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A Review and Evaluation of Recent Scholarship on America's War in Vietnam

Abstract

This review examines three recently-published books about the Vietnam War: Max Hastings, Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975, Max Boot, The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam, and Brian Van-DeMark, Road to Disaster: A New History of America's Descent into Vietnam. As indicated by the books' titles, they all depict the war as a "tragedy," "a disaster," etc. The review will detail their explanations for the Vietnam tragedy and evaluate the alternatives they suggest.

Keywords: *Vietnam War, Edward Lansdale, decision-making theories, counterinsurgency*

1. Introduction

This reviewer has studied America's failed responses to political violence in the non-Western world for more than thirty years. The experience in Vietnam is an essential case and, nearing the end of his career, he wanted to read recent books about Vietnam to remind himself of the course of the war and new interpretations of it. Revisiting the Vietnam era may also provide greater understanding of more recent events in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the United States also failed in its efforts to respond militarily to political violence.

Three books will be examined. One, Max Boot's *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975* (William Collins, 2018) chronicles the entire period from the end of World War II until the final unification of the country in

1975. The other two concentrate on the crucial decade of the 1960s. Brian VanDeMark, in his *Road to Disaster: A New History of America's Descent into Vietnam* (Custom House, 2018), focuses on Washington and the decisions of the John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations to, first, send military advisers to South Vietnam and then ever larger numbers of U.S. combat troops. Max Boot's biography of Edward Lansdale, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (Liveright, 2018), focuses on Vietnam through the eyes of Lansdale, an active proponent of the "other war," that is, to place greater emphasis on political efforts to win the support of the South Vietnamese people rather than traditional military strategies to kill the government's enemies.

Four sections follow. The first examines widespread American attitudes and beliefs that the authors believe contributed to its failures. The second section examines Lansdale and proposed policies that reflected very different attitudes, while the third examines decision-making patterns in Washington that worked against policy change. The fourth section directs our attention to the governments in North and South Vietnam and to the ordinary people affected by decisions in Washington, Saigon, and Hanoi.

2. Counterproductive American Attitudes

Each of these books illustrates widespread American attitudes that contributed to its failure in Vietnam – ignorance, arrogance, indifference to the Vietnamese, and overemphasis on military power.

a. Ignorance Compounded by Arrogance

As Washington moved increasingly toward greater military involvement in the 1960s, American officials knew little of Vietnam, the nature of the war there, or their adversaries. Kennedy administration officials – most of whom stayed on into the early Johnson years – “possessed scant knowledge and even less understanding of Southeast Asian history, language, and culture” (VanDeMark, 2018, p. 131). The State Department did not train any Vietnamese-speaking foreign service officers until the mid-1960s. Those in the country were typically French speakers, who might be able to interact with urban elites, but not the great mass of the Vietnamese peasants. For example, when the “Buddhist crisis” broke out

in 1963, the administration had no comprehension of what was happening. One NSC official lamented, "We didn't know who [the Buddhists] were, we didn't have... the faintest idea what their organization was all about." As VanDeMark notes, "In a country populated mostly by Buddhists, this admission revealed a great deal about what America did not know about Vietnam" (VanDeMark, 2018, p. 159).

There was also a lack of understanding of the nature of the war the U.S. was fighting. American military leaders consistently employed the tactics that had prevailed in previous wars, i.e. mass firepower to destroy the enemy, rather than counterinsurgency efforts of the sort necessary in Vietnam. In 1961, only three members of the military's advisory mission in Vietnam were trained in guerilla warfare operations. One general later lamented that the military's "'reservoir of ignorance' about counterinsurgency was almost unlimited" (quoted in VanDeMark, 2018, p. 150). Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, later acknowledged – in an assertion that could also have described himself and many in Washington – that the military "didn't speak the language, they didn't know the values, the culture, the habits of thought" of the Vietnamese, meaning that "the great majority of them were not competent to judge progress other than in terms they normally examined military operations" (quoted in VanDeMark, 2018, p. 150).

