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Why 'Groupthink' Doesn't Explain the CIA

by Rushworth M. Kidder

Last week, when the Senate Intelligence Committee released its scathing report on the CIA's intelligence failures concerning the Iraq war, it reinjected a dangerous and ethically complex attempt at explanation -- the term *groupthink* -- into the global political discourse.

Introducing the report at a July 9 press conference, Sen. Pat Roberts noted that "the intelligence community was suffering from what we call a collective groupthink, which led analysts and collectors and managers to ... interpret ambiguous evidence ... as conclusive evidence."

Psychologist Irving Janis, who coined *groupthink* three decades ago, called it "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action." According to Janis and his followers, the characteristics of groupthink include:

- A conviction in the group's inherent morality
- An assumption that everyone agrees with the group's decision and that silence means consent
- An unwillingness to examine alternative views
- A deliberate refusal to gather information that could be contrary to the group's predilections
- An illusion of invulnerability, producing overly optimistic views that overlook danger and downplay risk
- Pressure to conform, including negative stereotyping of those outside the group and the branding of opposition from within as "disloyalty"
- Collective rationalization, in which the group explains away warnings and failures contrary to its position

Some of these attributes fit the Central Intelligence Agency. It is "a cohesive in-group." Its members have a strong "conviction [of] inherent morality" -- fortunately, since no nation would tolerate an intelligence service convinced of its own immorality. And through professional activities that agents describe as their "tradecraft," it creates a "pressure to conform" to rigorous standards and practices.

But like so many terms imported into political discourse from pop psychology, *groupthink* can appear to mean much more than it really conveys. That, of course, is the characteristic of *cliché*. Like all clichés, this one at first seems freighted with great significance. Those who use it get the heady sensation of having said something profound.

But did the CIA *refuse* to gather contrary information? There's no evidence of that. Did it downplay danger and risk? It appears instead to have exaggerated the threat from Saddam. Did it engage in collective rationalization to explain away failures? Its agonizing over its failures has instead been a serious blow to its self-confidence.

In short, the Senate report simplifies a complex phenomenon: the ability of a collective will to manipulate the thinking of otherwise good people. In grabbing at this explanation, the report does exactly what it accuses the CIA of doing: adopting an assumption and fitting the evidence to it. For the CIA, that assumption was that Saddam has weapons of mass destruction. For the Senate, the assumption is that the CIA is riddled with groupthink. Were weapons an issue? Yes. Was groupthink a problem? Yes. But neither group got the analysis right.

Certainly groupthink was in operation, nationally and globally. The "strivings for unanimity" went far beyond the CIA. The Senate was guilty of groupthink in voting to go to war in Iraq. The voters were guilty of groupthink in lauding Congress after 9/11. Al Qaeda is guilty of groupthink in its views of Western culture. If groupthink is this widespread, what's to be gained by singling out one group for accusation?

What makes the accusation especially suspect are the global parallels. The Senate report notes that other nations' intelligence services arrived at the same conclusions as the CIA. That's an astounding recognition. If the best professional systems in the world get the same results, then neither the CIA's people nor its own systems were *peculiarly* wrong. Something larger is at work here.

We may be discovering that the entire post-Cold War intelligence profession has inherent limits. The pressure to insert political bias into the analysis (an issue deliberately avoided in this report, which focuses only on the intelligence itself rather than on how it was used by policymakers) may simply be too subtle and strong. In addition, the governance of intelligence functions may be too closely controlled by the end users, who find it tempting to blame the messenger when they don't like the message. So the ability of the intelligence community to speak frankly and resist self-censorship -- arising from the normal human desire to give those in charge what they want -- may require an almost superhuman capacity for moral courage. For the Senate Intelligence Committee to give the appearance of explaining all of this with a single pop-psychology term is to give pretty thin gruel to a public in need of a far better analysis.