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Groupthink and the Gulf Crisis

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'Groupthink' refers to a situation in which decision makers seek to achieve concurrence among group members more than to make calculated, carefully considered decisions. In this study, the theory is explored in the case of the 1990–91 Persian Gulf crisis, with particular emphasis on President George Bush's inner circle. Using rare interviews and primary sources, it is revealed that some important conditions of the theory were present that affected how decisions were made, and it is explained theoretically why the outcome was none the less positive, contrary to what the theory would seem to predict.

'The record will show that a lot of issues were not fully discussed.'
US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Chas W. Freeman Jr[1]

The theory of groupthink developed by Irving Janis remains highly influential in explaining how groups make decisions.[2] Prior to Janis, social psychologists explored the implications of small group settings, but not in foreign affairs. While Janis set off a major research tradition that has sought to evaluate, challenge and expand the theory,[3] its non-laboratory application to political contexts outside the originally studied foreign-policy decisions is quite limited. Scholars across disciplines have repeatedly called for systematic and comprehensive testing of the theory, but their call has largely gone unanswered, notwithstanding many useful partial tests of the theory.[4]

By focusing on US decision making in the 1990–91 Persian Gulf crisis, triggered by Iraq's 2 August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, this article seeks to address that gap, to explore the theory as a whole, and to shed new light on why and how the United States went to war on 16 January 1991. The path towards war involved linked, overlapping and sometimes incremental decisions. They included the decisions to deploy US forces to the Gulf initially,

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[1] Interview with Chas W. Freeman Jr, US ambassador to Saudi Arabia (Washington, DC, 19 February 1999). All interviews will be cited in full initially and only with the interviewees' names thereafter.

[2] See Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd ed, revised (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), p. 9.

[3] This literature is discussed throughout this article, but is subsumed in Paul 't Hart, Eric K. Stern and Bengt Sundelius, eds, *Beyond Groupthink: Political Dynamics and Foreign Policy-making* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), esp. chaps. 2 and 3; Won-Woo Park, 'A Review of Research on Groupthink', *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 3 (1990), 229–45; Paul B. Paulus, 'Developing Consensus about Groupthink after All These Years', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 73 (March 1998), 362–74, at pp. 370–1; A. Amin Mohamed and Frank A. Wiebe, 'Toward a Process Theory of Groupthink', *Small Group Research*, 27 (1996), 416–30.

[4] Sixteen partial tests were conducted across disciplines prior to 1991, see Park, 'A Review of Research on Groupthink'. A consensus among scholars on the need for more systematic and partial tests was identified in Paulus, 'Developing Consensus about Groupthink after All These Years'. Also see Sally Riggs Fuller and Ramon J. Adlag, 'Organizational Tonypandy: Lessons from a Quarter Century of the Groupthink Phenomenon', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 73 (1998), 163–84; Christopher P. Neck and Gregory Moorhead, 'Groupthink Remodeled: The Importance of Leadership, Time Pressure, and Methodical Decision-Making Procedures', *Human Relations*, 48 (1995), 537–57, at p. 554.

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to reverse the invasion, demand a total and unconditional Iraqi withdrawal, move away from using economic sanctions, double US forces in the Gulf and issue Iraq an ultimatum to withdraw. In exploring the Gulf case, the article makes three related arguments. First, enough conditions of the theory of groupthink existed (although certainly not all) to say that President George Bush's inner circle exhibited significant elements of groupthink. Secondly, that finding can help explain why few members of Bush's inner circle opposed the sometimes controversial decisions that took the United States to war. Thirdly, while elements of groupthink existed, the outcome was largely positive, contrary to the theory's probabilistic prediction. After presenting the evidence, the article develops a theory to explain when groupthink may produce a positive outcome. The potential for groupthink existed because Bush relied heavily on the 'gang of eight' and the deputies' group. The 'gang of eight' included the president, Vice President Quayle, Chief-of-Staff John Sununu and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, who met nearly each morning, in part to prepare the agenda for the gang of eight meetings.[5] It also included Secretary of State James Baker, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs-of-Staff Colin Powell and Robert Gates, Scowcroft's deputy, who acted as a link to the deputies' committee. White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater also joined the gang of eight, and participated in its deliberations, particularly on questions of public relations.[6] While several committees composed of deputies played a role, the main deputies' committee which framed many of the key issues and papers for the gang of eight consisted of six core individuals. They represented members of the gang of eight and included Gates, who chaired the committee; Paul Wolfowitz, under secretary of defense for policy; Robert Kimmitt, under secretary of state for political affairs; Richard Kerr of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA); Admiral David Jeremiah, who was Powell's deputy and representative; and Richard Haass, special assistant to the president for Near East and South Asian affairs, who drafted most of the papers.

GROUPTHINK AS A THEORY

Janis's theory examines small elite groups at critical junctures in the foreign policy process, although the theory is of cross-disciplinary salience. According to Janis, groupthink is a concurrence-seeking tendency that develops particularly at an early decision-making stage. In such a group, 'the members' striving for unanimity override[s] their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.'[7] As Janis points out, when 'groupthink dominates, suppression of deviant thoughts takes the form of each person's deciding that his misgivings are not relevant, that the benefit of any doubt should be given to the group consensus.'[8] As a result, individuals hesitate to dissent, and conflict avoidance becomes a norm. Groupthink is most likely to occur in groups that are cohesive or, in other words, exhibit a high level of amiability and *esprit de corps* among their members. But while high cohesiveness is necessary for groupthink to occur, it is not sufficient. Rather, four structural conditions (represented by Box B1 in Figure 1) also play a crucial role. They are (1) group insulation from outside sources of information and opinion that could

[5] Interview with National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft (Washington, DC: 18 February 1999). Interview with Chief-of-Staff John Sununu (by phone: 11 August 1999).

[6] Interview with White House Spokesman Marlin Fitzwater (by phone: 21 June 1999).

[7] Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 9.

[8] Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 247.

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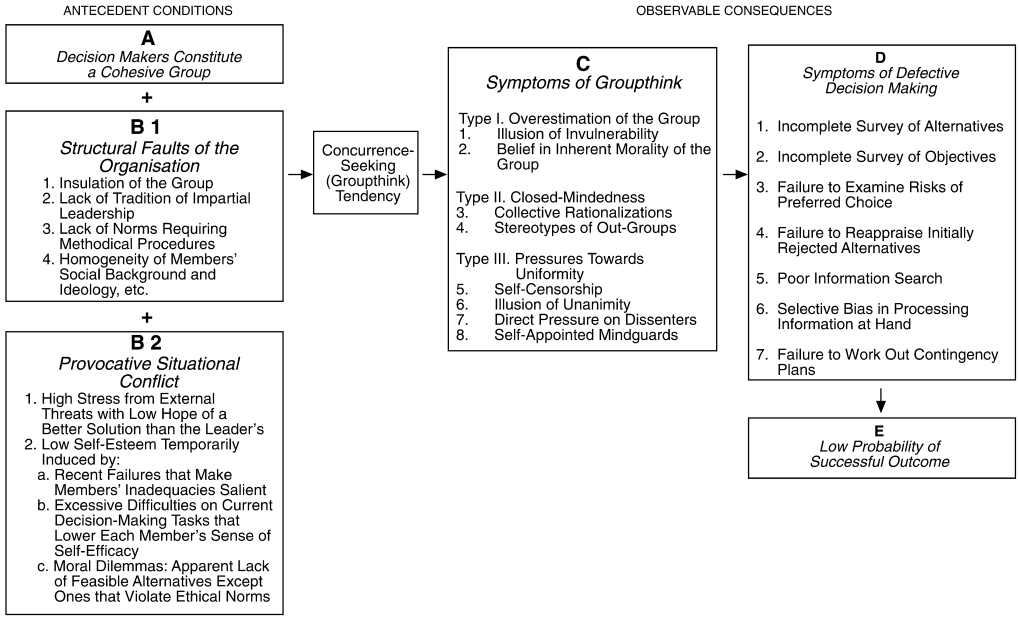


*Fig. 1. Theoretical analysis of groupthink**

*Based on Irving James and Leon Mann, *Decision Making* (New York: The Free Press, 1977).

challenge group beliefs; (2) a lack of tradition of impartial leadership; (3) lack of norms requiring methodical decision-making procedures for considering evidence and alternative options; and (4) homogeneity of members' social background and ideology. These conditions increase the likelihood of groupthink because they predispose group members to believe that before all alternatives have been carefully weighed, a prevailing course of action has developed that they should support. The conditions represent 'the absence of a potential source of organizational constraint that could help to prevent the members of a cohesive policy-making group from developing a norm of indulging in uncritical conformity.'[9]

In addition to cohesiveness and the four structural conditions, Janis identifies a provocative situational context (caused largely by high stress) as contributing to groupthink (represented by Box B2 in Figure 1). This context contributes to groupthink, in part, because it makes members of the group more cohesive in addressing the threat or challenge at hand. The antecedent conditions (group cohesiveness, the four structural conditions and a provocative context) can cause groupthink. Groupthink, in turn, produces symptoms of groupthink or the observable consequences of groupthink (represented by Box C in Figure 1), and symptoms of defective decision making of which Janis identifies seven types (represented in Box D in Figure 1).