Finally, Americans knew little of their adversary. The CIA director, Richard Helms, later wrote that "Within the Agency, our failure to penetrate the North Vietnamese government was the single most frustrating aspect of those years. We could not determine what was going on at the highest levels of Ho's government, nor could we learn how policy was made or who was making it" (quoted in VanDeMark, 2018, p. 324). It had no agents in North Vietnam and had not even developed a model of the North Vietnamese leadership structure until 1969.

Americans' ignorance was compounded by their arrogance. While it might seem likely that replacing the French after the 1954 Geneva Accords would result in the same result for the Americans as it had for the French, few Americans would agree. Rather, "France was a washed-up colonial power scheming to recapture yesterday's glory... The United States, on the other hand, was a great power that had championed democracy and sought no territorial gains... France had sought geographical conquest; the United States sought to rescue a beleaguered people from tyranny" (VanDeMark, 2018, p. 123). In practice, however, the Americans "were

bent upon conducting a war in exactly the style of colonialist governments through the ages" (Hastings, 2018, p. 181).

Another manifestation of American arrogance: there were few doubters at the outset in Washington or Vietnam about the power and ability of the United States to achieve its goals. In Washington, Secretary of State Dean Rusk wondered, "How can Hanoi stand up to us when we have just made Khrushchev back down" in the Cuban Missile Crisis. In Vietnam, Philip Caputo, who later wrote a best-selling book criticizing the war, described his thinking at the outset of his tour: "If [Kennedy] was the King of Camelot, then we were his knights and Vietnam our crusade. There was nothing we could not do because we were Americans, and for the same reason, whatever we did was right" (Rusk quoted in VanDeMark, 2018, p. 209; Caputo quoted in Hastings, 2018, p. 213).

b. Indifference to Vietnamese Allies

In addition to their ignorance about the Vietnamese, Americans were indifferent to the interests of their Vietnamese allies: an "extraordinary aspect of the decision-making in Washington between 1961 and 1975 was that Vietnamese were seldom if ever allowed to intrude upon it. Successive administrations ignored any claims by the people who inhabited the battlefields to a voice in determining their own fate..." (Hastings, 2018, p. 121). U.S. officials acknowledged this; John McNaughton, an aide to McNamara, calculated America's interests in Vietnam to be "70 percent to avoid a humiliating defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor) – 20 percent to keep South Vietnam (and the adjacent territory) from Chinese hands – 10 percent to permit the people of South Vietnam to enjoy a better, freer way of life" (quoted in Hastings, 2018, p. 176).

This indifference is best illustrated by examining two crucial U.S. decisions regarding the future of the South Vietnamese government: the November 1963 coup vs. Ngo Dinh Diem and the deliberations about the Paris Peace Accords that ended the American involvement. Diem had been an American ally for nearly a decade, but by 1963 his intransigence and excessive reliance on his family had led some in Washington to view him as an obstacle to successful prosecution of the war, and they argued that he should be removed by the South Vietnamese military. One such advocate was the American ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, who argued, "I don't think we ought to take this government seriously.

There is simply no one who can do anything. We have to do what we think we ought to do regardless... As we move ahead on a new phase, we have the right and duty to do certain things with or without the government's approval" (quoted in Hastings, 2018, p. 223). Kennedy decided to endorse the coup, Diem was removed from power, and he and his brother were shot by the South Vietnamese military. Kennedy later acknowledged the crucial American role, writing a private memo to himself that, "I feel we must bear a good deal of responsibility" for the coup (quoted in Boot, 2018, p. xxxvii). However, events were soon to prove that Diem's successors were worse than he was – less competent, more corrupt, and constantly scheming against each other. In the nineteen months following Diem's removal, between November 1963 and July 1965, there were ten different South Vietnamese governments.

Roughly a decade later, Americans were secretly negotiating with the North Vietnamese about an end to the American combat involvement, if not an end to the war. The South Vietnamese, whose future was being negotiated, were not directly involved in these talks and were given less than complete information about them. As the talks developed, the Americans made a major concession: they would agree to withdraw their troops from South Vietnam, but not insist that the North Vietnamese withdraw theirs. This concession made South Vietnam's future problematic. Even worse, the Nixon administration "made plain to both Moscow and Beijing that it had no private expectations the North Vietnamese would honor the terms of the settlement; it merely wanted their autograph on the paperwork" (Hastings, 2018, p. 557). What the administration needed was a period of time, a "decent interval," between the time of the withdrawal of American combat troops and the ultimate fall of South Vietnam.

