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Reluctant Customers: Presidents and Policy Advice

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Groupthink or Deadlock: When Do Leaders Learn from Their Advisors? By Paul A. Kowert. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002. 265 pp., $65.50 cloth (ISBN: 0-7914-5249-2), $21.95 paper (ISBN: 0-7914-5250-6).

In *Groupthink or Deadlock*, Paul Kowert has written a clever but ultimately unsatisfactory book about the nexus between leaders and their advisers when they deal with weighty foreign and domestic policy issues. Kowert's study fits neatly within the steadily growing literature on foreign policy decision making, a field persistently ignored by mainstream international relations that has nonetheless developed into a cumulative, multidisciplinary part of the discipline. At the same time, Kowert's study makes a contribution to presidential studies and indeed, albeit moderately, to leadership studies in political science at large. Kowert builds upon the pioneering work of Irving Janis (1972), Alexander George (1980), and Margaret Hermann (1980). He also fits into a stream of recent, highly related political-psychological studies of leader–adviser interaction in US foreign policy-making by such young scholars as Patrick Haney (1997), Thomas Preston (2000), and David Houghton (2001).

Kowert's main claim is that, when making key decisions, US presidents only learn from their advisers if a good fit exists between their personal learning style and the structure of their advisory groups. In short, leaders can be open or closed in their desire or ability to solicit a wealth of information and a diversity of viewpoints. (Open presidents like it; closed presidents do not.) Open leaders should, therefore, work best when they have an advisory system that is open, that is, a quasi-pluralist arena in which information flows upward easily and conflicting arguments are brought before the president. Closed leaders, in contrast, would likely be distressed and paralyzed by this kind of advisory system. They need a closed system: one that is orderly, hierarchical, and geared toward presenting the president with consensual recommendations or compromises. The book's title, *Groupthink or Deadlock*, refers to the results of two archetypical asymmetries between presidential style and advisory system structure. Groupthink occurs when an open president has a closed advisory system. The president may think he gets all the options and hears all the disagreements, but in fact he is isolated from the complexities of the issue at hand by a congenial, harmonious group of advisers. The main risk in groupthink is that a president will stumble into a policy disaster inadvertently. Deadlock, by contrast, occurs when a closed president has an advisory system that is beset by bureaucratic politics and interpersonal rivalry between advisers. Deadlock invites stalemate and paralysis of the policy process, with no authoritative decisions being made at all, and policy effectively being made at lower levels.

Kowert examines the relationship between presidential style and advisory structure in a series of case studies involving two presidents: Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan. He first sketches their leadership styles, with Eisenhower emerging as an open and Reagan as a closed leader. He then describes cases in

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which the advisory system around each president worked well, that is, cases in which both leaders learned from their advisers. (Learning, as defined by Kowert, occurs when leaders change their minds on policy issues, about which they have strong feelings, as a result of exposure to their staff's arguments and interactions.) Two subsequent chapters document learning failures of the kinds described in the book's title: Eisenhower's procrastination on the McCarthy witch hunts and the United States' mounting international debt, along with Reagan's Iran-Contra fiasco and his failure to tackle the mounting budget deficit.

Kowert's book is clever because he exploits a point not sufficiently argued by former analysts: a single optimal advisory system for US presidents does not exist. Many scholars have made the mistake of thinking that some form of multiple advocacy, a term coined by Alexander George (1972), is a one-size-fits-all solution to the problems of staffing and structuring the White House. Previous analysts, Preston (2000) most convincingly, have shown that presidents put a personal stamp on their advisory systems, depending on such dimensions of their political personality as their need for information and their need for control. In passing, Kowert observes, quite correctly, that "staff arrangements (also) represent a cycle of reactions to the perceived shortcomings of a predecessor's methods" (p. 25). This point is sadly neglected by many political-psychological scholars, despite their claim that "who leads matters." Whether it is presidential personality or reactions to mistakes of the past, however, it is clearly unlikely that every president creates a system resembling the presumed, static ideal. Kowert goes one step farther, however, arguing that they should not try to create this alleged ideal. His key argument is normative: what constitutes a good staff system depends on which type of president it is supposed to serve. This is a point that is easy to grasp intuitively. One should not try to set up multiple advocacy around a leader like Richard Nixon, or a formalized hierarchy around someone like Bill Clinton. The point is almost so obvious that it is startling that no one has made it as forcefully as Kowert has. He deserves praise for doing it cogently.

Unfortunately, Kowert's study is less than satisfactory when it comes to elaborating and empirically testing his argument. He unnecessarily complicates the picture by choosing the slippery slope of learning theory. Decades of heroic but problematic efforts by political scientists and organizational theorists show that it is almost impossible to operationalize learning in a theoretically valid and yet empirically robust way (Tetlock and Breslauer 1991; Easterby-Smith, Araujo, and Burgoyne 1999). Kowert's solution to this problem is another recipe for failure. If he had looked more carefully at the literature on public policy change, he would have found that policymakers reverse policies and change initial preferences for many reasons other than learning from their advisors (Polsby 1984; Rose 1993; Hemerijck and Schludi 2000). By failing to include alternative explanations for change, and its absence, Kowert has left the reader guessing as to what caused what in the cases he studied.

Similarly, Kowert uses suggestive terms like groupthink and deadlock much too offhandedly to characterize policymaking processes that produce policy failures. His theoretical chapter demonstrates a good comprehension of the complexities of groupthink analysis, but Kowert still chooses to operationalize that term in a simplistic manner. No serious groupthink scholar will view his study as a contribution to the literature seeking to capture the occurrence, causes, and consequences of groupthink in the real world of policymaking.

Finally, precisely because proper operationalizations of the key concepts are lacking, it is very hard to judge the empirical merits of Kowert's case studies. They appear to be well researched and are certainly written very smoothly. Yet the overall impression is that they are too good to be true. Everything Kowert presents to the reader corroborates his claim about the case in question. The cases never deviate from the desired storyline. They have no outliers, no anomalies. Scholars working

in the tradition of case study analysis should demonstrate a keen awareness of its fragility, that is, the tendency to bend the story to fit the hypothesis. This problem can only be prevented if the researcher takes pains to demonstrate how he measures variables, how he reconstructs cause and effects in complex chains of events, and how he allows for the possibility that the evidence supports interpretations other than the one he favors. This is why people like Alexander George (1979) and Robert Yin (1984) developed now classic methods for making case study analysis more rigorous, and why their methods have been followed by scholars worldwide. Kowert's empirical argument remains unconvincing because he has preferred to ignore the methodological essentials of this kind of research. His creative theorizing deserves a better fate.

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