

## Understanding Groupthink: The Case of Operation Market Garden

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**ABSTRACT:** This article applies the groupthink model of decision-making to the planning for Operation Market Garden in late 1944. It shows especially strong parallels between decision-making in the Market Garden case, and those of the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, and the Challenger shuttle disaster.

In 1982, social psychologist Irving Janis—heir to a long line of others who had shown how social pressures and the power of the situation can combine to make us do things we never dreamed we would—published the second edition of his book *Groupthink*.<sup>1</sup> Originally published a decade earlier, the book articulated the “groupthink” hypothesis, arguing certain tight-knit groups were especially prone to making policy errors. Some groups induce conformity or groupthink, a process through which a group reaches a hasty or premature consensus and then becomes effectively closed to outside ideas.

In Janis’s groupthink model, the rationality of decisions is distorted by dysfunctional group and social forces because members come to prize unanimity and agreement over considering all courses of action rationally.<sup>2</sup> Janis referred to this tendency as a “concurrence-seeking.”<sup>3</sup> Once the group has reached its decision, that decision cannot be revisited or reconsidered. Dissenters are progressively excluded or shunted aside altogether. “Self-censorship” occurs as those who disagree with the chosen course of action remain silent, often because they think changing the minds of others is hopeless. Furthermore, “mindguards” are apt to appear, individuals who take it upon themselves to police the decision taken and to dissuade dissenters from rocking the boat. This action can sometimes lead to the removal of a determined dissenter from the group altogether, or else to the effective silencing of the individual.

Janis discussed a number of the symptoms of groupthink as well as the antecedent conditions that could produce it.<sup>4</sup> These conditions encourage the symptoms but do not necessarily produce them. Of these, an especially important factor is group cohesiveness, where a “clubbish” atmosphere develops between the members. Often this atmosphere occurs when the decision-makers have spent a great deal of time with

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1 Irving Janis, *Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

2 *Ibid.*, passim.

3 *Ibid.*, vii.

4 *Ibid.*, 174–197, where Janis lays out the theory at length.

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one another or begin to socialize together. During the Kennedy/Johnson era, for example, many members of the administration stayed in the same posts for several years and came to know one another very well. While cohesiveness is critical to many teams - including military ones - this trait is a double-edged sword; a group in which members become overly familiar with one another can come to think alike and can fail to question each other's assumptions. Decisions regarding Vietnam, for instance, were made by a collection of like-minded individuals who agreed on aspects of foreign policy, and cultivated an atmosphere of consensus.

Other pre-conditions include a history of failure, stress induced by time pressure, and overly directive leadership of the type that allows no disagreement. Margaret Thatcher, for instance, was known for arriving at meetings already having decided what she wanted, stating her position upfront and then effectively challenging others to disagree with her. There is also what Janis calls "suave leadership," where a leader induces docility and a false sense of complacency.<sup>5</sup> The presence of a charismatic president in 1961 during the disastrous Bay of Pigs episode appeared to reinforce the idea that the plan was in fact a good one. But he allowed the CIA to monopolize the discussion, failing to encourage his advisers to ask tough questions that might have exposed the plan's flaws before it went into effect.

The symptoms of groupthink, similarly, take on disturbingly common forms. They include the following:

- *Illusions of invulnerability.* The group comes to believe it cannot lose. As Janis sees it, the new Kennedy officials who came to office in 1961 were laboring under an illusion of invulnerability, believing they were winners.<sup>6</sup> Unaccustomed to losing, JFK had emerged victorious from a very close presidential election in late 1960, and persuaded similarly youthful "can do" figures to join him in office.
- *Rationalizing away problems.* Risks and dangers are waved away and treated as insignificant. Many of the supporters of the decision for intervening in Vietnam compared it to the Korean War, and Johnson's views drew explicitly on this analogy. Johnson dismissed the differences as insignificant.<sup>7</sup> A war of insurgency was hence treated as if it were a conventional conflict like Korea.
- *Belief in the group's inherent morality.* This condition exists when decision-makers see themselves as morally correct. The Kennedy officials in 1961 viewed themselves as the "good guys," moral men who were on the right-side of history. Surely this was enough to do the job? The same was true of Johnson's group, which came to see itself as the purveyor of morality, despite the fact that Vietnamese civilians were continually being caught in bombings by American B-52s.
- *Stereotyping the opposition* – the group comes to see the adversary as weak or stupid. In 1961, Kennedy's advisors overestimated US capabilities and stereotyped the enemy—Fidel Castro—as both weak and

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5 Ibid., 42.

