

Process Learning in Foreign Policy: From the Bay of Pigs to the Berlin Crisis

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DONALD TRUMP ASSUMED THE U.S. PRESIDENCY in January 2017 with no government experience—a record unique among modern presidents. Observers on the right and left noted with particular alarm his lack of national security credentials and apparent disinterest in educating himself about international relations during the 2016 campaign.¹ Only five days after taking office, Trump faced his first major national security decision: whether to approve a special operations raid against an al Qaeda target in Yemen.² After reviewing the plan over dinner with senior military and political advisers, Trump authorized the operation—with ultimately fatal results. One U.S. Navy SEAL died in the

¹See, for example, Zeke Miller, “Donald Trump Stumbles on Foreign Policy Knowledge in New Interview,” *Time*, 3 September 2015, accessed at <http://time.com/4022603/2016-election-foreign-affairs-international-relations-donald-trump-republican-nomination/>, 29 September 2019; and Heather Haddon and Janet Hook, “Donald Trump Flunks Foreign-Policy Quiz, Says He’ll Learn on the Job,” *Wall Street Journal*, 3 September 2015, accessed at <https://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/09/03/donald-trump-flunks-foreign-policy-test-says-hell-learn-on-the-job/>, 29 September 2019.

²Eric Schmitt and David Sanger, “Raid in Yemen: Risky From the Start and Costly in the End,” *New York Times*, 1 February 2017, accessed at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/01/world/middleeast/donald-trump-yemen-commando-raid-questions.html?_r=1, 29 September 2019.

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raid, the press reported civilian casualties of “at least 15 women and children,” and the target was neither killed nor captured.³ This high-profile misstep by a new and inexperienced Commander in Chief highlighted an enduring question for scholars: under what conditions do leaders learn from foreign policy failures?⁴

Studies tend to approach this question through the lens of policy learning: the ability of political leaders to extract substantive lessons from history as well as from their personal experiences of foreign policy successes and failures.⁵ Although this element of learning is critically important, it is also exceedingly difficult to measure. Consider, for example, the “lessons of Korea”: in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War, the lesson seemed to be “no more Koreas”—but by the 1990s, senior members of the George H.W. Bush administration viewed the Korean War as a model military intervention.⁶ What is more, just as policymakers’ notions of lessons learned change over time, so, too, does the judgment of scholars, as revisionism continually challenges the apparent lessons of history. Consensus on the causes of the United States’ failure in Vietnam, for instance, remains elusive.

An exclusive focus on policy learning has resulted in the neglect of an equally consequential form of learning in international relations: “process learning.” Process learning assesses learning internal to the national security decision-making process, independent of the substantive content of policy choices and their outcomes. In developing and applying the concept for a new type of learning, this article draws on recent scholarship in organizational and administrative studies, as well as the political science/international relations literature on policymaking, to blend the study of decision-making processes with that of organizational learning. Although successful policy creation does

³Ayesha Rascoe, “U.S. Military Probing More Possible Civilian Deaths in Yemen Raid,” Reuters, 2 February 2017, accessed at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-commando-idUSKBN15G5RX>, 29 September 2019.

⁴A number of popular outlets published pieces during the first 100 days of Trump’s presidency seeking to assess whether he was learning from mistakes. See Julie Smith and Loren DeJonge Schulman, “Bannon’s Demotion Means the Trump Team Is Learning—Even If Trump Isn’t,” *Foreign Policy*, 6 April 2017, accessed at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/06/bannons-demotion-means-the-trump-team-is-learning-even-if-trump-isnt/>, 29 September 2019; and David Rothkopf, “Can Trump Learn?,” *Foreign Policy*, 5 April 2017, accessed at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/05/can-trump-learn-from-his-mistakes-steve-bannon-nsc-mcmaster/>, 29 September 2019.

⁵Jack S. Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” *International Organization* 48 (Spring 1994): 279–312; and James B. Steinberg, “History, Policymaking, and the Balkans: Lessons Imported and Lessons Learned,” in Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 237–252.

⁶Richard Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 116–117, 139–140; and Rebecca Lissner, “Grand Strategic Crucibles: The Lasting Effects of Military Intervention on State Strategy” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2016), chap. 5.

not always produce successful foreign policy outcomes, good process makes desirable outcomes substantially more likely.⁷ Good process can thus constitute the difference between crisis management and escalation and, ultimately, between peace and war. In the first section, the article elaborates on the process learning framework and situates it within the literature on policy and organizational learning.

Then, the article demonstrates the value of the process learning framework by applying it to a comparative case study of national security decision-making in the first year of the John F. Kennedy (JFK) administration. The process learning framework structures the comparison of JFK's decision-making in the lead-up to the Bay of Pigs invasion and the subsequent decision-making process during the Berlin crisis. Using extensive archival material from the JFK Presidential Library, the case studies show that process learning did indeed occur in response to the Bay of Pigs fiasco. While scholars typically compare the Bay of Pigs with the Cuban missile crisis, evaluating the Berlin crisis provides earlier and more direct evidence that the Kennedy administration assimilated lessons from its April 1961 failure in Cuba. This finding substantiates the proposition that presidents can learn from foreign policy failures—and that the concept of process learning can illuminate previously unappreciated elements of that learning.⁸

The article then turns to the conditions that may increase the likelihood of learning. Although testing the effects of different organizational conditions is beyond the scope of this article, it draws inductively on the empirics presented in the previous section, as well as deductively from recent work in international relations, political psychology, and organizational sciences, to suggest three factors that influence whether learning takes place after failure: organizational characteristics, attributes of the failure, and presidential cognitive complexity. Even as these conditions may make learning more likely, however, each one introduces political and/or efficacy trade-offs. In identifying these trade-offs, the article highlights

⁷Gregory M. Herek, Irving L. Janis, and Paul Huth, "Decision Making during International Crises: Is Quality of Process Related to Outcome?," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31 (June 1987): 203–226; and Mark Schafer and Scott Crichlow, "The Process-Outcome Connection in Foreign Policy Decision Making: A Quantitative Study Building on Groupthink," *International Studies Quarterly* 46 (March 2002): 45–68.

⁸For example, using a policy learning framework, Etheredge concludes that the Kennedy administration learned little from the Bay of Pigs failure: Lloyd Etheredge, *Can Governments Learn?* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1985), chap. 3.

challenges faced by decision makers as well as fruitful pathways for future research.

CAN PRESIDENTS LEARN?

Scholarship is generally pessimistic about the possibility of learning in international relations.⁹ This skepticism reflects mixed empirical support for policy learning—that is, the translation of experience into new beliefs about the substantive dimensions of international politics, such as the conditions under which certain tools of statecraft, whether foreign aid or military force, will be effective in achieving desired political outcomes, or the intentions of foreign allies and adversaries. Yet in focusing exclusively on policy learning, scholars have neglected a distinct but equally important form of learning: process learning.

By isolating the concept of process learning and applying it to the study of U.S. foreign policy, this article proposes a new way of assessing learning in international politics—one that enhances scholars' understanding of an important facet of foreign policy behavior. Evaluating process as distinct from policy outcomes is an analytical strategy most closely associated with the international relations scholar Alexander George. According to George, "process theory focuses on how to structure and manage the policymaking process to increase the likelihood of producing more effective policies."¹⁰ This approach has methodological advantages: unlike studies of policy learning, focusing on the foreign policy decision-making process isolates the effects of learning and decreases noise from exogenous factors, such as structural changes in the international system. Measuring procedural changes is also a promising means of assessing the effects of presidents' on-the-job learning—an important area of study given recent findings regarding the importance of leaders' experience to decision-making.¹¹

⁹For those who believe that decision makers learn, see Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition? The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973–1996* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); George Breslauer and Philip Tetlock, *Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); Janice Gross Stein, "Political Learning by Doing: Gorbachev as Uncommitted Thinker and Motivated Learner," *International Organization* 48 (Spring 1994): 155–183; and Richard Ned Lebow, "The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism," *International Organization* 48 (Spring 1994): 249–277. For skeptics, see Sarah Elizabeth Mendelson, *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Philip Tetlock et al., eds., *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 255–354.

¹⁰Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993), 20.

¹¹Although Saunders does not address on-the-job learning, she identifies it as a promising area of future study. Elizabeth N. Saunders, "No Substitute for Experience: Presidents, Advisers, and Information in

Moreover, process learning is substantively quite significant in the high-stakes realm of foreign policy decision-making: while good process does not ensure desired outcomes, poor process increases the likelihood of unsuccessful policies.

PROCESS LEARNING

To develop the concept of process learning, this article leverages the organizational model of learning by evaluating the institutional and cultural norms and practices that produce leaders' foreign policy decisions. Viewing the American presidency from an organizational perspective is well established in presidential studies. As political psychologists Margaret Hermann and Thomas Preston argue, "The presidency has become an organization or advisory system. In effect, as in an organization, the president's staff extends his capabilities by increasing his 'available attention, knowledge, and expertise' and by coordinating the behavior of the other units involved in making and implementing foreign policy."¹² Therefore, I take the presidency—defined broadly to include the president as well as his close advisers—as the unit of observation in this study.

