A Spy's Guide To Thinking

John Braddock

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by

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www.spysguide.com

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How To Think

Spy gadgets are fun. Not Q's rocket cars and jetpacks. Not James Bond's remote detonators. The real world stuff. Crazy, complicated things. Fun, yes. Interesting, yes.

But if you're a spy in the field, you start to think. Do I want to bet lives – my life – on a gadget working?

You say no to a lot of gadgets. You turn down most of what they send you. When you get one that might be good, you ask questions. Does it work? Does it work in a simple way? Will it break?

Even then, you pause. You want someone else to use it first. Just to be sure. You learn the best things aren't the new things. Used things are better. Worn things. Things that have worked in the field. For fifty, sixty years, if possible. Updated, sure. But tested. Proven. If the mission fails because a gadget breaks, it's not Q at risk. It's you.

When you find something that works, it's gold. The thing does its job, you do yours. You go out and be a spy. Maybe even save the world.

This little book is about thinking, but it's like a gadget. It has tools that work. In a simple way. Without breaking. Even better, the tools have been used for a long time. Updated, sure. But used successfully by people and organizations for many years.

The tools here are most useful under pressure. First, because they stop us from only reacting. They bring focus. They help us resist the takeover of the lizard brain. They remind us what sets us apart: We think.

Lastly, they've been tested in a variety of environments with a variety of people. With varying levels of complexity. Different situations, different people, different needs.

Bottom line: They work.

On that, I bet my life.

Early morning in Europe. Not the worst place. Not the best. A weekend. Just after public transport opened. Quiet. A good time for a spy to meet a source.

I found a seat in the back of a subway car. Pulled out a phone to check for last minute communications. A guy saw me do it.

Normally, not a big deal. Lots of people dressed like me. Looked like me. Had their phones out. But the guy chose me.

“Let me see your phone,” he said in the local language.

I ignored him.

“Let me see your phone,” he said again.

I looked at the guy. Started thinking. Collected data.

The guy: My height. A little heavier. Wiry. Some muscle under a thin coat. Cheap shoes. Jeans. Non-native ethnicity. Aggressive posture.

He stood in the walkway. Blocked the exit. His gaze was intense. But his eyes were dancing and unfocused.

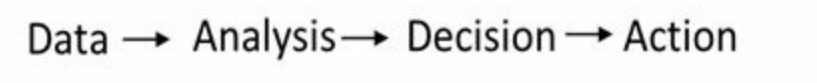
Time for some analysis.

Pretty clear that “Let me see your phone” equaled “Let me steal your phone.”

More analysis needed. I started on the usual cycle of questions when approached by anyone in a foreign country.

The first question was always the same: Does this guy know I’m a spy?

Thinking, in its simplest form, looks like this:



Notice the end: Action. If thinking doesn't end with action, it's useless. Taking action is why we think. If you're thinking just to think, that's useless, too.

Back up another step: Decision. We're deciding on a range of options. Simple.

Back up another: Analysis. We're sifting through the information needed to make a decision. We're judging the credibility of the information. Its reliability. Its usefulness for the decision. And we're combining the new data with what we already know.

Then we're at the beginning: Data. We're collecting data on the world. We're gathering what we think will be useful down the line. The information we need to analyze. To decide. To take action.

That's the chain of thinking: D-A-D-A. Getting data leads to analysis. Analysis leads to a decision. A decision leads to an action. Simple. That's how thinking works.

It's not just people who think this way. Organizations, large and small, do it, too. Instead of the process being in one head, it's spread among many. Some gather data. Some analyze it. Others make decisions. Still others take action. Some organizations do this well, some don't.

I was part of the thinking process in the largest organization of all: the U.S. government. What I did was collect data. The front end of this chain. It was secret data. Risky data. The kind of data that people can die for. People like me. Because secret data starts a process that leads to certain kinds of action. Sometimes, it leads to war.

One nation learns about a rival's weakness. Another discovers that the first is planning an invasion. A third tries to pre-empt with negotiations. A fourth takes advantage of the confusion and starts a war.

I collected secret data so the U.S. could make the right decisions. Take the right actions. Hopefully, before things spun out of hand. It's the game before the game. What happens before news becomes news. That's intelligence-gathering. It's collecting data to feed into a government's thinking process.

To do my job, I also did the four parts myself. Collect the data on the intelligence target. Analyze it. Make a decision on the approach. Take action to get the intelligence.

Not thinking well is dangerous. Because the spy world is risky and

constantly changing. New data to collect. More analysis to do. New options to evaluate. New actions to take.

Even when you least expect it.

Does he know I'm a spy?

He had spoken to me in the local language. A good sign that he didn't know I was a spy. Or at least, an American spy.

I had to be sure. Everything I would do next depended on that answer.

Collected more data. First: What's he looking at?

My phone. Mostly my phone, anyway. A quick glance at my face just then.

The phone is what he wants. Doesn't mean he doesn't know I'm a spy. Maybe his job is to get my phone because he knows I'm a spy. If so, would he be so obvious? A follow-up: Is he here to distract me from something else?

More data needed. On the environment.

The first thing to know: Was the guy alone?

I looked around.

Sleepy faces in the seats. A young guy two rows away watching. A surprised look on his face. No tenseness in the shoulders. No readiness. No slight shift of weight. No preparation for movement. He's watching because this guy asked to see my phone. Not a normal occurrence. He's interested but not expecting to do anything. The young guy's not planning to get involved.

In front of him, an old woman in a scarf. A bag on her lap. A quick turn of the head, then back around. The Russians are famous for using old women as surveillants, but not the locals here. Doubtful she was with the security services. She's trying to avoid attention. She doesn't want to get hurt.

