The Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Was An Act of State

Book Review by David T. Ratcliffe 20 January 2003

A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. . . .

We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate.

--Martin Luther King, "Beyond Vietnam," Address delivered to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, at Riverside Church, NYC, 4/4/67

Dr. William F. Pepper was the King Family's lawyer-investigator in the 1999 Circuit Court trial in Memphis, Tennessee, *King Family versus Jowers and Other Unknown Co-Conspirators*. The Honorable James E. Swearengen (Division 4, judge presiding) stated to the jury after reaching its verdict:

"In answer to the question did Loyd Jowers participate in a conspiracy to do harm to Martin Luther King, your answer is yes. Do you also find that others, including governmental agencies, were parties to this conspiracy as alleged by the defendant? Your answer to that one is also yes."

The story of Martin Luther King's assassination, and the 1999 trial where the truth of this event was finally revealed in a court of law is now encapsulated in Dr. William F. Pepper's new book, released by Verso this month: *An Act of State - The Execution of Martin Luther King*. The dust jacket summarizes what many have intuitively known for more than thirty years:

"William Pepper, attorney and friend of Dr. King and the King family, became convinced after years of investigation that not only was Ray not the shooter, but that King had been targeted as part of a larger conspiracy to stop the anti-war movement, and to prevent King from gaining momentum in his promising Poor People's Campaign. Ten years into his investigation, in 1988, Pepper agreed to represent Ray. While he was never able to successfully appeal the sentence before Ray's death, he was able to build an air-tight case against the real perpetrators. In 1999, Loyd Jowers and co-conspirators were brought to trial in a wrongful death civil action suit on behalf of the King family. Seventy witnesses set out the details of the conspiracy in a plot to murder King that involved J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, Richard Helms and the CIA, the military, the local Memphis police, and organized crime figures from New Orleans and Memphis. The evidence was unimpeachable. The jury took an hour to find for the King family. But the silence following these shocking revelations was deafening. Like the pattern during all the investigations of the assassination throughout the years, no major media outlet would cover the story. It was effectively buried.

"Until now, the details, evidence, and personalities of all these nefarious characters have gone unreported. In *An Act of State*, you finally have the truth before you -- how the United States government effectively shut down one of the most galvanizing movements for social change by stopping its leader dead in his tracks."

In his closing remarks on the last day of the trial, Dr. Pepper touched upon the underlying dynamics of what created the circumstances of Dr. King's execution:

Martin King, as you know, for many years was a Baptist preacher in the southern part of this country, and he was thrust into leadership of the civil rights movement at a historic moment in the civil rights movement and social change movement in this part of the country. That's where he was. That's where he has been locked in time, locked in a media image, locked as an icon in the brains of the people of this country.

But Martin King had moved well beyond that. When he was awarded the Noble Peace Prize he became in the mid-1960's an international figure, a person of serious stature whose voice, his opinions, on other issues than just the plight of black people in the South became very significant world-wide. He commanded world-wide attention as few had before him. As a successor, if you will, to Mahatmas Gandhi in terms of the movement for social change through civil disobedience. So that's where he was moving. Then in 1967, April 4, 1967, one year to the day before he was killed, he delivered the momentous speech at Riverside Church in New York where he opposed the war.

Now, he thought carefully about this war. . . . I remember vividly, I was a journalist in Vietnam, when I came back he asked to meet with me, and when I opened my files to him, which were devastating in terms of the effects upon the civilian population of that country, he unashamedly wept.

I knew at that point really that the die was cast. This was in February of 1967. He was definitely going to oppose that war with every strength, every fiber in his body. And he did so. He opposed it. And from the date of the Riverside speech to the date he was killed, he never wavered in that opposition. Now, what does that mean? Is he an enemy of the State? The State regarded him as an enemy because he opposed it. But what does it really mean, his opposition? I put it to you that his opposition to that war had little to do with ideology, with capitalism, with democracy. It had to do with money. It had to do with huge amounts of money that that war was generating to large multinational corporations that were based in the United States . . .

