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The Myth of Situational Awareness

By [Grant Cunningham](#)

Photos by Author

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Even the highest levels of situational awareness are not a defense against a surprise ambush attack.

Over the last several decades, it has been fashionable to teach defensive handgunning from the premise of “awareness.” From color codes to misinterpretations of [Boyd’s OODA loop](#), the idea persists that awareness allows one to see a threat coming farther out and prepare to face it. This supposedly gives the defender time to deploy the competition and target-shooting techniques that are taught to go along with this artificial “awareness.”

I’m not at all convinced it works. At least, not as advertised.

Risk and Reward

Criminals are human, even when under the influence of illicit substances. While their decisions might seem irrational to us, the way in which they make those decisions—the actual neurological functions—are the same as ours. The fact that they’re predators with a human’s abilities is what makes them dangerous.

It doesn’t take education or socioeconomic status to be a human animal, with all the innate abilities that implies. Get the notion out of your mind that your superior intelligence is sufficient to outsmart a streetwise thug. He’s an expert at this—you’re not!

When looking for a victim, a criminal—like anyone else entering into a dangerous activity—is going to evaluate his personal risk versus the reward he’ll receive (what he’ll get from his victim). It may not be a conscious evaluation and he may not be able to articulate that he’s doing so, but that’s what he’s doing. In his case, it involves considering how valuable the target is compared to how much trouble it will be to extract that value.

One doesn’t have to be dressed in the latest Paris fashions and dripping with jewelry to be a high-value target. One’s value as a target can increase simply because of availability (one of a very few people in a largely empty parking garage or a lone jogger on a wooded trail). It can also increase by virtue of timing: the strung-out meth addict needs a fix now, which raises the value of anyone who happens by at that moment.

On the other side of the equation, risk to the attacker increases when witnesses are present and able to view/hear the altercation, law enforcement is close by or easily summoned, or the victim appears to be vigilant about his/her surroundings. Of course it increases if the victim is suitably armed, though if the intended target is legally carrying a concealed weapon, the perp may not know that.

“AH-HA!” you’re probably thinking, “Situational awareness works!”

Don’t be too hasty! Yes, vigilance or awareness or whatever you want to call it might reduce your victim profile by raising the apparent risk to the attacker. But if that’s the case, and situational awareness does lower one’s victimization chances, why am I so pessimistic about the concept?

The Awareness Fallacy

It’s because awareness is too often touted as a talisman against attack, and it’s used to justify training that doesn’t reflect the realities of criminal attacks. Being situationally aware doesn’t mean that you’ll be able to see your attack coming farther out. In fact, the opposite is more likely.

Ever seen a movie or television show where someone is planning a jail break or burglary? They case the joint (usually at night), watching the guard patrol



“Checking your six” will raise your profile, but won't give you advance notice of an attack.

the area. They learn how long it takes the guard to make a complete circuit of the building, and just as he turns the corner, they make their move—secure in the knowledge that they have a predictable amount of time to work before he gets back.

This is the fallacy of situational awareness. You can “check your six” all you want, but if your attacker has determined you’re worth the increased risk, he’ll simply wait until your head starts to turn to the front again, and attack you from the rear. You’ll be ambushed because that’s the safest thing for him to do. He’s not going to stand 21 feet in front of you, knife in hand, and start running while your hands hover over the butt of your gun. He’ll wait until your attention is diverted and suddenly appear from your blind side.

Situational awareness doesn’t reduce your need to prepare for that ambush attack! An ambush, by its very nature, happens when you are least expecting it. Everyone, no matter how aware of their surroundings, has moments (lots of them) when their guard is down. Even if it’s only for a second or two, that’s all an attacker needs once he’s decided on his target. He’s not going to attack you while you’re looking at him—he’s going to wait until you’re not looking and then strike!

