Decision-Making during National Security Crisis:
The Case of the JFK Administration

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ABSTRACT

Decision-making during crises is an important task that many elected officials
face during their time in office. This thesis seeks to identify principles that make up a
sound policy decision-making process and may lead to more positive outcomes. The
analysis here is a comparative case study of three national security crises that faced the
John F. Kennedy administration: the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the
Vietnam conflict. Each case is examined for the presence of indicators of groupthink. I
hypothesize that the relative absence of groupthink is related to a positive outcome. That
hypothesis is examined by reviewing each case. The study finds that the cases that
contained higher levels of groupthink tended to have poorer quality decision processes
than those with less evidence of groupthink.

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Chapter One: Introduction

     This thesis examines decision-making processes during national security crises in order to identify principles for making sound decisions during critical times. Many scholars have studied the decisions elected officials have made during crises; however, few have reached consensus on what defines a high-quality decision-making process. Sometimes in order to find out what happened at the end, it is important for one to study the beginning of the journey, along with the multiple processes and leadership changes along the way. Decision-making during crisis is inarguably an important issue. The security of a state often lies in the capability of its leaders to guide it through a crisis effectively. What principles of decision-making lead to decisions that become policy successes or by not being followed, to failures?

     Groupthink is a phenomenon that many scholars have studied and blamed for faulty decisions over the last several decades. Because groups rather than individuals make most major policy decisions during times of crisis in the United States, it is important to consider the impact of groupthink on decision-making in crisis. Does the presence of indicators of groupthink seem to be related to a poorer quality decision-making process and outcome? To explore this question, I undertook a comparative case study of three national security crises during the John F. Kennedy administration, looking for indicators of groupthink and their associations with the quality of the decision-making processes.

     The three main national security crises that the JFK administration faced were the Bay of Pigs operation, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the situation in Vietnam that ultimately led to major U.S. involvement there. The decision-making process during the

Bay of Pigs operation was of poor quality and led to a negative outcome. The Administration seemed to learn from that experience, and consequently the decision-making process during the Cuban Missile Crisis, a time of tension that held the potential for nuclear destruction, was higher in quality and led to a more positive outcome. One would expect then that decisions during the third crisis in Vietnam would have been of the highest quality. Yet the decision-making group made costly mistakes that helped lead to a long war for the United States. How did the same group of individuals make such poor decisions, improve their decision-making process, and then return to poor decision-making skills? Was groupthink responsible?

Chapter Two will review the scholarly literature on groupthink and decision-making during times of national security crisis. Next, Chapter Three outlines the research design. Chapter Four summarizes the Bay of Pigs Crisis and examines the decision process for indicators of groupthink, drawing conclusions about the quality of the process and the outcome. The same will be done for the Cuban Missile and the Vietnam crises. Finally, I draw conclusions about principles of sound decision-making based on the evidence from the three crises.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Scholars who have studied decision-making processes have not reached much consensus on what constitutes a high quality process. Although groups of scholars have reached internal consensus, there are others who disagree. Those who have studied the phenomenon known as groupthink have attributed this in part to the varying competence of different decision makers over time.[1] However, valuable foundations have been laid for future research. The study examines two barriers to good decision-making: cognitive consistency and the related phenomenon of groupthink. This study seeks to lay the basis for future research in these areas as it cannot alone cover the many barriers to good decision making that exist when studying human behavior.

Alex Mintz, a prominent scholar of decision making, recognized that the study of the actual decision-making process was relatively new, with the first findings not published until 1954.[2] The importance of studying the decision process, however, cannot be overstated. Mintz asserts that no crisis or war can be understood without studying the decision-making process of the leaders involved.[3] The study of the process is crucial to understanding the decision choices and the results.

This chapter reviews scholarship on cognitive consistency, focusing primarily on the work of Robert Jervis. Then, work highlighting the importance of groupthink as proposed by Irving Janis will be presented. Although different scholars proposed the two separate ideas, the concepts overlap considerably, as I will demonstrate. Several of the symptoms of groupthink are characteristics of cognitive consistency. The incomplete survey of alternatives, failure to examine risk of preferred choice, poor information

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[1] Hart, 220.
[2] Mintz, 5.
[3] Mintz, 5.

search, and selective bias in information processing are conceptually related to cognitive consistency as Jervis defined it, because they have to do with improper information-gathering which consequently influences perception. For this reason, I considered cognitive consistency as an indicator of groupthink. The discussion also acknowledges other important factors associated with decision making during a national security crisis. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting key scholarly themes.

Cognitive Consistency

In order to explore the connection between the two main scholars I studied, I first want to outline the basics of cognitive consistency. It was a term Robert Jervis coined in Perception and Misperception in International Politics. In this work, Jervis explores the ways in which people draw inferences from evidence to form beliefs that consequently influence policy; he shows how policy makers frequently misperceive their environments and therefore reach inappropriate decisions.[4] His approach is interdisciplinary, and he was an outlier when he first wrote since he focused more on the cognitive process than his contemporaries did.

Cognitive consistency refers to the tendency of people to perceive what they expect to be present.[5] If one perceives another to be hostile, friendly actions will be disregarded and ambiguous events will be interpreted as hostile. Often the misperception lies in the original perception of the other involved, and the first person's actions based on initially false images can actually transform the other person's reactions.[6] Additionally, when one views another as hostile, they will be likely to find all compromises

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[4] Jervis, 29.
[5] Jervis, 68.
[6] Jervis, 77.

unattractive, making the situation particularly problematic.[7] Furthermore, the reverse also applies: when one views another as friendly, one is more likely to accept unfriendly actions.

Because information is filtered through a complex set of preexisting beliefs and expectations, the information that is considered most important can vary from person to person. Expectations create predispositions that lead actors to notice certain things and neglect others.[8] Often, discrepant information is simply not noticed.[9] This is important in foreign policy decision making as certain members of a group may notice specific information while others notice something different. This presents an additional challenge when a group of varying backgrounds and interests is trying to make foreign policy decisions together.

Foreign policy decision making consists of a sequence of interactive decisions that may be complex, crucial, and often take place under constraints of information-processing limitations.[10] When information-processing limitations already exist, the bias of cognitive consistency can further cripple the decision-making process. Alex Mintz also points out that leaders often fail to track and audit their decision process in order to avoid past pitfalls.[11] In spite of the various obstacles and complications, elected officials are still expected by their constituents to make good decisions and to be responsible and accountable for the choices made.[12] It is therefore important for them to be aware of the potential pitfalls of cognitive consistency.

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[7] Jervis, 104.
[8] Jervis, 145.
[9] Jervis, 143.
[10] Mintz, 16, 38.
[11] Mintz, 40.
[12] Mintz, 170.

Because the human mind craves consistency, discrepant evidence tends to be ignored, misremembered, or twisted to preserve existing perceptions.[13] In fact, in the face of discrepant information, people change as little as possible, starting with the beliefs that are least important and least central to their overall view.[14] Furthermore, when actors are presented with discrepant information but do not want to alter their beliefs, they often engage in defensive tactics such as bolstering, discrediting, and undermining.[15] Finally, Jervis concludes that a person is more likely to alter his/her belief if a large amount of discrepant information arrives at once than if the discrepancies are presented bit by bit, making it particularly difficult for actors in a decision-making process to identify discrepancies.[16]

Jervis suggests that people debating policy should minimize their own misperceptions by asking themselves what possible behavior on the part of the adversary could be taken as evidence against the perceptions they currently hold.[17] Similarly, because decision-makers in a country often believe that others will interpret their own behavior as they intend it and will share their view of their state's policies,[18] Jervis also places great value on the ability to place oneself in the shoes of one's adversary. He considers it wise to be able to empathize with a variety of possible outlooks.[19]

Jervis also believes that making one's beliefs and values explicit can help to minimize misperception.[20] Assuming that those in other nation-states understand one's own thought processes and goals often is not realistic. Jervis also implores decision

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[13] Jervis, 154.
[14] Jervis, 291.
[15] Jervis, 296.
[16] Jervis, 308.
[17] Jervis, 112.
[18] Jervis, 69.
[19] Jervis, 112.
[20] Jervis, 410.

makers to search for evidence that would contradict their views; thus he encourages the

formulation and application of alternative images.[21] He highlights the importance of a

decision maker having subordinates with conflicting policy preferences so that a variety

of viewpoints can be considered and the pitfalls of reaching an agreement too quickly can

be avoided.[22] A devil's advocate can be beneficial to the decision-making process

according to Jervis.

      Other scholars also have explored the perils of cognitive consistency. Alexander

George, in Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of

Information and Advice, addresses the processing of information gathered prior to

making a decision. This important first step is subjective and susceptible to bias.[23] The

subjective beliefs, perceptions, and misperceptions of foreign policy-makers play into

their decision-making. Each policy-maker has a set of beliefs, and s/he will filter new

information through those beliefs. If new information contradicts his or her beliefs, s/he

is likely to ignore, reject, or downplay it, resulting in distorted information-processing.[24]

This is consistent with Jervis's cognitive consistency position. Alex Mintz also points

out the fallacies of cognitive consistency, the tendency to perceive incoming information

in light of previously held expectations, resulting in decision makers closing off their

minds to anything not compatible with preexisting beliefs.[25]

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[21] Jervis, 413, 415.
[22] Jervis, 416.
[23] George, 57.
[24] George, 64.
[25] Mintz, 98.

Groupthink

Information-processing can get even more complicated in a group setting, which brings me to the frequently mentioned barrier to good decision-making, groupthink.[26] Irving Janis introduced this term in 1971 to refer to persons engaging in concurrence-seeking behavior in a cohesive in-group so strongly that their thinking tended to override a more realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action.[27] Although a certain amount of cohesion is beneficial, at a certain point it becomes detrimental to the quality of decision making; discussion and dissent are critical to arrive at well-grounded choices.[28]

The concurrence-seeking behavior causes decision makers to strive for quick and painless unanimity on issues by suppressing personal doubts, silencing dissenters, and following the suggestions of others.[29] The results of this behavior make the group vulnerable to initiating or sustaining projects that turn out to be policy fiascoes.[30] The groupthink phenomenon results in several consequences that interfere with effective group decision making, such as discussing only a few alternatives, avoiding the use of experts, being overoptimistic, and lacking contingency plans.[31] Janis asserted that because of groupthink, poor policy choices are made by participants who are otherwise highly intelligent, substantively experienced, and politically sophisticated.[32]

There are two different sets of groupthink symptoms. The first contains eight main symptoms, which basically summarize the actions associated with groupthink. The second set includes seven "defective" symptoms, which are the manifestation and

[26] Hart, 247.
[27] Chen, 137.
[28] Hart, 253.
[29] Hart, 247.
[30] Hart, 247.
[31] Chen, 137.
[32] Burke, 504.

consequences of the actions associated with groupthink. According to Janis, eight main symptoms of groupthink are illusions of invulnerability, collective rationalization, belief in inherent group morality, stereotypes of outsiders, direct pressure on dissenters, self-censorship, illusion of unanimity, and a self-appointed mind guard.[33] He claims that these symptoms lead to seven "defective symptoms": an incomplete survey of alternatives, an incomplete survey of objectives, failure to examine the risks of a preferred choice, poor information search, selective bias in information processing, failure to appraise alternatives, and failure to work out contingency plans.[34] Janis thus defines a high-quality decision-making process as one that is characterized by a relative absence of these defective symptoms.[35]

Several of those symptoms, such as the incomplete survey of alternatives, failure to examine risk of preferred choice, poor information search, and selective bias in information processing are conceptually related to cognitive consistency as Jervis defined it. Because Jervis based his theory on the ways that decision makers misperceive their environments and therefore reach inappropriate decisions, factors such as the symptoms listed above are relevant as they have a profound impact on perception.

