



The OODA Who-sey What-sey? Lessons From Col. Boyd's OODA Loop

In my last post, I discussed how it's possible to make of habit of Situational Awareness. In this post, I'm going to examine the nexus between Situational Awareness and Training by discussing Col. John Boyd's OODA Loop and its implications for self defense. And for a mind-blowing finale, I'll explain how to tap the power of subconscious mind. So, buckle up peeps!

Col. John Boyd, USAF (1927-1997) was a legendary pilot, a student of armed conflict, and perhaps one of the greatest military strategists in contemporary times. During the Korean Conflict he noticed, despite flying inferior aircraft, the US maintained air superiority over our enemies. He sat out to establish why this was so. His study yielded a simple, but profound theory which became - and still is - the model for United States military training.

Col. Boyd noticed that conflict can be seen as a repeating series of time-competitive, Observation-Orientation-Decision-Action (OODA) cycles. The underlying concept is that, in any human conflict, time or opportunity neglected by one adversary can be exploited by the other. Without getting too far into the weeds, both parties to any conflict must go through their own OODA cycles - hence, time-competitive.

Col. Boyd understood the importance and advantages of relentlessly forcing one's adversary to deal with a rapid series of events in order to disorient and "get inside" the opponent's OODA cycle. Once "inside," time for the insider moves as it should, while the "enemy" is stuck in time. This is because the "enemy" is responding to events that are no longer relevant. You are now several moves ahead. Thus, the adversary who can consistently go through Boyd's Cycle faster than the other gains a tremendous advantage.

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My favorite, albeit fictional, illustration of Boyd's OODA Loop (Cycle) comes from the movie "The Patriot," starring Mel Gibson and Heath Ledger. The scene begins with Benjamin Martin's (Gibson) eldest son Gabriel (Ledger) being arrested by the British as a Colonial spy. It continues with Martin's next eldest son being murdered by a brutal British officer, Martin's home being torched, and his farmhands enslaved by the British.

So...how does Martin's OODA Loop unfold?

OBSERVATION: One son arrested, one son dead, home on fire, farmhands enslaved....SO. MUCH. ANGER!

ORIENTATION: The British column must traverse his land with which Martin is intimately familiar to transport his son to be hanged. Martin knows every square inch of the land, including where best to attack.

DECISION: Ambush a superior force of British soldiers with his two youngest boys. Sounds reasonable...right?

ACTION: Martin runs back into his flaming house to gather several flintlock rifles, a flintlock pistol, a HUGE knife, and one bad-ass tomahawk. He issues both his sons a rifle and high-tails it through the woods to the perfect strategic hillside overlooking the road where the British column will soon be passing. He positions his two sons with orders - on his signal - to shoot the officers first, then work their way down.

At the outset of the skirmish, Martin shoots the officer leading the parade. This creates a great deal of confusion among the ranks. The boys then begin shooting the other officers, creating even more confusion. Martin then runs from tree to tree where he has pre-positioned his other rifles, and begins shooting. This creates the illusion the British are being attacked by a large force. The British troops are effectively paralyzed by their own confusion. Of course, with every shot, the situation changed. So, Martin began the cycle over and over. He just went through each cycle much faster than the enemy, yielding a distinct advantage.

Having effectively gotten "inside the British soldiers' loop," Martin then rushes into the midst of the soldiers and begins to wreak havoc with his knife and tomahawk. In the end, the British column is wiped out...son saved.

You're probably thinking, "OMG, it's Just A Movie!" Yes, but it's illustrative...and, I really enjoyed it. Hang on, I'm getting to the point.

Back to the movie. What allowed Martin to gain the advantage? Naturally, our fictional hero has a fictitious back story: Though reluctant to join the colonial rebellion, Martin was a seasoned officer in the French-Indian war, and was well-known as a brilliant strategist. So, his actions in this situation were not so out of character.

Martin's seemingly brilliant split-second planning was, more likely, the result of years of training and experience....which brings us to the Central Lesson of Boyd's OODA Loop (You see how I did that?):

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A major key to time-compressed decision-making is to relegate as much as possible to the powerful subconscious mind, through realistic training.

This is where the proverbial rubber meets the road. As I mentioned earlier, Boyd's OODA Loop is the model for US Military Training. Our military are masters of realistic training. Our troops are continuously exposed to realistic force-on-force training. So, when they experience the real thing, there's no thinking...just action. They've already been there, done that, and got the TShirt. The appropriate Decision/ Action is hard-wired in their brain. Their "training just kicks in."

By now, you've probably connected the dots on the implications of Boyd's OODA Loop as it relates to personal defense. The Observation and Orientation steps roughly equate to Situational Awareness. In my last post, I described how you can make a habit of situational awareness, essentially relegating a significant portion to your subconscious mind. To an even greater extent, you must do the same with the Decision and Action steps.

So, what's the big deal about the subconscious mind? It's simple, really. Metaphorically, our conscious mind is a hand-held calculator (not even a scientific calculator), while our subconscious mind is a supercomputer. Our conscious mind handles one problem at a time, while our subconscious mind can multi-task.

In the context of Boyd's OODA Loop, the power of the subconscious mind rests in the ability to automatically and instantaneously make decisions and act upon them. The catch: the subconscious mind can only do the things we have previously trained it to do - much like programming a supercomputer.

The key to "programming" your subconscious mind is continuous, realistic training. You don't have to become a weekend warrior and go on maneuvers. Continue to develop the Habit of Situational Awareness. Get as much training from a professional trainer as you can afford. Develop a solid training schedule of dry-fire, visualization, and live-fire - and stick to it. Read as many books on the subject as possible. Get involved in practical pistol competitions at a local range. That's it...PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.

One Caviat: When practicing with a firearm, make sure you are performing drills correctly and safely. Have a knowledgeable shooter watch you - or film yourself - to ensure you observe the 3 NRA Rules of Safe Gun Handling at all times. Practice DOES NOT make perfect. PERFECT PRACTICE makes perfect.

With each training session, you will "program" your subconscious to respond appropriately to different situations. In time, your subconscious mind will form a "bridge" between the Observation and Orientation (Situational Awareness) and Decision and Action (Training) elements.

One more lesson from Boyd's OODA Loop: Although I used a movie to illustrate the OODA Loop, **This Ain't The Movies!** In a violent confrontation, **you will not rise to the occasion. You will default to the highest level of training you have mastered.** So, Train Hard and Train For Real Life.

Till next time, God Bless and Be Safe

-Rob