In front of her, two people stood up – a middle-aged woman and an older man. They moved to the far end of the car. Must have heard the guy ask for my phone. Or seen something like this before.

Conflict was coming. They didn't want any part.

No one else reacted.

That didn't mean this wasn't a spy thing. Spies try to blend in. If they were sitting among the passengers, they would have just sat there. They wouldn't have moved. Not yet.

A half-second to breathe and think. Time to think through the questions again.

The still unanswered question: Was the guy alone?

Like I said before, spies like old, worn things. Proven things. Things that have stood the test of time.

The thinking process here -- Data-Analysis-Decision-Action -- dates from the 1950's. That's when a flight instructor for the U.S. Air Force took a close look at fighter pilots in a dogfight. How they think. How they act. How it all determines who wins. His name was John Boyd.

Boyd used different words for the first two steps. Instead of Data, he used Observe. Instead of Analysis, he used Orient. But he meant the same thing. A fighter pilot collects data on an enemy pilot by observing. He analyzes by orienting himself to the enemy. He decides what to do, then acts.

When Boyd broke thinking into those steps, he discovered something interesting: Whichever pilot goes through the process quickest is the one who usually wins. He called going through the process and repeating it a loop.

Boyd's name for thinking: the OODA Loop. When you get to the end, you start the process again. You gather data on what you just did, analyze that data, and make another decision, followed by another action. Then you do it again. Whoever "loops" most quickly in a dogfight? They usually win.

Because of Boyd's OODA Loop, the U.S. Air Force made a change. They wanted planes to let a pilot go through the OODA Loop as quickly as possible. Planes that moved as quickly as a pilot could think.

The process helped the Air Force think more clearly, too. As an organization. Thinking about how a pilot thinks, they made changes. Big changes. They ditched their old way of doing things. Approached the problem differently. Came up with a new plan for more maneuverable,

responsive aircraft.

The F-15 and F-16 fighter platforms were born.

Was the guy alone? Yes.

By his stance, he wasn't allowing anyone else to see what was going on. He was shielding me from the rest of the car. Isolating me. That's not something you do, if you're working with someone else. You want them to see. So they can jump in, if needed. He didn't want anyone to jump in.

He was alone.

Back to the original question: Was this a spy thing?

Couldn't be.

If it was, it wouldn't happen like this.

If the local security service wanted my phone, they would have come at me with at least a pair of guys. Maybe more. Overwhelming force. Probably in uniform, too. To be sure no locals got involved.

And if they were going to arrest me, it wouldn't be in a subway car. It would be in the middle of some incriminating act. With the source. Probably at the safehouse I was headed to.

What about another spy service? Hostile and foreign?

No – this was too straightforward. No subtlety. Just come up and ask for my phone? No way. If a spy wanted my phone, he'd figure out a way to get it, mess with it and return it without me knowing. And, if he couldn't, he wouldn't do anything. No self-respecting spy would just ask for my phone.

Plus, dark orbs in the ceiling were recording everything. Spies, local or foreign, don't like cameras.

He's not a spy, I decided. Which means he doesn't know I'm a spy.

Question answered.

A new set of questions, then.

I reevaluated his clothes, posture and face. He wanted my phone. Why?

Still seated, I shifted my legs toward the guy. He moved closer. Almost within arm's reach. I saw something new: his eyes were dilated.

It wasn’t bright in the subway car, but his eyes were off. That’s why his gaze was dancing and unfocused.

A new hypothesis: The guy is a druggie. Because it’s early morning, probably coming off last night’s high. If he isn’t still high. He’s out of money. To get his next fix, he needs something to sell or trade. A phone is perfect. Me? I’m just the guy holding the phone.

A random mugging. Not a spy thing. Dangerous, but a different kind of dangerous. With different rules.

And a different kind of trouble. A guy high enough to be stupid. Stupid enough to start something. Something with a range of bad outcomes. Including losing my phone.

A phone that connected me to an important source. A phone I wouldn’t give up without a fight.

2

What To Think About

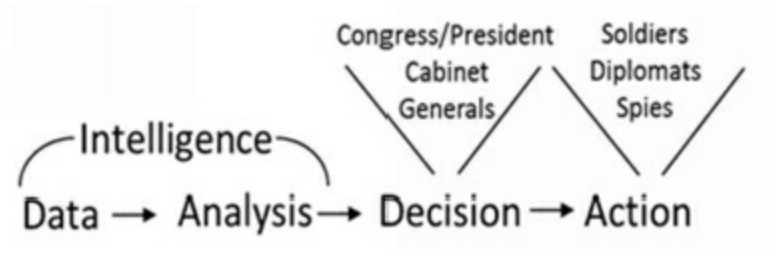
I did data collection for the CIA. But the intelligence process didn't stop there. What I collected went to analysts.

The first two parts of thinking – Data and Analysis – are what intelligence agencies do. When the analysis is done, an intelligence agency generates a product. Called finished intelligence. They give that to the decision-makers.

That's thinking at an organizational level. With many brains involved. Every one responsible for a small part of the thinking process.

After the decision-makers deliberate and decide, who takes action? Maybe soldiers, in a time of war. Or diplomats, in peace. Or in the quasi-war, quasi-peace of the early 21st century, a combination. Or maybe, it's us again – the spies.

In the American system, here's how government-level thinking works:



Whether spies take action or not, we always do the first part first. We go to foreign countries for secrets. We get them in the ways you see in movies. Using the occasional gadget. Then we send the secrets to the analysts.

Analysis isn't what they make movies about, but it's important. It's judging the credibility of the data. It's asking where it came from. It's understanding how close the source was to what they described. Whether the

data can be trusted.

Analysis is filtering. Sifting wheat from chaff.