6 Ibid., "A Perfect Failure: The Bay of Pigs," and "Escalation of the Vietnam War: How Could It Happen," and 35-37.

7 See, for instance, Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 110-111.

unpopular (both assumptions were wrong). The staying power of Ho Chi Minh was similarly underrated, and US policymakers thought he would cave to graduated bombing.

- *Illusions of unanimity* – the group comes to see itself as wholly united. Some – notably Arthur Schlesinger – privately harbored doubts about the Bay of Pigs plan, as did a few other Kennedy advisers. Schlesinger did send Kennedy memoranda in which he questioned various assumptions behind the plan. But when he was given the opportunity to speak up in official meetings before the plan was implemented, he remained strangely silent. In Janis’s words, Schlesinger engaged in “self-censorship.” As the Vietnam group became more and more cohesive, it closed in upon itself. Members became increasingly unwilling to revisit old decisions or reassess their collective wisdom.
- *The emergence of dissenters* – the supposed unanimity is exposed as an illusion, since “transgressors” emerge. As we have noted, Schlesinger and others did eventually express their doubts. In the Vietnam case not everyone within the administration agreed with Johnson’s eventual decision to escalate the war in 1965. Dissenters like Clark Clifford and Undersecretary of State George Ball quickly stepped forward, arguing the United States could not win without paying unacceptable costs to do so. While Johnson initially gave Ball a sympathetic hearing, the Undersecretary of State became less trusted over time. Others on the inside dealt with any dissent by implying the decision-maker was somehow “burned out” or even ill. The phrase “I’m afraid he is losing his effectiveness” became a standard refrain, as more and more members of the Johnson administration left government for good, despairing of ever changing the president’s mind.
- *The emergence of “mindguards.”* This condition occurs when various means are employed to get dissenters to “toe the line,” which may involve marginalization or complete exclusion from the group. When they finally spoke out against the consensus to go ahead with the Bay of Pigs plan, both Schlesinger and Chester Bowles (Undersecretary of State) were effectively mindguarded. Just as bodyguards protect against physical threats, mindguards are said to act as guardians of the group’s collective conscience. Bowles sent his boss, Dean Rusk, a strongly-worded memorandum which challenged the plan’s assumptions; but Rusk apparently shoved this in his desk and did not pass it on to the president.<sup>8</sup> In Vietnam, meanwhile, mindguards like National Security Advisor Walt Rostow would tell the president what he wanted to hear and keep dissenters away from the oval office. Eventually, even one of the original architects of the war, Robert McNamara, began to have doubts about its wisdom. When he started to express these doubts outside the inner circle, Johnson compared him to a son who had let slip to prospective buyers of a house that there are cracks in the basement.<sup>9</sup>

### Three Caveats

At this point, three caveats should be noted. First, although Janis was vague on the issue of how many symptoms of groupthink have to

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8 Ibid., 40-42.

9 Ibid., 118.

be present before one can reliably diagnose it, he was clear that most of them have to be present. For instance, it is not sufficient to note some dissenters were present, since this is almost always the case. For practically any decision, there are people who can honestly say afterwards they disagreed. After the raid to get Osama Bin Laden in 2011, for instance, it became clear Robert Gates (then Secretary of Defense) had been opposed to a military infiltration of Bin Laden's base in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Equally, there were those who wanted to go ahead. But to diagnose groupthink, most or all of Janis's symptoms must be present (an illusion of invulnerability or unanimity was arguably missing from the Bin Laden case, for instance). But as we shall see in the Market Garden case, a whole range of symptoms manifested themselves.

Secondly, there are plenty of policy failures where we can show groupthink was not at work; errors can be individually-based rather than resulting from the group, or may derive from bureaucratic politics or inter-service rivalry. As Janis noted,

...obviously, one cannot assume that groupthink is the cause of practically all policy miscalculations and fiascos. Anyone who relies on that naïve assumption in reading a case study would be carrying out a worthless exercise in unadulterated hindsight.<sup>10</sup>

Some policymaking fiascos emerge from the application of dubious analogies by leaders who have first-hand experience of the events.

