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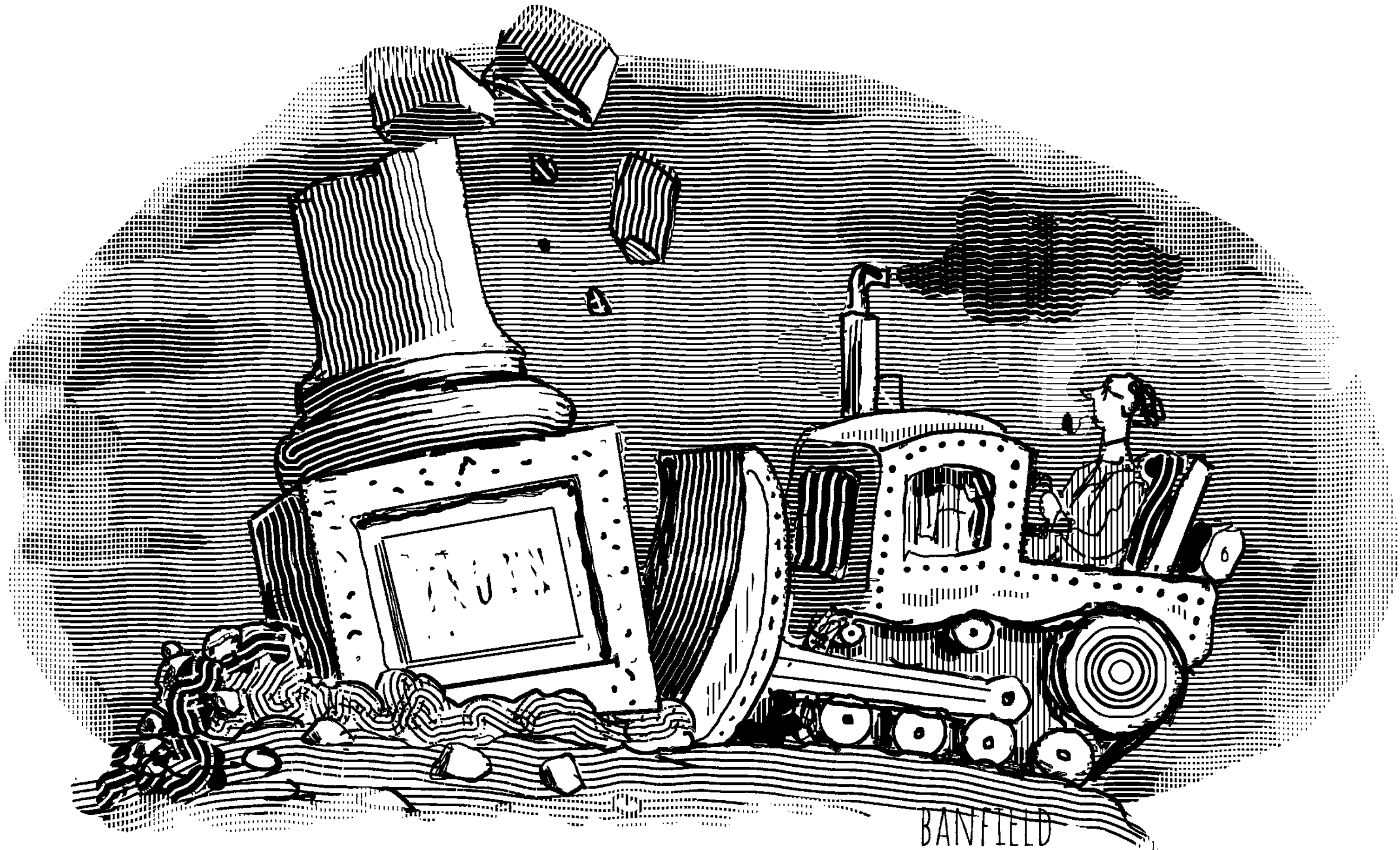

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Essay by Lane Scott

Analog Kids

Stranger Things *and the upside-down American childhood.*

Everyone remembers the 1980s—even the people who weren't there. Often portrayed in television and film as a decade of jubilant excess, America's favorite theme for costume parties allows for the most abundant hair, makeup, and clothing styles imaginable, with minimal explanation needed. It was peak America: gaudy and neon-hued, with big hair, boxy shoulders, and pinstriped suits on Wall Street. *Greed was good*, and it was *morning again in America*. Whatever that style was, the '80s was more itself than any other decade.

