failure was influenced by powerful group dynamics of the sort Janis described.

### *Johnson's Political Construal of the Conflict in Vietnam*

If much of this new evidence does not support Janis's original characterization of the decision making process surrounding Vietnam, what *does* the evidence suggest? Is there a discernible pattern to the data? Several conclusions seem warranted. First, much like his predecessor, Johnson viewed his decisions as president largely in terms of political and historical imperatives (see, e.g., Califano, 1991; Kearns-Goodwin, 1976; Valenti, 1975). He was determined to use presidential power effectively and on a scale never before seen in U.S. history. Always foremost in his mind was furthering his goal of becoming one of the greatest U.S. presidents in history (Goodwin, 1988; Kearns-Goodwin, 1976). As Jack Valenti put it, "He had one goal: to be the greatest president doing the greatest good in the history of the nation" (Middleton, 1990, p. 24). As Nicholas Lemann commented, Johnson wanted "to set world records in politics the way a star athlete would in sports" (quoted in Dallek, 1995, p. 109).



Repeatedly, Johnson expressed privately to aides and journalists alike his concerns regarding the legacy of his administration and his own role in presidential history. The image he held of himself was that of a president who would be remembered, like FDR, as having led the nation through a series of stunning domestic achievements, while at the same time successfully defending it from threats from abroad. To accomplish these goals, Johnson had decided to place his bets on the creation of a “Great Society” that would eclipse anything that FDR or any other president had achieved (Goodwin, 1988). However, just as John F. Kennedy had inherited the “hot potato” of Cuba from Eisenhower, so Lyndon Johnson felt he had inherited the unwelcomed conundrum of Vietnam. And just as John Kennedy had viewed the prospect of “backing down” in Cuba unacceptable, so Johnson viewed Vietnam as a critical test of his resolve—the results of which would affect not only his contemporary image as a world leader, but potentially his legacy in history. There was no doubt in Johnson’s mind that, were he to be the first U.S. president to accept defeat in a ground war in a foreign land, this place in history would elude him.

Recognition of Johnson’s construal of the conflict in Vietnam and the best way to manage it casts new light on Janis’s analysis of the psychological climate in which Johnson and his advisors worked, especially his arguments regarding the prevalence of unrealistic optimism and overconfidence on the groups’ deliberations about its options.

### *Unrealistic Optimism and Overconfidence*

Janis argued that the flawed judgment and decision making within Johnson’s group flowed, at least in part, from unrealistic optimism regarding his policy, especially overconfidence in the ability of U.S. economic and military might to overwhelm the enemy. According to Janis, this unrealistic optimism and overconfidence contributed to an illusion of invulnerability as Johnson and his advisors proceeded with escalation of the war. However, more recent accounts by insiders within his administration, as well as accounts by others who knew him, suggest that Johnson’s optimism about the war, especially in the early days of his administration, was not a product of an insidious group dynamic, but rather flowed from a fundamentally pragmatic construal of the Vietnam conflict. Throughout his life, Johnson had displayed a tough-minded, optimistic attitude toward all of the challenges and crises he confronted in his rise to political power—and there had been many of them (see, e.g., Caro, 1982; Dallek, 1991). As Herring (1993) commented, Johnson’s credo from youth had been, “if you work hard enough you will win. . . [and Johnson] brought to the war this same enormous energy and compulsive attention to detail that characterized his approach to politics, the presidency, and life in general” (p. 89). Perhaps even more significantly, there is substantial evidence that pessimism, not optimism, often dominated Johnson’s decision making, especially with respect to the later decisions to escalate the war (see, e.g., Gelb and Betts, 1979).

Johnson also believed strongly that the path to victory in Southeast Asia

depended upon skillful exercise of the same political “truths” he had discovered in his rise to power in the Senate. As Halberstam (1972) noted, Johnson was

convinced that you could accomplish things by reasoning with leaders. . . *all men had a price*. . . [and he would] find Ho’s price, Ho’s weakness, whether it was through bombing the North or through threatening to use troops and then offering Ho a lollipop, massive economic aid and regional development, a Mekong River Delta development project. (p. 438–439)

Recognizing that he could not afford to lose the war, he incrementally took those steps that he felt necessary at each turn to avert an immediate loss, while energetically pursuing his domestic agenda on civil rights, educational reform, and poverty.