Process learning is a form of experiential learning—that is, "a change of beliefs (or the degree of confidence in one's beliefs) or the development of new beliefs, skills, or procedures as a result of the observation and interpretation of experience"—though it is not the only one.¹³ In international relations, learning may also entail changes in beliefs about how the world works or about the intentions and capabilities of other states. Process learning contrasts with this policy learning approach, however, by highlighting the procedural, rather than the substantive, dimensions of foreign policy decision-making.

Process learning, like organization learning, is therefore defined by lasting changes in an entity's "range of potential behaviors,"

Group Decision Making," *International Organization* 71 (April 2017): S219–S247, at 242. On leaders' experience, see Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); and Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization* 68 (Summer 2014): 527–559.

¹²Margaret G. Hermann and Thomas Preston, "Presidents, Advisers, and Foreign Policy: The Effect of Leadership Style on Executive Arrangements," *Political Psychology* 15 (March 1994): 75–96, at 76; the quotation refers to M.S. Feldman, "Organization Theory and the Study of the Presidency" (paper presented to the Institute for Public Policy Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1990).

¹³Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy," 283.

including beliefs, habits, and practices.¹⁴ Evidence of process learning manifests as changes in formal and informal organizational routines. Formal routines include decision-making procedures, rules, conventions, and strategies—such as the formation of organizational bodies, their standards of membership and inclusion, methods of evaluating evidence, and rules for making decisions. Informal routines are the “structure of beliefs, frameworks, paradigms, codes, cultures, and knowledge that buttress, elaborate and contradict the formal routines.”¹⁵ Although effectiveness is not always considered a prerequisite for learning, this article defines process learning as an intentional increase in the effectiveness of an organization’s decision-making process, measured according to widely accepted criteria. While these criteria do not translate into precise prescriptions for institutional design, they nevertheless provide an objective standard for evaluating the effectiveness of decision-making processes. What is more, they represent a significant improvement over prior attempts to measure governmental learning, such as the political scientist Lloyd Etheredge’s approach, which focuses on policy learning and relies on highly subjective evaluation of policy-maker “intelligence” as well as judgments regarding the success of policy outcomes.¹⁶

Assessing the quality of decision-making processes is a subject of particular interest to leaders of any organization, whether in the public or the private sector.¹⁷ In addition to the aforementioned organizational learning literature, corporate leaders and scholars of business administration have identified best practices for decision-making. An effective decision-making process is one that guards against individual cognitive biases and perverse group dynamics.¹⁸ According to the McKinsey Global Survey, “satisfactory outcomes are associated with less bias, thanks to robust debate, an objective assessment of facts, and a realistic assessment

¹⁴Linda Argote, “Organizational Learning Research: Past, Present and Future,” *Management Learning* 42 (June 2011): 439–446, at 440; Linda Argote and Paul Ingram, “Knowledge Transfer: A Basis for Competitive Advantage in Firms,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 82 (May 2000): 150–169; and James P. Walsh and Gerardo Rivera Ungson, “Organizational Memory,” *Academy of Management Review* 16 (January 1991): 57–91.

¹⁵Barbara Levitt and James G. March, “Organizational Learning,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 14 (1988): 319–338.

¹⁶Etheredge, *Can Governments Learn?*, chap. 3; and Lloyd Etheredge and James Short, “Thinking about Government Learning,” *Journal of Management Studies* 20 (January 1983): 41–58.

¹⁷For a review of the literature, see Cass Sunstein and Reid Hastie, *Wiser: Getting Beyond Groupthink to Make Groups Smarter* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2015).

¹⁸Saunders, “No Substitute for Experience”; and Alexander L. George, “The Case for Multiple Advocacy in Making Foreign Policy,” *American Political Science Review* 66 (September 1972): 751–785.

of corporate capabilities.”¹⁹ To simplify an extensive literature, this article isolates three general attributes of high-quality decision-making processes: information sharing, avoiding premature consensus, and considering implementation. The absence of these features, in turn, characterizes poor decision-making processes.

Information Sharing

One requirement for high-quality decision-making is the availability of information related to the policy problem at hand, and then the employment of that information for analysis and diagnosis.²⁰ Information fails to circulate sufficiently when “informational signals” are crossed, either because a group does not harvest information held only by peripheral members or because it unwittingly privileges “common knowledge” (which is to say, information shared by all group members).²¹ While groups have the potential to produce higher-quality decisions than individuals, failure to share information short-circuits the benefits of group deliberation and can actually amplify individual errors.²² By the same token, policymakers must acknowledge when information is unavailable or unknowable and realistically assess the costs and benefits of various policy options despite inevitable uncertainty.²³

Avoiding Premature Consensus

Beyond the availability of information, the character of group deliberation matters a great deal. Most important is the avoidance of premature consensus, whether on account of group dynamics or because a leader makes his or her preference known at a time or in a manner that stifles debate. This criterion reflects major findings of the business and organizational studies literature, which go beyond the classic theory of groupthink.²⁴ At the individual level, an effective process requires that members of a group feel empowered to voice their ideas, including controversial ones. Reputational pressures can “lead people to silence themselves or change their views in order to avoid some

¹⁹McKinsey & Company, “Flaws in Strategic Decision Making: McKinsey Global Survey Results,” January 2009, accessed at <http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/flaws-in-strategic-decision-making-mckinsey-global-survey-results>, 29 September 2019.

²⁰McKinsey & Company, “Flaws in Strategic Decision Making.”

²¹Sunstein and Hastie, *Wiser*, chaps. 4–5.

²²Sunstein and Hastie, *Wiser*, chap. 2.

²³Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980), 10.

²⁴Irving Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

penalty.”²⁵ Fear of opprobrium by superiors can be a major source of this type of self-censorship²⁶; indeed, as the management scholar Ethan Burris argues, “managerial beliefs and behaviors play a large role in developing a climate of silence or voice.”²⁷ Pressure toward conformity is especially acute in new groups, which “lack stable norm, role, and status structures”—though even mature groups often fail to “outgrow” conformity patterns.²⁸ At the group level, avoiding early consensus corrects for several pathological tendencies: the tendency of groups to amplify, rather than correct, the errors of their members; the tendency toward cascade effects in which the opinions of those who speak first are repeated and reified by subsequent contributors; and the focus on commonly shared information rather than specialized knowledge.²⁹

Considering Implementation

Implementation is a critical element of effective decision-making.³⁰ A good process should accurately assess the resources required to implement policies under consideration; it should also formulate a framework for assessing the success or failure of a policy over time. Resourcing is frequently given short shrift in group deliberations: noted cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky found that groups often fall prey to planning fallacies that cause vast underestimates of the resources required to complete projects.³¹ Moreover, even well-selected and well-resourced strategies can nevertheless fail on account of changing external circumstances or unanticipated second- and third-order effects. Therefore, high-quality processes should answer the question “how and when will we know if this approach is working?” and, ideally, pre-determine metrics and milestones for assessing progress.

²⁵Cass R. Sunstein and Reid Hastie, “Making Dumb Groups Smarter,” *Harvard Business Review* 92 (December 2014): 90–98.

²⁶McKinsey & Company, “Flaws in Strategic Decision Making.”

²⁷Ethan R. Burris, “The Risks and Rewards of Speaking up: Managerial Responses to Employee Voice,” *Academy of Management Journal* 55 (August 2012): 851–875.

²⁸The persistence of conformity pressures in established groups suggests teleological accounts of stages of organizational development miss an important piece of the puzzle. Eric Stern, “Probing the Plausibility of Newgroup Syndrome: Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs,” in Paul ‘t Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius, eds., *Beyond Groupthink: Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policymaking* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 153–190.

²⁹Sunstein and Hastie, “Making Dumb Groups Smarter.”

³⁰McKinsey & Company, “Flaws in Strategic Decision Making.”

³¹Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Intuitive Prediction: Biases and Corrective Procedures,” in Amos Tversky, Daniel Kahneman, and Paul Slovic, eds., *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 414–421.

Measuring Process Learning

An effective decision-making process should index highly on each of these dimensions. For the purposes of measuring process learning, however, improvement along any one dimension, or multiple dimensions, would constitute process learning. Such change need not be dramatic, but it should be substantively significant, and there must be evidence of intentionality to qualify as learning. In the context of the post-World War II American national security state, process learning is most likely to manifest in the following:

- Presidential management style—for example, the president’s role in the policymaking process, the formality of the decision-making process, the president’s preferred means of processing information, and his or her willingness to receive “bad news.”
- The organization and structure of small-group decision-making around the president—for example, protocols for policy planning and policy implementation, briefing responsibilities, deliberative routines, and the criteria for selection, inclusion, and exclusion of group members.
- The role and structure of the National Security Council (NSC)—for example, its composition, formal and informal participants, frequency of meetings, related subordinate or informal bodies, protocols for information circulation, and substantive agenda.

Using these metrics, the next section demonstrates the theoretical and empirical importance of evaluating process learning in a foreign policy context.