But Netflix's hit show *Stranger Things* is set in a very different 1980s than the one we all think we remember. The now-complete five-season series begins in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana in the late fall of 1983. Created by twins Matt and Ross Duffer, *Stranger Things* portrays a flat, threadbare existence more at home with 1970s fuel rationing than the good-time '80s.

The Duffer Brothers' Hawkins is dim and worn out. The houses are simple and small, the streets orderly but dull. It could be any boring Midwest town. There is also a large government research lab cordoned off by acres of forest. The lab is well-funded, militaristic, and painfully out of place in its setting. From the first moments of the series it is evident that this lavishly funded government plant in the middle of nowhere is too big for its town and too dangerous.

As the series introduces the residents of Hawkins—particularly the charming nerd-fest of twelve-year-olds at the center of the story—older viewers recognize a few familiar souvenirs: Dungeons & Dragons, the synth music soundtrack and analog childhood antics that saturated our time before the digital revolution. The series is self-aware of its borrowed aura, openly calling on Steven Spielberg, Joe Dante, and John Carpenter movies to fill out its scenery, and channeling that peculiar Stephen King eerie horror vibe. The Duffer Brothers' Hawkins is a salute to a particular time and place in American popular culture—just not the one we usually associate with '80s nostalgia.

The Analog Childhood

It's the '80s as experienced by working-class kids of that time: more '70s recession than '90s abundance. Parents struggling to make ends meet, friends sleeping over and hanging out in each others' houses, with little to no adult anxiety about where the kids are or what they've been up to. Childhood was chill and chronically under-supervised. But viewers aren't invited to indulge in any of this nostalgia for very long, because *Stranger Things* makes it immediately apparent that Hawkins is nothing like the haven of our '80s childhoods. Something is very wrong here, and these charming, guileless characters are no match for it.

Stranger Things premiered in July 2016, just months before we got the surprise of our lives in Donald Trump's defeat of Hillary Clinton that November. Netflix released season two a year later, and the last three seasons slowly, while dodging Covid and writers' strikes. American kids on the cusp of adulthood have grown up with it. Fans have watched as the series' plotlines seeped bizarrely into real life headlines. The show enabled us to preview things like lab leaks and dystopian science experiments gone wrong, and biohazards unleashed onto an unsuspecting population with hasty government cover-ups *before* enjoying them in real life.

Netflix reports that its series is the most popular streaming hit of all time, with a record-breaking 1.2 billion views clocked before the last episode premiered on December 31, 2025. The Duffer Brothers' "dark Amblin [Entertainment]" concept, named after the production company behind such '80s hits as *E.T.*, *The Goonies*, and *Back to the Future*, was rejected by more than a dozen studios before Netflix finally accepted. Nobody thought four children could carry a thriller aimed at adult audiences. They underestimated both middle-aged viewers' desire to relive their analog childhoods from the kids' perspective, and younger

generations' fascination when introduced to the Duffers' dark Amblin '80s for the first time.

From its first episode, *Stranger Things* confronts its viewers with scarcity and a threadbare social fabric. There are too many absent dads, stressed-out moms, and lost children. The first character to go missing—of course the cutest, littlest, and most vulnerable of the bunch—disappears at dusk and isn't even missed until the next morning, when his mother, Joyce (a perfect Winona Ryder, as good as she's ever been while appearing as bad as she's ever looked), goes to rouse him for school. Will (Noah Schnapp) never made it home the night before, and wasn't in his bed come morning, *and nobody noticed*. Will's dad has abandoned the family, Joyce works constantly to make ends meet, and his older brother, Jonathan (Charlie Heaton), was supposed to be looking after him but picked up an extra shift at work instead. Will is just gone and no one has any idea where he could be.