When Martin King opposed the war, when he rallied people to oppose the war, he was threatening the bottom lines of some of the largest defense contractors in this country. This was about money. When he threatened to bring that war to a close through massive popular opposition, he was threatening the bottom lines of some of the largest construction companies, one of which was in the State of Texas, that patronized the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson and had the major construction contracts at Cam Ran Bay in Vietnam. This is what Martin King was challenging. He was challenging the weapons industry, the hardware, the armament industries, that all would lose as a result of the end of the war. . . .

Now, he begin to talk about a redistribution of wealth, in this the wealthiest country in the world that had such a large group of poor people, of people living then and now, by the way, in poverty. That problem had to be addressed. And it wasn't a black-and-white problem. This was a problem that dealt with Hispanics, and it dealt with poor whites as well. That is what he was taking on. That's what he was challenging.

The powers in this land believed he would not be successful. Why did they believe that? They believed that because they knew that the decision-making processes in the United States had by that point in time, and today it is much worse in my view, but by that point in time had so consolidated power that they were the representatives, the foot soldiers, of the . . . very economic interests who were going to suffer as a result of these times of changes. So the very powerful lobbying forces that put their people in the halls of Congress and indeed in the White House itself and controlled them, paid and bought them and controlled them, were certainly not going to agree to the type of social legislation that Martin King and his mass of humanity were going to require.

On the King Center website, a draft from Pepper's new book, describes the role played by the media from the testimony of William Schapp, attorney, military and intelligence specialization, and co-publisher *Covert Action Quarterly*. The culpability of the commercial media uniformly burying this Crime Of The Century story is the most evident indicator of the true interests served by the U.S. corporate press.

Half a day was occupied with the testimony of Attorney William Schapp, who we qualified as an expert on government use of the media for disinformation and propaganda purposes. . . .

Schapp revealed that the [central intelligence] agency alone -- not to mention its counterparts in the rest of the American intelligence community -- owned or controlled some 2,500 media entities all over the world. In addition, it has its people ranging from stringers to highly visible journalists and editors in virtually every major media organization. As we have seen and were indeed experiencing every day of the trial, this inevitably results in the suppression or distortion of sensitive stories and the planting and dissemination of disinformation.

Considering all of the aspects of the cover up in this case, the ongoing media role is the most sinister precisely because it, if not powerfully controverted, as was done with the trial, perpetuates the lies and disinformation from one generation to the next, for all time.

Writing in an April 7 2002 letter to John Judge, Dr. Pepper explained further details of the manner in which disinformation serves to distract people from making the connections that lie at the heart of Dr. King's assassination. Note that the 7,000 (at its peak) protesters who lived in Resurrection City between mid-April and 19 June 1968 comprised less than 2 percent of the 500,000 people Martin King was committed to bringing to Washington that Spring to force the United States government to abolish poverty.

... I still represent the family and monitor developments such as the recent allegations, regarding which the family asked me to respond to media queries. So far as we are concerned the truth about the assassination was fully revealed in court, under oath over a month long trial in late 1999 in Memphis. In *Kings v. Jowers, et al*, some 70 witnesses completely set out the details and the range of the conspiracy which was coordinated by the US Government with the assistance of state and local officials and on the site implementation of local organized crime operatives.

The entire trial is on the web site of the King Center. It took the jury about one hour to find the Government liable through the actions of its agents. The identities of the shooter and James Earl Ray's handler, Raul, were also established. . . .

So, John, it is not true that this case is open. It is open, officially, but unlike the other assassinations we know and have evidence of the details of the killing. The family believes that they are completely vindicated. Even the *New York Times* in a front page piece (never again mentioned, by their local reporter) acknowledged that members of the jury were quoted as saying that the evidence -- never before seen or heard or tested under oath -- was overwhelming. . . .

Your analysis is correct. This type of [false] claim [of a supposed King assassination plotter that is not credible] distracts us from the overall coordinating role of Government and the powerful economic interests which decided that MLK had to be removed from the scene because of his increasingly effective opposition to the war and, perhaps, more significantly, his commitment to bring upwards of 500,000 of the wretched of America to Washington, not to march but to encamp and daily visit their elected representatives to demand the restoration of the social welfare/health and educational programs which had been severely, even terminally, cut in deference to the military budgetary increases.

