

TACTICS AND PREPAREDNESS

SKILLS AND SURVIVAL FOR ALL SITUATIONS

FREE-RANGE STOCK-JACKMOREH

COGNITIVE DOMINANCE IN THE AGE OF DISTRACTION

What does cognitive dominance mean, and why does it matter to us? If you're thinking of Mr. Spock and his Vulcan mind-meld, that ain't it.

BY: JOHN NOWELL

Or Darth Vader strangling his lieutenant from across the room; that's in the R&D phase, but not here yet. Hordes of AI-enabled bots swarming an objective and accomplishing a mission seemingly by magic? Cool if you are a Lockheed-

Martin salesman, but that's not really in our wheelhouse.¹

The U.S. Army defines it as *"a position of intellectual advantage over a situation or adversary that fosters proactive agility over reactive adaptation,*

*facilitating the ability to anticipate change before it occurs."*² If that leaves you feeling a little ... "dominated" ... you are not alone.

At the tactical level, Cognitive Dominance means treating the Brain Housing Group as your primary weapons system. It means thinking clearly, acting effectively and being prepared to change course in an instant if the situation calls for it. It means operating smart *and* strong, and it outweighs all other factors in determining *continued on next page*

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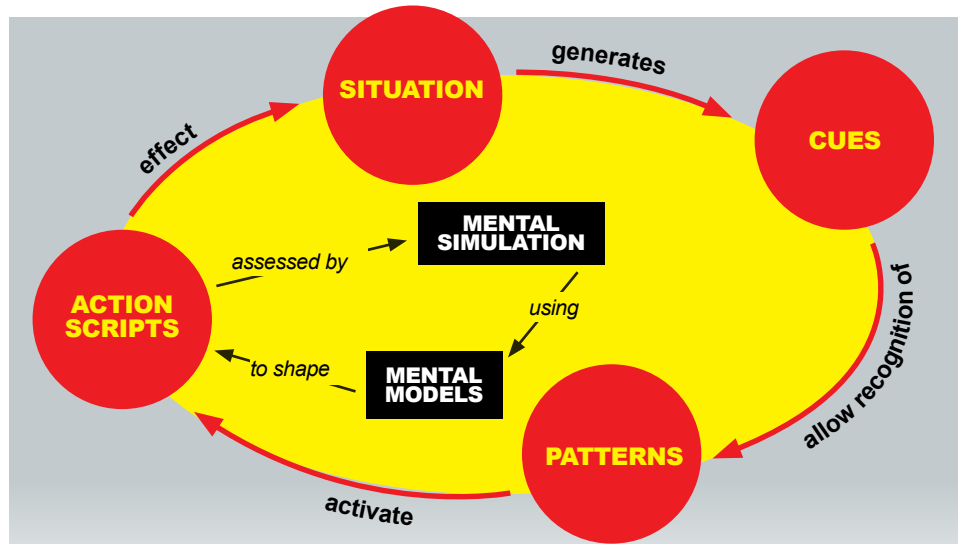
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The Recognition Primed Decision Model (RPD) only tells you **what to do**, while Cognitive Dominance tells you **how to do it**.

victory or defeat. Cognitive dominance doesn't come easily. It requires work and discipline and study and even some sweat. Those who pursue it are forever changed, not only in combat situations, but in all facets of their lives.

Cognitive Dominance may be a new buzzword, but it's a very old concept. In the earliest stories of the Western Tradition, the ancient Greeks celebrated the accomplishments of Odysseus, "that man who could not be confounded." Throughout the Trojan War and his ten-year journey home, Odysseus consistently outsmarted all adversaries. He was strong and brave, but it was his brain that brought victory at the walls of Troy.³ Throughout history, Napoleon, Grant, Patton and many others out-thought as well as out-fought their opponents.⁴

THROW AWAY MY OODA LOOP?

Absolutely not! Since the 1960s, Colonel John Boyd's cognitive model has proved itself time and again.⁵ Thirty years later, Gary Klein developed his Recognition Primed Decision Model (RPD), which builds on and enhances the original OODA Loop.⁶ But in both cases, the models only tell you *what to do*. Both models (especially RPD) rely heavily on the *experience* of the operator. Cognitive Dominance supports both models by teaching you *how to do it*. This enhances the performance of both seasoned and inexperienced operators.