Will's group of friends, who call themselves "The Party" after their frequent D&D basement campaigns, quickly realize that his disappearance isn't being taken seriously by the town authorities and organize their own search party. The Party's first real-life expedition establishes the framework for the true genius of the entire series, which is its ability to illustrate how the antics of middle-childhood enable kids to grow up into dependable and courageous adults. More than any other beloved '80s relic on display in *Stranger Things*—more than the analog tech, more than the clothes, music, or hair—the authentic *'80s childhood antics* are the primary nostalgia driver for adult viewers.

Stranger Things reacquaints us with a childhood that everyone took for granted, until it was gone. That world of constant boredom, limited screen time, and default in-person social organization forced us to be curious and inventive, and delivered us into adulthood comfortable with in-person world building. If today's kids are digital natives, the children of the '80s were social natives, simply because there was no other option. That childhood, and the real-life adventures that came with it, is completely lost to our children.

In a decade of American art defined by despair-porn series like *Breaking Bad*, *Better Call Saul*, *Hannibal*, and *Ozark* which wallow in exhibitions of bad characters and evil, *Stranger Things* is unique in its superior portrayal of the good. Hawkins's monsters are terrifying, but they remain mysterious while lurking in the background for much of the series. This allows the show runners to highlight the ragtag group of friends determined to defeat the evil haunting Hawkins. The loyalty these kids have pledged to their friend group slowly calls forth the unique strengths of each member, and the particular excellence of each person shines in turn as the characters race to save their friends. *Stranger Things*' detailed explanation of the good—and what enables good to defeat evil—is its crowning virtue.

Friends Don't Lie

While searching for their friend, The Party of nerds discovers a shaven-headed near-mute girl in a hospital gown wandering through the woods surrounding the federal lab. The girl (played by Millie Bobby Brown) has no name and no ability to relay what on earth she's doing there. The boys adopt her into their group after it becomes clear she has something to do with Will's disappearance and may be able to help find him.

This girl, named "Eleven" after the tattoo on her arm, has never had any friends. She's been trapped and used by adults who have tortured her for their experiments her entire life. The boys, especially Party leader Mike Wheeler (Finn Wolfhard), carefully and tenderly teach her how friendship and loyalty work, and show how even a semi-feral child can find her place among a group of social outcasts. The viewer, fully immersed in our digital-era solitary and immobile childhood, experiences the lost analog world through Eleven's eyes as she discovers not only The Party's clunky walkie talkies and transistor radios, but also their rules of social engagement.

Discussed in this essay:

Stranger Things, created by Matt Duffer and Ross Duffer. Netflix

The boys have set up a governing philosophy for themselves in their basement D&D campaigns, which they apply seamlessly to the self-government of their first real-life adventure: finding and saving their friend. When Eleven asks what a friend is, the boys teach her that a friend is someone who doesn't lie to you for his own convenience or to further his own interests at the expense of yours. The most important governing rule of The Party: *friends don't lie*. This is a high bar, and all the characters struggle to meet it at various points over five seasons.

The Party of twelve-year-olds moves quietly and undetected through Hawkins, hiding Eleven in basements and carting her on the back of their bikes as they search for Will. The anxiety that these goofballs create in the viewer as they search desperately for their friend amid terror that grows more disturbing with each episode is overwhelming. From our vantage point, there isn't enough help in this town, or enough sophistication to keep these kids safe from what haunts them. Someone should help them find their friend, but the adults are too busy repeating the official government narrative of Will's disappearance to listen.

Running Up That Hill

Most shows take multiple episodes to establish the kind of worldbuilding that the Duffer Brothers manage to achieve in the first ten minutes of the first episode. It's almost as if they don't need to convince us—we're already there, especially those of us who were alive in the early '80s. But for younger kids who have no living memory of that time, *Stranger Things* is curiously adept at pulling them in, too.

