

2018

Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking

Richard Norton

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Norton, Richard (2018) "Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 59 : No. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <http://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol59/iss1/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact daniel.desilets@usnwc.edu.

analysis of the following case studies. Chapter 2 is almost unreadable, apparently due to the failure of anyone actually to read or edit it. Apart from turgid and sloppy language, the chapter's most egregious defect is the author's nonsensical adaptation of charts from Clay Christensen's *The Innovator's Dilemma*, a standard in the innovation literature. Pierce employs his own versions of Christensen's charts but leaves out certain key elements, with the result that the reader has no hope of making sense of them. This will give the knowledgeable reader serious doubt regarding the validity of the book.

However, things get better as Pierce swings into the case studies. He contrasts successful attempts to institutionalize disruptive innovations, like the Marine Corps shift to offensive amphibious warfare doctrine in the 1930s, with such failed efforts as Admiral Elmo Zumwalt's Project 60, an attempt to refocus the Navy on sea control. Pierce also compares the management methods used to promote sustaining innovations, such as continuous-aim gunfire, with those successful in promoting disruptive innovations, and he finds significant differences. In the end, a degree of clarity is attained, and by the final chapter the reader can with some effort understand and even agree with the author's main arguments. In fact, people engaged in military innovation efforts will likely find some practical insights.

If, then, this book, despite its flaws, can be useful for the knowledgeable military officer, academic, or defense industry manager, it is most definitely not for the uninitiated or casual reader. Ultimately, it is too hard to follow and contains too many editing errors to be

recommended as a worthwhile investment for the general reader. It is too bad that neither Pierce's advisers nor his publisher extended the effort to review and edit his dissertation properly; it could have had far wider appeal and value.

ROBERT C. RUBEL
Naval War College



Gladwell, Malcolm. *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*. New York: Little, Brown, 2005. 277pp. \$15.57

Among the many attributes desired in professional military officers is the ability to make extremely rapid decisions under conditions of extreme stress and peril, and for the highest imaginable stakes. Decisions may even have to be made in less time than is available consciously to weigh the alternatives and select a course of action. Although not unique—others, including doctors, law enforcement officials, and firefighters, face similar situations and under equivalent expectations—such demands are not a common part of most people's work experience.

In *Blink* Gladwell examines rapid, almost instantaneous, decision making—decisions made in the “blink of an eye.” The book advances an intriguing and seductive proposition, that people can be trained to make nearly instantaneous decisions using minimal amounts of data and yet achieve remarkable percentages of successful outcomes. If reading *Blink* could produce such a result, the book would represent one of the most significant advances in the field of decision making in decades. Unfortunately, such is not the case.

Blink is not going to transform its readers into paragons of successful, instant decision makers, however much the dust-jacket hype might imply it will. However, this does not mean *Blink* should be completely written off. There are insights worth thinking about and lessons to be gleaned from Gladwell's work.

For the most part, *Blink* is an extremely reader-friendly volume. Gladwell introduces concepts and follows up with deeper illumination and understanding through a variety of well documented anecdotes. During the first half of the book, the author seems about to deliver on the implied promise of better decision making as he explains how some people seem to master what might be called the "art of snap decisions." He does this in graduated steps, providing convincing evidence for each component of his argument.

Drawing on data from a study of gambling, Gladstone demonstrates that decision making occurs in both the human conscious and the subconscious mind. The gambling study found that at least in some people subconscious decision making occurs more rapidly than conscious decision making. *Blink* also provides convincing evidence that distilling, rather than increasing, information may result in not only faster but better decision making. The combination of subconscious data processing and the use of very limited data is known as "thin-slicing," defined as "the ability of the unconscious to find patterns in situations based on very narrow slices of experience." A related illustrative anecdote comes from the medical community. Doctors have determined that confining an examination to four key observations results in significantly higher percentages of correct diagnosis

of heart attack in the emergency room than do more comprehensive diagnostic protocols.

Blink identifies experience as another key component in the ability to make rapid and accurate decisions. Deep familiarity with one's subject, be it ancient Greek statues, professional tennis, marriage counseling, or, one may assume, battle displays, is an essential component to making correct fast decisions. To demonstrate this point Gladwell offers the example of Vic Braden, a noted tennis coach who apparently has a supernatural ability to predict when a professional tennis player is going to double-fault. Yet Braden cannot explain how he knows the double fault will occur. Clearly decades of coaching tennis have left him with a predictive ability that functions either so rapidly or so subconsciously that he himself does not understand it.

Gladwell also explores the negative aspects of thin-slice decision making. Everybody makes lightning decisions, all of us work off hunches and feelings, but all too often the decisions are influenced by images and stereotypes that have bombarded us from birth. One of the most powerful questions raised in *Blink* concerns the degree to which our attitudes on such fundamental questions as racial equality are answered through snap decision making. According to Gladwell the answer is "to a very large extent," so much so that people who sincerely believe they are not biased carry embedded subconscious attitudes that affect their perceptions of others. Interestingly, *Blink* suggests such attitudes do not have to be permanent, that exposure to positive images can result in measurable changes to subconscious perceptions. If true, these

findings would seem not only to give significant ammunition to those who claim the nation's children are excessively influenced by what they see on television but to have importance in efforts to counter terrorist attempts to popularize their ideologies.

