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The Origins of the Modern American Conservative Movement

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While this is my first visit to Mainland China, I have visited Hong Kong and Taiwan many times over the last 30 years, drawn to this nation and its people by their important place in world politics and human history.

Much of what I know about China I learned from Walter H. Judd, who was a medical missionary in China in the 1920s and the 1930s. Dr. Judd is relevant to our discussion because he was a major influence on the American conservative movement from the 1950s through the 1980s. Indeed, what he said about China was very nearly the gospel for many conservatives.

After a year's study at the University of Nanking, Dr. Judd was posted to the Shaowu mission in the town of Shaowu, Fukien Province, so far into the interior that it could only be reached by a 10-day boat trip up the Min River. He spent the next five years in Shaowu, caring for the sick and the dying, facing death at the hands of bandits, criticizing the Nationalists, debating with Communists, including Gen. Lin Piao, going for months without seeing another white face, and falling deeply in love with China until, his life threatened by persistent bouts of malaria, he reluctantly came home to the United States.

Dr. Judd had many Communists as his patients in Shaowu, and he was always impressed by their discipline. They first came through his town in 1926 when they were part of Chiang Kai-shek's united front against the warlords. "They were the first mili-

Talking Points

- The central idea upon which American conservatism is essentially based is *ordered liberty*: a blending of the sometimes contending requirements of the community and the individual, of individual freedom and individual responsibility, of limited government and unlimited markets.
- In large measure, the success of the American conservative movement rests on its role in two epic events: the waging and the winning of the Cold War and the American public's rejection of the idea that the federal government should be the primary solver of major economic and social problems.
- Through the power of its ideas—ever linked by the priceless principle of ordered liberty—and the unceasing dissemination and application of those ideas, the conservative movement has become a major, and often the dominant, player in the political and economic realms of America.

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tary outfit I ever saw,” said Dr. Judd, “that never had a case of venereal disease.”

He returned to the Middle Kingdom in 1934 to take charge of a large hospital in Fenchow, Shansi Province, in the North where he would not be exposed to malaria. During his second tour of duty in China, he often found himself under martial law as Communists and Nationalists vied fiercely for control of the area before forming an uneasy united front against the invading Japanese. In early 1938, Fenchow fell to the Japanese, and Dr. Judd was a “guest” of the occupying Japanese forces for five tense months.

Miraculously, Dr. Judd was allowed to leave Fenchow and return to the United States after treating the Japanese commanding general for a sexual disease he had contracted from a Chinese woman. The embarrassed general sought help from the American physician because he did not want to lose face by revealing the nature of his illness to a Japanese doctor. And he made sure that none of his countrymen would learn about his problem by sending the American who had treated him back home, 10,000 miles away.

For the rest of his long life, Dr. Judd gave many speeches about Asia, always emphasizing the central importance of China. He would hold up his hand, palm out, and say:

This is Asia. My palm is China and my fingers are the nations extending from the continent—Korea, Japan, Indo-China, the Philippines, and Indonesia. When China is at peace and under a government that truly represents the interests of the Chinese people, all of Asia is at peace. But if China is at war and under a government that does not represent the true interests of the Chinese people, all of Asia is in conflict.

Russell Kirk and *The Conservative Mind*

It is a striking historical coincidence that both the People’s Republic of China and the modern American conservative movement were born a little over 50 years ago, the PRC in 1949 with the coming to power of Mao Zedung and modern conservatism in 1953 with the publication of Russell Kirk’s masterwork, *The Conservative Mind*.

Chairman Mao famously declared that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. While that may be true for certain regimes in certain circumstances, such political power cannot be sustained permanently, for it requires ever larger barrels and ever more guns. Political power that depends exclusively for its survival upon force inevitably degenerates into military power and leads to an authoritarian and usually a totalitarian state. Chairman Mao’s aphorism in fact denies the reality that lasting political power grows not out of a gun, but out of an idea.

The central idea of *The Conservative Mind*, upon which American conservatism is essentially based, is *ordered liberty*. It is a blending of the sometimes contending requirements of the community and the individual, of individual freedom and individual responsibility, of limited government and unlimited markets.

