

The expansion of the issue is affected not only by what is said, but also by the receptivity of the mass media and the exposure and predispositions of various audiences.

Beyond this, however, the relevance of the book to the promotion function is rather limited, since attention tends to be diverted to issue expansion. A theory of agenda-building and guidelines for promotion must take into account the competition between the symbols associated with one issue or one proposed policy initiative and other symbols at the focus of attention of the public. Each symbol of identification, expectation, or demand competes with all others as a focal point for the organization of a range of generalized concerns of the public and members of the media alike. Moreover, these generalized concerns, or moods, compete with each other in the sense that some are differentially intensified relative to others from time to time. The Watergate affair, for example, seems to have intensified a generalized concern for abuses of power and focused them on Richard Nixon and, to a lesser extent, the Presidency. Is it more than mere coincidence that the same concerns were focused on the C.I.A. only after the symbol of Nixon disappeared from the headlines? The theoretical basis for the efficient exploration of questions such as this already exists.* What remains is to develop the instrumentation that will not only clarify the answers, but also clarify the shifting potentials for promotion as events unfold.

Reviewed by RONALD D. BRUNNER, Institute of Public Policy Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A.

Failure Has Many Fathers

Irving Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*.¹ Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972

The history of Pearl Harbor has an interest exceeding by far any tale of an isolated catastrophe that might have been the result of negligence or stupidity or treachery, however lurid. For we have found the roots of this surprise in circumstances that affected honest, dedicated, and intelligent men.

(Wohlstetter, 1962, p. 357)

Although written in reference to the staff of Admiral Kimmel, U.S. Navy commander of Pearl Harbor at the time of the Japanese surprise attack, this description seems to apply equally well to those advisors who helped lead: (a) President Truman to pursue North Korean forces to the Yalu River (and massive intervention by People's China); (b) President Kennedy to sacrifice 1400 refugees and American prestige on the beaches

* In particular, Cobb and Elder seem to have overlooked H. D. Lasswell, "The Politics of Prevention," in *Psychopathology and Politics* (New York: Viking Press, 1960 ed.) and H. D. Lasswell, "The Climate of International Action," in H. C. Kelman, ed., *International Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).

¹ An abbreviated version of this review originally appeared in Hebrew in *Megamot*, 1974, 20: 325-328, and is reprinted with permission of the publisher, Szold National Institute for Research in the Behavioral Sciences.

of the Bay of Pigs; and (c) President Johnson to initiate a variety of devastating, but unsuccessful escalatory acts in Viet-Nam. Why did “some of the most intelligent men ever to participate in the councils of government” (p. 14)² fail so miserably?

Professor Irving Janis identifies these decision makers and the nations they led as *Victims of Groupthink*. “Groupthink” is defined as a “mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action” (p. 9). Janis examines groupthink in case studies of the four American strategic fiascoes noted above. The essence of groupthink is extreme pressure to conformity. Three familiar expressions of this pressure are: ridicule, expulsion and isolation of the non-conformist. As an example of ridicule, a favorite epithet for the hesitant in the Johnson administration was “I am afraid he’s losing his effectiveness” (p. 119). An example of expulsion is Johnson’s firing of Robert MacNamara for publicly protesting the continued bombing of North Viet-Nam. For the edification of his remaining associates Johnson ridiculed MacNamara, comparing him to the son of a family trying to sell a house who “went to the prospective buyer to point out that there were leaks in the basement” (p. 123). A sophisticated mode of isolation is what Janis calls “docility fostered by suave leadership” (pp. 43–46), exemplified by President Kennedy’s policy of “gently” dividing and conquering opposition by forcing each member of his council of advisors to individually defend any consensus-countering argument he might let slip. A fourth expression is the use of what Janis calls “mindguards” (p. 41), in-group members who take it upon themselves to insulate their leader from divergent views which might shake his confidence in time of crisis.

