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Setting the Record Straight on Malayan Counterinsurgency Strategy: Interview with Karl Hack

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You are a long time researcher and observer of the Malayan Emergency. What were the core key ingredients that broke the back of the communist insurgents in the Malayan Emergency? The primary cause for putting the campaign on a firmly winning path? The game changer that helped at the end of the day to regain the initiative?

That is a bit like asking, ‘In making a cup of tea, which action is the game-changer: the heating of the water, the addition of the tea bag, or the correct amount of steeping? If you don’t heat the water, or don’t add the teabag, or under or over-steep, you don’t get a drinkable cup of tea. In addition, if you do things in the wrong order, it may turn out disgusting. You can’t just skip a stage and go to the one and single ‘really important’ bit of tea-making.

The same goes for counterinsurgency. You cannot, for instance, go straight to a comprehensive approach for ‘winning hearts and minds’ and expect it to work, if you have not first broken up the larger insurgent groups, disrupted their main bases, and achieved a modicum of spatial dominance and of security for the population in the area concerned. Local fence-sitters are, quite rightly in terms of family survival needs, likely to regard personal safety and avoiding ‘collaboration’ with you as overriding concerns, especially after contractors and officials who help you are assassinated or tortured.

Yet for counterinsurgency, people do sometimes ask ‘what is the one key ingredient’? The answer is, menus do not work like that, and neither did the Malayan Emergency. There were distinct phases or stages. I would argue that many other insurgencies are also likely to have distinct stages, and indeed that within a single insurgency different provinces or regions may be at different stages at any one time. It is quite possible that Helmand and Herat, Kandahar and Nangarhar, could simultaneously be at very different stages, requiring very different policies

The question above, therefore, encompasses what I would like to dub the ‘temporal fallacy’ (that policies abstracted from one defining moment might be equally valid in qualitatively different phases), and the spatial fallacy (that different geographic regions will be in the same phase, so allowing a single strategy for a country no matter how fractured and diverse)

In Malaya, each stage was mastered by a particular set of responses. But in classical Marxist fashion, each set of counterinsurgency policies called forth an antithesis, which required yet another set of game-changing policies.

For Malaya, my articles elsewhere (JSS and RUSI) have characterized the main phases as:

1.1. Counter-terror and counter-sweep of 1948-9. This was period from the British declaration of Emergency in June 1948, to the communist reorganization of its network of civilian helpers (*Min Yuen*) in 1949. This is analogous to the situation in any insurgency where the state may be faced with insurgents about whom it has little intelligence, and who are either strong or rapidly growing in strength and unit size. In Malaya, the insurgents brazenly tried to establish large liberated areas in remote locations in this stage. In response, the state resorted to wide sweeps to break up large insurgent units (of up to 500 at peak), riding to the sound of guns, air action when targets presented themselves, punitive actions, and what amounted almost to a ‘counter-terror’. I am not suggesting that ‘counter-terror’ per se is wise or acceptable. But think back to the tea-making analogy. Had the British attempted resettlement of villagers, for instance, in places where insurgent units had not been broken up, what would the result have been? Some early resettlements were a disaster. Had they sent civil improvement teams into villages which insurgents freely intermingled with at night - or even by day - how long would these teams and their helpers, have lasted? How likely was a village leader to genuinely cooperate, if that invited execution as a ‘running dog’? In other words, a prior stage had to be gone through before it was safe and practical to control areas. Call this what we may – *counter-terror, first contact or combustion phase* – the lack of government intelligence and numbers, insurgent strength, and poor governance in infected areas may require significant ‘pre-treatment’ with kinetic force, and security force and militia buildup. Those buildups may entail expansion before training is really adequate, and taking significant risks. Or, at the least, it did entail these things in Malaya.

So in Phase 1 the game changing tactics involved many of the things you are traditionally advised to avoid in insurgencies, because that was what that stage, and context, required.

Is going straight to ‘Clear and Hold’, or area or population control, then, rather like making the tea with tepid water?

1.2. Clear and Hold of 1950 to 1952. Successful British breakup of larger insurgent units, and disruption of free interaction between insurgent and jungle-fringe villager, produced its antithesis. That is, insurgent *Min Yuen* reorganization to operate as small, secret cells, and smaller insurgent units practicing hit and run tactics, ambushes, wide-scale sabotage, and persistent and increasing penetration of rural settlements. Thus reorganized, the insurgents and supporters stepped up activity to their highest levels yet.

