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The Future of American Nationalism

by Clyde Wilson

“All the evidence shows that differentiation which is not fragmentation is a source of strength. But such differentiation is possible only if there is a center toward which the parts look for their meaning and validation.”

—Richard M. Weaver

One of the most interesting of many superb memoirs of the American Civil War is that of the erudite Confederate General Dick Taylor, called *Destruction and Reconstruction*. During the closing days of the war, Taylor found himself in command of the last remnants of organized Confederate troops in the Gulf states. After the surrender of the armies of Lee and Johnston and the capture of his brother-in-law President Davis, Taylor saw nothing for it but to open surrender negotiations with the nearest federal commander.

Hungry and shabby, he went to meet General Edward Canby under a flag of truce, and was received by that splendidly accoutred Union officer with quiet courtesy and respect. Conquered and conqueror sat down to a welcome breakfast. In his usual dry and understated way, Taylor remembered what happened next:

There was, as ever, a skeleton at the feast, in the person of a general officer who had recently left Germany to become a citizen and soldier of the United States. This person, with the strong accent

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and idioms of the Fatherland, comforted me by assurances that we of the South would speedily recognize our ignorance and errors, especially about slavery and the rights of the States, and rejoice in the results of the war. In vain Canby and Palmer tried to suppress him. . . . I apologized meekly for my ignorance, on the ground that my ancestors had come from England to Virginia in 1608, and, in the short intervening period of two hundred and fifty-odd years, had found no time to transmit to me correct ideas of the duties of American citizenship. Moreover, my grandfather, commanding the 9th Virginia regiment in our Revolutionary army, had assisted in the defeat and capture of the Hessian mercenaries at Trenton, and I lamented that he had not, by association with these worthies, enlightened his understanding. My friend smiled blandly, and assured me of his willingness to instruct me.

Taylor was too much the gentleman to mention that the person to be instructed by the newcomer on the principles of Americanism was also the son of a President of the United States.

This small incident speaks volumes about the history and nature of American nationalism. (Nationalism I will herein consider to be a people's idea of themselves, their more or

less conscious and public identity, which reflects their history and values. This is the implicit basis for their internal cohesion and their mobilized interaction with other nations. The experiences attendant upon interaction, friendly or unfriendly, with other peoples will play back and become a formative influence upon the sense of identity itself.)

One of the central features of American nationalism is that it has not only constantly evolved, but has undergone sea changes at least three times, though Americans are hardly aware of it, one indication of which is that very few could today sympathize with Taylor's viewpoint. When President Ronald Reagan celebrated America as a "City upon a Hill," a beacon to all mankind, he paid tribute to what he believes is a long-continued tradition of American prosperity, egalitarianism, and good works, without recognizing that the modern America he celebrates is something quite foreign and in many respects inimical to what the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts Bay in the 17th century had in mind when they expressed their aspirations to become a "City upon a Hill." This is perhaps as it should be, since nationalism is a mythology, a form of consciousness, the success of which is measured not by its historical accuracy but by its power to bind a given community into a common sense of interest and identity.

Yet if our goal is understanding the nature of American nationalism, and its relationship to the nationalisms of other parts of the world, it is necessary to take a historical view as well as describe the current consciousness. One thing is clear: American nationalism has always had about it, in its articulated aspects and compared to the nationalisms of Europe, something of the nature of a doctrine, a set of beliefs, as opposed to the allegiances of blood, dynasty, language, history, religion, and territory that form the core of European senses of national identity. Which is not necessarily to say that American nationalism has always lacked an ethnic and religious core or always been understood in terms of a universal to be applied to all mankind.

The 13 British colonies of North America that united to fight a successful war of independence and to found a constitutional federal union were quite diverse in their histories, economies, interests, and culture. What they shared in common was a British Protestant origin, a strong sense of the value of those inherited parts of British constitutional liberty and self-government that were most useful and pertinent to them, and the experience of the Revolution and Constitution-making itself.

A sense of American nationalism was not absent from the War of Independence, but it was relatively muted, especially in comparison to the nationalist outbreaks in Europe that began a few decades later. (Dick Taylor's German interlocutor was more than likely an offspring of the Revolutions of 1848.) And while Americans sometimes appealed to the opinion of mankind and thought of themselves as an example to peoples everywhere oppressed by arbitrary governments, they were not really universalists or egalitarians. Their attitude was more that of a younger son declaring his equality with his older brothers than of a revolutionary eager to impart "democracy"—a bad word to them—throughout the universe.

