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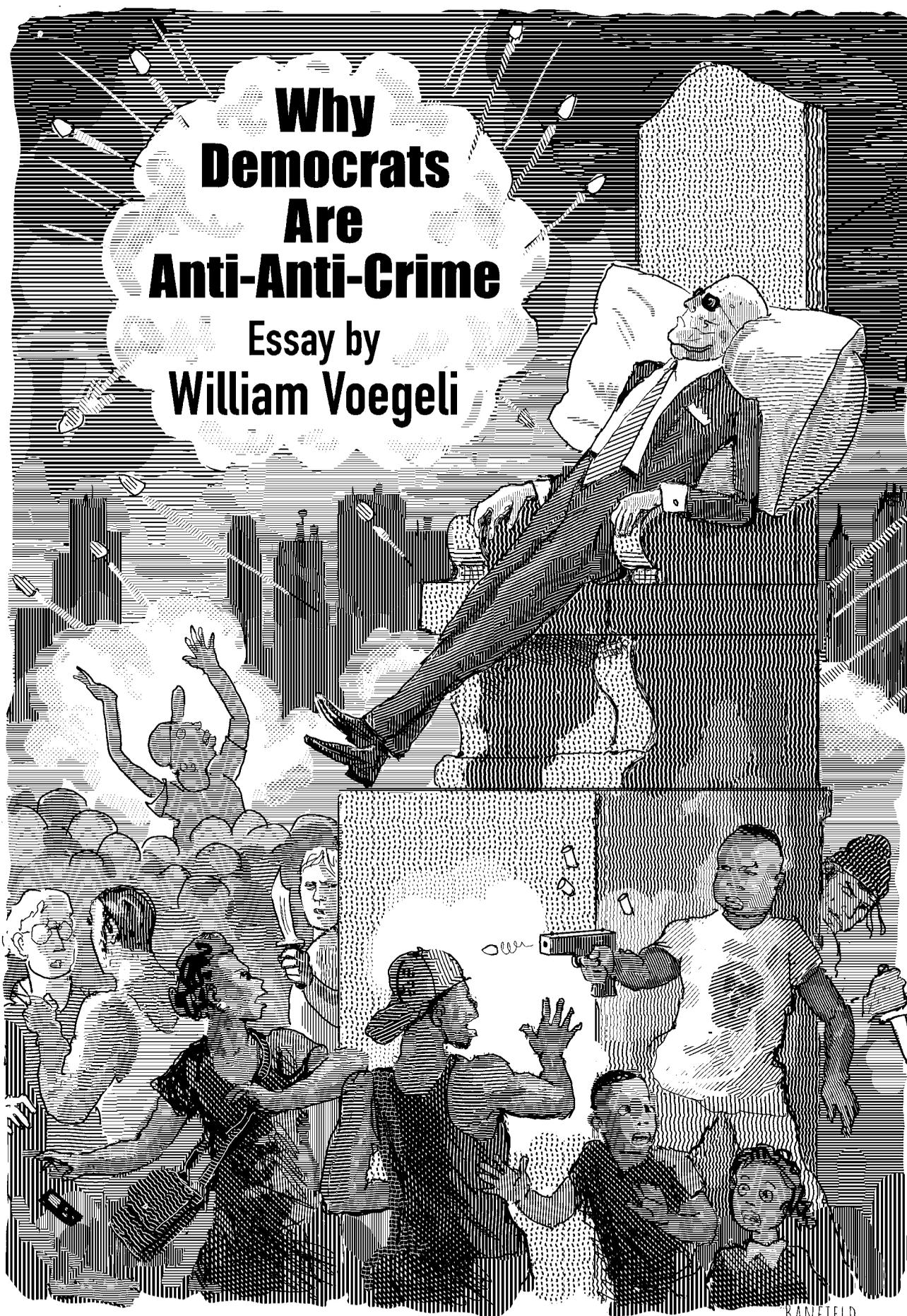
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Liberty and Union

James Hankins has given CRB readers a splendid meditation on “Political Thought in an Age of Conformity,” carefully distinguishing philosophy (good) from ideology (bad) and recommending the former as an antidote for the latter (Spring 2021). I don’t fault the thrust of his essay—Hankins’s heart is certainly in the right place—but lest he leave the impression that “freedom to philosophize,” or American freedom more generally, is just pluralism for pluralism’s sake, let me say a word in defense of conformity.

