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Notes and Comments

Groupthink and the Hostage Rescue Mission

STEVE SMITH*

Irving Janis's work on groupthink has attracted considerable attention from those who seek to explain foreign-policy decision making. The basic argument – that excessive *esprit de corps* and amiability restrict the critical faculties of small decision-making groups, thereby leading to foreign-policy fiascos – is both an appealing and a stimulating one.¹ In addition, it is also an argument that is capable of being tested against empirical evidence. Thus, Frank Heller has suggested that groupthink may be very useful in explaining British policy during the Falklands Crisis.² The purpose of this note is to indicate the utility of the notion of groupthink in explaining one recent foreign-policy fiasco, the attempt by the United States to rescue its hostages in Tehran.

In the second edition of his book on groupthink, Janis actually mentions the hostage rescue mission as a possible example of groupthink in operation.³ He argues that the groupthink perspective leads us to ask a number of questions about the rescue mission and suggests that a detailed case study might well illustrate the utility of the approach in explaining how the decisions were taken, and why the fiasco resulted. Before turning to examine the fiasco, it is first necessary to outline the theory of groupthink.

The explanatory basis of Janis's work on groupthink is the linkage between group pressures and the suppression of doubts in the members of that group. He builds on the work of social psychologists such as Lewin and Festinger and argues that the members' strivings for unanimity and group cohesiveness override their ability realistically to evaluate alternative policy options. Specifically, he defines groupthink as follows: 'The more amiability and *esprit de corps* among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out-groups.'⁴ In other words, pressures internal to the group result in an overriding concern with maintaining a sense of an amiable in-group, at the cost of individual members ignoring or suppressing their doubts over policy options. Anyone who does express such doubts, argues Janis, is liable to be excluded from the in-group in order to restore the unity of that group. Janis selects a series of case-studies that resulted in policy fiascos (the Bay of Pigs, the Korean War, Pearl Harbor, the escalation of the Vietnam War, Watergate) and shows how groupthink was present. The clear implication of his argument is that groupthink tends to result in bad policy making. Thus his book ends with a series of suggestions as to how groupthink might be avoided.

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¹ For a critique of Janis's work on groupthink see J. Longley and D. Pruitt, 'Groupthink: a Critique of Janis's Theory', *Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1 (1980), 74–93.

² F. Heller, 'The dangers of groupthink', *The Guardian*, 31 January 1983.

³ I. Janis, *Groupthink*, 2nd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

⁴ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 13.

Janis lists eight symptoms of groupthink, which he feels the policy fiascos he has looked at amply illustrate. These are:

1. An illusion of invulnerability . . . which creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks 2. An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality . . . 3. Collective efforts to rationalize in order to discount warnings . . . 4. Stereotyped views of enemy leaders as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate . . . 5. Self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus . . . 6. A shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgements conforming to the majority view . . . 7. Direct pressure on any member who expresses strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments, making clear that this type of dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members 8. The emergence of self-appointed mindguards – members who protect the group from adverse information.⁵

The evidence from the recent massive outpouring of work on the hostage rescue mission provides an excellent opportunity for examining the extent to which these symptoms were present and, if so, to what extent they help to explain that fiasco.

That the hostage rescue mission was indeed a fiasco is clear.⁶ The plan was for a small rescue force to slip into Iran on the night of 24 April 1980, to hide until the next night, and then travel into Tehran during the early hours of the next day, overpower the captors at the Embassy and release the hostages. What happened was very different: the rescue force never got beyond the initial staging post in Iran (Desert One) because one helicopter of the eight on the mission had got lost in a duststorm, and two others suffered mechanical breakdown. This left the force with only five helicopters, not the six demanded by the plan. The mission was therefore abandoned, and, during the period of escaping from Iran, one of the remaining helicopters collided with a C-130 transport plane, causing the death of eight men. From a groupthink perspective, we need to concentrate on two questions: first, to what extent did the decision-making group fail fully to evaluate the risks of the operation (Janis's first four symptoms of groupthink as outlined above)? Secondly, did the group tend towards unanimity and the exclusion of any deviants (the remaining four symptoms of groupthink)?

