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**Spencer Klavan's  
How to Save the West**

**Michael Anton**  
**Mark Helprin:**  
**Debating Ukraine**

**Julius Krein:**  
**Up from Neoliberalism**

**Conrad Black:**  
**Remembering Paul Johnson**

**Diana Schaub:**  
**The Age of LGBTQ+**

**Christopher Caldwell:**  
**India's Uprising**

**Martha Bayles:**  
**TV's Yellowstone**



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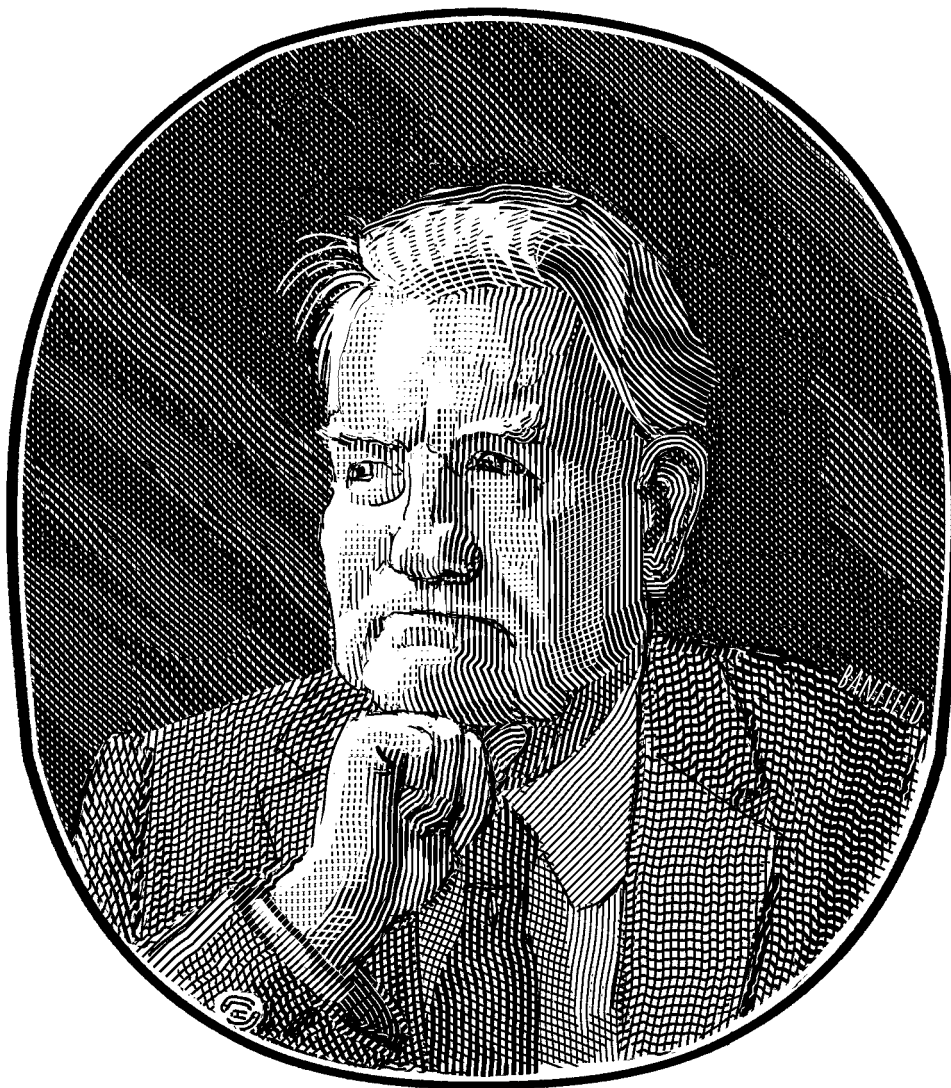
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Essay by Conrad Black