The outright stifling of opposing views often leads to the voluntary suppression of personal doubts. For example, Arthur Schlesinger blames his failure to point out follies in the Bay of Pigs plan (e.g., contingency plans called for the invaders to escape to the Escambray Mountains—across 80 miles of impassable swamp and jungle) on his desire to be “just as tough as the military men” at White House meetings and not to act like a “soft-headed idealist” (p. 41). The resulting self-censorship often creates an “illusion of unanimity . . . without (which) the sense of group unity would be lost, gnawing doubts would start to grow, confidence in the group’s problem-solving capacity would shrink, and soon the full emotional impact of all the stresses generated by making a difficult decision would be aroused” (p. 205).

“Preserving the sense of unity . . . can (also) induce . . . an exhilarating sense of omnipotence . . . with(in) a group that displays solidarity against an evil enemy and complete unanimity about everything that needs to be done” (p. 205). This *esprit de corps* encourages, among other things, what is called the “risky shift” phenomenon, the tendency for groups to make riskier decisions than their members would have made acting on their own. Such over-optimism helped Kennedy’s team believe that 1400 malcontent Cuban refugees would overthrow Castro’s military forces of 200,000—without overt American support. It also led Truman’s advisors to believe that whereas the U.S. found communists 8000 miles away in South Korea intolerable, People’s China would passively accept troops led by General MacArthur on the Yalu River.

² Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers refer to the book being reviewed.

Pressure to uniformity of opinion leads to the complacency and conservatism of groupthink. Good examples may be found in the incorrect and unquestioned assumptions which constituted the basis for the Pearl Harbor command's belief that "It couldn't happen here." Two of these assumptions were "the Japanese would never dare attempt a full-scale surprise assault against Hawaii because they would realize that it would precipitate an all-out war which the U.S. would surely win" (p. 87), and "even with only ten minutes warning from radar, practically all attacking planes could be shot down" (p. 90). Confidence was so blinding that no one ever bothered to make certain that the radar was in continuous operation (it wasn't), or that it could guarantee the necessary ten minutes warning (it couldn't), or that an effective warning-transmitting system existed (it didn't).

According to Janis, such unchallenged in-group cohesion also encourages the pejorative stereotyping of the enemy as both evil and impotent (pp. 159-165). Such self-righteousness helped Johnson's Tuesday Lunch Group to pioneer its "euphemistic vocabulary of 'body counts,' 'surgical air strikes,' and 'pacification'" (p. 116). Together with over-confidence it helped the CIA to get away with depicting Castro as a "weak 'hysteric' leader whose army was ready to defect . . . so stupid that although warned by air strikes (the day before the invasion), he would do nothing to neutralize the Cuban underground" (p. 38). Similar misconceptions helped U.S. intelligence to consistently underestimate the capabilities of Japanese fighters and equipment.

A supposedly impotent enemy also allows a relaxation of vigilance. On December 7, the Pacific fleet was still on the "limited alert conditions that had prevailed in the fleet for several months" (p. 79). Normal peacetime leaves and liberties had been granted. "Not a single reconnaissance plane was sent out to the north of the Hawaiian Islands, allowing the Japanese to win the incredible gamble they were taking in attempting to send their aircraft carriers to within bombing distance of Pearl Harbor without being detected" (p. 92). Indeed, "Army officers shared the belief that the presence of the Navy at Pearl Harbor was sufficient guarantee of full protection for the Hawaiian Islands" (p. 95), and that the fleet was a deterrent and not a target.

One additional result of this stereotyping might be called the "illusion of initiative," the belief that time and initiative are on one's side, and that when taken, the initiative will work. This illusion frequently underestimates the enemy's capabilities and resilience. For example, President Johnson was astonished when the "punch he had been saving," the bombing of North Viet-Nam's industrial base (in operation Rolling Thunder) failed to turn the tide in America's favor. It seemed inconceivable that the North Vietnamese could absorb and adapt to such a "decisive" blow.

Groupthink is not, unfortunately, as readily eliminated as it is diagnosed. The conditions which increase pressures toward groupthink are almost exactly those sought for satisfying group life: internal cohesion, member-keeping power, active participation, security, and self-esteem. Janis' suggested remedies all recognize the need for that delicate balance which is probably the essence of all democratic life: encouragement of critical thought; adoption of a neutral posture by group leaders; and exposure to independent outside opinions.