Don’t make the mistake of assuming the criminal is going to engage in a protracted surveillance of his target, giving you time to spot him. His assessment can happen in a matter of seconds, because an experienced perp uses the same kind of apperceptive pattern matching and recall that you do when you perform a task that you’re good at. That’s what makes him an expert at what he does, and it’s why he’s so dangerous.

What’s the Best Preparation?

This is the Catch-22: if you’re not aware of your surroundings, you’ll be more attractive to criminals and more likely to be caught off guard. Every attack will be an ambush to you. On the other hand, if you have a very high level of situational awareness, it’s more likely that the attack you do experience will be of the violent, ambush variety—because he’s going to wait until your attention is diverted just long enough to strike.



If your target value is high enough, the attacker will simply wait for the right time to strike.

Regardless of your level of awareness at the time, the attack is likely to be close, fast and violent. That kind of attack—the ambush—is what you need to prepare and train for! Situational awareness advocates usually miss this point, because color codes and OODA loops and all that other stuff are used to justify training that doesn’t reflect this gritty reality.

The most productive thing you can do is incorporate counter-ambush methodology into your training, whether it be armed or unarmed. Counter-ambush methodology looks at the realities of surprise attacks, then considers the body’s natural reactions to those attacks, and from that derives the techniques that will be of most use when you don’t know the attack is coming.

A training regimen that ignores how these attacks go down is of little use. If you don’t understand that criminals rarely signal their intent ahead of time, you’ll end up spending precious training resources in irrelevant drills of the “21-foot rule.” If you don’t understand that ambulatory conjoined twin criminals are non-existent, you’ll waste time and effort performing unrealistic, choreographed “multiple target engagement” drills.

Perhaps more importantly, a counter-ambush strategy understands that the body reacts very differently to a surprise threat than to one which is even slightly anticipated. This isn’t “shooting under stress.” It’s the realization that the body has very specific natural responses to a threat stimulus that go well beyond the simple anxiety of the firing line. It takes those natural reactions into account in both what is taught and how it’s taught.

Successful counter-ambush methodology puts all this together to come up with a training regimen that prepares the good guy for the completely unanticipated need to engage a lethal threat. If it involves any sort of assumption that you’ll know the time,



It's unlikely that a predator will stand 21 feet away and give you time to respond.

awareness just isn't enough.

place, or nature of the attack ahead of time, it's not counter-ambush training!

Is There a Place For Awareness?

None of this means that situational awareness is useless. Properly understood, it can alter the criminal's risk-reward assessment in your favor. It might reduce the number of potential attackers simply because not all of them will be sufficiently expert enough to work around your alertness. What it probably won't do is give you advance notice, nor lessen the severity, of their attack. As we've explored, the opposite is probably true.

Change the risk/reward equation. Make yourself look like a hard target by cultivating an appearance of readiness, then back it up with learning good counter-ambush techniques for the time when

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25 Comments

Kirk (7 months ago)

A good article, yet the closing comment leaves me asking: What are "good counter-ambush techniques" and who's teaching them?

GrantCunningham (7 months ago)

I would suggest: <http://combatfocuss shooting.com/>

Mark (7 months ago)

Yes Grant can you email with who is teaching the counter-ambush techniques. Does I.C.E do this and how do they do it? Ex would it be force on force training and have multi people around and you don't know who will do the attack? Then will they teach you empty hand tactics to counter the ambush ? Thanks

Bob (7 months ago)

You are kidding right? I am to believe that paying attention to one's surroundings is useless, and will not help to anticipate or react to a potentially violent confrontation? Wow. But, if I can look intimidating, and take a class from you, I will can easily thwart a violent attack? I suppose it is pretty decent marketing to create a problem then offer a handy solution. Do you also teach Rex Kwon Do?