Neither their geographical situation—their isolation from the Old World and the prospect of a nearly empty

continent to be settled—nor their inclination suggested to them any mission to expand democratic revolution to the world. They were, indeed, highly content with their own principles, prospects, and nature. It did not occur to them that they were Citizens of the World. Their British Protestant culture was nearly unremarked upon, not because it was rejected but because it was so taken for granted.

What held the American states together in a loose political unity was not nationalism but a constitutional settlement embodying federal republican principles. One of the implicit aspects of this settlement was that it was to preserve an already existent identity. (Americans still swear allegiance to the Constitution, not to the nation or to any explicit set of political dogmas.) This historical truth is little understood today. In fact official American belief regards the Declaration of Independence as the beginning of an endless process of active movement toward an ever-more egalitarian and universalist society. This is because of the intervention between us and the Founding Fathers of that sea change in the thinking of men that is summed up in the term "the French Revolution."

While Americans before the Civil War were often quite truculent in asserting their rights and honor over against other countries, and in upholding the superiority of their republican, constitutional liberties to arbitrary governments elsewhere, they were not nationalists in the sense that was later to be understood. There were in antebellum America no loyalty oaths or pledges of allegiance to the flag or the nation. Freeborn American citizens would have considered such to be an insult to their patriotism as well as an invasion of the rights of their states.

It is true that during the early 19th century rhetorical emphasis was increasingly laid on an idea of nationalism. New Englanders, who had always had the most organized sense of community and mission among Americans, strove, with a good deal of success, to promote New England ideals of the future of America, as those ideals had been transformed by the devolution of Puritanism into a progress-oriented economic system and by Transcendentalism, a German stepchild of the French Revolution.

Americans of other sorts were no less patriotic, and in fact were far more typical, but the New Englanders were the more articulate. The outcome of the Civil War completed a process by which the New England community, in an idealized form, became the prototype of Americanism, both at home and abroad. (For example, the first American dictionary, produced by Noah Webster of Connecticut, was not an American dictionary at all, but a New England dictionary, establishing spellings and pronunciations that were not at all typically American but which were proselytized as standards by subsequent generations of schoolmarm.)

Until the Civil War, nationalism was a sentiment with many different acceptable connotations. It was not an instrumental concept, except occasionally as an assertion against foreign interference. It involved no particular imperatives or organized missions, except as regarded the empty lands on the borders of the Union which might become future states. And even so, the westward movement was largely a matter of individual initiative, not national self-

assertion.

It was in the crucible of the Civil War that the first American nationalism in the strict sense was formed. The Civil War has faded in memory and significance to generations of Americans who have seen two World Wars, a worldwide empire, and vast social changes. Yet the Civil War—in terms of the mobilization and casualties, and in terms of the consequences—is still the largest event in our history.

The central issue in the Civil War, to which all other questions, including slavery and centralization, were subordinate, was the movement of American society into modernization. Modernization, among other things, implies economic, political, and cultural centralization and nationalism. To modernization the divergent development of the American South presented a formidable obstacle. The South was vast, politically skilled, increasingly unified as the antebellum period wore on, and firmly opposed to both economic nationalism (in the form of protective tariffs, federal subsidies for the transportation infrastructure, free public lands, and a central banking system) and to cultural nationalism in its New England variety. Furthermore, it had the weight of prestige and tradition on its side in its appeal to the limited constitutional settlement, a tradition that at least latently counted on the allegiance of many Americans outside the South who were dubious about the effects of modernization.

It was during the Civil War, with the appeals to the Union as a mystic indissoluble bond, to unlimited exercise of power by the agents of a putative national majority, to loyalty oaths and the archetypal image of Uncle Sam, that American nationalism came into being. The outcome settled certain issues forever. The formerly plural United States was now a nation-state with a centralized economic policy under the aegis of a federal government restrained by no constitutional checks not internal to itself. Further, the course of the war had, if not universalized the concept of American citizenship, immensely broadened it. Contrary to widespread belief, immigration of new peoples into the United States had been a minor phenomenon in the early days of the Republic. (George Washington was already the fifth generation of his family in America.) Not until the 1840's did it become substantial. Among the major components of the new nationalism were the Irish and German immigrants, who indeed made the outcome of the Civil War possible.

