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Writer attacked by sex-crazed bird

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Do I look like a mature, male red-winged blackbird? I don't think so. My beak is not pointy. My shoulders are not red. My feathers are not glossy black.

Do I look like I'm romantically interested in mousy brown, streaky-breasted females with wings? I hope not.

I tried to explain this to Mr. Red Wing who was diving and buzzing me as I walked through a patch of high grass near a pond in our back field one afternoon.

He came in fast at eye level. His brilliant scarlet epaulets were puffed up like shoulder pads. If I had had a tennis racket, I could have smacked him over the net for a winner.

He might have had as many as 15 nesting females scattered close by. Fifteen nesting females!—no wonder the boy was a little crazy.

His defense was instinctual. He was defending his territory against whatever threat an intruder might represent.

Mr. Red Wing got me to thinking about Robert Ardrey—playwright, Hollywood scriptwriter and author of The Territorial Imperative: A Personal Investigation into the Animal Origins of Property and Nations (1966). I read TTI in the fall of 1967 during a graduate seminar on “The Causes of War,” taught by Warner Schilling at Columbia University.

Ardrey was a trained anthropologist who returned to this field after a successful writing career.

He was, I should point out, one of several sponsors of an Adlai Stevenson opposition-research team in 1952. One of these snoops discovered in the archives of Richard Nixon's high-school newspaper

his nickname—“Tricky Dick.” Nixon later transferred to Whittier High School where he was known as “Gloomy Gus.”

I’ve always thought that the principal motivation behind Nixon’s hatred of wealthy, Ivy League, New Yorky, Establishment “enemies” was rooted in two humiliations.

Although Nixon was offered a full scholarship to Harvard, he was forced to stay at home and attend California’s Whittier College, because he had to help his parents run their small grocery store-gas station. His parents had no money for train fare, and, apparently, Harvard would not kick it in.

When Nixon graduated from Duke Law School, after living for a time in an abandoned toolshed to save money, no old-line Wall Street firm would hire him despite ranking third in his class of 26.

I think he felt himself “kicked around”—by the media, by liberal intellectuals, by Rockefeller Republicans and by the Eastern prep school crowd who ran the big banks and blue-chip corporations. They saw him as graceless and unpolished. Just not their sort.

The most powerful memory I have of meeting Nixon in the summer of 1967 was that he was the most physically awkward human being I’d ever met.

These snubs denied Nixon territory -- legitimacy, money, acceptance, security -- that he felt he had earned.

Ardrey’s basic thesis in TTI is that human beings share with other animals an evolutionary instinct to establish and defend territory against members of their own species. This is an adaptive behavior linked to survival.

Humans, Ardrey might argue, are hard-wired to enlarge their territory when an opportunity appears and it’s to their advantage.

Enlarging territory is expressed in more ways than just piling up acres. It can explain the need to buy a bigger house, build a taller building, grab a bigger market share, drive a more expensive car, establish presence through celebrity and even snag a trophy spouse. The

need for territory may explain both human greed and running for political office.

Territory is critical to self-preservation insofar as it conveys wealth and control. Human territory even affects reproduction.

The competition to get into exclusive colleges is also a competition to share privileged territory where elbows will be rubbed with acceptable mates. One elbow might lead to another.

Individuals mark their territory, and territory marks individuals.

A person or group that lacks territory is at risk. Without territory in a broad sense, the person or group lacks a base that provides identity and sustenance.

Groups that have lost their territory may be kept around as a permanent underclass.

Genocide is one powerful group ridding desired territory of a weak, unwanted group.

Conflict comes about when two groups claim the same territory. Both are following their territorial imperatives.

But it's also clear that the idea of territory means more than just land and property.

In Iraq, Muslim fights Muslim over land packaged in religious doctrine. It's reasonable to conclude from watching them kill each other that "only-my-way" religion is a form of territory to be advanced and defended.

Religious genocide, whether intra-religion or inter-religions, is acting out the territorial imperative, Ardrey might say.

Wars occur when one group wants to enlarge its territorial boundaries at the expense of another group.

Ideologies and religious doctrines come and go, but the instinct to defend territory -- the Fatherland, the Motherland, the Homeland, the nation-state, the neighborhood, the block, the farm, the house, "our way of life," my room and certainly the meadow with nesting females -- is a constant in our history.