Cecilio Mendez (7 months ago)

Many years ago, I learned from Mr. Dean Grennel that his father (or was it his grandfather) used to say: "xxxx can do for brains, if you are lucky." As a well aged and old instructor I know that, although planning is paramount, there is not such thing as a PERFECT plan. Plan A will go to hell right after the first shot is fired. After that, is going to plan B, C, D, etc.; alone or combined. An ambush, by definition, is an unexpected - by surprise - attack. Nobody will ever be truly prepared for one. Counter-ambush is a description of what somebody did after one attack, at an specific moment, in certain place, under certain circumstances. That term is one which falls in the category of half-pregnant , half-sick and half-dead. There are none of those either! If we start

teaching AVOIDANCE first, then we know that what follows is - CHOICE. LEO's and the military do not have that opportunity (and some "shepherd dogs" also, but that is another story). Everybody else can choose whether to avoid or to proceed with an action. Those with a lot of information and skill will be better prepared to face many abnormal situations - but nobody will EVER be prepared to counter-ambush. So, my advise is this: learn a lot, practice a lot, trust your instincts, fight to win (cheating of course) and NEVER EVER give up. Have the biggest bag of tricks that you possibly can. That is how you MAY counter-ambush.

Gary Revere (7 months ago)

If your concern in writing this article was that some people believe that situational awareness completely removes the possibility of criminal assault, then I see your point. But in reading your article, I've gotten the impression that you believe taking effective measures to increase one's awareness is a low-payoff technique. In my opinion, developing good situational awareness skills, good Managing Unknown Contact skills (Southnarc's phrase), and good "don't go to stupid places with stupid people skills" will keep the vast majority of people from ever being confronted with a criminal assault. In my opinion, all these aforementioned skills are very high payoff. They are likely to be used often, and can be effective in avoiding and deterring most criminal assaults. Now I also believe that folks should have weapon skills (unarmed, impact weapon, firearm, etc) but these will be needed rarely by the person employing the awareness/avoidance/deterrence skills mentioned above. And the awareness/avoidance/deterrence skills make it less likely that we'll need to use a weapon of any kind.

GrantCunningham (7 months ago)

Bob - You need to go back and re-read, perhaps a bit more carefully. I never said paying attention to your surroundings was useless, and in fact I pointed out that it was a valuable thing to do - just not for the reasons that everyone thinks it is. What I *did* say is that situational awareness is not a panacea, and it's not the only thing you need to do. Even the best SA can leave you open to a surprise attack - then what? -=[Grant]=-

LarryA (7 months ago)

You make a good point, but about a limited situation. This article presumes I am already the individual targeted for an unexpected violent attack by a criminal. There's more to self-defense than that. I'm at a party. I notice one of the guests is inebriated. He approaches and begins to act belligerently. He wants to pick a fight with someone and because of my gray hair thinks I'm an easy target. I walk out of a mall. There are two groups of men in the parking lot throwing gang signs at each other. I'm sitting in my church choir room at rehearsal. A man walks in the door. He has a reputation for causing disturbances wherever he goes, and has been banned from several local businesses, churches, etc. My wife and I are picking out snacks in a convenience store. The door dinger goes off. A man wearing a ski mask and brandishing a pistol walks in. I'm sitting in a restaurant/library/church/whatever when I hear gunshots and screams outside. A man with a glassy stare walks in the door with an AR-15. In these situations I'm more aware of the attacker than he is of me, as an individual. There are also situations I can recognize as extra risk, and respond accordingly. I have to stop by my ATM at night. While it's impossible to routinely maintain a high state of situational awareness, I can be extra vigilant for the few minutes it takes me to complete my transaction. Again, I mainly agree with your article, but I think you should have mentioned that it's limited to a certain situation.

