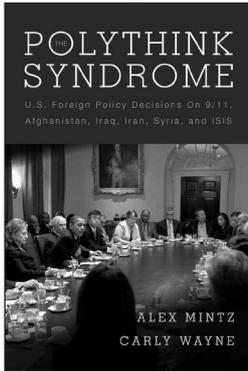


Book Review



The Polythink Syndrome: U.S. Foreign Policy Decisions on 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and ISIS

Alex Mintz and Carly Wayne

Stanford University Press, 2016, 200 pp.

**Reviewed by by Lt. Col. Todd Schmidt, U.S. Army
Military Research Fellow
Arthur D. Simons Center for Interagency Cooperation**

Why do elite decision-makers often make sub-optimal decisions? This is the primary research question driving the theory and empirical analysis offered in *The Polythink Syndrome* by Alex Mintz and Carly Wayne.¹ The authors propose “polythink,” an alternative theory to “groupthink,” a dynamic characterized by *uniformity* of opinion. Polythink, on the other hand, features a *plurality* of opinions that results in intragroup conflict, disjointed decision-making process, and decision paralysis as each group member pushes for their preferred policy action. The authors support their theory with meticulous, systematic and illustrative case study analysis spanning decisions from 9/11 to the final years of the Obama administration. They demonstrate the symptoms and implications of their theory for elite, small-group decision-making in foreign policy arenas, and offer prescriptions and strategies for avoiding negative aspects of polythink, while taking advantage of its useful qualities.

Polythink offers an equally problematic phenomenon to groupthink, a leading theory in foreign policy decision-making explored by Yale Research Psychologist Irving Janis. Understanding polythink requires understanding groupthink for context, comparison and contrast. Groupthink theory describes natural psychological tendency and pressure within small groups to maximize unanimity and uniformity; minimize dissent and conflict; fail to consider, analyze and evaluate all feasible options; ignore limitations of their decisions; and overestimate the odds of success. Conformity of thought results in stifled creativity and little independent thought. It is “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.”²

The book is an important contribution to international relations and the foreign policy analysis literature for four primary reasons. First, its release at a time of presidential administration transition makes it a timely alternative theory to groupthink. Secondly, with its 21st century focus, it is a contemporary addition to the decision-making models outlined in Graham Allison’s *Essence of Decision*. Additionally, it provides explanations for international relations scholars, and high-ranking civilian and military practitioners seeking to understand why elite decision-makers engage in flawed

decision-making process resulting in flawed policy that produce flawed policy outcomes. Finally, for students of civil-military relations, the case studies provide important applications and lessons for highly competitive organizations. They demonstrate how intra-departmental or interagency decision-making can be influenced and potentially flawed through “expert-novice” divides, as well as manipulating leader-follower relationships.

In contrast, polythink is a theory of small-group, elite decision-making that is fraught with intragroup conflict and disunity, disagreement and plurality of opinions, divergent and disjointed recommendations, paralysis and inaction. Challenges arise because of differing world views, political and institutional considerations and affiliations, personality and leadership traits, competing expert-novice perspectives, and unaligned leader-follower interests, goals and objectives. Symptoms include conflict, turf battles, leaks, confusion, disjointed communications, limited options, little or no appraisal of critical information, compromised position-taking, and paralysis.

The authors explore foreign policy decision-making in five major case studies: the 9/11 Attacks; Afghanistan War Decisions; Iraq War Decisions; the Iranian Nuclear Dispute; and foreign policy challenges surrounding Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Each case study is analyzed using a rubric that demonstrates the symptoms of polythink, as well as normative, value-driven differences, expert-novice divides, and leader-follower relationships within elite, small-group, decision-making bodies.

The authors’ theory assumes decision-making process is a human process and state decisions are human decisions. To understand human decision-making, we must understand the human process. Understanding microfoundations in international relations and foreign policy analysis is critical to identifying elite, small-group decision-making dynamics. Is the small-group competitive, collegial, formal or informal? Identifying and understanding these group dynamics can help identify potential flaws to which the small-group may be susceptible. Collegial groups are more susceptible to groupthink symptoms, while competitive groups are more susceptible to polythink symptoms.

In conclusion, the authors suggest there are positive qualities inherent in polythink that can be exploited. Strong leadership, clear vision, unambiguous goals and objectives, open discussion, diverse membership, and a balanced process can exploit polythink inherent advantages. Advantages include increased effectiveness and efficiency at which diverse groups learn, adapt, and remain agile in the ability to confront and negotiate a complex and chaotic international environment. This book is highly recommended for foreign policy analysis scholars, as well as for students of civil-military relations and senior-executive elites in civilian and military leadership positions. **IAJ**

NOTES

1 Mintz serves as Chairman of the Israeli Political Science Association, Director of the Institute for Policy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel. Wayne is a PhD candidate at University of Michigan. Both authors’ research and scholarship is deeply grounded in International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis and Decision-making.

2 Janis, Irving, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascos*, (2d ed), (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 9.