Indifference to the locals also characterized American soldiers serving in the country, many of whom "departed without holding any more meaningful intercourse with the inhabitants than a haggle about the price of sex" (Hastings, 2018, p. 119). In an extraordinary example of indifference, William Westmoreland, U.S. military commander in the mid to late-1960s, argued that the haggling was actually one of the reasons why U.S. soldiers were better liked than their French predecessors: "when the French wanted a woman they simply grabbed her off the streets and went to bed with her," but "when an American soldier wants a woman he pays for her" (quoted in Boot, 2018, p. 430).

c. Great Reliance on Military Remedies

America emphasized military tactics from the very beginning of its involvement in South Vietnam; by the late 1950s, 90% of US aid was going to military purposes. By the end of the war, the U.S. had spent sixteen times as much on military efforts as pacification. The amount of firepower used by American forces is truly astounding. The U.S. fired an average of more than eight hundred tons of bombs, rockets and missiles every day and in total fired nearly seven million tons of bombs, three times what it had used in World War II and thirteen times what it had dropped in the Korean War. Such bombing did inflict great damage on North Vietnam, \$2.1 billion in 2018 dollars, but it cost the U.S. \$6.4 billion to do so.

There were also, of course, human consequences of the military effort. VanDeMark has estimated that North Vietnam suffered 58 times the number of war related deaths as the U.S. (one million North Vietnamese deaths from a population of fifty million vs. 58,000 American deaths in a total population of 200 million). In South Vietnam, where most of the ground fighting took place, as many as 75,000 South Vietnamese non-combatants were killed or wounded each year in the war's later years. This was a "problem," admitted Westmoreland, but "it does deprive the enemy of population, doesn't it" (quoted in Hastings, 2018, p. 279).

To give one local example of the extent and the impact of America's use of military power, consider Operation Benton, a two-week August 1967 search and destroy mission in South Vietnam. In a small area, six miles by thirteen miles, 282 tons of bombs and 116 tons of napalm were dropped and 1,000 rockets were fired. At the end of the two-week mission, it was reported that 397 North Vietnamese were killed and 640 South Vietnamese had become refugees. "Such a fortnight's work," Hastings argues, "may be deemed representative" (pp. 643–644).

Critics of the U.S. military effort argued that it should have done more, e.g., broadening the range of bombing targets in North Vietnam, ground action and more extensive bombing in Laos and Cambodia, or even using atomic weapons. There were reports that Johnson and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had considered the use of atomic weapons in response to the North Vietnamese siege of Khe Sanh during the Tet Offensive. When these speculations became public, it was claimed that there had been no intention to use atomic weapons, merely an effort to keep the North Vietnamese guessing. There was, however, no denying the proposal of the Air Force chief of staff, Curtis LeMay, who wrote in his

memoirs that, "My solution... would be to tell [the North Vietnamese] frankly that they've got to draw in their horns and stop their aggression, or we're going to bomb them back into the Stone Age" (quoted in Hastings, 2018, p. 283).

3. Edward Lansdale: The Road Not Taken

Edward Lansdale's proposed, but rejected, approach might have been a way to counteract these attitudes. Lansdale served in the CIA and later the Air Force and was at various times an advisor to the Filipino and South Vietnamese governments. "Among twentieth-century advisers," according to his biographer, Max Boot, "his influence was rivaled only by that of T.E. Lawrence, and his example is arguably more important for the present day because, while 'Lawrence of Arabia' was an insurgent, Lansdale was a counterinsurgent par excellence" (pp. xlv–xlvi). If, in practice, American efforts were characterized by ignorance and indifference to the Vietnamese, "Lansdalism" could be characterized by "3 L's," like, learn, and listen. He recognized that military action was necessary to defeat insurgents, but he stressed the importance of political solutions to the communist challenge. As he wrote after he had left the government, it would be "Damn hard for guerillas to get people to help them throw down a government that people feel is their own." Instead in Vietnam, the U.S. "mostly sought to destroy enemy forces" (quoted in Boot, p. 599). In light of these beliefs, as an advisor Lansdale sought to strengthen embattled governments, generate popular loyalty, and promote stability.