Kirk described six basic “canons” or principles of conservatism:

- A divine intent, as well as personal conscience, rules society;
- Traditional life is filled with variety and mystery while most radical systems are characterized by a narrowing uniformity;
- Civilized society requires orders and classes;
- Property and freedom are inseparably connected;
- Man must control his will and his appetite, knowing that he is governed more by emotion than by reason; and
- Society must alter slowly.

The Conservative Mind was an impressive feat of scholarship—a synthesis of the ideas of the leading conservative Anglo-American thinkers and political leaders of the late 18th century through the early 20th century. The work established convincingly that there was a tradition of American conservatism that had existed since the Founding of the Republic. With one book, Russell Kirk made conservatism intellectually acceptable in America. Indeed, he gave the conservative movement its name.

However, the intellectual pedigree of American conservatism goes much farther back in time than the 18th century. In a subsequent book, Russell

Kirk wrote that the roots of American order were first planted nearly three thousand years earlier.

Kirk used the device of five cities—Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, London, and Philadelphia—to trace their development. The roots first appeared in Jerusalem, with the Hebrew perception of a purposeful moral existence under God. They were strengthened in Athens, with the philosophical and political self-awareness of the Greeks. They were nurtured in Rome, by the Roman experience of law and social awareness. They were intertwined with the Christian understanding of human duties and human hopes, of man redeemed. They were joined by medieval custom, learning, and valor.

The roots of American order were then enriched by two great political experiments that occurred in London, the birthplace of parliaments and the guardian of common law, and in Philadelphia, where both the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution were written. The miracle of Philadelphia was that the delegates were able to resolve, for the most part, the conflicting demands of freedom and order. They created a true national government but not an absolute government. They designed something new under the political sun—a federalism which carefully enumerated, separated, and restrained the powers of the national government.

1953: A Critical Year

1953—the year of *The Conservative Mind*—was a critical year in American politics and conservatism. Dwight Eisenhower was inaugurated as President, signaling an end to the New Deal era. Conservatives such as Russell Kirk, Robert Nisbet, Richard Weaver, Clinton Rossiter, and Leo Strauss published works that could not be ignored. It was the year that conservatives began to coalesce, arguing and disputing all the while, into a political movement.

Over the next 50 years, a succession of conservative philosophers, popularizers, philanthropists, and politicians marched across the American political stage. First came the philosophers, who presented their ideas usually in an academic forum. Next came the popularizers, journalists and the like, who translated the often obscure language of the philosophers into a common idiom. Finally came the politicians, whose attention was caught and whose imaginations were fired by the popular-

izers and who introduced public policies and campaign platforms based on conservative ideas. Throughout this period, prescient philanthropists underwrote the thinking of the philosophers, the journals of the popularizers, and the campaigns of the politicians.

The history of American politics suggests that a political movement must experience these successive waves of ideas, interpretation, and action along with sufficient financial resources to be successful.

The rise of conservatism was also helped significantly by the decline and fall of American liberalism, which lost its way between the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Great Society of Lyndon B. Johnson, between the anti-communist Korean War, which it supported, and the Sandinistas' Marxist takeover of Nicaragua, which it also supported, and between the earthy populism of Harry Truman and the cerebral elitism of Al Gore.

In large measure, the success of the American conservative movement rests on its role in two epic events—one foreign, one domestic—that have shaped much of modern American history. The first was the waging and the winning of the Cold War. The second was the American public's rejection of the idea that the federal government should be the primary solver of major economic and social problems.

Conservatives declared that communism was evil and had to be defeated, not just contained. And they said that the federal government had grown dangerously large and had to be rolled back, not just managed more efficiently.

Because conservatives played a decisive part in ending the Cold War and alerting the nation to the perils of a leviathan state, they reaped enormous political rewards, such as Ronald Reagan's sweeping presidential victories in 1980 and 1984, the Republicans' historic capture of Congress in 1994, and George Bush's capture of the White House in 2000.

But the conservative revolution that remade American politics was a long time in the making. In the mid-1950s, conservative ideas did not seem to be taking hold in many Americans' minds. Similarly, conservative politicians found themselves far from the center of the public square.