Typically in the United States, the president turns to advisors for information, advice, and support before making crucial decisions, so most policy decisions are made by groups.[36] Alexander George also identified several potential problems that can arise in group decision-making processes. First is the problem of conformity, the danger that advisors holding unpopular policy views will be silenced or ineffectual when subjected to

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[33] Chen, 138.
[34] Chen, 138.
[35] Herek, 206.
[36] George, 81.

pressure for conformity by the group or executive.[37] Even the best advisor is usually

hesitant to stand alone. A second danger is succumbing to Janis's groupthink.[38] Finally,

each decision-maker tends to concentrate on acquiring information that protects or

advances his or her own interests.[39] The decision maker also tends to overstate the

expected benefits and downplay risks.[40]

Challenges to Decision-Making in Crisis

In addition to the important work of Robert Jervis and Irving Janis, I acknowledge

that other scholars have explored additional possible influences on decision-making.

Graham Allison's work in the Essence of Decision is a study that altered the view of

International Relations. He posited that the actions of states are analyzed with the

assumption that the states consider all options and act rationally. In this way, his work

coincides with that of Jervis in that he explored the perceptions states have of one

another. While it would be ideal to consider all options and act rationally, decision

making in times of crisis does not always allow for that to be the case.

Some have stated that an "objectively rational" approach to decision making is

never fully possible because decision makers do not have complete knowledge and

anticipation of the consequences that follow from each conceivable choice.[41] However,

there is a relationship between the quality of the process and of the outcome, which

supports the hypothesis that high quality decision making leads to more favorable

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[37] George, 90,
[38] George, 92.
[39] George, 112.
[40] George, 112.
[41] Herek, 203.

outcomes.[42] If a nation-state's leaders use a less vigilant approach to decision making, they tend to ignore important warnings, facts, and contingencies; a frequent policy result is avoidable losses and failure to achieve objectives.[43] On the other hand, more vigilant problem solving requires the fullest use of available information and resources, and increases the likelihood that the chosen course of action will anticipate consequences and formulate contingency plans.[44] Alex Mintz also points out the common mistakes attributed to the groupthink phenomenon. He argues, as does Jervis, however, that it is quite possible to overcome the challenges of groupthink by encouraging a "devil's advocate" and forcing the group to think of alternative options other than those preferred by the majority.[45]

Still other scholars have written about the impact of stress on groupthink and decision making. Chances of groupthink markedly increase during times of stress.[46] Alexander George highlighted this connection when he observed that rational calculation requires information, knowledge of relevant cause and effect relationships, and a way to apply the values engaged by the problem in order to judge the best course of action.[47] Often the aforementioned requirements are not met, resulting in high levels of psychological stress on the policy maker, which can in turn impair judgement.[48]

George also introduced the idea of value-complexity, the presence of multiple, competing values embedded in a single issue.[49] This challenge requires the policy maker to prioritize values. Furthermore, crises are often laced with uncertainty and a lack of

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[42] Herek, 217.
[43] Herek, 221.
[44] Herek, 221.
[45] Mintz, 47.
[46] Hart, 258.
[47] George, 25.
[48] George, 25.
[49] George, 26.

adequate information, which can make it even more difficult to make reliable cost-benefit appraisals.[50] George asserts that international crises generate additional stress because they typically threaten major values, come as surprises with very little warning, and require decisions to be made quickly.[51] While mild stress can enhance performance, major stress causes deterioration, impairing attention span, narrowing perspective, and reducing creativity.[52] The odds seemingly are stacked against the foreign policy decision maker, according to George.

Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin also note several stress-related limitations in decision-making. Information can present a challenge; decision-makers are not guaranteed complete or accurate information and are sometimes forced to make decisions based on inadequate information. Another challenge can be communication failures. Information may be present but not communicated clearly or accurately to appropriate personnel. Furthermore, perception can also be a limitation. What the decision-makers "see" is what they act upon, but are they assessing the situation appropriately? Finally, resources can pose a limitation. A lack of time, money, staff, or intelligence can cause decisions to be made that were not thoroughly researched or considered.

Furthermore, while Jervis focused on perceptions that factor into the decision-making process, Snyder et al. emphasized a different aspect. In <u>Foreign Policy Decision-Making</u>, scholars Richard C. Snyder, H.W. Bruck, and Burton Spain studied the decision-making process and how it occurs in government. Their main conclusion was that the decision-making process is guided by the agenda of the decision-makers, and that agenda in turn affects their perceptions. Accordingly, the decision-makers' actions flow from

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[50] George, 27.
[51] George, 48.
[52] George, 49.

their definition of the situation.[53] In this way, Snyder et al. differ from Jervis in that rather than perceptions driving the decision-making process; they view it as guided by the agenda of the primary decision-makers in leadership, which influences their perceptions.

Snyder et al. go on to argue that participants define and redefine a crisis, and the definition of the situation is based on the policy goal as well as the reasons for that goal.[54] Also important is decision-makers' attachment of significance to various courses of action.[55] Execution of decisions requires implementation, continual adjustment to circumstances, and interpretation by decision-makers of what they decided and what the unfolding action means.[56] Unstructured situations and situations that require immediate response represent additional challenges for decision-makers.[57] It is important to note that Snyder and his colleagues view the decision-makers as elected officials only, but acknowledge that citizens can influence those decisions.[58] Finally, it is critical to note that they are interested in the mechanics of the process; perceptions are not a factor, and in this way they differ from Jervis.

This is the crucial distinction among the authors discussed. Jervis is unusual in his focus on cognitive variables; the procedures/characteristics/dimensions of the decision making process have been explored far more extensively. Others have examined the organizational structuring of presidential administrations and its influences on the decision making process, and some of that work is useful historically. Because this comparative case study will be dealing with the same administration throughout, this

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[53] Snyder et al., 6.
[54] Snyder et al., 33.
[55] Snyder et al., 59.
[56] Snyder et al., 68.
[57] Snyder et al., 71.
[58] Snyder et al., 85.

research is less relevant since the overall structure remained stable. John Burke refers to the Kennedy White House as being organized collegially, operating using what Robert Tanner Johnson and others have referred to as a "spokes of the wheel' system, with the president as the hub and advisors as the spokes, directly connected to the president.[59]   A collegial model can fuse the strongest elements of divergent points of view among the members of the administration, since the president has access to multiple opinions. Yet, it requires presidential management to maintain a positive group dynamic.[60] The collegial model contains the potential to overcome the pitfalls of groupthink if it is utilized correctly, but I will demonstrate that in some of the crises during the JFK administration, it was not.

Conclusions

Several common themes appear in the scholarship on policy decision making. First, several researchers have noted bias due to cognitive consistency. Because the human mind craves consistency, discrepant information that should be evaluated is often ignored, skewing perceptions. Although Jervis, not Janis, proposed the concept of cognitive consistency, the two go hand-in-hand. Several of the symptoms of groupthink are characteristics of cognitive consistency. For this reason, I considered cognitive consistency as an indicator of groupthink. Second, group dynamics can have a profound impact on the decision-making process. Intimidation, perceptions of the desires of others, motives of decision-makers, wishful thinking, and ranking of group members all play into the process. Third, international crises generate considerable stress that can

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[59] Burke, 502.
[60] Burke, 502.

affect decision-makers and the decision-making process; yet world leaders are expected to be able to make sound political decisions under various time and information constraints, and stress can serve to exacerbate the problems of cognitive consistency and groupthink.

Previous research is useful as a basis on which to study policy decision making in times of crises. The principles of good decision making are important to leaders and citizens alike. By examining whether the various decision-making pitfalls that have been identified appeared in particular cases in one U.S. presidential administration, I hope to further understand the principles of good decision-making. Although no recipe for a good decision exists, it is often beneficial to look at history and attempt to learn from it. This study is only the beginning and covers only a limited time and set of decisions. I hope to expand it in the future and believe it will be helpful to others who wish to study presidential decision making. The next chapter turns to describing this study.

Chapter Three: Research Design

What principles of decision-making lead to decisions that become successes or, by not being followed, to failures? How can one attempt to avoid making mistakes in the decision-making process? Clearly, it is of great importance to understand what makes a decision-making process of higher quality, especially during crises. However, the researcher must bear in mind that a good decision process and decision can lead to poor outcomes if improperly implemented or unexpected events take place. Success usually is measured in hindsight, looking at the outcomes of a specific policy. Although there is not one right way to make decisions, I sought to identify principles of good decision making that can be applied to a variety of policy situations. It is important to bear in mind, however, that when dealing with human behavior and international dynamics, decisions can be unpredictable at times.

The lack of scholarly consensus is due in part to their examination of actual decision-making processes rather than focusing on the principles governing them. My goal is to examine principles that might be applied to enhance the quality of the decision process. This chapter describes how I sought to do so.

This study begins by examining decision-making in the Kennedy administration during three national security crises. First, most regard the Bay of Pigs as a failure, one that manifested overoptimism and cognitive consistency[61]. On the contrary, many have hailed the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis as a success; in that instance, decision-making evidently was guided by sound information processing and careful deliberation under time constraints.[62] Finally, many scholars such as George Herring and former

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[61] See, e.g. Wyden, Lynch, and Higgins.
[62] See, e.g. Allison and Zelikow, Janis, Robert Kennedy.

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara consider U.S. involvement in Vietnam to have

been an unnecessary failure; decision-making featured cognitive consistency and

consensus-seeking behavior. Decision-making in the same administration associated

with these three international crises provides useful information to establish some

principles of good policy decision-making during national security crises.