How to Test the Theory

The theory of groupthink is quite complex and thick, which makes it useful to test it systematically. As a prior task, however, we need to address three methodological concerns. In order to do so, I draw heavily on the guidelines for testing the theory provided

[9] Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 249.

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by Janis.[10] The first concern that Janis identifies is objectivity. Individuals involved in the subject matter or recently affected by it may be less objective. That is not the case here. The second concern deals with the requirements used for the acceptance or rejection of the theory. This article attempted to use multiple sources before determining whether a crucial condition of the theory was present. The third concern is sources of information. While Janis was limited to secondary sources in testing the occurrence of groupthink, which he recognized to be a limitation,[11] this article is based on analysis of documents at the George Bush Presidential Library, memoirs, public statements by key decision makers, and extensive interviews with them. While interviews can be useful, especially for a data-demanding theory like groupthink, they can also pose risks.[12] While we cannot eliminate them, we can take several measures to decrease them and help ensure the accuracy of the account.[13]

ANTECEDENT CONDITIONS

We now can turn to a systematic analysis of the theory and explore in order the antecedent conditions that can contribute to groupthink: group cohesiveness, the four structural conditions and a provocative situational context.

Group Cohesiveness

Group cohesiveness was in part engendered by Bush's style and existed to a significant extent. To be sure, it is not uncommon for presidents to choose friends to join their cabinets. Trust and co-operation are well served by doing so, not to speak of managing campaigns and handling scandals. But, in the Bush White House, camaraderie was perhaps unprecedented, despite the sometimes confrontational style of John Sununu and C. Boyden Gray, who was the unabashedly opinionated chief counsel. Cheney, Bush, Gates and Scowcroft had worked together going at least as far back as the Ford administration, and Baker was a longstanding Bush confidante. Scowcroft, who had served in four administrations and had known Bush since the Nixon administration when he was military assistant to the president and Bush was at the United Nations, put it in perspective in saying that he had 'never seen anything like it before'.[14] Gates, another Washington veteran who served under six presidents, put it more interestingly:

I tell professors to throw those textbooks out, because at crunch time, it is personalities that count. The unique distinction was that the whole inner circle was composed of old friends who

[10] As do Hensley and Griffin. See Thomas R. Hensley and Glen W. Griffin, 'Victims of Groupthink: The Kent State University Board of Trustees and the 1977 Gymnasium Controversy', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 30 (1986), 497–531, esp. p. 501.

[11] Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. viii–ix.

[12] In particular, decision makers may not recollect events accurately or may seek to provide self-serving accounts.

[13] The interviewees cited here are on the record. Their input may be evaluated against extant or future historical accounts and memoirs. Major pieces of evidence are usually backed up with more than one source and/or cross-checked for accuracy against information obtained from declassified documents, personal papers, memoirs and other interviewee inputs. Statements that were viewed as self-serving were explored in follow-up interviews or vetted out.

[14] Scowcroft interview.

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went fishing and golfing together. By contrast, as an insider, I can say that by comparison everybody hated everybody under Carter and Reagan.[15]

The group was so close knit that some meetings appeared to reflect a convivial card game, with feet kicked up and laughs making the rounds, than a sober, formal review of options. Cohesiveness was also fuelled by norms of loyalty, which Bush, nursed on such notions at an early age, instilled in others.[16]

Group Insulation

The first structural condition deals with group insulation, in this case, from the broader foreign policy community. The gang of eight was, to some extent, insulated from outside sources of information and opinions, in part because it was structurally exclusive. Neither the group of four – composed of Bush, Quayle, Sununu and Scowcroft, who met nearly each morning in regular staff meetings – nor the gang of eight relied on outside experts or input except, sporadically, from some foreign leaders.[17] The gang was also insulated by design to avoid leaks to the press.[18] While Chas Freeman criticized US decision making for not integrating military and political approaches, Scowcroft wrote in his diary on 6 August that he recognized that the 'economic side of the house feels excluded from the military options side; and yes, they are by my order … Economics are an important part of this but we are trying to curtail some of the information on a "need-to-know" basis.'[19]

Bush's ability to press the war option was related to exclusive decision-making. As with the decision to invade Panama,[20] virtually all critical decisions were made by Bush and the gang, with the bureaucracy essentially shut out, although administration officials, including Bush, did extensively brief members of Congress and hear their concerns.[21] Despite that, Speaker of the House of Representatives Thomas Foley was perplexed that he was notified of the 31 October decision to double US forces in the Gulf, made privately, only on 8 November.[22] It is clear that the administration would have gone to war, based on the Korean precedent in which President Truman intervened militarily in a UN collective security effort, even if Congress did not support the move.[23]

Lack of Tradition of Impartial Leadership

The second structural condition exists when a leader does not feel restricted by 'any organizational tradition to avoid pushing for his own preferred policies'.[24] Under such

[15] Interview with Deputy National Security Advisor Robert Gates (by phone: 24 June 1999).

[16] John Sununu, Speech on Bush Presidency, and Question and Answer session (C-SPAN-2, 31 December 1991).

[17] Fitzwater interview.

[18] Sununu and Scowcroft interviews.

[19] George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), p. 338.

[20] For a brief, authoritative sketch, see David Hoffman, 'The politics of timidity', *Washington Post*, National Weekly Edition, 23–29 October 1989, p. A6.

[21] Report, Meetings on the Persian Gulf (OA/ID CF 01361, Virginia Lampley Files, NSC, George Bush Presidential Library (GBPL), Texas A & M University, College Station, Texas). Bush was pleased when leaders such as Speaker of the House Tom Foley recognized as much. Excerpt from Bush diary, in Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 397.

[22] *The Road to War: American Decision Making During the Gulf Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1993).

[23] Scowcroft interview.

[24] Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 249.

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conditions, the leader is more likely to be 'partial', as I refer to it hereafter. Such partiality can be exercised through overt pressures or through subtle constraints on open expression. When a determined leader announces a certain decision, others are likely to accept it 'somewhat uncritically, as though it were equivalent to a group norm'.[25] While that does not transform them into sycophants, it makes them reluctant to express their doubts openly or to consider alternatives fully.[26]

It is abundantly clear that partial leadership was at play. From the outset, President Bush steered others towards his unyielding view that Iraq would face massive war if it did not withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait, and should be constrained even if it withdrew. Scowcroft noted, for instance, that he 'was absolutely essential … a pillar of strength … He realized early on what was required and was determined to do it and simply kept on course,' and Baker added that Bush 'clearly set the course for US decision making.'[27]

While Bush acknowledged that the 'Reagan style of "collegial" management encouraged outspokenness at Cabinet meetings, with the president listening to a spectrum of opinion',[28] his approach in the Gulf crisis differed. His style also differed from that of presidents such as Dwight Eisenhower, who encouraged others at National Security Council (NSC) meetings to challenge his position so as to explore options more systematically,[29] and that of Nixon who, in instituting a new NSC system, stressed that he wanted the bureaucracy to present clear alternatives, irrespective of what his key advisers were recommending.[30]

While Bush at times did encourage open discussions and debate, his approach did not place a high priority on each member airing doubts and raising objections. He certainly did not refrain from stating his preferences early on and sometimes in quite stark terms. Nor did he assign anyone the role of devil's advocate, or ensure that all alternatives were carefully considered, which might have offset leadership bias,[31] a dynamic on which we will focus more attention later in this article.

Lack of Norms for Methodical Procedures

The gang of eight clearly lacked procedures for evaluating alternatives (such as carefully considering the pros and cons of each available option). That was in stark contrast, for instance, to President Kennedy's decision-making group during the Cuban missile crisis, which laid out at least ten alternatives and discussed them methodically.[32] Indeed, no

[25] Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p. 131.

[26] Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*, p. 3.

[27] *Frontline* interview with Brent Scowcroft. (All *Frontline* interviews cited hereafter were aired originally on 9 and 10 January 1996, on the PBS show *Frontline*.)

[28] George Bush (with Victor Gold), *Looking Forward* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. 231.

[29] See Patrick J. Haney, *Organizing for Foreign Policy Crises*: *Presidents, Advisors, and the Management of Decision Making* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 65. Also, on Eisenhower's style, see Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), esp. p. 256.

[30] Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1974), p. 109.

[31] See Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 267.

