

PRISONERS OF THEIR PREMISES
HOW UNEXAMINED ASSUMPTIONS LEAD TO WAR AND OTHER
POLICY DEBACLES

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The Power of Premises

“We are never deceived; we deceive ourselves.”

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The specter of catastrophe haunts the history of public policy. Capable, dedicated, and patriotic men and women frequently make disastrous decisions that squander the lives, fortunes, and goodwill of their fellow citizens. Why do such debacles occur when the incentives are so strong to make good decisions and there is every reason to believe that leaders strive to do so? Why is it so difficult for decision makers to deal with facts that challenge their understanding of events and issues? Moreover, why are they often slow to adjust their policies in the face of failure?

Premises

Leaders and their aides bring to office sets of beliefs about politics, policy, human nature, and social causality—in other words, beliefs about how the world works as it does and why it does so.¹ Decision makers have in their heads dozens of policy-related premises, such as the intentions and capabilities of other nations, the predilections of other leaders and their responsiveness to a variety of incentives, the capacity of their own governments to produce results, and the consequences of their current policies.

These beliefs provide a frame of reference for identifying problems, evaluating policy options, filtering information and giving it meaning, and for establishing boundaries of action.² Most important, premises predispose leaders to make certain decisions.³

One explanation for ruinous policies is that decision makers are often *prisoners of their premises*. This captivity discourages them from questioning the fundamental assumptions underlying a policy and leads them to ignore or dismiss facts and arguments pointing toward a different decision. Historian Barbara Tuchman termed assessing a situation in terms of preconceived, fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting contrary evidence as “wooden-headedness.” Acting according to one’s predispositions and refusing to be influenced by facts is a form of self-deception, epitomized by her summary of Philip II of Spain: “No experience of the failure of his policy could shake his belief in its essential excellence.”⁴

Unfortunately, the incidence of such dysfunctional behavior is not limited to inbred hereditary monarchs and plays a significant role in more contemporary government decision making.⁵ Two core traits of human beings assure that premises will play a prominent role in decision making.

Limits on Rationality

There is widespread understanding that there are important limits on the possibility of rational decision-making in politics as in other areas of life. Sometimes we refer to these limits as “bounded rationality.”⁶ There are cognitive limits to the ability of the human mind to process and analyze information. There are also limits on the time a person can devote to any decision. Finally, decision makers, particularly public officials, face intractable difficulties in choosing policies, including

- identifying problems
- selecting goals for policies
- prioritizing among goals

- choosing among a restricted range of options and incomplete information on them
- predicting and measuring the consequences of policy alternatives
- applying alternative criteria, such as efficiency and equity, to evaluating predicted consequences.

Decision makers cope with these decision-making challenges by simplifying and organizing their world. They are “cognitive misers,” who take shortcuts whenever they can.⁷ One broad strategy is satisficing, which entails seeking a satisfactory solution rather than an optimal one by searching through the available alternatives until an acceptable threshold is met.⁸ Thus, humans prefer to think efficiently rather than analytically. They do so by applying a number of heuristics or mental short cuts in their decision making.⁹ Although more efficient than systematic analysis, reliance on heuristics increases the probability of biased information processing because cognitive misers ignore much of the relevant information to reduce the demands on their minds or they overuse some kinds of information to avoid searching for more information.

Beliefs or premises fulfill a need for cognitive simplicity by making our complex and contradictory world comprehensible. They also help busy people cope with complex decisions to which they can devote limited time. Despite the utility of beliefs in facilitating efficiency in decision making, they provide their holders a simplified and thus inaccurate representation of reality. Sometimes these inevitable distortions are severe and lead to disastrous policies. Nevertheless, because they are useful for coming to grips with the complexity of the world, basic beliefs about politics and policy are resistant to change.

Motivated Reasoning

Cognitive limits explain why we hold premises and why they are there is a strong potential for them to be faulty. In addition, people simplify reality not only to deal with the world’s complexities but also to meet their psychological and social needs related to decision making. Meeting these requisites sustains the power of premises.

The physiology of human cognitive processes, the way we think, produces a psychological bias toward continuity. Human beings share a need for having consistent thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes.¹⁰ Thinking about something in a certain way reinforces this pattern, making it difficult to reorganize or adjust our views thoughts. As a result, there is an unconscious tendency to view persons and events in the world in a way that is compatible with how we previously viewed them. In other words, we process information in a way that buttresses our existing beliefs.

This human propensity distorts our analytical handling of evidence and produces a number of related biases.

- The *confirmation bias* refers to searching for, interpreting, favoring, and recalling information that confirms prior beliefs.
- The *prior attitude effect* involves viewing evidence consistent with prior opinions as more compelling than evidence that is inconsistent with them.
- The *disconfirmation bias* entails challenging and dismissing evidence inconsistent with prior opinions, regardless of their objective accuracy.

These biases may distort a person’s exposure to and perception of new information and the conclusions she reaches about it. Most people seek out information confirming their preexisting opinions and ignore or reject arguments contrary to their predispositions. When exposed to competing arguments, they typically accept the confirming ones and dismiss or argue against the opposing ones. People also tend to interpret ambiguous evidence as supporting their existing

position. Moreover, they are unlikely to search for information that challenges their views or options contrary to those they advocate. Instead, they tend to incorporate new information in ways that render it comprehensible within their existing frames of reference. In other words, they rationalize information to support their previously held beliefs.¹¹

Another cognitive strategy that can sustain premises and distort analysis is defensive avoidance, in which decision makers attempt to avoid or postpone the stress of making a decision. Irving Janis and Leon Mann argue that defensive avoidance can take three forms: procrastination, shifting responsibility of decision to others, and bolstering. Bolstering occurs when decision makers cannot identify an altogether satisfactory option, so they choose the least objectionable alternative and exaggerate its positive consequences and minimize its costs. A more systematic appraisal would force them to acknowledge the high costs and risks of their policy. Moreover, they try to keep from being exposed to communications that might reveal the shortcomings of the action they have chosen. When they do encounter contrary information, such as warnings of impending problems such as an enemy attack, they downplay it through wishful thinking.¹²

Both dissonance reduction and stress avoidance can be institutionalized if leaders encourage their subordinates to report or emphasize information that support their premises, as we will see below. In extreme cases, decision makers may simply cut off dissident information. The U.S. Forest Service was committed to preventing forest fires, and it disbanded its research arm when the unit showed that healthy forests required periodic burning.¹³ In such cases, premises are constantly reinforced and become even more resistant to change.

In addition to being motivated by cognitive consistency and stress reduction, people also unconsciously strive to maintain their positive or negative feelings, generally referred to as “affect,” toward political actors and issues. When called on to make an evaluation, people instantly and unconsciously draw on their prior attitudes. A heuristic mechanism for evaluating new information triggers a reflection on “How do I feel?” about the topic. This drive for affective consistency results in a bias towards maintaining existing affect, even in the face of disconfirming information. Moreover, the effects are strongest for those with strong attitudes and knowledge because they have repeatedly connected their beliefs to feelings, and they have the information to rationalize away disconfirming evidence and better defend their prior attitudes.¹⁴ People do not reason to find the right answer; they reason to arrive at the answer they want to be right.

To be clear, people are generally not closed-minded, consciously deceiving themselves to preserve their prior beliefs. Indeed, cognitive biases are powerful because they are not volitional, occurring unconsciously and automatically.¹⁵

Scholars have long known that beliefs are resistant to change. Francis Bacon, often credited with developing the scientific method, summarized them exactly four centuries ago.