This chapter first outlines and defines the concepts used in this study. Next, it

reviews the cases selected for comparative case study and the reasons behind the

selection. Units of analysis, variables, and indicators of groupthink also are discussed.

Finally, the selection of data sources is reviewed, and the chapter concludes with several

of the limitations of the study.

Conceptual Overview

Looking at the decision-making processes within a single presidential

administration permitted me to control for (that is, hold constant) the potential impact of

differing presidents on the decision process. Although no human remains constant

throughout his or her life, I believed that I controlled for potential changes as much as I

could while dealing with human behavior.

A next step was to define "crisis." I used the definition employed by the

International Crisis Behavior Project. It identified an international crisis when it meets

two criteria. First, a crisis is present when a change has occurred in the type and/or the

intensity of disruptive (hostile, verbal, or physical) interactions between two or more

states, with a heightened probability of military hostilities. Second, these changes

destabilize the states' relationship and challenge the structure of an international

system.[63] More simply, a crisis here refers to an intense conflict between nation-states that had the potential to escalate to war and destabilize the international system.

Each crisis selected meets this definition. The CIA masterminded the Bay of Pigs operation that was carried out by a small undercover army trained by the U.S. Armed Forces. It served as an increase in the intensity of disruptive interactions between Cuba and the United States. The operation destabilized the states' relationship and ultimately led to the Cuban Missile Crisis. That crisis signaled a change in the intensity of interactions between the Soviet Union and the United States, and challenged the structure of the international system as it propelled the world to the brink of nuclear warfare.

Finally, Vietnam differs from the first two crises, since during the Kennedy administration it did not involve the level of military action that the other two did. However, based on my definition of a crisis, it does qualify. The crisis in Vietnam signaled a change in the intensity of disruptive actions between the United States, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam (SVN), and it served to destabilize their relationship, particularly in regards to SVN President Diem. It destabilized the international system, plunging the U.S. into economic distress and causing its allies to question its choices. Additionally, the international system was destabilized from the military action and the coup that included the death of President Diem.

The three crises occurring during the JFK administration led to both positive and negative outcomes. General conflict resolution focuses on seeking longer term remedies that address the root causes of conflict and underlying issues.[64] I defined positive outcomes as the cessation of the crisis and accomplishment of the intended objective, the

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[63] Wilkenfeld, 281.
[64] Wilkenfeld, 281.

longer term remedies that address the root causes of conflict and underlying issues. Principles of a high quality in the decision process such as good communication, careful deliberation, and consideration of alternative viewpoints tend to lead to positive decisions and outcomes; factors such as cognitive consistency, group intimidation, and ranking issues in a group hindering open discussion tend to produce negative decisions and outcomes.

That one can assess what is "good" and "bad" only in hindsight should not deter analysts from identifying the specifics of each situation and observing the principles adhered to in making decisions. Observation of such principles allows one to identify a set of "lessons learned" that may be useful to other foreign policy makers.

Comparative Case Study

During JFK's presidency, the United States faced three major national security crises, and the decisions made during each varied dramatically as did their impact. Why the variations? How did the same administration make decisions that led to both a catastrophic failure such as the Bay of Pigs and a global success such as the Cuban Missile Crisis? I explored the principles that seem to have guided the decision-making process involved in the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the beginnings of the Vietnam conflict, all three crises of regional and global importance.

These three crises were selected because, although their outcomes varied, roughly the same group of people made the decisions that led to these outcomes. Controlling for presidency and personnel, I focus on why the same group of decision makers made

decisions that led to both positive and negative outcomes and how those decision making processes differed from one another.

I chose the Bay of Pigs crisis because it was produced by a decision-making process that resulted in a negative outcome, a lack of achievement of the objective and a lack of cessation of the crisis. The Bay of Pigs failure in many ways fostered the Cuban Missile Crisis. The decisions made during the latter crisis led to a positive outcome, when the objective was achieved and the crisis ended. At this point, one might expect that the Administration had learned from past mistakes and evolved into a better equipped decision making team; however, it went on to make decisions during the Vietnam crisis that ultimately became the start of one of the longest conflicts in which the U.S. has been engaged. The objective was not achieved, and the crisis did not end with the Kennedy administration, but went on for many years.

Because international crises often span many years, these three crises did not begin and end during the Kennedy presidency. Here, however, in order to control for leadership, I looked at the decisions made by the group of individuals who advised JFK on national security matters.

Unit of Analysis, Variables, and Indicators

The unit of analysis in the study was the process of decision-making itself. I considered two primary variables. The dependent variable is the quality of the process of policy decision making in crisis. The quality of the process (and potentially the outcome) will improve or deteriorate depending on the extent and the nature of the factors tapped by the independent variable. The primary independent variable is the level of the

groupthink phenomenon in the decision-making process. I argue that a higher quality

decision making process is one characterized by the relative lack of evidence of

groupthink and a lower quality process by more evidence of its presence. The more

groupthink indicators that are present, the lower quality the process, and probably the

more negative the outcome.

I examined several indicators of groupthink. The first is the presence of cognitive

consistency in information processing. While Jervis introduced this concept, it

encompasses several of the symptoms of groupthink that Janis proposed, such as poor

information search and selective bias in information processing. I hypothesized that the

presence of cognitive consistency is related to a poorer decision-making process. Jervis

in particular stressed that accurate information processing helps eliminate the bias caused

by cognitive consistency. I searched for evidence of this indicator by looking for the

presence of information that contradicted the generally held belief of the group. I call

such information "red flag information." Was information available to the decision-

makers might have made them reconsider their decisions? Were "red flags" ignored

because they did not coincide with prior information? The presence or evidence of red

flag information indicates a general absence of cognitive consistency. Such information

is recorded in selected secondary source materials and in transcripts from group

meetings.

The second indicator of groupthink is unanimity. Again, I hypothesized that the

presence of unanimity will be associated with a poor decision-making process. Was there

a split vote? Were alternative and opposing views presented? It is important to note that

a split vote may differ from a split opinion. While some may express doubts during

discussion, concurrence-seeking behavior can override their misgivings when it comes time to actually speak up in a voting situation. Because of this, I examined when decisions were made and looked for concrete evidence of split votes in memoirs and transcripts.

A third indicator of groupthink is "overoptimism." Were members of the group so confident of the success of their decisions that they had no alternative contingency plan in place should things not go as planned? Janis maintained that the lack of a contingency plan was a primary symptom of groupthink, since it suggested overoptimism. When making crucial decisions in the midst of a crisis, because the stakes are so high, the decision-makers should be aware enough of the possibility of failure that they have contingency plans in place. I searched for overoptimism by looking for the presence of a contingency plan in memoirs and transcripts. I hypothesized that if overoptimism is present, the decision-making process will be poorer in quality.

The final indicator of groupthink is the "lack of alternative appraisal." This was tapped by examining the decision making process for evidence that decision-makers considered alternative actions. Was the risk of the preferred choice weighed against the risks of other options? I looked for evidence in memoirs and transcripts. I hypothesized that a lack of alternative appraisal is related to a poorer quality decision-making process.

These indicators are not mutually exclusive. Due to the nature of the indicators, it is likely that if one was present, others would be as well. I examined each crisis for evidence of each indicator. All indicators did not have to be present for me to conclude that there was evidence of groupthink; rather, I considered groupthink to be an ordinal

level variable, with higher and lower levels of groupthink possible. The more indicators present, the higher the overall level of groupthink, and vice-versa.

Data Sources

A project of this size necessarily relied on many sources. Fortunately, much of the history of the cases examined has been recorded, both in firsthand accounts and by secondary sources, including those of numerous scholars and journalists. Unfortunately, due to time limitations, I could not examine all of them, so I carefully chose the sources cited and consulted. I selected memoirs that I believed to be transparent, candid, honest, and accurate. When authors faced opposing views, they acknowledged them, heightening the memoirists' evident trustworthiness. Transcripts of the meetings and notes taken by attendees and support staff also were examined and used to corroborate the evidence in the memoirs.

On the Bay of Pigs crisis, I consulted a memoir by Grayston Lynch. Lynch was active in the United States military forces sent to Cuba and thus gives a firsthand account of the crisis. In studying the Cuban Missile Crisis, I examined a detailed account written by Robert Kennedy, which also provided a firsthand account of the crisis. Chairman Nikita Khrushchev's memoir provided input from the point of view of the Soviet Union's leadership. Finally, to study the decision-making process behind the decisions involving Vietnam crisis, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's memoir was the basic document I relied on. These memoirs were corroborated by secondary sources selected carefully as they overlapped with memoirs and could essentially be used together to construct a historical account of the events, as well as transcripts of NSC, cabinet, and White House Office meetings that members of the decision-making team attended.

Limitations

As with any research project, this one has limitations. Primarily, it examined only the JFK administration. At the same time, as already noted, this can be considered a strong point since it permitted me to control for presidency. Yet, because the presidency of JFK was held constant in each crisis, the variation in national leaders and their administrations in other crises may produce different results. Furthermore, because the U.S. national government and the international community are ever changing, the methods learned for making successful decisions during one period may not be completely applicable to other periods. Nonetheless, I believe general principles can be applied to contemporary national security decisions.

Source selection imposes another potential limitation. Particularly in the case of Vietnam, there was controversy and disagreement among those who were part of the decision making process about the events that occurred. While careful consideration was given to the selection of sources, inappropriate selection could indeed limit this study.

Finally, because this thesis focused on groupthink, other variables that were not considered certainly might have contributed to the nature of the decision processes and the outcomes, such as information-gathering limitations, constraints on the ability of the group to meet in person, or time restrictions. Much more research can still be done to build upon this study. When dealing with human behavior, many different variables can contribute to the outcome, and it is impossible to examine or control for them all.

Chapter Four: The Bay of Pigs

The first crisis that I examined was the Bay of Pigs operation. After a summary of the decision-making process and operation, I analyze the indicators of groupthink present in the process.   The chapter concludes with an examination of the outcome.

Summary

Both Americans and the international community regarded the Bay of Pigs operation as a fiasco. Nearly 1300 lives were lost in an attack that failed to accomplish its intended objective. It exacerbated an already tense situation, moving the U.S. toward the brink of nuclear holocaust. How did that happen? What went wrong during the decision-making process that led to the U.S. executing a plan that was so embarrassingly inadequate?