And analysis does something else: it combines new data with what we already know.

In my time, the big question was Iraq. Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) or not?

We had existing data on that. Some of it pointed to Saddam Hussein having WMD. Some of it said he didn't. Some old data said his scientists had the capability to build WMD. Some old data said they didn't.

Then there was the new data. The Niger Yellowcake. A source named Curveball. The evidence Secretary Powell presented at the UN.

Good analysis is the combination of old and new data. In a way that leads to a good decision. As in the Iraq situation, that's not easy.

Without good analysis, we can't make good decisions. Without good analysis, we can't even figure out what our options are.

Not a spy or a member of the local security service, the druggie with the dilated eyes. But still dangerous. And still wanting my phone.

Analysis done, that decision made. I turned to my next decision. What should I do?

Options were:

1. Stay in my seat and let him come to me
2. Stand up and face him
3. Go on offense. Start the fight that was probably going to happen anyway.

I'm a decent athlete. Played a college sport that got rough. Had a couple concussions. Delivered some, too. I'm not afraid of contact.

But if I start a fight, will I win? Not sure. A drugged-up guy is the worst kind of opponent. Brain and body are disconnected. Pain signals don't work. He could take a beating and not feel it. Keep coming at me when he should stay down.

Worse: I wasn't sure I wanted to win. The last guy standing gets the

questions. Best case scenario, the cameras would take a picture. Of me standing over a body. It would go to police stations. A bad thing for a spy in a foreign country.

Like every other spy, I just wanted to blend in.

Might not be an option.

Data collected and analysis done, I made my first big decision: my objective.

Thinking through the Data-Analysis-Decision-Action chain is an action-oriented version of another old tool you probably know: the scientific method.

The scientific method says: Develop a hypothesis, Test it and observe the results. With results in hand, decide whether your hypothesis was correct.

Albert Einstein had a hypothesis: The universe was expanding. He tested that hypothesis against the data of the day. Analyzing the data, he had a decision to make: Call his hypothesis true or false. The data said it was false, so he said it was false. The universe wasn't expanding, he decided.

Einstein later called it, "the greatest blunder of my life." But the problem wasn't with his process. It was a good process. Einstein had bad data.

When Edwin Hubble got better data and tested Einstein's hypothesis again, he found Einstein's original hypothesis was right. The universe is expanding. Hubble developed a follow-up hypothesis: The universe is expanding at a constant rate.

When more data came available, scientists tested Hubble's hypothesis. They discovered that the universe is expanding, but not at a constant rate. The speed of the universe's expansion is increasing.

That's how the scientific community thinks. A hypothesis is generated. The hypothesis is tested against data. It's analyzed. A decision is made. When new data comes available, they test it again. Each loop in that process improves scientific knowledge.

You'll notice something interesting about the way scientists think: they don't start with data. They start with a hypothesis. Then they go to the data.

Good thinkers, including intelligence agencies, don't start with data, either.

The world is overflowing with data, secret and otherwise. It has to be shrunk. That happens in the analysis process. But how do analysts decide what's important and what's not? More importantly for spies, how do we decide which secrets are worth risking lives for and which aren't?

We ask the decision-makers.

We ask them what decisions they're thinking about. What's keeping them up at night? And we ask them to look ahead. What actions do they expect to take next?

A general might say he's worried about a border war. And that a treaty might force him to intervene. For the general, the first question might be, "What's the troop strength on both sides of that border?"

A cabinet secretary might be about to sign an agreement with a rogue state. He's worried that whatever is signed won't be adhered to. For the cabinet secretary, the key question might be, "What reports from the rogue state can we trust?"

The President might be deciding whether to pursue an initiative at the UN. He's worried other nations might sabotage his effort. For the President, the key question might be, "What other nations will undermine the initiative at the UN?"

They tell the intelligence agency the issue, the options they're facing and their questions. Based on those, the analysts come up with what they call "requirements." Which are basically questions again. More open-ended than scientific hypotheses, but with the same goal: to help a decision-maker make the right decision.

Questions from the general worried about a border war might be: "How many divisions does each side have? What's their tank technology? How efficient are their supply lines?"

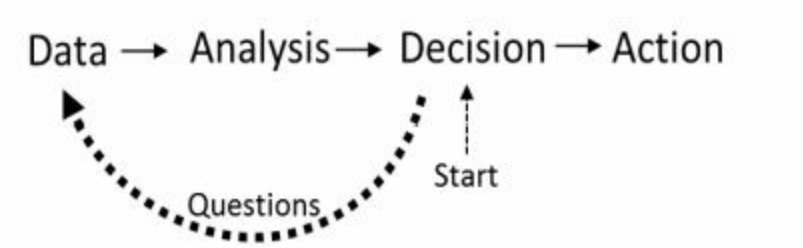
Questions from the cabinet secretary worried about the rogue state might be: "Do we have any independent sources of information on the rogue state's

weapons? Who's the ultimate decision-maker on their side? What's the rogue state's schedule for upgrading their weapons?"

Questions from the President worried about a UN initiative might be: "Where do our allies stand on the initiative? Who's leading the opposition? What compromises will the opposition accept to work with us?"

Our analysts collect those questions. Send them to spies in the field. We get answers.

It looks like this:



Intelligence agencies start with the decision. Like scientists start with the hypothesis. That's how we know what we're looking for.

That's how we know if it's worth risking lives to get the answer.

I was the one who would take action in the subway car. I was the decision-maker. My first decision had been: Was this a spy thing or not?

Then the questions. About the guy. Whether he was alone. About others in the car. The environment. I had gathered data.

My analysis took the data and combined it with what I already knew. I knew what dilated eyes meant. I knew what a typical local looked like. And I knew what a spy approach looked like.

