

# How could this have happened critical thinking example - groupthink

[War](#), [World War 2](#)



## **Critical Thinking Essay: Groupthink**

According to Irving Janis, groupthink is defined as “ A mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive ingroup, when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternate courses of action” (Wikipedia, 2011). What does this mean in plain English and who is Irving Janis? His definition of groupthink means that sometimes members of a group of people such as family members or a team at work feel so bonded to each other that they do not want to hurt each other’s feelings or they trust each other’ s opinions so much that they ignore the need to consider alternatives to ideas that arise during group discussions. Irving Janis was a research psychologist employed at Yale University. Janis applied his theories on groupthink to major historical events such as Pearl Harbor and the Bay of Pigs.

According to Janis, the Naval officers at Pearl Harbor, Japan, were victims of groupthink. Most people do not know that the United States had overheard messages from Japan indicating that Japan was preparing for an attack on the United States (Wikipedia, 2011). Washington, D. C. sent warnings to the Navy at Pearl Harbor about these attacks but the warnings were ignored. In fact, Pearl Harbor officers just assumed these offensive attacks were going to be placed in action only if Japanese embassies or consulates were attacked. Basically, it was our own confidence as a nation that allowed the attacks on Pearl Harbor.

Here are some rationalizations used by the Army and Navy about why Japan would not attack Pearl Harbor: If Japan attacked Hawaii, a war would start which the United States undoubtedly would win; Pearl Harbor itself is a deterrent to attacks; and, our technology would be able to intercept attacks from Japan (Wikipedia, 2011).

Everyone blames President Kennedy for the Bay of Pigs. How many citizens actually know that President Kennedy inherited the idea for the Bay of Pigs from his predecessor, President Eisenhower (Wikipedia, 2011)? For some reason, the CIA underestimated Castro and his army. Kennedy's administration members just accepted Eisenhower's plan without question. One member of Kennedy's administration did have doubts. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. However, the power of groupthink made Schlesinger ignore his doubts (Wikipedia, 2011).

Janis offers a possible explanation. Janis saw eight danger signs of groupthink. They are: 1) The group thinks it is invincible and can do nothing wrong; 2) Warnings are discounted by the group; 3) The group assumes it is morally correct; 4) The group views the other group as stupid, weak or evil; 5) Group members censor themselves in an effort to keep the peace; 6) The group applies pressure to conform; 7) Everyone always agrees with the other group members; 8) Contrary viewpoints are not allowed to reach the group members (Changingminds. org, 2011). When groups suffer from these eight warning signs, the group will be dogmatic, act on irrational decisions, believe themselves to be extremely moral, and stereotype anyone not in their group (Changingminds. org, 2011).

What can be done to avoid groupthink? Changingminds. org offers some ideas: New or outside opinions need to be considered by the group; Frequently split the group up into sub-groups for discussion and decision making; and poll individuals like in a jury to get individuals' true opinions.

Corporations and governments need to be aware of groupthink because both corporations and governments keep making the same mistakes over and over. When will they learn that something needs to change? Implementing Janis's ideas could save jobs and governments.

## **References**

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