Octagon (7 months ago)

I don't see the article as that valuable. It basically states the obvious and attempts to paint several issues in all or nothing absolutes. Situational awareness is not everything and I can't ever remembering reading or hearing that it is or was claimed to be. The 21 foot rule(Tueller drill) is to demonstrate an awareness to the dangers of edged weapons at distance and the response time not some assumption that an attacker will display an edged weapon at 21 feet or any significant distance and then charge as alluded to. The conjoined twin comparison to multiple threats is just sarcasm taken to excess rather than any real attempt at enlightening discussion. Yes there are issues and training flaws however being overly sarcastic and critical while offering no alternatives just seems bitter and pessimistic which is all too common. The OODA loop works in predicted and surprise attacks and is even reinforced in its value when considered along with SA. They have real benefits that shouldn't be ignored or denigrated for drama or just to be controversial. Just as SA isn't everything neither is preparation and practice for ambushes . No one thing is everything and most everything has some value. Learning and discussing the pros and cons of each with a reasonably objective attitude more will benefit from it then negativity and polarized articles.

Clathrus (7 months ago)

If the article fulfills the promise of the title, I can say only one thing: Bullxxxx.

Ron Willis (7 months ago)

I'm not aware of anyone teaching that situational awareness alone was any sort of guarantee, or panacea to avoid an attack. Awareness is simply one of many tools to help avoid a criminal attack. As a retired police detective, now working in executive protection, I'm here to tell you that if a criminal targets someone, there is little that an individual can do to prevent that attack. As the attack develops we can deploy various defense tactics, and the sooner you become aware of the attack, the sooner you can mount your defense and increase your chances of survival. To say that awareness is a "myth," may be a poor choice of words.

Montana (7 months ago)

I agree with article. SA is a good tool, but it is only one of the necessary tools. I am in Kabul and often on the streets in a soft vehicle or walking from the vehicle to places I need to reach to do my job. It's a bit different here, but the principles are valid. You try to be subtle about your awareness gathering and you look for body language, facial especially. BUT, you never can be a hundred percent sure especially when many people are armed, the good and the bad don't dress differently and things happen very quickly. Reaction to an attack is your ONLY protection as it is not a matter of if, here it is only a matter of when. SA might help but it is not a panacea. Some people think it will keep them safe, it will help but that is all, it's just one tool. I agree with Grant, it's a start but not an answer.

Miguel (7 months ago)

Self Awareness is like Radar: you may detect incoming enemies but you better have a means to act/respond or you are just looking at your own demise.

rlcross (7 months ago)

I really liked the article and I think we can learn from it. Grant is right, the predator is an expert at what he does - he has to be or he will not survive. I have been caught off guard because of doing something stupid and it shocks me that just for a few moments I was at risk and I told myself afterwards, "don't let that happen again!" I agree that SA is simply part of a full on strategy but being highly aware while out in public has saved me and my family on more than one occasion. My head is on a swivel and I constantly flow from yellow to orange and back several times when I'm out and I think my environment is unstable. When I make eye contact with the 'would-be criminal' and he sees I mean business and won't back down...he usually does. He doesn't want the fight. And yes, when I need to, I simply avoid the situation/area all together and when I do, I'm in orange because even in avoidance you have to make sure it's safe to leave the area and if not, my gun is out but still hidden from view.

jrv (7 months ago)

I think some people are missing the point. SA is only going to get you so far. What is the most dangerous fight? The one you didn't see coming, the Ambush. You could walk around everyday in color red with pink stripes and Orange stars, but its that moment when you're in the icecream store with your family and trying to decide chocolate or vanilla and someone comes in presenting a lethal threat that's the most dangerous fight. You are being ambushed. That being said if you have always trained with your hands by your side like your Doc Holiday and never integrated a startle flinch into your draw before, that intuitive response to being caught off guard and being ambushed isn't there. I always tell people it's not the tattooed scary guy who gets your attention who's your biggest threat, its the criminal who's dressed in a suit that doesn't raise your "color"

trustedstar1 (6 months ago)

The article was a good one with good insight. However, it would be prudent to avoid situations that put you in an ambush situation. Traversing an area with ambush points is not wise. Now, it's a mute point indeed, if the area is filled with people. Again, "Situational"

Dick (6 months ago)

