

Divining 2026-2035: To Get It Right, Start with Double-O

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If we don't start by asking the right questions, there's no way the answers will be relevant, coherent and useful.

Our questions reflect the contexts we've chosen to make sense of the world, the lens we look through that sharpens our focus on some things and leaves the rest blurred in the background. If we choose the wrong lens, our questions will generate answers that lead to catastrophically misguided decisions.

In order to respond appropriately to all that will unfold in the decade ahead 2026-2035, **we need to ask the right questions, and the most fruitful place to start is with Double O: observation and orientation.**

In John Boyd's OODA Loop decision-making heuristic--*observe, orient, decide, act*--**orientation is the process of selecting the contexts and frameworks that organize our observations.**

Though the assumption that all humans see the same things is natural, it turns out culture generates profound differences in what we observe and how we organize our observations.

Studies have found that Americans and Asians focus on different aspects: Americans focusing their attention on the brightest fish in an underwater scene (for example) while those raised in Asian cultures focus first on the relationships of objects and backgrounds in the scene. The frame of reference / orientation drawn from these observations will naturally be quite different.

Experiential (i.e. tacit) knowledge and belief structures also play a role in what we see and identify as threats, obstacles and opportunities, what we identify as important and what can be safely ignored, and the mapping that we subconsciously use to organize our observations.

These frameworks may be heuristic, spatial, ideological, cultural or knowledge-based, as those with either specialized or broad-based knowledge will see far more when observing the same

phenomena than a person with little or no tacit knowledge of what's being observed.

If we get the Double O (observation-orientation) wrong, then our decisions will be wrong and our actions counter-productive.

Here are two examples of these dynamics.

Those raised in locales without pickpockets will emerge from a metro station in a culture and city that's new to them, and what they see as they glance around will appear to be a semi-random array of pedestrians. Someone who's been pickpocketed in various settings will immediately see a potential threat in a narrowing sidewalk and a cluster of lingering people as a classic setup used by pickpockets to distract and confuse the unwary.

Both people see the same scene but with a much different orientation, decision and response / action.

A broader example is the Vietnam War. The policy decisions that generated the war have been well documented.

Once I'd taken anthropology courses in university, I realized that the trajectory of history might have been entirely different if the White House had employed even one anthropologist who was given the same credence as the "Whiz Kids" whose frame of reference was data analysis and systems (Robert McNamara and staff), those focused on the geopolitical rivalry with the Soviet Union and the "Domino Theory" of Communism spreading through Southeast Asia (State Department and the Pentagon), and the political vulnerability in upcoming elections should the Democrats be viewed as "soft on Communism" (President Johnson and his political advisors).

None of these policy makers knew anything of any cultural, social, political, historical or military value about Vietnam. They did not recognize their profound ignorance, or the negative consequences of their implicit belief that their abstract contexts could be substituted for granular knowledge, or the inadequacy of their frame of reference for understanding Vietnam's complex history, terrain, culture and what mattered most in terms of asking the right questions: 1) the endemic corruption and weak public support of South Vietnam's elitist regime and 2) the Vietnamese populace's resistance to foreign occupiers (first China, then the French, then the Japanese and now the Americans).

While American policy makers viewed the US as "the good guys" in South Vietnam, many Vietnamese viewed the US as just another hegemon seeking to occupy their homeland.

In terms of negotiating an end to the war, the orientation of America's leadership was American politics: if we could just get Ho Chi Minh in a room and talk some sense into him, we could hammer out a deal. That this was not the context of the North Vietnamese did not occur to US policy makers.

This catastrophically hubristic tunnel-vision--our analysis is data-driven and therefore sound, we're powerful, we don't need to know anything about Vietnam beyond it's a domino in our geopolitical game--led to asking the wrong questions which guaranteed disastrous decisions and actions.

So the American leadership asked, "can we incrementally increase the military pressure until they cry uncle?" and the answer came back, "yes." What actually happened was this escalation led to a widening of the war.

The question, "Can we win the war on the battlefield?" was naturally answered, "Yes," due to American firepower and technology. But even repulsing the Tet offensive and inflicting crippling losses on the Viet Cong on the battlefield in 1968 did not end the war; rather, it was a public-relations defeat as all the "light at the end of the tunnel" perception-management had raised expectations of victory that were unrealistic, a reality that had already seeped into policy makers, who privately admitted that it was impossible to build victory on political quicksand, even as they continued to publicly support the war.

