

THE MIND OF WAR: JOHN BOYD AND AMERICAN SECURITY

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Staff College students, at all levels of study, instinctively associate John Boyd with the OODA loop in which the war fighter – again at every level – is invited to *Observe, Orientate, Decide* and then *Act*. After a moment's self-congratulatory pause for remembering the mnemonic, there follows a major scratch of the cranium while attempts are made to recall what else John Boyd did, said and wrote. To start with the last aspect, Boyd committed very little of his work to paper. Like most aviators he preferred to do, or to teach in the air and, as a fallback, to brief on the ground. His briefing material gradually coalesced into a multi-hour presentation entitled '*Patterns of Conflict*'; as Hammond points out this briefing was some 193 vu-graphs long. Boyd's central thesis was that neither machines nor weapons fought wars – only people did that. Boyd used his huge experience of air-to-air combat (including Korea) as a basis for explaining the need to outwit your opponent by thinking and acting faster. This appears obvious in dogfight terms, but Boyd extended the theory into a generic war-fighting ethos that became enshrined in the OODA loop.

From his extensive study of the history of warfare, Boyd believed that the enemy system could be forced to collapse into confusion and disorder through the rapid and flexible application of force, and the judicious threat of force. Boyd's conceptual approach hit a chord with both the US Army and more particularly the US Marine Corps. His

theories utilised the core concepts of precision, speed and manoeuvre – key characteristics of air power but applicable across the piece. Boyd's theorising, along with the thinking of a group of reformist colleagues, became the underlying premise behind manoeuvre warfare. Boyd's briefing process then expanded to encapsulate '*A Discourse on Winning and Losing*' with 327 slides!

In addition to his theoretical work on the nature of warfare, Boyd was a hugely talented fighter pilot who invariably won bets on his ability to get into guns solution on any adversary. He also worked on a theoretical air-to-air combat construct based on energy manoeuvrability theory. Boyd's theories and early computer simulation work were some of the most influential factors behind the design criteria of the F-15 and F-16. He also authored the first real USAF tactics manual. Modern-day fighter pilots talk about aircraft energy states, tactics and procedures with no realisation that John Boyd was the major thinker behind the codification of basic fighter lore into the jet age. There was no scope for intellectual copyright or elaborate footnoting in air combat training and manuals and therefore little recognition for Boyd personally.

Hammond, who is at his best in challenging orthodoxy (as is evident to regular readers of *Air Power Review*), evidently believes that there should be more like Boyd in the air power game. That Boyd won more recognition, and was accorded greater status, by the Marines clearly rankles with his biographer – and so it should. Boyd was an intellectual maverick operating in an environment that values neither trait. He was either loved or hated with equal extremes of sentiment. There is, however, little doubt that as personal memories fade, and the angst lessens, Boyd will be considered by history to have been one of the 20th Century's greatest strategic thinkers. There is no doubt at all that this biography will be a significant factor in aiding Boyd's eventual rehabilitation. Furthermore, it is a significant work on strategic thinking in its own right and should be widely read.

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