The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion . . . draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects, in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusions may remain inviolate.¹⁶

In essence, we tend to see what we expect to see on the basis of our prior beliefs. Moreover, we seek and are more receptive to information that supports our views and resist information that is contrary to them.¹⁷ There is a related tendency toward premature cognitive

closure, terminating a search for information when we get enough information to support our existing views. Sometimes this tendency is aggravated by time pressures or the desire to finish an unpleasant decision task.¹⁸

Thus, we are reluctant to revise or update our beliefs.¹⁹ As a result of biased reasoning, most people remain unreceptive to major revisions of their beliefs in response to new information unless extraordinary circumstances force them to do so. Instead, we focus on what we know and neglect what we do not know, which makes us overly confident in our beliefs and our intuitions. As Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman put it, we have an “almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance.”²⁰

We know, then, that individuals have cognitive biases that strongly influence their decisions. But what about high-level officials? The fact that leaders occupy positions of power is evidence that they are in at least some ways exceptional. Moreover, the stakes for making the right decision about, say war and peace, are infinitely greater than the decisions to buy an automobile or choosing for whom to vote. Thus, political leaders have incentives to invest more fully in challenging their assumptions. Are public officials able to overcome the biases of ordinary citizens and carefully and dispassionately consider at least the most important options for a policy?

Some systematic research has concluded that officials, like the rest of us, engage in motivated reasoning and biased decision-making, even during critical times of international crisis.²¹ As Philip Tetlock put it, “experts neutralize dissonant data and preserve confidence in their prior assessments by resorting to a complex battery of belief-system defenses that, epistemologically defensible or not, make learning from history a slow process and defections from theoretical camps a rarity.”²² Moreover, subordinates learn and adopt the policy biases of their superiors and may focus on identifying and reporting information supporting such beliefs while diluting data that challenges them.²³ Leaders are especially likely to resist change if they have had success in the past with their views, if their beliefs are deeply entrenched, if the stakes—and thus, the related emotions—of decisions are highly consequential and the relevant information on alternatives is ambiguous.²⁴

The Role of Premises

Limits on human rationality and motivated reasoning inevitably distort leaders’ processing of information and bias them against changing their minds. These characteristics of individuals can affect any stage of decision making, and they explain why premises are often faulty and resistant to change. However, cognitive limitations and motivated reasoning do not explain the impact of premises on policy choices. To answer this question, we must turn to leaders in action.

Studying the Power of Premises

To investigate the impact of premises in the most rigorous fashion would require isolating the impact of premises. However, there are many other factors in addition to the limits of human rationality and motivated reasoning that can influence decisions, including personality characteristics such as personal insecurity, distortions in the information and options presented to decision makers resulting from bureaucratic politics and bureaucratic structure, the organization and management of advisory processes, interactions among advisers and between them and the principal decision maker, an official’s personal style of decision making,²⁵ and decision makers’

ethical and normative beliefs. There is no doubt that each may influence decision making at one time or another.

Studies of decision making tend to focus on the consequences of one of these variables such as psychopathologies, “groupthink,” the organization of advisory processes, or bureaucratic politics. Lacking measures of the various influences on decisions, we are not well-positioned to rigorously control for their impact while focusing on the significance of a particular component of decision making. It is not surprising, then, that although decision making is the most important role of political leaders, it is the one we understand the least.²⁶

It may always be thus. As John F. Kennedy wrote, “The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer—often, indeed, to the decider himself.... There will always be the dark and tangled stretches in the decision-making process—mysterious even to those who may be most intimately involved.”²⁷ Nevertheless, there is a path forward, and following it allows us to advance our understanding.

Nathan Leites developed the concept of the “operational code” of leaders in his masterful work, *Study of Bolshevism*.²⁸ Nearly a generation later, Alexander George structured the concept and argued it was important for understanding political decision making, particularly in conflict situations.²⁹ An operational code in Leites’ and George’s terms is a set of general philosophical beliefs about fundamental issues of history and central questions about the nature of politics and conflict as well as instrumental beliefs about the efficacy of various strategies for advancing their interests. Perceptions of the enemy are particularly important components of an operational code. These beliefs influence decision makers’ understanding and diagnoses of political events and influence their choice of strategy and tactics.

Although some work was done applying the concept of operational code,³⁰ the complexity of the concept has limited its utility in explaining decisions.³¹ To Leites and George, an operational code begins with a set of master beliefs at a high level of abstraction. My focus is on premises more directly related to specific policies. Tying premises to policy choices is more useful for explaining decisions than applying an operational code for each participant. In addition, these premises are more easily observed. We know, for example, what French planners thought about a possible German invasion in 1914. We know what U.S. decision makers thought about Iraq’s possessing weapons of mass destruction in 2002.

Inspired by David Mayhew’s classic work, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*,³² I engage in a thought experiment. Focusing specifically on premises, I ask, What if we knew little else about the influences on decision makers aside from their core premises regarding a policy? If their premises predict their decisions, then we have a basis for concluding that leaders were indeed their prisoners. If, on the other hand, decision makers routinely challenged their core assumptions and adjusted their decisions accordingly, we may infer that the analytical biases represented by premises were one of many influences on decisions and effects that sophisticated leaders can reliably overcome.

Where should we look to determine if decision makers are often prisoners of their premises? To examine the power of premises, I focus on major decisions in both the U.S. and other nations. These are the policies that are most consequential. The choice to go to war, for example, is different in kind than decisions regarding military strategy, economic mobilization, logistics, or peace negotiations. All of these matters are important, but I am particularly interested in the decisions that set the general course of a nation or leaders’ mindsets that prevented a recognition of significant developments in other nations such as surprise attacks.

On what aspect of decision making are premises likely to have their greatest impact? My point of departure is the foundation, explicit or merely implicit, of all decisions: identifying problems. Before policymakers can focus on developing and evaluating policy options, they must have an idea of the goal or goals the options are supposed to achieve. Policy goals usually focus on solving a problem such as a threat to national security, a stagnant economy, polluted air, or inadequate access to health care. Thus, most decision processes begin with identifying a problem to be solved, and decision makers need a clear and accurate understanding of the nature of a problem to best evaluate options for ameliorating it.

Problems, then, are the base of decision making. They do not come defined, however. Officials must delineate them. If decision makers share premises that lead them to assume the presence of a problem that actually does not exist, the rest of the decision-making process will be fatally flawed. You cannot solve a problem that does not exist. Moreover, you are likely to waste time, resources, and even lives and pay substantial opportunity costs in attempting to do so.

Premises may also blind policymakers to problems that require their attention or cause them to underestimate the likelihood of problems arising. Presuming away problems may give policymakers undue confidence in their favorite options, whether they are designed to maintain the peace or prepare for war, and thus cause them to evaluate certain options more positively than is appropriate. Similarly, policymakers need to carefully and dispassionately evaluate feedback on the consequences of policies they or their predecessors have put into place. However, premises about the efficacy of a policy may distort their evaluations of its success and discourage their consideration of changes to it.

The Chinese Intervention in Korea in 1950

The Chinese intervention in Korea was “one of the most terrific disasters that has occurred to American foreign policy”³³ —

Secretary of State Dean Acheson

In this paper I analyze an example of ignoring and underestimating a problem. Nine years after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States again suffered from surprise attacks, this time in Korea. Actually, the country was surprised twice in Korea – first, by the initial invasion of the South by the North Koreans and then six months later by the entry of China into the war. American strategic premises inhibited policy makers from anticipating both the North Korean and the Chinese attacks, with catastrophic consequences.

I examine these two strategic surprises through the lens of policymakers’ premises. And these decision makers were giants. President Harry Truman and his senior officials built a new international order in the wake of World War II. Most broadly, the United States adopted the doctrine of containment, the basic framework of U.S. foreign policy for the four decades of the Cold War, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union. As part of this effort, the president and his advisers channeled economic and military assistance to countries vulnerable to communism under the Truman Doctrine and executed the Berlin Airlift. They also constructed the modern foreign and defense policy apparatus, including the National Security Council, the CIA, and the Department of Defense. These same men adopted policies that transformed Germany and Japan into democracies and built a network of alliances in Europe and Asia that contributed to maintaining the peace. They also provided Europe the aid necessary to recover

from the war under the Marshall Plan, and they established a multitude of international organizations, including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (the forerunner to the World Trade Organization) to help keep the peace and the world to prosper. The world also avoided a great power war and witnessed the spread of democracy around the globe.

Thus, this set of officials presents a best test case. If even they were prisoners of their premises, it is easier to understand how lesser mortals might fall prey to the same malady.