Trouble between the United States and Cuba escalated when Fidel Castro came to power promising democracy, but then began to reorganize Cuba into a communist state.[65] Castro started to advocate the liberation of Puerto Rico from the United States, and he also stated that any American effort to intervene in Cuban affairs would result in many deaths for the country.[66] United States officials viewed Cuba as representing a Soviet satellite 90 miles from the U.S. border and believed that some kind of action was called for in order to prevent the danger the spread of communism posed to the security of the United States.[67] The United States sought a middle-of-the-road solution, one that would stop the spread of communism without a direct clash.[68]

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[65] Lynch, 6.
[66] Higgins, 43.
[67] Lynch, 13.
[68] Lynch, 13.

In April 1959, Castro visited Washington on a goodwill tour and met with Vice President Richard Nixon. Based on their interaction and discussion of communism, Nixon became a strong advocate for forcibly overthrowing Castro by arming exiles to fight the Cuban regime.[69] On November 5, 1959, Secretary of State Christian A. Herter recommended to President Eisenhower that opposition to Castro be encouraged in the most discreet fashion in view of sensitivity to American intervention in the world.[70] Eisenhower approved, essentially launching a secret war against Cuba.[71]

In June 1960, further executive economic sanctions were levied against Cuba, pushing it to request help from the Soviet Union.[72] In July of that same year, Khrushchev offered Soviet military support to Castro should the United States decide to attack.[73] Meanwhile, in the United States, a plan was put in place in which the CIA would take covert action to overthrow Cuba and establish a government that would be friendly to the United States.[74] The CIA formed the Cuban Task Force headed by Richard Bissell, the chief of Clandestine Services.[75]

In August, President Eisenhower approved a budget of $13 million for a guerilla war against Castro.[76] He also approved the use of Defense Department personnel and equipment for training anti-Castro Cubans in Guatemala.[77] While campaigning for the presidency in September 1960, John F. Kennedy spoke openly about the need to

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[69] Higgins, 44.
[70] Higgins, 46.
[71] Higgins, 46.
[72] Higgins, 53.
[73] Higgins, 54.
[74] Lynch, 14.
[75] Lynch, 14.
[76] Higgins, 57.
[77] Higgins, 57.

empower Cubans to fight Castro.[78] Kennedy was elected, and on November 18, 1960, the Eisenhower administration informed the President-elect of the plan to help the anti-Castro guerillas.[79]

At this time, the CIA plan involved a few hundred anti-Castro guerillas who infiltrated the Cuban mountains, where supposedly others were already operating against Castro.[80] The Joint Chiefs of Staff considered the Cuba Project as aiding guerillas and not as an invasion.[81] When the plan was presented to Kennedy, he gave the general impression that he agreed with it, as he had indeed just been elected in part on an anti-Castro platform and on a false notion of a missile gap between the U.S. and the USSR.[82]

Kennedy reappointed Allen Dulles as CIA director, and Dulles began to revamp the plan, transforming it from a small guerilla operation to an amphibious invasion involving between 600 and 750 men.[83] The new plan would not be a coordinated uprising, but rather an invasion complete with air strikes.[84] Colonel Edward Landsdale, who served under President Kennedy as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, among others, expressed doubts and suggested that the CIA plan would require at least 3000 men, and that logistics were inadequate.[85] Furthermore, Defense Secretary Thomas Gates told Eisenhower that the project appeared impractical.[86] The

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[78] Higgins, 59.
[79] Higgins, 66.
[80] Higgins, 61.
[81] Higgins, 64.
[82] Higgins, 67.
[83] Higgins, 68.
[84] Higgins, 68.
[85] Higgins, 69.
[86] Higgins, 69.

newly appointed leaders under JFK recommended not undertaking the plan unless there was no chance of failure.[87]

On January 1, 1961, Castro warned the CIA that it could not overtake Cuba in a weekend operation.[88] On January 3, Eisenhower completely broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba.[89] On January 19, the outgoing President told Kennedy that he needed to do whatever was necessary to overthrow Castro and to conceal the American hand in the operation.[90] On January 22, the top advisors in the new administration met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to review the options for the Cuba operation, and agreed that employment of Cuban guerilla force with U.S. backup would be best, which coincided with the CIA's plans.[91] Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, CIA Director Allen Dulles, and General Lemnitzer of the Joint Chiefs of Staff reviewed all of the options as the CIA defined them.[92] The committee approved the invasion, believing it had a fair chance of success if the initial attacks were followed by a substantial uprising in Cuba.[93] Despite several believing the plan was weak and sloppy, the Joint Chiefs offered approval to McNamara on February 7, 1960.

The main idea behind the Cuba plan was that 1500 men would be the skeleton around which the full force would form. Some 3500 men were expected to join the ranks once the beachhead was secured and the uprising began.[94] The brigade was to seize

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[87] Higgins, 70.
[88] Higgins, 70.
[89] Higgins, 71.
[90] Higgins, 77.
[91] Higgins, 81.
[92] Higgins, 81.
[93] Higgins, 83.
[94] Lynch, 24.

control of the beachhead while B-26 planes struck blows against Castro's army.[95] CIA

officials believed that the B-26's would be unopposed for two to three weeks, and that

Cubans would join the force when they saw that Castro was being defeated on his own

territory.[96] A provisional government then would be established and aided by the United

States.[97] However, when intelligence indicated that Castro had substantial support based

on his anti-American sentiments, the group of decision makers ignored it, even though

the success of the plan hinged on Cuban support for the brigade.

Kennedy called a formal approval meeting on March 11, at which time Rusk

advised the President to disapprove the plan because the invasion was so similar to the

World War II invasion that the Secretary was certain it would indicate U.S.

involvement.[98] The State Department also requested a night landing rather than a day

invasion in order to further conceal the role of the United States in the invasion.[99] The

U.S. armed forces, which had conducted more invasions than anyone else, had never

performed a successful night invasion.[100] Furthermore, both Kennedy and the State

Department believed that the landing site at Trinidad was too obvious, and again stressed

the secretive nature of the operation. The President concluded that the plan was too

spectacular[101] and thus he rejected it.[102]

The CIA, however, resisted having its years of work undone in a single meeting.

Officials scrambled for another option and chose the Bay of Pigs as a new landing site in

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[95] Lynch, 24.
[96] Lynch, 29
[97] Lynch, 29.
[98] Lynch, 38.
[99] Lynch, 38.
[100] Lynch, 38.
[101] Wyden, 100.
[102] Lynch, 39.

a matter of minutes.[103] It was the only other site to meet the requirements: it was

accessible by sea, had an airfield, and was located on the south end of Cuba.[104] The Joint

Chiefs of Staff estimated that the new site had less than a 50% chance of success.[105]

Despite the disadvantages of the Bay of Pigs site, such as the presence of coral reef, water

too deep to anchor in, and the lack of an escape exit,[106] Kennedy approved the plan on

April 4. He believed that the men could still escape into the mountains in the event that

the attacks did not go as planned, and no one brought the distance of the mountains from

the Bay of Pigs to his attention.[107]

In the meeting on April 4, the CIA presented the plan, which was unopposed

except by Senator William Fulbright of Arkansas, who expressed serious doubts,

although he did not have an official vote.[108] He asserted that the project had been poorly

evaluated and was anything but a secret.[109] At the meeting, the President was impatient

and asked for simple yes or no votes, which greatly limited the discussion.[110] After the

unanimous approval, advisor Arthur Schlesinger sent the President a memo on April 5

opposing the plan due to underestimated political risks.[111]

The State Department insisted that the United States have a cover story in place to

conceal its involvement. It decided to place blame for the attacks on Cuban pilots who

defected, and thus the number of planes decreased from 22 to 16 to better fit the needs of

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[103] Lynch, 39.
[104] Lynch, 39.
[105] Higgins, 96.
[106] Lynch, 43.
[107] Wyden, 102.
[108] Lynch, 43.
[109] Higgins, 106.
[110] Wyden, 149.
[111] Higgins, 114.

the story.[112] Furthermore, Kennedy asked the CIA to reduce the noise level of the landings and to unload the cargo ships at night.[113] He also emphasized that he wanted American troops kept out of the invasion.[114] The CIA continued to give the President the impression that the force would be small, with quiet, trained guerillas.[115] Kennedy gave tentative approval but reserved the right to cancel the invasion up to 24 hours before it began.[116]

On April 12, 1960, President Kennedy, in an effort to conceal the American hand in the coming invasion, announced in a press conference that there would be no intervention in Cuba by U.S. armed forces and that any conflict would be between Cubans themselves.[117] The State Department had lingering doubts that U.S. involvement could be concealed and further reduced the number of planes to six, eliminated the use of napalm, and cancelled all but the initial strikes in order to preserve the image of noninvolvement.[118]

On April 15, six B-26 bombers struck the Cuban airfields.[119] After the first strike took place, U-2 photos demonstrated minimal damage, with only five planes damaged and countless left unharmed.[120] Dean Rusk called on the President to cancel the second strike because the air strip in the Bay of Pigs had not been fully established, and the strike would not appear that it came from Cuba.[121] The President was not happy, but he

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[112] Lynch, 42.
[113] Wyden, 102.
[114] Higgins, 105.
[115] Higgins, 105.
[116] Higgins, 99.
[117] Higgins, 121.
[118] Lynch, 44.
[119] Higgins, 129.
[120] Wyden, 193.
[121] Wyden, 199.

approved cancelling the second air strike nonetheless.[122] No one informed General

Lemnitzer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, of the changes in the war plan.[123]

The strike sparked adverse publicity and the CIA cover story began to crumble

quickly, its exposed lies heaping embarrassment upon the United States.[124] Adlai

Stevenson, the American delegate to the UN, was questioned incessantly because the

planes did not resemble Cuban defector planes.[125] He realized he had been told a cover

story, and later commented to an aide that he had been deliberately deceived by his own

government.[126] On April 16, Kennedy approved the invasion,[127] which was doomed from

the beginning due to its dependence on the success of the pre-invasion strikes.[128] The

brigade began the attacks confident that the United States was undefeated and standing

behind them in support.[129]

The invasion began, and the forces were detected before landing on the

beachhead.[130] Castro had militia stationed on the beach who warned him using radio.[131]

Due to the pre-invasion strikes, the shock value of the invasion was lost.[132] The coral

reefs also posed a threat, delaying the boats from reaching the beaches at the planned

times.[133] Things began to disintegrate quickly, and Castro destroyed all but one ship.[134]

The poorly trained brigade ran out of ammunition before the attack ended.[135]

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[122] Wyden, 199.
[123] Wyden, 202.
[124] Higgins, 130.
[125] Lynch, 75.
[126] Higgins, 130.
[127] Higgins, 130.
[128] Lynch, 68.
[129] Lynch, 70.
[130] Higgins, 138.
[131] Higgins, 139.
[132] Higgins, 140.
[133] Higgins, 141.
[134] Higgins, 141.
[135] Higgins, 142.