Lastly, groupthink does not always lead to disaster. Policy successes that involved an element of groupthink may somehow work anyway. Like Clausewitz, Janis conceded there are moments when chance intervenes; decision-making processes are only one determinant of success or failure. A group can also reach the right conclusion via the wrong route. The relationship between groupthink and policy outcomes, Janis notes, is imperfect.

## Operation Market Garden

There has been relatively little interplay between theories of foreign policy decision-making like groupthink and the study of strategy. Even Norman Dixon's *On The Psychology of Military Incompetence*, which deals briefly with Market Garden, does not conceptualize the failures which occurred in groupthink terms (even though the theory is covered in his book).<sup>11</sup> In fact, none of the standard accounts of the Arnhem affair attempt to apply an overarching theory such as groupthink.<sup>12</sup> Instead, they focus on detailing what went on during the operation, apportioning

<sup>10</sup> Janis, *Groupthink*, 193.

<sup>11</sup> Norman Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London: Pimlico Books, 1994), 399-400.

<sup>12</sup> Of these, by far the most famous is Cornelius Ryan, *A Bridge Too Far* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2007). But there are many others, a number of them by participants in the events themselves. See for instance Christopher Hibbert, *The Battle of Arnhem* (London: Batsford, 1962); Roy Urquhart, *Arnhem* (London: White Lion, 1973); Lewis Golden, *Echoes from Arnhem* (London: William Kimber, 1984); Geoffrey Powell, *The Devil's Birthday: The Bridges to Arnhem 1944* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1992); Peter Harclerode, *Arnhem: A Tragedy of Errors* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1994); Martin Middlebrook, *Arnhem 1944: The Airborne Battle* (London: Penguin Books, 1995); A.D. Harvey, *Arnhem* (London: Cassell, 2001); John Frost, *A Drop Too Many* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2001); David Bennett, *A Magnificent Disaster: The Failure of Market Garden, the Arnhem Operation September 1944* (Drexel Hill, PA: Casemate, 2008); and Sebastian Ritchie, *Arnhem: Myth and Reality* (London: Robert Hale, 2011).

blame and ultimately debating whether the operation was a wise military move or ill-considered (and therefore doomed) from the very start.

Accordingly, this brief piece tries to demonstrate the ultimate value of applying a groupthink explanation to the planning behind Market Garden. As we shall see, an intriguing number of symptoms as well as some of its most potent antecedent conditions were visibly present. Avoiding groupthink requires an ability to rethink and reassess in the light of new information, or evidence which has been seen in a new light; but this was made impossible by the time constraints imposed.

Market Garden was a truly bold and inventive plan. Some have even seen it as strategically brilliant in conception, though most authors consider it a heroic failure. While the definition of success and failure is partly in the eye of the beholder, John Buckley captures the consensus view of Arnhem when he argues “it was a poorly conceived, ill considered and deeply flawed plan which stood little chance of success before it had even begun.”<sup>13</sup> Other accounts have already done a good job of outlining its key features, so these will be dealt with only briefly here and only as particular aspects of the plan pertain to the theory of groupthink. However, its essential elements were the air component (Market) and the land one (Garden). In September 1944, the strategic problem was that eight bridges lay between the Allies in France or Belgium and the industrial Ruhr in Germany, including key Dutch bridges at Eindhoven, Nijmegen and Arnhem. It was assumed that capturing the Ruhr valley, on which the German war making machine depended, would quickly cut Berlin’s capacity to fight. Using three sets of airborne troops – two American and one British – the basic idea was to drop soldiers quickly behind enemy lines. The Allies would thereby leapfrog over the German defensive wall and attempt to capture all key bridges simultaneously. Speed and surprise were absolutely critical, since catching the Germans off guard was the only way to make this bold military plan work.

Needless to say, it did not work as intended. For the Allies, the numbers killed, wounded, or missing exceeded an astonishing 17,000; as many as 10,000 Dutch civilians may have died as well. As Dixon puts it, “defeat was absolute and terrible.”<sup>14</sup> And the military objectives, of course, were not achieved, since the Germans successfully repelled the attack and took many Allied soldiers prisoner.