His initial success came in the Philippines where, as a close adviser to Ramon Magsaysay, defense minister and later president, he promoted military and political reform and efforts to reduce corruption to win the "hearts and minds" of the Filipino people and defeat the Huk insurgency. These efforts were successful, and by 1953–54, the Philippines "had become one of the few places in the postwar world where a major communist uprising was defeated without intervention by foreign troops, as in Malaya, or, without a bloodbath as in Indonesia or Guatemala." This success was accomplished largely by Lansdale's "deft manipulation of local politics rather than through costly American spending or heavy-handed American military action" (Boot, 2018, p. 168).

Lansdale's success in the Philippines led the U.S. government to assign him to Vietnam, but the situation there was much more chaotic and

threatening. With the departure of French colonial forces in the spring and summer of 1954, there was a need to establish a new government capable and strong enough to resist the communist challenge domestically and from North Vietnam. Lansdale served as advisor to the new president, Diem, and advocated many of the types of policies that had worked in the Philippines. He worked to befriend and advise Diem as he had Magsaysay – with less success – facilitated the movement of a million Catholics from northern to southern Vietnam to support Diem’s Catholic-based regime, urged Diem to become more visible in the countryside to generate popular support, and initiated a program to bring medical care to those areas recently vacated by the guerillas.

Diem was much more difficult to work with than Magsaysay had been, however, and he quickly developed enemies in Saigon and Washington who sought his removal. Lansdale consistently advocated for the South Vietnamese leader. He intervened in Washington during a Spring 1955 coup attempt when many, including the American ambassador, J. Lawton Collins, urged the U.S. to abandon Diem. Lansdale’s intervention was “the largest single influence on deliberations in Washington at the most critical point of Diem’s tenure before 1963,” according to a CIA history (quoted in Boot, 2018, p. 275). The mention of 1963 is important because that was the year the U.S. did endorse a military coup against Diem. Lansdale had left South Vietnam by that time, but he disapproved of the proposed coup. Americans were “trying to play God, by trying to pick a leader for Vietnam.” He acknowledged that Diem had his faults, but he was better than any who might replace him. Lansdale defended this position years later, writing, “It was morally wrong and strategically stupid to divide our political base in Vietnam when that political base, small as it was, was facing an energetic and exploitative enemy” (quoted in Boot, 2018, pp. 407, 415).

As Lansdale had predicted, the situation in South Vietnam became more chaotic following Diem’s removal and the position of communist insurgents became stronger. The U.S. began to place greater emphasis on military responses to this threat, sending more troops to South Vietnam and bombing North Vietnam. Lansdale believed this was a mistake; he wrote in 1964 that the communist danger would be present “even if South Vietnam were isolated completely from North Vietnam or outside Communist help.” There was no need to expand the military mission: “Overt U.S. intervention against North Vietnam or Cambodia is neither necessary nor appropriate.” There was also no need to increase the num-

ber of U.S. troops above the existing 20,000: existing resources “should be more than sufficient to cope with most military aspects of the Vietnamese insurgency” (quoted in Boot, 2018, pp. 436–437). By this time, however, Lansdale’s influence was very modest and his suggestions were ignored.

Would “Lansdalism” have worked in Vietnam? Boot is not sure, but “...at the very least the war’s loss would have been less painful all around if Lansdale’s advice had been heeded” and his approach, “successful or not, would have been more humane and less costly” (Boot, 2018, p. 574). But what about the question of the utility of Lansdale’s approach? Was the success in the Philippines the creation of what could have been a new rule for American foreign policy or was it an exception? Lansdale’s project in the Philippines had a number of advantages that did not exist in Vietnam: the United States was well-liked, while in Vietnam, many viewed it as simply replacing the French. There was a good, non-corrupt leader who was willing to follow Lansdale’s advice. That is, both a good leader and a good advisor were crucial to success there, a fact demonstrated by events in the Philippines in a few short years following Magsaysay’s death in 1957: “Everything that Lansdale and Magsaysay had strived to achieve by making the government more honest and accountable was unraveling” (Boot, 2018, p. 309). Perhaps Diem might have developed into a “good leader” with Lansdale’s advice, but, given his secrecy, his nationalism, and the adverse influence of his family, one must wonder. Moreover, the North Vietnamese/Viet Cong were a much more potent foe than were the Huks. They had experience against the French, a ready sanctuary in North Vietnam, and support from the Soviet Union and China.