[32] Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 143.

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evidence exists that anyone even referred to the desirability of using methodical decision-making procedures in the Gulf crisis.

Several factors can explain why such approaches were largely absent, especially on the more significant decisions. First, while Bush, as Powell described him in his earlier days, tended to be a cautious information gatherer,[33] in the Gulf crisis he was more impetuous. This was reflected in his bold and surprising statement that the invasion would not stand; in his emotional response to Kuwaiti atrocities;[34] fiery and repeated use of the Munich analogy; and personalization of the conflict with Saddam.[35]

Secondly, the president often knew what he wanted ahead of gang of eight meetings, either through independent, bilateral or group of four meetings.[36] As Sununu puts it, a 'lot of opinion shaping took place on a one-on-one basis and was then firmed in the group of four meetings, before affecting the gang of eight as a whole'.[37] Scowcroft understood 'Bush's mind better than anyone else' and was central in pushing the 'engine of government' that implemented Bush's views.[38] He encouraged Bush to shape his views privately sometimes.[39] This type of decision making increased Bush's power by decreasing the unpredictability of group meetings and helping shape group consensus. In this sense, in the Gulf crisis at least, Bush was not unlike President Lyndon Johnson who funnelled and received information through McGeorge Bundy, his special assistant for national security affairs,[40] and who used closed meetings with no established staff process for evaluating options.[41]

Scowcroft, in particular, spent much time privately with Bush during which Bush tested ideas on him and shared concerns.[42] They had the intimacy of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and President Nixon, with an added dimension of implicit trust and deep friendship. Scowcroft had access to the president at any time, without making an appointment, on virtually any issue. As Quayle put it, if the president did not decide an issue immediately, that usually 'meant that Brent Scowcroft was going to get his way, and you could pretty much count on whatever position you'd just heard him argue being the one that would prevail.'[43]

During the crisis, there were innumerable ways by which decisions could have been more methodical.[44] But Bush, buoyed by Scowcroft, often knew what he wanted to do, and given group dynamics, could do so. To a lesser extent, Bush also confided in Baker on a one-on-one basis. Other officials, according to Colin Powell, did not even know what

[33] See Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New York: Scribner, 1997), p. 455.

[34] They had a major impact on him (Scowcroft interview).

[35] On the impact of personalization and the use of the Munich analogy, see Betty Glad, 'Figuring Out Saddam Hussein', in Marcia Lynn Whicker, James P. Pfiffner and Raymond A. Moore, eds, *The Presidency and the Persian Gulf War* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993), 65–89; Alex Roberto Hybel, *Power over Rationality: The Bush Administration and the Gulf Crisis* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991).

[36] Gates and Sununu interviews.

[37] Sununu interview.

[38] Gates interview.

[39] Scowcroft interview.

[40] On Johnson, see Haney, *Organizing for Foreign Policy Crises*, p. 70.

[41] David C. Humphrey, 'Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House: A Preliminary Assessment', *Diplomatic History*, 8 (Winter 1984), 81–101.

[42] Scowcroft and Gates interviews.

[43] Dan Quayle, *Standing Firm: A Vice-Presidential Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 102.

[44] See James P. Pfiffner, 'Presidential Policy-Making and the Gulf War', in Whicker *et al.*, eds, *The Presidency*, pp. 3–23, at pp. 7–8.

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was going on in these bilateral meetings because Bush, they surmised, shared certain views only with Baker.[45] Yet, when it served particular goals, even Baker was excluded either intentionally or unintentionally from key decisions. As Freeman asserts,

> Baker played the role the president wanted him to play, which reflected poorly on the president's notion of the relationship between war and diplomacy. He cut Baker out of the military planning. Baker had no real idea of military planning. He did not understand the air campaign and he thought it would be one week long – ignorance that surprised me.[46]

Thirdly, the complexities and time pressures of decision making, particularly in periods of crisis, meant that decision making perforce was often *ad hoc*. As Scowcroft recalls:

> If there was time, I would talk to Cheney and Baker to gauge their mood. If a lot of space existed between their views, their principals would meet without the president and we would hash out differences or sharpen them to see where all of us were, so we wouldn't waste the president's time and then have one or more meetings with him at which he would then decide the big issues. For immediate issues, we called the gang together but I hated to do that because it wasted the president's time. I tried to make meetings more efficient.[47]

Homogeneity of Members' Social Background and Ideology

Group insulation was enhanced by the homogeneity of social and ideological views within the gang. Bush and Scowcroft were not only close friends, but also saw reality in general and Saddam in particular similarly. Scowcroft, moreover, viewed one of his core tasks as generating and maintaining harmony among the president's key advisers, who in his estimation had a 'common world view' and shared 'broad consensus about policy'.[48] By contrast, in past administrations, the general world view itself was in question. Under Carter, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance disagreed fundamentally on how to deal with Moscow. Vance argued for lowering tensions and Brzezinski for a tougher line, especially on global competition.[49] In Scowcroft's view, based on firsthand knowledge of both instances, the 'Bush team wasn't anything like Cy Vance and Brzezinski, Weinberger and Shultz under Reagan, or even Kissinger and Rogers under Nixon.'[50]

Moreover, the group had similar social backgrounds. Bush and Baker were old Texas friends who were doubles partners in tennis; Gates, Scowcroft, Cheney, Baker and Bush were old government hands, having been moulded for two or more decades in the Washington milieu by virtue of their shared experiences.[51]

[45] Interview with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs-of-Staff Colin Powell (Alexandria, Va: 26 May 1996).
[46] Freeman interview.
[47] Scowcroft interview.
[48] Scowcroft interview.
[49] At several points, Vance even 'warned' President Carter of the danger that Brzezinski's public pronouncements could undermine Vance's and harm US interests. On this schism, see Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), p. 36.
[50] Scowcroft interview.
[51] Professional socialization is associated with generating a similar frame of reference, a similar orientation and disposition towards issues. See Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, 'The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields', in Powell and DiMaggio, eds, *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 36–82, esp. pp. 71–2.

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Provocative Situational Context

We can now examine the third and final antecedent condition – a provocative situational context (Box B2 in Figure 1). The first aspect of this context is high stress from external threats. They arise chiefly when members are concerned about the risk of personal or organizational setbacks and losses from whatever option is chosen. Such threats can unify the group. While Janis emphasizes that high stress alone is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for groupthink,[52] the social psychology literature counsels that stress adds to it.[53]

In the Gulf case, decision makers were not under constant pressure and stress as was the case in the much shorter Cuban missile crisis. But they did experience stress, which they often tried to relieve through jokes and raucous laughter.[54] In particular, they faced significant stress in the first weeks after the invasion.[55] They feared that Iraq might invade Saudi Arabia and successfully seize Saudi oilfields, thus giving Saddam influence over nearly half of the world's oil. Indeed, as early as 2 August in a meeting in Aspen, Colorado, Bush and Thatcher contemplated which countries would be with them if Saudi Arabia were invaded.[56] The president would assert a few days later his concern that the Iraqis were headed south towards Saudi Arabia when 'they said they were withdrawing'.[57] Iraqi forces, for their part, did enter Saudi territory on three occasions beginning on 3 August, prompting the Saudis to activate a 'hot line' to Iraq's army.[58] In a 9 August letter to Congress, Bush observed that the Iraqis were 'capable of initiating further hostilities with little or no additional preparation … and pose a direct threat to neighboring countries'.[59] The gang of eight in particular feared that the first arriving US forces could be easily overrun by Iraq's army.[60]

Meanwhile, developments that we take for granted in retrospect were not clear at the outset. It was unclear whether the Saudis would grant access (and continued access) to forces led by the United States,[61] whether such forces could arrive in the Gulf in a timely fashion,[62] whether Washington could effectively develop and maintain a coalition, and whether Iraq could be evicted from Kuwait without massive casualties. Bush and the gang of eight were clearly on top of, but at the same time highly pressured by, the tough task

[52] Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 250.

[53] See Hensley and Griffin, 'Victims of Groupthink', p. 511.

[54] Sununu interview.

[55] This paragraph is based on interviews with Scowcroft, Powell and Baker. Also, interview with Director of Central Intelligence William Webster (Washington, DC: 1 October 1999).

[56] Interview with Fitzwater, who was present at the meeting.

[57] Press Conference by the president, 8 August 1990 (OA/ID, CF0703, Roman Popadiuk Files, Office of the Press Secretary, GBPL). Also, see Bush interview with Sir David Frost, PBS, 16 January 1996.

[58] See Jacob Goldberg, 'Saudi Arabia: The Bank Vault Next Door', in Amatzia Baram and Barry Rubin, eds, *Iraq's Road to War* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 117–34, at pp. 127–8.