Senator Robert Taft of Ohio died in the summer of 1953, and Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wiscon-

sin, after his Senate censure in December 1954, was as good as dead. President Eisenhower was offering a “dimestore” New Deal at home while Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was accused by some conservatives of failing to pursue an aggressive enough anti-communist foreign policy.

William F. Buckley Jr. and *National Review*

In the early 1950s, in fact, the conservative movement could claim only a few publications and fewer organizations. Conservative victories, wrote William F. Buckley Jr., were “uncoordinated and inconclusive” because the philosophy of freedom was not being expounded systematically in the universities and in the media. A new conservative journal was needed, he argued, to combat the liberals, to compensate for “conservative weakness” in the academy, and to “focus the energies” of the movement.

In the first issue of his new magazine, *National Review*, Buckley sounded the clarion, averring that conservatives lived, as did all other Americans, in “a Liberal world.” *National Review* would not submit but would stand “athwart history yelling Stop!” confident that “a vigorous and incorruptible journal of conservative opinion” could make a critical difference in the realms of ideas and politics.

National Review, then, was not simply a journal of opinion but a political act which, like the publication of Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, shaped the modern conservative movement.

Barry Goldwater and *The Conscience of a Conservative*

Along with the publication of *The Conservative Mind* and the founding of *National Review*, a new political star was rising in the West in the 1950s. Barry Goldwater was the grandson of a Jewish peddler who became a millionaire; a college dropout whose book *The Conscience of a Conservative* sold 3.5 million copies and was for a while required reading for History 169B at Harvard University.

Goldwater delighted in challenging conventional wisdom but always used the Constitution as his guide. He said that the future of freedom in America depended upon the election of public officials who pledged to enforce the Constitution and who proclaimed, “My aim is not to pass laws, but to repeal them.” He also called for victory over communism in the Cold War.

All the ingredients of a national political movement seemed to be coming together: a charismatic political leader, Senator Barry Goldwater; widely known popularizers like Bill Buckley; thinkers like F. A. Hayek, Russell Kirk, and Milton Friedman in their intellectual prime; and far-sighted “golden” donors.

These were heady times for the conservative movement, capped by a *Time* magazine article that reported: “A state-by-state survey of *Time* correspondents indicates that at least Republican Barry Goldwater could give [President] Kennedy a breathlessly close contest.” The American conservative movement was prepared to help Goldwater capture the Republican presidential nomination and then perhaps secure the most sought-after prize in American politics—the presidency.

And then, on November 22, 1963, a smiling, tanned John F. Kennedy settled back in an open limousine to parade through downtown Dallas.

The bullet that killed Kennedy also killed Goldwater’s changes to become President—the American people did not want three different Presidents in a single year. And yet, the Arizona conservative still announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination, unwilling to disappoint the millions—and there were millions—who looked to him as a political savior. Rarely does a presidential candidate run knowing beyond a reasonable doubt that he cannot win.

President Johnson demolished Barry Goldwater in the presidential election, receiving 61 percent of the popular vote and carrying 44 states. Liberal commentators declared that the conservative movement was dead. James Reston, Washington bureau chief of *The New York Times*, concluded that “Barry Goldwater not only lost the presidential election...but the conservative cause as well.”

Conservatives emphatically disagreed.

- “The landslide majority did not vote against the conservative philosophy,” wrote Ronald Reagan; “they voted against a false image our liberal opponents successfully mounted.”
- *National Review* senior editor Frank Meyer pointed out that, despite the liberal campaign to make conservatism seem “extremist, radical, nihilist,

anarchic,” two-fifths of the voters still voted for the conservative alternative.

- *Human Events* stated that the Goldwater campaign had accomplished three critical things: “The Republican Party is essentially conservative; the South is developing into a major pivot of its power; and a candidate who possesses Goldwater’s virtues but lacks some of his handicaps can win the presidency.”

