



by ML Cavanaugh

OODA's not a bad idea. It's a good one, applied poorly and too liberally. It's not as if faith in John Boyd's [Observe-Orient-Decide-Act](#) Loop is instantly fatal, more like a chronic illness that weakens the mind over time. It limits an actor to aim for speed and locks out other options beyond speed.

As a "[time-based theory of conflict](#)," in the words of Boyd's biographer, Robert Coram, the OODA Loop only gets you so far. Tactical speed is only one component in the larger success-seeking activity known as strategy.

Strategy is Not the Sum of its Tactical Parts

The problem is the inherent tactical focus of OODA. It's entirely about tactics, as William Lind, [writing](#) in 1980, acknowledged: "Working from his studies of air-to-air combat, Col.

Boyd has generalized a theory of conflict. Which both explains the essence of maneuver war seen historically and provides a basis for further development of maneuver tactics...The Boyd Theory enables us to understand what happens in maneuver warfare.”

Using early Cold War-era aerial dogfighting to generalize a theory of conflict seems a bit of a stretch. But let’s lean in to this idea, that winning on the battlefield is simply the sum of all tactical parts (i.e., X1 vs. Y1 + X2 vs. Y2 + X3 vs. Y3, etc.). But we know that’s not how war goes. Many tactically superior forces win head-to-head and then lose wars. Tactics don’t simply scale up to strategy. They are related games played at different levels. Both are important but they are not the same.

A single great teacher doesn’t tell you much about a national education system. One great salesperson can’t make an entire company. One great hitter doesn’t tell you everything about the health of a team, a league, or a sport. These are all related on some level, but distinct.

That’s not to say that OODA can’t have an impact. It might help, say, amateur basketball teams win by [creating chaos](#) through raw speed. It can have an impact there, where the rules and referees box the teams into certain behaviors.

To dive deeper, let’s apply Boyd’s logic. As he once put it, “If you want to understand something, take it to the extremes or examine its opposites.”

Let’s go to the extremes. Imagine the world’s fastest and smartest mosquito, able to out-fly anyone or anything. It wouldn’t matter much because it’s too small to make a difference in our world.

Now let’s scale up. Imagine a human being that can out-ODA anyone else. Again, an actual Army of One wouldn’t matter much no matter how fast or how talented. Perhaps tactically excellent, but strategically not all that impressive.

Let's scale up again. Imagine a country, an entire country that's nimble, agile, and doesn't have to wait for plodding persuasional politics to act.

We're in luck. There are such countries—North Korea can launch attacks at will, Russia often chooses to kill first and ask questions never, and Belarus demonstrated recently it can opt to skyjack a plane full of people when it wants.

These each represent the autocrat's advantage. Autocracies almost always have the first mover advantage. If that's the case, if North Korea can always out-OODA the West, they should be getting whatever they want whenever they want it, right?

Wrong.

Sure, time matters and speed sometimes kills. Speedy success can look appealing. But time and speed aren't the only things that matter. Other factors are very important, often more important.

Context Matters as Much or More Than Speed

Success has many different forms across several different contexts. Imagine someone that achieves business success in California (say, Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg). Then try to think of what it might take for a similar level of success in London, Mexico City, Russia or China.

Context matters. Overspeeding over and through a slower opponent doesn't always "win." Consider the Gulf War, famously 100-hours long. Coalition forces out-OODA'd the Iraqi defenders and really ripped through Saddam's army. Yet would anyone say overspeed was strategically decisive? No, not really, because a certain tactical activity is just one instrument in a much larger strategic symphony. And few if any would judge American and Western efforts in Iraq successful over the past three decades.

In its purest form, OODA is essentially an algorithm that guides you to always be faster than your opponent. But what about the second opponent behind you? (Ask Julius Caesar about this problem.) Or the emergent strategic response triggered by an actor's tactical victories—say, the alliance that Napoleon brought down on France, that upended his empire?

The Legend of Boyd, the Myth of OODA

It's strange that so many have placed so much faith in OODA. Isn't it? That a theory developed from aerial combat has kept hold of so many in an age when aerial combat has virtually vanished? There's no more dogfighting; this part of war's history has almost entirely shriveled up.

Boyd's OODA Loop, in this way, reminds me of the seventeenth-century Japanese swordsman Miyamoto Musahi. A learned, great tactician with a relatively simple philosophy of action. There seems to be a deep human urge to reach for another era's ideas. We want some ancient Yoda-like figure to bestow wisdom on us.

Imagine OODA came from baseball's Ted Williams, or an Olympic wrestling coach. It probably wouldn't have so much grip as having come from an amazing fighter pilot like Boyd. His quirks, his mannerisms, his other ideas and speeches, and the fact that he never really wrote much of anything that's provided this mostly empty vessel into which so many pour their need to hook-on to a Great Genius of ye olden days.

It seems the mystique of leaving nearly nothing written down has magnified Boyd's impact. His adherents' interpret what little there is like soothsayers reading bones. They typically claim Boyd's "misunderstood," just as Boyd [himself](#) often did. But the burden here falls on the proponent of the theory. If Boyd wanted to be understood clearly, he should have written clearly. That was his own bloody, cardinal red sin.

The Weakness of OODA: One-Speed-Fits-All is not a Recipe for Strategic Success

Boyd was a [brilliant guy](#), and OODA's tactically useful, but strategically limited. Use it wisely where applicable, and run away quickly when someone wants to wield it where it just won't work.

Lieutenant Colonel [ML Cavanaugh](#), PhD, is a senior fellow with the Modern War Institute at West Point, and writes a weekly newsletter at [StrategyNotes.co](#).

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)