[59] Letter from Bush to Foley, 9 August 1990 (OA/ID CFO1362, Virginia Lampley Files, NSC, GBPL). The US view paralleled that of Saudi Arabia. As the chief Saudi military leader on the ground put it, even if Saudi Arabia were not invaded, Iraq would be in a position on 'all important matters – particularly oil policy and foreign affairs' to 'dictate terms' (HRH General Khaled Bin Sultan (with Patrick Seale), *Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War by the Joint Forces Commander* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), esp. p. 19).

[60] That this became a collective concern early on was confirmed by all the interviewees.

[61] See Dilip Hiro, *Desert Shield to Desert Storm: The Second Gulf War* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 110–11.

[62] On this challenge, see Michael R. Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The General's War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1995), pp. 57–66.

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of addressing the threat at the international level, while dealing simultaneously with domestic opposition and politics.[63]

Stress took a visible toll. Scowcroft's many all-nighters, starting on 2 August when he awakened the president and first lady at 5 a.m. to fill them in on the invasion, left him dozing at meetings. This prompted Bush affectionately to bestow the newly minted Scowcroft award on anyone who fell asleep during meetings – a ritual that added to group cohesiveness. At certain junctures, however, Bush was quite concerned about Scowcroft's health and that of others. As Bush recalls in his diary on 24 January:

> everybody's got the shivers. I worry about Brent Scowcroft. He's been up all night – many, many nights and I worry about him. I call the doctor and the doctor goes down and talks to him and says he's got a fever and the flu and the guy just won't go home and take care of himself.[64]

Baker recalls that Bush, who like Powell agonized over potential casualties, also understood that the crisis could bring down his presidency,[65] a prospect that Baker and Quayle seriously contemplated as well,[66] a prospect with negative implications for all of the members of the gang of eight. In addition to the Gulf crisis, we should recall that the administration faced a slate of evolving domestic problems, including a serious economic recession that higher oil prices would have exacerbated if the crisis were to be mishandled.

A second aspect of the provocative situational context is a temporary lack of self-esteem. It is an internal source of stress that is based much more on the self-perceptions of group members. It can be caused by (1) recent failures that make members' inadequacies salient; (2) excessive difficulties in making decisions that lower the members' sense of self-efficacy; and (3) moral dilemmas of having to choose an option that violates their ethical standards of conduct. Such factors can bring the group closer together to cope with the challenge at hand. This condition is difficult to test because it requires knowledge about the psychology of the decision makers, which they themselves may not understand. We do know that Bush was viewed as a 'wimp' in some political quarters – a label at which he chafed;[67] that an October 1990 budget showdown with Congress loomed and would push Bush to renege on his 'no new taxes' pledge, damaging his credibility; and that decision making was taxing. But it is not clear how that affected their sense of efficacy. Finally, the group did face moral dilemmas associated with the decision to go to war, but they were not notably forced towards an option that they felt, or we could infer, violated their sense of ethics.

Concurrence-Seeking (Groupthink) Tendency

In brief, the gang of eight was highly cohesive, the four structural conditions existed, and there was a provocative situational context. While no votes were taken at meetings, the record suggests that few individuals challenged the consensus that developed on the central

[63] *Frontline* interview with Richard Cheney; Scowcroft, Haass and Fitzwater interviews. On the complexity of dealing with domestic and international constituencies simultaneously, see Robert Putnam, 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-level Games', *International Organization*, 42 (1988), 427–60.

[64] Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 459.

[65] James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1995).

[66] Quayle, *Standing Firm*, p. 208.

[67] Scowcroft interview.

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decisions leading to war. We can contrast that with dynamics during other crises, such as in Lebanon during President Reagan's first term, when core decision makers disagreed bitterly on the basic nature of US policy, or even during the Cuban missile crisis.

SYMPTOMS OF GROUPTHINK

We have discovered that the antecedent conditions for groupthink largely existed. Janis theorizes that groupthink and their existence can produce eight symptoms of groupthink, but that all eight need not be present to say that groupthink has occurred. These symptoms or indicators of groupthink can be broken down into three categories: (1) overestimation of the group's abilities and morality, (2) closed-mindedness, and (3) pressures towards uniformity.

1. Overestimation. The first aspect of overestimation is an illusion of invulnerability. Little evidence confirms that members of the gang of eight developed a shared view that they could do no wrong. Baker saw the peril in the crisis quite clearly, as did Powell who cautioned the president repeatedly about potential casualties.[68] Moreover, as noted before, the presidency was viewed as on the line by Bush, Quayle and Baker.[69] The second aspect of overestimation is a belief in the inherent morality of the group, such that it views its motives and actions as just and ignores the moral implications of its behaviour.[70] Clearly, the members of the gang of eight saw its motives as just. While differences in view existed, they felt that Saddam was an egregious transgressor who had to be checked and even punished. But it is not clear that they ignored the moral implications of their behaviour.

2. Closed-mindedness. Janis identifies two symptoms closely associated with the closed-mindedness of the group: stereotyped views of rivals as too evil to negotiate with or too lame to be a serious challenge, and rationalizing to discount any warnings or information that might question or destroy group consensus on a decision.[71] The gang, and Bush in particular, did not view Saddam as someone with whom to negotiate. And to some extent, that no doubt was related to an image of Saddam as evil. As Scowcroft noted of Bush:

> I think he in his own mind demonized Saddam Hussein. And it's not hard to do … when the reports came in about the way Kuwait was being treated, or just the way Saddam treated his own people in different circumstances, it took on a good versus evil kind of quality to it.[72]

The administration not only refused to negotiate with Saddam, but also to give him even the semblance of a face-saving withdrawal. At the same time, it is fair to say that Iraq's aggression itself made negotiation problematic, even without stereotypes at play. Moreover, little evidence suggests that the group rationalized or discounted crucial warnings or information.

3. Pressures towards uniformity. The third category of symptoms involves pressures towards uniformity, of which there are four symptoms: self-censorship, an illusion of

[68] Gates and Fitzwater interviews.
[69] Quayle, *Standing Firm*, p. 208.
[70] See Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 174.
[71] Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 174.
[72] *Frontline* interview with Scowcroft.

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unanimity, direct pressure on any member who dissents or argues against any of the group's views and the emergence of self-appointed mindguards who protect the group from adverse ideas or information that can undermine consensus.[73] Evidence suggests that the first three symptoms were present to some extent but not the fourth.

Self-censorship, as well as group pressure, is indicated by the fact that key group members agreed with Bush in the group, despite their own doubts about his approach outside it. Like Nixon who, according to Kissinger, was opposed to settling 'disagreements face-to-face' and 'abhorred large meetings, especially those in which he might be asked to arbitrate between conflicting points of view',[74] Bush himself hated confrontation. As Quayle notes, Bush 'wanted to avoid friction. He didn't mind debate in his administration, but he was very bothered by any report of people not getting along,' such that he refused to settle disagreements between officials.[75] That predilection affected the decision-making atmosphere.

Bush preferred to generate consensus, and on some issues Scowcroft and others even screened the debate before it reached the president,[76] thus injecting direct pressures on group members. While Bush was much more likely to encourage debate on domestic issues,[77] he was inclined to eschew it on foreign affairs and in particular in the Gulf crisis case. This proclivity, when combined with Bush's strong views and the general mood of harmony and loyalty discussed earlier, made members of the gang less likely to question him. Such an atmosphere also created the type of tacit peer pressure that made deviance from the norm more difficult. That was reflected in the high level of agreement in the group. As Secretary Cheney put it, while some disagreement arose, by and large the crisis was one of 'co-operation and moving in sync and agreeing 90 per cent of the time'.[78] While there were instances of questioning who was giving the president bad advice, co-operation was strong.

Bush set the tone for consensus, and Powell, Baker and Schwarzkopf voiced muted or transient concerns at best, despite their own views. As Scowcroft recalls, almost from the outset,

> Powell was much less convinced about the importance of the invasion. That was manifested on several occasions. Powell was wedded to the notion that you used armed forces when the country is behind it, a function of his Vietnam experience which flavoured Colin's approach.[79]

Gates added that 'Colin felt an enormous sense of responsibility for the troops – worried that they were being pushed into conflict, in the post-Vietnam period.'[80]

At the second NSC meeting on 3 August, Powell lightly questioned whether it was worth going to war to liberate Kuwait, later admitting that the question was inappropriate given that he was only supposed to give military advice.[81] Indeed, Cheney would reprimand him for precisely that. As Powell recalls, such questions annoyed Cheney enough that he

[73] Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 175.
[74] See Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 68.
[75] Quayle, *Standing Firm*, p. 93.
[76] Scowcroft interview.
[77] John P. Burke, *The Institutional Presidency* (Baltimore, Md: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 162–63.
[78] *Frontline* interview with Richard Cheney.
[79] Scowcroft interview.
[80] Gates interview.
[81] Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 465–6.