The Army knew that their demands would not be met, realized that the massive assemblage would likely become enraged and emerge as a revolutionary force in the nation's capitol -- the very belly of the beast -- and were fully aware that they did not have the troops available to put down the rebellion. (Remember, at the time, Westmoreland wanted another 200,000 for Vietnam and those were also not available).

Hence, MLK had to be stopped. He would never be allowed to bring that alienated mass to Washington. A logistics officer in charge of troop movements and truck allocations at Fort Meade, passed word to me that on the morning of the assassination he was put on alert and told to be ready to bring the National Guard and other troops to Washington that afternoon. Martin King was shot at 6:01 PM. The troops were already on the move in anticipation of the rioting which was certain to break out when the news reached the capitol.

On the back cover of *An Act of State*, Coretta Scott King sums up her understanding and appreciation of its significance:

"For a quarter of a century, Bill Pepper conducted an independent investigation of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. He opened his files to our family, encouraged us to speak with the witnesses, and represented our family in the civil trial against the conspirators. The jury affirmed his findings, providing our family with a long-sought sense of closure and peace, which had been denied by official disinformation and cover-ups. Now the findings of his exhaustive investigation and additional revelations from the trial are presented in the pages of this important book. We recommend it highly to everyone who seeks the truth about Dr. King's assassination."

In the 12/9/99 King Family Press Conference on the MLK Assassination Trial Verdict, Dr. Pepper described the significance of what the trial had uncovered and established:

... Then the proof goes into the broader conspiracy. The fact that had you known that there were photographers on the roof of the fire station? Had you known that two army photographers were on the roof of the fire station photographing everything? Two cameras, one on the balcony and one whisking around the driveway and into the brush area. Did you know ladies and gentlemen that the assassination was photographed? That there were photographs buried in the archives at the Department of Defense? No, you did not know.

And you know why you did not know? Because there was no police investigation in this case. No house-to-house investigation. Neighbors as late as two weeks later stated "they never knocked on my door, now let me tell you what I saw." . . . They didn't talk to the Captain who ran the fire station. No one talked to that man in thirty years. He put the photographers up there. He took the stand and stated, "yeah I put them up there. They showed me credentials saying they wanted to take pictures." Where are those pictures? That proof has existed for all of these years. It's there. It has been buried.

The tragedy of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. is a tragedy for this family here. This family in my view is America's first family because of their struggle and for what they have stood for, going back for generations, going back to 1917, the first world war period, this family was under surveillance by military intelligence back then. Up to the present time they have been feared. So that is a tragedy for this family. It is a tragedy for this nation and to the world that this man was taken from us when he was.

The third tragedy was the failure of representative democracy to deal with this as a political act. This type of act which was covered up. How was it covered up? Well, the jury heard evidence as to how it was covered up for 31 years....

We can end this nonsense. We can end this cover-up. We can say for once and for all that a jury has spoken. They heard everything. If there is any decency left in this system, it is the fact that you can get 12 people who can hear what other people have to say, they can review documents, there are about 50 exhibits that they were able to review, and they can make up their own minds. The defense tried several times to have the case dismissed. The Judge refused. So it did go to a jury and that jury has spoken.

Let's hope this is a forum, which we can say, is healing. We have reached the truth. The family is satisfied. What the government does, the government can do. The government may do now what it has never done before. If they want to take it up now, let them take it up.

The real, real ongoing, almost criminal aspect of the case that still exists, is the fact that this family privately had to do what the government has not done and would not do. Make no mistake about it, all the evidence that was heard in that court over the course of the last 30 days has been available for 32 years. It has been there right in front of them. . . .

In the traditional history of the country, where a person who was a friend and a colleague of a victim, only for one year, the last year of his life, but during that year the friend and colleague of the victim decided 20 years later the convicted murderer of that victim. Then eventually came to represent the family in the final quest of justice. That has been the process that I follow. That has been the result.