It seems these United States could use a healthy dose of conformity—in shared symbols, heroes, stories, and holidays—through a shared civic education, one rooted of course not in the lies of the 1619 Project or critical race theory but in the Spirit of 1776 and our equal natural rights. Easier said than done, I know, but we should nevertheless look to fight a bad consensus with a good consensus, not no con-

sensus. Freedom of thought, yes, but within a set of first principles, such as that there is a true, a good, and a beautiful that thought is rightfully free to discover.

Francis Sobczak
Clearwater, FL

Reckoning with Robert E. Lee

Christopher Caldwell has presented the finest brief reconsideration of Robert E. Lee to have appeared in too long a time (“There Goes Robert E. Lee,” Spring 2021). A single regret is that he did not expand on his references to Charles Francis Adams, Jr., descendant of two presidents, and a colonel in the Union Army, including in the 5th Massachusetts Colored Volunteer Cavalry. In speeches he gave, Adams said that had he been in Lee’s position, he would have chosen as Lee did, siding with his sovereign state against the federal power, as he believed that the War of 1861-65 was about deciding once and for all the locus of sovereignty in our national system, and not principally about slavery. What’s more, Adams argued that Lee “saved the common country,” both North and South, by the manner of his surrender at Appomattox, which precluded the possibility of prolonged guerilla warfare. To many Virginians, Lee therefore remains the greatest figure in American history.

David A. Bovenizer
Lynchburg, VA

Christopher Caldwell has written movingly of how Robert E. Lee is and should be remembered in our day. And yet, for all

of Lee’s indisputable moral rectitude and gallantry, it remains the case that at the critical hour he chose wrongly. He led an armed rebellion against the duly elected government of the United States and did so in the cause of chattel slavery. He said he could not bring himself to take up arms against his home state of Virginia. In saying so he failed to take to heart the words of his hero and fellow Virginian George Washington, who in his Farewell Address admonished his fellow citizens that the “country has a right to concentrate your affections” and that “[t]he name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations.” However well Lee comported himself before and after the war, his fateful decision must forever remain a mark against him.

Courtney B. Wilson
Plano, TX

Can We All Get Along?

In his review of Thomas Ricks’s *First Principles* (“Classical Education,” Spring 2021), Spencer Klavan breezes past Ricks’s main arguments about the influence of Greek and Roman literature on the founding generation. He does so in his haste to reach what he clearly considers the main event: an extended rant about the failures of “our monied and educated classes.” Klavan thinks he is justified in dilating on this subject because Ricks’s opening statements about the 2016 election “leave one wondering whether Ricks is really prepared to stomach the whole of

what America is—and whether he is ready to share a country with Trumpists.”

This is an act of psychoanalysis, not a book review. Ricks does explain that he was inspired to research his subject by the alarm and confusion he felt when Trump won. But there is no indication that the ensuing discussion of, say, the classical models for Washington’s military tactics or Jefferson’s admiration for Epicurus are motivated by anti-Trump sentiment. Ricks is, unlike Klavan, quite charitable and generous toward the other side in his approach. He even recommends, in his prescriptions for our national restoration, that we “treat people who think differently...with courtesy” and “[t]ry to understand their points of view.”

Klavan thus offers us a Ricks quite of his own invention: bristling with barely concealed hostility and champing at the bit to outlaw conservatism outright. The paranoia really reaches a fever pitch when Klavan wonders aloud “whether a national return to the ‘common good’” as Ricks envisions it “will entail input from conservatives, or merely their marginalization in the public square.” Ricks does not so much as flirt with this kind of authoritarianism in *First Principles*, and for Klavan to raise the specter of it suggests more about his own persecution complex than it does about the book under review.

We are indeed, as Klavan suggests, at a fever pitch of partisan tension in this country. But it seems to me Ricks has offered a rare olive branch: he has proposed a return to the nation’s founding principles via a study of the nation’s founders. In Klavan’s own words, “Ricks attempts, by studying the education and personal formation of America’s

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founders, to understand more deeply the principles on which they built the country.” I fail to see what about that effort means he is unprepared to come to the table with Trump voters.