### *Ignoring Warnings from Outside Experts and Advisors*

In arguing for the groupthink hypothesis, Janis emphasized the tendency of President Johnson and the members of his advisory group to ignore warnings and critical assessments from outside experts. Recent accounts suggest that this tendency was less the result of group dynamics than a reflection of Johnson’s own tendency to view others’ actions (and the motives behind them) in the same way that he viewed his own actions, viz., as politically motivated. For example, he attributed Senator Fulbright’s critiques of U.S. policy in Vietnam to Fulbright’s desire to further his own stymied political ambitions. Johnson argued that Fulbright is “frustrated up there on the Hill” because “he wants the nation to stand up and take notice of Bill Fulbright, and he knows the best way to get that attention is to put himself in the role of critic” (Kearns-Goodwin, 1976, p. 313).

Similarly, he felt that many of his critics within the liberal wing of the Democratic party were simply Robert Kennedy loyalists who were trying to undermine his effectiveness and hasten his exit from the White House. As Johnson put it,

I was keeping the throne from Bobby Kennedy. Because the Great Society was accomplishing more than the New Frontier . . . *they had to find some issue on which to turn against me and they found it in Vietnam.* (Kearns-Goodwin, 1976, p. 313, emphases added)

Along similar lines, Johnson believed that the various academics and the journalists criticizing him were similarly motivated purely by self interests, however carefully concealed they might be. As he reasoned,

they turned against me on Vietnam because it was in their self-interest to do so, because they knew that no one wins a Pulitzer Prize these days by simply supporting the President and the administration. (Kearns-Goodwin, 1976, p. 313)

As evidence of the groupthink thesis, Janis also suggested that unrealistic optimism and the perception of invulnerability led Johnson and his advisors to discount pessimistic intelligence forecasts about the war. However, new evidence indicates just how energetically Johnson sought out diverse intelligence estimates from a wide range of sources (Berman, 1989; Gardner, 1990). However, like Kennedy, Johnson was a wary consumer of such intelligence. As vice-president under President Kennedy, he had experienced, even if only

vicariously, the painful lesson that a healthy skepticism toward intelligence forecasts from experts within the CIA, the military, and the State Department was often warranted. As the Bay of Pigs fiasco had demonstrated all too well, presidents who too casually accepted such intelligence estimates were as likely to err as those who chose to ignore them.

Moreover, Johnson deeply believed that efficacious action by a leader often requires a more tenacious kind of pragmatic optimism than that usually manifested by academic advisors and career bureaucrats. Thus, he tended to ignore gloomy intelligence estimates from the State Department because he viewed them through the jaded eyes of a leader who was often bombarded with such fatalistic forecasts about what cannot be done: "Anyone can knock a barn down," he once noted in dismissing such reports, but "it takes a carpenter to build one" (Berman, 1989, p. 154).

### *Summary*

Janis portrayed Lyndon Johnson and his advisors as a highly cohesive group of isolated decision makers who were suffering from a variety of groupthink-like symptoms. Although he was able to marshal an impressive amount of evidence in favor of this portrait, it is a picture that has not held up well over the past 25 years. In a recent assessment, Barrett (1993) has put this conclusion most crisply: "Assertions that there must have been an irrational advisory process surrounding Johnson *simply do not meet the test of evidence*" (p. 193, emphases added). Instead, Johnson can be better characterized as a reluctant but unrepentant warrior who felt that the United States was legally and morally obligated to not abandon South Vietnam to the communists. Moreover, the risks of failure in Southeast Asia were viewed by Johnson and his advisors as potentially catastrophic. From Johnson's vantage point, all of the options he confronted were fraught with significant political disadvantages, in which he stood to lose not only his credibility as a contemporary world leader, but also his legacy in the history books. As Gelb and Betts (1979) aptly noted, the decisions Johnson confronted created a "damned if I do and damned if I don't dilemma" (p. 111). In the prescient words of McNamara, "there appears to be *no* attractive course of action . . . *so we must choose among imperfect alternatives*" (quoted in Berman, 1989, p. 44).