Furthermore, since both countries' planes were required to look Cuban, it was difficult to tell them apart in battle; the brigade ended up shooting at its own men.[136] The brigade requested aid from United States jets, but Kennedy declined in order to keep his promise of avoiding U.S. military involvement.[137]

On April 17, the President decided to allow three B-26 planes to bomb Castro's airfield at dawn on the morning of April 18; however, heavy haze aborted the mission.[138] Overall, Castro's air force proved much larger and more effective than American intelligence had anticipated.[139] By April 19, the Cuban pilots were exhausted[140] and refused to fly; Castro's forces shot down four volunteer American pilots, invalidating U.S. claims that it was uninvolved.[141] Kennedy ordered the CIA to get the brigade out of Cuba, but escape options had not been discussed.[142]

By the afternoon of April 19, the brigade began to surrender.[143] In the end, of the 1300 men who landed in Cuba, 1200 were captured and 100 killed.[144] Admiral Arleigh Burke pressed Kennedy for assistance from the U.S. military in a rescue effort, but the President resisted, wanting the U.S. hand to be concealed even in a search and rescue mission.[145] Reportedly, Richard Bissell, the Chief of CIA Operations, found it inconceivable that Kennedy would stand by his no-intervention promise and let the battle

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[136] Lynch, 108.
[137] Lynch, 206.
[138] Higgins, 143.
[139] Higgins, 144.
[140] Lynch, 235.
[141] Higgins, 148.
[142] Higgins, 147.
[143] Higgins, 149.
[144] Higgins, 149.
[145] Wyden, 267.

fail when he had the United States armed forces at his disposal.[146] The mission was a complete disaster.

Indicators of Groupthink

Appendices A and B summarize the presence of indicators of groupthink in the Bay of Pigs crisis. All four indicators of groupthink were present in the decision-making process for the operation at the Bay of Pigs, which indicating higher levels of groupthink. Cognitive consistency appeared in red flag information that was available that contradicted the generally held opinions of the group. Throughout the meetings held, various leaders brought up the inadequate logistics of the plan, but yet it was still approved. When the Joint Chiefs reviewed the plan, several had doubts and thought it to be both weak and sloppy, yet they approved it. Not only was information on the geographic limitations of the invasion location ignored, but so was available information on Castro's support among the Cuban people. Furthermore, when the air raids were unsuccessful, that information was ignored as well and subsequent raids cancelled. Finally, that the United States had never before conducted a successful night invasion should have caused the decision-makers pause. There were clearly several red flags throughout the process that should have prompted careful reconsideration, but were ignored, preserving the consistency in place in the minds of the decision-makers.

Unanimity was present in the voting that took place on the plan and the location change for the plan. The discussion was greatly limited by the President asking simply for a yes-or-no answer, but nevertheless, none of the voters stood in opposition to the plan in place. In fact, Senator Fulbright was the only one who even spoke out against the plan at the meeting, as the transcripts demonstrate.

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[146] Wyden, 270.

Overoptimism can be clearly seen when the group did not develop a contingency escape plan should the invasion fail, even though the Joint Chiefs anticipated less than a 50% chance of success. Furthermore, though the U-2 photos indicated that the air strikes did not cause the damage anticipated, the plan was still modified and future air strikes were cancelled. This seems to indicate an overoptimism on the part of the decision-makers as well, since much of the plan hinged on Castro's air force being destroyed before the Brigade arrived. Finally, when the President asked the CIA to withdraw the Brigade, it had no way to get them out as escape options were never considered. Grayston Lynch clearly indicated that surrender had never crossed the minds of the Brigade members.

Finally, there did not seem to be any indication that alternative plans were considered or that a diplomatic solution was sought. The transcripts suggest that another plan was never proposed or analyzed. Rather, an invasion was planned from the beginning, and the questions discussed focused more on tactics and logistics than consideration of multiple options for a solution. Furthermore, an alternative to concealing the American hand, such as openly invading, was not considered either. Ultimately, the concern for noninvolvement overruled considerations of logistics, causing the demise of the invasion. All four indicators of groupthink were present in this crisis, leading to a higher level of groupthink present.

Outcome

The outcome of the Bay of Pigs was undoubtedly negative. The objective of the operation was not achieved. Furthermore, the impact of the deceptive nature of the plan

served to precipitate further tensions between the Soviet Union, Cuba, and the United

States in the coming years, leading me to conclude that the crisis did not end in April

1961. In the case of the Bay of Pigs, high levels of all four indicators of groupthink were

present, and the crisis ended with a negative outcome. This case supports the hypothesis

that when higher levels of groupthink are present, indicated by the presence of multiple

indicators, the quality of the decision-making process is poor and leads to a negative

outcome.

Chapter Five: The Cuban Missile Crisis

This chapter summarizes the events and the Kennedy administration's decision-making process for responding to the Cuban Missile Crisis that followed the failed Bay of Pigs operation. Following the summary is a discussion of the indicators of groupthink found to be present within the decision-making process. The chapter concludes with the outcome of the crisis.

Summary

The Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in October 1962 and many regard this as one of the most dangerous times in the history of the United States.[147] The Soviet Union had placed missiles in Cuba that the United States discovered and in turn confronted the Soviets. Following the confrontation was nearly two weeks of deliberations and negotiations as the world stood on the brink of nuclear holocaust.

When the crisis began, the United States had imposed an economic blockade of Cuba.[148] With Cuba's fuel supply from the U.S. severed, the country was in dire need of support from the Soviet Union.[149] The USSR evidently felt obligated to support Cuba as a socialist example to Latin America; if Cuba fell, other Latin American countries would claim that the Soviet Union could do nothing, which would result in a loss of prestige.[150] Furthermore, the United States had just orchestrated and supported the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, which was consistent with Soviet views of U.S. aggression toward Cuba.[151] Following the Bay of Pigs, United States military preparations to defend against Cuba

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[147] See, e.g., Robert Kennedy, McNamara, Khrushchev, Janis, and Allison.
[148] Gromyko, 169.
[149] Khrushchev, 490.
[150] Khrushchev, 493.
[151] Gromyko, 170.

escalated.[152] As a result, Cuba requested both arms and instructors from the USSR, and it obliged.[153]

The Soviets evidently assumed that the United States was poised to attack Cuba. They believed that the Bay of Pigs was just the beginning and that Americans were planning an invasion.[154] Soviet Chairman Khrushchev also perceived that President Kennedy was weak and easily pressured by the CIA and Pentagon, making it easier for "warmongers" (Khrushchev's term) to start an armed conflict in Cuba.[155] Furthermore, Soviet officials knew that Congress had approved action against Cuba if necessary to protect U.S. interests.[156] Finally, Kennedy had failed to appreciate that his activities in 1961 and 1962 could lead the Soviets to believe that a Cuban invasion was possible.[157]

Khrushchev stated in his memoir, "Everyone agreed that America would not leave Cuba alone unless we did something."[158] Furthermore, according to Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko:

> Under these circumstances, it became a task of primary importance to strengthen Cuba's defensive capability. The USSR and Cuban governments arrived at the conclusion that the policy of threats and aggression with regard to the Island of Freedom had to be repulsed decisively. An agreement was therefore reached to deliver Soviet medium-range missiles to Cuba for defensive purposes.[159]

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[152] Gromyko, 169.
[153] Khrushchev, 491.
[154] Khrushchev, 492.
[155] Blight, 294.
[156] Blight, 294.
[157] Blight, 301.
[158] Khrushchev, 493.
[159] Gromyko, 170.

It is unclear exactly when the Soviets decided to place missiles in Cuba,[160] but it was sometime during the late summer or early fall of 1962. Missile placement seemed to be the perfect solution to the problem: it would answer the American threat but avoid nuclear war.[161] The Soviets agreed to tell Castro that the missiles were needed to defend the revolution.[162] They explained to him that a second invasion of Cuba would not be as badly planned as the first, and that his regime would be crushed.[163] This was a bold move on the part of the Soviet Union; never before had it placed medium-range missiles outside of its borders.[164] Furthermore, successfully transporting offensive missiles to Cuba during a time of tension was a formidable undertaking.[165]

During the early fall of 1962, 42 intermediate-range missiles were stationed in Cuba, along with 40,000 men to guard them.[166] The missiles remained under Soviet control the entire time.[167] There were enough missiles to destroy New York City, Chicago, many midwestern industrial centers, and Washington, DC.[168] The operation was kept a complete secret from both allies[169] and Soviet ambassadors.[170]

United States intelligence discovered the missiles and informed the President on October 16, 1962.[171] "This was the beginning of the Cuban missile crisis – a confrontation between the two giant atomic energy nations, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.,

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[160] Brugioni, 83.
[161] Khrushchev, 493.
[162] Dobrynin, 72.
[163] Khrushchev, 494.
[164] Brugioni, 82.
[165] Brugioni, 83.
[166] Dobrynin, 73.
[167] Dobrynin, 73.
[168] Khrushchev, 496.
[169] Gromyko, 173.
[170] Dobrynin, 74.
[171] Kennedy, 19.

which brought the world to the abyss of nuclear destruction and the end of mankind."[172] The missiles surprised United States officials, who had no plans to attack Cuba. In fact, on the eve of the crisis, Kennedy himself had said that no military operations would be launched against Cuba unless it actually acted against its neighbors.[173]

Many Americans felt blind-sided by this turn of events, and anger quickly followed. In Kennedy's words, "The dominant feeling was stunned surprise…now as the representatives of the CIA explained the U-2 photographs that morning, Tuesday, October 16th, we realized that all of it [reassurances from the Soviet Union] had been lies, one gigantic fabric of lies. The Russians were putting missiles in Cuba…"[174] Khrushchev later stated, "I don't think America had ever faced such a real threat of destruction as at that moment."[175]

Khrushchev evidently did not anticipate the strong negative reaction of the United States. On the contrary, he seemed to think that relations would improve after the discovery of the missiles.[176] He thought that if missiles were installed in Cuba, when the United States found out, it would think twice before attacking.[177] However, Khrushchev was ignorant about the United States, and he kept the missile operation secret from advisers who could have helped him.[178]

The Kennedy administration formed an executive committee of the National Security Council (referred to as the "ExComm"[179]) to address the situation. Its members included Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Director

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[172] Kennedy, 19.
[173] Dobrynin, 75.
[174] Kennedy, 20.
[175] Khrushchev, 496.
[176] Blight, 239.
[177] Khrushchev, 494.
[178] Blight, 302.
[179] Kennedy, 24.

of the CIA John McCone, Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon, President Kennedy's

advisor on national security affairs McGeorge Bundy, Presidential Counsel Ted

Sorensen, Under Secretary of State George Ball, Deputy Under Secretary of State U.