In the decade since the series debuted in 2016, younger fans have allowed the Duffers' '80s vision to shape their own generation's self-image. Gen Z adores the music, the shaggy more-'70s-than-'80s hair, and the funky clothing. The Wheeler family has a 22" TV, chic '80s clothes, and lots of consumer goods, but the rest of the characters are poor. As most of the kids are victims of the sexual revolution and broken homes, their furnishings, cars, clothing, and hair are all stuck in the previous decade, which is of course more like how the early '80s actually looked, unless you were wealthy and living on the coasts.

From the start, the authenticity of the pre-digital childhood presented here, with its clunky black tech (pre-Jony Ive's minimalist Apple designs), captured younger viewers, who have adopted characters' broccoli-top and disheveled hair styles as their own. Several songs featured in the series had a more successful second run in the 2020s than they did originally, with Kate Bush's 1985 single "Running Up That Hill" the prime example.

In writing the series, the Duffer Brothers said their goal was to create the world that they themselves found most exhilarating when they were twelve: the horror movies, social situations, and adventures of the kids who were *just a little bit* older than they were. It is a universal truth of childhood that the absolute coolest things are those just out of reach; just a little bit too mature for us. The writers do an excellent job creating an older Hawkins High group of allies and enemies for The Party, engaging the viewers in their high-school drama and social hierarchy even as the younger characters are weaving in and out of the frame, mostly undetected as kids often are in middle childhood.

Stranger Things touches on familiar themes of '80s coming-of-age movies like *Sixteen Candles* and *The Breakfast Club*. The Party are all nerds, but Mike Wheeler's older sister, Nancy (Natalia Dyer), is trying to be a popular girl and is on the brink of catching the attention of prom king Steve Harrington (played by Joe Keery). Keery's character was originally destined for a quick death but the actor was so winning, so likable as the classic spoiled, rich '80s jock that the Duffer Brothers decided to keep him. Steve Harrington's story arc made him the hero and fan favorite of the large ensemble cast, second only to David Harbour's police chief, Jim Hopper.

Will the Wise Is in the Lights

Joyce Byers is barely sane, and crazier by the minute as she explains to Hopper that she can hear her missing son, Will, speaking to her through her phone, through her Christmas twinkle lights, and even from behind her living room's faux wood paneling. Joyce insists Will is in the house, haunting her, even after state authorities swoop in to announce a body has been discovered in the local quarry. Joyce isn't having it, and just as she reaches absolute insanity, Hopper wakes up from his drunk, dead-end career cop routine to help her.

Hopper—a giant, lumbering, overweight unmade bed of a man—is instantly lovable but absolutely a mess. Nothing has ever happened in Hawkins up until this point, and he's been able to do his job while mourning the death of his daughter and his marriage in a comfortable downward spiral of self-pity and alcohol. Hopper has little patience for Joyce's hysterics, but it's his job to find her kid and he takes that seriously enough to stumble upon some odd coincidences.

The slovenly Hopper and the selfish, immature Harrington are just about the only available muscle Hawkins has to spare to help these kids outrun the terrifying demons lurking just below—or behind or beyond the walls of—their houses. Its atmospheric '80s mood and setting firmly planted in the minds of its viewers, *Stranger Things* tells its heartfelt story about how nerdy social outcasts, together with one or two self-sacrificing popular kids, can form a platoon strong enough to defeat otherworldly evil. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and this magic appears possible because The Party of kids at the center of the series infuses the entire mission with its simple code of conduct: *friends don't lie*.

It's great fun to watch a group of intelligent children carve an alternative social system outside of the usual status games and popularity contests of junior high and high school. It doesn't take long for the viewer to realize that this party of weaklings is surprisingly well prepared to campaign against the monster stalking Hawkins; they've been practicing their entire childhoods. Each kid has a particular skill or character strength, identified and honored by the friend group, and frequently called upon.

The kids have comms and strategy, weaponry and reconnaissance down pat. The only thing missing from their nerdfest is a little muscle, which is provided at various times by Hopper, Steve, Jonathan, and other older allies. The series is at its most delightful when it makes good use of a rusty or latent hero, and the delight in seeing a formerly misused or misappropriated strength finally employed in self-sacrificial courage is not to be missed. Even the quintessential adult nerd, the boys' favorite science teacher and president of the Hawkins Middle A.V. Club, Mr. Clarke (Randy Havens), is clutch in tense situations.