### **THE BAY OF PIGS AND VIETNAM REDUX: TOWARD A *POLITICAL* PSYCHOLOGY OF COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE FAILURES**

I have argued that newly available evidence—as well as a reasonable reinterpretation of old evidence—does not support the view that President Kennedy's decision to proceed with the CIA's Bay of Pigs operation and Lyndon Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam were *primarily* the products of defective deliberation by small, highly cohesive groups of individuals locked in the numbing jaws of groupthink. If casting doubt upon the groupthink hypothesis, what,

if anything, can we learn from these fiascoes? As Whyte (1989) succinctly put this issue,

The critical question [becomes] whether or not any pattern can be recognized from decisions of this sort, *or are these simply difficult decisions that unfortunately went awry* (p. 40, emphases added)

In this paper, I have tried to argue that there *is* a coherent pattern discernible in the data, but that the conceptual story that emerges from that data differs from the groupthink hypothesis along several important dimensions. First, although there is no doubt that group deliberations played an important role in both Kennedy's and Johnson's decision making, neither leader relied solely on the inputs from the groups that Janis identified. Both Presidents reached beyond these seemingly isolated inner circles for advice. To secure political counsel, they drew on a diverse network of personal contacts that they had carefully cultivated and that had served them well in the past. Second, although it is clear that Kennedy and Johnson trusted their advisors, it is also clear that they deeply trusted their own political instincts—especially when it came to protecting their political capital as leaders and their image in history. Kennedy and Johnson were accustomed to making their own decisions—and both the decision to proceed with the Bay of Pigs and the decision to increase U.S. military involvement in Vietnam were carefully considered, individual decisions by tough-minded political pragmatists seeking a course of action that offered some prospect of political gain, but also, and importantly, one that would minimize the risk of political loss. Reedy's (1970) reflective assessment of presidential decision making describes their approach perfectly: "The fact is that a president makes his decisions as he wishes to make them, under conditions he himself has established, and at times of his determination" (p. 31).

Third, although it is true that both Kennedy and Johnson sometimes discounted ominous warning signs and repudiated expert advice they were receiving, these tendencies did not reflect the operation of groupthink-like factors. Johnson and Kennedy did not avoid or minimize painful trade-offs, and they were seldom naive or unrealistically optimistic about their ventures. If anything, they tended to ruminate intensely about their decisions, and always with an eye toward careful appraisal of the *political* consequences of action or inaction on a given issue. Consistently, their decisions as president reflected the same sort of pragmatic appraisal that had helped them reach the highest pinnacles of power.

Relatedly, the data suggest that a rather fundamental asymmetry existed within both Kennedy's and Johnson's decision calculus with respect to the salience of political losses over gains. Specifically, in both cases, the prospect of domestic political losses often seemed to loom much larger than the prospect of potential gains. Thus, Kennedy and Johnson almost always opted for the course of action that averted or minimized, to the greatest degree possible, the prospect of immediate and potentially catastrophic political losses. With respect to Kennedy, this orientation led to favoring the status quo option, (i.e., the decision to do nothing to "turn off" the Cuban operation). In Johnson's case,

it prompted an escalatory decision process. As Ellsberg perceptively noted, Johnson's decisions throughout the decision making process were informed by one fundamental political rule: "This is not a good year for this administration to lose Vietnam to Communism" (cited in Janis, 1982, p. 102).