This last insight came to pass in the person of Ronald Reagan, who delivered a nationally televised address for Goldwater in the waning days of the 1964 campaign and became, as a result, a national political star overnight. Prominent California Republicans later admitted that they would not have approached Reagan to run for governor of their state if it had not been for his TV address, entitled, “A Time for Choosing.”

An Enduring Legacy

There was another critical legacy of the Goldwater campaign I want to mention—the entry of thousands of young people into American politics and policymaking. These young conservatives now sit in Congress and on the Supreme Court, manage campaigns and raise millions of dollars, head think tanks—like The Heritage Foundation—and write seminal books, edit magazines, and anchor radio and television programs.

In addition, Barry Goldwater addressed in a serious and substantive way issues that have been at the center of the national debate ever since—Social Security, government subsidies, privatization, morality in government, and communism. Campaign strategist John Sears summed up that Goldwater changed “the rhetoric of politics” by challenging the principles of the New Deal, “something no Democrat or Republican before him had dared to do.”

There were several milestones in the first 20 years of the conservative movement, such as the publication of *The Conservative Mind* and the founding of *National Review*, but none equaled the political salience of Barry Goldwater’s seemingly quixotic run for the White House. His candidacy was “like a first love” for countless young men and women, never to be forgotten, always to be cherished. It was the beginning rather than the end of conservatism’s political ascendancy.

The Rise of Ronald Reagan

Although he had never before run for public office, Ronald Reagan trounced the incumbent Democratic governor of California, Edmund (Pat) Brown, by 1 million votes in the November 1966 election. By the following July, after only six months in office, Governor Reagan was ranked in opinion polls as a serious contender for the Republican presidential nomination.

Over the next eight years as governor of the most populous state in the Union, Reagan cut and trimmed government wherever possible, kept government income and outgo in balance (as required by law), used business and professional experts to make government more efficient, and did not hesitate to make unpopular decisions, such as instituting tuition for the state’s university system. His most important accomplishment was welfare reform. In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed into law a welfare reform program that relied in large measure on the California plan that Reagan had engineered a quarter of a century earlier.

While Ronald Reagan was finishing up his second term as governor of California in the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon was sinking deeper and deeper into the mire of Watergate. In July 1974, the House Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment. Any possibility—and it was slight—that Nixon might evade impeachment disappeared in early August with the release of his “smoking gun” conversations with White House aide Robert Haldeman. The President had deliberately participated in an unconstitutional cover-up of Watergate.

The New Right and the Neoconservatives

During this chaotic period, two new and influential branches of conservatism came into being. The New Right was a reaction to the attempted liberal takeover of the Republican Party—epitomized by President Gerald Ford’s selection of Nelson Rockefeller as his Vice President. The neoconservatives similarly responded to the liberal seizure of the Democratic Party, represented by the nomination of George McGovern as President.

The New Right and the neoconservatives were not a natural alliance. The New Right was deeply suspicious of government, while the neoconservatives embraced it. The New Right loved the mechanics of politics, while the neoconservatives preferred the higher plane of public policy. But both hated communism and despised liberals—the New Right for what they had always been, the neoconservatives for what they had become.

In the end, it was the neoconservatives' anti-communism and resistance to the counterculture that won the approval of the conservatives and led to a pragmatic marriage. The minister who presided over the nuptials was Ronald Reagan, who needed the brainpower of the neoconservatives and the manpower of the New Right, especially the Christian Right, to be elected.

Reagan as President: Defining a Decade

In 1980, at the age of 69, Reagan bested six of the GOP's brightest stars in the Republican primaries, including George Herbert Walker Bush, who had served as U.S. envoy to China among other assignments. In the fall campaign, President Jimmy Carter attempted to portray his Republican opponent as a right-wing extremist opposed to peace, arms control, and working people. Reagan refused to be thrown off-course and went on courting the blue-collar, ethnic Catholic vote, concentrated on Carter's sorry economic record, and reassured the voters that he could handle the weighty duties of the presidency.

Although most of the national polls said it would be a close election, Reagan won by an electoral landslide and more than 8 million votes. Observers agreed that the results constituted a broad mandate for Reagan to change the direction of American politics. *Newsweek* called Reagan's plan to cut both spending and income taxes a "second New Deal potentially as profound in its impact as the first was a half century ago."