Is such an increase in insurgent activity the almost inevitable result of government success in the first stage? That is, government interruption of insurgent ability to move freely, and increasing arrests, and threat to the insurgent’s income-raising ability, are together likely to increase insurgent numbers and force them to defend their position.

That, at least, is how it turned out in Malaya. Population disgust with early British tactics, and the flight from increasing security force control, and from possible arrest, increased overall insurgent numbers. So what was the ‘primary cause’ or method which broke the back of this new *mature, second, phase* of insurgency, and the concomitant new insurgent tactics? Here I want to be careful, because you can characterize British tactics in at least two overlapping ways, namely:

Population Control. In 18 months from 1950 to early 1952 the British resettled about 500,000 out of a growing population of 5-6 million, and regrouped almost as many workers’ huts into defensible perimeters. They also introduced Executive War Committees at every level from state downwards, in which the police, administrators and military coordinated plans. Finally, home guards were raised, and British forces were posted to areas for consistent, small-scale patrols. In short, the most vulnerable ‘population’ was policed, protected and –yes – administered through Resettlement Officers and the extension of basic government services. Though this has similarities to what today might be called a ‘comprehensive approach’, the provision of amenities was at this stage both secondary to the physical relocation and control of population, and very rudimentary. ‘Administration’ meant being in a secured area, with a viable police post giving cover to a Resettlement Officer and coordination for home guard.

Spatial Control. Note that though we may term the above population control or ‘population-centric’, it could equally be termed ‘spatial-centric’. The government forced insurgents to come into ground prepared to the government’s advantage, should they want to interact with the population. This control of space – even down to designing New Villages for easy surveillance, placing them near roads, and destroying some surrounding vegetation – increasingly turned the security forces from the ambushed to the ambushers. It also created ‘security’ in more ways than a mere separation of insurgent and people. After all, villagers still left the barbed wire to tap rubber or tend to pigs during the day, albeit searched to prevent them taking supplies out. People often note that this brought previously isolated communities under government administration, but at this stage that was hardly compensation for loss of earnings, plots and more, which had to be re-established. What is perhaps even more significant is that it ‘framed’ space such that villagers had persistent contact with government officers – military and civil – allowing information to be passed on without instantly being identifiable as a ‘running dog’: with all that entailed. It also allowed villagers to claim they *wanted* to support insurgents to their faces, but that they could not circumvent government controls. Spatial control was thus an absolutely central part of giving ‘security’ and ‘confidence’, increasing everyday intelligence, creating safe ‘everyday contacts’, and allowing insurgent supporters to be more easily weeded out (and turned).

This population/spatial control – centered in this instance on resettlement - ‘broke the back’ of the insurgent’s Phase Two tactics. That is, in October 1951 the insurgents issued directives to break into yet smaller units, transfer some fighters to close civilian protection and others to jungle planting, and to reduce sabotage and security measures which hurt popular support. They also recommended increasing subversion and entryism, in order to build up civilian support and so make possible another surge in the future. Again, government tactics had produced their antithesis, in a more dispersed, more self-reliant mode of insurgent activity, plus more subversion. Yet new developments would be required to ‘break the back’ of this third insurgent set of tactics.

Before moving on to that third phase, I would like to add a few additional observations about the second 'Clear and Hold' Phase. First, the numbers of security forces used against less than 8,000 insurgents was phenomenal. Not just in the 60,000 police and 40,000 foreign military forces, but the 250,000 plus Home Guard and, less often noted, thousands of Chinese in the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA). The latter's active assistance was vital. Secondly, the escalating violence and numbers of this period meant security forces, especially police, were often overstretched and their training feeble to non-existent. Thirdly, even British National Servicemen expected to remain in theatre for 12 months, allowing some rudimentary buildup of rapport and spatial awareness. With even the best handover procedures, it is difficult to see current British tours of six months as fully fit for the purpose of sustained spatial domination, confidence building, or effective partnering of locally raised units. Fourthly, though such physical resettlement may be impossible elsewhere, the underlying concepts of population and spatial control may be realizable by other means.