Along related lines, the new evidence points to the conclusion that many of the individual members within Kennedy's and Johnson's advisory groups (and overlap in the cast of characters is substantial) operated out of a similar political calculus—a calculus honed by years of experience in the political trenches. Thus, group members' suppression of personal doubts and self-censorship appear to have reflected *self-conscious* political considerations, as much as they did preconscious concerns about disrupting the group's cohesiveness or destroying its *esprit de corps*. In certain respects, this pattern is hardly surprising: both Kennedy and Johnson selected as advisors individuals who possessed the same pragmatic intelligence and tough-minded optimism they possessed and viewed as necessary for getting things done.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

The contributions of the present research can be framed in terms of several theoretical, methodological, and practical implications.

#### *Theoretical Contributions*

The results of the present research support a number of recent theoretical perspectives that have been brought to bear on the groupthink hypothesis. First, they are consistent with conclusions that Raven (1974) reached in his thoughtful reexamination of the role that groupthink played in the attempts by Richard Nixon and his advisors to cover up White House involvement in the Watergate burglary. Raven argued that a close scrutiny of the data reveals little evidence of the sort of cohesiveness, mutual attraction, and high *esprit de corps* that Janis associated with the groupthink syndrome. Instead, it suggests group members were motivated primarily by self-interested, pragmatic motives: Nixon surrounded himself with politically tough, like-minded individuals, all of whom wanted to remain at the center of power and were willing to do whatever was necessary to do so. Thus, in a very real sense, Nixon created in his advisory group an extension of his own ruthless, pragmatic—and ultimately self-defeating—approach to dealing with political crises.<sup>10</sup> Along similar lines, I would argue that both President Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, as group leaders, replicated in their advisory systems—and perhaps to an unintended

<sup>10</sup>In his privately taped conversations and off-the-record comments, Nixon repeatedly emphasized the importance of toughness and pragmatic ruthlessness in his advisors. In a recently released transcript of one such conversation, for example, Nixon complains about one of his advisor's tendency to always worry about what was "technically [i.e., legally] correct." "I want somebody that's just as tough as I am, for a change. Just as tough as I was, I would say, in the Hiss case" (Biskupic, 1996, p. 22).

degree—their own essentially pragmatic, calculative view of the decision making process (cf., McCauley, 1989).

Some of the internal dynamics observed within both Kennedy and Johnson's advisory groups also seem consistent with behaviors that one would expect to observe from the perspective of the Turner *et al.* (1992) social identity maintenance model. According to their framework, groups are often motivated to maintain positive social identities, especially in the face of external threats to those identities. It is clear that both Kennedy and Johnson construed their choices with respect to the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam (especially the option to “do nothing” about them) as serious identity-threatening predicaments for their administrations. Both felt under enormous pressure to prove their toughness and resolve as leaders. Thus, defeat or retreat were out of the question. Both leaders communicated this sense of threat to their advisors by framing the courses of action in terms of the possible dire political repercussions of doing too little or too late.<sup>11</sup>

Several features of the argument I have developed here are also consistent with recent theory and research on risky decision making. At the time Janis conceived the groupthink hypothesis, formal theory and research on organizational decision making were dominated largely by subjective utility theory. According to this theory, decision makers are assumed to be motivated to maximize their gains through their actions. More recent research on risky decision making has offered an alternative view in which loss avoidance figures prominently in judgment and choice (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). In particular, researchers have increasingly appreciated the effects of loss aversion on political judgment and choice (e.g., Farnham, 1994; Kramer, 1989; Kramer, Meyerson, & Davis, 1990; Stein & Pauly, 1993; Whyte, 1989). In emphasizing the importance of political loss aversion in Kennedy's and Johnson's decisions, the present article lends credence to Whyte's (1989) prospect group polarization perspective. As Whyte noted, “For each of the fiascoes discussed by Janis, the frame adopted by decision makers led them to perceive their decision as *between a certain loss and potentially greater losses*” (p. 48, emphases added).