There is considerable evidence that these two main aspects of groupthink occurred in the group that made the decisions to attempt the rescue. In terms of the first question, it is evident that those who made the decisions did not critically evaluate the probability of success. The mission was an extremely risky one, and, because those who made the decisions wanted a rescue attempt to go ahead, they did not look at the very obvious weak points in the plan. Indeed, when the hostages were initially seized (4 November 1979) the Joint Chiefs of Staff were asked to prepare a plan, but were told by the commander (Colonel Beckwith) of the specialist group concerned that the probability of success was 'zero'.⁷ Subsequently, the mission was planned in considerable detail, so that by the start of April 1980 a rescue mission was considered to be feasible. Yet, at the three crucial meetings to decide whether or not the mission should proceed (11, 15 and 16 April 1980), although weak points were acknowledged, the political leadership did not examine them in any detail. They were very evidently predisposed towards giving the mission the go-ahead: they knew that President Carter

⁵ Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 174–5.

⁶ The problems in the implementation of the rescue mission plan are discussed in detail in S. Smith, 'The Hostage Rescue Mission', in S. Smith and M. Clarke, eds, *Foreign Policy Implementation* (London: Allen & Unwin, forthcoming 1985).

⁷ *Newsweek*, 12 July 1982, p. 17.

wanted some action given the criticisms by his presidential rivals over his lack of firm leadership; they felt that the negotiation path was closed; and they felt that their action was morally right. Thus, both Brzezinski and Jordan recall in their memoirs the intense pressure on Carter to act decisively, rather than stand by and let negotiations take their time.⁸ Further, there was a clear disposition on the part of the senior political decision makers to accept Jordan's assessment that negotiations were deadlocked; Carter writes that when he had a message from Jordan that there was no possibility that continuing negotiations would lead to an early release of the hostages, his resolve to go ahead with the rescue mission was strengthened.⁹ As their memoirs indicate, the decision makers were clear as to the moral nature of the rescue mission. The combination of these factors resulted in mind-sets that were predisposed towards the mission. Brzezinski wrote to Carter that 'unless something is done . . . we must resign ourselves to the continued imprisonment of the hostages . . . we have to think beyond the fate of the fifty Americans and consider the deleterious effects of a protracted stalemate, growing public frustration, and international humiliation of the US'.¹⁰

For these reasons, the key decision makers simply did not realistically appraise the plan for the rescue mission. There were a number of weak points in the plan, weak points which the Special Operations Review Group (set up by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to examine the failure of the mission) concluded should have been noticed in the final planning stage.¹¹ Even before then, as Gabriel has noted, the style of decision making involved in the planning stage had resulted in a situation 'that neutralizes dissent by making it costly to dissent once plans have gathered momentum. As a consequence, operational plans are often unrealistic but adopted anyway because they are "acceptable" from the perspective of institutional interests'.¹²

At the final meetings to give the go-ahead to the mission the following factors were not realistically assessed in any detail. Any one of these would have given serious cause for concern to any policy review group. The first was that there was no overall written plan for the mission; because of an overriding concern for operational security (OPSEC), oral briefings were used. In the view of the SORG, an overall plan would have 'sharpened their understanding of details and led to more incisive questions'.¹³ Secondly, there was no independent review of the plan; the political decision makers were not given any review of the prospects of the success of the mission except from the Joint Chiefs of Staffs. In fact one such independent review had been undertaken by the CIA but the head of the CIA, Stansfield Turner, although a member of the key decision-making groups, never discussed its findings at the top-level meetings to plan the mission (see below). Thirdly, there was no overall rehearsal of the mission, again for reasons of OPSEC; specifically, the rescue force rehearsed in separate units. Such rehearsals as were undertaken were by no means unqualified successes – one participant described the final dress rehearsal as 'the sorriest display of professionalism

⁸ Z. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), p. 490; H. Jordan, *Crisis: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency* (New York: Putnam's, 1982), pp. 248–54.