1.3 Third phase, 'Optimization' from late 1952 to 1960. The population/spatial approach of Phase Two, accompanied by large Security force: insurgent ratios, 'broke the back' of insurgency as something high level, spiraling, and potentially deadly to government survival. But the antithesis to Phase Two counterinsurgency tactics was more subversion, entryism, and smaller insurgent units operating from deeper inside inaccessible terrain (here mountainous jungle and on the Thai-Malaysian border). Without some form of 'optimization' of COIN, this new form of insurgency might still have persisted as a significant, nagging threat. It was in this phase that General Templer's impact was most felt, after his arrival in early 1952. Improvements in this period included those in intelligence (Special Branch autonomy and its own training school), better central control, better collection and distribution of best practice, and large-scale police retraining, including to emphasize their role as public servants. Most famously, Templer referred to 'winning hearts and minds', by improving conditions in New Villages (travelling dispensaries, community halls, local elections, and more), and accelerating the advance of self-government.

Less often noted is the way British spatial/population control also peaked in this period. It was not all Boy Scout groups (something Templer thought civilizing) and Red Cross Nurses, as important as they were. Operations around New Villages became ever more sophisticated, and ever more designed to feed on, and in turn create, 'live' intelligence. By 'live' I mean intelligence about likely events in the future. This is discussed in detail by people such as Richard Clutterbuck. Suffice to say that the emphasis was on getting rid of hard-line *Min Yuen*, and then upping food control and security operations, until newer, softer, *Min Yuen* recruits could be identified, turned, and made to yield live information. With operations also increasingly targeted around the areas of particular insurgent committees, 'spatial' and population-centric approaches reached a peak after 1952. Villagers may have gained a new community centre, but at operational peak they also found their food rations cut, curfews extended, and an ever-more pervasive security force presence. It does strike me that the very heavy Malayan emphasis on tailoring spatial control and operations to create a spiral of live intelligence has not been emphasized anywhere near enough.

So yes, Templer increased civil action, and even rewards such as declaring some areas ‘White Areas’ – free of insurgent activity – and removing restrictions. Yes, such actions were vital to maintain and increase support as the most intense crisis phase passed. But he also saw population-control’s controlling aspects brought to a peak. It was not a case of nice after nasty, but rather of extra stick and lots of extra carrot at the same time.

In the jungles, meanwhile, deep penetration patrols, helicopter support and liaison with *orang asli* were stepped up and refined.

So, the answer to the question above is that the ‘back’ of insurgency looked different in each of three phases, and was broken in each by different bundles of tactics. It is a case of ‘Horses for Courses’. I dislike the ‘end-state fallacy’ that seeks to identify just one winning ingredient, and ignores the issue of phases, and of the thesis-antithesis way by which government polices call up new stages of insurgency. I also dislike the naivety of the idea that *identifying an end-state* means you can get to it. I may see the mountain peak before me, but that does not necessarily mean I have any clue as to the correct path upwards. Just naming the problem is not a solution. Quite the reverse in the Malayan case. People discussed population resettlement much earlier than its wide scale implementation under the Briggs Plan from 1950. But land in Malaya was a state responsibility (there being several states, each with its own Sultan), and in addition Malays jealously guarded established rights to good land. So initially it was not practical politics. It is very noticeable in Malaya that two major leaps – the introduction of a comprehensive plan in 1950, and appointment of Templer in 1952 – came because very severe *crises* were skillfully exploited to remove roadblocks.

We probably need to pay much more attention to the dynamics of crisis management as opportunity, and of how you remove roadblocks to achieving more rational, coordinated, integrated control in COIN situations. Malaya is a good example of how – notwithstanding the ‘colonial’ context – Britain as the external power had to struggle very, very hard to achieve the coordination and policies it wanted. I note that Colonel Alexander Anderson holds up Dhofar as an alternative case-study, of how COIN had to be done ‘by, with and through’ local government and society (*Small Wars Journal* 7, 1, Jan. 2011). Britain’s very unwillingness to provide significant resources concentrated the mind on how to leverage action. As such it provides an excellent example of how to act through local forces, without bursting its vessels by pumping in more resources than can be coped with. However, he is wrong if he also means to imply that achieving good coordination in Malaya was easy because it was ‘colonial’. The obstacles to achieving civil-military-police coordination and comprehensive resettlement were formidable, and we need to study what such obstacles are, and how historically they have been overcome. By contrast, the 1970 palace coup in Oman placed the Anglophile Sandhurst graduate (and ex officer of the British Army) Qaboos bin Said in charge of what had been a feudal system. Arguably therefore, while Dhofar is excellent as an example of low-resource intervention, it is less interesting than Malaya as an example of how political ‘roadblocks’ to reform were dealt with in complex political situations. Unless one wants to feverishly fantasize that Hamid Karzai could be replaced in a coup by a pro-American West Point Graduate who is then to be given autocratic powers.