## A MAGNIFICENT PHENOMENON

*Remembering Paul Johnson.*



AS A FRIEND OF PAUL JOHNSON'S FOR more than 35 years, my first recollections of him on the news of his death on January 12, at age 94, were of his kindness and wise advice to me when I arrived in London as a newspaper owner in the mid-1980s. And these recollections are only fortified by his countless acts of generous solidarity in subsequent decades. Particularly, I recalled his implacable support of me when I was under heavy attack in the British media when, as has now been determined, I was falsely accused by American prosecutors of defrauding my shareholders. We had many differences of opinion, as Paul was a man of an extraordinary range of interests and a decisive nature that formulated opinions quickly. And he had great talent as a forensic advocate, which impelled him to express his opinions constantly, without reserve, and frequently in extremely

colorful, entertaining, and often perceptive terms. He also had that technique which I've only also seen in the upper socioeconomic echelons of New York and official Washington, of denouncing in violent strictures people with whom he was perfectly cordial face to face.

### Getting On Well

I RECALL ONE OCCASION WHEN HE HAD been bombarding me for several months personally and in emails and faxes about the utter ineptitude of one of my editors. My stupefaction was considerable when I arrived at one of Paul and Marigold's (his wife of 65 years) many well-attended outdoor drinks parties—made all the more interesting for the remarkable range of their cordial acquaintances—to see the editor he had been raging

at me for months to dismiss introduced about as if he were the most eminent of all of the many celebrities present.

Even with those of whom he approved, Paul still liberally exercised his right to give advice peremptorily and incontestably. I think I was comfortably and gratefully in this category, sharing it with a number of distinguished people such as Rupert Murdoch and Tony Blair. Above us was a pantheon of those so exalted in Paul's esteem that any criticism of them was apt to bring an incendiary rebuke. The chief occupant of this stratum in my experience was Margaret Thatcher and as I venerated her almost as much as Paul did, this was never an issue between us. (For several months after she was shamefully ousted by her own treacherous and ungrateful party in 1990, Paul would greet her with the mistaken but entirely well-intentioned assurance:



“You’ll be back in three weeks!” If only; Britain is now almost back to pre-Thatcher irresolution and demoralization.)

To be a friend of Paul’s was to be treated to the refreshing roller coaster ride of his personality. But if there were ever a genuine crisis, few people I have known were as reliably and formidably responsive as Paul Johnson. He defended his friends in print and conversationally with extreme vigor. He was a friend of Jonathan Aitken, a grandnephew of Lord Beaverbrook, a Thatcher-era M.P., and a kindred spirit in the alternate political and social establishment conducted for some years in London by flamboyant financier and politician Sir James Goldsmith, casino-owner and zoologist John Aspinall, and a number of other more or less eccentric scions of well-known families. When Aitken’s libel suit against *The Guardian* collapsed and it became evident that he had perjured himself, Paul conducted in *The Spectator*, which my associates and I then owned, a vendetta against *The Guardian* and its editor and a defense of Aitken that were so vehement and ingenious that the *Guardian* editor was effectively stripped of his self-righteousness and reduced to writing to me asking that I restrain Paul. Since Johnson and Aitken were both friends and I have long regarded *The Guardian* as the most

nauseating newspaper in the English language, it gave me the utmost pleasure, politely to decline his request.

Socially, Paul was like an adjustable radar apparatus that could adapt to any interlocutor. He was from a modest socioeconomic up-country background, was educated by the Jesuits at the famous Stonyhurst College, and was a scholarship student at Oxford where his supervisor in history was the eminent controversialist historian, Alan J.P. Taylor, whom Paul emulated in a number of his works, consciously or otherwise, in his startling historical reinterpretations. This combination of a thoroughly respectable but not wealthy background, high-quality education amongst unusually intelligent students often of well-to-do families, and his national service in days when Britain drafted its young men (he served at Gibraltar shortly after World War II) all made Paul at once reasonably respectful and not at all chippy toward important people, but admirably courteous and, when appropriate, solicitous of ordinary people, including all young people and all those in subordinate positions. On countless occasions, I witnessed Paul inquiring pleasantly and with genuine interest of even very young people and their still young minders, legitimately curious without being nosy or

annoying about where they came from and what they liked to do. He was one of those unusual people who if he made the slightest effort, as he almost always did, could get on well with anyone of any identifiable cultural, sociological, or sectarian group, and could discuss almost any subject knowledgeably, so wide were his own interests. Once when he was at my home in London, he saw my large model of *H.M.S. Hood*, that had been used in the film *Sink the Bismarck!* (1960). He immediately gave a very recondite analysis of the exchange of fire between the two famous warships.

