



TACTICAL CONCEPTS

By Sid Heal

IMPLEMENTATION (OODA LOOP OR BOYD'S CYCLE)

Because all tactical operations are dynamic, they are also time sensitive. Decisions and actions that are delayed are often rendered ineffective because of the constantly changing circumstances. When an adversary is involved, the operation is not only time sensitive, but also time competitive. Time or opportunity neglected by one adversary can be exploited by the other. Recognizing the importance of this characteristic, Napoleon said, "It may be that in the future I may lose a battle, but I shall never lose a minute."

A useful tool for understanding the importance of this concept is the OODA Loop. The OODA Loop, often called Boyd's Cycle, is a creation of Col. John Boyd, USAF (Ret.). Col. Boyd was a student of tactical operations and observed a similarity in many battles and campaigns. He noted that in many of the engagements, one side presented the other with a series of unexpected and threatening situations with which they had not been able to keep pace. The slower side was eventually defeated. What Col. Boyd observed was the fact that conflicts are time competitive.

According to Boyd's theory, conflict can be seen as a series of time-competitive, Observation-Orientation-Decision-Action (OODA) cycles. Each party to a conflict begins by observing themselves, the physical surroundings and the adversary. Next they orient themselves. Orientation refers to making a mental image or snapshot of the situation. Orientation is necessary because the fluid, chaotic nature of conflicts makes it impossible to process information as fast as we can observe it. This requires a freeze-frame concept and provides a perspective or orientation. Once we have an orientation, we need to make a decision. The decision takes into account all the factors present at the time of the orientation. Last comes the implementation of the decision. This requires action. One tactical adage states that, "Decisions without actions are point-

less. Actions without decisions are reckless." Then, because we hope that our actions will have changed the situation, the cycle begins anew. The cycle continues to repeat itself throughout a tactical operation.

The adversary who can consistently go through Boyd's Cycle faster than the other gains a tremendous advantage. By the time the slower adversary reacts, the faster one is doing something different and the action becomes ineffective. With each cycle, the slower party's action is ineffective by a larger and larger margin. The aggregate resolution of these episodes will eventually determine the outcome of the conflict. For example, as long as the actions of the authorities continue to prove successful, a suspect will remain in a reactive posture, while the commander maintains the freedom to act. No matter that the suspect desperately strives to accomplish something that will work, every action becomes less useful than the preceding one. As a result, the suspect falls farther and farther behind. This demonstrates that the initiative follows the faster adversary. (For more information on initiative, see "Tempo and Initiative," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 1996, p. 75.)

IMPORTANCE OF INITIATIVE

The importance of initiative can be easily and clearly demonstrated in competitive games. Take football for instance. What difference does it make who receives the kick-off? It is because possession of the ball is necessary to score and thus, to be fair, the initiative is initially determined by chance—a coin toss. In other games, like Monopoly, it is determined by a throw of a die, or in chess, by choosing in which hand a pawn is hidden. As a game progresses, the initiative may revert back and forth among the players numerous times until one succeeds in gaining, maintaining and exploiting it to achieve a victory. Thus, it can be seen that initiative has value.

Some games, like hockey and basketball, compete for initiative from the onset by throwing the ball up in the air or dropping a hockey puck. So it is with tactical operations where initiative is always contested.

Boyd's Cycle demonstrates the value of gaining and maintaining the initiative. A commander may decide to initiate an action simply to cause a suspect to respond. By forcing a response, the commander maintains freedom of action while requiring the suspect to react. Once gained, the initiative can be maintained by compelling the suspect to respond in some manner that consumes so much time or resources that it is not practical to do anything but react. This eventually results in exposing a critical, sometimes even decisive, vulnerability that can be exploited.

In a tactical operation without an opposing will, such as a response to natural disasters like fires, floods, earthquakes, storms and the like, initiative may not be competitive but is still critical to success. The "opponent" may simply be the arbitrary and capricious whims of nature but, to achieve a satisfactory resolution, a tactical commander must overcome the effects or attenuate the consequences in some manner to succeed. This will require observing the situation, making an orientation of what can be done with given resources and time, making a decision and acting upon it.

It is important to remember that Boyd's Cycle is descriptive in nature, and not prescriptive. This means that it does not require anything, it merely describes what is naturally occurring. In the ever changing and rapidly evolving circumstances accompanying tactical operations, it provides a quick, efficient and simple method to understand the dynamics in play. It becomes clear that an implied objective in every tactical operation is to gain and maintain the initiative. ■

Editor's Note: Portions excerpted from the book, "Sound Doctrine: A Tactical Primer," by Sid Heal, available from Lantern Books, Summer 2000.