For Klavan to slap Ricks’s hand away when it is thus extended in outreach raises the question of which man is really the more intractable. If conservatives can’t so much as read a book written by a liberal about 18th-century politics without seeing authoritarian bogeymen hiding behind every page, then one wonders why anyone should make the effort to meet them in the middle to begin with. No one is coming to cart Klavan off to the Gulag—least of all Thomas Ricks.

Deborah Frank
Lansing, MI

Spencer A. Klavan replies:

The context in which a book is written matters. The context in which Thomas Ricks wrote *First Principles* is that Donald Trump was elected president in 2016. Ricks could not believe he lived in such a country; it totally transformed his assumptions about who we are as a nation. “What just happened?” he asked. “What kind of nation do we now have?”

This inspired him to research the Founding Fathers, but that research did not change his mind that “one of the two major parties always seems to have offered a home to white supremacists, up to the present day.” It is, to begin with, a bit silly that Ricks does not come out and say which party he thinks is at fault: we all know it’s Republicans. They are the ones, Ricks suggests, who now furnish the nest in which vipers breed.

Deborah Frank highlights the fact that Ricks makes a few conciliatory invitations to dialogue in his conclusion. But those invitations always come with the implicit caveat that *some* views, and indeed some people, are simply beyond the pale. “[W]e live under a president who is anti-Enlightenment, even though he would not know what that means.” This claim, made without evidence, is more than just a cheap shot. It is an insinuation that Trump is not simply wrong but *foundationally opposed* to what America is and stands for in Ricks’s view. The same goes for everyone who believed Trump, though unhinged, was right about things like immigration and political correctness. That is a whole lot of people.

Here is some more context: from the moment Trump was elected, his opponents did their

best to cast his every belief as fundamentally un-American and therefore outside the remit of reasonable debate and disagreement. This is a neat trick, because it allows Democrats to delegitimize their opposition while pretending to be open to dialogue. As I argued at length in my review, many leftists—including those who now run the country—“[issue] calls for ‘unity’ and ‘healing’” while simultaneously implying that Trump voters are dangerous insurrectionists who must be hounded from public life.

Contra Frank, I devoted considerable space in my review to showing where I think Ricks’s analysis of our country’s principles is sound, and where I think it goes wrong. But I also thought I would do the reader a disservice if I did not point out that Ricks’s misapprehensions about Jefferson and Epicurus translate pretty directly into a lopsided diagnosis of our national malaise: it is all the fault, in his telling, of those white supremacist Trump voters. No mention is made of the academics, governors, bureaucrats, and public health officials who have failed the American people so extravagantly and maligned them so disdainfully.

Since I wrote my review, the Biden Administration has pub-

lished its National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism. If I had written it myself, this document could not exemplify more perfectly the tactic I attributed to our radical Left: feign outreach while working to make real disagreement impossible and indeed illegal. President Biden’s opening letter states, “Together we must affirm that domestic terrorism has no place in our society. We must work to root out the hatreds that can too often drive violence.” No description is given of what it will mean to “root out...hatreds.” Instead we are treated to a litany of violent outrages committed by the Right, and only by the Right. This gives us a pretty good idea about what sort of thought is to be criminalized.

I did not accuse Thomas Ricks of wanting to “cart [me] off to the Gulag.” I merely pointed out that he adopts a posture of ecumenism while hinting throughout that certain views are simply outside the Overton window as he wishes to frame it. When conservatives point out that this seems to be a rhetorical pattern among their opponents, the response they get is often the one I have gotten from Frank: “Oh come on now, that’s just a paranoid fantasy.” I believe this is what the kids call gaslighting.

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Book Review by Michael Anton

RIGHT FLIGHT

Texas vs. California: A History of Their Struggle for the Future of America, by Kenneth P. Miller.
Oxford University Press, 384 pages, \$99 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper)

IN THE PREFACE TO *TEXAS VS. CALIFORNIA*, Kenneth Miller indicates that he finished his manuscript in May 2020. That makes it unusually prescient for an academic book. For at that time, three key events lay ahead: the summer in which some 220 American cities were looted and burned following the death of George Floyd (leading to the worst urban crime wave since the 1960s, which continues to this day), the full effect of the coronavirus lockdown and mask mandate, and the outcome of the 2020 election.