North Korea Attacks

In his memoirs, President Harry Truman remembered that throughout the spring of 1950 the CIA reported that North Korea might launch a full-scale invasion of South Korea.³⁴ These reports lacked specificity as to such an attack, and officials viewed the information of North Korean activities as just a continuation of their border raids.³⁵ They expected that the North would continue to rely on “guerilla and psychological warfare, political pressure and intimidation” rather than an all-out assault.³⁶ When the South Koreans sent a warning of a broader offensive, U.S. officials interpreted it in the light of their efforts to obtain heavier military equipment. Washington officials dismissed the American ambassador to Korea’s warning as a case of special pleading for his host country.³⁷ Thus, top officials were surprised when on June 25, 1950, the North Korean army swept across the 38th parallel and came close to uniting the Korean peninsula under the Communist regime of Kim Il-sung.

North Korea as a Soviet Agent

A principal reason the United States was surprised was its view of communism. No less than in the 1960s, policymakers in 1950 saw communism as an international conspiracy.³⁸ U.S. officials could not grasp that North Korea might act on its own volition.³⁹ They operated on the premise that that North Korea was under Russian control⁴⁰ and that war in Korea would be only an adjunct to general war with the Soviet Union. Because decision makers thought the Russians were not ready to take such a step, they concluded that no invasion would occur.⁴¹ According to General Matthew Ridgway, the Army deputy chief of staff for operations and later commander of United Nations forces in Korea, “the concept of ‘limited warfare’ never entered our councils.”⁴² Moreover, the premise that excluded the possibility of a geographically restricted war seems to have inhibited decision makers from asking just why Stalin would see supporting a limited war in Korea as a high risk or a pathway to global war.⁴³

It was true that the Soviets equipped, trained, and advised the North Korean army⁴⁴ (which the United States underestimated—providing an additional reason to discount warnings of an invasion).⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it was the North Koreans who took the initiative for the war. Kim was an “intense Korea nationalist,” not merely a Soviet pawn. From at least 1949, he sought Josef Stalin’s support for an invasion of South Korea. The Soviet leader put him off throughout 1949. By 1950, Stalin gave in and assented to an invasion, but he distanced himself from direct involvement. Korea was not his primary concern, and he was not willing to risk direct military confrontation with United States to save the North Korean regime.⁴⁶ Although North Korea was largely under the Kremlin’s thumb, in war “Stalin was more the accommodator than the instigator.”⁴⁷

It is also the case that the North Koreans were not subservient to the Chinese. They did not want China to dominate their country, and China had little influence on the beginning of the war, although it did approve of the concept. Kim did not even tell the Chinese the details or the

timing of the June attack.⁴⁸ It was not until the U.S. counteroffensive at Inchon that the North Koreans requested substantial assistance from China.⁴⁹

Contrary to American premises, then, the North Koreans were not an agent of a broader communist conspiracy, nor did their invasion of the South portend global war.⁵⁰ Yet “the idea that Stalin had acquiesced to and not driven the invasion was alien” to U.S. policymakers.⁵¹ Nearly a year after the North Korean invasion, the president told the American public, “The Communists in the Kremlin are engaged in a monstrous conspiracy to stamp out freedom all over the world.” Moreover, “the attack on Korea was part of a greater plan for conquering all of Asia.”⁵²

Thus, despite years of provocations from the North, American officials ignored substantial evidence of a North Korean military buildup and mobilization near the border with South Korea. In fact, they were more concerned that South Korea would start a wider war by attempting to conquer North Korea, so the United States limited the size of their forces and the equipment available to them to discourage such an action and warned the South Korean president that he could not count on American support if he took aggressive action against North Korea.⁵³

Resisting Aggression

Once surprised, how would the U.S. respond? Harry Truman believed that for almost all problems there were precedents that provided clear guides to principles for action. “When we are faced with a situation,” the president explained, “we must know how to apply the lessons of history in a practical way.”⁵⁴ As Glenn Paige put it, “With history as an unambiguous moral teacher, decision making became an exercise in applying the lessons. An occasion for decision became a stimulus to search for past analogy.”⁵⁵

But which analogy was appropriate? For President Truman and his advisers, the 1930s was the most vivid period in history. “Truman saw the 1930’s as teaching a plain and unmistakable lesson.”⁵⁶ After learning of the North Korean attack, the president raced back to Washington from his home in Independence, Missouri. In his memoirs, he remembered thinking about previous instances “when the strong had attacked the weak.”

I recalled some earlier instances: Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria. I remembered how each time that the democracies failed to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier. I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores. If the Communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors. If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war.⁵⁷

By the time his plane touched down in Washington, Truman had made his basic decision. When the president surveyed his advisers, he found “complete, almost unspoken acceptance on the part of everyone that whatever had to be done to meet this aggression had to be done.”⁵⁸ In their discussions, they drew historical parallels to Hitler’s many aggressions, Mussolini’s rape of Ethiopia, and Japan’s seizure of Manchuria. At other times they also employed analogies from Greece in 1947 and the Berlin crisis in 1948.⁵⁹ As Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Dean Rusk put it, “the Korean decision was in the process of being made for an entire

generation since Manchuria.”⁶⁰ Thus, the president and his advisers shared the premise that you could not appease aggressors. As he told the American people, “If history has taught us anything, it is that aggression anywhere in the world is a threat to the peace everywhere in the world.”⁶¹ Speaking of communists, the president declared, “There is no telling what they will do if we don’t put up a fight now.”⁶²

How would the U.S. resist aggression? The premise of challenging aggressors was so powerful that it dominated decision makers’ thinking, even before discussions began. Prior to Truman boarding his plane in Independence, one of his aides told a reporter, the president “is going to hit those fellows hard,” and when the president landed, the first thing he said was that he was going to “hit them hard.” The officials with whom the president would soon meet also were convinced that the United States would have to take action.⁶³

The president told his advisers that it would take force to stop the North Koreans. The most fateful decision would be committing ground troops to the fight. Anticipating an eventual decision, in the first meeting with his advisers Truman asked the military to prepare the necessary orders in case the UN asked for American forces.⁶⁴ Four days later, he committed troops to provide order, transportation, communications, and protection for military facilities in Korea. The next day General MacArthur recommended using ground troops for offensive actions, and Truman immediately, and without consultation, agreed to the use of one regimental combat team. Later that day—five days after their first meeting—he found unanimous support among his advisers for giving MacArthur full authority to use the troops under his command at his discretion.⁶⁵

Containing Communism

Two momentous events occurred in 1949. The Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb on August 29. On October 1, Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong declared the creation of the People’s Republic of China. Washington elites, having already proclaimed the Truman doctrine and implemented the Berlin airlift, had to develop a policy to deal with these shocking developments. On April 7, 1950, President Truman received a 66-page top secret National Security Council (NSC) policy paper drafted by the Department of State and Department of Defense. It is commonly known as NSC-68 and was one of the most important American policy statements of the Cold War. According to the report, the United States should vigorously pursue a policy of “containing” Soviet expansion anywhere around the globe. The president signed the document into policy in September 1950.

Before the North Korean invasion, U.S. officials did not view South Korea as of strategic importance in the case of a broader war.⁶⁶ The premise of containing communism, along with a need to check aggressors and the belief in the central role of the Soviet Union in the invasion put Korea in a new light. Rather than perceiving the fighting as a localized conflict over control of the Korean peninsula, top officials saw the assault on South Korea as another battle against communism in the Cold War.⁶⁷ According to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, “It seemed close to certain that the attack had been mounted, supplied, and instigated by the Soviet Union and that it would not be stopped by anything short of force.”⁶⁸ Moreover, top officials thought the North Korean attack might be an effort to divert U.S. troops from Europe, where the Russians might attack, or it might be a step toward a full-scale war.⁶⁹

U.S. decision makers concluded that a communist Korea posed a threat to Japanese security, not responding would send a signal to the Soviet Union that it could act elsewhere with impunity, and inaction would jeopardize the prestige and reputation of the United States as a reliable ally in fighting communism and negate five years of effort to build collective security.⁷⁰

Korea became politically significant in light of the Cold War, something that officials did not foresee.⁷¹ Thus, the American decision to intervene was momentous, resulting in the globalization of containment, the core national security strategy for the next four decades.