Alexis Johnson, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor, Assistant

Secretary of State for Latin America Edward Martin, Advisor on Russian Affairs

Llewellyn Thompson, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric, Assistant

Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, and several others who participated intermittently in

various meetings.[180] They met daily and deliberated for the next 12 days, and then

occasionally for six weeks after the conflict was resolved.[181] Robert Kennedy described

the group as "…men of highest intelligence, industrious, courageous, and dedicated to

their country's well-being."[182] The President did not attend all of the meetings in order to

keep the discussions from being inhibited, but rather asked the group to come up with one

or two recommendations and present those to him.[183]

The President believed that he would have to act. According to Robert Kennedy,

"It would be difficult; the stakes were high- of the highest and most substantial kind – but

he knew he would have to act. The U.S. could not accept what the Russians had

done."[184] The tone of the ExComm meetings was usually calm and businesslike;

participants spoke freely without regard to rank and often disagreed with President

Kennedy in a manner bordering on disrespect.[185]

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[180] Kennedy, 25.
[181] Kennedy, 24.
[182] Kennedy, 25.
[183] Kennedy, 26-27.
[184] Kennedy, 26.
[185] Stern, 58.

From the beginning, participants carefully considered the options facing the United States. Indeed, they agreed at the first meeting that decisions did not have to be made immediately, but should be well thought out because action against Cuba would have widespread consequences.[186] Members of the ExComm believed that some action was required, for inaction would make the U.S. appear scared of Cuba.[187] Yet President Kennedy thought that the crisis was as much political as it was military.[188] McGeorge Bundy, the Assistant to the President for National Security, encouraged committee members to ask themselves before making a decision what the world would be like if they proceeded and what it would be like if they voted against it.[189]

Some members supported a military strike, but in the end the decision was made to institute a military "quarantine."[190] ExComm members were aware that multiple air strikes would appear to be a pre-invasion effort.[191] Furthermore, Undersecretary of State George Ball urged that a strike without warning would not be what one would expect given the values of the United States.[192] The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended air strikes but acknowledged the political costs.[193]

Many of the participants wavered back and forth between the options, indicating that there were no preconceived notions.[194] President Kennedy split the committee into two groups and had each write a plan of action, beginning with the President's speech to

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[186] Stern, 63, 64.
[187] Stern, 81.
[188] Stern, 82.
[189] Stern, 87.
[190] Kennedy, 34.
[191] Stern, 72.
[192] Stern, 104.
[193] Stern, 121.
[194] Stern, 133.

the nation and continuing with the whole course of action thereafter.[195] The groups then

exchanged their papers, edited and criticized them, and handed them back for more

work.[196] During this time, the men reportedly spoke as equals.[197]

On October 21, deliberations entered a new phase after a blockade had been

chosen. ExComm members viewed the blockade as an important initial step; military

action could be added later should the situation escalate.[198] Instead of debating the

course of action any longer, the group then considered all of the unpleasant potential

situations that might arise following the "quarantine" and their hypothetical responses to

them.[199] The President was determined not to misjudge or miscalculate any of the

information and was emphatic both that no errors be made and that every attack be

verified before a counterattack.[200]

This time of deliberation was both intense and stressful. The President repeatedly

advised the committee that it needed to be aware of the implications of their actions; war

is rarely intentional.[201] During this period, Kennedy communicated almost daily with

Khrushchev.[202] The U.S. President issued statements, which he also read aloud to Andrei

Gromyko, the Soviet Foreign Minister, to help ensure no communication errors were

made.[203]

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[195] Kennedy, 35.
[196] Kennedy, 36.
[197] Kennedy, 36.
[198] Kennedy, 43.
[199] Stern, 144.
[200] Kennedy, 46, 49.
[201] Kennedy, 74, 80.
[202] Kennedy, 61.
[203] Kennedy, 32.

Khrushchev recalled that "Any fool can start a war, and once he's done so, even the wisest of men are helpless to stop it, especially if it's nuclear war."[204] Khrushchev and Kennedy excelled in crisis management.[205] President Kennedy made clear that he did not want war with Cuba, but that something must be done or he believed the U.S. military would force his hand.[206] Khrushchev realized that a solution must be found that resolved the conflict but did not compromise Cuba.[207] Thus, the two began discussing a resolution.

Khrushchev suggested to Kennedy that the United States remove its missiles from Turkey in exchange for the removal of the missiles from Cuba.[208] However, Kennedy countered with a promise not to invade Cuba if the Soviets removed the missiles from Cuba.[209] Robert Kennedy communicated to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that the United States was prepared to use force if necessary if it did not receive an answer from Moscow.[210] Dobrynin communicated this to the Soviet leader; this was a turning point in the crisis resolution. By October 26, Khrushchev and Kennedy had come to see the predicament in the same light; they each faced common dangers and shared an interest in resolving the confrontation on mutually satisfactory terms.[211]

On October 28, the Soviet Union accepted the terms negotiated by the United States for the missiles to be removed from Cuba in exchange for a U.S. promise not to invade Cuba.[212] A secret deal also pledged that the United States would withdraw

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[204] Khrushchev, 493.
[205] Blight, 305.
[206] Khrushchev, 498.
[207] Khrushchev, 498.
[208] Dobrynin, 86.
[209] Dobrynin, 86.
[210] Dobrynin, 88.
[211] Blight, 303.
[212] Dobrynin, 90.

missiles from Turkey.[213] At Kennedy's request, this agreement was never publicized, which cost Khrushchev dearly; to the entire world, it looked as though Kennedy had won.[214] In reality, the terms of the settlement were neither a victory nor a defeat for either side.[215]

Indicators of Groupthink

Appendices A and C describe the indicators of groupthink present in the Cuban Missile Crisis. The decision process differs greatly from that of the Bay of Pigs Crisis. In handling the Cuban Missile Crisis, members of the ExComm evaluated, debated, and frequently agonized over information. No red flag information was present but ignored, leading me to conclude that cognitive consistency did not appear in the decision-making process. In the memoirs and transcripts from the meetings, each time information was presented, it was considered carefully.

Unanimity was absent during the process as well. Many committee members wavered in their decisions and repeatedly changed their minds. Robert Kennedy specifically stated in his memoir that it was evident that there were no preconceived notions; many of the members shifted back and forth on their decisions. Additionally, President Kennedy took steps to prevent unanimity by dividing the group to consider multiple options.

The group was not overly optimistic, and it had a contingency plan in place to proceed to a military strike if the blockade failed. The committee members also continued to meet even after the blockade was chosen to consider all of the potential complications that could arise and the possible responses to them. The cautionary

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[213] Dobrynin, 91.
[214] Dobrynin, 91.
[215] Dobrynin, 91.

attitude is also depicted in the various memoirs when the writers describe the tension when the blockade was tested; none of the decision-makers knew how the Soviets would respond, indicating a lack of overoptimism.

Furthermore, alternative action was thoroughly considered when President Kennedy split the committee into groups and had them examine the risks and benefits of multiple plans. For each decision made, an alternative was worked out and debated. All four of the groupthink indicators were absent or at low levels in the decision-making process in the Cuban Missile Crisis. The level of groupthink present in this crisis was very low/absent as evidenced by the lack of indicators present.

Outcome

Most scholars and world leaders consider the Cuban Missile Crisis to have been handled quite effectively.[216] The evidence indicates that not only was the groupthink phenomenon not present, but ExComm members were aware of the pitfalls of potential bias and took careful steps to protect themselves from it. The President in particular was very cautious at each step of the decision-making process and reminded the committee of the significance of their decisions. The objective, removing the missiles from Cuba, was achieved, leading to the cessation of the crisis. In this crisis, the four indicators of groupthink were absent, and the outcome was a successful one, supporting the hypothesis that a principled process, characterized by lower levels of the groupthink indicators, is associated with a higher quality process and a more positive outcome.

It is important to note that not all of the crises I examined contained the same stakes. The Cuban Missile Crisis, unlike the other two analyzed here, had the potential to

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[216] See, e.g., Janis, Robert Kennedy, Khrushchev, Allison and Zelikow, and Hart.

escalate rapidly to nuclear warfare. Because of this danger, the Administration may have been more cautious in this case than in the other two crises it faced. The risks could have changed the willingness of the decision makers to adhere more fully to principles and to avoid the potential pitfalls of bias.

Chapter Six: Vietnam

Like the previous case chapters, this one begins by summarizing the events that led to the crisis in Vietnam as well as the decision-making process in the JFK administration. Following the summary is a discussion of the indicators of groupthink present in this crisis. Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief examination of the outcome of the crisis.

Summary

The decisions made that led to heightened U.S. involvement in Vietnam occurred in JFK's administration. Eisenhower had previously concluded, and his successors did not question, that the fall of South Vietnam to communism would threaten the security of the United States.[217] In the 1950's, the United States set out to make South Vietnam a bulwark against communism.[218] In 1954, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was created, conditionally pledging the United States to protect Indochina. Prior to Kennedy's presidency, the U.S. had spent more than seven million dollars in economic and military aid to South Vietnam.[219] Furthermore, Soviet activity in Berlin and Cuba seemed to underscore many U.S. officials' beliefs about the aggressive nature of communism.[220]

In the early 1950s, however, conditions in Vietnam were far from ideal for the beginning of a war. The economy was devastated, chaos reigned, and religious tension between Buddhists and Roman Catholics was high.[221] The National Intelligence Estimate

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[217] McNamara, 30.
[218] Herring, 53.
[219] McNamara, 31.
[220] McNamara, 32.
[221] Herring, 57.

of 1954 predicted that even with solid support from the United States, the chances of establishing a strong and stable government were "poor."[222]

The United States viewed Indochina as a necessary part of its containment policy; JFK officials also believed, however, that only the South Vietnamese could defend their nation and the U.S. should limit its involvement, two objectives that later proved to be contradictory.[223] The decision-making process was made even more difficult by the lack of a senior official either in the Pentagon or the State Department with intimate knowledge of Southeast Asia.[224] Lacking knowledge of Vietnamese history and culture, most Americans failed to comprehend the difficulties of nation building in an area with a fragile basis for nationhood.[225] U.S. officials saw Ho Chi Minh, President of North Vietnam, as being analogous to Castro, which rendered the foundations for decision-making flawed, for the leader and the countries were quite different.[226]