Perhaps the problem here is that we need political scientists to study more of these issues of political adjustment in COIN situations, not just officers, or historians such as myself.

Can we make a firm distinction between the sequence of “clear hold population centric” (Briggs Era) and the “persuading minds then winning hearts” (Templer Era)?

No, we cannot. I do not see 'population-centric' strategy as either opposite to, or synonymous, with 'winning hearts and minds'. That is to confuse overall approaches with mere tactics. To my mind, 'population-centric' suggests an approach, it means you are putting the population at the centre of your planning. It does not tell me whether you do that more by coercing the population or by persuading it.

I would argue that in Malaya's Phase One, almost of necessity, there was an insurgent or combatant focused approach. Phases Two and Three (Briggs and Templer) both saw a population-centric approach.

But if a 'population-centric' approach is like a vessel, fill-able with any combination of tactics, the question changes. It becomes, to what degree were so-called 'hearts and minds' tactics already being used before Templer, during Phase Two, when the back of the campaign as a high-level, potentially regime-killing, insurgency was broken?

In fact the Malayan campaign was turned from its peak levels during 1950-52 by a population-centric approach which both tightly controlled population, and persuaded it that cooperation was rational and safe (e.g. via contact with village police posts via enforced home guard duty), even while many hearts still festered. Things that are normally considered as 'winning hearts' were, for the key, Chinese rural population, only incipient at the time the communists changed their policy in October 1951.

So the 'winning hearts and minds' tactics at that point primarily meant controlling space, providing security to people, and so persuading the fence-sitters amongst the latter rationally to cooperate even when their hearts were reluctant. It was about their 'confidence', and their calculation that maximum safety and minimum threat came from avoiding insurgent support. So for 'fence-sitters' it was less about winning hearts before 1952-3, and more about *persuading minds*, and security and confidence were critical to the latter.

It is, however, true that the more positive measures to improve living conditions gathered pace during 1952-54, under Templer. Regarding that intensification of civil measures, I would like to emphasize three points:

- First, a necessary condition of those improvements was the prior achievement of breaking up insurgent groups (Phase 1) and securing a degree of population and spatial control (phase 2).
- Secondly, under Templer as well it was not a case of *either* a kinetic and coercive approach *or* 'winning hearts and minds'. It was just a changing emphasis within the mix of COIN tactics.

- Thirdly, it's not exactly rocket science to state that, once you can offer a modicum of security, the more you can improve people's lives the better. Providing, of course, you do so in a sustainable way.

How, then, do I see the relationship between 'population-centric' approaches and 'winning hearts and minds'?

Try for a minute envisaging counterinsurgency as like a Venn diagram in which various tactics and approaches overlap to define a central area, or alternatively as a matrix.

Most of the approaches are there to some degree in all stages: kinetic, winning hearts and minds, confidence-building, etc. It is a matter of their emphasis changing.

Take 'hearts and minds' measures. These can and should be further sub-divided. Hence the idea of giving increasing self-government, and willingness to make concessions to Malay and Chinese communal leaders, persisted across all three Malayan phases. That 'high politics' of counterinsurgency was vital to recruiting for the security forces, and elite cooperation. Fence-sitters, however, were treated harshly in the first phase, and with sustained control and a degree of coercion in the second and third stages. Attempts to 'win' fence-sitters' and soft insurgent supporter 'hearts' were minimal in the 'counter-terror' period, limited in phase two, and only really took off in phase three. Even then, it probably took years not months for more aggrieved villagers to acknowledge truly improving conditions. Hence in 1951 to mid 1952 most resettled New Villagers were struggling to re-establish jobs or vegetable plots after moves, and arguably traumatized by resettlement.