Ernest May argues that the president did not have to choose to go to war. The U.S. had no special obligation to South Korea, and the country would have followed him had he chosen not to go to war. Moreover, the desire to contain communism and deter aggression could have led him to conclude that Korea was a Soviet trap to involve United States in an Asian ground war where it would be at a disadvantage. Not fighting could also reassure European allies that America would not waste scarce resources in an area of secondary concern. That is not how Truman saw matters, however. Low in the polls and suffering from criticism of the loss of China to communism, he and his advisors devoted little analysis to the differences between the 1930s and 1950 Korea or to a more sophisticated view of containment.⁷² Instead, they went to war.

The Chinese Intervene

The invasion of South Korea was only the first strategic surprise endured by the United States and its allies. Worse was yet to come. Exactly four months after the North Korean invasion, the Chinese People's Liberation Army intervened in massive numbers after American-led UN forces had pushed the North Koreans far back across the 38th parallel. U.S. military and civilian leaders were again caught by surprise, and American paid another costly price in casualties as the Chinese drove UN troops out of North Korea and almost out of South Korea as well. "The war was transformed from a police action against an obscure and weak government to a conflict with the most populous nation in the world and the second ranking communist power."⁷³

How could such a surprise happen? Given the success of the fight against the North Koreans, the UN's war aim changed from simply freeing South Korea of the invaders to occupying and unifying Korea as a democratic nation. In essence, decision makers concluded that the destruction of a communist regime in North Korea would not provoke a large-scale war with China. Once again, the premises of decision makers distorted their evaluations of a major threat to their success, with tragic consequences.

Premises

The premise of the Soviet Union's control of its communist neighbors extended to China and was to influence U.S. decision makers again in the fall of 1950, distorting their analyses of whether the Chinese would enter the war. U.S. leaders reasoned that the Soviet Union did not want a general war and therefore would restrain its Chinese clients, whom they thought were under Russian control.⁷⁴ When the Chinese intervened in the war, top officials believed the Russians were behind it.⁷⁵ (Interestingly, the British disagreed.)⁷⁶ Once officials concluded that the Soviet Union would not intervene in the war, it became easier to ignore warnings about a Chinese intervention.⁷⁷

Prominent journalist John Hersey summed up the premise of Soviet control in a story written about the White House after the Chinese attacked U.S. forces in massive numbers.

The entire policy since June, which had seemed to be turning out for the best, was now to be more heavily tested than ever; hopes of imminent peace were gone; the willingness of the Chinese Communists, and therefore, obviously, of the Russian Communists, to risk a general war for the stake in Korea was suddenly palpable.⁷⁸

Even after it was clear that they had made serious errors in judging what China would do, policy makers continued to assume that China was participating in a Russian-inspired conspiracy.⁷⁹

Yet the premise was incorrect. The Chinese decided to intervene, even in the absence of Soviet support, and began redeploying troops, stockpiling material, developing strategy, and mobilizing the country soon after original North Korean invasion. Only then did Stalin agree to support a Chinese intervention in the war.⁸⁰ “Thus, the Chinese not only made a unilateral decision to intervene for nationalistic purposes, but also intimidated the Soviets into supporting them.”⁸¹ When Stalin reneged on his promise to provide air cover, China went ahead anyway.⁸²

A second premise relevant to the catastrophe that was to occur in Korea focused on Chinese motivations. George and Smoke found that “Estimates of Chinese intentions . . . were based on a faulty premise—namely, the belief that the Chinese leaders were calculating their interests in much the same way as we did.”⁸³ U.S. officials did not understand that Chinese leader Mao Zedong’s motivation in acting had more to do with China’s traditional concerns about its borders, and fears based upon previous American support of Chinese Nationalist forces, than it did with any Communist worldwide strategy. They did not consider how China might respond to American troops in Korea, and they were insensitive to the fact that Mao saw the U.S. presence in North Korea as a security threat to the existence and stability of his new communist regime. Moreover, when the war broke out, the United States added protection for Formosa (Taiwan), undermining the tacit acceptance of allowing it to fall to mainland.⁸⁴

Mao also saw the unification of Korea under a non-Communist regime as a threat to revolutionary prospects in the world and also to the Chinese domestic situation, which was unsettled following the long civil war. A victory of the United States in Korea would increase the prestige of the Communist party in both China and North Korea.⁸⁵

For the first time, Western nations were employing force to eliminate a communist regime. How could we not expect China to respond strongly to the destruction of an ally on its borders? In addition, previous experience forewarned that China would not willingly tolerate the presence of hostile armies in its backyard. The United States had not hesitated to resist aggression eight thousand miles from its shores; why should China not be expected to react to MacArthur’s hostile campaign in similar fashion?⁸⁶

U.S. officials were confident that Peking would regard its interests in Korea as quite limited and sent numerous reassurances to China that they had no military or political designs on the country. In addition, the United States declined offers of Chinese Nationalist troops from Formosa and in the first months of the war did not bomb support bases in Manchuria or cross the 38th parallel or the borders of China or the Soviet Union. Thus, decision makers thought their intent not to threaten China was clear and were convinced they were not threatening legitimate Chinese interests by occupying and unifying North Korea. It followed, to them, that the Chinese would see their actions in the same light or could be persuaded to do so. Even in the face of warnings from China and evidence of the buildup and deployment of Chinese troops (see below) policymakers continued to believe their reassurances would work.⁸⁷

Moreover, top Americans leaders did not consider how the Chinese might view the more hostile declarations issued by MacArthur and those who agreed with him that contradicted their limited aims or the administration’s efforts to curb such statements.⁸⁸ The Chinese found it hard to believe that U.S. officials such as MacArthur could be advocating a policy that did not represent the views of those at the highest level.⁸⁹ Similarly, officials believed that neither the Soviet Union nor China would intervene if only South Korean soldiers were in control of the

extreme north of the country.⁹⁰ However, the United States could not successfully constrain MacArthur's use of American troops in those areas.⁹¹

There was no challenge to leaders' understanding of China's frame of reference, no examination of the assumptions on which it rested. Although George Kennan and a few others below the top level of officials did disagree, there was no systematic reevaluation.⁹² Moreover, Kennan was concerned about Russian, not Chinese, intervention.⁹³ Instead of reexamining assumptions, "Washington's reluctance to accept information that challenged the premises and wisdom of its policy strongly encouraged its tendencies to misread the frame of reference with which Peking perceived events in Korea, to misinterpret available intelligence, and to underestimate Peking's motivation and willingness to take risks."⁹⁴

A third faulty premise was that China was too weak to conduct a large-scale military effort. Thus, decision makers did not believe the Chinese would intervene because it would require a large number of trained troops, it might weaken the Chinese government both internally and internationally, and there was no real advantage to China for such an action.⁹⁵ American officials routinely underestimated China's military capabilities, concluding that it could not organize, train, equip, or transport a large ground army.⁹⁶ They also thought the best time for a Chinese intervention has passed and that China's entry into the war would make it more dependent on the Soviet Union, a situation that it wished to avoid.⁹⁷

In sum, "American policymakers simply could not image that Beijing would gain anything by involving itself in a major confrontation with the United States."⁹⁸ They were wrong.

Warnings

Despite their premises, it is not as if U.S. decision makers had no inkling of a Chinese attack. Harvey DeWeerd noted that the warnings of a Chinese intervention "showered down upon us in connection with Korea in 1950 seem strident and compelling."⁹⁹ These alerts of possible Chinese intervention included¹⁰⁰

- July 6: Army chief of staff tells President Truman there were about 200,000 Chinese troops in Manchuria.
- By late August and for the next three months numerous studies from the Joint Intelligence Reports of the Far East Command, the primary source of intelligence for Washington decision makers, warned of the possibility of Chinese intervention.
- September 5: secretary of state told that Chinese Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai (Chou En-lai) warns that if UN forces approached the Chinese border, China would intervene in Korea.
- September 25: China communicated through India that it would intervene if the UN forces crossed the 38th parallel. The British ambassador to the United States passed the same message to the State Department.
- September 30: Zhou Enlai brands the United States as China's worst enemy and declares that China will not allow a neighbor to be invaded.
- End of September: U.S. ambassador in Moscow reports that Soviet and Chinese contacts told both the British and Dutch ambassadors that if foreign troops crossed the 38th parallel, China would intervene.
- October 2: Zhou Enlai again warns that China will respond to an invasion of North Korea.