Less important at the time and not originally intended as a consequence, but of immense importance to the future, was the emancipation and then enfranchisement of the Afro-American population, the first as a military measure and the second as a political necessity for the ruling party. Before the war no respectable Northern politician had dared suggest much more than a restriction of slavery in the territories, with a hint of a future gradual elimination of the institution, though without any concrete suggestion as to how this would be done or what would be the status of the freedmen.

Yet in the nationalist mythology that was formed in the struggle for the Union, next in importance to the Union itself and in time more important, was the moral imperative of equality and universalization of citizenship enshrined in the Fourteenth Amendment. The success of the new

mythology has been demonstrated by the fact that while it is possible to criticize almost anything else in American history—the Constitution, George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt—it is nearly impossible to criticize, even on limited historical grounds, the righteousness of the movement for emancipation and equality for the freedmen. With the crusade for equality American nationalism had achieved not only its political and economic goals but had fashioned a moral imperative in compelling form.

But what emerged was a strange form of universalized democracy. Government of, by, and for the people had come to mean all people in a new and uniquely American way. This universal principle, however, existed in the quotidian context of an American society that was still overwhelmingly British Protestant not only in its composition but in its values and aspirations. In fact, the very aspiration of equal liberty and opportunity was itself a form of idealism that rested upon a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon heritage.

In the half century between the Civil War and the First World War, American nationalism was subjected to immense stresses. Regionalism did not disappear. The South, in some respects, remained obdurate, and the new states of the Plains and Rocky Mountains sometimes erupted in quite radical forms of populist revolt. More important were the stresses associated with the creation of a modern industrial nation-state, which tended to wipe away and recreate classes, localities, occupations, and ways of life. These stresses have been suffered by every modernizing society and in themselves are capable of great disruption. But in America, simultaneously with these vast social changes came another unprecedented dislocation: an immense immigration of new peoples from the east and south of Europe, altering the ethnic and religious composition of the population to an extent no other modern society had ever undergone.

History is always seeking new forms of equilibrium. Out of this social crucible came, uneasily and unevenly, a new form of American nationalism, which eventually established its hegemony. The settlement that emerged was part and parcel of the Progressive era. Progressivism was not simply the clear-cut reform movement of the history textbooks—it was a sea change in consciousness, the completion of a stage of mental modernization with vast and sometimes ambivalent and contradictory implications with which we are still living and which historians have barely begun to describe adequately.

The Progressive settlement that emerged, symbolized in different ways by such politicians as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson and such writers as Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann, had two aspects. Externally, it implied the emergence of the United States as a world power of the first class, along with Britain, France, and Germany. There might be disagreement about the exact implications of this and the policies to be pursued, but it was soon clear that traditional American isolation would give way to a determination to act aggressively on the world stage. In this situation, which had behind it the seeming force of inevitability, a spokesman for the older America like William Jennings Bryan could only appear as a hopeless archaism.

One of the more obviously observable internal results of

the triumph of nationalist Progressivism was a change in the nature of American leadership. The old gentry, which had evolved leaders from the locality, had been supplanted by a national, even international, class of politicians, publicists, experts, intellectuals, and professionals who acted in many respects together, had, broadly speaking, common goals, and who considered themselves to be the natural masters of the nation. To a considerable extent the new nationalism was not a product of the grass roots but an ideology of the masters.

Another internal aspect of the new nationalism was "the Melting Pot." The Melting Pot was the American answer to the immense changes brought by the New Immigration. It had many aspects and could change its character depending upon which angle it was viewed from. It was amorphous enough to provide comfort both to the old stock American uneasy with the changes sweeping over his country and the immigrant uneasy with his place in the New World.

To the immigrant the Melting Pot offered opportunity and assimilation: Americanization, which would bring with it prosperity and full participation in democracy. To the old American it offered the prospect of melting down an alien mass into a form compatible with what he valued. It was a little unclear whether the immigrant would become in time an Anglo-American or whether all would become together something new. In this very vagueness was its strength.