Construed broadly, the results of the present research engage contemporary debates about the different sorts of “logics” that underly organizational and group decision making. As Tetlock (1991) and March (1995) have eloquently argued, real-world decision making does not reflect only the dispassionate

<sup>11</sup>It is instructive to note in this regard that even during the Cuban Missile Crisis, as he was contemplating the likely consequences of various alternatives, Kennedy mused that if he did nothing about getting the missiles out of Cuba, he would be impeached. In response to such cues, Kennedy's and Johnson's loyal group members may have been prompted to engage, collectively, in attempts to protect and enhance the leader's positive identity (and by association and implication their own identities as well). Interestingly, this response is also evident in Nixon's advisory group. As Raven (1974) noted, the members of the Nixon in-group were “all bound to the group through loyalty, acceptance, and identification with their leader” (p. 310). Thus, they were willing to do whatever was necessary to protect and maintain the positive identity of their leader and his administration. That common concern—more than concern about protecting the group's cohesiveness—was the cement binding them together.

pursuit of rational or “pareto-efficient” outcomes, but also decision makers’ hopes of realizing complex and often concealed social motives, such as self-presentational goals. Thus, concerns about maintaining a positive identity or image can completely dominate individuals’ worries about whether a decision is “good” or of “high quality.” As a consequence, “Response tendencies that look like judgmental flaws from one metaphorical perspective frequently look quite prudent from another” (Tetlock, 1991, p. 454).

In this respect, the analysis advanced in this paper resonates with recent perspectives on the role of *practical intelligence* in real-world decision making and problem solving (Sternberg, 1985; Sternberg, Wagner, Williams, & Horvath, 1995; Wagner & Sternberg, 1986). As Sternberg (1985) has noted, intelligent behavior in real-world settings is often “directed toward purposive adaptation to . . . real-world environments relevant to one’s life” (p. 45). In developing this idea, Sternberg *et al.* (1995) draw an important distinction between formal, academic knowledge and practical *knowledge*. As defined by them, practical knowledge is “action-oriented knowledge . . . that allows individuals to achieve goals they personally value. The acquisition and use of such knowledge appears to be uniquely important to competent performance in real-world endeavors” (p. 916). Kennedy and Johnson were at heart pragmatic intellects of exactly this vein. Their political intelligences were shaped by years of cautious climbing through a series of highly competitive political tournaments. As a result of these experiences, they possessed a remarkably complex political schema that helped them negotiate the twists and turns of the political landscape and that had reliably kept them out of harm’s way.

However, in contrast with previous research on practical intelligence, which has largely extolled the *virtues* of such intelligence, the present research suggest some ways in which such hard-won knowledge, so useful and adaptive on the road to power, may impede effective sense making and decision making once power is achieved.

### *Methodological and Practical Implications*

Within social psychology and organizational theory, case studies are usually employed as a means of generating inductive insights and innovative theory. The process is often described as one of moving back and forth between a set of qualitative data and an emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Implicit in such a portrayal is the presumption that eventually a good theory emerges that has the quality of a gestalt—a figure with good “form” in that it accommodates the various features of the extant data. In fact, the metaphor of “saturation,” imported from chemistry, is sometimes used to describe the end state of this process. For a long time, the groupthink model has seemed to provide just such a gestalt for decision making fiascoes of the sort Janis studied. The results of the present research suggests, however, that it is useful, even imperative, that qualitative researchers revisit their case studies as new data emerges to see how well the theory continues to hold up. The travel between theory and data should, in short, go in both directions.

From a practical standpoint, does it ultimately matter which model we accept when viewing decision making fiascoes of this sort? It does to the extent such models and metaphors serve as templates that guide policy makers as they wrestle with difficult and complex sense making predicaments of the sort that Janis studied. Janis remained optimistic in this respect regarding the utility of groupthink as a remedy for reducing avoidable decision errors by groups and organizations. He believed that a broad theory of groupthink could provide a “new perspective for preventing Watergate-like fiascoes in government, private industry, and public welfare organizations” (1983, p. 204). However, if the theory is wrong in focusing so much of the analytical limelight on group dynamics, it may quite obviously lead policy makers to focus on irrelevant factors when trying to avoid such problems, stimulating wrong-headed interventions or remedies.<sup>12</sup>

