CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It may be lonely at the top, but hardly ever so lonely that important decisions in government and business are made by only one person. Even presidents and prime ministers must rely on others. In fact, the most powerful leaders generally confront such a range of problems that they require assistance and advice more frequently than less prominent figures. Small wonder, then, that the most important and time-consuming issue confronting newly elected presidents before they take office is not to determine their own position on various policy issues, but simply to decide how they will organize their staff.

In business as well as in government, this is a crucial problem. Schools of management debate ad nauseam the most effective and efficient way to fashion work groups of various sizes and functions. Does the Japanese *ringi* system of collective decision making, for example, produce better decisions than Western management styles even though it may seem less efficient?[1] Are cohesive groups more productive, or is some disagreement healthy?[2] How important is strong leadership for group efficiency?[3] Such questions are the staples of research on group decision making. And while their answers are debated, almost everyone agrees that groups deserve attention in their own right.

Yet no matter how indispensable a well-organized staff may be, even carefully assembled groups of advisors can sometimes

create more problems than they solve. Many studies of presidential decision making argue that social pressures within high-level policy groups can lead presidents to make worse decisions than had they acted alone. The best-known work of this genre, Irving Janis's study of groupthink, holds that this danger is especially prevalent in highly cohesive groups.[4] Janis suggests that taking steps to prevent "excessive" conformity and to promote "devil's advocacy" will make the group a more benign setting.

Janis was not the first to recognize the danger of groupthink. It was probably common wisdom even when Aristotle wrote that "evils draw men together."[5] The danger is not simply that the presence of like-minded others can reinforce one's own sense of rectitude and virtuousness far beyond prudence. The mere presence of others is energizing in a way that can prompt rash action or even mob behavior.[6] Groups also provide a measure of anonymity; they make it easier to entertain the belief that, when plans go awry, someone else can be blamed.[7] This aspect of groups not only encourages risky behavior, but it creates problems of accountability that undermine democratic procedures. It is bad enough that leaders might be led by advisors to contemplate unwise adventures, but even worse when leaders purposefully distance themselves from the details of an operation to preserve "deniability," thus subverting their accountability before the public.[8]

One is tempted to assert that leaders (and their constituents) would be better off by themselves than in a room full of advisors.[9] Whatever its merits, no policymaker could really afford to adopt this maxim. Even the most knowledgeable leaders cannot be experts on everything. Neither side of the debate over the usefulness of advisors really takes issue with an underlying premise: that more information is always better, so long as there is sufficient time to consider it. Information, one might say, is the lifeblood of decision making. The assumption that it is intrinsically valuable is a truism among almost all of those who study group decision making.

MATCHING ADVISORS TO LEADERS

This book rejects the assumption that more information is always helpful—even when the information itself is important and even when there is sufficient time to consider it. For people as for com-

puters, information is not helpful if it arrives in too great a quantity to process. For computers, the problem is simply one of processing speed. All that is necessary, for computers, is enough time. But for people, the problem is processing speed *and* tolerance for ambiguity, diversity of opinion, complexity, and many other features of the information itself. Computers are indifferent to the information they process, but people obviously are not.

To store knowledge efficiently, the brain simplifies and distorts learned information. One of the most basic assumptions of cognitive psychology is that people attempt to preserve consistency among their beliefs, fitting beliefs to simpler (and thus more efficient) mental frameworks.[10] When we are unable to preserve consistency, however, we do not merely experience this as another interesting fact. Inconsistency is uncomfortable; it produces anxiety. A quantity of discrepant information is merely input for a computer, but for a person it can be very disturbing. And this is more than a matter of "taking it all in." The complexity, inconsistency, and even "acceptability" of information are all distressing in their own right.[11] Emotion and learning influence each other in other ways too. Emotional arousal is beneficial in some circumstances. It draws attention to important problems and motivates hard work to solve them. Yet great anxiety can be distracting.[12] Mood also alters the way people gather and use information: those in a good mood pay greater attention to "positive" information and those in a bad mood, to "negative" information.[13] And emotion leads to certain characteristic errors in decision making. Happy people, for example, tend to make decisions faster, based on less information, and with greater tolerance for risk than do neutral individuals.[14]

When the stakes are high, as is often the case in the policy-making groups on which this book focuses, the relationship between emotion and information is even harder to ignore. For the reasons just given, some of which will be considered in greater detail in chapter 2, leaders are rarely indifferent to information. Sometimes they are well aware that the problems they face need closer scrutiny. At other times, they are equally sure that further discussion and debate is intolerable. For some leaders (and in some settings), learning more about a particular problem is a burden rather than a benefit. Certain types of leaders do not benefit from a smorgasbord of advice, should not endeavor to receive it, and will suffer if it is thrust upon them. Others, precisely as

Janis argues, do benefit (and can avoid costly mistakes if they get the right information).