There was about it something of the aspect of the old American imposing his culture on the newcomer as a condition of acceptance; this was to be accomplished chiefly in the time-tested ways that New Englanders had always proposed to tame wild Southerners and Westerners—through the public school, disciplined labor, economic progress, moral exhortation, and appeals to an idealism of American uniqueness. There was also about it an aspect of the immigrant himself contributing to a newly emergent culture. These ambiguities were not and never have been resolved. The power of the Melting Pot ideal is not in its logic but in its art, its ability to command common consent from diverse groups.

There were a number of concrete results of the process. Catholics and Jews, from being small tolerated minorities, became equal partners with Protestants in the American religious commitment. The British Protestants went from an overwhelming to a bare majority. Inherited differences in values, however, would inevitably complicate many areas of American life and politics—the form and function of city governments, the role of the public schools, the relationship of church and state, and perhaps most importantly, the national stance toward other nations, many of which were traditional homes or traditional enemies of large groups of voters. The debacle of Prohibition was one example of the ensuing mess. The politics of ethnic coalition was another.

Both the old American and the new American, to the extent they valued their own culture and religious forms, were bound to feel a certain uneasiness with the compromise that bound them together. Yet America provided a generally high standard of living, economic opportunity, vast elbow room, and freedom from the pressure for conformity that results from external threat. The nationalism that emerged from the Melting Pot was a resounding success of which Americans were justly celebratory. At its best it

provided a graceful surmounting of problems such as no large society had ever faced and in the larger things showed a remarkable tolerance and cohesion. World War I revealed some, but not insurmountable, tensions. World War II consolidated the success of Americanization. A regiment of Japanese-American volunteers piled up an impressive combat record, and the Allied forces in Europe were led to victory by a German-American, Eisenhower. Americans were massively united, first in their reluctance to enter the war and then in their determination to win it.

Moreover, World War II, in the expansion of federal power and the mobilization of egalitarian sentiment against fascism, laid the basis for another major movement—the extension of *de facto* equality to the black Americans who had emerged from slavery some generations before. (It is wrong to say, in the often-used phrase, that the Civil Rights revolution was a completion of the long-deferred commitment to equality, because there never really had been any such commitment before, except in a very rhetorical, limited, and expedient sense.)



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During and after World War II, American society for the third time made a perilous leap into the cauldron of history, boiling down its existing consensus in the optimistic prospect of moulding itself into a newer and more daring form. The Civil Rights revolution and a radical alteration of the immigration laws were simultaneously undertaken in the 1960's. It was as if the Melting Pot, having proven itself able to boil down all of Europe, was now to test its capacity to do the same for the whole world. So natural and inevitable a next step in the progress of the success of American democracy did this seem, that it was hardly noticed. The almost complete triumph of the Melting Pot ideal is indicated by the fact that Americans, with no noticeable demurrer, celebrated the centenary of the Statue of Liberty not as a memorial to liberty but as a memorial to ethnic diversity.

The attempt to create a third form of American nationalism also had an external as well as an internal aspect. From an actor on the world stage America perforce became the leader of the world. Its prosperity, its security, its freedom from major internal stress, its tolerance, its confidence that the present is always better than the past and the future will always be better than the present, provided the model for the world, at least in the minds of its leaders.

For the first time the American leadership class, the politicians and intellectuals who were the inheritors of the Progressive era's belief in elite and expert rule, in technique,

optimism, and progress, began to regard American success not as an end but as a means. The successful mobilization against the totalitarianism of the right, which they believed, perhaps mistakenly, to be a demon from the past rather than a portent of the future, proved to them the need and possibility for worldwide democracy on the American model—democracy conceived in terms of the American standard of living and middle-class civilities and technological expertise.

From the war onward the ideal of global democracy under American leadership and example provided the rationale for American interaction with the world. Its instruments were the United Nations and other international organizations, which were invested with the same mystic devotion that the concept of “Union” had once enjoyed; massive economic aid to bring the rest of the world up to American standards; and, less certainly, a determination to provide military security. This international mission was to be carried out at the same time reform at home—the Great Society, the Civil Rights revolution, and the opening of the borders—was to perfect the American example so there could not be left in the world any doubters of the sincerity and success of American equality and democracy.