Was the decision to go ahead taken in a group setting, or was it taken unilaterally? As the name suggests, groupthink is obviously a group-based process, and decisions which are not taken in a group context therefore do not fit within the remit of the theory. Available evidence is admittedly thinner on this question than on other aspects of the decision-making, partly because Montgomery was rather secretive about his own decision-making processes. It is, of course, possible he was a “lone wolf” who made decisions entirely on his own. Yet, the available evidence suggests he was not. First of all, it would have been impossible for a figure like Bernard Montgomery – who had lost overall control of the Allied war effort to Eisenhower – to violate the chain of command or fail to consult with others. We know he obtained Eisenhower’s permission to

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13 John Buckley, *Monty’s Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe, 1944-45* (London: Yale University Press, 2013), 208.

14 Dixon, *On The Psychology of Military Incompetence*, 148.

go ahead with the plan, though the relationship between the two men was difficult at best.<sup>15</sup> More tellingly, we know meetings were held at various stages before the green light was given.

The key planning meeting at which it was decided to go ahead with Operation Market Garden was held on September 10, 1944. Anxious to go, most members of the group strongly believed in what Montgomery was planning.<sup>16</sup> There was an especially pervasive feeling that a “single thrust” was all that Allied resources could do. There was also a strong sense of unanimity within the group that aligned with Montgomery’s absolute conviction he was right. The group also believed intelligence emanating from the Dutch underground was not to be trusted, based on past experience.

The objections of those who felt Montgomery was not correct seem to have been wholly ignored or swept aside. Forrest Pogue notes, “some individuals at 12th Army Group and First Allied Airborne Army, and even some members of the 21st Army Group staff, expressed opposition to the plan.”<sup>17</sup> Among those who disagreed, Monty’s own Chief of Staff, General Francis de Guingand, did not feel the plan could work. Brigadier Ronald Belchem, his Chief of Operations, disliked the “narrowness” of the thrust.<sup>18</sup> We also know General Sir Miles Dempsey, Commander of the British 2nd Army, advocated an airborne drop at Wesel; dropping at the Arnhem bridge, he argued, made little strategic sense.<sup>19</sup> All were overruled by Montgomery; he desperately wanted it to go ahead.

#### *Antecedent Conditions*

*Time Pressure and a History of Failure/Cancellation.* Janis always emphasized that various things can aid in (or make more likely) the appearance of groupthink. One is simple time pressure, along with the frustration that inevitably accompanies repeated cancellations or failures to launch. This is not to say time pressure necessarily leads to disaster; but the decisions which led to the ill-fated *Challenger* mission in January 1986 provide a classic example.<sup>20</sup> On five or six occasions the shuttle launch was scrapped or delayed, mainly due to bad weather and other technical issues. These delays led to immense pressure to go ahead, increasingly embarrassing officials at NASA. However, it was an unusually cold winter day in Florida, and employees like Roger Boisjoly tried to warn their bosses the O-Rings which connected sections of the solid rocket booster used to put the shuttle into space were simply not tested at such low temperatures; hence, they might shatter with absolutely catastrophic effect. Sadly, this advice was ignored, and the O-Rings did indeed fail, causing the shuttle to explode.

In the case of Market Garden, a large variety of plans – no less than sixteen, by one count - had already been scrapped prior to the decision to

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15 Thomas Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 81-95.

16 Alistair Horne and David Montgomery, *Monty: The Lonely Leader, 1955-1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 283.

17 Forrest Pogue, *The Supreme Command* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1996), 281.

18 David Irving, *The War Between The Generals* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 72.

19 Chester Wilmut, *The Struggle for Europe* (New York: Harper, 1952), 488.

20 See the film *Groupthink* (CRM Films, 1991), which recreates the shuttle launch decision-making with actors, using Janis’s theory.



go ahead. Operation Comet, for instance, had just been scrapped prior to Market Garden, much to the frustration of men who were anxious to get into battle. The sense of hurry was also encouraged by the feeling the Germans were on the run, and Montgomery believed their presumed disarray could be exploited.

*Suave Leadership.* A further background factor that may encourage groupthink is what Janis calls “docility fostered by suave leadership.”<sup>21</sup> The tactless Montgomery seemed anything but charismatic, although it should be noted charisma is very subjective. More than Montgomery, though, one figure who was almost universally agreed to have ‘oozed’ such qualities was Brian Horrocks of XXX Corps. Horrocks was an immensely charismatic figure who, in the eyes of one observer at the time, would have made “a very good salesman.”<sup>22</sup> While Horrocks was not a key decision-maker, his salesmanship of the plan may well have contributed to the general sense of camaraderie and to the feeling that Allied forces could not lose.