So I object to any artificial opposition of 'population-centric' to 'winning hearts and minds'. The first is an approach or vessel to be filled with specific tactics, the second is a specific category of tactics or action. I also strongly object to any notion that the Malayan Emergency was 'won' by shifting from mere coercive and population control approaches to 'winning hearts and minds'. The former was a prerequisite for increasing 'hearts and minds' actions. The blend in the matrix always included some 'hearts and minds' measures, but their range and intensity increased over time. Anyway, when winning people's cooperation, issues such as 'confidence' and rational calculation of cost and benefit are likely to come first.

Could we say that the primary aim of the resettlement operation was that of reconnecting the government with its people? Is the Briggs's response a vindication of the old Bernard Fall dictum-*"the insurgency problem is administrative in a primary sense"*? After all, before the resettlement, the squatters had practically no contact with the government.

Being able to administer a population is of course vital, but you can only administer them if you control population and space in a security sense. In the Malayan case people were first and foremost coerced to resettle in order to make them secure, and secured. It is cruel to pretend to be a sovereign administrator, if you know full well that you are in effect allowing a dual administration, in which the insurgent part has large scope to command and punish. It is naïve to think that justice will be effective in such circumstances. Perhaps the fact that Robert Thompson,

whose works became so influential, was primarily an administrator in Malaya - and that played a part in colouring people's views here?

On the other hand, extending effective administration is of course an integral part of a balanced population-centric policy. Apart from anything else, if you do not administer, you send a signal that you cannot provide security, and you miss the opportunity for safe everyday contacts with villagers.

There is, however, no doubt that the extension of administration was deeply embedded from Phase 2 in Malaya. In addition, though, there was a vital political element to this. The Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) played a key part not just in providing social welfare in resettled 'New Villages', and in filtering detainees (sorting sheep from goats), but also in providing an outlet for political expression. The MCA's leaders included traditional clan and business leaders, and even where villagers might not like this arrangement; they did provide a funnel for villagers' demands and needs to be expressed to government. The MCA worked closely with government from formation in 1949, and from 1952 increasingly carried political clout as one of the parties likely to dominate Malayan politics in coalition with its Malay partners. So it was not just an administrative integration of vulnerable populations, but also the provision for them of a political transmission belt. What is the political transmission belt, or belts, to be in Afghanistan?

How important was the Briggs Plan with its emphasis on designing a coordinated like-minded government machinery for the history and the practice of COIN? At the time Sir Harold Briggs understood instinctively what General Frank Kitson would brilliantly sum-up later: *“the government, like the insurgents, has to combine political, economic and psychological pressures with the operations of the security forces. It cannot be said too often that countering insurgency involves a wide range of government activity, and operations by the security forces only help matters if they are conducted within an overall framework that ties the whole programme together”*.

Yes, of course the Briggs Plans coordination of all security and government action, especially via joint war executive committees at all levels, was a huge boost, and provides a brilliant 'ideal-type' of coordination.

But how does the statement help us if the government will not, or cannot, play ball? The problem in Malaya, and likely problem elsewhere, is that governments have to attend to politics and patronage, and also have bureaucratic inertia. Describing desirable end-states is about as useful as saying apple pie is nice. We know we want it, perhaps need it, but how do we get it?

What we really need to know is how do we overcome roadblocks to effective government action, and its effective coordination with the security forces? Briggs was able to do this because the sense of crisis in early 1950 was so acute, and because the Malay leaders he needed to persuade were then persuaded that they had no alternative but to make concessions. A more useful question might therefore be - what can we learn about the science of restructuring highly stressed governments so they are willing and able to play their part in the above? I would like to see political scientists looking more closely at what the roadblocks to this desired end-state are and what sorts of things might help us overcome the roadblocks.

How important and instrumental were the “Home Guards” in changing the balance of power in the Malayan Emergency? Today, in Afghanistan, we see a similar effort focused on creating local community defense initiatives.

Home Guard/Area Defence Initiatives were certainly core to Malayan changes. But they were arguably only possible once high intensity operations had broken up insurgent groups in a particular area, and a degree of Security Force dominance of the particular area had been achieved (by area security measures, small sustained patrolling, etc), so that a minimum of security was present. The numbers involved – if the Malayan example is moot – are huge. For Malaya there were up to 250,000 Home Guard for a population of less than 6 million. What would that imply if scaled up for Afghan population levels? This provided tens of thousands of ‘everyday opportunities’ for information to filter to the government.