In some respects, if not all, global democracy, which has remained the chief justification for American foreign policy under both Democratic and Republican, liberal and conservative administrations, is an elite ideology rather than a movement of the grass roots. Until the attack on Pearl Harbor, for instance, despite massive interventionist propaganda and a complete commitment to an antifascist crusade on the part of the leadership, Americans at large were overwhelmingly resistant to involvement in external quarrels. Following the war, the burdens of the Cold War were shouldered, but often quite reluctantly.

The ideology of global democracy left many Americans ill-prepared for the resistant reality of the real world. Americans, generally, could not understand how other peoples might regard what Americans considered as self-evidently generous assistance to be unwanted dictation—as, in fact, imperialism. Few Americans and no American leaders were able to conceive that the benefits of technology and the dollar applied to an undeveloped society did not always lead to unalloyed progress, as witness the disintegration of the viable tribal societies of black Africa without their replacement by anything stable or satisfactory. Similarly, the United Nations proved a disappointment to most of its devotees.

The great triumph over fascism was succeeded by the Iron Curtain, then by the draw in Korea, and then by the debacle of a high-minded effort to defend democracy in the formerly French colonies in Indochina. While American democracy might provide an appealing contrast to Soviet imperialism, it offered little guidance in dealing with militant fundamentalism in the vast Islamic world. The Afghans who resisted communism did not aspire to democracy but aspired, in a predemocratic way, to the preservation of their religion and way of life. And what was to happen to the idealism of global democracy when it was found that those foreigners one was called upon to defend from communism were not democrats but merely practitioners of an older and nearly as ugly if not quite as thoroughgoing a form of

oppression as that against which they were fighting? Thus global democracy provided no basis for an anticommunist policy in Central America.

Despite these setbacks and confusions, global democracy has maintained a remarkable hold upon the imagination of the American leadership class. The real question is whether an insistence on applying the measure of democracy—conceived in a rather abstract and implicitly American way—really gives us an adequate basis for relationships with other peoples. One does not have to believe in a cynical foreign policy to be wary of a rather rootless and insubstantial form of idealism. This is as true after as before the dissolution of communism. Nor is it clear that the American public as a whole, as opposed to the leadership class, is really committed to a mission to defend and implement American-style democracy around the world. The felt necessity of the leadership to idealize every step as surrounded with an immaculate democracy has prevented any constructive American role in places such as Latin America, where democracy may be chimerical under any circumstances.

Global democracy may prove more dangerous to allies and neutrals than to enemies. Amazingly, the same American liberals who believe that America should not police the world when it is a question of an aggressor leftist regime, find no problem in subverting governments of the right—even though, presumably, such intervention is only morally justified by self-defense and regimes of the right, however distasteful, pose no threat to America. Thus, an ideology put forth by Reaganites as a defense against totalitarianism can just as easily, and without any change in assumptions, be used to undermine some friendly regime that some future Democratic administration finds inadequate by its standards of democracy—El Salvador, Chile, South Africa, or even Israel. Global democracy already has a substantial record of abandoning American allies.

Internally, American society is now engaged in an experiment to test the limits at which a coherent nationalism can be maintained in a democratic system by a shared doctrine of equality and prosperity, without any binding cultural, ethnic, religious, or ethical cohesion. The strategy of the leadership toward this problem is one of optimism. Refuse to recognize the problem and it will go away. Assume that it is already solved and it will be. Optimism, positive thinking, is one of the most characteristic of American traits and attitudes.

The history of America has been such as to provide a realistic basis for optimism. A good deal of national morale was restored during the Reagan years (though it remains to be seen how genuine and deep this restoration will prove under possible future stresses). There have always been naysayers and prophets of doom in the past and America has always ignored them and proved them wrong. There is no question that American society has already tested and transcended the limits of all previous experience in creating national unity out of diversity. Optimism, the expectation of the best, is in itself one of the causes of success, Americans believe, while pessimism is sure to find what it expects.