I had crossed the last one out. No way this was a spy thing.

Analysis done. Situation clear. On to objectives.

Primary objective today: Get intelligence from a sensitive source.

That would happen later.

Now, a druggie wants my phone. A new objective. A more immediate objective: Get past this moment without a loss. Don't let the druggie get my

phone. Don’t lose the game we’re about to play.

Don’t lose.

For spies, a typical objective. Showing a border guard a false passport? Don’t lose the game. Detecting surveillance? Don’t lose the game. Facing a drugged-up mugger? Don’t lose the game.

Don’t lose the game. Because losing this game means you don’t play the next game. The next game is bigger. The next game is collecting intelligence. Finding a source that can answer the questions the decision-makers had sent. Because the next game is bigger still: War or war averted. Lives lost or lives saved.

It didn’t help to rush. Hurrying is the surest way to screw up. Screwing up slows you down. Hurrying makes the game you’re trying to get past take longer.

So I took another second. Sitting in the subway car seat with a druggie blocking the way. I had decided I wouldn’t go on offense. I wasn’t going to start a fight, if I didn’t have to. I wasn’t going to create conflict first.

That left me with a defensive strategy. And the first step in that strategy would be one of two things:

1. Stay seated
2. Stand up

I chose option 2.

I stood up. Let the druggie see I was his height. Close to his weight. Not a pushover.

I looked him in the eye.

The druggie didn’t move. Just stood in the way. He wasn’t backing down. Must have really needed that fix.

Since he hadn’t backed down, I had a different set of options.

Now there were four.

Choosing the right one depended on what I thought he would do.

When thinking about what someone else will do, it’s easy to ask the wrong

question first. We might ask something like, “What’s the other side trying to achieve?” Or “What’s their endgame?”

Good questions for later. Not first.

The first question should always be, “What kind of game do they think we’re playing?”

3

How Others Think

With billions of people, interactions between us are in the trillions every day. Individually, we interact with hundreds every day. Buying. Selling. Competing. Cooperating. Even signaling to change traffic lanes is an interaction.

Every interaction is a kind of game. Some games have winners and losers. Some games have only winners. Some have only losers.

It's impossible to think deeply about each game. There are too many. If we tried, we'd only think. Never take action. Which would be useless. Even for one person, there are too many interactions in a day to analyze each one.

Fortunately, there's a shortcut. All our interactions are only three kinds of games:

A. Zero-sum

B. Positive-sum

C. Negative-sum

Just three.

Zero-sum games dominate the history books. They're conflicts. They're when one player can only gain what another player gives up.

European wars. The Germans gain Alsace-Lorraine by force, the French lose it. The Treaty of Versailles gives Alsace-Lorraine back to the French, the Germans lose it. When it comes to land, France can only gain what Germany loses, and vice-versa. When the game's finished and you add what was lost and gained by the players, it equals zero.

Politics, whether in a republic or democracy or monarchy or dictatorship, are also zero-sum games. One candidate wins a seat another candidate loses. One party wins control that another party loses. One king takes power when another dies. One dictator takes over because the last is removed in a coup. Power politics are zero-sum games, no matter what politicians want us to believe.

Positive-sum games are different. They're cooperative. They continue only as long as both sides are gaining, or expect to. Like any good marriage or alliance or business partnership, benefits to both sides is what keeps it together. When you add up the gains, the result is positive. A positive-sum game.

Some positive-sum games last for centuries. Like the "special relationship" between the U.S. and the U.K on diplomatic issues. Some positive-sum games last for only as long as it takes to do the drive-thru at McDonald's. Whatever the context, positive-sum games require exchange. They require voluntary action. Benefits to both sides.

Negative-sum games are rare. They're wars of attrition. Verdun. Or a labor strike. Both sides are losing. Each side hopes it's losing less than the other. As soon as one side figures it's losing too much, the negative-sum game is over. Negative-sum games are like heavy elements that live for a short time before decaying into something else.

Understanding these three types of games is a shortcut to good thinking.[1] It helps us understand the people we're working with or against.

Best of all, the games shortcut gets us closer to the Holy Grail of thinking: predicting what others will do next.

The druggie was playing a zero-sum game. He wanted my phone. Wasn't going to give me anything for it. If he wins, I lose. One winner. One loser. That was the game he wanted to play.

Conflict. No question about it. The little war we were having wasn't over anything great or noble. No land at stake. No honor. No survival of a people. No epic poems would be sung. It was just a fight over a phone.

He wanted the phone. I wanted to keep it. At the end of the game, one of us would have the phone. One wouldn't. Add up the result for us players: A zero sum.

His first move in the game: Ask to "see" my phone. If I had given it to him, the game would have been over. He would have the phone. I would have lost it, because he wasn't going to give it back. Game over. Unless I escalated. Which would have been difficult for a spy trying to blend in.

But I hadn’t given him my phone. So he asked again. Again, I didn’t give it to him.

He had gathered some new data along the way. He had seen my reaction. Sized me up. Seen that I was going to resist. How much? He didn’t know.

What kind of analysis could he do through the fog in his brain? I don’t know. It was probably slow. Slow analysis leads to slow decision-making. Which means he was slow to action.

Maybe that’s why I had time to stand up.

When I stood up and he saw I was his height and his size, he hadn’t backed away. Maybe because he was thinking slowly. Maybe because he didn’t care. Maybe I was his quickest route to a fix. Didn’t matter if I was Andre the Giant. He was going to try to get my phone.

Standing face to face, I had four options:

1. Move sideways around him
2. Push him out of the way
3. Sit back down
4. Do nothing

Later a colleague suggested a fifth: Drop the phone and stomp on it. Smash it up. That way the druggie doesn’t get it, and I avoided what was coming. I didn’t think of that. Besides, it was an important phone. It was a link to an important source. At that point, I thought I could keep it.