#### Always Lively

HE NATURALLY STARTED OUT AS A man of the Left, and equally naturally, given the spectacular failure of left-wing government in Britain in the ’70s, he became a conservative and a powerful tribune of Thatcherism. He did not share his friend, our *Sunday Telegraph* editor, Peregrine Worsthorne’s snooty condescension toward “bourgeois triumphalism”; Paul respected everyone. Although he tended to despise the masses and popular tastes, he was never a snob. He had no prejudices against any group, and formed his opinions based on the intel-

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ligence and personality of everyone he met. It is unusual to find so prodigious an intellect without any sense of intellectual self-importance. He was respectful of the many exalted people he met; when he came to a dinner Barbara and I held for Henry Kissinger, he brought a sketch he had done of him, himself. He was an ardent and talented sketcher and painter, in watercolors and oil. Other obituarists have written concerning the evolution in his political views, that Paul, to borrow William Blake's phrase, changed his opinions but not his principles. That is probably true.

But he also seems to have had a full-body immersion in the faddish and somewhat anarchic left radicalism of the '60s. He was at this point the leftist *New Statesman* correspondent in Paris, in which capacity his finest hour was to commit the almost unprecedented impudence of interrupting General de Gaulle at one of his carefully prepared press conferences. When de Gaulle proclaimed his support of a Europe of fatherlands ("Europe des patries"), he said that he wanted to build the Europe of Dante, Goethe, and Châteaubriand. The young English representative of the *New Statesman*, under a mighty profusion of unkempt red hair spoke up: "Et de Shakespeare, mon general"—more an assertion than a question. As Paul recalled, the majestic founder of the Free French and of the Fifth Republic, little accustomed to being interrupted, or to being addressed in such comradely terms by the disheveled representative of a leftist British intellectual magazine, said with an epic Gallic shrug, "Oui, aurons Shakespeare" ("Yes, we will have Shakespeare"). Even the most opinionated journalists on the French Left never presumed to interrupt de Gaulle, and Paul was lionized by the Paris press corps.

But four years later, in 1968, when a student strike broadened to a general strike and it appeared to anti-Gaullists that Gaullism was crumbling, Paul briefly fell in with that sentiment. But de Gaulle responded decisively, and after ostentatiously assuring himself of the loyalty of the army, called an election, and achieved the greatest electoral victory in 175 years of Republican French history. In retrospect, Paul told me that he had put "too much of a premium on the superficially refreshing libertarianism of the students and the workers and had momentarily forgotten de Gaulle's extraordinary ability to personify France in moments of crisis."

Paul's journalism in the years that I knew him was always lively but largely confined to cultural areas. He was conversant with almost all the works of all the well-known Western authors, was a knowledgeable art historian,

and had very well informed though traditional tastes. He and Marigold, who had once been a Labour Party candidate and was somewhat to his left, agreed at some point that they would not discuss politics; which left them with many other subjects to discuss, including their four talented children. Paul famously regarded Picasso as a fraud and almost all modern art as rubbish. William F. Buckley, Jr., wrote, almost surely accurately, that Paul had "as productive a literary-analytical career as any in modern times," and he wrote a flattering introduction to *The Quotable Paul Johnson: A Topical Guide to his Wit, Wisdom, and Satire* (1994), which contains 2,000 aphorisms and epigrams on every conceivable subject.

### Chosen Peoples

**T**O THOSE WHO DID NOT KNOW HIM, Paul will be best remembered as a historian, where he must be considered the indomitable head of a highly interpretive and aggressively controversial historical school. Assessing him as a historian is a complicated task. Regarding the body of his work and hav-

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ing read most of it, I think Paul was preeminently a national British historian. He revered the Jews as progenitors of Christianity and as an imperishable, brilliantly creative, and courageous people. Both as a historian and as a devoted if somewhat eccentric Roman Catholic, Paul embraced the concept of the chosen people. He generally took Communion in his local Roman Catholic Church every day but thoroughly approved of the Reformation and held his Church responsible for inheriting the mantle of the Roman Empire in imposing order at the expense of progress and discovery, and for retarding Western man for a thousand years from the fall of Rome to the Reformation. He used to lecture me as a co-religionist on the evils of going to churches in London where he said the clergy was "infested with sodomites." He dismissed my suggestions that the early Christian Church deserves great credit for preserving antiquities, humanizing politics and assimilating the barbarians, and funding and eventually encouraging the principal figures of the Renaissance, most conspicuously, Michelangelo and Raphael.