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cautioned him to 'just do the military options. Don't be the secretary of state or the secretary of defense or the national security adviser'.[82] While that may have been motivated in part by turf issues, it also suggested direct pressure to rein in Powell's dissent.

Inasmuch as dissent existed, it did not cause serious disagreements on key questions. Bush helped ensure that 'people acted in the bounds that he thought were appropriate',[83] and the gang eventually fell in line with the move towards war.

SYMPTOMS OF DEFECTIVE DECISION MAKING

While the antecedent conditions can cause groupthink, groupthink can produce seven types of defective decision making. They are explored systematically below. It is vital to note that the theory does not require that all or even a majority of them occur, but holds that the greater the number present, the more likely groupthink will produce a fiasco.

1. Incomplete Survey of Alternatives

The most important symptom is that the group does not effectively discuss alternatives or options. This is especially problematic if a leader seeks to push an agenda on the group and reveals a favoured policy alternative early in the decision-making process, before other alternatives can be discussed fully.[84]

Without opening up the black box of decision making and delving into the inner workings of a unitary actor, we could reconstruct the crisis as one in which the United States at the broadest level weighed alternatives. That is, it tried diplomatic means, economic means and military threats to get Saddam out of Kuwait before going to war. Inside the black box, we could also note that behaviour was not black and white. In Scowcroft's view, 'while the president and I talked about the crisis frequently and were on the same wavelength, no *faits accomplis* were presented to the group.'[85] Bush sometimes also was careful, Fitzwater recalls, not to bias the discussion but 'instead to smoke others out first in a non-adversarial manner. You would sometimes have people on each side and in the end the president would say that this is what we will do.'[86] However, these qualifications notwithstanding, the record strongly suggests that alternatives were not carefully evaluated on key decisions.

After the first NSC meeting on 2 August 1990, in which, as Scowcroft put it, the invasion was treated 'as if it were a *fait accompli* and as if it was hard to do anything about it',[87] Bush and Scowcroft decided to alter how the crisis was interpreted and treated.[88] Bush opened the second NSC meeting on 3 August with a few stern remarks, remaining largely quiet thereafter, and then Scowcroft asserted that the invasion was a critical threat to US and global interests, which could not be tolerated. Members present believed that

[82] *Frontline* interview with Colin Powell.
[83] Sununu interview.
[84] See Clark McCauley, 'The Nature of Social Influence in Groupthink: Compliance and Internalization', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57 (1989), 250–60.
[85] Scowcroft interview.
[86] Fitzwater interview.
[87] Scowcroft interview.
[88] On the vital importance of problem representation, see Donald A. Sylvan and James F. Voss, eds, *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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Scowcroft sought to get others to fall in line, and indeed Scowcroft asserted that accommodating Iraq 'should not be a policy option'.[89]

Lawrence Eagleburger, aware of Bush and Scowcroft's strong position, pounded the table and said, 'absolutely right', asserting that Saudi Arabia and then Israel would be Saddam's next targets.[90] As Scowcroft recalls and Bush confirms, Eagleburger as well as Cheney, 'reinforced solidarity for the larger group',[91] contributing to a significant shift in 'tone' from the first NSC meeting.[92] Bush who had been somewhat reserved, concluded the meeting by asserting that the invasion was 'an issue of great importance for the United States', and that 'he expected everybody to treat it as such'.[93] Powell was largely quiet, despite preferring to protect Saudi Arabia rather than to reverse the invasion.[94]

On 5 August, Bush made an important statement about the crisis. He asserted in public that Iraq's invasion would not stand, effectively eliminating the alternative that the United States would allow Iraq to remain in Kuwait. Bush's statement was made outside the group setting, but it shaped group dynamics. An emerging norm for taking a strong, uncompromising stand began to develop in which Iraq would be removed by force if it did not withdraw unconditionally and totally. That contrasted sharply with the approach of President Kennedy in the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. Kennedy had wanted some meetings held without him, after learning that that motivated more spirited debate, and purposefully made certain that his first moves did not shut down options for either side.[95]

Scowcroft, who was not consulted on Bush's statement, despite being Bush's closest confidante in the crisis, was surprised at how early in the crisis Bush made it.[96] Powell viewed it as altering US options from protecting Saudi Arabia to evicting Iraq from Kuwait.[97] For him, the president had moved from 'not discussing intervention' to a 'line in the sand'.[98] Bush's 5 August statement was particularly powerful because the chief focus at Camp David the weekend before, as Quayle observed, was on how to defend Saudi Arabia rather than on how to evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait.[99] While Powell and Baker realized that there was little debate on the options of deploying forces to Saudi Arabia and reversing the invasion, Powell did not question the move at the NSC meeting on the evening of 5 August.[100]

From the outset, Powell felt that the 'President should not be just looking at a single option of invading at the end of a time', but rather 'felt it was important that he look at all options available to him'.[101] However, he presented Bush with his position of continuing

[89] Bush and Scowcroft, *The World Transformed*, p. 323; see Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 237.

[90] Scowcroft and Fitzwater interviews. Also, see Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990–1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 76.

[91] Scowcroft interview; Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Restored*, pp. 322–3.

[92] Interview with Scowcroft, and Special Assistant to the President for Near East and South Asian Affairs Richard Haass (Washington, DC: 13 June 1999).

[93] Based in part on a *Frontline* interview with Scowcroft.

[94] See Gordon and Trainor, *The General's War*, pp. 35–7.

[95] Theodore C. Sorensen, *Decision-Making in the White House*: *The Olive Branch or the Arrows* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 20–1.

[96] Scowcroft interview.

[97] *Frontline* interview with Colin Powell; Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 333.

[98] Powell, *My American Journey*, p. 466.

[99] Quayle, *Standing Firm*, pp. 206–7.

[100] See Woodward, *The Commanders*, pp. 261–2.

[101] *Frontline* interview with Colin Powell.

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economic sanctions and using containment in lieu of force only on 24 September in a brief meeting, where he was rebuffed in short order.[102] Powell's opposition, as described by Scowcroft, Gates and Fitzwater, was 'subliminal'.[103] As Fitzwater recalls, from the first day on 'Powell never offered a word of reluctance about the approach, or even suggested reservations about not using economic sanctions longer, despite our many discussions on it'.[104] Gates who was at most of the gang of eight meetings, confirms that point:

> I never heard Colin Powell try and deflect the president from his course of action or to argue in front of the president for containment. I don't recall any such thing. He would at times in the privacy of Scowcroft's office, sometimes with Cheney there, sometimes with Cheney and Baker both there, make those points.[105]

Like Powell, Baker was concerned about the path towards war. As Eagleburger observes, Baker, 'in his gut, preferred not to do any of this'.[106] Baker informed Powell early on in the crisis, after Powell contacted him to express concern over the march to war, that the state department was preparing a report on the advantages of waiting for economic sanctions to work.[107] Baker was concerned that the United States would assume major commitments without considering all the consequences,[108] and wanted to give economic sanctions a chance. However, no evidence at hand suggests that he raised that option seriously, if at all, at meetings. As Gates recalls, 'Baker's reservations were never done in meetings – perhaps privately with the president, since he hoped that diplomacy would work to get Saddam out.'[109]

Schwarzkopf also preferred other options. He not only found war noxious, but believed Washington was moving too quickly towards force.[110] However, his opposition in and outside meetings with the gang of eight was low key, except for one instance when in a press conference, he expressed his misgivings about the option of moving towards war in lieu of continuing economic sanctions.[111] Even later in the crisis when speaking to Bush, he voiced no objections to ending the war earlier, although he in fact strongly believed that more time was needed to crush Saddam's Republican Guard.[112]

By invoking the Munich analogy of failed appeasement and repeatedly comparing Saddam Hussein to Hitler, Bush also clipped the potential for the gang of eight to consider even a veiled face-saving withdrawal for Iraq as an option.[113] If Saddam was Hitler and Iraq was a major threat to regional and world peace, then it must be treated firmly, even punished. That meant that economic sanctions were dubious, a view that Bush may have started to develop tentatively as early as 3 August, but increasingly thereafter.[114] At an 11

[102] Scowcroft interview; *Frontline* interview with Colin Powell.
[103] Scowcroft, Gates and Fitzwater interviews.
[104] Fitzwater interview.
[105] Gates interview.
[106] Interview with Under Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger (by phone, 23 July 1996).
[107] See Woodward, *The Commanders*, pp. 299–303.
[108] Thomas L. Friedman, 'Baker seen as a balance to Bush on crisis in Gulf', *New York Times*, 3 November 1990, A1.
[109] Gates interview. Webster observes that he also never saw Baker argue against military action (Webster interview).
[110] Lamb interview with Schwarzkopf (C-SPAN, 1 October 1992).
[111] See Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict*, p. 204.
[112] Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict*, p. 405.
[113] Even Scowcroft was annoyed (Scowcroft interview).
[114] 'Remarks by the President upon Departure to Camp David', 3 August 1990, p. 2 (OA/ID CF0703, Roman Popadiuk Files, Office of the Press Secretary, GBPL).