- October 3: the UN Command reports evidence that twenty Chinese divisions had been in Korea since September 10.
- October 3: Zhou Enlai repeats China's threat to the Indian Ambassador in Peking. There are similar reports from Stockholm, Moscow, and New Delhi.
- October 8-14: UN Command reports the massing of Chinese troops in Manchuria "appears conclusive."
- October 10: Radio Peking repeats the warning of October 3.
- October 25: first large-scale Chinese attack on South Korean troops.
- October 26-27: the United States reports its first engagements with Chinese troops.
- October 28: newly captured Chinese prisoners of war say they are from large units.
- October 31: Russian-made MIGs flying from Manchuria appear in combat.
- November 1-2: Major Chinese attacks on U.S. forces
- November 4: the United States identifies the presence of seven Chinese army divisions in the Korean theater.
- November 4: MacArthur terms Chinese intervention "a distinct possibility of the gravest international importance."
- November 5: MacArthur reports hostile contact with Chinese troops.
- November 6: MacArthur alerts Washington that "Men and material in large force are pouring across all bridges over the Yalu, from Manchuria. This movement not only jeopardizes but threatens the ultimate destruction of the forces under my command."
- November 6: the CIA reports 200,000 Chinese troops massing across the North Korean in Manchuria.
- November 7: MacArthur reports hostile air operations from Manchuria against his forces. He warns that if the Chinese build-up continues, he may have to retreat.
- November 7: U.S. identifies presence of 12 Chinese army divisions in Korean theater.
- November 24: the CIA predicts Chinese action that would nullify the U.S. efforts and preserve the North Korean state in some form.

In addition, throughout the summer and autumn of 1951, the Chinese openly engaged in the build-up and movement of troops on a massive scale. They expected the United States to see these actions – and it did.

Dismissing Warnings

Even after China repeatedly warned that it would enter the war with a full-scale effort and after seeing Chinese mass troop movements, American officials viewed Chinese warnings as bluffs or diplomatic pressure and dismissed the possibility of a major intervention.¹⁰¹ On October 12, four days after Mao had issued his order for China to enter the war, the CIA concluded that Chinese intervention "was not probable."¹⁰² The strategic surprise of Chinese intervention was not the result of intelligence failure but the "unwillingness to draw unpleasant conclusions . . . we refused to believe what our intelligence told us was in fact happening because it was at variance with the prevailing climate of opinion in Washington and Tokyo" (MacArthur's headquarters).¹⁰³ Decision makers were blinded by their premises.

For example, on October 3 when Zhou Enlai sent through the Indian ambassador a warning to the U.S. not to cross the 38th parallel, Secretary of State Dean Acheson inexplicably concluded it was "not to be disregarded but, on the other hand, not an authoritative statement of policy." Perhaps it was just a public relations attempt to save the North Korean regime.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, President Truman thought Zhou's message could be "more than a relay of Communist propaganda."¹⁰⁵

At their meeting on Wake Island on October 15, 1950—just as the Chinese were entering North Korea, General MacArthur told President Truman there was little chance of a large-scale Chinese intervention. Moreover, MacArthur claimed, should China enter the war, it would do so with only limited numbers of troops, and his air power would destroy the Chinese forces. The "greatest slaughter" would occur. Indeed, the general proclaimed, victory was won, all resistance would end by Thanksgiving, and he could withdraw one of his armies by Christmas.¹⁰⁶

We have seen that the UN Commander at times issued his own warnings, but he also discounted them. On both November 5 and November 7, the mercurial MacArthur altered his pessimistic assessments of the days before and concluded that the Chinese military actions did not constitute a full-scale intervention. It appears that the general raised the issue of Chinese intervention to convince Washington to let him bomb the bridges across the Yalu and continue his offensive.

An additional complicating factor was that MacArthur's intelligence officials played down the threat of Chinese intervention so as not to upset him and alarm the South Koreans. They also distorted the evidence of Chinese activity. Similarly, American field commanders did not exercise appropriate caution in probing Chinese strength because they were unwilling to defy MacArthur. The general himself suppressed and then minimized the significance of the evidence of Chinese intervention.¹⁰⁷

On November 7, MacArthur announced he was planning on moving forward. Two days later, he wrote Secretary of Defense George Marshall that the Chinese were first-class soldiers representing an aggressively imperialistic country who allied with the Soviet Union for its own purposes.¹⁰⁸ He was correct in his analyses, but he did not draw the appropriate conclusion. Instead, the general expressed confidence he could deny the enemy reinforcements and destroy him. This statement was especially ironic because, in the words of Secretary of State Acheson, "In fact, his troops were being secretly surrounded by overpowering numbers of Chinese."¹⁰⁹

Over the period of August and September, American official gradually began discussing the possibility of Chinese intervention. During mid-September, American officials across the national security bureaucracy openly acknowledged that MacArthur's successful invasion at Inchon and his movement up the Korean peninsula had significantly increased the likelihood of China entering the war on a large scale. These concerns increased in October in light of the growing evidence of Peoples Liberation Army activity in Korea. A November 8 National Intelligence Estimate recognized that Chinese ground troops were engaging UN forces in North Korea and that China had accepted an increased risk of war, which was probably going to occur.¹¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, there were disagreements between MacArthur, who wanted to reunite Korea, and those felt that to move further north would lead to a larger and more aggressive Chinese intervention.¹¹¹

Nevertheless, the United States and the UN pursued a policy that ensured China would enter the fray. The great American landing at Inchon occurred on September 15. That same day, Truman directed MacArthur to force the North Korean army back across the 38th parallel or destroy it altogether. If the Soviet Union or China had not entered the war or if there was no indication or threat of their entry, he could extend his operations beyond the 38th parallel and occupy North Korea.¹¹²

MacArthur's forces had to move across the border, because the border itself offered a poor defensive line. To break off the UN offensive when its forces reached the border was to

invite a new attack from the North Koreans. Yet it was not necessary to occupy North Korea to find a suitable defensive position. Eager to reach the Yalu River before it froze, making it easier for the Chinese to cross, and to occupy all of North Korea, MacArthur proclaimed that to draw a line at the narrow neck of the peninsula would be appeasement that found its “historic precedence in the action taken at Munich.” Domestic critics of the Truman administration would also have seen not crossing the border as appeasement.¹¹³

On September 27, Washington again told MacArthur his objective was to destroy the North Korean armed forces and gave him permission to cross the 38th parallel as long as major Soviet or Chinese forces did not enter the war, they made no announcement of their intent to enter, and they made no threat to counter UN forces militarily. In the event of major Chinese forces fighting *south* of 38th parallel, he could continue as long as he had a reasonable chance of successful resistance.¹¹⁴

There were warnings, of course, but the United States only hardened its policy of unifying Korea. On October 7, 1950, the 1st Cavalry Division crossed the 38th parallel and the UN passed a resolution calling for a “unified, independent and democratic Korea.” For the first time, the West had decided to move beyond containment to the elimination of a communist regime. Unbothered by the threat of Chinese intervention, the administration drifted into this expanded war aim without an explicit, well-formulated decision to do so. Given MacArthur’s success at Inchon, unification seemed the only way to end the war, and was an attractive and low risk bonus of the UN counterattack.¹¹⁵ Richard Neustadt described the decision to occupy North Korea as a “passing fancy, taken and abandoned as the war news changed.”¹¹⁶

This change in the aim of the war provided China a strong motivation to prevent the UN from achieving it. On October 8, Mao issued the official order to enter the war. Nevertheless, on October 9 the president gave MacArthur extraordinary discretion, directing him that in the event of a major Chinese entry into the war, he should continue his efforts to unify Korea and resist Chinese troops anywhere in Korea as long as he had a reasonable chance of success.¹¹⁷ Truman does not indicate that he consulted with anyone in this decision.