*Aggressive Leadership.* Overly assertive or aggressive leadership is another one of the classic antecedent conditions which can encourage groupthink, as when a leader comes into the meeting room having already decided what she/he wants. Montgomery’s aggressive leadership was always likely to give rise to a dysfunctional decision-making process, and there is some evidence he “knocked down” anyone who disagreed with him. Brigadier Bill Williams and General Walter Beddell Smith would both complain afterwards they simply could not get Montgomery to change his mind. What is also known is Montgomery was more generally an aggressive leader who rarely if ever brooked objections to his ideas. Indeed, even after the failure of the operation, he would insist (rather absurdly) that it had been “90% successful.” As Max Hastings argues, “this was nonsense, for it was a *cul-de-sac* which took the Allies nowhere until February 1945 ... the Arnhem assault was a flawed concept for which the chances of success were negligible.”<sup>23</sup>

Montgomery’s arrogance was legendary. Brighton talks of his “obstreperous behavior towards his seniors,” Sosabowski thought him “recklessly overconfident,” Irving calls him “spiky” and self-obsessed,” while Ricks speaks simply of Montgomery’s “egotism.”<sup>24</sup> The Field Marshal’s own official biographer, Nigel Hamilton, goes even further, arguing that by 1942 “Monty’s egoism, his doctrine of quasi-papal infallibility, began to mushroom, and the final vestiges of modesty were cast overboard.”<sup>25</sup> He “refused to listen to the exhortations of his main Headquarters staff,” and would frequently exasperate his colleagues.<sup>26</sup>

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21 Janis, *Groupthink*, 42-44.

22 Sydney Jarey, quoted in the BBC series *Battlefields*, “Arnhem.”

23 Max Hastings, *Inferno: The World At War, 1939-1945* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2011), 561.

24 Terry Brighton, *Patton, Montgomery, Rommel: Masters of War* (New York: Crown Books, 2008), 219; Irving, *The War Between the Generals*, 42; and Ricks, *The Generals*, 85.

25 Nigel Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield: Monty’s War Years, 1942-44* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1983), 142.

26 Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Final Years of the Field Marshal, 1944-1976* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1986), 73.

## Symptoms

### *The Illusion of Invulnerability*

In 1944, there was a sense among many British servicemen after the routing of the Germans in France that “we cannot lose.” Montgomery had also been through a victorious campaign in North Africa and been integral to the conquest of Sicily. He had enjoyed one military success after another, which made him immensely popular in Britain. As Harclerode notes, “the relative ease with which the Allies had advanced through northern France into Belgium had resulted in a dangerous and misplaced sense of euphoria which permeated their forces at all levels.”<sup>27</sup> Others argue there was a kind of “victory virus” infecting Monty and his group within 21st Army.<sup>28</sup> By the time the plan went ahead, the Germans had reorganized and regrouped sufficiently to put up a highly effective defense, and fanatical SS troops had also been held in reserve as reinforcements.

### *Collective Rationalizations*

Here the group ignores or rationalizes away evidence that challenges its shaky assumptions. In a perfectly rational world, of course, new information would be taken on board and strategies altered. But as Janis maintains this is all too often not how things work in practice. Market Garden depended above all on two closely related factors: the element of total surprise, and the airlift capability necessary to put an airborne force close to the eight bridges in Holland at a moment’s notice. Sadly, because the Allied planners lacked the second capability – and the planners would not or could not put the men and material in with the speed required - they could not provide the first.

The transporter of choice for the men – which would convey both men and gliders – was the American Dakota C-47 Skytrain. But there were simply not enough of them to put both men and equipment into the battle in one go; it would take three days to do so because Browning’s superior, General Lewis Brereton, feared exhausting his crews by forcing them to do two runs in a single day. Two drops might have been performed in a single day: one by the RAF at night, and one by USAAF forces during the day. But this would have meant waiting several days for moonlight, and the planners were not interested in further delays.

