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Waco Tragedy Product of Groupthink

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The fiery end to the 51-day Ranch Apocalypse standoff in Waco sent shock waves across the nation and around the world. In serious analysis of the tragedy, as in federal spin control, one explanation was curiously absent: groupthink.

Social psychologist Irving L. Janis, in his book *Groupthink* (Houghton Mifflin, 1982), uses the term to refer to a mode of thinking where group members' "strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action. ... [resulting in] a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment." According to Janis, a number of "historic fiascoes" may be attributed to groupthink, including the failure to protect Pearl Harbor against Japanese attack, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the Watergate cover-up.

Though initial assessment in the aftermath of the Waco debacle strongly implicates the presence of groupthink, it should be borne in mind that criticism of the Justice Department's decision-making procedures no more absolves David Koresh of blame than U.S. negligence pardons the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The diagnosis of groupthink hinges on several symptoms. Let's examine the available evidence:

Illusion of invulnerability. This symptom is characterized by an unrealistic sense of confidence, encouraging group members to take extreme risks. A reliable sign of this shared illusion is the failure to work out contingency plans. According to Attorney General Janet Reno, her worst-case scenario before the assault was an explosion. So, where was the firefighting equipment when the blaze erupted?

Belief in the inherent morality of the group. In groupthink, group members are inclined to ignore the moral and ethical consequences of their decisions. Statements by spokespeople for the FBI, the Justice Department, and the Clinton administration immediately following the fiasco were characterized by a seeming insensitivity to the moral question of subjecting children to potentially lethal CS gas as a means of ending alleged child abuse.

Collective efforts to rationalize. Victims of groupthink typically discount warnings that may induce them to reconsider their assumptions. In view of the fact that the planners' worst-case scenario was an explosion, how did they rationalize the decision to ram combat engineering vehicles into a relatively fragile frame building containing highly flammable substances and ammunition? In addition, the FBI's argument that the elite Hostage Rescue Team was "fatigued" after only 51 days is particularly unconvincing. When decision makers rationalize their chosen course of action, an inevitable casualty is the evaluation of alternatives. The use of child abuse

allegations as a pretext for the FBI assault is a clear example. Wasn't the original warrant issued to investigate firearm violations? Moreover, did the Attorney General forget that the investigation of child abuse is not under federal jurisdiction?

Stereotyped views of the adversary. It appears that the FBI plan to terminate negotiations was based in part on expert advice that Koresh's statements were "the ramblings of a diseased mind" and "one-sided delusional tirades" of a "paranoic." This dehumanization is also evident in Janet Reno's testimony on April 28 during a congressional hearing: "You were dealing with a madman, Congressman — he was totally unpredictable." These diabolical-enemy images in the Justice Department played a key role in making Koresh's apocalyptic predictions a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Self-censorship and illusion of unanimity. It is symptomatic of groupthink that members who deviate from the apparent group consensus fail to express their reservations, contributing to a shared illusion of unanimity. It may thus be expected that formerly unexpressed misgivings about the abortive scheme will emerge if those involved in the decision are intensively questioned during subsequent investigations.

Direct pressure. In groupthink, dissenting group members are invariably subjected to strong conformity pressure. The question is this: What, if any, pressure did the FBI exert on Janet Reno to approve their ill-fated plan?

Mindguards. The emergence of "mindguards" — self-appointed gatekeepers who "protect" the decision-making group from information that may disturb members' complacency about the correctness and morality of their course of action — is symptomatic of groupthink. It is significant that FBI Deputy Director Floyd Clarke and Assistant Director Larry Potts were briefed in Waco as early as April 7 and 8 by Special Agent in Charge Jeff Jamar about his plan to use armored vehicles to infuse the Branch Davidian compound with tear gas. This places a serious question mark over the earnestness with which alternatives were examined during the period immediately preceding the April 19 assault on the compound. It is reported that the plan was presented to Janet Reno on April 12, and that on April 14 she widened the task force, calling in additional Justice Department and FBI officials and representatives of Delta Force, the army's crack rescue team. Delta Force commanders were reportedly "scornful" of the plan, yet the Pentagon maintains they merely attended the briefing and were not asked for an evaluation. Why this apparent suppression of information?

Finally, perhaps the most telling manifestation of the mental paralysis produced by groupthink occurred when the Attorney General, several hours *after* the fiery holocaust, explained that the FBI was forced to act because "nobody could tell what he [Koresh] might do." Begging the question, she continued: "Anybody that has done what he did today — this stark and horrible tragedy — could do anything."

Such is the unreasoning beast that is groupthink.

Note. This article was originally published as "Waco tragedy product of 'groupthink' in the *St. Cloud Times*, May 9, 1993, p. 8A.