MacArthur’s messages about Chinese troops pouring across the Yalu “aroused immense anxiety in Washington.”¹¹⁸ By November 8, in light of the evidence of Chinese military activity, the president’s advisers recognized the UN probably could not unify Korea by military means and that it would be necessary to negotiate with the Chinese to salvage as much as possible. However, they rationalized that they would prefer to negotiate from a position of strength. They also recognized the risk to MacArthur’s forces, and the president gave the general permission to bomb bridges across the Yalu River to stem the flow of Chinese troops into Korea.¹¹⁹

Nevertheless, after months of dismissing warnings of Chinese intervention,¹²⁰ Truman’s top advisers did not suggest he send new instructions to the general, ordering him to halt his advance to the Yalu River and pull back to less vulnerable positions.¹²¹ Instead, they recommended, and obtained presidential approval, to keep the mission assigned to MacArthur under review.¹²² Dean Acheson later recalled,

Here, I believe, the Government missed its last chance to halt the march to disaster in Korea. All the President’s advisers in this matter, civilian and military, knew that something was badly wrong, though what it was, how to find out, and what to do about it they muffed.¹²³

Once the participation of Chinese troops was finally accepted, the question became how to interpret their presence. Consistent with the prevailing premises, the new narrative was that China’s goal was to stall the UN advance and provide a buffer zone on its border rather than

mount an offensive to defeat it.¹²⁴ Unsurprisingly, on November 17 MacArthur reported that he would begin his push to the Chinese border “to end the war” on November 24th. According to Truman, he even told one of his commanders to inform his troops they would be home by Christmas.¹²⁵ The Chinese intervened with a massive force on the 25th, but MacArthur was so convinced the Chinese would not intervene that it took him days to accept the fact that they had indeed done so.¹²⁶ In the end, the Chinese forced the general to conduct the “longest military retreat in American military history.”¹²⁷

Obstacles to Reexamining Premises

Several factors complicated reexamining the war aim and the premises on which it was based. First, there was a broadly shared reluctance to override a theater commander in the field. According to President Truman, “You pick your man, you’ve got to back him up.”¹²⁸ Moreover, Acheson felt that under this obvious truth lay an uneasy respect for the MacArthur mystique. Army Chief of Staff and World War II hero General Omar Bradley later admitted that MacArthur’s stature was so great that the Joint Chiefs of Staff felt literally incapacitated to deal with him.¹²⁹ Moreover, the threat of Chinese intervention only encouraged rapid movement north so could MacArthur could establish good defense lines.¹³⁰ U.S. troops crossed the 38th parallel on October 8, and the clearest evidence of Chinese action came after that, when the commander was in battle mode.¹³¹

Perhaps the sorcerer of Inchon could pull off a 5,000 to 1 shot. Between October 26 and November 17, Acheson lamented,

all the dangers from dispersal of our own forces and intervention by the Chinese were manifest. We were all deeply apprehensive. We were frank with one another, but not quite frank enough. I was unwilling to urge on the President a military course that his military advisers would not propose. They would not propose it because it ran counter to American military tradition of the proper powers of the theater commander since 1864.

If military officials had recommended withdrawal to a more southern line, disaster would probably have been averted. But such an action would have meant a fight with the commanding general and possibly the relief of him. So, the president’s advisers hesitated, and the chance was lost.¹³²

Defaulting to MacArthur’s Yalu River plan and minimizing the warnings of Chinese intervention allowed policymakers to pursue an aggressive stance against the Chinese communists, a strategy that was more politically advantageous domestically than a more modest goal of driving the North Koreans from the South. Responding to the evidence of Chinese intervention would have required admitting that the administration’s war aims of unifying Korea under a noncommunist government were wrong, which would incur severe political costs as long as Chinese intervention did not seem inevitable.¹³³

Officials also knew that the public had become disenchanted with Truman’s foreign policy. The communist takeover in China, the unexpected Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb, and the outbreak of the Korean War aggravated a feeling of insecurity, and the Republicans were exploiting this angst for partisan advantage in the November elections. Thus, a victory over communism was appealing.¹³⁴

Adding to the momentum of U.S. policy was the fact that the Chinese forces disengaged from fighting and disappeared in the period of November 9-24. This disappearance reduced

anxiety in Washington and encouraged the view that the Chinese had only defensive purposes, nourishing MacArthur's illusions and encouraging him to gamble with occupying the North.¹³⁵ The secretary of State thought, "The most elementary caution would seem to warn that they [the Chinese troops] might, indeed probably would, reappear as suddenly and harmfully as they had before." MacArthur, however, was taking no precautions.¹³⁶

In addition, the Soviet Union responded with moderation to the war. It gave modest aid to the North Koreans and was circumscribed and conciliatory toward the United States. This behavior inspired risk-taking, as it strengthened the view of American officials that Russia would not intervene.¹³⁷ China also seemed to exhibit restraint. It did not attempt to take Formosa or intervene in North Korea in the summer, when, in the view of U.S. officials it would have been most propitious to do so, especially because the North Koreans were still an effective fighting force.¹³⁸

With victory in their grasp, the intervention of major powers unlikely, and American military prowess clear, taking risks seemed acceptable. Reinforcing the predilections of policymakers were the broader advantages of unifying Korea. Japan would be heartened, Sino-Soviet divisions might emerge in an avalanche of recriminations at the loss of a communist nation, and Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe might feel an incentive to distance from Moscow.¹³⁹ Truman believed the reunification of Korea would inflict a momentous defeat on the strategy of Soviet expansion.¹⁴⁰

Governing routines, domestic politics, international strategy, misperceptions, and enemy deception were obstacles to challenging the premises on which the UN fought the Korean War. Once established, the premises on which leaders base their war aims are not easily changed. It takes time and commitment, openness to change, and the cooperation of commanders. Moreover, officials are less likely to revise strategic assumptions if disconfirming evidence accrues in piecemeal fashion rather than in a sudden jolt.¹⁴¹ The Chinese were not so obliging. Thus, a number of factors abetted the miscalculation of Chinese actions.

The point remains that the policymakers' premises held and determined their choices. In the words of George and Smoke, "Behind the administration's wishful thinking lay its reluctance to accept and weigh properly information that challenged the premises and wisdom of occupying North Korea as a prelude to unification of the country."¹⁴²

Groupthink

President Truman and his top advisers demonstrated mutual support for risk-taking (occupying North Korea) and tenaciously held to erroneous assumptions, even in the face of mounting evidence to challenge them. I have argued that the core explanation for these decision-making failures was the faulty premises held by these officials.

Irving Janis offers a different explanation. In his influential *Groupthink*,¹⁴³ he finds a major defect in cohesive decision-making groups. Although not sycophants and freely speak their minds, members of such groups nevertheless suffer from subtle constraints that prevent them from fully exercising their critical powers and openly expressing doubts when most others have reached consensus. Cohesive groups tend to evolve informal norms to preserve friendly intragroup relations. The greater the cohesion in the group, the more power it has to produce "mindless conformity" that leads group members to exhibit a lack of vigilance regarding problems with their decisions and excessive risk-taking in them. Indeed, the concurrence-seeking tendency can be maintained only at the expense of ignoring realistic challenges.¹⁴⁴

Groupthink, then, refers to “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative sources of action.” Thus, “the more amiability and esprit de corps among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out-groups.”¹⁴⁵

Janis knows that common failures in decision making, such as not properly evaluating options and the information supporting them and considering too narrow a range of options “can arise from other common causes of human stupidity as well.” Nevertheless, he “assumes” such failures result from groupthink, because when there is a cohesive group and defective decision making, there is a “better-than-chance-likelihood that one of the causes” of the defective decision was a strong concurrence-seeking tendency, which is the motivation that gives rise to all the symptoms of groupthink.”¹⁴⁶

He offers five case studies to illustrate “fiascoes” resulting from groupthink. One case is Vietnam, on which his discussion is tentative. The second of these cases focuses on the Korean War, in which virtually all analysts agree that decision makers took great risks and indulged in wishful thinking. Janis leaves no doubt as to the explanation.