WHAT ABOUT MY MUSCLES?

Yep, you still need 'em. *Mens sana in corpore sano* (a sound mind in a healthy body) means we need a balance, especially in a world of uncertainty. In fact, physical health and fitness, along with emotional and mental fitness make up the key components of resilience.

What has changed is our understanding of the brain and neuroplasticity. In the past we thought that mental capacity was fixed at birth. Ulysses, Napoleon and Patton were just *born* as military geniuses. You could work on your biceps, but not your cerebellum. Now we know that with effort, we can improve our mental capacity much like we can our muscles. Technology has also changed the balance between physical strength and mental power. A smart, strong soldier is a lot more dangerous than one that is merely strong.

Asymmetric Warfare, Hybrid Forces, Cyber and Information Warfare, all produced and supported by our near-peer opponents, demand the best performance our minds *and* bodies can achieve.

HOW DO I GET IT?

Cognitive Dominance is an *outcome*. Unlike your hand-held, air-cooled, magazine-fed multi-purpose Shiny Thing, you can't buy it. At the individual level it is the result of mental preparation, situational awareness and visualization. At the team level it further requires clear and effective communication. At any level, it is folly to think that one can



**In the middle
of chaos lies
opportunity.**

– Bruce Lee

dominate an environment—*any environment*—without first controlling the self. The most dangerous man on the battlefield is the one who can harness his intellect and his emotions. The combination of skills, attitudes and training that produce cognitive dominance in our world is known as *Agile Mindset™*. It doesn't come gift-wrapped. You have to earn it.⁷

In his book, *Antifragile*, Nassim Talib describes three states of existence. Objects, people and systems are either fragile, robust or antifragile, depending on how they relate to chaos and uncertainty.⁸ Detailed war plans are fragile and vulnerable to uncertainty. Battle drills are robust and endure regardless of the situation. An *Agile Mindset™* is antifragile; it benefits from uncertainty and chaos. Cognitive dominance recognizes where we are fragile and takes measures to minimize the risk. It builds the mental and physical stamina to endure the struggle. And finally, cognitive dominance allows us to see and exploit opportunities in the fog of battle. To survive and thrive in a chaotic and uncertain environment is the hallmark of *Agile Mindset™* and Cognitive Dominance.

INDIVIDUAL MASTERY: MENTAL PREPARATION

We live in a world full of distraction, lies and illusion. At best we cling to a set of values without knowing how to maintain them. At worst we are lost in self-delusion and are hapless, helpless and hopeless. You can flail about in that sea of misery for the rest of your life or you can learn to *think* and *move* and *take action* in the world of reality.

The first step is to learn *Critical Thinking*. That means evaluating the world as it is, not as someone else told you or how you wish it might be. Reality is a harsh teacher, but the only one that tells the truth. We are all subject to cognitive biases and sloppy thinking. Critical thinking allows you to become truthful to yourself and to cut through the fog of illusions. There are plenty of resources to teach you how to throw a punch or shoot a pistol, but precious few to teach you how to think. A good place to start is with the U.S. Army's *Applied Critical Thinking Handbook*.⁹ Next is to embrace a *Heritage of Experience™*. General George S. Patton frequently said, "There is no excuse for any of my officers not to have 2,000 years of combat experience."

More than simply reading history, *Heritage of Experience™* means mastering the art, absorbing the grit and sharing honest experiences between peers. It means studying your opponent and yourself for relative strengths and weaknesses. It enables pattern matching and the high-stress/high stakes skill of *Recognition Primed Decisions* whether you are a novice or a veteran.