All of this meant the element of surprise upon which Market Garden would depend would be gone. Montgomery clearly realized this was a problem. The fact they had insufficient airlift and would lose the element of surprise altogether might scupper the whole thing. But he simply insisted the plan could not be changed. He also wholly discounted Walter Bedell Smith’s warning about the presence of panzer divisions in the Arnhem area. Similarly, when presented with photographic evidence that two German panzer divisions were there, General (Boy) Browning simply rationalized the information away. “I wouldn’t trouble myself about these if I were you. They’re probably not serviceable at any rate,” he told his astonished subordinate Major Brian Urquhart.<sup>29</sup>

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27 Harclerode, *Arnhem*, 38.

28 Horne and Montgomery, *Monty*, 273. The Montgomery referred to here was Bernard’s son.

29 Ryan, *A Bridge Too Far*, 142.



### *A Belief in the Group's Inherent Morality*

It hardly needs to be noted that the planners of Market Garden saw themselves as morally superior to the opposition. While it is hard to deny the proposition that Hitler himself was morally evil, as well as at least some of his deputies. The war gave rise to a number of morally “gray” areas though, such as the Allies indiscriminate bombing of civilians, in the hope of dramatically shortening the war.<sup>30</sup>

### *Stereotyping the Enemy as Evil, Weak or Stupid*

It was certainly true German intelligence was woefully unprepared for the timing of what occurred. However, the Allied planners seem to have greatly overplayed their hand, especially by claiming that the enemy was weak. The clearest manifestation of this came in the belief – apparently widespread amongst the planners – the invading force of British and Americans would be met only by “old men and boys.”<sup>31</sup> This was perhaps the most mystifying belief of all, but it can be traced to intelligence reports which suggested the enemy was in complete disarray after its collapse in France. The Allies saw the enemy as ineffective and completely demoralized.<sup>32</sup>

This, of course, ignored other intelligence which suggested Arnhem was well-defended by SS troops, evidence which genuinely troubled Urquhart and others. In fact, the Germans were fully aware Arnhem was a key access route to the Ruhr and industrial Germany. In that sense, it is amazing how British planners underestimated the Germans. In reality, Arnhem and the other bridges between France and Germany were the obvious next target.

### *The Illusion of Unanimity*

The planning group seemed to be unanimous in its approval of Market Garden, but this masked what were in fact real divisions within it. Generals Stanislaw Sosabowski and James Gavin had major doubts about the plan, but neither voiced these forcefully. Indeed, Sosabowski went so far as to ask Browning for a written order during the previously cancelled but similar Operation Comet, convinced his men were about to be massacred. But having voiced his dissent already to little or no effect, Sosabowski saw little point in doing so again during the planning for Market Garden. As Cornelius Ryan relates:

Despite Sosabowski's anxieties, at the September 12th briefing, he remained silent. 'I remember [Roy] Urquhart asking for questions and nobody raised any,' he recalled. 'Everyone sat nonchalantly, legs crossed, looking bored. I wanted to say something about this impossible plan, but I just couldn't. It was unpopular as it was, and anyway, who would have listened?'<sup>33</sup>

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30 See for instance Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe, 1939-1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

31 See Chris Brown, *Battle Story Arnhem 1944* (London: The History Press, 2011), 57; and John Nicol and Tony Rennell, *Arnhem: The Battle for Survival* (London: Penguin Books, 2011).

32 Horne and Montgomery, *Monty*, 273.

33 Ryan, *A Bridge Too Far*, 126.

*Emergence of Dissenters*

The best-known dissenter within Browning's own staff was Brian Urquhart. Urquhart was greatly worried by intelligence gleaned from the Dutch and from British overflights which suggested the presence of two SS panzer divisions, since the lightly armed paratroopers could be easily wiped out by the heavily armed panzers. Intelligence is sometimes ambiguous, especially during the fog of war, but the mission had also already reached an advanced stage. Urquhart's dissent parallels that of Arthur Schlesinger in the Bay of Pigs case, George Ball in the Vietnam example, and Roger Boisjoly in the *Challenger* one. In all of those cases, the concerns of the dissenter were downplayed or ignored, but were ultimately proven correct.