The Duffer Brothers' creation illustrates the value of the pre-digital childhood that older Americans experienced: real-life play, honing real-life skills in order to achieve the kind of

New from AEI Press

Democracy or Republic?

How the Founders Crafted the Constitution as the Blueprint for Self-Government

Jay Cost

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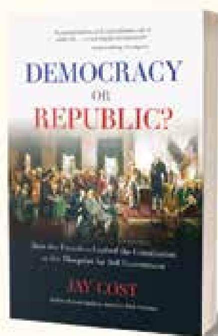

The Constitution has become a source of political controversy. While the right defends it, the left claims it violates the principles of democratic sovereignty. In *Democracy or Republic?*, Jay Cost argues that America's Constitution was designed for a republic, not a democracy. The Constitution ensures that the people rule for the good of all, not just the majority. It empowers broad coalitions of people who have found common cause. America, then, is not merely a democracy. It is something greater.

The Unheavenly City Revisited

Edward C. Banfield, with a Foreword by Kevin R. Kosar

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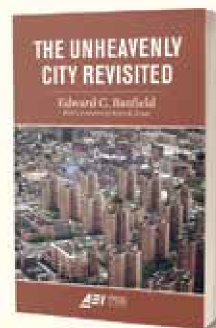

Americans have long believed that urban areas are in crisis and that the federal government must act. Edward C. Banfield argues that the conventional wisdom is incorrect. In *The Unheavenly City Revisited*, he shows that urban Americans are "better off than any other large group of people has ever been." Furthermore, some well-intended government actions to help cities have proved harmful. Improving cities is exceedingly complex. Government officials and citizens alike must be realists about what government action can achieve.

The American Revolution and America's Role in the World

Edited by Yuval Levin, Adam J. White, and John Yoo

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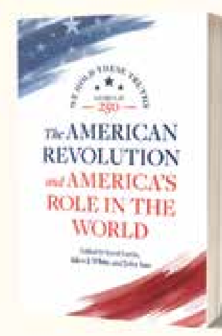

The American founding is controversial now in ways it has not been in decades. In *The American Revolution and America's Role in the World*, scholars of American history and international relations survey how the United States defined its place among the community of nations following independence. As the revolutionaries understood, America's success depended on assistance from allies abroad. Looking at the founding-era debates over America's "empire of liberty" can inform the foreign policy questions we face today.

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dominion over our physical environment that gives kids both standing in a group, and later admired expertness in real-world scenarios. We simulated adulthood long before we practiced it. For younger viewers of the show, who compose the series' largest fan base, perhaps the appeal of *Stranger Things* lies not in nostalgia but reintroduction to an unfamiliar—or forgotten—American childhood. We allow children mental dominion over online spaces and screens, but we don't give them physical dominion of any kind. The rapid loss of mental health and happiness arising in tandem with increased screen time paints the loss of the analog childhood in a new, terrifying picture: perhaps we cannot achieve the mental toughness and confidence necessary to a well-adjusted adulthood without establishing dominion over our physical reality first.

Woke for Applause

Critics of *Stranger Things* offer two main critiques of the Duffer Brothers' creation. The first is that the show is too dependent upon nostalgia and too derivative of original '80s hits to be successful art. The show's creators openly admit their devotion to '80s culture. The series is self-aware of its nostalgic borrowing and encourages fans to find various nods to '80s culture hidden in each episode. Despite this, *Stranger Things* does not suffer from a lack of originality, thanks to its superior character development and inventive plotlines and, most especially, to the Duffer Brothers' original concept of the murky realm that harbors the show's monsters.

The more serious criticism of the show concerns the writers' development and integration of anachronistic woke themes into a purposefully nostalgic and beloved 1980s tapestry, in order to propagandize faithful young viewers to their political agenda. The Duffer Brothers introduced Will Byers's sexuality in the first few episodes of the series, when Joyce reveals to Chief Hopper that Will's absent father never understood him and always thought that he was gay. The Party appears aware of Will's sexuality as well, and fight for him when school bullies mock their friend behind his back. None of this is necessarily out of place in an '80s story about a group of social misfits. Gay kids existed in the '80s, and friends and family didn't speak about it much, but did protect and defend their loved ones from bullying and abuse when necessary, as the show illustrates.