We have at last obtained justice. Martin King was always fond of saying in moments of trial, that truth crushed to earth, no matter how much it is crushed, will always rise again. Ladies and Gentlemen, in that courtroom yesterday in Memphis, Tennessee, finally that truth crushed to earth

Jim Douglass was one of only two reporters who attended the trial proceedings from start to finish in Memphis. Writing in the spring of 2000, he emphasized that we have yet to address the fact that 32 (now 34-plus) years later, the United States government is that much more committed to representing the private interests of monied power and putting the interests of corporate power ahead of people and the public interest.

Perhaps the lesson of the King assassination is that our government understands the power of nonviolence better than we do, or better than we want to. In the spring of 1968, when Martin King was marching (and Robert Kennedy was campaigning), King was determined that massive, nonviolent civil disobedience would end the domination of democracy by corporate and military power. The powers that be took Martin Luther King seriously. They dealt with him in Memphis.

Thirty-two years after Memphis, we know that the government that now honors Dr. King with a national holiday also killed him. As will once again become evident when the Justice Department releases the findings of its "limited re-investigation" into King's death, the government (as a footsoldier of corporate power) is continuing its cover-up -- just as it continues to do in the closely related murders of John and Robert Kennedy and Malcolm X.

Almost 35 years after Martin Luther King's assassination, the current corporate presidency pursues the global prosecution of its so-called war against and war on terrorism. This carefully orchestrated, on-going, pre-emptive war of aggression is unique in scope and ambition to anything before or since World War II. The size of the United States' arsenal of weapons of mass destruction -- the world's largest repository of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the only nation to ever use nuclear weapons on civilian targets -- and the power of its conventional military might stands alone, at a quantum level above the world's next ten largest militaries combined. Dick Cheney asserted in October 2001 that this war "may never end. At least, not in our lifetime."

In *An Act of State*, Chapter 10 - A Vision Unto Death And A Truth Beyond The Grave, is a section headed by the latin phrase, *Non nobis solum nati sumas*, meaning We exist not for ourselves alone. In this subsection Pepper considers the challenge of the growing, unbridled militarism Martin King knew he faced, especially in the last year of his life.

"... post[-1945]-war America began to breed a military establishment which would gradually grow beyond civilian control. By the year 2000, the pre-1960 warning of President Dwight Eisenhower about the power of the military-industrial complex was all too real. Martin King saw it as violating Americans' cultural heritage by making us the greatest purveyors of violence on the planet. In fact, in our lifetimes, the American military establishment has virtually become an autonomous system. It is today an entirely mercenary -- voluntary -- force increasingly separate from all but the transnational corporate interests it protects. (pp.169-170)...

"Though he could not have predicted the details of the demise of democracy and the ultimate alienation of America from its cultural and spiritual roots, as well as the consequences of its Cold War policies upon the nation and its system of government, Martin King instinctively knew that the only alternative to disaster was to promote the perception of the oneness of humankind over the public policies of the nation. (p.171)...

"He knew that if the torch of brotherhood were taken up, its bearers would face hatred like they had never known. So, he urged his followers not to hate those who hated them, for hate, he said, was too great a burden to bear. . . . King agreed that the challenge was not to turn new, emerging societies into mirror reflections of Europe or the United States, not even ideal reflections. Neither was it desirable to imitate institutions which had been derived from those models. Rather, he argued, new concepts must be advanced and a new man brought forward -- one who embraced the brotherhood of all.

"In order for this to occur, he said, these courageous pioneers would have to suffer being

called social misfits or as he put it 'maladjusted.' He said that concerning certain values and practices of the existing social order, and in particular the growth of militarism, he was proud to be maladjusted and he called upon all people to become maladjusted. He said he refused to adjust to a socio-economic order which deprived the many of necessities and allowed luxuries for the few. He refused to adjust to the madness of militarism and the self-perpetuating use of violence in the development of the American empire." (pp.171-2)

On 22 December 2002, columnist Eric Margolis wrote about how in Afghanistan, "Details of U.S. victory are a little premature". Near the end he cites the financial cost to the United States for maintaining its occupation:

"The ongoing cost of Afghan operations is a closely guarded secret. Earlier this year, the cost of stationing 8,000 American troops, backed by warplanes and naval units, was estimated at \$5 billion US monthly!"