Yep, Jeff Cooper's color code system is just a fallacy. A fallacy based in experience through two wars and training thousands of law enforcement officers. Read his work, he never says his code system is foolproof or the only tool in your bag. The only thing I see here, is the lack of reality in the author's assertions. The biggest threat? Disregarding systems that work to try to stir the pot.

jrv (6 months ago)

" However, it would be prudent to avoid situations that put you in an ambush situation." Are you missing the point you can be ambushed anywhere? Walking to your car, the mall, icecream store, etc etc. The point was to point out you can be caught off guard and ambushed even in your super code red pink stripes high speed low drag ninja powered mythical heightened awareness. As far as the comment about the tried and tested comment. Well things evolve and if they dont they stay stagnant and die. Just saying its always been done this way, doesn't mean its the best way. Would you want heart surgery done with a technique used 30 years ago, or with a new more efficient technique?

RobPincus (6 months ago)

Some Harsh thoughts.... Kicking Sacred Cows sometimes stirs up emotions. In regard to this article, I have seen a recurring problem with many students who come to firearms courses: They think having the gun and sitting in the seat that faces the door of the restaurant are going to magically keep them safe. This theme of complacency that comes from all their "awareness" is a serious detriment to their ability to be open to training for Worst Case Scenarios. "Counter Ambush" training simply means that you are NOT going to assume that your color-code or habits or intentions are going to keep you from actually being caught off guard. We all look down, we all study the menu, we all check our phones, fish through our pockets for keys or do something other than "keep our head on a swivel and maintain a reactionary gap." Accepting that reality and training in ways that incorporate performing skills on demand after natural reactions (such as not choreographing malfunction responses or failing to integrate a flinch before drawing from the holster) can only serve to make you "more ready" if the worst befalls you and you happened to, maybe, possibly not be at Def-Con-Ready-Go when you need to access your skills. My guess is that 10 years from now, this article will seem mundane. (I know some of my most controversial ideas from the last decade are now much more widely accepted). The more we watch dash camera videos, the more we learn about the way the brain controls the body under stress and the more we practice realistic training methodologies, the more we will see "best case" thinking fade away. At the end of the day, if you

train for being off balance and you do happen to be on balance, at least your fight will be easier than what you've trained for. That seems like an easy PLUS to me. -RJP

stenusmc (6 months ago)

The problem is that most people lack focus in their training and thrash about in their search for the be all, end all. If you start from the standpoint that life sucks and xxxx happens and go from there, your training integrates various philosophies and techniques correctly. If you only train to clear malfunctions standing on your hind paws with two good hands, you're wrong. If you use that as a starting point and take it further, then you're on the right track. There is nothing wrong with using the color code and OODA loop. There is nothing wrong with learning to engage multiple targets. There is nothing wrong with understanding the 21' rule. The key is to understand what you're training for, and learning as much as you can, always keeping in mind that life sucks and xxxx happens. The more skills and knowledge you have, the easier it is to deal with.

Gordon Johnson (6 months ago)

Good article. Very good information. It really does make sense that just being aware isnt enough to thwart an attacker.

DavidWilliams (6 months ago)

I think Grant did a great job of putting this in context. SA is PART of the equation. Training in counter-ambush techniques is another PART of the equation. What he wrote makes sense if you put it in context or, in other words, look at the big picture. Grant wrote, "Successful counter-ambush methodology puts all this together to come up with a training regimen 1) that prepares the good guy 2)for the completely unanticipated need 3)to engage a lethal threat. If it involves any sort of assumption that you'll know the time, place, or nature of the attack ahead of time, it's not counter-ambush training!" I break it down due to the bad habit of writing firearms and police training curriculum for way too many years but he gives the three points needed for the training. You can, as an armed individual, take this information and incorporate it into your personal training. You can also use this information in your training programs if you have not done it already. Not matter what, Grant has made us think and examine these things. That is always good.

