Introduction

The 9/11 event changed the general threat perception of the American public significantly. Post 9/11 “the war on terror” emerged as a galvanizing and rallying call by the George W. Bush administration. The war on terror as it ensued illustrated Bush administration’s pledge to use unilateral, pre-emptive strikes if necessary against nations believed dangerous to American national security. However there were certain series of key errors of judgment made by the administration between 2001 and 2003 that can be attributed to a phenomenon called “groupthink” (Badie, 2010).

According to Bordens and Horowitz (2013: 345) groupthink refers to “a breakdown in the rational decision-making abilities of members of a cohesive group.” The origin and coinage of the term can be traced to an article in the Fortune Magazine by William Whyte in 1952. The framing and development of concept is however attributed to social psychologist Irving Janis who studied post hoc certain fiascos in American diplomacy and foreign policy such as: US failures to anticipate the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the failure of the Vietnam war, the ill-fated hostage rescue situation in Iran, the contra affair and other similar mishaps (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2004; Bordens & Horowitz, 2013). It occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment” (Janis, 1972: 9).

Iraq invasion

On March 19 2003 the United States, along with some partner states that formed the so called the Coalition of the Willing States, launched lightening attack on Iraq dubbed “Operation Iraqi Freedom” aimed at a toppling dictator Saddam Hussein who had ruled the country for decades. The ground for the invasion as announced by President Bush right before the invasion despite growing controversy and opposition was that he had authorized Operation Iraqi Freedom to rid Iraq of tyrannical dictator Saddam Hussein and eliminate Hussein’s ability to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and bring back democracy in the country. In a State of the Union address, President Bush's
made certain specific claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, i.e., "500 tons of sarin, mustard and VX nerve agent; mobile biological weapons labs"; and "a design for a nuclear weapon" (Bush, 2003).

Between 2002 and early 2003, a team of United Nations weapons inspectors had been sent to Iraq to ascertain if Saddam Hussein indeed had any such weapons of mass destruction or violated U.N. resolutions against manufacturing such weapons. Their mission did not find any such weapons, Iraq’s capacity to develop them having been debilitated earlier in the 1990s after the first Gulf War.

**Illustration of groupthink in Iraq invasion**

According to Bordens and Horowitz (2013) the four key components of groupthink include:

1. a group driven by consensus seeking
2. the persuasive strength of the leader
3. a group insulated and homogeneous
4. the lack of open and complete discussion

All these came into play in the lead up to the invasion among the core group which became involved in the decision to invade Iraq comprising of the President and his Principal Advisors; specifically: VP Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, NSC Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Undersecretary of Defense Policy Douglas Feith, David Wurmser, who served as Special Assistant in the State Department, and later as Cheney’s Middle East advisor, Richard Perle and Kenneth Adelman on the Defense Policy Board, Bill Luti and Abe Shulsky at the Office of Special Plans (OSP) and CIA Director George Tenet (Badie, 2010).

Within the group the neoconservative hawkish members comprising of Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz, and the President himself were in favor of a broad retaliation against the vague network of terrorists and their state sponsors the so called axis of evil. While Powell and Armitage favored a limited, direct and targeted approach against al Qaeda’s from its hub in Afghanistan but found themselves a minority insufficient to
counter the groupthink that had built up. Since the President himself had also taken a presumptive position it was perhaps difficult for them to unequivocally express their reservation to the idea of invasion which had already gained momentum lest they be seen to contradicting the President. The majority within the core group had also insulated themselves from any contrary opinion since they were already spoiling for war.

Even though it was apparent that there was no reliable intelligence or concrete evidence of a stash of such weapons, the 9/11 September event had reportedly put considerable pressure on this core group to retaliate against terrorism and develop a new foreign policy grand strategy. That is how the plot of the invasion took place. Removing the dictator was swift however the country has descended into chaos that have continues to date.

**Combating groupthink**

According to () one of the ways of combating groupthink is independent analysis. Like in the case of the invasion, perhaps the administration would have collected more reliable intelligence from the CIA which was independent unlike the Pentagon whose the head honchos themselves had already taken a position on the matter in favor of invasion.

Groupthink can also be combated by including a devil's advocate in the group, i.e., an individual tasked with pointing out the shortcomings and weaknesses of the group's accepted wisdom. The President himself or someone like Colin Powel could have played that role.

Brainstorming is another technique that can work wonders. Brainstorming involves putting forward all sorts of ideas including the craziest and then thrashing them out to obtain the best option.

**References**