The Duffer Brothers undoubtedly tried to develop Will's sexuality into more of a source of pride and less of a social liability for the character, all while consistently portraying him as a social outcast. The series also introduced a faintly gender-nonconforming hero in the second season, a long-lost sister to Eleven with the curious power to deceive or present absolute lies to people as if they were real (isn't that interesting). This character, the least popular with fans of the series by a large margin, was quickly dismissed and not seen again until her unwelcome reintroduction in the final season. All told, *Stranger Things* portrays three gay characters in a friend group of fewer than 15 kids—strange odds in a one-horse town. It's obviously anachronistic to have such a high percentage of kids out and proud in that setting and time period.

The series takes pains to portray Will and the other gay children as stronger through or even because of their sexuality and present the characters' story arcs as one of strength through self-acceptance. The way in which characters discussed Will's sexuality in the earlier seasons was believable for that time and place. In the final season, however, writers employed the wokest of plot devices, the "Author Filibuster," in which the entire cast is made to sit and endure a character delivering the author or creator's point of view before being shown to fawn over and praise him. The author filibuster is done with little regard to the way those characters in that setting would realistically behave should one of them press pause on world-saving to deliver a self-indulgent, lengthy 2020s soliloquy. Will's speech in the penultimate episode of season five was absurd enough for *Saturday Night Live* to mock it just a few weeks later, in a sketch explaining that Noah Schnapp, the actor who portrays Will, was the only one of the series not yet signed to a new project, as his character was still stuck in that room delivering his never-ending "woke for applause" scene.

> We allow children mental dominion over online spaces and screens, but we don't give them physical dominion of any kind.

The use of nostalgia to propagandize young people who weren't there and wouldn't know how far-fetched it is for a fifth of the characters in a small Midwest town to be openly gay is grievous. Christopher Lasch explored the morality of using memory versus nostalgia to portray the past, arguing that *memory* connects us to our past, weaving one continuous people with a shared history together into a common story. Memory helps us to see how the past informs our culture and connects us to the earlier version of ourselves so that we might come away with a better understanding.

But *nostalgia* can sever us from our past by stretching and manipulating reality to make it politically useful. Often this is done so that modern people might feel the rush of judging the past for its sins from our superior vantage point. This use of nostalgia reveals a progressive mindset that views everything past as inferior and underdeveloped. Lasch wrote in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1994) that

> [n]ostalgia is superficially loving in its re-creation of the past, but it evokes the past only to bury it alive. It shares with the belief in progress, to which it is only superficially opposed, an eagerness to proclaim the death of the past and to deny history's hold on the present. Those who mourn the death of the past and those who acclaim it both take for granted that our age has outgrown its childhood.

After a decade of grand adventures in Hawkins, Indiana, *Stranger Things* leaves its fans to wonder whether it is the Duffers' dark Amblin '80s, or our time, that is more troubled than it first appears. Despite some missteps, the final season offers a lengthy meditation on Lasch's memory versus nostalgia theme, as the children stolen this time are trapped in a saccharine 1950s brainwashing world of the monster's memories. Artistically at least, *Stranger Things* distinguishes between brainwashing nostalgia for the purpose of propagandizing the youth to cannibalize them, and good old-fashioned '80s throwbacks, even if it sometimes fails to respect its own position.

It is fascinating to note that the most popular television show of all time received dumpster fire ratings on IMDb.com for exactly two of its 42 episodes: "The Lost Sister," which features the gender nonconformist in season two, received a 6.0, and "The Bridge," which contains Will's lengthy author filibuster, received a 5.6. The average episode rating for *Stranger Things* is 8.5/10. Woke-era viewers are all grown up, too, and appear to have developed a reduced tolerance for propaganda.

After all, *friends don't lie.*

Lane Scott is a writer living in Angels Camp, California. She writes the Substack Matriarch Goals.

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