When I asked him what his source for this was he responded, "Cost derived from Pentagon's budget request to Congress." As William Pepper described above, Martin Luther King "was challenging the weapons industry, the hardware, the armament industries that all would lose as a result of the end of the war". Today, the military-industrial-corporate complex is the sole winner of a dead-end future it compulsively pursues to the detriment of all life on earth. Where does the \$5 billion a month come from to finance the occupation of Afghanistan? A year ago a story by by cbsnews.com described how the Pentagon was unable to account for \$2.3 trillion in taxpayer money. At this point, the Pentagon is a runaway train of feverish proportions. The current war party occupying the oval office has refined the prosecution of endless war to an heretofore incomprehensible degree. This present is the future Martin Luther King sought to alter.

In the Epilogue, Pepper describes how the powerful economic interests that Martin Luther King had chosen to directly challenge in the last year of his life have consolidated their power and control under an increasingly formalized movement of corporate globalization. The poor and wretched of our country were represented and championed by Dr. King like no political or religious figure before or since. King intended "to compel Americans and their government to come face to face with the least of them -- the hidden wretched of their native land."

"Martin Luther King Jr was, for the transnational corporations, public enemy number one. He stood in the way of their inexorable consolidation of power. If he had played along as have many of his peers before and after, he would likely be with us today, a wealthy and honored man, a pillar of the state. But he did not choose to play that game and as we have seen the might of the steward state was brought to bear upon him, and to this day the pillars of the American Republic continue to be supported by the same foundation stones of lies and greed which he was determined to crumble to dust and replace. (p.267)...

"Martin King's commitments to social and economic justice went beyond the contemplative intellect into the arena of an active life. The root and branch transformations of our society, which was about the shaking of all the old foundations, will require nothing less than a struggle in whatever focus it ultimately takes against the familiar, the comfortable, and the acceptable values and inclinations which constitute a very real type of determinism for each one of us. This transcendent struggle, this exalted commitment, emerged as an all-consuming passion of Martin King. He acted upon it until he drew his last breath.

"This is his living legacy to us and people everywhere." (p.272)

As overwhelming as it is to face squarely the implications of this central tragedy of the latter half of 20th century American history, I am nonetheless deeply inspired by William Pepper's

unflinching pursuit of the truth and of his commitment to produce a fuller and just accounting of the actions of my government in the meticulously planned execution of a man of peace who stood and died for the weak, oppressed, impoverished people of our world.

Speaking to a group of us in the Gethsemane Lutheran Church on 3 December 1999 at the end of the WTO meeting in Seattle, David Korten emphasized a fundamental issue that Martin Luther King passionately committed his life's energy to addressing:

"I suggest we be clear that our goal is not to reform global corporate and financial rule -- it is to end it. The publicly traded, limited liability corporation is a pathological institutional form and financial speculation is inherently predatory. As a first step both must be regulated. The appropriate longer term goal is to rid our economic affairs of these institutional pathologies -- much as our ancestors eliminated the institution of monarchy."

Pepper's *An Act of State* expands and further informs one's awareness and consciousness of how our world actually operates. In April 2000, media analyst, author and professor Bob McChesney talked about Global Media and Democracy at the IFG Washington World Bank/IMF Teach-In. He made that point that "if you are going to change something, you have to understand how it works." God Bless America won't carry us through this transformational epoch of the human journey. God Bless Humanity just might if we can come to terms with the fundamentally interdependent nature of our species and how psychically connected we are to each other.

There are many processes unfolding which we can explore and participate in to honor and serve Life's needs. Some examples are given here. See what you can find that best suits your individual nature and gifts. Local-to-ratical content includes:

- 9/22/01 ratitor's corner:
 - The New Myth For Our Species: The Creation of Consciousness
- by Elisabet Sahtouris:
 - O Living Systems, the Internet and the Human Future, 5/13/00
 - O Issues of Human Evolution into Global Community, January 2002
 - O Skills for the Age of Sustainability: An Unprecedented Time of Opportunity, May 2002
 - O The Biology of Globalization, 1998
 - O EarthDance: Living Systems in Evolution, 1999
- Letter from Susan Witt on 10/12/02 Demiurgus Peace International Gathering
- Book Review of David Korten's The Post-Corporate World: Life After Capitalism
- Unequal Protection: The Rise of Corporate Dominance and the Theft of Human Rights, by Thom Hartmann, 12/02
- by Dr. Mae-Wan Ho:
 - O Organism and Psyche in a Participatory Universe, 1998
 - O Towards a New Ethic of Science, 3/16/00
 - O Evolution, 1998
 - O The Organic Revolution in Science and Implications for Science and Spirituality, 9/00
 - O The Biology of Free Will, 1996
- A Native American Worldview / Hawk and Eagle, Both are Singing by Paula Underwood Spencer, 1990
- by Laurens van der Post:
 - O Race Prejudice as Self Rejection, An Inquiry into the Psychological and Spiritual Aspects of Group Conflicts, 12/56
 - O The Psychological Origins of Racial Prejudice, 10/61
 - O Witness to a Last Will of Man
- The Enemy Within by Gore Vidal, 10/27/02
- Broadening Our Perspectives of 11 September 2001 by David T. Ratcliffe, Sept 2002

while content out there includes:

- One Million Taxpayers for Peace
- War Resisters League
- The Sunshine Project
- Council for Responsible Genetics
- Northampton Bill of Rights Defense Committee: useful and current set of Links
- Office for Intellectual Freedomof the American Library Association
- Living Economies Program Walking away from Empire, Living Community into being
- Institute for Local Self-Reliance
- The Simultaneous Policy Breaking Downthe Barriers to Solving World Problems
- YES! Hopeful News for a Just, Compassionate and Sustainable Future
- The Complete 9/11 Timeline, by Paul Thompson
- Program on Corporations, Law & Democracy (POCLAD)
- On the Duty of Civil Disobedience by Henry David Thoreau, 1849
- The War on Freedom, How and Why America was Attacked September 11, 2001, by Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, July 2002

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- An Act of State The Execution of Martin Luther King, by William F. Pepper, Verso, Jan 2003 (http://www.versobooks.com/books/nopqrs/nopq-titles/pepper_w_act_state.shtml)
- "Beyond Vietnam", Address delivered to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, at Riverside Church, NYC, 4 April 1967 (http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/MLKapr67.html)
- William Pepper on the MLK Conspiracy Trial, 4/7/02 (http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/WFPonMLK.html)
- From The King Center (www.thekingcenter.com):
 - O Trial Information including a complete transcript of the trial (http://www.thekingcenter.com/tkc/trial.html)
 - From VOLUME IX: Testimony of Mr. William Schaap, attorney, military and intelligence specialization, co-publisher Covert Action Quarterly, 11/30/99 (http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/MLKv9Schaap.html)
 - VOLUME XIV: Closing Statements and verdict, 12/8/99 (http://www.thekingcenter.com/tkc/trial.html)
 - Trial Transcript Excerpt of Final Day's Proceedings, 12/8/99 (http://www.thekingcenter.com/tkc/trial/trial.html)
 - O Transcription of the King Family Press Conference on the MLK Assassination Trial Verdict, December 9, 1999, Atlanta, GA. (http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/MLKctPC.html)
 - O Chapter 9: The Trial (PDF format), an earlier draft excerpt from the book. This also serves as the family's detailed analysis of the Department of Justice "limited investigation" report. (http://www.thekingcenter.com/tkc/trial/the-trial-chapter-9.html)
- The Martin Luther King Conspiracy Exposed in Memphis, by Jim Douglass, Spring 2000 (http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/MLKconExp.html)
- Details of U.S. victory are a little premature, by Eric Margolis, *Toronto Sun*, 12/22/02 (http://www.ratical.org/ratville/CAH/USvPremature.html)
- The War On Waste, CBSNEWS.com, 1/29/02 (http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/01/29/eveningnews/printable325985.shtml)
- Oh, no Pentagon loses \$2.3 trillion, by Uri Dowbenko, Online Journal, 2/17/02 (http://www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/JohnJudge/linkscopy/PentaLoses.html)
- David Korten, Corporate Accountability: Who Rules?, 12/3/99 (http://www.ratical.org/ratitorsCorner/12.21.99.html#120399)
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