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When a commercial airliner with 155 passengers and crew lands in the Hudson River alongside New York City skyscrapers, people pay attention. It’s a story that will go down in air folklore. Captain Chesley Sullenberger – “Sully” – was at the controls when his US Airways flight lost power in both engines after flying through a flock of birds on take-off, forcing a quick return to La Guardia airport.

Then, after seventy-four seconds had elapsed, he decided that an emergency landing at nearby Teterboro airport was a better plan. Just 30 seconds later though, when air traffic control told Sully to land on Runway One at Teterboro, he replied “we can’t do it. We’re gonna be in the Hudson.” And amazingly, Captain Sullenberger actually executed a successful landing on the famous river, saving all on board.

How did he do it? Research in neuroscience offers an answer. Sully was operating with “one plan at a time”. He didn’t start a debate; his brain instantly decided what to do, and in this case, thankfully, he was right.

In fact, we’re all wired to make quick decisions. Any of our ancestors who took a little too long to think about that striped animal moving in the tall grass didn’t have a chance to pass along their genes to the next generation – slow reactions to saber-toothed tigers were not a path to longevity.

But sometimes, a “one plan at a time” decision-making process can lead to disaster. Think of bankers who continued to reinvest in mortgage-backed securities as if nothing could ever go wrong, or auto industry executives who created business strategies predicated purely on selling large gas-guzzling cars to American consumers. And now we have Republicans in the United States Congress who may be betting their political futures on obstruction rather than statesmanship. In such cases, decisions seem to be made without careful consideration, governed more by emotional bias than rational decision-making.

Here’s the fascinating thing about all this: One plan at a time works great when we have the right experience – Sully trained new pilots and was an accident investigator. It’s hard to imagine someone with better, more appropriate experience to safely bring down a large disabled jetliner.

What about the bankers and executives? In each case the experience base they were relying on meant they were following only one plan, a dangerous plan that they refused to switch away from. They needed to change, but they couldn’t.

Bankers couldn’t cash in their enormous bonuses fast enough from selling the very same investments we now call toxic. They didn’t notice how the level of risk was slowly reaching the point of no return.
For American carmakers, the decline has been slower, but once again leaders became intoxicated with old strategies that they never questioned.

And now, Republican members of the US Congress have united to oppose virtually all of President Obama’s initiatives to turn around the economy. But they have a plan of their own, and yes, it is a one plan at a time. What is this plan? Tax cuts, the key mantra of Republican rule during the reign of President George W. Bush, and a policy that led to enormous budget deficits. It just makes you wonder, what would they do about that saber-toothed tiger in the tall grass?

This is Sydney Finkelstein for the BBC World Service.