4. Decision-Making in Washington

If Boot suggests how things might have been different in Vietnam, VanDeMark’s book suggests why they would not have been different in Washington. Using new research in decision-making and cognitive psychology, he tries to understand and explain “an unnerving puzzle”: why the decision-makers of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, “extraordinarily bright and able” men, made decisions about Vietnam that “make them appear blind, slow, and altogether inadequate in dealing with the problems that inflicted terrible suffering on millions of people” (VanDeMark, 2018, p. xiii).

He begins, perhaps surprisingly, with America's policy toward Cuba, which seemed a much more dangerous threat at the outset of the Kennedy years than Vietnam. The disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961 taught Kennedy not to rely on perceived experts, especially in the military and intelligence communities, and to make his own judgements. In the Missile Crisis of October 1962, Kennedy was eventually able to put himself in the shoes of his adversary, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, to understand the issue from his perspective, and to stumble upon a mutually agreeable outcome. While VanDeMark suggests these events were relevant to subsequent Vietnam decision-making, it seems more likely that they were not precedent-setting but exceptional, i.e., the Johnson administration relied heavily on military advisers – although more because it feared the domestic political consequences of not doing so than their purported expertise – and was never able to understand the tenacity or goals of their North Vietnamese adversaries.

With respect to Vietnam, VanDeMark identifies a number of political, psychological, and decision-making dynamics that lead all humans, including decision-makers, to make the decisions they do: efforts to try to fit new facts into preconceived beliefs, rejecting information that contradicts prevailing beliefs, failure to conceptualize the long-term consequences of short-term decisions, risks of sunk costs, and domestic political pressures. Two will be discussed here, domestic political pressures and the perils of short-term thinking.

Domestic political pressures were central in the calculations of President Kennedy and, especially, President Johnson. Both were Democrats and could recall how President Harry Truman, another Democrat, had been tormented about the alleged loss of China barely more than a decade previously. Kennedy, privately, considered withdrawing from Vietnam but reasoned that he could not do so before the 1964 presidential election. Johnson, who came to office after Kennedy's assassination, wanted to be remembered as a domestic reformer. He realized, however, that he would not win congressional approval for his Great Society measures if he did not persist in the war. As he later remarked, "I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved – the Great Society – in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home" (quoted in Hastings, 2018, p. 170). Because the public was more hawkish on Vietnam than the administration throughout these years, it

would be very difficult politically to reduce the American effort, much less to withdraw. Johnson reasoned that the loss of South Vietnam would have greater domestic consequences than sending combat troops, so he first sent troops in 1965 and more and more in subsequent years.

Many decisions were made as short-term fixes to problems without recognizing their long-term consequences. Johnson had resisted pressure to continuously bomb North Vietnam for most of 1964. One way he did so was by tasking the military to plan an air campaign, but that planning served to increase pressure to actually initiate an air campaign. While political instability in Saigon had previously been a reason not to bomb the north, by 1965 political instability in the south was a reason to bomb the north, trying to dissuade it from sending supplies to the south. In fact, it had the opposite effect as the North Vietnamese now saw little reason not to aid the south, since the Americans were now committed to attacking North Vietnam, further increasing the risk to Saigon. Moreover, the stationing of American planes in South Vietnam led directly to the dispatch of the first combat troops, because the Americans had no faith that the South Vietnamese army could protect them. Of course, the initial failure of bombing and troops to solve the problem in South Vietnam and the sunk costs in American commitments and American lives resulting from those decisions, increased pressure to do more bombing and send more troops.