A cardinal feature of Malaya and Kenya and other successes was, however, that the existing administration remained on a viable footing despite these numbers. It did not have its cells burst and its financial viability rendered hopeless by Vietnamese-style financing at multiples of the host nation’s financial capability to sustain. The U.S. needs to find ways of building structures which are sustainable on Afghan resources and a modest outside subvention. Otherwise they may destroy the very basis for the state and render the host nation collaborators little more than clients. Having said that, use of existing tribal structures and part time forces could play a major part in such a restructuring of efforts.

There is also an absolutely vital distinction between Malaya and Afghanistan. In Malaya, the link between villager and state (e.g. screening detainees, providing acceptable outside assistance, etc) was provided by the MCA (Malayan Chinese Association), as described above. This was a plausible all-Malaya Chinese body. In Afghanistan, will attempts to make the intermediary force a national one fail? Might intercessories need to vary from region to region and province to province, drawing on acceptable local groups – possibly tribal, etc – who also have a sufficient stake to risk death. Many MCA members were willing to risk death, as communist success meant death to their capitalist model and so to their main reason for being in Malaya. For Afghanistan, is the only comparable ‘idea’ to risk death for regional/tribal? If not, what would a passion-sustaining, worth-dying-for ‘national’ idea look like? Is the national idea in Afghanistan largely alien/shallow and so expensive/intensive to force through at this stage? Might forcing through national-level solutions carry a very high risk of destroying the state, making it overwhelmingly reliant on outside funding/officials, etc? One needs a joined up strategy on ideas - affordable local defence structures, etc - which then go hand in hand with building up area security forces in places where the earlier stage of breaking up larger insurgent forces and building a basic intelligence map have already progressed. But one also needs to identify where the local resources – in ideas, loyalties and revenue – will come from to sustain these domestic forces. The key thing here is that British counterinsurgencies have tended to work when they successfully hitched themselves to viable local allies, rather than reducing those allies to clients in an alien system over time. The British in Malaya found the grain of local society, and realigned their policies to run with it. The British there cooperated with Malays and Chinese who wanted a communal solution to politics (the ‘Alliance’ of the MCA and other communal parties) – despite the British initially wanting to replace communal politics. They succeeded in Kenya by

working with those Gikuyu who viewed the Mau Mau as waging a vicious Gikuyu civil war. They failed miserably in Palestine because they would or could not hitch to either side, and in Aden likewise. In Northern Ireland the long war was waged in part-alliance with Protestants of a Unionist hue, and the eventual peace was due to the two sides realizing neither could win, not due to any great British advance.

Is policy in Afghanistan sufficiently meshed with local society and forces? Or, as in Vietnam, might a tendency emerge towards harnessing the narrow super-stratum who are most Westernized, even though that section can only harness society below by using local methods of patronage, tribal affiliation, etc? Above all, you need a joined up approach to COIN and the society it is in, and making that approach work has often meant sacrificing ideals and western norms to the way the local society and the elites most able and willing to deliver (at high risk of death) work.

When discussing such issues, it is also important to be crystal clear about terminology. All too often analysts and historians have talked about 'nation-building' in COIN when they have been describing no such thing. The U.S. rarely does 'nation-building' (which implies building social infrastructure, ideas and organizations) on any scale. It tends to go more for 'state' building via institutions and governance. Indeed, in the case of Malaya (and the Anbar Awakening and possibly Afghanistan) actual 'nation' building could have been counterproductive. In each case the 'nation' seems to have been bypassed to some degree in favor of cooperation with particular sub-national groups. For the other point about Malaya, and the Philippines, and Anbar, was that all built on alliances with key local forces, all with non-democratic or traditional agendas strong enough to risk death for. In each case Western powers downplayed liberal aims and ideas of good governance in order to prioritize cooperation with key local actors. In other words, while 'state-building' may have been crucial, 'nation-building' was put on the back burner, in favour of letting local, sub-national groups set the agenda at crucial points.

That particular aspect of the Malayan Emergency raises some very awkward questions for western counterinsurgency in general.

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