Rather than accept defeat, the response of the North Vietnamese leadership was to dramatically escalate the number of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) troops in the south.

The "Domino Theory" lost credibility, but to limit the political damage, the administration doubled-down on its defense of the war, even as those in charge of policy privately admitted the war's initial justifications were all grievously misguided.

It's important to note that the terrible consequences of this detached-from-reality policy catastrophe did not fall on those who planned and executed it. If the connection between error and personal consequences had been stronger, perhaps their orientation would have been less abstract.

When *the Pentagon Papers*--a dry, factual history of the war's origins--were released to the public, the Powers That Be freaked out because the perception-management cover had been blown, and the public would realize that the enormous sacrifices had been based on

miscalculations drawn from uninformed, incoherent frames of reference. As the war's realities had diverged from the narrative, observations had been shoe-horned into delusional perception-management: *the Five O'clock Follies*.



There are other limits in the process of selecting and fixating on an orientation. The human mind recoils at uncertainty and ambiguity and finds relief in assigning certainty to inherently fluid conditions.

This is why people cling so adamantly to an ideological or financial orientation, as this framework generates questions they already have answers to: if we marginalize the Other Ideology, the world will be made right; fix the money, fix the world, and so on.

This is not to say that ideological, geopolitical or financial filters aren't relevant. The point here is they're too narrow to be *totalizing*, i.e. they're not broad enough in scope and flexibility to integrate all the inter-connections that are hidden within our observations of complex ecosystems.

Abstractions (Domino Theory, ideology, Progress, etc.) are not substitutes for an integrated understanding of the complex situation we're observing.

Put another way, **we're more comfortable clinging to what we already know rather than ask what we might not yet know** that might be a more valuable source of the right questions and answers going forward.

This rigidity is comfortable but it doesn't generate the kind of flexible, adaptive approach that generates the right questions and a range of potentially useful answers.

There's no way we can "know what we don't know" with any assurance of completeness, but we can seek to remain open and flexible.

The problem with choosing a simplified framework like ideology or money is when circumstances change, the orientation selects only those observations that fit the acceptable template. **The most important observations no longer fit, and there's no way to make sense of them.**

On top of all this, due to pride and the potential loss of prestige, we recoil at admitting errors and respond by doubling down on the very convictions that generated failure.

In the next Musings Report, I'm going to lay out a framework for understanding the next decade (2026-2035) that is based on my own tacit knowledge (i.e. lived experience) and broad reading in history, science, politics, economics, anthropology, theology, philosophy and the intersections of these disciplines--for example, sociobiology, energy, demographics, the study of systems and cycles, etc.

This structure doesn't exclude other frameworks. It's broad enough and flexible enough to integrate a wide range of observations and ways to make sense of them. That integrative, totalizing capacity is what makes it valuable.

The danger in periods of change that don't follow the conventional narratives is our existing orientation no longer makes sense of what we observe, and **in clinging to it we spiral into *Model Collapse***, where the orientation, we've relied on to make sense of the world collapses into incoherence.

The temptation to double-down on whatever framework we've relied on, even as it no longer generates the right questions, only accelerates the descent into collapse.

This spiral is not as distant as we might imagine, nor is it as controllable as we might imagine, for the problem with rigid frameworks is they're brittle; they don't bend or expand, they crack.

When resources are plentiful and systems still have the capacity to adopt a new orientation in response to failure, even catastrophic losses can be absorbed because these buffers are robust.

Should resources dwindle or become costly, and institutions substitute perception-management for from-the-ground-up transformation, **the buffers needed to absorb losses no longer exist**. Decay or disastrous losses then trigger nonlinear unraveling and Model Collapse.

In the terminology of Boyd's heuristic, **events raced through our faulty orientation and wormed inside our OODA loop**, disrupting our ability to reorient our way of understanding events to ask the right questions, make coherent decisions and act effectively on those decisions.

The result is confusion, doubt, distrust, loss of focus, fear and chaos. This is the outcome we must avoid.

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This essay is part of the series *How Things Break*.