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October meeting, the president and gang of eight agreed that military action, and not sanctions, would almost certainly be needed to evict Iraq from Kuwait.[115]

The fact that the gang was so exclusive, and that methodical procedures were eschewed, contributed to groupthink, and made it easier for Bush and Scowcroft to advance the war option, without carefully considering the costs and benefits of other alternatives. The gang of eight had slowly coalesced, behind its strong and partial group leader, around the notion that economic sanctions would fail. While Powell and Baker had voiced some dissent outside the gang, there had 'never been', as Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor point out, 'much of a debate' on that score or, for that matter, on the decision to double US forces in the Gulf, which was made at a 31 October NSC meeting.[116] Bush insisted upon that decision ahead of most of his advisers,[117] and it was adopted without consulting the most senior US generals and admirals, including Powell, who was disturbed by it, and Schwarzkopf, who was fuming mad.[118] Key members of Congress also objected to what they viewed as a hasty move away from economic sanctions.[119] Members of the gang of eight fell in line, despite their private reservations, and by November even Baker, who had wanted to give sanctions a chance, joined the gang of eight in arguing that an 'ultimatum, plus a major force build-up, would make it clear we're serious', although he thought 'ultimatum' was the wrong word to use.[120] The ultimatum was issued on 8 November, which triggered congressional hearings of the Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees, and allowed for a serious, sustained challenge to the administration's approach. 'The chorus', Bush recalled, was still to 'let sanctions work.'[121] The joint chiefs whom Bush met on 1 December were also annoyed about being shut out of decision making.[122] While Bush informed them of his plans, they, like Congress, were not consulted beforehand.

2. Incomplete Survey of Objectives

The second aspect of defective decision making that can arise is an incomplete survey of objectives. Did the gang fail to identify objectives or lose sight of them as time wore on? As Scowcroft testifies, the administration tended to try to generate public support, which began to flag in November, by expanding the list of US interests to include such things as stopping the next Hitler, protecting US jobs and creating a new world order. That led to charges that each of the members of the gang of eight had his own rationale and that, as Scowcroft views it, the administration did not really have its 'act together'.[123]

The administration's shifting objectives confused the public and necessitated the development of a co-ordinated public relations plan. The goal was to make sure that all of the gang of eight members and their assistants hammered home the same objectives in their speeches.[124] While the administration's objectives did appear to shift in a confusing

[115] Scowcroft interview; Gordon and Trainor, *The General's War*, p. 139.
[116] Gordon and Trainor, *The General's War*, pp. 153–8.
[117] Gates interview.
[118] Woodward, *The Commanders*, pp. 312–13. Quoted in *Washington Post*, 2 December 1990, p. A33.
[119] Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 390.
[120] Quoted in Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 394.
[121] Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 396.
[122] *Washington Post*, 2 December 1990.
[123] Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 399; also, see Hiro, *Desert Shield to Desert Storm*, pp. 246–7.
[124] Fitzwater interview; also, memo from Sununu and Scowcroft, 28 November 1990 (OA/ID 03195, Persian Gulf Working Group: Notebooks of David Demarest, Communications, Files of Paul McNeill, GBPL).

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manner, we can say that that was done at least partly for public consumption. Privately, the gang of eight largely understood that the key objective was to check Iraq and evict it from Kuwait if necessary, although the members differed on the value of economic sanctions and the timing of when to evict Iraq.

3. Failure to Explore Risks

The evidence at hand suggests that the gang did explore the risks involved in going to war with Iraq and took them seriously. Powell in particular emphasized them. On the day before the war, for instance, he warned everyone, as he had done before, that war was 'hell' and that 'unpredictable consequences' would result, that 'once it has started, the president was no longer in control'.[125] On some issues, however, president Bush did act quickly without consulting others in order to evaluate the risks of such actions. That is true, for instance, of his statement that the invasion would not stand or of his myriad efforts to describe Saddam in Hitlerian terms. Little evidence suggests that group members discussed the risks of such behaviours, even though some found them problematic. Thus, Powell described Bush's 5 August statement as policy making 'on the hoof'. Meanwhile, even Scowcroft told Bush privately that the use of the Hitler analogy was problematic.[126]

4. Failure to Reappraise Alternatives, Rejected Initially

Some of Bush's independent actions, as well as the strong decisions made by consensus in the group, made it difficult to reappraise alternatives. Thus, the administration early on asserted that it sought an unconditional and unequivocal withdrawal by Iraq from Kuwait as a requisite for ending the crisis. That made it hard for the gang of eight to consider, for instance, the alternative of offering Iraq a veiled face-saving withdrawal in order to avoid war, despite the fact that Saddam became more willing, though not sufficiently willing, to meet US demands as the crisis proceeded.[127] No evidence suggests that the benefits of such an approach, or the continued use of economic sanctions, were reconsidered in the gang of eight. The evidence in fact suggests precisely the opposite.

The analysis above does not establish that Bush and the gang of eight lacked good reasons for their actions. We should consider that they may have done little to reappraise alternatives, in part, because they saw them as less savoury than the chosen path.[128] The theory of groupthink, however, does not distinguish between, and ascribe importance to, different causes of failing to reappraise alternatives. In testing it, we need to focus on assessing the existence of the symptoms, while leaving the question of causality for future work.

5. Poor Information Search

While President Bush did make some quick decisions, as described herein, evidence also suggests that the gang did seek sufficient information to make decisions, including

[125] *Frontline* interview with Robert Gates.
[126] Scowcroft interview.
[127] Steve A. Yetiv, *Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming 2004).
[128] Gates interview.

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background reports on the efficacy of economic sanctions, on Iraq's developing weapons programmes, and on the views of coalition partners.[129] Each agency also conducted significant research and evaluation. Secretary Cheney, for instance, was briefed dozens of times on various options for warfare.[130]

6. Selective Bias in Processing Information

Such a bias results when information is screened out that challenges the group's decisions or consensus. While biases result from many different processes, one cognitive bias which was clearly at play in the Gulf crisis was historical analogy.[131] Information and ideas were evaluated through the prism of Munich by Bush chiefly, but also by some of his advisers.[132] That cognitive dimension helped generate and confirm the uncompromising, strong-handed approach towards Iraq. As one scholar put it, referring to Martin Gilbert's history of the Second World War, Bush 'got hooked on Gilbert's book in early August, and from that point on, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was identified with the Holocaust, and Saddam equated with Hitler.'[133] Other scholars argued that, drawing on Munich and his own experiences in the Second World War, Bush personalized the conflict with Saddam and that made war more likely,[134] and that the commitment by Bush and his advisers to the Munich analogy undermined their ability to 'contemplate alternative definitions of the problem and to give serious thought to other policy options'.[135]

7. Failure to Work Out Contingency Plans

It is a sign of poor decision making if decision makers fail to produce contingency plans in case the circumstances they face change or their primary plans fail to produce desired results. Little evidence at hand suggests that this type of defective decision making took place on the major issues in the Gulf case. The deputies' group and the gang of eight, for instance, did create contingency plans in case Iraq withdrew fully or partially from Kuwait.[136] They did appear to anticipate and prepare for such contingencies. We may find a different result, however, in studying how the administration planned for the period following Iraq's eviction from Kuwait.

THE BALANCE SHEET IN THE GULF CASE

As noted earlier, Janis did not require that all of the conditions of the theory be met, nor did he discriminate between them, except for cohesiveness, which was necessary but not sufficient. In the Gulf case, evidence suggests that the antecedent conditions existed, and that they contributed to a concurrence-seeking tendency, and to some important symptoms

[129] Evident from numerous documents at the GBPL.
[130] Powell interview.
[131] For a good overview and formulation of cognitive process theory, see Charles S. Taber, 'The Interpretation of Foreign Policy Events: A Cognitive Process Theory', in Sylvan and Voss, eds, *Problem Representation*, pp. 29–52.
[132] Extensive evidence cited in Yetiv, *Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior*.
[133] Jean Edward Smith, *George Bush's War* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992), p. 3.
[134] Glad, 'Figuring Out Saddam Hussein', in Whicker *et al*., eds, *The Presidency*.
[135] Hybel, *Power over Rationality*, p. 9.
[136] Haass and Jeremiah interviews.