The new President and his advisers were well aware they had to act, and quickly—in presidential politics, as in the 100-yard dash, a quick start is everything. Their domestic cornerstone was the 1981 Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA), which cut all income taxes by 25 percent, reduced the top income tax rate from 70 percent to 50 percent, and indexed tax rates to offset the impact of inflation.

As a result, beginning in the fall of 1982, the economy began 60 straight months of growth, the longest uninterrupted period of expansion since the government began keeping statistics in 1854. Nearly 15 million new jobs were created during this period, and just under \$20 trillion worth of goods and services, measured in actual dollars, were produced.

From intelligence reports and the insights gained over a lifetime of study, President Reagan concluded that communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe was cracking and ready to crumble. In one of the most memorable utterances of his presidency, the President in 1982 predicted (before the British Parliament at Westminster): "The march of freedom and democracy... will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people."

A critical part of what came to be called the Reagan Doctrine was the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), the development of a comprehensive anti-ballistic missile system. The only people who hated it more than its liberal detractors in America (who ridiculed it as "Star Wars") were the Soviets. In 1993, General Makhmut Gareer, who headed the department of strategic analysis in the Soviet Ministry of Defense, revealed what he had told the Soviet general staff and the Politburo in 1983: "Not only could we not defeat SDI, SDI defeated all possible countermeasures."

The Reagan Legacy

Biographer Lou Cannon wrote that "no president save FDR defined a decade as strikingly as Ronald Reagan defined the 1980s." But Cannon did not go far enough. Reagan left an indelible mark on American politics, starting in the 1960s, when he was governor of California and continuing through the 1980s and to the present day. I predict that just as the first half of the 20th century has been called the Age of Roosevelt, the last half of the 20th century will be called the Age of Reagan.

Just as Roosevelt led America out of a great economic depression, Reagan lifted a traumatized country out of a great psychological depression, induced by the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., and sustained by the Vietnam War, the scandal of Watergate, and the malaise of Jimmy Carter. Reagan used the same political instruments

as Roosevelt—the major address to Congress and the fireside chat with the people—and the same optimistic, uplifting rhetoric.

But although both Roosevelt and Reagan appealed to the best in America, there was a significant philosophical difference between the two Presidents: Roosevelt turned to government to solve the problems of the people, while Reagan turned to the people to solve the problems of government.

Traditionalists vs. Neoconservatives

The conservative movement had generally flourished during the 1980s, but there were inevitable tensions as it grew in size and influence. In the 1950s, the sharpest debates had been between traditionalists and libertarians as to the proper balance between order and liberty. In the 1980s, traditionalists and neoconservatives disputed as to the correct role of the state.

The external threat of communism and the calming presence of President Reagan had persuaded most conservatives to sublimate their differences for the greater good. But with the collapse of Soviet communism and Reagan's departure, disagreements among the varying kinds of conservatism came to the surface with more intensity.

Newt Gingrich and the Contract with America

President Bush the Elder was a severe disappointment to many conservatives, who did not mourn for long his 1992 defeat to New Democrat Bill Clinton. They found consolation in a new and somewhat controversial conservative leader who came from the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue—Congressman Newt Gingrich. His Contract with America was the tip of a giant conservative iceberg that tore into the seemingly permanent Democratic majority in Congress and sank it faster than the *Titanic*.

In the November 1994 elections, Republicans gained 52 seats and assumed a majority in the House of Representatives for the first time since 1953 when Dwight Eisenhower was President. And they recaptured control of the U.S. Senate. *The New York Times* called the Republican-conservative triumph “a political upheaval of historic proportions.”

But the year that began with such shining promise ended in bitter disappointment. The Republican House watched its public approval sink from 52 percent to the upper 20s in January 1996, while Speaker Gingrich received a perilous disapproval rating of 51 percent.

Republicans grossly underestimated President Clinton's political skills, especially his use of the veto, and they failed to respond forcefully enough to the Democrats' propaganda. And they overestimated the ability of Congress to govern. In the age of mass media, presidential power is too great and congressional power is too diffuse for Congress to prevail over the President for long.