⁹ J. Carter, *Keeping Faith* (London: Collins, 1982), p. 512.

¹⁰ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 492.

¹¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff Special Operations Review Group (SORG), *Rescue Mission Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980), pp. 35–6.

¹² R. Gabriel, 'A Commando Operation that was Wrong from the Start', *Canadian Defense Quarterly*, x (1981), 10.

¹³ SORG, *Rescue Mission Report*, p. 36.

I've ever seen'.¹⁴ Fourthly, and probably of most salience, there was no questioning by the political leaders as to the size of the helicopter force despite their being informed that it was the weakest element in the plan (and ultimately the reason for the abandonment of the mission). This is a most significant factor, since the evidence concerning the reliability of the helicopters was available and their vulnerability to mechanical breakdown a constant factor in the planning process. Indeed, in the final period of rehearsal, two helicopters suffered from precisely the same mechanical failures as caused the abandonment of the mission. In the original plan, only four were to be used, but this was raised to eight, with six being the minimum necessary to continue from Desert One. The commander of the rescue mission, Major General Vaught, told President Carter that the helicopters were the weak link,¹⁵ yet this was not questioned further by the decision makers. The SORG concluded that this was a major failure in the policy-making process. Even the most optimistic assumptions of the planners indicated that one of the helicopters would be lost, so that there was a margin of only one more; a realistic evaluation of the plan and its risks would have at least questioned this. Finally, a number of issues which might have caused the failure of the mission had it not been aborted at Desert One were not discussed. The main ones included the fact that the rescue force simply did not know exactly where the hostages were when the decision to proceed was given. Also the plan was, to say the least, somewhat risky, involving, as it did, travelling through the streets of Tehran at night in a convoy of trucks and cars, and then, having released the hostages, being able to get to areas where helicopters could rescue them. Further, there was no overall commander of the mission on the ground, each service having responsibility for its own part of the operation. Aside from the factors that led to the eventual abandonment of the mission, it is clear that the whole plan received little in the way of critical evaluation. So many risky and dubious aspects of the plan slipped through the political decision-making process that one is forced to the conclusion that, having decided that a rescue mission should be undertaken, the decision makers accepted very optimistic assessments of its likely success, and did not probe in any detail even those weaknesses acknowledged in the planning of the mission. Janis's first four symptoms of groupthink seem entirely supported by this case study.

The second set of four symptoms of groupthink centre on the question of whether the group tended towards unanimity and the exclusion of any deviants. In this regard, the hostage rescue mission represents an almost classic case of groupthink. The decision to proceed with the rescue mission was taken on 11 April 1980, with President Carter, Vice-President Mondale, Secretary of Defense Brown, Deputy-Secretary of State Christopher, National Security Adviser Brzezinski, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Jones, CIA Chief Turner, and presidential aides Jody Powell and Hamilton Jordan, present. The major figure absent was Secretary of State Cyrus Vance who had departed the day before for a short holiday in Florida.

At the meeting, his deputy, Warren Christopher, was shocked to find that the rescue mission was to go ahead, and assumed that his boss had accepted it. Tom Wicker has written that Christopher 'was led to believe that the Secretary already knew that the the President had decided to undertake the mission.'¹⁶ Now, as his memoirs show¹⁷ the

¹⁴ *Newsweek*, 12 July 1982, p. 22.

¹⁵ Jordan, *Crisis: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency*, p. 257.

¹⁶ T. Wicker, 'A tale of two silences', *New York Times*, 4 May 1980, p. E23.