Like the Cohen *et al.* (1972) influential “garbage can” model of decision making, groupthink has acquired the status of a metaphor for organizational and group decision making. When the status of an empirical model is elevated to metaphor, however, it can obscure important relationships, hindering understanding as much as illuminating it (see Bendor, Moe, & Shott, 1996). Along these lines, t’Hart (1990) lamented the tendency for researchers to use the concept of groupthink

loosely and indiscriminately as a symbolically powerful pejorative label. . . a kind of analytical garbage can for commentators and analysts in need of a powerful metaphor when trying to blame or explain some ill-fated institutional or organizational action.(p. ix)

Given the prominence of such powerful metaphors for decision making, it is essential that scholars energetically revisit such hypotheses and subject them to intense scrutiny. Otherwise, we the run the risk—paraphrasing George Eliot (cited in Hardin, 1981, p. 261)—of getting our thoughts hopelessly “entangled in metaphors,” and acting “fatally on the strength of them.”

### *A Final Caveat*

I have argued that Janis’s analysis of the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam decisions overstates the causal importance of social psychological processes—especially small group dynamics—while underestimating the causal significance of *political* psychological processes in the unfolding of these fiascoes. It is important to emphasize that I am not arguing here that politicothink and groupthink are rival explanations for decision making fiascoes in general. There is nothing inherently incompatible about these explanations for policy fiascoes. They are

<sup>12</sup>The conclusions reached in this paper also parallel Vaughn’s (1995) assessment of the role groupthink did *not* play in the decision to launch the space Shuttle Challenger. Assessing the evidence, she notes, “Most posttragedy accounts concluded that Janis’s theory of groupthink—perhaps the leading theory of group dynamics and decision making—was responsible for the launch decision” (p. 404). However, she argues, although there was evidence of pressure toward uniformity, self-censorship, and an illusion of unanimity. . . they were derived from “culture imperatives of the original technical culture, bureaucratic accountability, and political accountability” (p. 525).



not, in other words, necessarily competing conceptions of collective folly. In fact, decision fiascoes might very easily reflect the operation of both dynamics in varying degrees. What I am arguing is that with respect to at least two of the major decisions Janis used to motivate and justify the groupthink hypothesis, considerable doubt obtains today regarding the priority of group dynamics in those fiascoes.

Relatedly, I am not arguing that politicothink provides a *sufficient* explanation for fiascoes such as the Bay of Pigs or the Vietnam escalation. Clearly, such decisions must be analyzed from the standpoint of a broad consideration of psychological, social, and institutional imperatives. To the extent that political and group dynamics influence real-world decisions, both frameworks provide only partial explanations and incomplete accounts. In fact, given the complexity of most organizational fiascoes, a "multiple lens" perspective is probably always warranted and necessary, as Allison (1971) compellingly demonstrated in his influential analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The argument that leaders and their advisors may be swayed by this sort of politicothink is no more reassuring, of course, than the original groupthink hypothesis in terms of its implications for high quality decision making. Both hypotheses converge on a justified caution about the extent to which collective deliberation necessarily enhances collective intelligence or that group processes provide effective safeguards against acts of organizational foolishness. In fact, politicothink may in certain respects constitute the more insidious threat to high quality decision making: For, to the extent processes of competitive selection in organizations propel to positions of power those individuals who possess well-developed political schema and essentially pragmatic views of organizational life, those who reach the top, and are struggling to reach the top, may be particularly prone to politicothink. As Kissinger (1960) once observed in this regard, "One of the paradoxes of an increasingly specialized, bureaucratized society is that the qualities rewarded in the rise to eminence are less and less the qualities required once eminence is reached" (p. 240). Of course, within this paradox lurks an irony: Thus, when informed that former President Dwight Eisenhower had once expressed an intense disdain for the word "politics," the newly elected President Kennedy retorted, "I like politics. It's how a president gets things done" (Reeves, 1993, p. 134). From the vantage point of politicothink, it is also the way a president and his advisors can get undone.

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