George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism

No U.S. President was as coolly welcomed as Republican George W. Bush was in January 2001. His inaugural was overshadowed by the disputed nature of his victory—narrowly losing the popular vote to Vice President Al Gore and winning the Electoral College by just one vote more than the needed 270.

Widely described—and not only by partisan Democrats—as the man who “stole” the 2000 election, a cautious Bush began his presidency by focusing on taxes and education reform as a reflection of his “compassionate” conservatism. His major accomplishment in his first six months was a monumental tax cut of \$1.6 trillion, a move in keeping with the supply-side economic philosophy of Ronald Reagan, not of his father George H. W. Bush. But the President seemed detached and even uncomfortable in the job, and Democrats began laying plans for an aggressive presidential campaign and a retaking of the White House in 2004.

And then came September 11, 2001—“9/11.” The hijacked airplanes that smashed into the white towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, the mammoth Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and the Pennsylvania countryside killed three thousand innocent people and swept away the political and social detritus of the previous 10 months. The nation was no longer divided between blue Gore states and red Bush states but was united in red, white, and blue.

The once passive President became an activist chief executive, asking for the authority to fight a protracted conflict against terrorists, help industries hit hard by terrorism, and rejuvenate a stalled economy. Aided by the public's tendency to rally around the President in a time of crisis, Bush's approval ratings skyrocketed until they topped 90 percent—as high a level as any President since the advent of polling.

Inevitably, President Bush's popularity has leveled off in the 50s. Bipartisanship in Congress has become more difficult as the fundamental differences between Republicans and Democrats on core issues like taxes and federal spending and even the Iraq War have resurfaced. Patriotism has become passé in some quarters, especially in the academy.

But America will not return to its pre-September 11 way of life. The terrorist attacks were a defining moment in modern American history. Americans are prepared to fight terrorism as long as they did the Cold War, which occupied us for some four decades.

In any war, leadership is critical. President Bush's leadership will be scrutinized as his Administration considers appropriate action against terrorists. Despite the questions about the existence or non-existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the majority of Americans still believe the war of liberation against Saddam Hussein was justified, and they have not forgotten how quickly the United States removed the extremist Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

At home, the Bush Administration is committed to preserving the tax cuts and stimulating the economy without massive federal spending and federal regulation. Such a balancing act of economics and politics will demand the greatest skill and care. The President is fortunate in that he can call upon the myriad resources of a mature conservative movement—the collective strengths of a great complex of politicians, popularizers, philosophers, and philanthropists.

The Triumph of Conservatism

The transforming power of modern American conservatism over the last 50 years has been unmistakable. In the late 1940s, we seemed to be headed

for a socialist world in which Marxism–Leninism could only be contained, not defeated. In the 1990s, we celebrated the collapse of Soviet communism and the adoption of liberal democracy and free markets around the world because of the leadership of charismatic conservatives like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

The impacts of modern conservatism in America have been equally profound. There is renewed public skepticism about Big Government, a “leave us alone” attitude that stretches back as far as the Founding of the Republic. Because of conservative initiatives like welfare reform, several of the nation's leading cultural indicators, such as violent crime, teenage births, and the child poverty rate, have declined. And in the wake of 9/11, a prudential internationalism has evolved, based on this principle: Act multilaterally when possible and unilaterally when necessary.

The liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote in 1947 that “there seems no inherent obstacle to the gradual advance of socialism in the United States through a series of New Deals.” Five-and-a-half decades later, the conservative columnist George Will wrote that we had experienced “the intellectual collapse of socialism” in America and around the world.

The one political constant throughout those 50 years has been the rise of the Right, whose Long March to national power and prominence was often interrupted by the death of its leaders, calamitous defeats at the polls, frequent feuding within its ranks over means and ends, and the perennial hostility of the prevailing liberal establishment. But through the power of its ideas—ever linked by the priceless principle of ordered liberty—and the unceasing dissemination and application of those ideas, the conservative movement has become a major, and often the dominant, player in the political and economic realms of America.

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