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of groupthink: self-censorship; an illusion of unanimity; and pressure on dissenting members, although not a proclivity to overestimate abilities or rationalize to discount warnings or information. It also led to some symptoms of defective decision making: an incomplete survey of the alternatives; problems in reappraising alternatives; and a selective bias in processing information. Some evidence also suggests a failure to evaluate risks, but it is unclear to what extent that was central in the group itself. The evidence, however, does not suggest that the group failed to survey objectives; and engaged in a poor information search. Moreover, while an *esprit de corps* contributed to high cohesiveness, friendship also at times allowed decision makers such as Bush, Cheney and Baker to be blunt with each other, without fearing that it would undermine their interactions.[137]

BEYOND GROUPTHINK: DEVELOPING THE NON-FIASCO THEORY

To presume the existence of groupthink from a policy fiasco or its absence from a positive outcome borders on tautology.[138] As Janis recognizes and McCauley has emphasized, the linkage between groupthink and failure is probabilistic rather than deterministic.[139] Yet the theory is designed to explain fiascos and all of Janis's cases were fiascos, raising questions about a 'suspicious fit'.[140] If groupthink and a positive outcome are possible, but the theory largely predicts failure, why was failure avoided in the Gulf case? We have no answer to that question in part because no study pairs groupthink with a positive outcome, and no effort has been made to develop what I call a 'non-fiasco theory' related to groupthink, although scholars have explored the contingent nature of the theory.[141]

In exploring when groupthink and a positive outcome are likely, *it is crucial* to note that, while innumerable variables can explain policy success or failure, the task here is to find variables that can cause groupthink (only the antecedent conditions in the theory) as well as a positive outcome. To be clear, these variables *must* serve both these causal purposes to constitute the basis of a non-fiasco theory. That narrows the field of salient variables significantly by eliminating variables or explanations that may serve one causal goal but not the other.[142] The theory adopted here focuses on two antecedent conditions: the lack of a tradition of impartial leadership, which in effect allows for partial leadership, and external threat faced by the group.

Leadership is an especially good variable upon which to build a theory. Many interpretations of the theory have emphasized it in one form or another.[143] Moreover, while

[137] Fitzwater and Gates interviews. Janis acknowledges this potential dynamic as have other scholars (Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 246–7).

[138] Fuller and Adlag, 'Organizational Tonypandy', p. 169.

[139] McCauley, 'The Nature of Social Influence', p. 251; Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 11.

[140] I owe this phrase to an external reviewer.

[141] Thus, some have pointed out that the impact of the antecedent conditions is contingent on task and contextual factors (James K. Esser, 'Alive and Well after 25 Years: A Review of Groupthink Research', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 73 (1998), 116–41.

[142] An explanation, for instance, that decision makers stumbled upon a positive outcome fortuitously, despite groupthink. That argument explains the positive outcome but not how groupthink could be paired with it. It also does not account for the real causes demonstrated herein of both groupthink and a positive outcome, real causes that make it hard to propound that the positive outcome occurred by chance.

[143] Gregory Moorhead, Christopher P. Neck and Mindy S. West, 'The Tendency toward Defective Decision Making within Self-Managing Teams: The Relevance of Groupthink for the 21st Century', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 73 (1998), 327–51, pp. 338–9; Eric Stern and Bengt Sundelius (review article), 'The Essence of Groupthink', *Mershon International Studies Review*, 38 (1994), 101–7, p. 103; Paul D.

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Janis assumes that a lack of tradition of impartial leadership is one of four antecedent conditions that contribute to groupthink, 'considerable empirical support' exists that partial leadership can, under some conditions, enhance group performance or at least be non-negative in its effect.[144] That raises an intriguing question: when can partial leadership contribute to a positive decision-making outcome?

In the theory adopted here, partial leadership assumes different dimensions. The crucial one is the leader's level of experience and skill. Studies have shown that these characteristics are associated with providing the wherewithal for enhanced decision making.[145] A skilled and experienced partial leader may or may not contribute to the existence of the other antecedent conditions and symptoms of the theory, but is more likely to mitigate their negative effect. Thus, group insulation and a lack of norms requiring methodical procedures may result in a failure to consider alternatives, but that may not be problematic if the leader is experienced and skilled and can negotiate such defective decision making.[146] By contrast, a partial leader lacking those attributes may not only contribute to the other antecedent conditions, but be unable to mitigate them. That suggests that it is not enough to know if a leader is partial or impartial to explain outcomes. We also need to know more about the leader's disposition and characteristics. Fortunately, we have a large theory-oriented literature upon which to draw for that purpose.[147]

The second key variable is external threat, which is especially important in groupthink theory. That is because it contributes to stress and cohesiveness which is, as Hart points out, the 'sole group-level factor that he [Janis] singles out as a substantive, independent cause of groupthink'.[148] Moreover, much evidence conditionally supports the stress–cohesiveness connection.[149]

(F'note continued)

Hoyt and Jean Garrison, 'Political Manipulation within the Small Group: Foreign Policy Advisers in the Carter Administration', in Hart *et al*., eds, *Beyond Groupthink*, pp. 249–74. On how the group leader can impact the other antecedent conditions of the theory, see Preston, 'Following the Leader', in Hart *et al*., eds, *Beyond Groupthink*, esp. pp. 192–5.

[144] See Ramon J. Adlag and Sally Riggs Fuller, 'Beyond Fiasco: A Reappraisal of the Groupthink Phenomenon and a New Model of Group Decision Processes', *Psychological Bulletin*, 113 (1993), 533–52, p. 543. Also see Randall S. Peterson, Pamela D. Owens, Philip E. Tetlock, Elliott T. Fan and Paul Martorana, 'Group Dynamics in Management Teams: Groupthink, Vigilance, and Alternative Models of Organizational Failure and Success', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 73 (1998), 272–305, p. 292.

[145] George, *Presidential Decisionmaking*, pp. 145–9; Margaret G. Hermann, 'Ingredients for Leadership', in Margaret G. Hermann, ed., *Political Psychology: Contemporary Problems and Issues* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986), pp. 167–92; also Preston, 'Following the Leader', in Hart *et al*., eds, *Beyond Groupthink*, pp. 193, 197, 206.

[146] On how leadership style can affect other antecedent conditions, see Neck and Moorhead, 'Groupthink Remodeled', esp. pp. 550–1.

[147] See Preston, 'Following the Leader', in Hart *et al*., *Beyond Groupthink*, esp. pp. 205–7; Margaret G. Hermann, ed., *A Psychological Examination of Political Leaders* (New York: The Free Press, 1977); Lawrence S. Falkowski, ed., *Psychological Models in International Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1979). For a good synopsis of case studies of individual leaders, see David C. Winter, 'Personality and Foreign Policy: Historical Overview of Research', in Eric Singer and Valerie M. Hudson, eds, *Political Psychology and Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 79–101, esp. pp. 85–6.

[148] Paul 't Hart, *Groupthink in Government: A Study of Small Groups and Policy Failure* (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1990), p. 31.

[149] Hart, *Groupthink in Government*, p. 36.

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The theory adopted here assumes that group members will form a perception of threat at the outset of the event. That perception may vary among the members of the group and, like the variable of partial leadership, can take different forms. While Janis sees external threat perception as contributing to stress and groupthink, there is reason to believe that some types of perception may cause stress and contribute to groupthink, but not to failure. In this theory, external threat perception ranges from significantly overestimated to significantly underestimated. Overestimation of threat is always possible because decision makers can feel threatened irrespective of the objective level of threat.[150] That is especially true under certain conditions, such as if cognitive biases derived from analogies highlight the threatening aspects of the situation;[151] or if decision makers face stress–inducing uncertainties; or, relatedly, if they are risk–averse and more likely to experience stress.[152]

While overestimation of threat is always possible, so is the potential for change in the situation confronting the group, between the outset of the event, T_1, and the period when the group actually addresses or confronts the challenge at hand, T_2. In the present case, T_1 occurred in early August and T_2 occurred when US-led forces launched Operation Desert Storm on 16 January. Two key changes are highlighted by the theory: the group may become more able to address the challenge, partly because its own overestimation of the challenge motivates it to prepare for it in some ways, and the challenge itself may become less formidable. The group, however, cannot predict these changes at T_1, although it becomes clear in T_2 to what extent the threat was over- or underestimated.

From the foregoing analysis, we can observe that when the threat at hand is overestimated in T_1, groupthink is likely to occur. Doing so will contribute to stress, cohesiveness and, in turn, groupthink.[153] As Janis puts it, groupthink 'tendencies are increased when the situational context at the time the group starts its deliberations is such that the members are undergoing high stress from external threats or losses to be expected'.[154]

However, departing from Janis, we can observe that while the threat is overestimated at T_1, it does not contribute to failure at T_2. This is because overestimation will place the group under stress at T_1, but the challenge will not materialize to such a great extent in reality at T_2. By contrast, we can hypothesize that when the threat is underestimated, groupthink will be less likely to develop at T_1 (although it may be generated by other conditions), but the challenge the group faces at T_2 will be more serious than it estimated at T_1.