The main reason for the members’ concurrences on the ill-considered escalation decision was that Truman’s advisory group was adhering to a set of norms that were promoted by the leader and that all willingly accepted. These shared norms enabled the members to maintain a sense of group solidarity at the expense of suffering from the major symptoms of groupthink. The most prominent were excessive risk-taking based on a shared illusion of invulnerability, stereotypes of the enemy, collective reliance on ideological rationalizations that supported the belligerent escalation to which the group became committed, and mindguiding to exclude the dissident views of experts who questioned the group’s unwarranted assumptions.¹⁴⁷

Were there “illusions of invulnerability”? I can find nothing in the record to support such an assertion. We know that many of Truman’s advisors were fully aware that the United States would be sorely strained if the Chinese intervened. Even MacArthur—despite his bravado at Wake Island in mid-October—understood that a Chinese intervention would change the war and prevent him from reunifying Korea. Military officials played a key role in the deliberations on Korea, and they routinely pointed out the challenges of confronting a large-scale Chinese intervention.

What about stereotypes of the enemy and ideological rationalizations about it? We have seen that Truman and his advisers operated under three faulty premises:

1. The Soviet Union controlled China and would restrain its junior partner
2. Chinese leaders would not see the United States occupying North Korea as a threat
3. China was too weak to conduct a large-scale military effort and thus would not intervene.

These premises are what Janis refers to as stereotypes.¹⁴⁸

He admits that Truman’s advisers’ views of China’s independence, military strength, and intentions were based on ideological presumptions that they shared with all leading members of the administration and many other Americans as well.¹⁴⁹ Yet because these premises were so widely shared, they did not require groupthink to protect them from challenges. The heated

debate that Janis advocates to correct these stereotypes¹⁵⁰ may have been an excellent idea, but who was going to participate?

Equally important, by November top officials were cognizant of Chinese military activity and its implications for their plans for the unification of Korea and as a threat to MacArthur's forces. They just could not figure out how great the problem was. There were disagreements between MacArthur, who wanted to reunite Korea, and those who felt that to move further north would lead to a larger and more aggressive Chinese intervention. Thus, Truman and his advisers took the precaution of keeping the mission assigned to the commander under review. Their premises inhibited effectively reading information, but groupthink did not prevent them from considering changing conditions and thinking about how to respond to them.

It is no doubt true, as Janis claims, that the failure to correct their misconceptions can be linked with the advisers' propensity to support each other in taking excessive risks. Of course they can. The real question is whether we need to resort to groupthink to explain such behavior. As we have seen, there is plenty of evidence that once having held widely shared premises, policymakers generally resist changing them in light of new and challenging information. We would have predicted the same behavior if we had never heard of groupthink.

Were there "mindguards" who protected the group from adverse information by excluding the dissident views of experts who questioned the group's unwarranted assumptions? The *only* example Janis offers is the concerns of George Kennan and Paul Nitze about the UN troops crossing the 38th parallel and occupying North Korea. Janis claims that Secretary of State Dean Acheson kept them from access to top officials.¹⁵¹ We simply do not know whether the views of Kennan and Nitze were known beyond their department, but it seems unlikely that the concerns of such visible officials went no further than Acheson. We do know, however, that Kennan was concerned about Russian, not Chinese, intervention,¹⁵² and that he did not make an argument about such a danger. Moreover, Kennan had left the government by August, before the warnings of Chinese intervention, indeed before MacArthur had landed at Inchon. In July, Nitze's "Policy Planning Staff urged caution but did not forswear opportunities should they arise."¹⁵³

Janis also discusses in detail the conditions under which groupthink is likely to arise. Were such conditions present in the Korean War case? The *sine qua non* for groupthink to occur is a cohesive decision-making group. There is broad agreement that Truman and his advisors formed such a harmonious group.¹⁵⁴

The first antecedent condition for the emergence of groupthink is structural faults in the decision-making process such as insulation of the group, a lack of a tradition of impartial leadership and a priority on open, unbiased inquiry into the available alternatives, the lack of norms requiring methodical procedures, and homogeneity of members' background and ideology.¹⁵⁵

There is no evidence that Truman tried openly or more subtly to influence the advice he was given. Moreover, he and his advisers routinely received information, evaluations, and recommendations from the Departments of State and Defense, the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, MacArthur's headquarters in Tokyo, and other relevant organizations. Truman and his advisors were not isolated.

In addition, there is no evidence of pressures to conform to a view on the likelihood of Chinese intervention. Truman encouraged open and candid discussion, even if he evaluated information in terms of his premises. Even Janis reports that the president "was highly responsive to his advisers' recommendations" and that the judgments expressed by his advisers

were sincere.¹⁵⁶ One example related to Korea is changing his mind on accepting help from the Nationalist Chinese on Formosa, which his advisors opposed.¹⁵⁷ Army Chief of Staff, General J. Lawton Collins, who, along with the other service heads, met regularly with the president during the war, termed Truman a “remarkable man” who listened carefully, heard all sides on an issue, got to root of problem, and then acted in a decisive manner.¹⁵⁸ It was premises, not process, that was at the heart of the decision making problem.

In general, however, there is little evidence of sloppy (as opposed to incorrect) staff work. Nevertheless, there are some worrisome indications of process failures. For example, the record does not indicate discussion of Truman’s October 9 decision to give MacArthur discretion in the event of a major Chinese entry into the war. Such a momentous decision surely deserved the most careful attention. There may simply be a gap in the record, or Truman may have thought previous discussion was sufficient. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the administration seems to have drifted into the decision to occupy North Korea.

It is true that discussion occurred among men of similar background and ideology. In particular, Janis notes that these men shared the same basic values and the beliefs, particularly the need to contain spread of communism.¹⁵⁹ It is important to note that this core view was widely held in Western society. It was hardly likely that there would be people in positions of influence who would have thought that the spread of communism was a positive development.

The second antecedent condition encouraging groupthink is the incentive to maintain group cohesiveness to provide a source of security for members, reducing anxiety and heightening self-esteem.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, Janis assigns “preeminence” to the impact of high stress and low self-esteem (constituting an internal source of stress) in explaining why group think occurs.¹⁶¹ He further suggests that conformist tendencies may be strongest in persons who are most fearful of disapproval and rejection. Nevertheless, anyone can get caught up in group madness at times that produces symptoms of groupthink.¹⁶²

According to Janis, A “provocative situational context” (high stress) occurs when there is serious external threats and low hope of a better solution than the leader’s. Low self-esteem may be induced temporarily by recent failures that make members’ inadequacies salient, excessive difficulties with current decision making tasks that lower each member’s sense of self-efficacy, and moral dilemmas such as an apparent lack of feasible alternatives except ones that violate ethical standards.¹⁶³ The symptoms of groupthink, then, “might be best understood as a mutual effort among the members of a group to maintain emotional equanimity in the face of external and internal sources of stress arising when they share responsibility for making vital decisions that pose threats of failure, social disapproval, and self-disapproval.”¹⁶⁴

Were Truman and his advisors likely to have felt unusual stress? Was their self-esteem at risk? There is little evidence to suggest it. It would be difficult to find a set of leaders more secure than Harry Truman, Dean Acheson, George Marshall, Omar Bradley, and their colleagues. Moreover, they were not operating in a peculiarly stressful environment. According to Paige, the response to the initial decision to commit U.S. troops to defend against the North Korean invasion was “overwhelmingly favorable” with the U.S.¹⁶⁵ Thus, this was not an agonizing or painful decision.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, there was widespread international support for the UN resolution to counter the attack. When these officials erred in not heeding warnings of Chinese intervention, they were operating in an environment of near euphoria at MacArthur’s success after his landing at Inchon. Thus, there was “little agonizing” over the decision to cross the 38th parallel, which was favored by most Americans, including Joseph McCarthy.¹⁶⁷

Janis also argues that “The chances of groupthink developing during crisis period of high stress will be markedly reduced if the leader conducts the policy deliberations in a relatively impartial way, so as to set the norm for the discussion of a wide range of alternatives.”¹⁶⁸ As we have seen, Truman met this norm.