Reading VanDeMark's book, there seems to be a certain inevitability to the growing American involvement in Vietnam: "Hubris certainly played a part. But it did so in concert with miscalculation that grew out of ignorance, blindness, pressure, fear, and wishful thinking" and "[o]nce ensnared, Kennedy, Johnson, and their advisors found it difficult to escape; the contours that they established entrapped them." Given this, "Whether anyone might have done better than they is arguable, given the times in which they lived and the pressures they confronted" (VanDeMark, 2018, pp. 114–115). This seems like an apology to this reviewer, although to be fair to the author, he does note that this context "does not absolve Kennedy, Johnson, and their advisors of responsibility for their decisions..." (VanDeMark, 2018, p. 115).

While decision-makers were forced to deal with various psychological and decision-making dynamics that limited their imaginations and shaped their decisions, they were still intelligent human beings who could have decided differently. Consider the crucial decision about sending

combat troops. Kennedy had avoided sending troops throughout his presidency and VanDeMark quotes his advisors who doubt he would have done so in 1964 or 1965. As Kennedy said in his last public comments about Vietnam, while the U.S. would not “give up” in South Vietnam, “I don’t want the United States to have to put troops there” (quoted in VanDeMark, 2018, p. 201). It was Johnson, admittedly eighteen months later and facing a more serious challenge, who made the decision to send U.S. combat troops. Kennedy, if you believe some of his closest advisors, would not have sent troops, but Johnson did. That is, America’s descent into Vietnam was not inevitable and while there were pressures to do so, these could have been resisted by determined leaders.

5. Hastings and Additional Perspectives on the Vietnam War

While Boot and VanDeMark concentrate on Washington and American policy decisions, a complete understanding of the Vietnam War era requires awareness of many additional perspectives. Max Hastings *Vietnam* does this. Not ignoring upper-level officials, he prefers to focus on the “many individuals, Vietnamese and American, of all ages and both sexes, military and civilian [who] behaved decently.” This is necessary, because “it is mistaken to allow virtuous endeavor to vanish into the cauldron of bomb blasts, brutalities and betrayals from which most accounts of the war are served up” (Hastings, 2018, p. xxiv). He provides details about the experiences of military personnel, individual soldiers on both sides, Soviet and Chinese technicians aiding their Vietnamese allies, and American pilots and the North Vietnamese anti-aircraft personnel. Also included are stories of American and Vietnamese civilians who were affected by the war, including South Vietnamese peasants and U.S. college students. Finally, Hastings examines the experiences of those who fought on the winning side upon their return to North Vietnam.

Another important perspective that Hastings adds is that of North Vietnamese decision-makers. As in the U.S., there were personal, political, and policy differences within the leadership. By the early 1960s, Le Duan had emerged victorious in the leadership struggle, superseding Ho Chi Minh. This was a crucial point in the war because Le, a native southerner, placed much greater emphasis on unifying the country via military action than Ho, who wanted to concentrate on strengthening the north and

eventual peaceful unification. Like the Americans, the North Vietnamese leadership also made a number of mistakes. One was a land reform program in the late 1950s that was both excessively brutal and destroyed the prevailing agricultural economy. Another mistake, more relevant to the war, was Le's continuing faith that a popular uprising in the south would follow a major North Vietnamese/Viet Cong military offensive. The most dramatic example of the adverse consequences of this belief followed the 1968 Tet Offensive, when much of the communist underground network in the south was exposed. A final similarity with the Americans was that the North Vietnamese leadership did not care a lot about the Vietnamese people, in this case, their own people. While the number of North Vietnamese who died as a consequence of the war with the South will probably never be known, a statement attributed to Vo Nguyen Giap, an important military leader in the fight against the French and the Americans, suggests indifference: "Every minute, hundreds of people die upon this earth. The life or death of a hundred, a thousand, tens of thousands of human beings, even our compatriots, means little" (quoted in Boot, 2018, pp. 11–12).

6. Conclusion

The words "disaster" or "tragedy" appear in the titles of each of these books, and they all present evidence to justify that depiction. They also demonstrate that the tragedy may have been inevitable, given America's goal of preventing communist advances in Asia, North Vietnam's commitment to unifying the country – by force if necessary – the American military's use of extensive firepower to attrite the enemy, and both sides' indifference to ordinary Vietnamese. Those realities suggest that there will be more Vietnam-era books written in the future, and this reviewer looks forward to reading them.

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