With just the four options I thought of, I chose option 1.

I moved to the side.

He shifted, too. Like a dance step. Blocked my way.

Now my options were the remaining three:

1. Push him out of the way
2. Sit back down
3. Do nothing

There wasn’t much more data to gather. At least, it didn’t seem that way.

Then he moved his hands.

It had been only a few seconds since everything started. A few seconds since the druggie had asked for my phone. I hadn’t hurried, but I’d slowed down too much. After seeing this wasn’t a spy thing, I had relaxed.

I hadn’t shifted to street crime defense. Druggie analysis. I wasn’t all the way inside the druggie’s head.

I had looked at his face, his eyes, his build, his demeanor, his clothes.

I hadn’t looked at his hands.

I hadn’t looked for weapons.

When his hands moved, it was to do something to help him win. Something to help him take my phone.

I looked down to see what it was.

The first step to winning a zero-sum game is to know it’s coming. It’s why spies work in peacetime. To be a tripwire. To give an alert when peace is about to become war. It’s why the CIA was formed in the first place.

The CIA traces its origins to the Office of Strategic Services, the World War II outfit that ran covert operations behind enemy lines. The OSS story is such a part of CIA culture that my training included parachute jumps. So maybe they could drop me behind enemy lines in a war.

In fact, the CIA story is more about a peacetime failure. Before World War II, the U.S. had codebreakers but no overseas spy service. There were some attempts by the FBI, State Department, Army and Navy, but they were half-hearted.

Then came Pearl Harbor. Thousands dead. Pacific Fleet decimated. Because the right people didn’t know war was coming.

When the dust settled on World War II, it was time to say, “Never again.” Could a spy service – a centralized spy service – have stopped Pearl Harbor? Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, the CIA was formed to do that. To gather data, analyze it, and pass it to the decision-makers so they would know what they needed to know. To give a heads up. Let key people know when peace was turning to war. So they could act in time.

Here’s the important thing: The CIA’s mission was not to centralize intelligence-gathering. The CIA would gather intelligence, yes. But so would others. The CIA’s mission was to centralize the *process* of intelligence-gathering and delivery to decision-makers. It was to be sure the Data-

Analysis-Decision-Action chain worked.

Over the following decades, more zero-sum games came along. The Cold War. The Vietnam War. The Iraq Wars. The War on Terrorism. All conflicts that needed good intelligence. Good intelligence that would give the best possible chance of a good decision. And implementing those good decisions would, hopefully, lead to victory. Or, at least, not a loss.

When you're part of the process of preparing for war, you realize something about zero-sum games. Winning isn't just about being good at conflict. In fact, being good at conflict isn't the best way to win a zero-sum game.

The best way to win a zero-sum game is to be good at positive-sum games.

There were no positive-sum games in the subway car. Not on my side, of course. I was alone.

When you're a spy, you get used to being alone. You're on planes alone. In cars alone. In hotels alone. Sometimes nice places like the Mediterranean resort where I stayed for a week waiting for someone who didn't show. Sometimes you sit for 24 hours in the freezing cold doing surveillance. You're alone and at risk. Situations where all you can do is think. And think about thinking.

Alone in the subway car: A normal situation.

There were people all around, though. Potential allies. A dozen or so.

The young man a row away was a potential ally. But he didn't want to get involved. The old lady? No – she would just get hurt, even if she wanted to help. The other two nearby had already moved.

Not that I blamed them. They didn't know me or the other guy. We could have a long-running feud. We could be about to pull guns. They didn't want to be nearby when the conflict started.

Could I have asked for help? Maybe. What would have been the druggie's reaction? Probably to accelerate what was coming.

Anyway, no good alliances available. No opportunity to increase power through partnering.

Plus, would it have been positive-sum? What would the others gain? Probably nothing. At least, that's what they would think. And they might get hurt. So there's a chance they would lose. Which makes everyone think twice.

Any alliances on the druggie's side? No. He was alone, too, as far as I could tell.

No allies on either side. Both of us would go into this zero-sum game with what we brought.

I hadn't brought much. Just technology for communicating. Something else for concealment. Nothing too useful in a fight.

The druggie, on the other hand, probably played a lot of these kinds of games. He'd probably been in a lot of fights in his life. He would have been ready.

And, he was starting the conflict. So he would be prepared.

When his hands moved, I immediately thought of weapons. Cursed that I hadn't been more careful.

But it wasn't a weapon he used first.

Thinking is cheap. Action is expensive.

Collecting data takes time and resources, but modern technology makes it cheaper every day. Analyzing that data? Making sense of it? More difficult. More expensive. Making good decisions takes even more resources, usually. But the most expensive thing, nearly always, is taking action.

If you've ever been on an IT project or tried to implement a new strategy or built an addition on your house, you know how this works. You know that actually doing something costs a lot more than deciding what to do.

There's another reason action is expensive. Something other than time and resources. It's because actions are a commitment.

Anytime in the thinking process, you can stop. You can reverse. You can move backward. You can gather more data. Do more analysis. Reconsider the decision.

Action is irreversible.

Actions, no matter how small, commit us to a particular path. Acting on Option 3 means Option 2 and Option 1 just went away. Economists call this losing the "option value." By taking one action, you lose the value of all the other options.