¹⁷ C. Vance, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 407-13.

critical point is that Vance had consistently spoken against a rescue mission in the discussions held before that date; certainly the President knew that he would argue against it at the meeting. Vance had no idea how far the planning had gone; he thought it was not yet a serious option.¹⁸ For these reasons, it seems to be fair to assume that Vance was deliberately excluded from the meeting; to argue otherwise would involve accepting the proposition that the sudden calling of the meeting just happened to coincide with the absence for a few days of its leading opponent. Certainly, Wicker believes that Vance was deliberately shunted aside from the crucial meeting, thereby weakening his ability to prevent the mission from proceeding. During the meeting Christopher turned to Hamilton Jordan and asked: “Does Cy know about this?” “The contingency rescue plan? Of course.” “No, no – does he realize how far along the President is in his thinking about this?” . . . “I assume they’ve talked about it.”¹⁹ On this basis, Christopher felt he had to go along with the plan on the assumption that his boss either had accepted it or had felt that it was not worth fighting. This feeling was strengthened when President Carter informed the meeting that, before he had left for vacation, Vance had told him that he preferred a rescue mission to other alternatives.²⁰

On his return from vacation on 14 April, Vance was alarmed to hear that a decision had been taken. Christopher explained that he had not telephoned him as he assumed that he was prepared to go along with it.²¹ Vance went to see Carter and protested very strongly. As a result he was allowed to address the National Security Council the next day. This he did, listing a number of objections to the rescue mission: it was extremely risky; the Iranians could respond by seizing other Americans in Iran; it would turn the Islamic world against the United States; it would give the USSR an opening in the area; finally, the State Department had spent months getting the allies to agree on economic sanctions against Iran, and they would feel very cheated as they were about to go ahead with them in order to forestall US military action. Vance’s objections were met by a ‘deafening silence’.²² As a result of this, Carter announced that he would proceed as planned. In groupthink terms this is not a surprising outcome: all the participants knew that President Carter had decided on the mission, all had agreed to go along with it; thus, to accept any of Vance’s objections would have meant not only reversing a previously accepted policy, but also going against the wishes of the President. Privately, however, Vance says that he was told after the meeting by a number of the participants that he had raised some serious questions as to the advisability of the mission.²³ From the groupthink perspective, the critical factor is that such doubts tend not to be voiced by the participants. In this incident, the evidence supports the contention that the participants played down their own doubts in order to maintain group cohesiveness.

Janis himself, in a short piece in the *New York Times* published soon after the mission, wondered whether any dissenters had been excluded from the relevant meetings.²⁴ As has been noted above, it is clear that Vance was deliberately excluded

¹⁸ P. Salinger, *America Held Hostage* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 235.

¹⁹ Jordan, *Crisis: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency*, p. 251.

²⁰ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 493.

²¹ R. McFadden, J. B. Treaster and M. Carroll, *No Hiding Place* (New York: New York Times Books, 1981), p. 220.

²² Wicker, ‘A tale of two silences’, p. E23.

²³ Wicker, ‘A tale of two silences’, p. E23.

²⁴ I. Janis. ‘In rescue planning how did Carter handle stress?’, *New York Times* 18 May 1980.

from this key meeting. After this exclusion, the participants had to react to his objections when he found out about the mission. These were seen as reflecting his growing unhappiness with the job and his general state of fatigue. Carter writes in his diary that 'Vance has been extremely despondent lately ... For a third or fourth time, he indicated that he might resign ... but after he goes through a phase of uncertainty and disapproval, then he joins in with adequate support for me.'²⁵ Carter was clear that Vance 'was alone in his opposition to the rescue mission among all my advisers, and he knew it.'²⁶ Brzezinski notes that: 'That only cloud on the horizon was Cy Vance's very evident disaffection ... [there was] growing bitterness between Vance and the White House ... Vance clearly felt set upon, and I sensed in my bones that he was ready to quit. He looked worn out ... the President ... told me that Cy seemed burned out and determined to quit.'²⁷ Such objections as Vance made were not only made after the decision had been taken (a decision that the President very evidently wanted) but could be written off in terms of Vance's wider tiredness and dissatisfaction. By treating him as someone who wanted to resign anyway, his objections were given less weight. Such behaviour is precisely that predicted by the groupthink perspective. Vance, of course, resigned shortly thereafter, but postponed the announcement until after the rescue mission.