On major policy issues such as deployment of advisors and troops to Vietnam, President Kennedy was cautious and hesitant, and he delayed making a firm commitment for nearly a year.[227] In March 1961, the President set up a task force composed mostly of members from the Department of Defense -- Deputy Secretary Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Under Secretary Johnson, Assistant Secretary Walter McConaughy, Paul Nitze, Rear Admiral Luther Hines, General Edward Landsdale, Colonel Edwin Black and Colonel J. M. Flesch from DOD; Ambassador Kenneth Young; General Lionel McGarr from the United States Army; and William Colby and Desmond Fitzgerald from the CIA -- to

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[222] Herring, 57.
[223] McNamara, 31.
[224] McNamara, 32.
[225] Herring, 86.
[226] McNamara, 33.
[227] Herring, 91.

explore alternative actions and make recommendations regarding the ever-growing problems in Vietnam.[228] In April, Kennedy approved aid conditional on political reform, but President Diem of South Vietnam balked.[229] On May 8, the task force presented a report to the President calling for a massive increase in personnel.   Before approving it, Kennedy scaled it back a great deal.[230] The tension between North Vietnam and South Vietnam continued to escalate, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk recommended continuing diplomatic relations while preparing for military action.[231] His recommendation was to authorize sending 30,000 combat troops to South Vietnam.[232]

By the fall of 1961, guerilla infiltration had increased and the Vietcong had intensified their attacks on President Diem. [233] President Kennedy sent General Max Taylor and Deputy NSA Walt Rostow to South Vietnam to assess the situation.[234] They recommended boosting the U.S. support with advisors, equipment, and troops, and upgrading the U.S. role in the war from an advisory one to a partnership.[235] However, the rest of the group did not share their views. McNamara and the State Department representative did not vote for the recommendation because they believed it was South Vietnam's war, and if it did not have enough will or ability to fight on its own, the chances of U.S. success were slim.[236]

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[228] McNamara, 37.
[229] Herring, 93.
[230] McNamara, 37.
[231] McNamara, 37.
[232] McNamara, 37.
[233] McNamara, 38.
[234] McNamara, 38.
[235] McNamara, 38.
[236] McNamara, 39.

The view early in the Administration was that the United States should not fight South Vietnam's war.[237] However, the number of advisors sent to South Vietnam jumped from 3205 in 1961 to 9000 in 1962.[238] Administration officials recognized that South Vietnam was a problem, but remained hesitant to commit combat forces.

On January 13, 1962, General Lemnitzer, representing the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued that combat forces would be effective in preventing the loss of South Vietnam, which the Joint Chiefs assumed to be the objective.[239] In order to gather information with which to make these important decisions, regular meetings of advisory personnel were held in both Hawaii and Vietnam.[240] However, at these meetings reports often were inaccurate and overoptimistic, as the Vietnamese reported what they thought Americans wanted to hear.[241] The decisions makers finally defined their objective as training the South Vietnamese to defend themselves, which they all agreed upon.[242] There were two opinions on how that objective should be achieved: one that the U.S. should stay in South Vietnam as long as it took to train them to fight their own war, and the other that the U.S. should limit training to a specified amount of time and then pull out if objectives were not met.[243] During these meetings, participants raised multiple issues for discussion but left most unresolved and undecided.[244] Amid all of the debate, the group failed to analyze the pros and cons of withdrawal.[245]

[237] McNamara, 40.
[238] Herring, 104.
[239] McNamara, 41.
[240] McNamara, 43.
[241] McNamara, 47.
[242] McNamara, 48.
[243] McNamara, 50.
[244] McNamara, 53.
[245] McNamara, 63.

As unrest in South Vietnam escalated, President Diem, a staunch Roman Catholic, acted violently against uprisings from Buddhists.[246] Although he paid lip-service to democracy, he assumed absolute powers in practice.[247] His inattention to the needs of the citizenry combined with his violent suppression of dissent stirred discontent to the point where a Buddhist priest immolated himself publicly and Diem only encouraged more of the same.[248] He granted blanket search and arrest powers while banning public gatherings and restricting the free press. At this point, on August 23, 1963, South Vietnamese army generals cabled Washington and inquired what the U.S. government would do if the army acted against Diem.[249] When these reports arrived in Washington, all key decision makers were out of the city at the same time.[250] The second-level officials left behind supported a coup, and it was approved unanimously through a series of phone calls in which the second-level officials informed their senior counterparts that others had approved. This led those being asked to reluctantly agree, when in reality no one fully reviewed the policy; each official granted approval over the phone.[251] This turn of events led to a major change in policy with no major alternatives explored.[252]

In the fall of 1963, Secretary of Defense McNamara visited South Vietnam and spoke with Diem.[253] At this time, President Diem was growing more and more frustrated with American involvement; he needed their help but resented the democratic reform they demanded.[254] Although Diem was uncommunicative and an enigma to most

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[246] McNamara, 52.
[247] Herring, 77.
[248] Herring, 77.
[249] Herring, 117.
[250] McNamara, 52.
[251] McNamara, 53.
[252] McNamara, 53.
[253] McNamara, 79.
[254] Herring, 112.

American officials, McNamara thought there was no suitable alternative or replacement and thus recommended that a coup not be organized.[255] Like the other senior officials, he had come to the conclusion that the hasty phone approval of the coup was a mistake. Instead, he recommended applying selective pressures on Diem and his government.[256] On October 2, 1963, President Kennedy convened the National Security Council to discuss the report and summarized, saying that the U.S. needed to find more effective ways to persuade Diem to change the political atmosphere in South Vietnam.[257] Once again, all agreed that it was South Vietnam's war, and the disagreement was over how to meet the objectives.[258] By the end of the meeting, the U.S. decision makers agreed to withdraw 1000 men and reiterated McNamara's discouragement of a coup.[259]

On November 1, 1963, a cable arrived in Washington stating that Diem had agreed to whatever Kennedy asked in order to fight off aggression from the Vietcong.[260] However, it arrived too late: the coup that the U.S. had repeatedly discouraged after their hasty approval had already begun. At 9:30 am in Washington DC, on November 2, the CIA in South Vietnam initially reported that Diem had committed suicide; however, he died of gunshot wounds and his hands were bound behind his back.[261] President Kennedy was visibly shaken by the news.[262] Diem's death created a political vacuum in South Vietnam with no solution compatible with U.S. objectives.[263]

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[255] McNamara, 42, 79.
[256] Herring, 123.
[257] McNamara, 79.
[258] McNamara, 79.
[259] McNamara, 82.
[260] McNamara, 83.
[261] McNamara, 83.
[262] McNamara, 84.
[263] McNamara, 85.

On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated. Because the two main leaders involved in the decision-making process behind the Vietnam conflict both were killed within a month of one another, the conflict took on a new shape under different leadership. Because one of President Kennedy's goals was to avoid the risk of unpredictable war, some scholars speculate that he would have limited future U.S. involvement.[264] Upon Kennedy's death, however, President Johnson inherited the conflict and approached Vietnam from a different perspective than his predecessor.[265] For the purpose of this study, my analysis ends here.

Indicators of Groupthink

Appendices A and D describe the indicators of groupthink present in the Vietnam crisis. The decision-making process in the Kennedy administration during the Vietnam crisis was for the most part a high quality process. The phone-call decision supporting a coup ultimately was the downfall of the process. Although it was later reconsidered and subsequently discouraged, the plan had been put into motion and the momentum was hard to stop. Had it not been for that one poor decision, the process would have been much better. Because of this, it makes the Vietnam crisis somewhat more difficult to analyze than the previous two crises faced by the JFK administration.

Cognitive consistency was largely absent in the process.   Administration officials were hesitant and cautious, evaluating the information they received carefully.   While the information itself was not always entirely accurate, the processing of that information seemed to be without bias. Officials considered and analyzed the information, and

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[264] McNamara, 97.
[265] McNamara, 89.

several travelled to Vietnam to assess the situation personally. Red flags contradicting the choices of the decision-makers seem to be largely absent.

Overall, unanimity was not present in the votes for the role that the United States should play or in discussions about the best way to achieve objectives in Vietnam. However, the initial decision to support a coup was made quickly and was unanimous. This one decision seemed to differ from the pattern upheld throughout the rest of the crisis, though.

Overoptimism also can be seen in the decision to support a coup in that there was no contingency plan for leading the country after the leader was assassinated. While President Kennedy did not envision this actually happening since it was manipulated into policy through the phone calls made by lower-level advisors, his administration still bears responsibility for giving the initial approval over the phone without a contingency plan for South Vietnam. The remainder of the decision-making process seemed to be free from overoptimism in that President Kennedy erred on the side of caution with sending advisors to Vietnam and trying to delay upgrading the political partnership to military action.

Finally, there was little appraisal of alternatives. Robert McNamara admitted that decision-makers did not consider complete withdrawal as an alternative to action in Vietnam. He also recalls that the decision for a coup was swiftly approved without any consideration of options. There was no alternative leader for President Diem being considered when the support for the coup was approved, and no alternative plan was discussed via cable while the main decision-makers were away from Washington.

Overall, the decision-making process during the crisis in Vietnam may have been of high-quality without the coup-related decision; in that decision, however, higher levels of three indicators of groupthink were present, thus lowering the quality of the process.

Outcome

The outcome of the decision-making on Vietnam during the JFK administration was negative. The objective, to enable the South Vietnamese to fight their own war, was not achieved. The crisis did not end, but instead was passed on to President Johnson. Furthermore, President Diem was killed in a coup that originally was authorized by a series of phone calls without alternative actions considered. Because there was no suitable replacement for him, the United States inherited a conflict that top officials evidently did not plan to take on. The initial decision to support the coup, which ultimately was the major mistake, contained higher levels of three of the four indicators of groupthink. In the Vietnam decision process, most of the indicators were present, and the outcome was negative, again supporting the hypothesis that the presence of the indicators of groupthink leads to a low quality decision making process, which in turn leads to negative outcomes.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions and Recommendations

Many lessons can be learned about decision making in times of national security crisis by examining and evaluating the decision processes during the JFK administration. From my study, President Kennedy seemed eager to learn from his mistakes and careful to avoid repeating them. He and his advisors made many mistakes in the authorization of the Bay of Pigs operation, but he was determined to avoid those same pitfalls in the Cuban Missile Crisis. His administration's national security decision-making processes seemed to evolve over the years he was in office. The Vietnam crisis seemed initially to be devoid of higher levels of most of the groupthink indicators, but the Administration succumbed to the pitfalls of groupthink in a series of phone calls, and he authorized a poor decision to have the President of South Vietnam removed, thus aggravating conditions on the ground in South Vietnam. This propelled the crisis further and led to American military involvement and a conflict that probably was unwinnable.