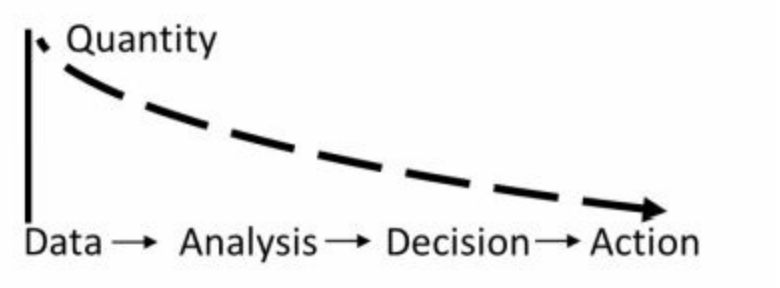
Costs go up as thinking moves closer to action:

This is the right way to do it. If we do it differently, things go wrong.

Think about trying to do the D-A-D-A chain in reverse. If we spend less time analyzing than we do collecting data, we never make it through all the data. If we spend more time making decisions than we do taking action, we end up not doing much at all.

Costs go up as you get closer to action in the Data-Analysis-Decision-Action chain. That's one trend. There's another trend that goes the other way.

It has to do with how much we're working with at each step. The trend of quantity slopes down to the right. It looks like this:



You, me, and organizations face a lot of data. Even before computers and the information revolution, we could collect more data than we could ever analyze. The weather. The environment. The people around us. There's always been more data than we could ever analyze.

Then, moving to the right, there's more analysis we can do than decisions

we can make. We compare our new data to existing data. Throw out some of it. Filter it. Prioritize it. And use it for decision-making.

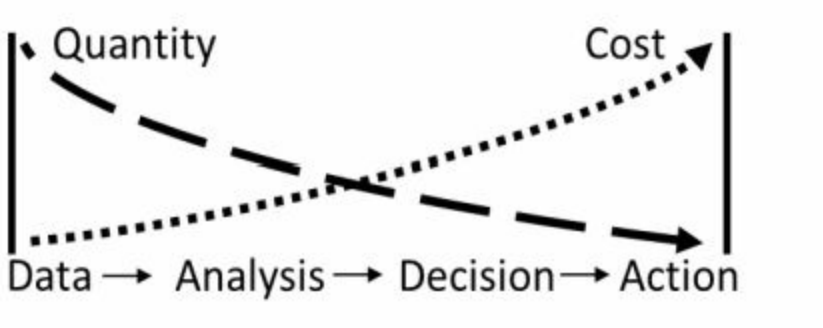
The decisions themselves are fewer still. There's more analysis we can do than decisions we can make.

And finally, there are more decisions we make than actions we take. Because some decisions are to stop. Some decisions are to do nothing.

In terms of quantity, actions are the fewest. Data the most.

Going to the right across the Data-Analysis-Decision-Action chain, the quantity goes down. While the cost goes up.

Put together, the two trends look like this:



There's a tension here. That tension is tough on our thinking.

It's worse for organizations. Most groups put most of their resources into action, as they should. But they also have to spend the right amount on data collection, analysis, and decision-making.

If they don't do a good job collecting data, filtering it, prioritizing it and combining it with existing knowledge, they won't make the right decision. If they don't make the right decision, it doesn't matter how much they spend on action. They're doing the wrong thing.

Moving through the Data-Analysis-Decision-Action chain smartly is the key.

If you're not going through this chain smartly in your daily life, it's not good. But when conflict comes and you don't think smartly, it's worse.

If you're still collecting or analyzing data while others are acting, you're in trouble.

There was no weapon in the druggie's hands.

It was a diversion. A distraction. A way to make sure I didn't see the real threat.

He had given me new data. When his hands moved, I looked for weapons. While I focused on his hands and what was in them, he was doing something else. It's a classic strategic move. What John Boyd called getting inside the other side's loop.

The druggie was moving his head. His forehead, specifically. In a downward motion. Snapped forward by his neck.

The forehead is a hard bone. Designed to protect the brain.

It's also a weapon.

His forehead landed on my left eyebrow.

My balance was thrown off. I fell.

Wet, sticky stuff on my face. My fingers came away red. Blood.

Head wounds bleed. All those vessels going to the brain. Carrying nutrients so you can think. Which I hadn't.

I was back where I started. Back in my seat with a druggie standing over me.

This time, with blood in an eye. This time, my options were more limited.

Only two.

4

How To Think About Others

I was bleeding. A little stunned. But I hadn't lost yet.

I still had the phone.

And two options:

1. Stay down
2. Get up again.

He had struck first. Knocked me down. Made me bleed. And it hurt.

But he hadn't knocked me out. Thankfully, I was looking down when it happened. With my chin tucked in, my neck was stronger. Stabilized my head. Kept it from twisting. Kept me conscious.

Looking down had been the wrong move. But it had also saved me from something worse.

I was functioning. Not thinking, just functioning. Not thinking enough to gather more data and analyze it. But functioning enough. Enough to make a decision. The last decision I would make in the fight.

When he came at me again, I wouldn't be lying down.

I started to get up.

Before I could, the druggie did something else I didn't expect. Something I wouldn't have guessed in a million years.

Let's take another look at the Iraq WMD situation. Before the war. In 2002. And let's look at the thinking of a person everyone considered crazy at the time: Saddam Hussein.

If you remember, the U.S. wanted Saddam Hussein to destroy his stockpiles of WMD. Hounded him for a decade. Got the UN involved. Sent

inspectors. Generated resolution after resolution calling on Saddam Hussein to prove to the world he had no WMD.

As far as the U.S. was concerned, the ultimate game was: Saddam Hussein gives up his WMD or he doesn't. If he doesn't, we go to war. One zero-sum game (Saddam gets rid of WMD) or another (war). His choice.

Saddam Hussein chose war. Why?

To Saddam Hussein's thinking, the ultimate game wasn't with the U.S. In fact, it wasn't even with the U.N. Or the international community. In the ranking of enemies Saddam Hussein cared about, the U.S. and the U.N. weren't even in the top two.