FINDING SUCCESS IN FAILURE IN JFK’S FIRST YEAR

To establish the plausibility of foreign policy process learning as a variable of interest to international relations scholars and analysts, this article conducts a comparative case study of the foreign policy decision-making that resulted in authorization of the Bay of Pigs invasion, as contrasted with the Kennedy administration’s subsequent policymaking process during the Berlin crisis. This method reflects agreement in the literature on foreign policy learning that small-*n* studies using process tracing are particularly well suited to examining the subtleties of the learning process.³² From a theoretical and methodological standpoint, these case studies are intended as a plausibility probe.³³

³²Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy.”

³³Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 75.

The Kennedy administration's foreign policy process became more effective after the Bay of Pigs, as demonstrated by decision-making during the period of the Berlin crisis that culminated in the Berlin Wall's construction. The modifications in decision-making routines and behaviors described in the case studies were not the product of automatic adaptation by Kennedy's advisers to variation in the international or domestic environment.³⁴ Rather, they reflect changes in their implicit and explicit beliefs about how foreign policy planning and execution should be conducted: whereas they entered the White House convinced that Dwight D. Eisenhower's procedures were overly stilted and hemmed in by "red tape,"³⁵ the Bay of Pigs experience resulted in new beliefs about the necessity of more rigorous and formalized procedures to produce high-quality decision-making.

The case comparison reflects several selection criteria. First, it controls for the individuals involved—the president and his primary advisers remain constant across the two cases.³⁶ Second, it controls for the confounding effect of different geopolitical contexts: both cases occurred during JFK's first six months in office and prior to the Cuban missile crisis, an episode often seen as a turning point in the Cold War. Third, both Cuba and Berlin were viewed by the Kennedy administration as central to the U.S.-Soviet rivalry: these were the two major Cold War flashpoints most likely to spark nuclear war between Moscow and Washington. Although Berlin loomed particularly large because of its strategic value in a Europe divided by the Iron Curtain, Cuba's proximity to the continental United States made its turn toward communism immediately alarming for American policymakers.

Even so, the comparison is necessarily imperfect. Most importantly, the Berlin crisis was instigated by Soviet threats and the Kennedy administration was in a reactive position, whereas the Bay of Pigs represented a proactive move that aimed to prevent Cuba from becoming a Soviet foothold in the Western Hemisphere. While this difference may account for some variation between the decision-making processes, it cannot explain the across-the-board procedural

³⁴This automatic view of social adaptation animates the "newgroup syndrome" account of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. See Stern, "Probing the Plausibility of Newgroup Syndrome."

³⁵These views reflected the findings of Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson's review of the National Security Act of 1947, which influenced transition planning in the Kennedy administration: Henry Jackson, ed., *The National Security Council: Jackson Subcommittee Papers on Policy-Making at the Presidential Level* (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1965).

³⁶By contrast, Etheredge compares cases across administrations, focusing his analytical attention on the bureaucracy rather than the presidency: Etheredge, *Can Governments Learn?*

changes described here. If anything, the reactive nature of the Berlin situation should have militated against an effective process because of the need to respond to external pressures—but the empirical record indicates otherwise. To substantiate these claims, the following sections present a historical narrative of the policy process that produced the Bay of Pigs plan, identify the lessons learned from that failure, and present a historical narrative of the policy process for Berlin.

“MAYBE WE’LL LEARN SOMETHING FROM IT”

The Bay of Pigs invasion was an utter disaster. The paramilitary invasion failed after only four days, and Fidel Castro emerged stronger and more adversarial to American interests. A canonical case of foreign policy failure, scholars have extensively studied the causes of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, attributing it to the perils of presidential transitions,³⁷ pathological small-group decision-making,³⁸ and overzealous intelligence services.³⁹ Therefore, the chronological narrative of operational decision-making is well known.⁴⁰ Generally overlooked, however, are the effects of this “perfect failure”—particularly its effect on subsequent foreign policy decision-making processes in JFK’s White House. Yet the potentially salutary effects of learning from the Bay of Pigs was readily evident to participants in that traumatic historical episode. As the president himself remarked, “We got a big kick in the leg—and we deserved it. But maybe we’ll learn something from it.”⁴¹ Did the Kennedy administration learn from the Bay of Pigs? The case studies indicate that the answer is yes—as a result of implicit and explicit lessons drawn from the Cuba experience,

³⁷Rebecca R. Friedman, “Crisis Management at the Dead Center: The 1960–1961 Presidential Transition and the Bay of Pigs Fiasco,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41 (June 2011): 307–333; and Christopher Andrew, *For the President’s Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 257–266.

³⁸Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, chap. 2; and Stern, “Probing the Plausibility of Newgroup Syndrome.” For a critical reevaluation of Janis’s account, see Roderick M. Kramer, “Revisiting the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam Decisions 25 Years Later: How Well Has the Groupthink Hypothesis Stood the Test of Time?,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 73 (February 1998): 236–271.

³⁹John Prados, *Presidents’ Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II through the Persian Gulf* (Chicago, IL: I.R. Dee, 1996), 236–271; Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 189–92, 197–204. Gleijeses jointly attributes failure to the newness of the Kennedy administration and passion of the operation’s CIA advocates: Piero Gleijeses, “Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27 (February 1995): 1–42.

⁴⁰The canonical examination can be found in Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

⁴¹Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 290.

decision-making improved along all three process learning dimensions during the Berlin crisis.⁴²

Information Control

Although strict information control would naturally characterize decision-making related to covert action, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) exerted an extraordinary degree of authority over information during the Bay of Pigs planning process. Not only did the CIA oversee the circulation of planning details to the interagency, it even limited the president's access to such information. Unlike the rest of the national security bureaucracy, the CIA briefed JFK independently; consequently, CIA director Allen Dulles and his deputy Richard Bissell molded Kennedy's understanding of the operation. The CIA went so far as to collect briefing materials at the end of every meeting, limiting the White House's access to the details of operational planning. As Secretary of State Dean Rusk later reflected, "The result was that those of us who were involved did not have a precise understanding of what was to happen."⁴³

Two additional factors exacerbated the effect of this compartmentalization of information. First, the group privileged information possessed by its two of its highest-status members, Dulles and Bissell. Kennedy and his civilian advisers deferred to the CIA throughout the planning process.⁴⁴ Dulles and Bissell were both legendary figures: Eisenhower holdovers, they were credited with overseeing the 1954 covert overthrow of the Guatemalan regime and development of the U-2 spy plane, respectively. Bissell further enhanced his standing by cultivating close ties to Kennedy and his team.⁴⁵ To make matters worse, planning and advocacy roles were undifferentiated. The CIA—specifically, the Directorate of Plans, as the nominally coequal Directorate of Intelligence was left in the dark about the operation—pushed its plan, defended its bureaucratic turf, and no other group was empowered or obligated to

⁴²Explicit learning predominantly took the form of postmortem memos among top advisers, as well as the investigations of the Taylor Committee, which Kennedy appointed to probe the Bay of Pigs failure. Jack Pfeiffer, "The Taylor Committee Investigation of the Bay of Pigs," 9 November 1984, accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/bop-vol4.pdf>, 29 September 2019.

⁴³Kenneth Thompson, Frederick Mosher, and Louis Joseph Halle, eds., *Papers on Presidential Transitions and Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 109.

⁴⁴Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 250; and Richard Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 167.

⁴⁵Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership from FDR to Carter* (New York: Wiley, 1980), 223–224; and James Blight and Peter Kornbluh, *Politics of Illusion: The Bay of Pigs Invasion Reexamined* (Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner, 1998), 43–44.

conduct a rigorous independent evaluation.⁴⁶ Bissell admitted, “The Agency was so committed to the Cuban invasion plan and so sure of it at this juncture that Dulles and I were edged into the role of advocates.”⁴⁷ Yet nobody else was empowered with sufficient information to forcefully dissent.

Second, processes that might have surfaced new information or forced information sharing broke down in the first few months of the Kennedy administration. Upon taking office, Kennedy dismantled much of the national security decision-making structure established by Eisenhower; the New Frontiersmen saw Eisenhower’s elaborate layers of deliberation as too slow and cumbersome and decided to eliminate “red tape.” Kennedy dismantled the covert action oversight mechanism, known as the 5412 Committee, as well as Eisenhower’s NSC Planning Board and Operations Coordinating Board.⁴⁸ This reorganization, enacted by an inexperienced team, resulted in haphazard accumulation and analysis of information about the Bay of Pigs plans. As National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy later reflected, “We were just freshmen, and as freshmen you don’t go in and say, ‘Dammit, Mr. President, you’re not getting the right kind of information.’”⁴⁹ The White House lacked even basic background on the plan’s history.⁵⁰ According to Bissell, there was a damaging “loss of information as reports worked their way through the bureaucracy.”⁵¹ Moreover, the cloistered and ad hoc deliberative processes excluded senior administration officials with relevant expertise. Most damningly, Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon “knew all about the Bay of Pigs” planning from his service in the Eisenhower administration, but he was never asked.⁵²

⁴⁶Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 222; Andrew, *For the President’s Eyes Only*, 257; and Blight and Kornbluh, *Politics of Illusion*, 44.