[150] For a bibliography on this point, see Raymond Cohen, *Threat Perception in International Crisis* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), chap. 1. Also, see James F. Voss and Ellen Dorsey, 'Perception and International Relations: An Overview', in Singer and Hudson, eds, *Political Psychology and Foreign Policy*, pp. 3–30.

[151] See discussion above on selective bias in processing information. The cognitive literature relevant here is enormous.

[152] See Yaacov Y. I. Vertzberger, *Risk Taking and Decisionmaking: Foreign Military Intervention Decisions* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), esp. pp. 74–7.

[153] Hart, *Groupthink in Government*. He argues astutely that a 'persistent problem in the original formulation of groupthink' is that the symptom of the illusion of invulnerability was 'never quite compatible with the picture of groupthink as a stress-triggered defense mechanism' (Hart, *Groupthink in Government*, p. 202). Hart resolves that issue in his revised model of groupthink. See his discussion of the difference between collective avoidance and collective over-optimism as two groupthink types (Hart, *Groupthink in Government*, esp. p. 202). The theory adopted here deals with that issues by hypothesizing that the group may or may not feel invulnerable depending on threat perception. Overestimation of threat is likely to yield a sense of vulnerability.

[154] Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 250.

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TABLE 1 *Groupthink and a Non-Fiasco*

		Partial leader	
		Highly experienced	Highly inexperienced
Threat	Under-estimated	Mixed outcome	Groupthink less likely; fiasco more likely
	Over-estimated	Groupthink more likely; fiasco less likely	Mixed outcome

The theory is illustrated in Table 1. Drawing on the variables of partial leadership and threat, four hypothesized outcomes are identified. The most salient one herein is that when a partial leader is highly experienced and the threat is significantly overestimated in T_1, groupthink is more likely to occur but a fiasco is less likely. By contrast, when a partial leader lacks these characteristics and the threat is significantly underestimated, groupthink will be less likely given the lowered levels of initial stress, but the leader will either contribute to failure or be less likely to prevent it, *ceteris paribus*.

The present theory, like all theories, is parsimonious. Future work could thicken it, for instance, by elaborating the enabling conditions for estimation of threat and by adding auxiliary assumptions about when changes in the situation will militate in favour of a positive, counterintuitive outcome.

THE THEORY AND THE GULF CASE

In the Gulf case, failure was avoided in part because Bush was both partial and highly experienced and skilful in the subject matter at hand. Indeed, while he was not particularly strong on domestic politics, he had served in the Second World War; directed the CIA; held key diplomatic posts, including US ambassador to the United Nations; and served eight years as vice president, where he was in charge of the administration's crisis task force. Through these positions, he befriended dozens of world leaders. As Sununu saw it, Bush's personal relations led leaders to help him in ways that they 'never thought they would'.[155] For instance, after getting assurances from Bush of US resolve against Iraq, the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar, told King Fahd that he had talked to the 'Big Man' – meaning Bush: 'Your Majesty knows George Bush very well and you know that he is a man who always keeps his word.'[156] Bush also understood Middle East politics from previous crises better than most presidents. As one of his close advisers put it, 'he was attached to and aware of Gulf politics and acted on the basis of knowledge'.[157] It mattered less if the group was insulated or lacked methodical procedures, when the group leader was skilled and experienced in the subject matter.

[155] Sununu interview.

[156] Quoted in Mohamed Heikal, *Illusions of Triumph: An Arab View of the Gulf War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 270.

[157] Interview with Sandra Charles, Deputy National Security Advisor for Near East and South Asia (Washington, DC, 5 June 1996).

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Failure was also avoided in part due to the dynamic of overestimation. As discussed earlier in the article, the group feared an invasion of Saudi Arabia, inability to gain access to the Saudi strategic infrastructure, vulnerable US forces being overrun by the Iraqi army, and inability to develop and maintain a coalition and gain world support. Indeed, as noted earlier, the gang of eight members recognized that the crisis could undermine the Bush presidency.[158]

Such concerns and realities, however, shifted over time – a dynamic that the theory of groupthink does not account for theoretically. Bush, Powell and others were 'deeply preoccupied' with potential casualties.[159] None the less, Bush and most members of the gang of eight increasingly did not believe the defence department's estimate of 10,000 body bags was realistic.[160] Bush had become, as he put it, 'more and more convinced that we could use force and be successful'.[161] Over time, the United States, in part motivated by its overestimation of the threat, built an impressive coalition and military capability in the region. By November, it had a mandate from the United Nations to use force and on 9 January from the US Congress as well. Support from the Soviet Union, which even included information about its military co-operation with Iraq, removed a large stumbling block.[162]

We should also consider another major change over time. While Iraq initially was very threatening, Saddam did not effectively translate his capabilities into real political and strategic gains. Rather, in reality and as perceived by the gang of eight, his use of human shields, the unyielding and unrealistic stand, the atrocities in Kuwait and hostile rhetoric helped unify the US-led coalition and isolate him worldwide through UN economic, diplomatic and military sanctions.[163] He also failed to withdraw partially from Kuwait, which would have made it harder to attack Iraq and even to preserve the US-led coalition, while leaving Iraq in control of parts of Kuwait. That is why decision makers called it the nightmare scenario, viewed it as quite likely, and prepared contingency plans for it.[164]

When war finally erupted, the Iraqi challenge would prove far less serious than most members of the gang of eight, and certainly Bush and Scowcroft, estimated in early August.[165] Iraq proved militarily ineffective. Several days into the air war, the allied airforce dominated the skies. The ground war would also prove far easier than anyone would have expected.

[158] Baker interview.

[159] Fitzwater and Gates interviews.

[160] Gates interview. On this estimate, see US Department of Defense, *Report on the Gulf War* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1991).

[161] Memo from Bush to Fitzwater, 25 September 1991, with attachment of Bush's proposed answers to an interview by Kenneth Walsh (OA/ID PR010 202278, Philip Brady Files, GBPL).

[162] See Foreign Broadcast Information Service: USSR, 23 August 1990, pp. 18–19.

[163] Interviews with Baker, Haass, Scowcroft and Sununu. *Frontline* interview with Baker. Also see Hiro, *Desert Shield to Desert Storm*, pp. 165–73.

[164] Haass and Scowcroft interviews.

[165] One study showed that integrative complexity, an attribute of information processing, varies inversely with stress; that Bush's integrative complexity increased throughout the crisis suggesting that his stress level decreased after its post-invasion high; and that the improved position of the coalition may account for that decrease. See Peter Suedfeld, Michael D. Wallace and Kimberly L. Thachuk, 'Changes in Integrative Complexity among Middle East Leaders During the Persian Gulf Crisis,' *Journal of Social Issues*, 49 (1993), 183–99.

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CONCLUSION

To be sure, this article has not completely explained small-group decision making in the Gulf crisis. Such decision making is too complex to be explained by any one theory. Nor can this article assert definitively just how important groupthink was in an overall explanation of decision making. That requires a volume-length work that juxtaposes groupthink against other models of decision making. The theory, furthermore, is not entirely supported by the evidence, albeit specific support over the past three decades for the entire model is at best meagre and few groupthink scholars would expect it.[166]

This article, however, provides a rare, in-depth look into group decision making in the Gulf crisis and does offer enough evidence to conclude that groupthink was at play, an argument not put forth in other scholarly empirical and theoretical works on the crisis. The theory helps explain how President Bush and others could advance the war option in a setting where top advisers, key military officials, core members of Congress, foreign leaders and significant elements of the public thought that other alternatives should be given greater consideration. Longstanding friendships and a culture of consensus did exist in the gang of eight, as well as strong loyalty to the president. That made it extraordinarily cohesive. As a highly partial leader, Bush pushed for the war option in a decision-making process that was fairly insulated from outside input, generally lacked methodical procedures for appraisal, and was marked by a high level of homogeneity in views and background among the decision makers. Stressful conditions added to group cohesiveness. While Bush faced public and congressional opposition, he did not encounter many challenges within his collegial, cohesive inner circle. The president's partial and strong role, combined with some implicit and explicit pressures towards uniformity, further decreased potential challenges.

At the theoretical level, the article paired groupthink with a positive outcome and sought to explain that result theoretically. We may in fact find groupthink and positive outcomes to be far more prevalent than expected if we begin to explore the conditions of the theory in such overlooked cases. That will, in any event, give us far more leverage in ascertaining the conditions under which groupthink is more likely to generate negative or positive outcomes.

[166] Paulus, 'Developing Consensus about Groupthink', p. 368.

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