In sum, groupthink provides a plausible explanation for the failure to challenge premises. In the case of the Chinese intervention in the Korean War, however, it adds little to an explanation focused on the power of premises themselves. President Truman and his advisers displayed a high degree of consensus on key decisions. They generally considered only a single course of action and had minimal conflict over it. They may have decided on a course even more rapidly, but they lacked information in the early days of the conflict. Nevertheless, there was never any question about challenging aggression and containing communist advances. Military officials pointed out the difficulties of military action but never opposed it.¹⁶⁹ Premises, right or wrong, prevailed.

Conclusion

The officials in charge of American national security policy in the Truman administration are renowned for their perspicacity. Yet even such Olympian figures were prisoners of their premises. They greatly underestimated the probability of Chinese intervention in Korea, dismissing warnings of impending conflict while holding fast to faulty beliefs and allowing Douglas MacArthur to attempt to unify the peninsula. The result was a catastrophe for America. Secretary of State Dean Acheson later summarized the consequences of the Chinese intervention, calling it

one of the most terrific disasters that has occurred to American foreign policy, and certainly the greatest disaster which occurred to the Truman administration. It did more to destroy and undermine American foreign policy than anything that I know about.¹⁷⁰

Notes

¹ For other aspects of beliefs, see Robert Jervis, “Understanding Beliefs,” *Political Psychology* 27 (October 2006): 641-663; Nils J. Nilsson, *Understanding Beliefs* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

² See, e.g., Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

³ See, e.g., Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), pp. 135-136.

⁴ Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), pp. 7, 23-24.

⁵ Tuchman, *The March of Folly*, pp. 7, 23-24.

⁶ The classics in this substantial literature are Herbert A. Simon, “A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice,” in Herbert A. Simon, ed., *Models of Man: Social and Rational- Mathematical Essays on Rational Human Behavior in a Social Setting* (New York: Wiley, 1957); James G. March and Herbert A. Simon, *Organizations* (New York: Wiley, 1958); Charles E. Lindblom and David Braybrooke, *A Strategy of Decision: Policy Evaluation as a Social Process* (New

York: Free Press, 1963; Herbert A. Simon, "Bounded Rationality and Organizational Learning," *Organization Science* 2 (March 1991): 125–134. See also Daniel Kahneman, "Maps of Bounded Rationality: Psychology for Behavioral Economics," *American Economic Review* 93 (December 2003): 1449–1475.

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¹⁰⁵ Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, p. 362.

¹⁰⁶ Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, pp. 365-366; Text of conference quoted in Richard H. Rovere and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The MacArthur Controversy and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Noonday Press of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), pp. 275-285.

¹⁰⁷ Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, pp. 158-162; Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁰⁸ Cohen and Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, p. 173.

¹⁰⁹ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, pp. 464-465. See also Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, p. 377; Hoyt, *On to the Yalu*, p. 264.

¹¹⁰ “Memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency: National Intelligence Estimate on Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea,” November 8, 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Korea, Volume VII* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976), pp. 1101-1106.

¹¹¹ Ovodenko, “(Mis)interpreting Threats,” pp. 261-264; Cohen “Only Half the Battle,” pp. 58-59.

¹¹² Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, p. 359.

¹¹³ Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, pp. 324, 329, 386.

¹¹⁴ Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, p. 360; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, pp. 452-453.

¹¹⁵ George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, pp. 196-198, 202-203. See also, Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 454; Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, p. 377-378.

¹¹⁶ Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, p. 107.

¹¹⁷ Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, p. 362.

¹¹⁸ Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, p. 379-380; Cohen and Goods, *Military Misfortunes*, p. 175.

¹¹⁹ Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, p. 382.

¹²⁰ Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, pp. 177-183.

¹²¹ George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, pp. 223-224; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, pp. 466, 468; Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, pp. 121-122; Leffler, *A Preponderance of Strength*, p. 396.

¹²² Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, p. 380; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, pp. 465-466.

¹²³ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 464.

¹²⁴ Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, p. 385; De Weerd, "Strategic Surprise and the Korean War," pp. 436, 448; Betts, *Surprise Attack*, pp. 61-62; George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, pp. 210-211, 218; Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, p. 119; Cohen, "Only Half the Battle," p. 56.

¹²⁵ Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, p. 381. Also see pp. 386-387; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 467.

¹²⁶ See, for example, Hoyt, *On to the Yalu*, p. 264; Rose, "Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950"; Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, pp. 56-57.

¹²⁷ Samuel L. A. Marshall, *The River and the Gauntlet: Defeat of the Eighth Army by the Chinese Communist Forces, November, 1950, in the Battle of the Chongchon River, Korea* (New York: Morrow, 1953), p. 1.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, p. 122.

¹²⁹ McLellan, "Dean Acheson and the Korean War," p. 34 and fn 45. See also Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, p. 379-380; Stueck, "The March to the Yalu," pp. 202-203, 228.

¹³⁰ Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, p. 114.

¹³¹ Betts, *Surprise Attack*, p. 61.

¹³² Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, pp. 467-468. See also Betts, *Surprise Attack*, p. 61; Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, p. 120.

¹³³ George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, pp. 171, 191, 227; Betts, *Surprise Attack*, p. 56; Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, p. 329.

¹³⁴ See, for example, Ronald J. Caridi, *The Korean War and American Politics: The Republican Party as a Case Study* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), pp. 83-84.

¹³⁵ George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, pp. 211, 226-230; Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, p. 120; Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, p. 379.

¹³⁶ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 466.

¹³⁷ Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, pp. 376-377.

¹³⁸ Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, p. 396; Cohen, "Only Half the Battle," p. 57.

¹³⁹ Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, pp. 379-380, 397.

¹⁴⁰ James I. Matray, "Truman's Plan for Victory: National Self-Determination and the Thirty-Eighth Parallel Decision in Korea." *The Journal of American History*, 66 (September 1979): 314-333.

¹⁴¹ Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics* 20 (April 1968), pp. 465-466.

¹⁴² George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, p. 208.

¹⁴³ Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

¹⁴⁴ Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 3-4, 7-8, 11-12.

¹⁴⁵ Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 9, 13.

¹⁴⁶ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 10.

¹⁴⁷ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 71.

¹⁴⁸ Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 58-59.

¹⁴⁹ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 58.

¹⁵⁰ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 59.

¹⁵¹ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 60. Also see p. 71.

¹⁵² Kennan, *Memoirs 1925-1950*, pp. 487-489; Kennan, *Memoirs 1950-1963*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁵³ "Draft Memorandum Prepared by the Policy Planning Staff," July 22, 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Korea, Volume VII* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976), pp. 449-554. Also see, Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, p. 375; Stueck, "The March to the Yalu," pp. 196-200; Lowe, *The Origins of the Korean War*, pp. 181-184.

¹⁵⁴ See, for example, Paige, *The Korean Decision (June 24-30, 1950)*, pp. 289, 307; Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 49-52.

¹⁵⁵ Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 243-248.

¹⁵⁶ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 194. See also pp. 69-71.

¹⁵⁷ Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol II*, pp. 342-343; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 412; Paige, *The Korean Decision (June 24-30, 1950)*, pp. 258-259; Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 2194-195.

¹⁵⁸ J. Lawton Collins, *War in Peacetime* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 14.

¹⁵⁹ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 49.

¹⁶⁰ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 4.

¹⁶¹ Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 250-259.

¹⁶² Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 242-243.

¹⁶³ Janis, *Groupthink*, pp. 243-245, 248-260.

¹⁶⁴ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 256.

¹⁶⁵ Paige, *The Korean Decision (June 24-30, 1950)*, p. 233.

¹⁶⁶ Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, pp. 368-369.

¹⁶⁷ Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, pp. 377-380.

¹⁶⁸ Janis, *Groupthink*, p. 254.

¹⁶⁹ Paige, *The Korean Decision (June 24-30, 1950)*, pp. 136, 143, 164, 174, 179, 320.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Stueck, "The March to the Yalu," p. 233.