⁴⁷ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 157.

⁴⁸Prados, *Presidents’ Secret Wars*, 472; John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 411; and William Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 151–155.

⁴⁹ Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 198.

⁵⁰Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking In Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 144–145.

⁵¹Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 197.

⁵²William Bundy, quoted in Thompson, Mosher, and Halle, *Papers on Presidential Transitions and Foreign Policy*, 94–95. As acting secretary of state, Dillon had briefed Eisenhower on planning for covert action against Castro: “Memorandum for the President on the Subject of Cuba,” by Acting Secretary of State Douglas Dillon, 2 December 1960, Eisenhower, Dwight D.: Papers as President, 1953–61 (Ann Whitman File), Dulles-Herter Series, Box 13, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.

Conclusions Reached Prematurely

Compounding the effects of poor information sharing was a deliberative process that allowed conclusions to be reached prematurely and without adequate vetting. The informal management style Kennedy established in the early days of his presidency created a decision-making process centered on JFK himself. But Kennedy lacked the confidence to dramatically reorient the CIA's planning, and his White House advisers were not empowered to speak out. The result was inadequate vetting of options and insufficient probing of the assumptions underpinning the Bay of Pigs operational concept.

Presidential management style. When Kennedy jettisoned Eisenhower's formal processes, the new president created a structure that relied on the ability of the Commander in Chief and his staff to wrangle the bureaucracy and vet foreign policy options. This informal style was highly conducive to biased group decision-making. Indeed, reflecting on the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy scolded himself: "If someone comes in to tell me this or that about the minimum wage bill, I have no hesitation in overruling them. But you always assume that the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals."⁵³ What is more, Kennedy inherited the ongoing covert anti-Castro program from Eisenhower, who strongly endorsed it when the two men met during the transition. The imprimatur of a two-term president and five-star general was too much for JFK to ignore in the early days of his presidency.

Disempowered White House advisers. Throughout the Bay of Pigs planning process, Kennedy's advisers shared the belief that strongly contradicting the president was both inappropriate and disadvantageous to their own status within the fledgling administration. This view was common to both advocates and detractors of the plan, as many of the central participants noted in memoirs and oral histories. In some cases, as with the secretary of state, this hesitancy entailed high-level officials failing to convey their strength of conviction against the operation. As Rusk later wrote, "As a Colonel of Infantry I 'knew' that the thin Cuban Brigade in Central America would have no chance of success. But in the spring of 1961 I was not a Colonel of Infantry, I was the Secretary of State, and I did not intrude myself in discussions with President Kennedy into the military aspects of the problem."⁵⁴ In other cases, as with Bissell,

⁵³Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 258.

⁵⁴Thompson, Mosher, and Halle, *Papers on Presidential Transitions and Foreign Policy*, 108.

it meant accepting modifications that significantly decreased the likelihood of operational success.⁵⁵

Participants also shared reticence about the proper way to act toward each other. As a result of late appointments, many top national security officials “met each other at the entranceway ten days before the inauguration.”⁵⁶ Moreover, there was a vast experience differential between Eisenhower administration holdovers and Kennedy’s staff. As Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. recalled, “Here we were, a bunch of ex-college professors sitting around faced by this panoply of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Allen Dulles, a legendary figure, and Dick Bissell, the man who invented and promoted the U-2. It was rather difficult even to open one’s mouth sometimes, in the face of these guys.”⁵⁷

Poor vetting. Alongside information compartmentalization, the dysfunctional decision-making process centered on an inexperienced president without confident advisers resulted in poor vetting of the options presented to Kennedy. The failure to evaluate core assumptions doomed the operation. Most damningly, in response to pressure from the president to enhance plausible deniability, the CIA changed the proposed landing site for the anti-Castro brigade.⁵⁸ The impact of the decision to land at the Bay of Pigs, instead of the original site, was substantial. Bissell conceded: the “operation became more operationally difficult, mass uprisings less likely, and it mooted the possibility of retreat into [guerilla warfare in the] the Escambray [Mountains].”⁵⁹ Unfortunately, the CIA did not map a route for the envisioned guerrilla retreat from the new landing site. According to Bissell, “if we had, it would have been obvious that there was no easy way to escape to the Escambray from the Bay of Pigs.”⁶⁰ Insofar as the military was asked to weigh in, it did so only halfheartedly. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) did not treat the CIA’s operation with the attention a military plan would have received.⁶¹ According to Bundy, “The military certainly wanted the

⁵⁵Taylor Report Memorandum No. 3: Conclusions of the Cuban Study Group,” 13 June 1961, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Reference Copy, Box 35 A, John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL).

⁵⁶Thompson, Mosher, and Halle, *Papers on Presidential Transitions and Foreign Policy*, 80–81.

⁵⁷Blight and Kornbluh, *Politics of Illusion*, 43–44.

⁵⁸“Revised Cuban Operation,” prepared by the CIA, 15 March 1961, reprinted in Blight and Kornbluh, *Politics of Illusion*, 227–234.

⁵⁹Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 172.

⁶⁰Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 172.

⁶¹Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 89–92.

operation to proceed; I do not think that this was because of a deep conviction that this was the best possible plan.”⁶²

Implementation Neglected

The likelihood of the Bay of Pigs operation’s success was implicated by all of the missteps described earlier. In particular, two fallacies guided the Kennedy team’s approach to implementation. First, they believed the operation would take on a life of its own, as the initial landing at the Bay of Pigs would catalyze a widespread uprising on the island. Not only did the use of the Bay of Pigs as a landing site negate the guerilla model envisioned by CIA planners, but there was serious reason to doubt that the anti-Castro cause enjoyed sufficient support among Cubans. The CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence and State Department Cuba experts believed Castro remained very popular among Cubans—yet neither were consulted on the Bay of Pigs plan.⁶³ What is more, Castro was tipped off by rumors of a coming U.S.-backed invasion and rounded up dissidents throughout Cuba prior to the operation—a possibility that should have been, but was not, anticipated.⁶⁴

Second, Kennedy never seriously considered what the United States could or would do in case of failure. In addition to the expectation of success, the inattention to contingency planning reflected the assumption that Washington could credibly disavow any responsibility if the invasion foundered. The CIA allowed Kennedy to believe that Washington could maintain plausible deniability of its involvement—something the president insisted on throughout the planning process—but prominent media reports of CIA training of anti-Castro guerrillas in Guatemala belied this assurance.⁶⁵ Indeed, by the time of the invasion, the highly classified plan was something of an open secret in Cuban circles in Miami—further calling into question the tightly controlled handling of information within the government.⁶⁶

⁶²“Letter to General Maxwell Taylor, from McGeorge Bundy,” 4 May 1961, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Reference Copy, Box 35 A, JFKL.

⁶³Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 222; Andrew, *For the President’s Eyes Only*, 257; and Blight and Kornbluh, *Politics of Illusion*, 44.

⁶⁴Gleijeses, “Ships in the Night.”

⁶⁵“Anti-Castro Units Trained to Fight at Florida Bases,” *New York Times*, 7 April 1961, accessed at <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1385910-anti-castro-units-trained-to-fight-at-florida.html>, 29 September 2019.

⁶⁶David W. Dunlap, “The CIA Readies a Cuban Invasion, and The Times Blinks,” *New York Times*, 26 December 2014, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/times-insider/2014/12/26/1961-the-c-i-a-readies-a-cuban-invasion-and-the-times-blinks/>, 29 September 2019.

As a result, the Kennedy team did not pay anywhere near sufficient attention to the requirements for effective implementation of the Cuba policy that hinged on the success of the Bay of Pigs invasion. The cover story crafted to obscure U.S. sponsorship of the invasion quickly collapsed under scrutiny. When the operation began to fall apart, Kennedy was caught flat-footed, and he vacillated on the appropriate American response. Despite the president's repeated insistence upon a less spectacular concept, CIA planners nevertheless assumed the president would ultimately authorize the full package of air strikes necessary to destroy Castro's air force—and perhaps even more dramatic measures.⁶⁷ Yet once the operation was underway, JFK denied appeals for expanded American intervention, effectively dooming the exile brigade to failure.⁶⁸

EXPLICIT LEARNING FROM THE BAY OF PIGS FAILURE

In the aftermath of the “perfect failure” at the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy and his White House team sought to understand why the operation had gone so terribly awry. The Kennedy White House took several important steps to understand its mistakes: first, the president signaled his personal interest in learning from the Bay of Pigs; second, the president empowered a committee to formally investigate the fiasco's causes; and, third, the president's closest advisers consciously reflected on the lessons of the Bay of Pigs. Through these measures, the Kennedy White House derived some explicit lessons—in particular, the need for more systematic review of policy options at levels subordinate to the president, better mechanisms of information circulation, and differentiation of policy advocacy and evaluation roles. These lessons resulted in intentional changes to formal and informal routines related to the foreign policy decision-making process, especially—though not exclusively—those centered on the White House national security staff.