Saddam Hussein's top enemies were internal. If you know Iraqi history, you know Saddam Hussein's party came to power in a coup. When he rose to the top, he had many of his own party members executed. He put down several attempts on his life over the years. He almost never slept two nights in the same place. Iraqi politics was the harshest kind of zero-sum game. Losing the game equaled losing your life.

Saddam Hussein's second-most important game? Also zero-sum, but not internal. It was against Iran. In the 1980s, Iran and Iraq fought a brutal border war. Tens of thousands killed. Chemical weapons used. Any day, to Saddam Hussein's mind, war with Iran could happen again.

What was Saddam Hussein's strategy for winning these two zero-sum games? It was complicated. Confusing to outsiders. With many levels. But if you understood the games he was playing and how he was thinking, what Saddam Hussein did with WMD made sense.

After the war, an FBI agent interrogated Saddam Hussein about WMD. The FBI agent summed up Saddam Hussein's answers this way: "Hussein believed that Iraq could not appear weak to its enemies, especially Iran."

What?

The short answer: Saddam Hussein wanted Iran to think he had WMD in order to deter attacks. But he didn't want anyone inside Iraq to actually possess WMD. Because whoever had the WMD inside Iraq could use it to threaten Saddam Hussein's grip on power.

Saddam Hussein created a perception of having stockpiles of WMD without actually having much (he had some). That worked, as long as the games against his internal opposition and Iran were the most important

games. When it came time to fight a third zero-sum game against the U.S. and an international coalition, that strategy backfired.

Saddam Hussein had to choose between winning his top two games (against internal opposition and Iran) and fighting a battle against the U.S. (against whom he had lost before, but afterward, stayed in power).

As most people do, Saddam Hussein decided to handle the more immediate threats first. That led to three decisions that ultimately meant his life:

1. Don’t allow international inspectors to see he had very little WMD.
2. Don’t allow anyone internally to know he had very little WMD.
3. Fight the U.S.-led international coalition.

I was bleeding on the subway seat but still in the fight. One working eye on the druggie, I gathered myself. Got ready to stand up.

That’s when it came.

A high-pitched howl. Like a wolf baying at the moon. The druggie’s face contorted into a smile.

It was so strange, so out of context, I didn’t recognize it at first. Then I understood.

He was laughing.

The druggie laughed and laughed. Like the funniest thing he’d ever seen was me bleeding on the seat.

Then he turned. Still facing me, still laughing, he walked backward down the subway car aisle. Sat down. Turned sideways and looked at me.

Still laughing.

I stood up, a hand pressed to my forehead. A couple more beats of my heart, and my fingers were dripping with blood. No way to stop it. Everything sticky. Everything red.

I checked my coat pocket for the phone. Still there. Glanced at the seat behind me to be sure I hadn’t dropped anything.

I got off at the next stop. Half the car emptied out. Probably the last stop

for only a few. The rest didn't want to be on a subway car with a laughing druggie lunatic who'd just made me bleed.

The young man in front of me got off, too. The one I thought might have been an ally. He came up and asked in the local language if I was all right.

I was glad to hear the local language. Because it answered the first question I always asked: Did he know I was a spy? The answer: No.

I was fine, I told him. But I must have looked bad, because he offered to take me somewhere. I thanked him again, said no. I'd be fine.

I climbed to street level. Took a crosswalk, and the first people coming toward me are local cops. Blood all over me and trying to blend in, they're the last people I want to see. They'll ask questions. Want to see ID. I was functioning, not thinking. Not wanting a test of my cover story.

They took a close look at me. One of them started to stop. But the other nudged him forward. They walked past. Maybe it was the end of their shift. Maybe they didn't want to deal with the blood.

The rest of the morning had smaller hurdles. In my office, the alarm wouldn't reset. Had to wake up a colleague to come babysit my stuff. Sat for two hours with Band-Aids and a cold rag.

When I got to the hospital, I had a cover story to tell the doctor. Why I was cut. What happened. But I didn't have to use it – no one asked why I had a two inch gash on my forehead. They just stitched me up. No need for general anesthetic, which I would have refused. Just a couple of pricks, a bunch of stitches and it was over.

When I made it to the backup meeting with the source, he was fine. A little concerned I had missed the first meeting, but not too worried. He was a crusty guy. Been through the wars. Understood the random difficulties of being a spy. A little cut over the eye? No big deal, in the grand scheme.

And I hadn't lost the phone. In the zero-sum conflict, I hadn't won anything. But I hadn't lost anything, either. Status quo was the result. Fine by me.

My wife looked over the stitches when I got home. Made sure they were tight. "It's not too bad," she said. "Could've been worse."

Thinking is what this short book is about. We've talked about two tools that help. The Data-Analysis-Decision-Action chain helps us focus on where we might have holes in our thinking. Have we gathered the right data? Are we analyzing it correctly? Are we making the right decisions, as a result? Are our actions in line with our decisions?

The Positive-sum/Zero-sum/Negative-sum framework helps us think ahead.

Now we'll use both to talk about the one thing you and I both know: this book. Or more specifically, your decision to buy this short book (assuming you did) and my decision to write it.

I'll start. First, I had to look ahead. Was there a positive-sum game out there to play? Was there an opportunity to create something that others would benefit from? That they'd pay for voluntarily?

My hypothesis was yes. If I wrote this, people like you would be interested. You'd even be willing to pay to read it. To test that hypothesis, I had several questions. What kinds of spy books sell? How about books about thinking?