Based on the examination of the three crises for levels of groupthink, some conclusions can be drawn. It is important to note that I cannot demonstrate causality, only suggest possible relationships between the relative presence of groupthink in the decision process and the quality of the resulting decisions. I noted in each crisis that the higher levels of groupthink, the lower the quality of the decision-making process. Little suggests that these results apply only to crisis or to national-security situations; rather they emerge in any group decision-making circumstance.

Recommendations can be made based on these conclusions. First, decision-making groups evidently should work to avoid the bias of cognitive consistency. In the Bay of Pigs crisis, many red flags should have been examined more closely and

alternative actions considered. If an administration adheres to the principles of systematic fact-finding and careful consideration, its decisions are more likely to lead to positive outcomes. The Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated the power of vigilant decision making and careful information processing and their relationships to a desirable outcome.

Second, the composition of the decision-making group is important. The participants need to be those of various backgrounds, statuses, and interests so as to reduce the pitfalls of the groupthink phenomenon. The leader needs to facilitate open and honest discussion and give a voice to those who have concerns about a favored plan of action. Members of the group need to be courageous and speak when they have doubts, even if they have few if any supporters. A commitment to integrity must outweigh the need for consensus. Moreover, when members of a decision-making team are able to meet regularly and speak freely, they are much more likely to arrive at solid decisions. When the president is directly involved in the process but yet allows others to express opinions without regard to rank, taking competing views into account, input can be given the critical evaluation necessary for sound decision making. When presidents or their closest advisers permit a range of participants to discuss misgivings and doubts and not press for simple yes-or-no answers, they give themselves the opportunity to pay appropriate attention to possible consequences. The president's direct involvement in the decision-making process is crucial, but so are the ability and willingness of members of the president's team to speak freely without fear of judgment.

Multiple plans need to be considered and examined in order to find a satisfactory course of action in any policy setting, especially a crisis. Contingency plans are crucial

to any operation. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy wisely asked his team to present two different plans of action and to weigh all of the possible complications that could arise in each situation. By doing this, he reduced the likelihood of unanimity. He also continually reminded the team that they were making very crucial decisions, so that they were less likely to grow overoptimistic. When groupthink is avoided and multiple options are considered, the outcome is more likely to be a positive one.

Alternative actions need to be considered. Decision makers must ask themselves what other possibilities exist and what the wisest course of action might be. Decisions made quickly without careful consideration of alternatives are often of poorer quality because feasible alternatives are overlooked. Many crises indeed do have extraordinary time and information constraints; however, when time allows, every effort must be made to avoid rushing the process and carefully weighing each option. In the JFK administration, the crises did allow sufficient time to make wise decisions, though it should be understood that may not always be the case.

Finally, efforts must be made to keep misperceptions to a minimum. The presence of a devil's advocate may be helpful in this regard. The importance of considering the perspectives of other states needs to be stressed. One of the pitfalls in the Vietnam decision making process was the lack of an expert on Indochina in the Administration.[266] This made it very easy to fall into the traps of groupthink. When precautions are taken to avoid unexamined assumptions and to use empathy, positive decisions are more likely.

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[266] McNamara, 32.

Groupthink is a phenomenon that will continue to be relevant to anticipate and guard against. Even with global information and technology flows, 24-hour news, and arguably more unpredictable, difficult to identify, and dangerous state and non-state actors, the principles still apply. In most advanced industrialized countries, leaders do not make decisions completely on their own and thus need to rely on a group that is capable of following a decision-making process that leads to higher quality outcomes. Moreover, although there are myriad influences on U.S. presidents, the influence of advisors will continually be present, rendering their abilities very important.

A principled process is one that minimizes the features associated with groupthink. Such a process is one that is characterized by the relative absence or lower levels of cognitive consistency, overoptimism, unanimity, and lack of alternative appraisal. Furthermore, these indicators would be less evident in a principled process because the principles adhered to (such as honesty, courage, integrity, and commitment) would reduce their impact on decision-making.

A principle that can be associated with avoiding cognitive consistency is the desire to seek the truth without regards to the personal cost. This also may be linked to the presence of or absence of humility. Decision makers sometimes focus on a desired course of action so single-mindedly that they do not want to turn back when new information, a red flag, indicates that a particular course of action is not recommended. It can take a leader and advisors with humility to admit that the original plan may no longer work in light of new developments. Courage is a second principle that is needed to overcome the pressures of the groupthink phenomenon. Each decision maker must be

more committed to making the right decision than to bowing to the opinions of their peers. It takes courage to speak up when the rest of the team may disagree.

These principles are as applicable today as they were during the Kennedy administration. While they are principles evidenced and desired in individuals, the groups that make important decisions are composed of individuals. Although they may manifest themselves differently in contemporary crises, humility and courage are both individual character traits that are desirable in leadership today. President Kennedy's legacy continues today in the lessons he learned about decision making in times of crisis, including those involving groupthink. By examining the various crises that he faced, one can discern appropriate principles making important national security decisions in the future, especially in times of crisis.

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Groupthink Indicators

Crises		Cognitive Consistency	Unanimity	Over-optimism	Lack of Alternative Appraisal
	Bay of Pigs	Info on geographic limitations of location ignored; info on Castro's support among Cubans ignored; info on unsuccessful air raids ignored	Bay of Pigs site approved unanimously; decision to keep the operation covert was unanimous as well.	Chance of success less than 50%, but plan was executed without a contingency escape plan in place for the Brigade.	No evidence of alternative plan discussed, invasion was sought for from the beginning. No effort to contact Castro or reach diplomatic solution.
	Cuban Missile Crisis	None present.	Split vote present throughout discussion, no unanimity present.	Contingency plan for military action in place should blockade fail, no over-optimism present.	Alternative of military action evaluated by ExComm, no lack of alternative appraisal present. Diplomatic efforts maximized.
	Vietnam	None present, red flag information seems to have been evaluated by the administration	Twofold: None present in the general process, however, coup was approved	No contingency plan for a new leader when Diem was removed.	Withdrawal was never considered as an alternative plan; when coup was approved, no alternative

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	.	unanimously without discussion.		was discussed. Diplomacy was not considered as an option.

APPENDIX B – Groupthink Indicators in the Bay of Pigs Crisis

Groupthink Indicators

		Cognitive Consistency	Unanimity	Over-optimism	Lack of Alternative Appraisal
Bay of Pigs	**Evidence**	Info on geographic limitations of location ignored; info on Castro's support among Cubans ignored; info on unsuccessful air raids ignored	Bay of Pigs site approved unanimously; decision to keep the operation covert was unanimous as well.	Chance of success less than 50%, but plan was executed without a contingency escape plan in place for the Brigade.	No evidence of alternative plan discussed, invasion was sought for from the beginning. No effort to contact Castro or reach diplomatic solution.
	Present Or Absent	Present	Present	Present	Present

Strength	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong

APPENDIX C – Groupthink Indicators in the Cuban Missile Crisis

Groupthink Indicators

	Cognitive Consistency	Unanimity	Over-optimism	Lack of Alternative Appraisal
Cuban Missile Crisis — **Evidence**	None present; Each piece of information considered and analyzed carefully as evidenced in transcripts and memoirs.	Split vote present throughout discussion, no unanimity present, group purposefully split to ensure unanimity absent.	Contingency plan for military action in place should blockade fail, each possible complication considered, no over-optimism present.	Alternative of military action evaluated by ExComm, group split for the purpose of evaluating alternatives, no lack of alternative appraisal present. Diplomatic efforts maximized.

Present Or Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
Strength	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Groupthink Indicators

		Cognitive Consistency	**Unanimity**	**Over-optimism**	**Lack of Alternative Appraisal**
Vietnam Crisis	**Evidence**	None present, red flag information seems to have been evaluated by the administration.	Twofold: None present in the general process, however, coup was approved unanimously without discussion.	No contingency plan for a new leader when Diem was removed.	Withdrawal was never considered as an alternative plan; when coup was approved, no alternative was discussed. Diplomacy was not considered as an option.

Present Or Absent	Absent	Present	Present	Present
Strength	N/A	Weak	Weak	Strong

APPENDIX E – Decision-Making Teams and Crises

<table>
<tr>
<td rowspan="3">Crises</td>
<td colspan="2">Decision-Making Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bay of Pigs</td>
<td>Allen Dulles, CIA Director
Colonel Edward Lansdale, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations
Defense Secretary Thomas Gates
Attorney General Robert Kennedy
Secretary of State Dean Rusk
Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara
General Lemnitzer, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban Missile Crisis</td>
<td>Secretary of State Dean Rusk
Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara
Director of the CIA John McCone
Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon</td>
</tr>
</table>

	President Kennedy's advisor on national-security affairs McGeorge Bundy Presidential Counsel Ted Sorensen Under Secretary of State George Ball Deputy Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America Edward Martin Advisor on Russian Affairs Llewellyn Thompson Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze
Vietnam	Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric Deputy Under Secretary Johnson Assistant Secretary Walter McConaughy Assistance Secretary Paul Nitze Rear Admiral Luther Hines General Edward Lansdale Department of Defense Colonel Edwin Black Department of Defense Colonel J. M. Flesch Ambassador Kenneth Young General Lionel McGarr from the United States Army CIA, William Colby CIA, Desmond Fitzgerald

APPENDIX F – Timelines and Crises

	Timeline	
Crises	**Bay of Pigs**	November 18, 1960 – Kennedy informed of plan upon being elected January 22, 1961 – New administration agreed to continue with CIA plans February 7, 1961 – Joint Chiefs approved plan March 11, 1961 – Plan disapproved April 4, 1961 – New plan approved with Bay of Pigs landing site April 12, 1961 – Press conference – U.S. will not act April 15, 1961 – Pre-invasion air strikes carried out April 16, 1961 – Kennedy approved invasion and it began April 19, 1961 – Brigade surrendered

Cuban Missile Crisis	Late Summer/Early Fall 1962 – Missiles placed in Cuba by Soviet Union October 16, 1962 – Missiles discovered in Cuba by U.S. October 21, 1962 – Blockade chosen as U.S. course of action October 26, 1962 – Khrushchev and Kennedy in agreement October 28, 1962 – Terms negotiated and crisis resolved
Vietnam	March 1961 – Vietnam task force established April 1961 – Aid approved conditional on reform May 8, 1961 – Task force asked for increase in personnel, approved Fall 1961 – Max Taylor and Walt Rostow visited Vietnam January 3, 1961 – General Lemnitzer suggested combat forces August 23, 1963 – Cable approval of coup following Buddhist crises Fall 1963 – Robert McNamara visited Vietnam to meet with Diem October 2, 1963 – NSC convened to discuss working with Diem, 1000 men withdrawn November 1, 1963 – Diem agreed to Kennedy's terms November 2, 1963 – Diem killed November 22, 1963 – Kennedy assassinated