After the Cuban rout, there was no doubt that the Bay of Pigs operation had ended in abject failure. Shortly after the invasion, on 20 April 1961, the president proclaimed, “There are from this sobering episode useful lessons for us all to learn.”⁶⁹ The next day, in remarks to the press, JFK ruefully noted that “victory has 100 fathers and defeat is an orphan”

⁶⁷Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 72; and Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story*, 270.

⁶⁸Central Intelligence Agency, *Official History of the Bay of Pigs Operation*, vol. 1, *Air Operations, March 1960–April 1961*, 174–405, accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/bop-vol1-part1.pdf>; and Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 250–53.

⁶⁹John F. Kennedy, “Address Before the American Society of Newspaper Editors,” 20 April 1961, accessed at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8076>, 29 September 2019.

before going on to assume personal culpability as “the responsible officer of the Government.”⁷⁰ Through these statements, the president signaled his willingness to acknowledge mistakes made under his leadership and publicly committed himself to learning from them.

As a bureaucratic corollary to this presidential *mea culpa*, Kennedy enlisted then-retired General Maxwell Taylor to lead a special committee charged with investigating “the lessons which can be learned from recent events in Cuba.”⁷¹ Joined by Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Chief of Naval Operations Arleigh Burke, and Dulles, the Taylor Committee had access to the central participants in, as well as relevant records of, Bay of Pigs planning. Taylor delivered his interim findings to the president on 11 May 1961; ultimately, after 21 meetings, witness testimony, and document review, the committee transmitted its final report on 13 June. That report documented the consensus on the administration’s failings:

The Executive branch of the Government was not organizationally prepared to cope with this kind of paramilitary operation. There was no single authority short of the President capable of coordinating the actions of the CIA, state, defense, and USIA [United States Information Agency]. Top level direction was given through ad hoc meetings of senior officials without consideration of operational plans in writing and with no arrangement for recording conclusions and decisions reached.⁷²

It also found that the JCS had errantly given the impression of approval of the Bay of Pigs invasion plan when actually it had preferred an earlier iteration.⁷³ Its recommendations implicated the oversight process for covert action as well as the national security decision-making process more broadly.

Moreover, as witnesses in this investigation, the committee called on JFK’s closest White House advisers to reflect on the defective decision-making process that had unfolded over the prior four months. Bundy,

⁷⁰John F. Kennedy, “The President’s News Conference,” 21 April 1961, accessed at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8077>, 29 September 2019.

⁷¹“Letter to General Maxwell Taylor, from John F. Kennedy,” 22 April 1961, in Central Intelligence Agency, *Official History of the Bay of Pigs Operation*, vol. 4, *The Taylor Committee Investigation of the Bay of Pigs*, 11, accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/bop-vol4.pdf>, 29 September 2019. Although the CIA also launched a formal investigation, it was marred by bureaucratic infighting: Central Intelligence Agency, *Official History of the Bay of Pigs Operation*, vol., *CIA’s Internal Investigation of the Bay of Pigs*, 1–4, accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/C01254908.pdf>, 29 September 2019.

⁷²“Taylor Report Memorandum No. 2: Immediate Causes of Failure of the Operation ZAPATA-SUMMARY,” 13 June 1961, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Reference Copy, Box 35 A, JFKL.

⁷³“Taylor Report Memorandum No. 3.”

for example, penned a postmortem to Kennedy and testified to the Taylor Committee interpreting the failure and suggesting responses. He wrote, “In the future, any such plan should have much more careful preparation and evaluation, and the President should have intelligence presented to him by others than advocates. In the future also the President should have an explicit White House review, so that he can have an independent judgment, especially on points of inter-departmental responsibility.”⁷⁴

On the basis of their own analyses, as well as the findings of the Taylor report, Kennedy and his advisers approached the national security structure in a significantly different manner after the Bay of Pigs. According to Schlesinger, an empowered NSC was a “lesson” of the Bay of Pigs:

Bundy was moved over from the Executive Office Building to the West Wing of the White House and given new authority as a coordinator of security affairs within the White House. He instituted regular morning meetings for his National Security Council staff, to which he invited other members of the White House group involved in foreign affairs—Goodwin, Dugan, and [Schlesinger]—as well as representatives from State, Defense, CIA, and USIA.⁷⁵

Bundy also set up the first White House Situation Room in FDR’s former wartime map room.⁷⁶ After the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy resurrected the President’s Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities, which had been active under Eisenhower but ended when Kennedy assumed office. The renamed Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board was charged with oversight of foreign intelligence and covert operations. It met for the first time on 15 May 1961.⁷⁷ In addition, responsibility for paramilitary activity shifted from the CIA to the Pentagon under the centralized authority of Taylor, when he subsequently became chairman of the JCS.

Beyond these formal changes, informal changes also followed from the Cuba failure. Through the Bay of Pigs experience, Kennedy learned which of his advisers he could best rely on for guidance;

⁷⁴“Letter to General Maxwell Taylor, from McGeorge Bundy,” 4 May 1961, regarding testimony to Taylor Committee, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Reference Copy, Box 35 A, JFKL.

⁷⁵Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 297.

⁷⁶Andrew, *For the President’s Eyes Only*, 266.

⁷⁷J. Patrick Coyne, “Future Undertakings of the Board,” 15 May 1961, accessed at <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-094-017.aspx>, 29 September 2019.

Kennedy subsequently brought speechwriters Theodore Sorensen and Dick Goodwin, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Attorney General (and presidential brother) Bobby Kennedy, Dillon, and Taylor into his closest deliberative circle, and ultimately he replaced Dulles and Bissell. As Schlesinger noted, Kennedy “turned from the people he had inherited in government to the people he had brought in himself—the people he had worked with longest, knew best and trusted most.”⁷⁸ Moreover, after the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy resolved to “make sure he had the unfettered and confidential advice of his own people.”⁷⁹ The effects of Kennedy’s learning from the Bay of Pigs were already evident by the summer of 1961, when he again faced a national security crisis, this time over Berlin.

BERLIN WALL CRISIS

While the second Berlin crisis officially began in 1958, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev froze U.S.-Soviet negotiations in mid-1960 after the Soviet Union shot down an American U-2 spy plane. Tension over Berlin remained in a lull through the first months of the Kennedy administration and did not heat up until June 1961—after the Bay of Pigs invasion. In fact, Kennedy saw Khrushchev’s renewed aggressiveness in the spring of 1961 as a reaction to the April misadventure at the Bay of Pigs, conjecturing that failure there had made Kennedy seem “inexperienced and [like I] have no guts.”⁸⁰

A defining moment of the Cold War, scholars have examined the Berlin crisis extensively,⁸¹ but never through the lens of process learning.⁸² Instead, scholars interested in the evolution of foreign policy

⁷⁸Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 296.

⁷⁹Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 297.

⁸⁰Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960–1963* (New York: Edward Burlingame Books, 1991), 224–225.

⁸¹Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*; Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), chaps. 7–9; Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), chap. 5; Frederick Kempe, *Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth* (New York: Penguin, 2011); John Gearson and Kori Schake, *The Berlin Wall Crisis: Perspectives on Cold War Alliances* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Norman Gelb, *The Berlin Wall: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and a Showdown in the Heart of Europe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Jack Schick, *The Berlin Crisis: 1958–1962* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); and Hope Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁸²Insofar as existing work has examined learning, it has focused on policy learning: Khrushchev’s assessment of Kennedy’s lack of resolve as a result of his failure at the Bay of Pigs, or the crisis’ stabilizing effect on the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in Europe: Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 162–163, 176–177; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 145;

decision-making under Kennedy skip ahead to the Cuban missile crisis as a procedural counterpoint to the Bay of Pigs.⁸³ Yet the period of acute tension that culminated in the Berlin Wall's construction in August 1961 was the first major foreign crisis the Kennedy administration faced after the Cuba fiasco. Though the United States and the Soviet Union did not come as close to war as they did in October 1962, the stakes were equally high: the issue of Germany's division was the geopolitical center of the Cold War. As such, the Berlin crisis is the best test of whether and how JFK learned from the Bay of Pigs. Moreover, by demonstrating that Kennedy did in fact learn from the Bay of Pigs, as exemplified by the decision-making process during the Berlin crisis, this article sheds new light on why Kennedy performed so well the following year, during those fateful 13 days.

OVERVIEW OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Kennedy assumed office with a strong command of Berlin policy as well as a firm commitment to defending the city. Khrushchev immediately tested this commitment, however, at their first summit meeting in Vienna in June 1961.⁸⁴ The German situation, Khrushchev told Kennedy, was intolerable. Khrushchev sought American cooperation on a peace treaty resolving Berlin's status, but he was prepared to proceed unilaterally if negotiations did not produce an East-West agreement within six months. Kennedy rejoined that the United States had an obligation, right, and commitment to continued presence in West Berlin.⁸⁵ Khrushchev was unyielding, however, and at the end of the conference, he told Kennedy that the treaty decision was irrevocable. "It will be a cold winter," Kennedy responded.