Yet the essence of statesmanship is to see and prepare for the dangers of the future. It is perhaps not too pessimistic to observe that the final answer is not yet in on the most recent

and ongoing experiment in testing the limits of national cohesion. Vast segments of American society have been and are being Hispanicized and Asianized. No one knows what the long-range consequences of this will be. To some extent it works against not only traditional Western culture and religion, but also against liberal tendencies, such as separation of church and state and feminism. Many of the new immigrants bring value systems not wholly compatible with the traditional and prospective functioning of American society.

Many observers, including the New Immigrants themselves, question the ideal of the Melting Pot. Some regard it as an intolerable oppression to give up Spanish for English or abandon their traditional male supremacy for more egalitarian American standards. Egalitarianism among groups does not necessarily translate into liberty among individuals. And what is good for particular groups is increasingly substituted for what is good for society as a whole, even beyond the degree to which the ideal of democracy as a consensual compromise between various groups would allow. Striving for Americanization has been replaced by striving for status in a hierarchy of "victims."

A pessimist would point to the increasing attenuation of the values and institutions that used to provide unity in diversity. The decimated public schools no longer maintain a common standard of culture and values, or even a common standard of educational achievement. Americans used to be unified by the Constitution — viewed largely as a negative restraint on government. But the Constitution now means whatever the most powerful and adept political forces want it to mean, and is viewed primarily as an instrument to serve the interests of minorities of all kinds.

Amidst a general decline of morals and the traditional family, it is difficult to find any ethical standards that firmly bind most of the population, and society increasingly resorts to bureaucracy and legal hair-splitting to enforce behaviors that once were enforced by social pressure. No one knows how deeply the resentments of older Americans now run against the establishment policies of affirmative action (the old ideal of equal opportunity having been swiftly supplanted by one of special privilege), unlimited immigration, intolerable toleration of crime, and official hostility to Christianity. It is possible that these resentments are much deeper and more lasting than the insouciant leadership, choosing to ignore the problems except in election rhetoric, will admit. They may even be intensifying in a young population that no longer has the experience of real national unity.

Even so, by a curious paradox, it is the unprivileged groups who remain the most committed to an unquestioning American nationalism — that is, a real love of country that transcends the question of "What's in it for me?" Middle Americans, Southerners, the ethnic groups less officially recognized and privileged have responded most readily to the Reaganite formulation of American nationalism in terms of pride and opportunity.

A shared culture has in the past provided a basis for unity among people otherwise diverse. But the most enduring and valuable forms of culture, at least in their formative stages, are a product of homogeneity and stability. Americanization has tended to attenuate both high culture and folk culture.

What has been gained in inclusiveness has been lost in focus. As Tocqueville and other early observers pointed out, the thrust of American democracy is toward standardization — a standardization that might be at a quite comfortable level but that tends to pull down the higher manifestations of culture.

Americans build splendid palaces in which to display the music and art created in other ages on other continents. Ours is a culture derivative and poured in from the top, not evolved from the grass roots, and it therefore has a limited power to bind. Without Southern and Jewish writers, both imperfectly Americanized, there would hardly be any American literature of world class in the late 20th century. The two most original forms of American folk culture, Southern black music (the various forms of jazz) and Southern white music ("country music") are being attenuated by standardization at the same time that they are admired around the world as both admirable and uniquely American.

To many the loss of some cultural coherence may be a small price to pay for a tolerant diversity, high standard of living, and democratic spirit, but culture is not only valuable in itself but makes up an essential binding ingredient that can hold a people together even under reverses and oppression. (The resurgence of Poland provides perhaps the most telling example today.) It may even be that, in the long run, a coherent culture is an *economic* necessity. ◊

After Memorial Day in the Brandywine Battlefield

by Ruth Moose

One sitting duck on a silver pond
circles cattails and jewelweed
beneath the bloom
of blackberry briars. Buttonwood trees,
hollow as caves were saplings under Lafayette,
whose headquarters is a shadow behind.
A dragonfly hovers like a helicopter
in the green and red sounds
of 9 A.M. traffic. On a floating limb
just below the freshet
where a redwing blackbird comes
to shower, sits a frog
the size of my thumb. He is bronze
as a medal, full of frog
and all the frogs before him,
not listening to the juggling,
like an orchestra of cellos,
from his father and uncles
around him. Future sounds
of gunfire like kettledrums
is held in the history
of stones who remember.
Frogs forget, forget, forget.

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