Grounded as they are in common sense, sensitive observation and group dynamics research, most of Janis' conclusions seem above reproach. The impression is left,

however, both that they are not the entire story and that Janis fails to realize fully (or at least acknowledge) the limitations of his thesis. Specifically, it seems possible to account for many of the phenomena attributed to groupthink by other factors.

Nowhere does Janis seriously consider the cognitive difficulties confronting his decision makers in attempting to process the information relevant to their jobs. There is, however, an extensive literature (e.g., Slovic, 1972; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974) showing that judges are prone to serious and systematic biases in processing complex and probabilistic information. Even the most efficient, enlightened, healthy and democratic group will fail in its appointed task if its members are unable to cope with the data with which they are confronted. Groupthink may alleviate, aggravate, or be irrelevant to these difficulties. Pressures to conformity might even be the result rather than the source of the group's data-handling difficulties (and consequent frustration).

Examples of the difficulties encountered in probabilistic judgment may be seen in Janis' own attempts to explain historical events. In our own work (Fischhoff, 1974; Fischhoff and Beyth, 1975) we have found that people consistently overestimate the predictability of past events once they know how they turned out. Upon examination, it seems likely that some of the wisdom of Janis' hindsight is no more than that sophistry within reach of all post-facto second-guessers. For example, he blames "collective groupthink among interlocking groups" (p. 99) for "America's astounding unreadiness at Pearl Harbor" (p. 100), after noting the extraordinarily clear intelligence picture which the U.S. had as a result of breaking the Japanese secret codes (known as MAGIC). Janis is not the only observer for whom, in the light of such abundant information, the catastrophic surprise raised suspicions of incompetence or worse. The U.S. Congress conducted 39 volumes worth of hearings into the events which preceded the attack. Like Janis, they found the conduct of the Pearl Harbor staff inexcusable.

Quite a different picture, however, emerged from historian Roberta Wohlstetter's (1962) study of these same proceedings and other relevant materials. She concluded that it was highly *improbable* that any American military or political leader should have anticipated the "Day of Infamy" attack, considering the information at his disposal. Available information did contain many harbingers of the impending attack.

The warnings, however, were buried in a mass of contradictory signals indicating that war was far from inevitable at that moment, and that if it came, it would begin elsewhere than Pearl Harbor. These signals were ambiguous as well as contradictory. As Janis himself noted, "for every signal that came into the information net in 1941, there were usually several plausible alternative explanations and it is not surprising that our observers and analysts were inclined to select the explanation that fitted popular hypotheses (none of which considered an attack on Pearl Harbor)" (p. 84).

The investigatory committee did find clear-cut instances of bungling and carelessness. For example, a radar report of the approaching Japanese air armada received a half hour before the attack was not transmitted because the duty officer was only a week-end fill-in and hadn't been thoroughly briefed on his job. But it must be asked whether SNAFU's wouldn't be found by careful scrutiny of any military set-up, successful or unsuccessful. Before passing judgment, it may be worthwhile to consider

Wohlstetter's finding that "Much of the appearance of wanton neglect that emerged in various investigations of the disaster resulted from the unconscious suppression of vast congeries of signs pointing in every direction except Pearl Harbor. It was difficult later to recall these signs since they had led nowhere. Signals that are characterized today as absolutely unequivocal warnings of a surprise air attack on Pearl Harbor become on analysis in the context of December, 1941, not merely ambiguous, but occasionally inconsistent with such an attack" (Wohlstetter, p. 387). Both for Pearl Harbor and the recent Yom Kippur War, hindsightful observers have been able to show "how it was all in the press," i.e., how careful reading of pre-attack newspapers revealed clear indicators of the attack (Marcus, 1973). The same newspapers could, however, have been read to indicate the likelihood of no war at all, or an attack elsewhere, or war between Arizona and New Mexico, for that matter, with properly selective retrospection.