Urquhart's dissent may be the most famous and best documented, but it was perhaps the least consequential due to his relatively junior status. Both the Intelligence Chief to the British 21st Army and General Eisenhower's Chief of Staff are known to have held similar positions to Urquhart's, and both had access to more sensitive intelligence which showed the young officer was absolutely correct.<sup>34</sup> The Chief of Intelligence for the British 21st Army, Brigadier Bill Williams, had access to secret ULTRA intelligence, for instance. Williams went directly to Montgomery on two separate occasions warning of the presence of the Panzer divisions, but was ignored. Days later, Montgomery received a similar visit from Walter Beddell Smith, Eisenhower's American Chief of Staff, who had seen the same evidence. But when Beddell Smith visited Montgomery in person, his concerns were summarily dismissed.<sup>35</sup> Intelligence from at least three separate sources had pointed to the existence of panzer divisions.

*Emergence of Mindguards*

As we have seen, dissenters are dealt with in part via the emergence of mindguards. These are individuals who take it upon themselves to suggest the dissenter's advice is of little or no value. Stating the dissenter is "sick" or "losing his mind" are common ways of doing this, as when Johnson suggested the dissenter Robert McNamara was literally "cracking up" over Vietnam.

Browning dealt with Urquhart's dissent by suggesting "his nerve had broken."<sup>36</sup> While Urquhart was certainly under great pressure—all of the planners were—he was apparently dealing rather well with this, and subsequently rose to become Secretary-General of the United Nations. Urquhart said later Browning treated him:

...as a nervous child suffering from a nightmare... I was a pain in the neck... Colonel Eggar, our chief doctor, came to visit me. He informed me that I was suffering from acute nervous strain and exhaustion and ordered me to go on sick leave. When I asked him what would happen if I refused, he said, in his kindly way, that I would be arrested and court-martialed for disobeying orders.<sup>37</sup>

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34 Harclerode, *Arnhem: A Tragedy of Errors*, 38-45.

35 Ibid, 39.

36 Christopher Hibbert, quoted in the BBC series *Battlefields*, "Arnhem."

37 Urquhart, *A Life In Peace and War*, 73.

## Conclusion

The presence of wishful thinking is very much in evidence in the Market Garden case. Those who conceived and planned the operation, as well as those who implemented it, desperately wanted it to succeed. As has often been noted, victory at Arnhem would have shortened the war by four months, and thousands might have been saved thereby. In retrospect, it might also have changed the shape of the Cold War, since the Allies would probably have reached Berlin before the Russians.

The theory of groupthink has been widely criticized as well as praised since it first appeared in the early 1970s. For one thing, critics have often been suspicious of the “fit” between Janis’s case studies and the various causes of groupthink, and have criticized the blurring of preconditions, symptoms, and effects. But the presence of his symptoms in the Market Garden instance – a case he never studied – is intriguing, and worthy of further study.<sup>38</sup> Montgomery was told there were major flaws in his plan. Yet, the prize itself proved too tempting to resist.

Avoiding groupthink requires an ability to reassess goals in the light of new information or evidence. But this was made impossible by artificial time constraints. As Sunstein and Hastie note, when we are in possession of information which cuts against the grain, “people have a strong tendency to self-censor.”<sup>39</sup>

The groupthink phenomenon is not inevitable, however, and the US military can take measures to safeguard against it. For instance, a member of the group can be appointed as a “critical evaluator,” ensuring all viewpoints are heard; leaders can absent themselves from meetings in order to avoid advisers becoming “yes men.” They can also break the group into option-based units, each given the task of explaining the merits and demerits of a course of action. Or outsiders can be brought in to provide fresh views and counteract any “clubbiness” within the group. A “devil’s advocate” can be created, whose job is to argue against whatever position emerges as the consensus view.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Alexander George has shown how the use of devil’s advocates, the rigorous exploration of alternatives and what he calls “multiple advocacy” – ensuring a given administration is filled with a diversity of voices – can counteract an overly-hasty rush to judgement.<sup>41</sup>

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38 See for instance John Levine, “Reaction to Opinion Deviance in Small Groups,” in Paul Paulus, ed., *Psychology of Group Influence*, 2nd ed. (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1989); and Paul ‘t Hart, *Groupthink in Government: A Study of Small Groups and Policy Failure* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

39 Cass Sunstein and Reid Hastie, *Wiser: Getting Beyond Groupthink To Make Groups Smarter* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2015).

40 Janis, *Groupthink*, 260-311.

41 Alexander George, *Presidential Decision Making in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), 169-208.

