



Photo Courtesy of Lucasfilm

By Joe Byerly

In the early 1970s, a young George Lucas had an idea to create a movie the likes of which no one had seen (or experienced) before. It would be a mix of science fiction and mythology. But there were problems. No one had tried to do anything like this before. The special effects technology didn't exist, and the filming technique he wanted for the dog fight scenes was still only a theory.

One of the biggest challenges Lucas faced was people questioning his sanity. As Brian Jay Jones highlighted in [George Lucas: A Life](#), many of those close to him didn't think he was taking on the right project. "His friends," wrote Jones, "saw it as a juvenile exercise unworthy of his talent." His wife even thought what he was doing was beneath him and wouldn't work. They thought he should do *Apocalypse Now*, not some kid's movie about a war in space.

The self-doubt ate away at him. At one point Lucas sank into a bit of a depression. He started to question his own sanity, his choice of creative projects, and his talent.

Could he keep going? Could he pull this off?

It's easy for us to look back now and say that Lucas had a billion-dollar franchise on his hands, but at the time, conventional wisdom said something different.

What would you have done in Lucas's shoes?

Recently, writers [Billy Oppenheimer](#) and [Steven Pressfield](#) introduced me to the idea of negative capability. It's a term coined by the poet John Keats.

When Keats wrote about negative capability, he was talking about the ability of artists to create in the face of uncertainty. This got me thinking about how we deal with uncertainty when we experience self-doubt and external criticism. Even though everyone questioned Lucas, *including* Lucas, he pushed forward. Lucas had negative capability.

As I reflect back on the last 10 years of *From the Green Notebook*, I realize that I've sat in self-doubt for most of it. I can't tell you how many times I questioned my ability to keep producing content for the Monthly Reading List Email or the Sunday Email while working challenging jobs. I've given myself serious anxiety about being able to release two podcast episodes a month when my time is severely limited. At every rank, people have told me that I wouldn't be able to keep the blog going. They told me it would be impossible to be a leader and a blogger. At times, I almost believed them.

Thankfully, I left it at "almost," and I kept writing and recording.

Over the course of my Army career, I've come to realize that the same resolve Lucas had for Star Wars and what I've experienced with *From the Green Notebook* is probably one of the most important skills we need as leaders.

As we move up in rank and responsibility, the decisions we make don't get easier. In fact, they get much harder. Many of the problems we encounter can no longer be solved; they can only be managed through tough (sometimes unwinnable) decisions.

This is where negative capability becomes so important.

Thinking about negative capability in this way helps us keep our wits intact and resolve steady when everyone around us says, "It won't work." More importantly, it enables us to

work even when our internal voice is louder than the external ones.

Negative capability allows leaders to innovate and try new things, even as people say, “That’s not in doctrine.”

It’s the skill that enables leaders to change the culture of an organization, even as they doubt themselves.

Negative capability is the skill we need to lead in the face of adversity.

In warfare, leaders don’t always have time to think through, gain consensus, and feel secure in the decisions they make. It’s easy to make decisions when answers can be found in U.S. military doctrine. It feels comfortable, because leaders have something other than themselves to blame when it goes wrong. “Hey, I followed the manual!” However, many of the problems leaders encounter in combat can’t be found in any manual.

“Nobody gives you points for this stuff,” writes Pressfield. “No one cheers. No one even knows.” Making decisions with self-doubt is a lonely endeavor, because it’s about overcoming an internal struggle with our worst critic – ourselves.

We have to learn to be okay with not feeling okay while we wait to learn the outcome of our decision, and sometimes that takes awhile.

Lucas had negative capability. He worked for a long time before knowing that *Star Wars* would pay off and change the movie industry forever. He had to keep pushing forward even as he doubted himself. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I now know that I had negative capability when I chose to keep *From the Green Notebook* going instead of shutting it down.

Military leaders must also possess negative capability – because sometimes we will never know if the decisions we make are the right ones.

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