It is entirely appropriate, then, for leaders to concern themselves with the organization of their staff.[15] Some adopt very complex staff systems designed to filter information at many different levels and through many different channels. Other place themselves at the center of the flow of information. And still others attempt to remove themselves altogether, as much as possible, from the flow of deliberations, preferring to delegate problems to their subordinates. Some prefer harmony among their associates. Others encourage friction in the belief that a little competition among subordinates promotes a more honest exchange of views. Yet despite the obviously great differences in the way leaders prefer to arrange their advisors, scholarship on group decision making tends to offer the same prescriptive advice: it is better to have more information rather than less and more opinions rather than fewer.

This book develops and tests a different claim. It argues that while some leaders thrive on diversity of opinion, others are immobilized by it. Some leaders should seek out many different perspectives on a problem, from a wide range of associates, just as Janis insists. But others must "ration" their attention. The latter sort of decision maker thrives in a carefully managed, hierarchical setting in which cohesion rather than discord is the norm. While this second type of leader may seem especially in need of devil's advocates, exposure to dissent can rapidly become too much of a good thing. Clearly, not all leaders actually employ the same decision style or use advisors in the same way. This book cautions them against trying to do so.

Chapter 2 explains in greater detail why policymakers differ in their capacity to use advice. It considers the appropriate management of advisory staffs for different kinds of leaders and concludes with a theory of group dynamics that predicts whether or not leaders are likely to learn from their advisors when making important decisions. Chapter 3 presents a more detailed picture of differences in leadership style through a comparison of two U.S. presidents: Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan. Although these two presidents (and their presidencies) resembled each other in many respects, they differed markedly in their tolerance for complexity, conflict, and contradictory advice.

Chapter 4 explores four cases—two from each administration—in which these presidents clearly learned from their advisors. In each case, the president reversed a policy to which he was personally committed after being presented with evidence that the policy was unlikely to succeed. In each case, moreover, learning followed changes in the organization of the president's staff in a direction consistent with the predictions of the theory. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss cases in which these leaders *failed* to learn, despite mounting evidence of their policies' improvidence. On the occasions when Eisenhower failed to learn, discussed in chapter 5, his decision process closely resembled the pattern of *groupthink* described by Janis. When Reagan was most unable to learn seemingly apparent lessons (chapter 6), the problem was not too much cohesion among advisors but rather too little—a situation that might be described as *deadlock*.

DOES LEADERSHIP REALLY MATTER?

Studying leaders and advisors is moot if one believes that individual leaders are not so important. It scarcely seems possible to understand modern India without a proper appreciation of Gandhi's influence, France without reference to Napoleon and de Gaulle, or Germany without understanding the roles of Bismarck and Hitler. But Louis XIV's famous dictum—*l'état, c'est moi*—overstates even a king's power. And three centuries later, despite his proclamation that "the buck stops here," Harry Truman was well aware that the buck also stopped at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Many prominent political scientists thus believe that it is a waste of time to study political leadership, preferring to focus instead on the political institutions within which leaders and followers alike must operate. As one former president of the American Political Science Association (APSA) put it, "an institutionalist approach does not deny the relevance of individual psychology but treats it as marginal in the context of the tremendous historical forces lodged in the laws, traditions, and commitments of institution."[16] From such a perspective, even when leaders do make a difference, they affect political outcomes only in unique and idiosyncratic ways that cannot form a solid basis for theorizing.[17]

Stephen Skowronek argues, to take but one example, that U.S. presidents are constrained by cycles in what he calls "political time."[18] Some presidents ride the crest of a new political wave, sweeping away much of the established institutional order that preceded them. Others consolidate and preside over the new order as caretakers. And still others must witness the decline and dissolution of the institutional patterns to which they have grown accustomed, preparing the way for yet another cycle in political time. In short, ruling coalitions form and prosper, consolidate their power and persevere for a certain period of time, and eventually weaken and die as they become outmoded. Whereas Bert Lance alone sufficed to bring President Carter's popularity rating to new lows, President Reagan survived a series of ethics scandals with his popularity intact. Skowronek's work offers a simple, institutional explanation for their differing political fortunes. Carter and Reagan simply held office, he would argue, at different points in the cycle of political time: Carter at the end of a dying coalition and Reagan at the head of a new one. Institutional arguments are good at explaining such patterns.

By the same token, however, they do not account well for abrupt changes in political patterns, such as Ronald Reagan's sudden inability to manage the Iran-Contra scandal after weathering so many others. Ad hoc explanations are certainly possible, but nothing in Skowronek's institutional theory suggests that such a popular president would suddenly have such difficulties. While institutional arguments may be able to account for gradual change, the "tremendous historical forces" to which APSA President Theodore Lowi alluded do not generally work rapidly or abruptly. Institutionalism is thus rarely useful for explaining important policy shifts or sharp breaks with the past.[19] To explain change, we must look to individuals rather than to their institutional roles. The perceptions and decision-making procedures of political leaders (and followers) connect institutional pressures to specific political outcomes. Even institutionalists thus need to know which institutional constraints a politician finds salient. And institutionalists must recognize that leaders may, over time, change their assessments of the constraints they face. In short, they may learn. Learning is particularly important when a single individual possesses sufficient power or influence to alter political outcomes decisively. This condition is not unusual even in international politics, as the historical contributions of Ronald Reagan,

Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and Saddam Hussein show. The lessons that each of these men learned (or failed to learn) from history mattered to a great many people.[20]

<div align="center">WHAT IS LEARNING?</div>

It is a simple matter to insist that it is important for political leaders to learn the lessons of history, but much more difficult to specify exactly what *learning* is. Like the old saying about pornography, most students of political decision making believe they know learning when they see it. Generally, they have found it unnecessary to be more precise than the "ordinary language" meaning of the term.[21] When Janis writes that groupthink leads to "a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment," one might readily conclude that groupthink results, in other words, in a general failure to learn.[22] Yet nowhere in his book on groupthink does Janis deem it essential to devote more attention to explaining exactly what learning, mental efficiency, reality testing, or moral judgment are. And in a compelling discussion of the Fashoda crisis and the Cuban missile crisis as "learning experiences," to take another example, Richard Ned Lebow associates learning with reassessing existing beliefs and dispelling "dangerous illusions," but he does not dwell further on how to define it.[23]

In this book, I will also adopt an ordinary language definition of learning. Even in conventional usage, however, *learning* can mean two very different things. One common meaning is *to gain knowledge about, or familiarity with, something through experience*. This is the way most cognitive psychologists use the term (though, to be sure, psychologists disagree among themselves about exact definitions).[24] In this definition, learning is acquiring information that one did not previously possess. The information may turn out to be incomplete or faulty, but one can be said to learn whenever the *process* of acquiring information occurs. Yet *learning* is often used in a second, more substantive way. In this second usage, *to learn* is a synonym for *to know*. When parents say, for example, that their child has "learned a lesson," they mean much more than that the child was exposed to new information. They are vouching for the correctness of what the child has learned.[25] In this case, it would be nonsensical to say, "she learned a valuable lesson, but she was wrong." Definitions of

learning can thus be either procedural (the first kind of learning) or evaluative (the second).[26]

I will resist the temptation to *evaluate* the decisions of the presidents on which this book focuses. To a certain extent, history has already performed this task, apparently vindicating certain of their decisions and condemning others. But this book's purpose is not to enter into essentially unresolvable political or moral debates over their choices. What *can* be determined is whether or not these two leaders gathered and used the information and advice that was at their disposal. It is merely an assumption that doing so would have improved (and in some cases, did improve) their decision making.

To assess learning, this book seeks answers to two questions. First, to what degree do leaders gather diverse information and advice? To the extent that leaders get more advice from more perspectives, they can tentatively be said to learn. Unfortunately, commissioning studies of a problem may be more an effort at public relations than a sincere attempt to learn. And leaders might consult their potential adversaries only to marshall their support (or defuse their opposition) rather than to discover the reasons for their opposition. Merely acquiring knowledge, therefore, does not in itself constitute proof of learning. One must also ask whether leaders use this information to reassess their policy options, even when doing so might challenge cherished assumptions about the world. Clearly, questioning one's basic assumptions is harder than merely adapting to changing conditions. The former is what some students of policymaking refer to as "fundamental" learning. Both adaptation and "fundamental" learning are important skills for policymakers.[27]

Answers to these questions promise no precise, quantifiable indicators of learning. Although such measures may seem desirable, they would only be misleading in practice. It is impossible to say, for example, whether a leader who reads ten policy papers has learned twice as much as one who reads only five. It is more important to know whether the documentary record indicates that a leader found information and advice to be valuable or thought-provoking, regardless of whether the advice was contained in the first or tenth study. As a practical matter, another indicator of learning is a change in policy. In an effort to establish a "baseline" for learning in the Eisenhower and Reagan administrations, chapter 4 will thus pay special attention to the reasons for changes in

policy and to whether leaders (or their subordinates) attribute these changes to information they acquired in the course of their policy deliberations.

CONCLUSION

There are larger issues in the study of high-level decision making that this book will not address. It will not ask, as many others have, whether the policy-making process is better characterized by essentially rational (i.e., economic) models or by the theories of cognitive or motivational psychology. It walks a middle road in this debate out of the conviction that economists and psychologists alike can agree that learning is valuable and that both leaders and their advisors have something to do with it. Nor, as already noted, do the following chapters make any effort to decide whether or not Eisenhower and Reagan learned the "right" lessons from history. The reader may draw his or her own conclusions.

This book will argue, however, that not every method of deliberating over important policy problems is equally fruitful. Some arrangements are more conducive to learning than others. Moreover, not every leader benefits from the same sort of staff arrangement. Students of policymaking would thus be wise to heed the advice that a famous turn-of-the-century medical researcher, William Osler, gave to his colleagues. He admonished them to study "not only what sort of disease the patient has, but also what sort of patient has the disease."[28] Considerable research on political and economic decision making has focused on the various alleged diseases (mental errors, emotional biases, etc.) that afflict policymakers. Paying a little attention to these individuals, and not only to their cognitive "diseases," promises to yield a more realistic and useful explanation of when leaders are likely to learn from their advisors.