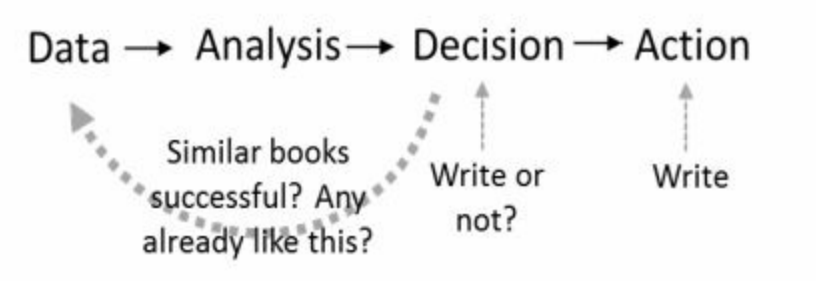
To answer, I gathered data. Not too difficult, with internet reviews, sales figures and the fact that writers love nothing more than writing about writing.

Analyzing that data, I noted the kinds of books people like to buy. The kinds of books that get good reviews. Books that aren't too long. Books with short sentences. Books that get a message across in an interesting way.

Final analysis: This kind of book has a chance, if I do it right. A chance to be bought. A chance to be read. Decision made: Write the book.

Acting on that decision was costly and time-consuming, including time for the CIA to approve it. Ultimately, it was completed. I wrote it and made it available for you to buy.

A graphic of the process:



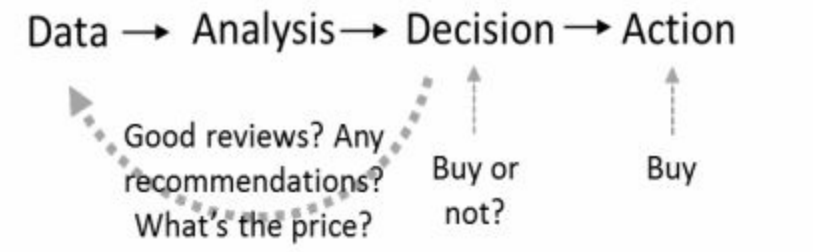
Now, your side. You, at some point, were presented with a decision on whether to buy this book (or steal it or borrow it) or not. You gathered data to make the decision. Maybe you read online reviews. Maybe you talked to someone who had read it. Maybe it wasn't really your decision: a teacher forced you to buy it.

You evaluated that data, judged its credibility and combined it with what you already know. You know that spy stories are generally interesting. You also know, if you've read any books by actual spies, that true spy stories can be dull. So you're reluctant. Or maybe you looked at the title and thought it was a little overdone. "A guide to thinking? Really?"

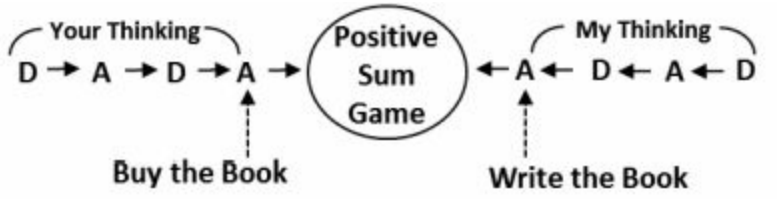
You also looked at the price and the time needed to read it and wondered if the book was worth the cost. Eventually you decided it was. Decision made: Buy the book.

In our modern world, turning that decision into action isn't too hard. Just a click or two, usually.

So you did it. You bought the book. Then you read it.



Since you bought this, and I wrote it, we both win. A positive-sum game, assuming you liked it. You get the stories and the knowledge in this book. A greater value, hopefully, than what you paid for it. I get the money. A greater value in aggregate, hopefully, than what it cost me to write it.



If both of us are acting in a positive-sum game, we both win. I've written the book. You've paid for it. I get paid. You get tools that work. We both win.

Then the game's over. The end. We take the results of the positive-sum game and go our merry ways. Our relationship is over. Unless you liked this book enough to buy another of my books. Then we have another positive-sum game. And that's the end.

Or is it?

Good thinking means good decisions. Good actions. Good results, hopefully. But not always. We live in a fog of uncertainty. Good thinking removes some of the fog. Never all of it. Living with ambiguity, as you learn in the CIA, is how you survive.

So is good strategy.

Good strategy means using thinking tools effectively. Choosing the right option. Making the right decisions.

There are many more ways to use the game theoretic framework we've used here. One, we've already previewed: How you play all the other games depends on what kind of game is the final game.

We'll talk about those strategies in the next book: A Spy's Guide to Strategy. We'll use some of the rules that game theorists have devised. The first, and most important being: Look forward and reason backwards.

We'll also look at some patterns game theorists have missed. Either because they haven't played the games I have. Or haven't lived them.

A preview of A Spy's Guide to Strategy is next.

A
Spy's Guide
to
Strategy

He was lying. That was no big deal. Lying is like breathing for spies. Everyone lies. That he was lying to me was a problem, sure.

He shouldn't have done that. But it wasn't unexpected.

That's why I had sources on sources. So I could know when they were lying. If it wasn't too serious a lie, I'd just move on. You can't expect to trust everything everyone says in espionage. Not realistic.

But this time was different.

There were three things:

1. He had done something bad
2. He was lying about it
3. He knew I knew he was lying

Numbers 1 and 2 were normal.

Number 3 was dangerous.

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[1] In this discussion of games, I'm leaning on game theory terminology but not using it exactly the way a game theorist would. For example: the term "positive-sum" (rarely used by game theorists – they prefer "non-zero sum"). Strictly speaking, game theorists could use "positive-sum" to refer to an interaction where one side's gain supersedes the other's, even if the other side loses. Here, I'm using "positive-sum" to refer to interactions where both sides win. This is also the way it's come to be used in popular culture. Probably because it's more useful for thinking.