Hunting for scapegoats can be as unproductive as it is unfair. Wohlstetter's summary recommendation is "to accept the fact of uncertainty and learn to live with it. No magic in code or otherwise, will provide certainty, our plans must work without it" (p. 401). Some surprises are evidently to be expected, given the indeterminacy of available data, and when they happen, the improvement of standard operating procedures is likely to be a more fruitful step than the placing of blame.

There are other important factors to which Janis has given short shrift which we will consider briefly. One is the basic ideological perspectives of his decision makers. The most sophisticated group dynamics techniques cannot save leaders who fundamentally misunderstand the political realities of their opponents. A second factor is the technical difficulties inherent in complex organizations responsible for the provision of information and the execution of decisions. Much Pearl Harbor information was lost because of inadequate communications links between intelligence operatives spread around the globe. Improving understanding between people with no direct contact or personal acquaintance would seem to call for operations research or policy science rather than group dynamics techniques.

These organizational considerations were omitted by design (pp. 6-7) in order to restrict the scope of the study. Similar considerations may have led to the elimination of other relevant factors. The exclusion of factors is certainly a valid practice in scholarly work. One frequent psychological side-effect, however, is exaggeration of the importance of those factors which are included. Conviction that groupthink is at work in any given fiasco does not imply conviction that groupthink is all that is at work. It may, however, seem that way if groupthink is the only factor considered.

In recommending ways to overcome groupthink, Janis suggests the "presentation of multiple scenarios as a stimulant to the imagination of the members of policy-making groups which could arouse a state of constructive vigilance in an inert group that has been reposing in tranquil over-confidence" (p. 217). As a possible model for the presentation of multiple scenarios he offers the classic Japanese play *Rashomon* in which "four entirely different scenarios (are presented) successively, each explaining the same events (a sexual assault and a murder) in a different way, attributing entirely different motivations to the principals, yet accounting equally well for the known facts" (p. 217). The point of *Rashomon* is, however, that the facts of any given

historical episode are so ambiguous that they can be accounted for by a variety of contrasting explanations. Although the data in the cases studied by Janis can be interpreted to fit a groupthink explanation, other observers may reasonably find in them evidence of incompetence, conspiracy, or the hopelessness of standing in the way of world revolution. Whatever the insight it provides, any one-factor explanation should carry very clear indications of its limitations.

Reviewed by BARUCH FISCHHOFF and RUTH BEYTH-MAROM, Oregon Research Institute, Eugene, Oregon, U.S.A. and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

REFERENCES

- Fischhoff, B. (1974). "Hindsight: Thinking backwards?" *Oregon Research Institute Research Monograph*, 14: 1.
- Fischhoff, B. (1975). "Hindsight \neq Foresight: The effect of outcome knowledge on judgment under uncertainty," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 1: 288-299.
- Fischhoff, B. and Beyth, R. (1975). "'I knew it would happen'—Remembered probabilities of once-future things," *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 13: 1-16.
- Marcus, Y. (1973). "It was all in the papers," *Ha'aretz*, Oct. 30.
- Slovic, P. (1972). "From Shakespeare to Simon: Speculations—and some evidence—about man's ability to process information," *Oregon Research Institute Research Monograph*, 12: 2.
- Tversky, A. and Kahneman, D. (1974). "Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases," *Science*, 185: 1124-1131.
- Wohlstetter, R. (1962). *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press.

The Politics of Environmental Management

Daniel H. Henning, *Environmental Policy and Administration*; New York: American Elsevier Publishing Company, Inc., 1974, 205 pages.

Since the modern Jeremiahs—Commoner, Erlich, Hardin, and Gofman/Tamplin—warned us that the planet earth is polluting itself out of existence, few political scientists have written "a coherent . . . book on environmental policy and administration" (p. xi). This is not to suggest, however, that none has ever ventured to focus their analytical and conceptual skills on environmental politics. For a good many of them—Caldwell, Davies, Rosenbaum and Garvey to mention just a few—have contributed to the increasing amount of literature on the politics of pollution. But Henning's volume, aside from being the latest publication on the subject, is rather a class unto itself in that it is the only book which so far "helps the student and reader," says Caldwell, "understand the complex overt and covert processes and institutions which underlie and shape environmental policy and its administration"