

Chewers by Masticadores

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“Mistakes, Tactical Errors and Missed Opportunities” by Matias Travieso-Diaz

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War is the unfolding of miscalculations.
– Barbara Tuchman

Two large colonies of driver ants (*Dorylus helvulus*) occupied contiguous stretches of the Kenyan savannah. Their members – numbering in the many millions – conducted periodic raids, marching in swarms across the grasslands in broad columns, overtaking and consuming any small animal, insect, or reptile in their path. Each colony, however, instinctively recognized the other as a potentially powerful adversary and largely stayed out of the other’s way. Instead, each driver colony pursued, independently, voracious campaigns aimed at the other inhabitants of the savannah.

The westernmost of the driver ant colonies often preyed on other ant species, and frequently came in contact with acrobat ants (*Crematogaster mimosae*), small red and black ants that dwelt on the whistling thorn acacia trees that dotted the savannah’s landscape. The driver ants counted on the overwhelming number of their forces, and the scissor-like mandibles of their soldiers, to shear their way through the bodies of the smaller ants, and confidently went up the acacias seeking to destroy and consume them.

This overconfidence was a mistake, for the attackers did not count on the resilience of the acrobat ants. The acrobats were prepared to defend their homeland and fielded battle-hardened forces, accustomed to engaging their opponents effectively. When confronting an enemy or prospective prey, an acrobat ant raised its abdomen forward and over its thorax and head, allowing it to point its sharp abdominal tip in all directions so that it could sting its enemy and inject a paralyzing venom into it. Then, it released an alarm pheromone to alert other soldiers or workers in the vicinity that prey was seized. Several defenders gathered around a fallen adversary, spread-eagled its limbs, and carried it along their backsides to a convenient spot on the tree to finish off and consume it.

Through the application of their respective tactics, a stalemate was reached between the invading driver ants and the defending acrobats. Heavy casualties were sustained on both sides, but the swarming driver ants could not overwhelm their opponents, and the acrobat ants were not capable of driving their adversaries away.

The denizens of the savannah might have been spared many months of death and destruction if the driver ants were able to assess the deadlocked status of their campaign and develop thoughtful plans to withdraw, circumvent, or negotiate a resolution of their conflict with the acrobat ants. However, that ability to reason coolly was absent, and the driver ants continued their futile efforts to overcome the acrobats.

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One of the driver ant leaders put into effect some new tactics to subjugate the acrobat ants. There were suicidal attacks by driver soldiers aimed at concentrations of acrobat ants, to slay as many of them as possible. The drivers also released misleading scents to attract enemy fighters and lure them away from the fight. Through these efforts, the number of acrobat ants deployed to resist the invasion of their territory was temporarily reduced.

In response, the weakened acrobat ants resorted to indirect resistance methods: hit-and-run tactics, ambushes, and nighttime incursions to harass and disrupt the driver forces. Through these tactics, the fighting spirit of the acrobat ants was maintained.

The driver ants were unable to adapt to the evolving battleground conditions, and the stalemate continued.

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As the dry summer season unfolded, the acacia trees that hosted the acrobat ants became the source of crucial shade for many of the animals that inhabited the savannah. A family of elephants sought refuge from the heat under the acacia tree that served as the battleground between the two species of ants. The elephants noticed the column of driver ants that had gathered around the acacia, and set out to stomp on them and drive them away. At the same time, however, elephants brushing against the tree disturbed the branches of the acacia, and acrobat ants rushed out in large numbers, bit the animals' exposed skin, ears, noses, and eyes, and swarmed aggressively over the elephants' faces.

After a few seconds, the elephants moved away from the heavily-defended tree. The possibility that their intervention would help defuse the driver ant attack was missed, and the ant battle resumed, with grievous consequences for both sides.

If a similar conflict took place between humans instead of ants, the results would be different. Being reasoning creatures, humans can avoid or correct disputes between nations and can adapt to adverse circumstances and take advantage of opportunities to settle disputes through negotiation. These faculties would preclude disputes from festering into prolonged armed conflicts.

After all, as the Bard proclaimed: "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and admirable! In action, how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a god! The beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!"

We are certainly at the top echelon of God's creation.

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