This was not the only instance of groupthink in the decision-making process. The group was a small one, working on the basis of extreme secrecy (notes were taken in longhand and aides were not informed of the possibility of a rescue mission). From the accounts of those who took part, the meetings were amiable, with a strong sense of belonging to an in-group. During the detailed examination of the rescue plan, even Cyrus Vance did not probe the assumptions and arrangements, although after the meeting he raised a number of difficulties with Hamilton Jordan, who put them down to Vance's opposition to the raid in principle.²⁸ Above all, Carter's key advisers seemed to have accepted that the President needed to act decisively; their reaction to the plan was filtered through that perception. This may well explain one of the most puzzling aspects of the decision, which was CIA Director Stansfield Turner's ignoring a CIA report which argued that there were very serious problems in the rescue plan. In a secret two-page memorandum given to him on 16 March 1980, a CIA review team estimated that 'a loss rate of 60 per cent for the AMembassy hostages represents the best estimate.'²⁹ It went on to point out the operational difficulties in mounting such a mission. There is no record of Turner raising this report at any of the meetings. The overwhelming impression is that the participants saw themselves as team players, censored or played-down their own doubts as to the wisdom of the mission, saw the silence of others as equalling consent, and discounted the critical comments of the one deviant. For these reasons, the second set of groupthink symptoms clearly seem to have been present in the meetings over the rescue mission.

President Carter wrote in his diary that: 'The cancellation of our mission was caused by a strange series of mishaps – almost completely unpredictable.'³⁰ Yet, an examination of the evidence leads to the conclusion that there were both serious

²⁵ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 511.

²⁶ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 513.

²⁷ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 496.

²⁸ Jordan, *Crisis: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency*, pp. 263–4.

²⁹ Salinger, *America Held Hostage*, p. 238.

³⁰ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 518.

deficiencies in the implementation of the plan and flaws in the basic idea itself. What the groupthink perspective leads us to consider is whether these deficiencies could have been predicted in the decision-making process. What is clear is that both aspects of groupthink were very evident in that decision-making process. To this extent, the failure of the mission cannot be explained in terms of simple bad luck; in this respect it has much in common with the other foreign-policy fiascos cited by Janis in his study. Those who took the decisions to undertake the rescue mission failed to evaluate the risks realistically, played down their own doubts as to its likely success, and excluded the leading critic of the mission from the key meeting, thereafter down-playing his doubts. On the basis of this brief examination of the hostage rescue mission, Janis's suspicion that groupthink was present in the decision-making process seems fully justified, and the rescue mission can be added to the list of foreign policy fiascos partly explicable from the groupthink perspective.

Comparing Decision Modes at the Country Level: Some Methodological Considerations Using Swiss Data

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In comparative politics, the units of analysis are usually countries. For many variables, this does not raise any particular measurement problems, because they can easily be aggregated at the country level. For other variables, however, measurement at the country level is a much more severe problem. The prevailing decision mode in a country is perhaps the most conspicuous case. In the last ten to fifteen years, this variable has gained key importance in several theories, most prominently in the theories of consociationalism and corporatism. Yet, these theories are plagued by perennial measurement problems. As an illustration, we use the case of Switzerland, but our argument should apply to other countries as well.

Many authors have characterized the Swiss decision-making style as co-operative and contrasted it to a more competitive style. At the beginning, classification of Switzerland seemed quite easy. Prime indicator of the co-operative decision mode was the composition of the Federal Council, the seven-member federal executive. Since 1959, Switzerland uses the 'magic formula' which gives two seats each to the three largest parties and one seat to the fourth largest party. This indicator of the composition of the Federal Council was reinforced by a few case studies which seemed to show that the Swiss political elite indeed practises a decision style of mutual adjustment and co-operation.

Brain Barry was the first to challenge in a serious way the prevailing Swiss decision mode as co-operative.¹ He drew attention to the prominence of the popular referendum in Swiss political life and argued that the referendum is a competitive decision mode *par excellence*. His criticism was countered with the argument that the referendum is irrelevant for the measurement of the prevailing decision mode which

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¹ Brian Barry, 'Political Accommodation and Consociational Democracy', *British Journal of Political Science*, v (1975), 477-505.