The three together have accelerated a new Great Migration from Blue to Red America. Almost 20 years ago, journalist Bill Bishop coined the term “Big Sort” to describe how Americans were self-segregating—by culture, religion, and even media consumption, especially news. Bishop’s “sort” was mostly intra-regional and granular, more a matter of where you lived *within* a given metro area or state than *in which* metro or state. But in more recent years, as America has become even more polarized, the sort has become more regional and state-to-state.

Now the migration appears to be a flood. As a result of the 2020 Census, Red states will gain three congressional seats (meaning Blues will lose three). California is losing one for the first time in its history. The fastest-growing states are nearly all solidly Red or, at

most, fuchsia (e.g., Arizona, Nevada). Everyone knows someone who’s moved to Texas or Florida. Many of us know several. Building costs in suburbs, exurbs, and Red states generally are soaring. Whatever Blue America has to offer—and it is not negligible—the Red model appears, at least right now, to be more attractive.

THE ROSE ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF State and Local Government and now the director of the Rose Institute at Claremont McKenna College, Miller has given us an appropriately political-science account of the roots of this movement, focused on two states he considers, with good reason, to be the respective capitals of Red and Blue America. In addition to some history explaining how each state got the way it is, he provides plenty of charts, graphs, and maps, plus abundant and lengthy footnotes to make his case. Although the book is not exactly breezy, neither is it written in dense academese; nor, unlike in so much mainstream political science, are the charts and graphs inapt window dressing to make a weak argument look strong. Miller mostly makes his case.

A native Californian who married a Texan, Miller professes to see the merits in both states’ differing approaches to governance and is even-handed throughout. Beyond the fact

that he lives in California rather than Texas (which for all I know could be simply for job reasons), I couldn’t tell which, if either, of the two states he prefers. (I hope that doesn’t get him in trouble with colleagues who expect him, as a matter of course, to be a partisan of the Blue Way.)

MILLER’S THESIS IS THAT, IN ADDITION to geographical, historical, cultural, economic, and structural differences, Texas and California have diverged specifically because of deliberately differing policy choices.

Yet he spends a good part of the book’s early pages explaining how similar the states really are. They’re both big, in terms of population (numbers one and two in the Union) and area (two and three). They’re both Western—with all that entails culturally and geographically. They both were briefly independent republics (though California’s was quasi-farcical and much shorter-lived). California was a free state and Texas joined the Confederacy, but slavocracy never had as much of a hold in the Lone Star State as in the rest of the South. Both states were more or less untouched by the Civil War (although, as Miller points out, Texas’s self-identity is as much Southern as it is Western). They share (or shared) many of the same big industries, from agriculture



to oil to tech (remember Texas Instruments? Ross Perot's Electronic Data Systems?). They both had, from their beginnings, substantial Latino populations and deep connections to their Spanish-Mexican roots.

But a few decades ago, the two states began to go in radically different directions, one toward high taxes and tight regulation, the other toward low taxes and light regulation. (Guess which favors which?) The heart of Miller's book is an examination of these differing approaches not just to taxation and regulation, but to economics generally, labor, energy and the environment, and social issues. These chapters are solidly descriptive and Miller refrains from taking sides, reserving his modest criticisms for the final chapter.

Given the immense differences, it would seem that if either the progressive or the conservative mode of governance were simply best, one state should be leaving the other in the dust. But Miller claims both have "flourished" in recent years. Have they, though? Leave aside for the moment the population question—Texas is attracting, and California shedding, residents—as more effect than cause. Miller builds his case for a flourishing California along familiar lines: its handful of world-dominating industries, its influence on the broader culture, top-shelf attractions and institutions, and alleged quality of life.

Only with respect to the first is Miller really on strong ground. Big Tech and Hollywood certainly are enviable assets if one's foremost concerns are GDP and national and global influence. What they do for California's (dwindling) cohort of ordinary middle-class citizens is harder to see. Yes, given California's extremely progressive tax structure—1% of the state's earners pay more than half the income tax revenue—these industries and their leaders disproportionately contribute to the state's massive welfare bureaucracy. But how much does that really matter to the average Joe?