Before I ever met Paul and was just starting to read his books, I noted in the introduction to his *The Offshore Islanders: A History of the English People* (1972; later reissued as *A History of the English People*) that "[m]uch research tends to obscure, rather than reveal, the truth; or, most depressing of all, to suggest that truth cannot be finally established, often on matters of outstanding importance." From this premise Paul chose with certain important formulations to dispense with research altogether with hazardous but often very interesting and even humorous consequences. He strenuously believed that the Jews genuinely were, and had the psychology of, a chosen people, and that the key to the modern world was the "gradually emerging recognition by the English that they, in their island, and especially after they had severed their connections with Rome, were the new chosen people." He's the author and, as far as I know, the sole adherent of the theory that the murder of Thomas à Becket in the 11th century "gave birth to English anti-clericalism, a smoldering national force which was to grow in depth and volume until it found expression in the Reformation." He likened Becket to Sir Thomas More.

He believed that William II and Henry I, followed by Henry V, Elizabeth I, and Oliver Cromwell were great national leaders who developed and personified the theory of Britain as a chosen people:

What sustained the English during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation years, what enabled them to preserve heterodoxy in England and uphold it on the continent, what enabled them to defeat the Armada and rip open the world empire of Spain—in short to thrust aside the inert log of the Roman heritage and allow the stream of progress to flow again—was not just patriotism, or nationalism, but racism, the most powerful of all human impulses. The English came to believe that they were the chosen people.... They could thus answer the Continental armory of faith and superstition with the vehement conviction of divinely inspired direction—the English reached the audacious conclusion that God, having found the Jews inadequate for His great purposes, had entrusted the island race with the unique role of completing his kingdom on earth. Their island situation had made them natural racists, overbearing and aggressive towards strangers, holding their own superiority to the rest of mankind to be self-evident.



This is an interesting argument, and there is no doubt that the British developed a unique notion of their national vocation. But the embellishment of a religious notion of a chosen people in succession to Israel, because of Israel's inadequacies (which, if pushed, Paul conceded to be the failure to recognize the Messiah), is a hard sell.

Because Paul was such an amiable though curmudgeonly figure, he got a free pass for a number of historical theories which are the core of his beliefs but were extremely difficult to sustain. The idea that the murder of Becket had any connection to the apostasy of Henry VIII 450 years later is nonsense. He argued that "happily the genius of the English for rewriting history while it is still happening turned an acrimonious disaster into a triumph of constitutional good sense and moderation." He held that the Magna Carta was only transformed by "a process of constructive national myopia and confusion (into) the bedrock of the English Constitution," and this only occurred when the early death of Pope Innocent III and King John "cleared the way for creative fiction and it became a solemn concordat." He claimed that this process was replicated when "Canute was transformed from a Scandinavian ruffian into an English Christian gentlemen, as the disaster at Dunkirk was transmuted into the prelude to victory," as Paul claimed it was represented. (Winston Churchill warned in a broadcast that Dunkirk was not a victory and that "wars are not won by evacuations." If Paul thought it was a disaster, one wonders how he would have described the German capture or destruction of the entire 338,000 Anglo-French force.)

Paul even noted that William II and Henry I were criticized by monks because they had red hair and said that Robert Peel, Stanley Baldwin, and Churchill were persecuted by their parties for the same reason. It is a bizarre theory and does not require a talented psychotherapist to imagine that Paul, who into his early 90s had a terrific shock of red hair, believed that he suffered similar discrimination.

If Henry V had lived a few months longer he would have become king of France and European tyrant, had he survived middle-age.... Elizabeth was Deborah, a virtuous and virginal creature, the special spiritual servant of God divinely appointed to safeguard true religion and lead the English to victory over God's enemies.