Nationalism is another form of the territorial imperative—the 13 colonies wanted independence from Britain, as did the Catholic Irish, Indians and Iraqis; the Confederacy wanted to be free of the North;

South Americans, Africans and Asians wanted to run their own lands without colonial and imperial occupiers.

Violence, according to Ardrey, is native to our species, as well as all others.

But the question is whether war is also an evolutionary instinct? Can we be a violent species without inevitably warring with each other over territory? Is war a useful adaptation? Does it further self-preservation? Can we control an evolutionary war impulse?

If war is an irresistible evolutionary instinct, we're fated to fight them with whatever clubs, guns and bombs we have at hand. Professor Schilling said that war was "functional, legal, frequent and fun." Alas.

But pacifists -- I'm not one -- have found ways to resist both the violence in our nature and its organization into warfare over territory.

Several countries have avoided wars with neighbors for a long time—Sweden for 150 years and Switzerland for 200 years come to mind. Iceland ranks at the top of the Global Peace Index, which suggests that peace is easier to achieve without neighbors.

We find human groups that make war a lot -- the Yanomami of the Venezuelan-Brazilian rainforest and the highlander tribes in New Guinea -- as well as groups that don't, such as the Buddhist Lepcha of the Himalayas (www.peacefulsocieties.org).

For 200 years, the United States and Canada have been at peace while sharing a long border. In that time, Europe has fed itself into the war inferno a half-dozen times. If the territorial imperative inevitably leads to war, how is peace explained between these neighbors? Is peace just an interlude?

If war is not a biological imperative even though violence is in us, then we have a chance to eliminate, channel, manage, marginalize, minimize, resolve, redirect and make fun of it.

Ardrey also had the idea that certain forms of cooperation were instinctual because they, too, enhanced our ability to survive. Our instinct to cooperate might gain some measure of control over our instinct to expand territory.

Well, all of this blathering didn't help me defend my own little territory against a pointed attack by a blackbird jacked up on testosterone and female adoration.

I galloped out of his territory.

Peace and polygamy reign in the meadow.

Richard Nixon often described his controlling, pacifist mother as a “Quaker saint.” Her “goodness” seemed to needle him, since he never matched it in his own mind. Some writers describe his feelings toward her as suppressed rage.

His father, a convert to Quakerism, was a failed, frustrated, angry man who abused his five sons psychologically and sometimes physically.

Although raised as an observant Quaker, Nixon enlisted in the U.S. Navy as an officer in 1942 and never professed pacifism as an adult.

Nixon seemed to have had dueling personalities—the dark, paranoid, mean-spirited gutter fighter and the environmentalist peacemaker who wrote his wife truly gushy love letters from his posts in the South Pacific.

Nixon grew up on a failed lemon farm. After law school, he and hometown investors in Whittier tried producing and selling frozen orange juice in 1938 as a get-rich-quick plan to take advantage of an orange glut.

Even as he started practicing law and made deliveries for the grocery store, Nixon was named president and counsel of this start-up—Citra-Frost. He invested his few savings and pitched in, cutting and squeezing by hand after hours.

He never figured out how to freeze the juice. He tried packaging it in glass jars, paper cartons and cellophane.

Finally, he placed his entire inventory in small plastic bags, which he stored in a refrigerated boxcar. The inventory exploded, most likely from fermentation. Bankruptcy followed.

Had Nixon used frozen concentrate instead of juice, he might have established a successful territory in business and never entered politics.

After all, concentrate worked for Minute Maid, Tropicana, Welch's and Dole.

The exploding boxcar followed a disastrous start in law where Nixon erred in representing one of his first clients and ensnared his tiny firm in years of litigation.

His wife, Pat, had an even more difficult childhood. Her parents died early. She worked in the fields, doing stoop labor. An orphan at 18, she took a custodial job cleaning at a bank in Artesia where she suffered the jibes of her classmates.

Pat was smart and had Hollywood looks. He was smart and, as a young man, was not unattractive. They both were ambitious and wanted to get out of where they were. His dogged pursuit of her was, I think, territorial.

One of his war-time letters contained these sentences: "Dear one—what fun we could have on a farm! Dogs, horses, snow – and somebody to do the work!" (February 11, 1944)

Farming taught Nixon an important life lesson: Get someone else to do the dirty work.

After failing in an agricultural business and as a small-town lawyer, Nixon would say: "Public service has always appealed to me more than making money."

Nixon lacked territory. His subsequent successes, failures and shots in his own foot stemmed, I think, from his desperate pursuit of it on larger and larger maps.