CALIFORNIA'S IMPLICIT MESSAGE IS similar to former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's description of his city as a "luxury product": sure, it's expensive, but it's expensive because it's awesome, and if you can't afford it, that's because you're a loser. In California, supposedly, one pays a lot to get a lot. But what does one really get? As William Voegeli pointed out in detail a dozen years ago, California's public services are not merely expensive but also inefficient and incompetent ("Failed State," *CRB*, Fall 2009). The state's real governance model is the "big-spending, high-taxing, lousy-services paradigm." Things have gotten worse since

then. (See his "Progressively Worse," *CRB*, Spring 2021.)

Some of California's man-made amenities—the two Getty museums, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Palace of the Legion of Honor, the San Francisco Opera—are (or nearly) world class, for those who care about such things. Other wonders, such as Yosemite, can be attributed to progressive governance only in that the original Progressives preserved these extraordinary natural resources—and using federal, not state, power. California's greatest asset, the weather, is similarly a gift of God and nature.

Miller doesn't mention the state's crumbling infrastructure, the homelessness and crime in its major cities, nor the myriad other ways the Golden State's quality of life for all but moguls and tech lords continues to plummet. Indeed, in certain precincts, public order has all but collapsed. Brazen thieves routinely enter stores with garbage bags and pillow cases, fill them with loot, and stroll out unchallenged. Walgreens alone closed 17 San Francisco stores in the past five years because of shoplifting, a crime the authorities no lon-

Lots of Californians are moving east while very few Texans pass them going the other direction.

ger even make a pretense of deterring or punishing. In my recent book *The Stakes* (2020), I dedicated the first chapter to the decline of California, describing the state as crowded, costly, congested, crumbling, incompetent, filthy, dangerous, rapacious, profligate, suffocating, prejudiced, theocratic, pathologically altruistic, balkanized, and feudal. Granted, I was making a semi-polemical case against the Californication of the entire country, which our elites, from Joe Biden on down, say they want. But if my portrait emphasized California's warts, Miller's feels a little airbrushed.

EVERYTHING IN THE BOOK POINTS TO an eventual showdown, and while the climax lacks the excitement of, say, *High Noon* or *Shane*, Miller does not disappoint. His last chapter speculates as to the future of the two models, both in terms of their competition with one another for residents and businesses and the implications of their rivalry for national politics. But his summary of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach feels rigged in order to

seem evenhanded. Can both models really be "equal"? Not in the sense of "identical"—but do the net advantages and disadvantages of each really all balance out so that, in the end, the choice of one or the other comes down to simple preference?

That seems to be the conclusion Miller wishes to draw, but his own summary tells against it. To say nothing of the things he leaves out, the flaws he explicitly identifies in the California model—its unaffordability, sky-high poverty rate, reliance on federal support, feast-or-famine budget process, and essentially undemocratic character—seem to dwarf the main problem he cites with the Texas mode, namely, too-low education spending.

One can even dispute whether the latter is really a problem, given decades of data showing that student achievement doesn't correlate with school spending (some of the highest-spending systems, such as the District of Columbia's, have the worst outcomes) and considering what school districts want to spend money on these days (e.g., critical race theory). California's public schools in any case rank in the bottom quartile among the 50 states. The state's high-end labor force, the backbone of its Blue model, spends lavishly to ensure that its own kids never have to set foot in one.

MILLER SEEMS TO CONCEDE THE point when he writes that "one could argue" that California recently has "flourished...in spite of" its progressivism. On the other hand, he continues, perhaps California's aggressive progressivism attracts the highly paid knowledge-economy workers that make the state the envy of America's Blue elite. But are such workers more attracted by California's deep Blue policies, or Silicon Valley's fat green paychecks? Granted, the two go together, but it's not as if poorer Blue precincts such as Baltimore or Detroit are vacuuming up overclass winners simply by virtue of being Blue.

Miller mentions Louis Brandeis's oft-quoted line about states being the "laboratories of democracy." Applying that to today's competition between Texas and California, once one discounts attractions beyond human influence (beaches, mountains, climate), Texas would seem to be winning on every metric but one: aggregate GDP. But how much does that really matter, especially to the ordinary citizen? It's important to a sovereign state that must field an army and contend with international competition. But to an American state that can (or should be able to) count on Washington to take care of that?

To the dubious extent that California has actually "flourished," it's obvious that its

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