

Bird brains and fowl play

Many years ago scientists asked why birds flock together and what causes the flock to sway side to side and up and down while staying intact, leaving no bird behind. After much experimentation they isolated what they called the “flocking mechanism” in the bird’s brain. After surgically removing this from the brain of a bird, let’s just call him Adolf, they placed Adolf back into the flock to see what would happen.

Adolf became the leader.

When a bird strays, say to snap up an insect, normal birds will flock around it, creating what we see as the meandering undulations of the flock. Since Adolf lacked the socialization part of his brain and never flocked back, while the others were obliged to flock to Adolf, Adolf led the way.

From the Pharoahs to Genghis Khan to Napoleon to Dubbya, I always thought this explained something.

Then there was the experiment where they put a pigeon, let’s just call her Martha, in a room with a machine that dispenses food into a bucket when a lever is pecked. Martha will soon find the lever and calmly peck when she’s hungry. If the machine is rigged to dispense food every second or third peck, Martha will learn the pattern and again peck at her leisure when she’s hungry. If the machine never dispenses anything, Martha, of course, will go peck somewhere else.

But if the machine is rigged to dispense food randomly, Martha becomes hooked. Never knowing when the payoff will come, she pecks furiously and defends her lever against all comers.

This, I have always thought, explains casino gambling. With just one difference. Gambling devices such as slot and poker machines are always rigged to give Martha back less than what she puts in. Eventually Martha will starve to death.

Assume for the moment that among the millions who flock to Las Vegas to peck at the levers, a wingless Martha from Oklahoma is pitching dice or pulling on her lever at a local resort, neighborhood casino, airport, tavern, grocery store, convenience mart, or whatever other excuse for a hunting license that our game wardens have come up with. Martha hits a jackpot or winning number, or so she thinks. Let’s assume that the local hunting ground, let’s just call it the Blamagio, thinks otherwise. The “random number generator” they say, i.e., the dice or that electronic chip designed to starve Martha to death malfunctioned. Holding her bucket of nickels, Martha stands up against the billion dollar Blamagio and demands her rights.

Guess what? She doesn’t have any.

The Nevada Legislature has stacked the deck in favor of Blamagio twice over. First, gambling debts are not enforceable under Nevada law unless they’re in the form of “an instrument of credit,” otherwise known as a marker. Only casinos, of course, have such things. The casino can even send the Sheriff out to collect under threat of criminal prosecution, but Martha can’t even file

a civil lawsuit. Second, although Martha can complain to the Gaming Control Board, she can't appeal a decision against her. The Blamagio, on the other hand, can take its case all the way to the Nevada Supreme Court. In other words, while the Blamagio can demand that the Board hear its case and respect its rights, Martha can only beg. We have a certain pecking order here in Nevada. Curiously, even the federal courts have upheld this fowl procedure. The casino has more to lose, they say, since the Board could clip its wings.

All Martha has to lose is her money, dignity, and sense of fair play.

It's not just the game that's rigged. Our leaders know that, once the pigeon is hooked, you can do just about anything you want to her.

Which brings us back to Adolf.