(Deborah was a proverbial figure of inspiration in ancient Jewish lore and Paul was de-

bunking the Church whose sacraments he took practically every day of his adult life. This, too, is interesting, but it is simplistic and, to say the least, unrigorous.) In the same effusive manner, he held that the meeting of the officers of Cromwell's New Model Army at St. Mary's Church in Putney in 1647

proceeded to invent modern politics—in fact, the public framework of the world in which nearly 3 billion people now live.... The ideas flung across that communion table and all the exciting novelty of their pristine conception traveled around the world, hurled down thrones and subverted empires, and became the common everyday currency of political exchange. Every major political concept known to us today, all the assumptions which underlie the thoughts of men in the White House, or the Kremlin, or Downing Street, or in presidential mansions or senates or parliaments through five continents were expressed or adumbrated in the little church of St. Mary, Putney.

His enthusiasm for his novel application of the concept of the chosen people transported him to some formidable exaggerations; the historic road from Putney to the Kremlin is very tortuous, and hitherto unsuspected.

#### Loved or Loathed

IT MUST BE SAID THAT AS A HISTORIAN, and to some extent as a man, Paul loved or he loathed. He loved the builders of what he regarded as the exceptional British character. "Cromwell's rebellion and the execution of Charles I were a reassertion of national pride, self-respect, and patriotism." Murdering the king, instead of just reducing his powers or even banishing him, was a needless, horrible, and ultimately futile crime. And in his hatred of the Stuart dynasty, Paul omitted to mention that they were brought back to Britain and restored on the throne, after Cromwell died, as a result of refusing to take quinine as the only known cure for malaria because it had been discovered by Jesuit priests, and that Cromwell was himself exhumed and posthumously decapitated, his head placed on a pike to widespread public approbation, where it remained on public display for 24 years. Even he would have found it a challenge to square that with "national pride, self-respect, and patriotism."

A great many examples of this sort of egocentric conclusion by Paul could be cited. But it doesn't dilute the point that Paul Johnson was above all a believer in order,

with a reasonable amount of freedom, and in the dignity and fundamental equality of all people, although he did certainly believe that the English-speaking Judeo-Christian peoples were psychologically, historically, and societally superior. His enthusiasm for the newer English-speaking countries was undoubtedly enhanced because "the arrogance of the English is gone and with it their self-confidence. The world suddenly seems a vast and alien place." England had not needed "nation states as allies, because her true allies were the forces of enlightenment, moral, economic, and constitutional." Paul never explained how he thought Britain lost the magic touch, any more than he explained how Israel fumbled the torch of the chosen, across a millennium, to the English. The custodians of all this are now the British offspring and particularly the Americans. This is the source of his great affection for the United States and for the Dominions of the old Commonwealth: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. He had many friends in all of those countries and believed that they were founded and built by the very best people from the old country and from Europe. He encouraged me for years to write a history of Canada and when I did so in *Rise to Greatness: The History of Canada from the Vikings to the Present* (2014) and dedicated it to him and a number of other people who took an interest in that project, he wrote a very gracious foreword for it.

In his more general surveys, such as *The Birth of the Modern: World Society, 1815–1830* (1991) and *Modern Times: A History of the World from the 1920s to the 1980s* (1983), there are outstanding cavalcades of people and events that reveal Paul's great talents as a historical raconteur and narrator, and these are generally reckoned as his greatest books, because they are not much colored by his championship of his own relatively benign theories of racism—he didn't disparage others, he just thought the Anglo-Saxons had achieved something that in sports would be called the pride of champions.

This brings us to his *A History of the American People* (1997), which is a substantial contribution to that vast literature. The readers are the beneficiary of Paul's extraordinary ability to insert amusing quotations; thus, according to Thomas Carlyle, George Ripley, the founder of the utopian Brook Farm community, was "[a] Socinian minister who left the pulpit to return to reform the world by growing onions." And when accused of joining in febrile negotiations to resolve the impasse of the 1824 election, the apparent winner, one of Paul's favorites, General Andrew Jackson,



replied that “Mrs. Jackson and myself remain at home smoking our pipes”—clay pipes for his wife but a long stemmed Powhatan bowl pipe for the future president, who puffed until the room “was so obfuscated that one could hardly breathe.”