USKMA (5 months ago)

I must disagree with your basic point here, that sit awareness isn't worth worrying about. If you are keeping your head on a swivel, not going to stupid places, not looking like a victim, etc. it HAS to make you safer. Maybe not if you are targeted for an ambush by a group but in everyday life sit awareness will make you less likely to be a target of random crime. USKMA.com

cs hoff (5 months ago)

While I believe Grant's suppositions have some value here, I also believe that it's a fallacy to think you can get true "counter ambush" training. Like it or not, when you take any kind of training course, your mind already KNOWS that at some point, something is going to happen and you will be forced to address the introduced stimuli. Sure, the instructor might wait until you are distracted to launch the mock attack, but when you got to class that morning, you knew full well the attack was coming at some point, and you mentally prepared for it, at least crudely. An ambush, on the other hand, comes when you are not expecting it. By it's very definition, it is something you CANNOT prepare for. There is no anticipation of the event before hand, there is no sign up sheet, there is no liability waiver to sign, and there is no mercy shown. Only ruthless, unexpected, unpredictable, pure violence. Now clearly that doesn't mean that we shouldn't train to deal with sudden threats, but we must not kid ourselves into thinking that a pre-planned, simulated event in a training class, is going to somehow be the equivalent to a true ambush. In the overall scheme of things, your elevated state of cognizance of your surroundings will probably keep you out of more danger than any other skill you could possibly deploy. To write that off as fiction or even as low priority, IMO, is dangerous.

smurray (4 months ago)

I agree completely that learning the typical modes of assault and how to deal with them is critical to any self defense program. I also agree that one needs to understand how the body "naturally" responds to assault, adrenaline, etc., in the formation of responsive training and tactics. However, I think the article's comments regarding the value of awareness (or the lack thereof) are dangerously flawed. Perhaps even irresponsibly so. The reality is that the vast majority of assaults are crimes of opportunity. The victim was in the wrong place at the wrong time and thereby made himself (or herself) an attractive target to the wrong people. In most cases, the victim wasn't aware of the danger he was in until it was too late to resolve it. This is primarily a function of self- and situational-awareness (or as we used to put it before all of the clever phrases, just "having a clue"). Being aware of yourself, your weaknesses, your surroundings, the people around you, etc., is critical to being able to anticipate likely danger and reduce the threat. The threat is obviously not reduced simply by being aware, but by *acting* immediately on that awareness. It is false to say that criminals do not signal their intent ahead of time. Certainly they do not intend to, but they actually do give off multiple signals in the minutes or seconds leading up to an attack. It is involuntary, and only a pro can suppress them. An observant person can detect these -- I have, myself -- and assault victims often recount specific behavioral things that they should have interpreted as cues of an attack, when they instead tried to rationalize them. It is also false to say that you cannot prepare (or train) for an ambush (which is the usual mode of assault). Common assault almost always takes one of two forms. Both are easily simulated and can be addressed in training and are avoidable without significant lifestyle or social changes. This doesn't guarantee that one is going to prevail

(which is unlikely in any assault scenario) but it can increase the chances. Of course, there is also a VERY small minority of crimes that are not crimes of opportunity. These are the ones where the predator carefully researched you, stalked you, and waited for the perfect moment to strike. Again, awareness is critical in such a situation, and only by being keenly observant does one have a chance to detect such behavior by a clever predator, and therefore have any chance of pre-emptively addressing the matter. I'm not sure that there is a good chance of avoiding or prevailing against such a predator, irrespective of one's training. In other words, if someone has specifically picked you out and decided to kill you -- a highly unlikely scenario -- and is intelligent and resourceful enough to carry this out without significant risk to himself, you are going to end up dead, irrespective of your training. There is little point in training for something that (1) is highly unlikely, and (2) in which the training is unlikely to make any difference. I agree that people should seek training to deal with "close encounters," but the first and best approach of all is to avoid such encounters at all costs. This can only be done effectively if you are aware of the circumstances that typically lead to such encounters, avoid them, and are aware of when you have mistakenly inserted yourself into such situations. ... and I do teach Rex Kwon Do.

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