By June, Kennedy had already commissioned reports on Berlin from the State Department, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson (a consultant to Kennedy's NSC), and the military. Acheson's hawkish position initially dominated discussion. Acheson authoritatively predicted a renewal of tensions over Berlin within the year and insisted "decisions and preparations to meet this crisis should be made at the earliest possible

and Ernest R. May, "America's Berlin: Heart of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* 77 (July/August 1998): 148–160.

⁸³Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 132; Patrick J. Haney, *Organizing for Foreign Policy Crises: Presidents, Advisers, and the Management of Decision Making* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 2; Kurt M. Campbell and James B. Steinberg, *Difficult Transitions: Foreign Policy Troubles at the Outset of Presidential Power* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 98; and Etheredge, *Can Governments Learn?*, 82–87.

⁸⁴Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 343.

⁸⁵Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 371.

date.” Per Bundy, Acheson’s “major conclusion ... [was] that we must be ready to use [conventional] force in substantial amounts.” In his final 28 June 1961 report to the NSC, which equated victory in Berlin with victory in the Cold War, Acheson averred, “It is not too much to say that the whole position of the United States is in the balance.”⁸⁶ He saw Berlin as a “test of wills”;⁸⁷ the challenge for Kennedy was convincing Khrushchev that nuclear war was possible and imminent—though Acheson conceded that even with adequate preparations, “there is ... a substantial possibility that war might result.”⁸⁸

The Acheson report generated considerable discussion within the Kennedy administration. As Schlesinger remembered, the report “helped fix the debate ... in terms of a clear cut choice between negotiation and a military showdown.”⁸⁹ Indeed, several of Kennedy’s advisers feared that Acheson’s paper was shaping policy “along restrictive and potentially dangerous lines.”⁹⁰ Schlesinger, in particular, questioned Acheson’s approach in a 7 July memo to the president drafted in consultation with State Department legal adviser Abram Chayes and outside NSC consultant Henry Kissinger:

1. Accepting for the moment the premises of the Acheson paper, what issues are avoided in that paper?
2. Are the Acheson premises adequate? What other premises ought to be brought into the Berlin discussion? What administrative means can help bring about a full exploration of alternative premises and a full consideration of the political issues?⁹¹

Schlesinger’s critical questions, which resonated with Kennedy, explicitly reflected the lessons he had learned from the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Indeed, on the same day, Schlesinger wrote another memo to the president, arguing that “the present stages of planning for Berlin are

⁸⁶“Report by Dean Acheson,” 28 June 1961, in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961–1963, XIV* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988–2001), 138–159.

⁸⁷“Memorandum for the President,” 3 April 1961, by Dean Acheson, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Box 81, JFKL. See also Ted Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 583–584; and Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 380–382.

⁸⁸“Report by Dean Acheson,” 142.

⁸⁹Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 385.

⁹⁰Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 385–386.

⁹¹“Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant to President Kennedy,” 7 July 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963, XIV*, 173–176; and Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 386–388.

ominously reminiscent of comparable stages in the planning for Cuba.”⁹² Though seeming to come “as the Cuban plan did, as if with the full endorsement of the various departments involved,” Schlesinger emphasized the insufficiency of these endorsements of the Acheson plan—the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, for example, had “considerable doubt.” Moreover, as with Cuba, there had been inadequate debate about alternatives to Acheson’s strategy. In particular, Acheson’s paper had limited discussions to military and operational details, rather than broad consideration of political issues. Finally, Schlesinger argued that presidential action on Berlin was “being gradually defined, to put it crudely, as —Are you chicken or not?”

Consistent with Schlesinger’s agitation for a more carefully considered political strategy, Kennedy deferred a decision on Berlin until 19 July. In the interim, the NSC met twice and Bundy commissioned options memos from the State, Defense, and Treasury Departments, as well as the CIA. Kennedy’s top advisers, meeting as the Berlin Steering Group, gathered to debate options in front of the president. No consensus emerged, as Vice President Lyndon Johnson wanted to “proceed with all possible speed with a substantial reinforcement of US forces”; McNamara and Rusk preferred to “proceed with all measures not requiring the declaration of a national emergency”; and Taylor wanted to “proceed with a declaration of national emergency and all preparation except a call up of reserves.”⁹³

Finally, at the 19 July NSC meeting, Kennedy made his ultimate decision. Kennedy called for a substantial conventional force build up, aiming to “give the US the capability of deploying as many as six additional divisions and supporting air units to Europe at any time after January 1, 1962.”⁹⁴ The president requested congressional authority to pursue the buildup program, to triple draft calls, and to call up reserves, as well as \$3.2 billion in additional defense appropriations to fund it.⁹⁵ Finally, the president called for negotiations with allies “toward their parallel participation in such a higher level of military readiness.”⁹⁶ Kennedy’s 19 July decisions resemble the Acheson report but feature

⁹²“Memorandum for the President,” 7 July 1961, by Arthur Schlesinger, Papers of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., White House Files, Classified Subjects Files, WH-35, JFKL.

⁹³“Memorandum of Discussion in the National Security Council,” 13 July 1961, by McGeorge Bundy, *FRUS, 1961–1963, XIV*, 192–194.

⁹⁴“National Security Action Memorandum No. 61,” 24 July 1961, by McGeorge Bundy, *FRUS, 1961–1963, XIV*, 225–226.

⁹⁵This brought Kennedy’s total increase in military spending since inauguration to \$6 billion. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 257.

⁹⁶Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 226.

three key divergences: no declaration of national emergency, nearly \$1 billion less in military spending, and the expectation that negotiations would be initiated in the near future. The president presented his decision to the nation in a 25 July radio address.⁹⁷

APPLYING THE LEARNING FRAMEWORK TO BERLIN

The foreign policy decision-making process that resulted in Kennedy's Berlin decision reflected lessons learned from the Bay of Pigs experience. In particular, it demonstrates process learning along each of the framework's three dimensions: greater information sharing, conscious avoidance of premature conclusions, and additional attention to implementation. While some of these changes likely reflected the magnitude of the Berlin crisis, they also indicate across-the-board process learning. Acknowledging the stakes of the crisis, the Bay of Pigs experience highlighted for Kennedy and his team where their decision-making process had to improve.

Information Sharing

Greater information sharing is to be expected in this case because, unlike the Bay of Pigs, Berlin policy did not center on covert action. As such, this dimension of improvement represents the weakest evidence of learning. Nonetheless, the historical record shows Kennedy, his cabinet, and his staff had access to complete information about existing Berlin policy. The State Department provided a chronology of all key decisions related to Berlin since the beginning of the crisis in 1958, as well as a comprehensive assessment of "The Berlin Problem in 1961."⁹⁸ Although there was highly classified information involved in Berlin planning, the president and his closest advisers—not a separate agency like the CIA—determined who "needed to know." With diplomatic and military aspects of the crisis inextricably linked, the State Department was privy to Defense Department plans. Less compartmentalization allowed for a fusion of operational and political considerations never achieved in Bay of Pigs planning—most critically, an interagency coordinating group for Berlin policy that met weekly in advance of NSC meetings. Additionally, Kennedy's control over information meant that he could bring extra-governmental resources to bear as well. Acheson had turned down var-

⁹⁷Text of the President's Report to the Nation on the Berlin Crisis," 25 July 1961, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Box 81, JFKL.

⁹⁸"The Berlin Problem in 1961," 10 January 1961, by Martin Hillenbrand, Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Countries, Box 81, JFKL.

ious posts in the administration but came on as a private consultant, with high-level clearance, to undertake the Berlin and NATO strategy reviews; Kissinger, then on the Harvard faculty, worked with Schlesinger to critique the Acheson plan; and a paper by another Harvard professor, Thomas Schelling, on “nuclear strategy in the Berlin Crisis” reached and made a “deep impression” on the president.⁹⁹

Avoiding Premature Conclusions

Presidential management style. At the beginning of his administration, Kennedy created a national security decision-making structure that was informal and relied on the president for guidance. Disputes were brought to the president himself, and he wanted direct involvement in policy planning. Kennedy maintained this collegial decision-making style after the Bay of Pigs—Kennedy’s advisers continued to voice disagreements and carry on debates in front of the president, though they were mediated through more formal mechanisms.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, in George’s terms, the administration shifted from dysfunctional-collegial to textbook-collegial management style.¹⁰¹

Kennedy was more active and engaged in Berlin meetings, preventing the decision-making malfunction known as cascade effects, in which early positions taken by high-status group members overshadow subsequent discussion. Take, for example, Bundy’s summary of a NSC meeting on 19 July: “Acheson initially appeared to believe that the proposed course of action was not sufficiently energetic or definite, but the president kept the discussion going until it became clear that Secretary McNamara’s flexible time-table would in fact permit a sufficiently rapid deployment in the event of deepening crisis, to satisfy Mr. Acheson.”¹⁰² Indeed, Kennedy insisted on serious information search during Berlin planning. From the State Department, Kennedy knew the complete history of American policy toward Berlin, the status of contingency planning, and the range of negotiating positions available. From Acheson, Kennedy heard criticism of existing policy and considered a policy framework based on a different set of assumptions. From meetings with European leaders, Kennedy became well aware of the various opinions and concerns of Western

⁹⁹Thomas Schelling, “Nuclear Strategy in the Berlin Crisis,” 5 July 1961, Document 56, *FRUS, 1961–1963, XIV*, accessed at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d56>, 29 September 2019.