Most of this book on the Americans is excellent, well-organized, and, as always with Paul, exceptionally finely written. And as usual, he tends to like the underdogs, not the champions. He purports to believe that Henry Clay, one of America’s greatest legislators and three-time candidate for president, could have avoided the Civil War. But his genius was as a compromiser and matters eventually reached the point where compromise was impossible—as Abraham Lincoln, whom Paul rightly confirms as the greatest of all Americans, demonstrated. (One side “would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came,” as Lincoln put it in his Second Inaugural Address. Clay shot his last bolt with the Compromise of 1850, which delayed the conflict for ten years.)

Paul rightly recognizes Richard Nixon as an outstanding president who was the victim of “American juvenilia.” No one really disputes that President Harry Truman couldn’t tolerate General Douglas MacArthur’s insubordination, but Paul ducks the fact that, in strategic terms, the general was probably correct and if he had been listened to, we wouldn’t be plagued by the North Koreans now. Like many foreign observers of the United States, he is carried away by his suspicions: he overstates the relationship between the Kennedys and the Chicago mafia and there is no evidence that Franklin Roosevelt suppressed a criminal tax fraud indictment of then-Congressman Lyndon Johnson. The gossip-historian Kitty

Kelley is cited in one anti-Kennedy reference, but the footnote advises that she should be treated with caution; she is so scurrilous that Ms. Kelley should never be cited by any serious historian. Paul despised the Kennedys, as he is dismissive of Nelson Mandela as a poor president of South Africa when he finally attained the position in 1994.

The one horrifying shortcoming of this book is Paul’s violent, relentless assault on FDR, who is portrayed as almost completely dishonest and a profligate fiscal spender, though courageous in fighting polio and an undoubted public relations talent. But he is reviled for failing to vanquish the Depression and accused of doing nothing significant to support the democracies against Hitler or “to involve the United States in the conflict.... Roosevelt showed himself as lacking in leadership as Baldwin and Chamberlain or Daladier.”

In fact, Roosevelt practically eliminated unemployment a year before the U.S. entered the war. He not only denounced Hitler before Churchill did, he gave the British 50 destroyers and imposed peacetime conscription for the first time in American history in the midst of a close election when, to deal with the war crisis, he broke a tradition as old as the republic by seeking a third term in 1940. He extended American territorial waters from three miles to 1,800 nautical miles and ordered the U.S. Navy to attack on detection any German or Italian vessel, and he enabled Britain and Canada to continue in the war by allowing them to buy anything they needed to conduct the war and pay for it when they were able to do so. Roosevelt attempted to provoke Hitler into attacking the United States by depth-charging German submarines and he attempted the same with the Japanese by cutting off 85% of their

oil supply unless they evacuated China and Indochina. There are few, if any, examples in modern history of greater and more statesmanlike benignity and dexterity in pursuit of a noble cause upon which the entire history of civilization depended than Roosevelt’s assistance to the democracies between the fall of France in June 1940 and the Japanese and Germans going to war with the United States in December 1941. With this one exception, I wrote a very favorable review of *History of the American People* and Paul very graciously returned me the favor with his review of my biography *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom* (2003), though he could not have agreed with its pro-Roosevelt thesis.

The many short biographies he wrote of prominent personalities in many fields were always witty and concise and informative though they followed his pattern of likes and dislikes: Churchill, Eisenhower, Mozart, and others were very good; Napoleon was horrid, a proto-Hitler, thoroughly evil—and all the fatalities of the Napoleonic Wars were to his account as surely as the liquidations in the Nazi death camps were to Hitler’s.

Paul Johnson was in a category of his own as a historian, a magnificent phenomenon, a wonderful man, and a dear friend. He would be horrified in all his Christian humility at any suggestion that he was infallible, and given his sometimes bizarre opinions, such a problem is unlikely to arise. There will be a great many who feel, as I do, that it was a privilege to know him and that it is a very great sadness that we shall not be seeing him again.

*Conrad Black is a former newspaper publisher, and the author of several books, including Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom (PublicAffairs) and Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full (PublicAffairs).*

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—Paul Johnson

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