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editor: dean (at) alt7.com
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December 06, 2004

Fahr Ain'ts : Stirring it Up in Iraq

An Alt7 exclusive guest column by [Clay Reynolds](#)

Down here in Texas, we have a pervasive little insect called a “fire ant,” correctly pronounced “fahraint,” apparently. It’s not indigenous to North America but came to visit, I understand, with a ship load of balsa wood from South America, then decided to overstay its welcome. These feisty little hymenopterouses fear no natural predators in this hemisphere and are free to breed like, well, like ants. They mate in mid-air, the queen colliding with a male, and consummating their enchanted evening as they fall to the ground. What happens to the male ant after this serendipity encounter isn’t known; however, the female, after a smoke and perhaps a twinge of regret, quickly discovers that she is pregnant, and she sets about building a mound. Actually, she doesn’t build it. Instead her numerous offspring, which quickly demonstrate the formicidae family’s fecundity by numbering in the thousands almost instantly—and mostly male, at that—are set to work constructing hearth and home so that even more of their siblings can be brought forth in greater comfort than was the occasion of their own inception, one presumes. The point being that wherever the initial bride falls, she commissions a mound.



The mounds can grow to enormous proportions. I’ve seen some with the circumference of manhole covers and the height of twelve or more inches from surrounding vegetation, and they reach deep underground in complex systems of miniscule tunnels all leading, presumably, to the queen herself, who, after all her industry, which continues apace, has a voracious appetite that keeps everyone quite busy. In sum, each mound has its own queen who does nothing but eat and make more fire ants.

From a distance, the mounds look like piles of harmless topsoil that somehow has been dropped onto a grassy area. I’ve seen pastures covered with them, so thick that they appear to have been deliberately deposited by some machine that would go along and leave one neat pile after another about every ten feet. Initially, the population of different mounds were hostile to one another, but they’ve apparently adapted to one another’s proximity, so they don’t even feud any more.

These tiny beasts are more than a pest to farmers and suburbanites trying to garden or grow a lawn; they’re also dangerous. Their stings or “bites” produce carbuncular welts the size of a teenager’s pimple, and they exude a toxic substance after nipping that causes them to itch and swell and then burn if they’re scratched and they erupt. If the bites occur in a cluster, they can become infected and cause fever, even death in small animals and children. Anyone who disturbs a fire ant bed soon realizes it. The slightest vibration or disruption of the surface of a mound calls them forth in legions. They swarm and attack whatever alien thing is handy, biting and crawling at lightning speed. As they’re fond of eating insulation around electrical boxes and outdoor lighting, like to invade planters, hay bales, even inner combustible engines; they’re attracted to sidewalk edges, foundations, hose reels, and garden implement sheds and barbeque pits. Mostly, they tend to build

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mounds in places where human contact is likely, particularly where it's likely to occur before the human is aware of it; but contact is something they're very fond of alerting the human to and in a painful way.

They're hard-shelled little beasts, difficult to kill even by pinching or mashing or even by stepping on them, and they're impervious to being wiped off the skin, as they tend to cling tenaciously to whatever is used to brush them away, and then to swarm up to cover any hand that might hold the instrument. But the big problem is that they have such great defenses against the usual anti-insect weapons of man. You can't drown them—whole mounds have been observed floating idly down flooded creeks and rivers—and poisoning them is difficult, as they're impervious to most insecticides save one or two very expensive concoctions that require complex and careful use. Even applying those has to be done carefully, for if the mound is even slightly disturbed before, during, or after the process of applying the granular poison is accomplished, the queen stops eating in self-defense. If they're seriously disturbed or the top of the mound is even destroyed, she reminds herself that busy children are happy children, and she orders a relocation of her domicile by moving off a few yards and starting over. They can be killed; but it takes patience and must be done thoroughly. Killing one or two or three beds won't do it. They have to be eradicated entirely.

I sometimes think that Iraq is George Bush's fahr ain't mound. He's put his sometimes Texas boot right into the middle of it, and now that they're swarming all over the vamp and threatening to climb up his leg while he frantically dances around and swats at them. He sometimes stomps on them to no good effect. I fear that he has disturbed the mound too much for surface treatments to be effective, and that they soon will relocate and begin to build again. I am also fearful that total eradication may be his only recourse. Actually, I'm terrified that it will be.

Native Texan novelist, scholar, and critic [Clay Reynolds](#) is the author of more than five hundred publications ranging from critical studies to novels to book reviews. His latest novel is "[Threading the Needle](#)".

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