¹⁰⁰For example, “Memorandum of Discussion in the National Security Council,” 13 July 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963, XIV*, pp. 192–194.

¹⁰¹For a typology of management styles and description of the collegial model, see George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*, 149–165.

¹⁰²“Memorandum of Minutes of the National Security Council Meeting,” 19 July 1961, by Bundy, *FRUS, 1961–1963, XIV*, 220.

allies. Moreover, in the case of Berlin planning, despite his predecessor's credibility and expertise, Kennedy initiated a review of Eisenhower-era plans that were inconsistent with his strategic objectives. Throughout the Berlin decision-making process, Kennedy controlled the pace of policy-making and was not overwhelmed by institutional or policy inertia.

White House voices empowered. In contrast to the Bay of Pigs, during Berlin deliberations, Kennedy's aides were more apt to offer dissenting opinions because they knew that the president wanted to hear them. Schlesinger identifies this as a key lesson of the Bay of Pigs: "The Bay of Pigs gave us license for the impolite inquiry and the rude comment."¹⁰³ They probed assumptions, contradicted each other, and pushed the president to make tough decisions. One indication of this was Schlesinger and Bundy's relentless attention to the assumptions implicit in Acheson's plan, as well as their dedication to highlighting "key clarifying questions" in memos.¹⁰⁴

Although intelligence and military leaders participated in the Berlin decision-making process, their roles—and the emphasis placed on their analyses—were diminished. The CIA's influence decreased greatly; even while Dulles and Bissell were still in office, they infrequently appear as participants in Berlin meetings. On the military side, McNamara assumed a larger role in representing the military's view to the president. Kennedy also replaced Lyman Lemnitzer with Taylor as chair of the JCS. Generally speaking, however, Kennedy lent less credence to military and intelligence analysis than he had in the Bay of Pigs planning. The most prominent hawkish voice was that of Acheson, a civilian outside of government.

In handling the Berlin crisis, Kennedy looked to personnel from the State Department, NSC, as well as extragovernmental consultants. Rusk enjoyed greater credibility with the president. Most notably, Kennedy displayed more confidence in his White House advisers. Kennedy included those he had long known and trusted, such as Sorensen, in foreign policy deliberations. Others, whom Kennedy knew less well prior to inauguration, such as Schlesinger and Goodwin, became trusted foreign policy advisers. Rather than growing dissatisfied with Bundy after the Bay of Pigs failure, Kennedy made him more central to presidential decision-making and the two shared close confidence. Indeed, Bundy's in-

¹⁰³ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 297.

¹⁰⁴ "Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Kennedy," 19 July 1961 SUBJECT: This Afternoon's Meeting, *FRUS, 1961-1963, XIV*, 218.

creased post-Bay of Pigs role became the archetype for the modern empowered national security adviser.¹⁰⁵

Options developed and vetted. By the time the Berlin crisis heated up after Vienna, Kennedy's NSC met with some frequency, and Kennedy had grown comfortable with formal interagency policy coordination. Whereas there were no NSC meetings on Cuba until after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy's NSC met to discuss Berlin three times in the two months during the crisis: on 29 June, 13 July, and 19 July.¹⁰⁶ Although not dispositive, the frequency of NSC meetings suggests the formalization of policy deliberations in this period. On many occasions, Bundy requested reports from the Departments of State, Defense, and Treasury, as well as the CIA in preparation for these meetings. The NSC was also the coordinating forum for the systematic consideration of alternative policy options—particularly Schlesinger's suggested alternatives to the Acheson plan. Kennedy's top advisers on Berlin, known as the Berlin Steering Group, met under the auspices of the NSC. Moreover, each of Kennedy's key decisions during the Berlin crisis were expressed through National Security Action Memoranda, which delineated the action desired, the actors to carry it out, deadlines, and follow-up mechanisms.

The Interdepartmental Coordinating Group on Berlin Contingency Planning complemented the Steering Group at the staff level. The interagency participation is apparent in the extensive memo traffic during the Berlin crisis at every classification level. Meetings had participants from all relevant agencies; the White House exerted the most control of the policymaking process. (Notably, in the wake of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy also established a similar group for Laos and Vietnam, indicating that these changes were specific to neither Berlin nor European issues more generally.) Taken as a whole the Berlin decision-making process reflected a deliberate effort to “[devise procedures] to make sure that alternatives are systematically brought to the surface and canvassed” from many different perspectives and levels of seniority—avoiding a bias in favor of information or views held by the president's most senior advisers.¹⁰⁷ Although Kennedy continued to use informal channels, the

¹⁰⁵Ivo H. Daalder and I.M. Destler, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisers and the Presidents They Served—From JFK to George W. Bush* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), chap. 2.

¹⁰⁶“Untitled List of NSC Meetings in 1961,” Papers of President Kennedy, National Security Files, Meetings & Memoranda, Box 313, JFKL.

¹⁰⁷“Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant to President Kennedy,” 7 July 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963, XIV, 173–176*; Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 386–388.

formal national security decision-making procedures structured the entire process.

Considering Implementation

Berlin policy planning attended carefully to questions of implementation. Kennedy's reevaluation of contingency plans was explicitly intended to ensure strategic objectives were clearly defined, and that resources matched these objectives. By defining the scope of American interests in Berlin, Kennedy created a framework for implementation—the reaction to the construction of the Berlin Wall was muted because Soviet attempts to restrict refugee flow between East and West Berlin had already been anticipated by contingency plans. As such, the wall did not require any alterations in implementing Kennedy's 19 July decision.

Even once policy goals were set, resourcing was a major subject of debate in the lead-up to Kennedy's final 19 July decision. Key administration figures discussed the extent of conventional reinforcements in Europe necessary to deter Soviet aggression and strengthen the U.S. negotiating position. These debates addressed force levels, as well as the amount of necessary supplemental defense appropriations, the extent of draft calls and reserve mobilization, and the advisability of declaring a national emergency. Kennedy's modifications to Acheson's proposal reflected his desire to calibrate means and ends—enough of a buildup to signal American resolve, but not so much as to provoke a backlash. Indeed, in defining a course of action, the Kennedy administration considered the likely reaction of a range of other actors—to include the East Germans, Soviets, Congress, public opinion, and American allies.

Comparing the Berlin and Cuba cases demonstrates improvement in the Kennedy administration's foreign policymaking process, while primary and secondary sources strongly suggest that these improvements were the intentional result of learning from the Bay of Pigs failure. Of the three dimensions of effectiveness, the most persuasive is changed decision-making routines that prevented the consolidation of premature consensus around a policy option until it had been comprehensively vetted. Moreover, formalization of the policy process, with an empowered White House at the center, reshaped all aspects of the deliberative process, to include information sharing and implementation issues. Greater information sharing and closer attention to implementation provide additional evidence for process learning, though external circumstances could also explain these differences: the Bay of Pigs' nature as a covert action in the case of information sharing, and the scale of the decision, as well as preexisting consultative mechanisms, in the case of

Berlin implementation. Taken as a whole, the case comparison presented here clearly establishes the plausibility of process learning as a variable that provides a new analytical lens for learning in international relations and warrants further study.

WHEN IS LEARNING MOST LIKELY?

In addition to establishing the plausibility and importance of process learning in foreign policy, this article proposes three conditions that may make learning most likely: characteristics of the organization in question, attributes of the failure, and presidential cognitive complexity. These conditions are derived inductively from the case study findings and deductively from recent work in international relations, political psychology, and organizational sciences. Although a president's cognitive complexity is a relatively fixed input—changing only between leaders or in the event of a major medical or psychological incident—the other two conditions face countervailing political pressures that militate against learning.¹⁰⁸ The discussion in this section highlights those trade-offs for policymakers while also charting a way forward for research on process learning.

Organizational Characteristics

Research in administrative science indicates that organizations learn better when members have shared relational and cognitive dimensions.¹⁰⁹ Organizational learning largely occurs in the minds of members; consequently, common relational and cognitive attributes increase the likelihood that individuals will interpret failures similarly. This factor is particularly important for explaining process learning because although presidents can unilaterally impose structural changes on the policymaking process, they have less control over informal routines and practices. Thus, for true process learning, the organizational ethos of foreign policymaking must change as a result of genuine agreement on the interpretation of failure by as many members as possible.

