Invoking the territorial imperative

"...If people think they have even modest control over their destinies, they will persist at tasks and have greater commitment."

by Lt.Col. Robert L. Ness, Jr.

There is a wellspring of energy in each soldier that leaders can tap to maximize that soldier's efforts. Two articles in recent editions of the *Army Times* newspaper allude to this wellspring. The source of this energy lies in the concept of the territorial imperative.[1]

In one article, P.J. Budahn looked at the concept of "power down."[2] He said, "It's decentralization to build initiative and cohesion at the small unit level." It was created to correct "the refusal or inability of senior commanders to allow their subordinates to exercise leadership." Such behavior operates directly counter to the concept of the territorial imperative.

In contrast, the other article, "Study Notes 'Calm' Style of Successful Leadership,"[3] also written by P.J. Budahn, distilled the essence of the territorial imperative. He captured it when he quoted the study entitled "Excellence in the Combat Arms" by saying, "The excellent battalion commanders realize that if people think they have even modest control over their destinies, they will persist at tasks and have greater commitment."

To best understand the concept of the territorial imperative, it is necessary to set aside for the moment that we are soldiers, Americans or even modern man. We need to look at ourselves simply as homo sapiens, just one of the many species of animals inhabiting the earth. As other animals with backbones, we are a territorial species.

Territory in this context is that location from which animals, either singly or in groups, will drive members of their own kind. The animal's willingness to fight is at its height at the center of the territory. That willingness decreases as the border of the territory is approached. It vanishes altogether when the border is crossed. Once on a territory not his own, the animal would take flight rather than fight. At the same time, his neighbor would rather fight and defend his territory. The basis of this territorial imperative is nothing more than the urge to survive.

Territorial animals are those where all the males and sometimes the females inherently seek a property they can claim as their own. Once they have attained this property, they will defend it from all others. In all territorial species, energy seems to increase with the holding of a key piece of territory. That territory gives the individual a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose and greater energy.

How can we apply this? How will it work? Fair questions. Military leaders have set areas of responsibility, given to them by higher authority. They and those around them know where and what that territory is. There is simply no question about it.

But what about the subordinates? Is it merely a job to them or do they feel a sense of ownership for what they are doing? Leaders influence that. They should give each subordinate the authority to carry out some particular set of duties or control some particular area, whether it be on a fire team or a radio team, in the supply room or the orderly room. Once soldiers know they have something for which they are responsible and for which they will be held accountable, they will act as the proprietors of their territories. Their leaders will then have few worries about their performance, once they have been trained.

There is no better testimony to the power of the territorial imperative than that corridor in the Pentagon called the "Hall of Heroes." It memorializes all of the Congressional Medal of Honor recipients. Each instance shows that when their time came, they acted. They gave no thought to what they did. In each case, they foreswore their own sense of survival for the survival of their fellow soldiers, their unit, their kind.

An army of deer led by a lion is more to be feared than an army of lions led by a deer.

They conformed to the territorial imperative.

However, the response operates on a less dramatic scale. One battalion commander I remember in Vietnam was concerned that his soldiers did not get to the bunkers fast enough whenever he called alerts. One night when the compound siren went off indicating a ground attack, the battalion commander went to the area between the barracks and the motor pool to see how the soldiers were proceeding to the perimeter. He became visibly upset when he saw few soldiers moving. He was about to go storming into the living areas when he realized that everyone had already gone to their assigned positions. Each soldier had responded beyond the commander's expectations. No one thought about where to go or what to do; they just went and were prepared to repulse the enemy. Their response was filled with the will to survive, to protect their territory and to defend their own.

The concept also applies outside of a war environment. Consider a company in the Federal Republic of Germany, whose on-hand strength ran about 50% of required strength. With the unit commander being the only commissioned officer assigned, sergeants first class served as platoon leaders, staff sergeants became platoon sergeants, and so on until in some instances, young specialists became team chiefs. In each case these specialists were technically proficient; in each case they knew the extent of their responsibilities and that the success or failure of their team/section/platoon depended upon them. Each became the proprietor of his territory and worked tirelessly to make his team or section the best in the company. When promotion selection time came, they went to the top of their lists. Their obvious skills, pride and confidence carried them to well-deserved recognition and advancement.

Just as the territorial imperative at work produces better leaders, effective leaders can trigger the territorial response in their subordinates. In describing his best NCO, one of my unit commanders said of him that "he created within his people a sense of ownership."[4] Ownership, indeed; one of the soldiers nurtured in that environment rose to win MACOM level recognition. He was selected as the US Army Information Systems Command NCO of the Year for 1984 and the Army representative at the USO Salute to the Services on Okinawa for 1985.

It is a basic response within each human being to feel a sense of ownership, a sense of having a particular territory. It is a strong force within everyone waiting to be tapped. Granted, it exists to a larger degree in some more than in others, but it is there. Leaders must remember the territorial imperative as they fulfill their duties. If they give their subordinates their areas of responsibility, they will become the proprietors of them. They will become proud of them and they will defend them. In so doing, they will become "All They Can Be."

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ENDNOTES

1. *Ardrey, Robert,* **The Territorial Imperative,** *Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968.*
2. *Budahn, P.J., "Power Down,"* **Army Times** *magazine, 10 June 1985.*
3. *Budahn, P.J., "Study Notes 'Calm' Style of Successful Leadership,"* **Army Times** *magazine, 13 May 1985.*
4. *From a conversation between Lt.Col. Robert L. Ness, Jr. and Maj. Peter A. Joel, 7 January 1985.*
5. *Material also drawn from* **The Social Contract,** *by Robert Ardrey.*