MASTERY OF ANY SITUATION

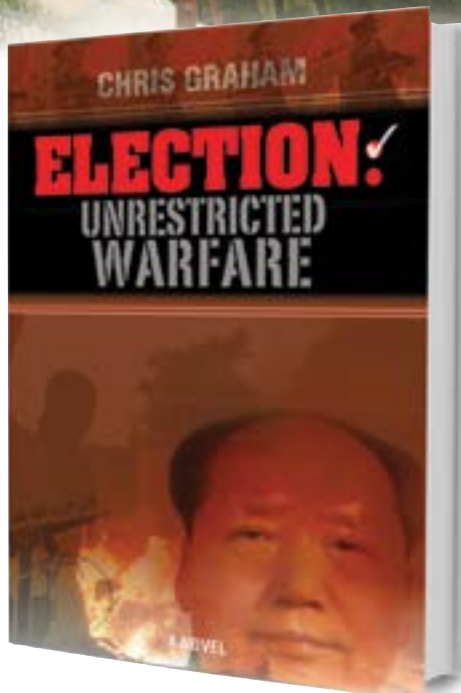
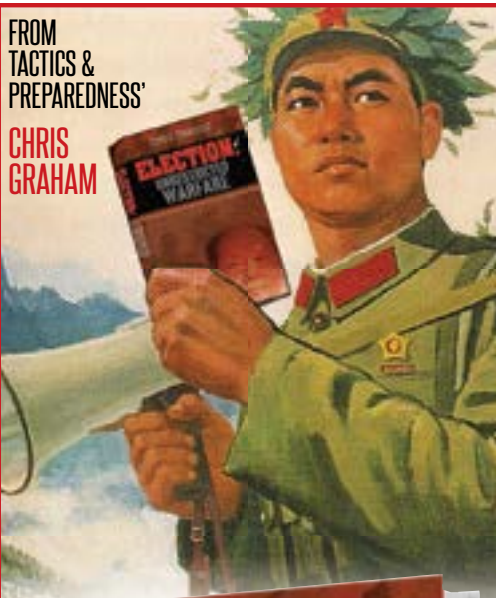
Once you have a handle on yourself, it's time to face the world. True *Situational Awareness*, based on *Reality*, is the first step. As with critical thinking, situational awareness is vulnerable to wishful thinking and a multitude of cognitive biases.¹⁰ *Perception*, *Comprehension* and *Projection* are the key components of true situational awareness.¹¹

Perception involves all your sensors, observing the external physical, social and cultural environments as well as your own internal status. Perception is sharpened by attending to factors that are relevant to your situation and mission.

Comprehension puts the pieces together from what your sensors are telling you. A

FROM
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CHRIS
GRAHAM



After the Iranian revolution, the new Islamic Republic of Iran instigates a series of terrorist attacks around the world. For what purpose? Col. Qiao Liang and Col. Wang Xiangsui unveil a modernized version of Sun Tzu's tactics. How could this be unfolding in current events? A corruptible American President approaches re-election... who is trying to manipulate her?

**AVAILABLE NOW
ON AMAZON**

"Chris Graham writes the way he flies: low, fast and hair raising. He's one of the best brightest and bravest Marines I've ever known. Now he's proven himself to be a sharp-edged master of suspense." - Oliver North

key component of comprehension is to accept and infer meaning from less than perfect information. Sometimes you must act even if you only have 70 percent of the data you need. Pattern recognition, drawing inferences and filling in the missing pieces of the puzzle are the comprehension skills that can turn 70 percent into *enough*.

Projection, leading to *Visualization*, is the Ninja Pinnacle of true situational analysis and the base for Cognitive Dominance. If you are going to *act* instead of *react*, you have to already *see* what is about to happen. Predicting outcomes is not a roll of the dice if you are mentally prepared and have perceived and comprehended the situation accurately. Now, if you act decisively, you should be a step ahead of your adversary. That's the first step on the road to victory. That's the outcome of Cognitive Dominance.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Be Prepared:

Mentally and physically. Know everything you can about your mission and your opposition.

Be Present:

Cognitive focus is on the *Here* and *Now*. Not ruminating about the past. Not worrying about the distant future.

Be Open to the Idea:

Don't cling to your original plan if things change—which they will. Be agile.

Pattern Match and be Predictive:



Bring your entire Heritage of Experience™ to the forefront. Trust your gut.

Poke the Bear. Take Action:

Who Dares Wins. Seize the Initiative. Favor an Offensive Posture.

Pay Attention to what happens next.

You are pulling the strings now. Get inside and disrupt the other guy's OODA Loop.

Lather, rinse, repeat. ✓

BIO

John Nowell is the President of Human Venture Group (www.humanventuregroup.com). HVG works to enhance performance of elite teams under extreme stress. John has almost 30 years of experience operating around the world and speaks Russian, German, Italian and Korean. He has a BA from Vanderbilt, an MPA from Harvard, and an AMP from Oxford.

NOTES

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