Despite the utility of a shared worldview in consolidating interpretations of failure, practical and political considerations make such unity difficult when it comes to U.S. national security decision-making. Military and civilian leaders tend to come from different backgrounds,

¹⁰⁸Rose McDermott, *Presidential Leadership, Illness, and Decision Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁹Relational dimensions include trust, norms, and identification; cognitive dimensions include shared codes, language, and narratives. See Janine Nahapiet and Sumantra Ghoshal, "Social Capital, Intellectual Capital, and the Organizational Advantage," *Academy of Management Review* 23 (April 1998): 242–266, at 252.

and hold systematically distinct perspectives on the appropriate use of military force.¹¹⁰ Even if shared relational and cognitive dimensions were possible, however, there is a limit to the desirability of monoculture in deliberative groups. Research continually affirms the value of diversity in fostering creativity and innovation in groups¹¹¹; indeed, rapid interpretive convergence among like-minded people can actually hinder effective assessment.¹¹² Thus, while shared cognitive dimensions may facilitate consensus and make learning easier, those same conditions constrain the degree of improvement such learning is likely to entail. The latest research on group decision-making begins to resolve this tension by focusing on the specific characteristics and practices of successful teams; by replicating their habits and backgrounds, governmental groups may be able to overcome the drawbacks of both excessive and insufficient diversity.¹¹³

Attributes of Failure

While many failures do not produce meaningful change in organizational behavior, certain types of failure increase the likelihood of learning. According to the political scientist Jack Levy, “The most likely learning triggers are failures that were either unexpected at the time or unpredictable in retrospect.”¹¹⁴ In particular, rapid and direct environmental feedback, time pressure, and failures that reflect organizational pathologies (rather than chance) make learning more likely.¹¹⁵ Moreover, in the American political system, foreign policy failures create domestic pressures to investigate the causes of failure and response—at least in appearance if not in fact.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰James Mattis and Kori Schake, *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2016); and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985).

¹¹¹Sunstein and Hastie, *Wiser*, 104–105.

¹¹²Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*. Tetlock’s work goes a step further in describing the optimal composition of groups for analytical tasks predicated on prediction: Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York: Random House, 2015).

¹¹³Michael Horowitz et al., “What Makes Foreign Policy Teams Tick: Explaining Variation in Group Performance at Geopolitical Forecasting,” *Journal of Politics* 81 (October 2019): 1388–1404.

¹¹⁴Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy.”

¹¹⁵Paul A. Sabatier, “Knowledge, Policy-Oriented Learning, and Policy Change: An Advocacy Coalition Framework,” *Science Communication* 8 (June 1987): 649–692; James G. March, Lee S. Sproull, and Michal Tamuz, “Learning from Samples of One or Fewer,” *Organization Science* 2 (February 1991): 1–13; and Christiana Weber and Ariane Antal, “The Role of Time in Organizational Learning,” in Meinolf Dierkes et al., eds., *Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 351–368.

¹¹⁶Jordan Tama, *Terrorism and National Security Reform: How Commissions Can Drive Change During Crises* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Even under optimal conditions, however, political pressures may also present barriers to learning. As Levy argues, “Important lessons are likely to be overlooked due to a lack of fit within prevailing organizational mind-sets or power structures. Political pressures for compromise may water down ‘lessons’ to a degree that greatly diminishes their potential value and insight.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, many scholars highlight the incentive for bureaucracies to cover up mistakes.¹¹⁸ Even when failures are concrete and vivid, they are apt to be dismissed as “one-offs.” Furthermore, the force of path dependence in highly institutionalized bureaucracies creates vast disincentives for organizational change.¹¹⁹ When lessons are difficult or costly to assimilate, politicians are apt to delay reforms—even at the risk of future failures.

Presidential Cognitive Complexity

A leader’s personality shapes his or her advisory process and, by extension, openness to foreign policy process learning.¹²⁰ In particular, a leader’s cognitive complexity is “generally associated with more sophisticated and better adaptive behavior, especially in ambiguous or confusing situations.”¹²¹ High-complexity individuals tend to be more open to environmental feedback, change beliefs more readily, and receive discrepant information more open-mindedly than those with lower cognitive complexity.¹²² They also tend to be more intelligent. Cognitively complex individuals are more likely to engage in psychological processes that increase the probability and quality of learning.¹²³ Moreover, leaders can create cultures that foster learning, including by encouraging their

¹¹⁷Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy”; and Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 217–319.

¹¹⁸Etheredge, *Can Governments Learn?*; George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*; Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*; Stern, “Probing the Plausibility of Newgroup Syndrome”; Graham Allison, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971); and Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹¹⁹James Mahoney, “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology,” *Theory and Society* 29 (August 2000): 507–548.

¹²⁰Thomas Preston, *The President and His Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Affairs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

¹²¹David G. Winter, “Assessing Leaders’ Personalities: A Historical Survey of Academic Research Studies,” in Jerold M. Post, ed., *The Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 27.

¹²²Stephen Benedict Dyson and Thomas Preston, “Individual Characteristics of Political Leaders and the Use of Analogy in Foreign Policy Decision Making,” *Political Psychology* 27 (April 2006): 265–288, at 267.

¹²³March, Sproull, and Tamuz, “Learning From Samples of One or Fewer”; and Dyson and Preston, “Individual Characteristics of Political Leaders.”

subordinates to express dissenting opinions.¹²⁴ Indeed, organizational researchers find that leaders that possess the attributes associated with cognitive complexity are more likely to be “transformational,” using their intellects to link individual and organizational learning.¹²⁵

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF LEARNING

The Kennedy administration’s reaction to the Bay of Pigs demonstrates process learning from foreign policy failure. The failure was clear and unambiguous; although a wide search for interpretations was permitted, organization members rapidly consolidated their interpretation of failure and the president was open to meaningful changes in response. Indeed, Kennedy’s high cognitive complexity, the unambiguous nature of the failure, and the still-malleable nature of routines so early in the administration created an organizational code particularly amenable to learning. The result was intentional improvement in organizational routines—that is, process learning—demonstrated soon after the Bay of Pigs by the administration’s conduct regarding Berlin. Unlike Bay of Pigs planning, a better-structured decision-making process with less information loss, more thorough vetting of options, and closer attention to implementation characterized the administration’s development of contingency plans for Berlin. Although the counterfactual is impossible to prove, the effectiveness of the Kennedy administration’s decisionmaking process likely contributed to a policy outcome that stabilized East-West tension over Berlin – and, by extension, a major Cold War flashpoint.

This finding belies the conventional wisdom that the Cuban missile crisis provided the first evidence that the administration learned from the Bay of Pigs. Furthermore, the findings presented here help explain the NSC Executive Committee’s (frequently referred to as “Excomm”) success as a deliberative body during the Cuban missile crisis—for example, the use of Robert Kennedy as a “devil’s advocate” to challenge premature consensus.¹²⁶ As the Cold War confrontation that brought Washington and Moscow closest to nuclear exchange, the Cuban missile crisis demonstrates the stakes of foreign policy process learning, for both scholars and policymakers: while

¹²⁴Bernard Bass, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* (New York: Free Press, 1985); Víctor J. García-Morales, Francisco Javier Lloréns-Montes, and Antonio J. Verdú-Jover, “The Effects of Transformational Leadership on Organizational Performance through Knowledge and Innovation,” *British Journal of Management* 19 (November 2008): 299–319; and Uri Bar-Joseph and Jack Levy, “Conscious Action and Intelligence Failure,” *Political Science Quarterly* 124 (Fall 2009): 461–488.

¹²⁵Uma Jogulu, “Leadership That Promotes Organizational Learning: Both Sides of the Coin,” *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal* 25 (June 2011): 11–14.

¹²⁶Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 268; and Sunstein and Hastie, *Wiser*, 116.

some failures cause only short-term embarrassment, others may entail the difference between peace and catastrophic war.

Yet Kennedy's learning from the Bay of Pigs does not indicate that all leaders can learn, nor does it indicate that learning is linear and consistently applied. It does, however, suggest that the process learning lens will reveal a greater frequency of learning than conventionally assumed and illuminate previously overlooked determinants of states' foreign policy behavior. Using this framework, future research can more rigorously test the effects of organizational characteristics, attributes of failures, and presidential cognitive complexity on the likelihood of learning from foreign policy failures. Such studies should also attend to questions of scope, which go beyond the data presented in this article: Under what conditions do presidents learn from foreign policy successes? Can presidents learn from others' failures? As other states adopt national security decision-making structures modeled after that of the United States, can we expect similar mechanisms of process learning?¹²⁷ Do domestic decision-making processes differ systematically from those designed for foreign policy?

As debate over the Trump presidency indicates, understanding presidential learning from foreign policy failures remains salient for scholars and practitioners alike. The president is predominant in matters of national security, all the more so in recent years, as the NSC staff has grown and taken on an increasingly operational role. What is more, presidents' influence over foreign policy is highest during times of crisis or major decisions about war and peace.¹²⁸ Improving the policy process, or failing to do so, can thus have critical implications at moments when ill-conceived decisions have the direst consequences.*

¹²⁷Jane Perlez, "New Chinese Panel Said to Oversee Domestic Security and Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, 13 November 2013, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/14/world/asia/national-security-committee-china.html>, 29 September 2019.

¹²⁸Andrew Bennett and Jonathan Monten, "Models of Crisis Decision Making and the 1990–91 Gulf War," *Security Studies* 19 (August 2010): 486–520.

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