Another reported pitfall to good snap decision making is the power of the first impression. Gladwell tells the story of Warren Harding, a man whose bearing and voice so impressed all who met him with their presidential quality that it seemed only right he should attain the Oval Office. Unfortunately, Harding's capabilities did not match his image, and his time in the White House was thoroughly undistinguished. In one of the book's more interesting anecdotes Gladwell explains the success behind the so-called "Pepsi Challenge," a blind taste-test designed to help the Pepsi Cola Company achieve a victory over its primary competitor, Coca-Cola. Being sweeter tasting than Coke, Pepsi was overwhelmingly favored when individuals sampled small amounts of each soda. The results were reversed, however, when the sample size was increased to an entire can. The Coca-Cola Company failed to realize this fact and diverted significant resources into a variety of failed attempts to meet the "challenge."

Much of *Blink* is devoted to the performance of retired Marine general Paul Van Riper as the commander of opposition forces in the MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE war game of 2002. This game simulated a massive U.S. military response to a rogue military leader in the Persian Gulf. General Van Riper reportedly scored an impressive victory against U.S. forces early in the game by a variety of innovative and unexpected tactics. Gladwell argues Van Riper was

victorious because his team, unencumbered by excessive information and overanalysis, retained the power of rapid cognition. In other words, rather than relying on technology and analysis to eliminate the fog of war, General Van Riper's team had been trained to work in the fog; his unexpected tactics plunged the U.S. military and political analysts into the very fog they had intended to dispel. Once both sides were operating in conditions of reduced clarity, Van Riper's team was able to triumph.

The remainder of the book examines in some detail the death of Amadou Diallo, a Guinean immigrant who was shot to death by members of a New York Police Department street-crime unit in 1999. Gladwell walks the reader through the shooting, presenting the police officers not as slaving racists or sociopaths but as victims of their own physiological responses to stress and a lack of training under high-stress conditions. According to Gladwell's research, as stress reaches extreme levels, such as in "shoot/don't shoot" situations, the human body changes the way it processes and perceives data. Under these conditions, signals, perhaps especially facial expressions, no longer carry the impact they would otherwise; humans enter a state the book identifies as "mind-blind," a condition that might also be described as temporary autism. The odds skyrocket that the affected individual, robbed of the ability to process key data rapidly, will opt to shoot a perceived threat. However, Gladwell explains, with training these automatic responses become less severe, allowing individuals to make accurate and appropriate decisions. *Blink* argues that an even more desirable outcome of proper training is to prevent such high-stress situations from developing in the first place.

Surprisingly, Gladwell concludes his book with a story that showcases the negative side of first impressions, thin-slicing, and stereotypes—the impressive increase in the number of women in professional orchestras. This growth, especially in sections of the orchestra traditionally thought of as masculine, is attributed less to a growing awareness of women’s rights than to the introduction of “blind auditions,” in which the applicants perform out of the judges’ sight. Deprived of immediate decision cues, the judges are forced to base their decisions solely on musical merit. Artificial or nonmusical impediments are removed, and women musicians are free to rise to their level of competence. As examples go, this is compelling in the extreme.

The merits of *Blink* are many. It is well written, lively, and engaging. Gladwell both explains the power of first impressions and demonstrates that there are indeed people who can make very successful decisions based on minimal data in next to no time. He also convinces that such talents can be acquired, or at least improved. Yet it is here that the book loses cohesion and momentum.

Having recognized that “blink” decision making can be both positive and negative, Gladwell offers no clear way by which the former can be improved and the latter minimized. Furthermore, the people he identifies as good “blink” decision makers are all *experts*. In many cases they have been mastering their fields for decades. For example, General Van Riper’s success was due at least as much to his expert knowledge of U.S. military procedures, strategy, and tactics as it was to his ability to make snap decisions. It is a pity Gladwell did not pursue the question of experience

a little deeper as, at least upon the surface, his findings would seem to have applicability to such issues as officer-training pipelines and criteria for command.

The fact that training can reduce the negative impacts of stress in snap decision making is nothing new, especially for those in the military. Whether it is the Marines reacting to a convoy ambush or a warship’s combat systems team responding to an air attack, realistic training is a critical component of success. Gladwell’s work simply reinforces what soldiers and sailors have long known: You fight the way you train.

While *Blink* will not make its readers experts at snap decisions, it remains a work of interest. For one thing Gladwell rather conclusively demonstrates that our individual personalities, our unique experiences, and beliefs and values, form an integral part of human decision making. Models that fail to take this aspect of decision making into consideration are almost certain to be flawed, and leaders who fail to understand the power of these attributes are almost certain to be disappointed. *Blink* may not provide all the answers, but the questions it raises are most definitely worthy of consideration.

RICHARD NORTON
Naval War College



Miller, Steven E., and Dimitri V. Trenin, eds. *The Russian Military: Power and Purpose*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004. 241pp. \$25

The study of the Russian armed forces has, like those armed forces themselves, fallen upon hard times in the contemporary world. Therefore, this study is most welcome. The editors and authors—