

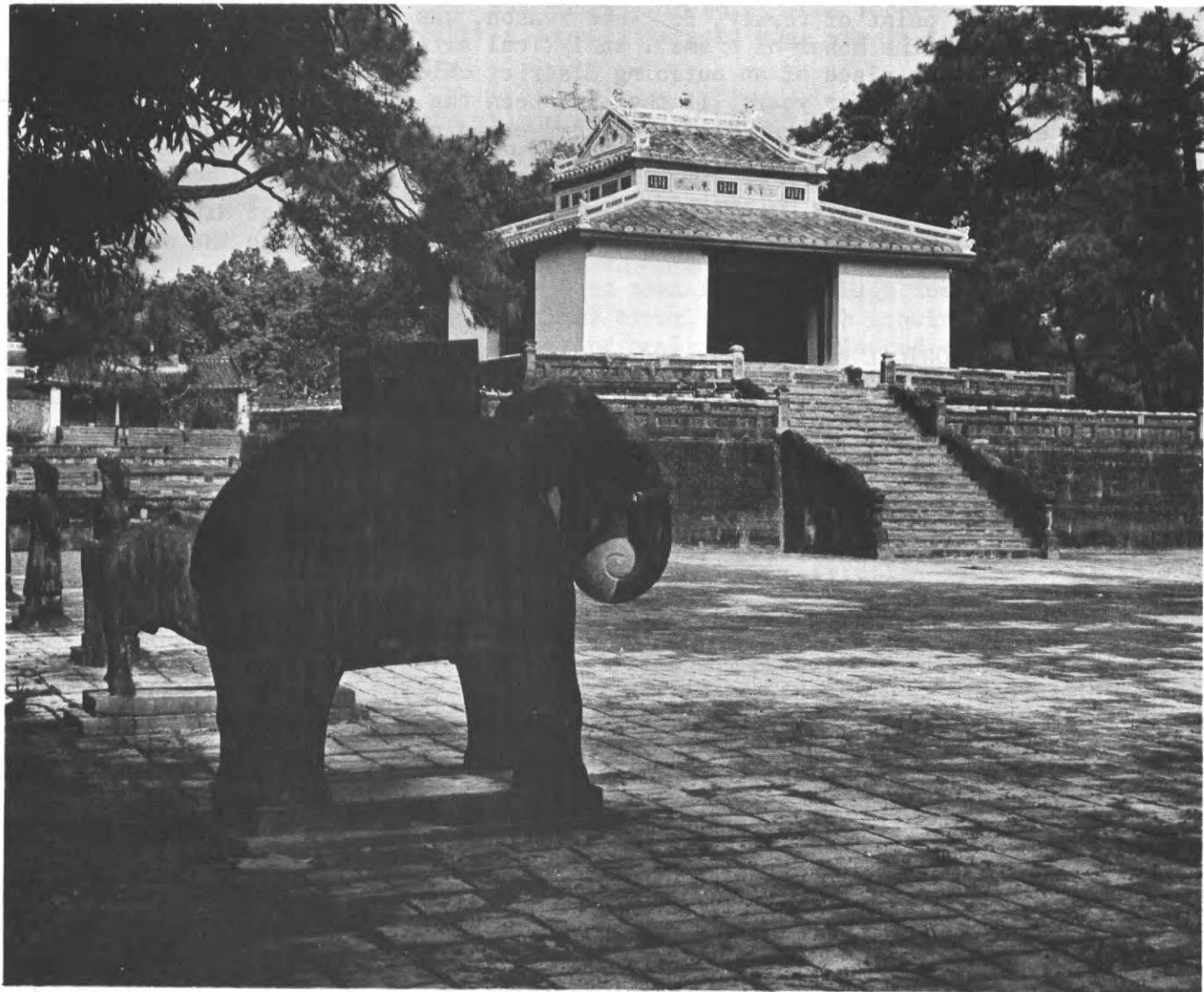
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Emperor Minh Mang's tomb in the Imperial City of Hue

Letter from Saigon

THE MANGROVES OF HIEU LE

Saigon, May 13, 1971. - A small ceremony took place last May Day in the mud of the U Minh forest, which went practically unreported by the Press -- in spite of its genuinely important significance.

Although taking place in the presence of Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem, the oath-taking ceremony of the Hieu Le district chief, Major Truong Cuoi, was only briefly mentioned by the most serious newspapers in Saigon. The fact it was the first time a Hieu Le district chief is sworn - in since the creation of this administrative division a decade ago simply went unmentioned by most reporters covering the event.

This point of verity, for some reason, was considered as natural and it did not even have the honor of a small analytical article. It was as if Maj. Cuoi were simply taking the place of an outgoing district chief in an area that has been under government control for years. If that had been the case, the scarcity of information on the event would have been easier to comprehend and less of an unacceptable journalistic oversight.

But it was not. Created ten years ago, the district of Hieu Le had only existed on paper, the Government having not even bothered itself with the appointment of a district chief.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: Indeed, not too long ago, such a measure would have been pointless. Spreading over some 1,000 square miles of marshy terrain, Hieu Le was considered solid Viet Cong territory for over a quarter of a century.

Even before the end of World War II, the U Minh forest -- as the common people call Hieu Le -- escaped government control. The French left this area and its inhabitants very much alone. A few years before, remnants of a Communist-dominated rebel organization had taken refuge there and converted the region into a war zone of sorts.

When the First Indochina War started in 1945, top Communist leaders in the western provinces directed the anti-French resistance movement from their dens in this practically impenetrable area. The French made a few attempts at sweeping though the U Minh marshes but they all ended up in total failure and Hieu Le remained as inviolable as ever.

Even in the heyday of the Ngo Dinh Diem administration in the late 1950's the presence of the central government manifested itself mainly through the dispatch of some land survey teams, whose findings were to result in the decision to establish a new district. Control of this region continued to be in the hands of the invisible Communist administration.

A few years later, when the Viet Cong insurgency exploded into a real war, the U Minh forest once again grew into the staging area of a strong Communist force operation in the western half of the Mekong delta.

FAILURE AFTER FAILURE: As the insurgent movement gained strength in the early sixties, the mangroves of Hieu Le became more important in the overall military picture. From this inviolable haven, Communist forces launched innumerable attacks on government positions in the neighboring provinces, reducing the South Vietnamese Army to the defensive west of the Bassac river.

This is not to say that government forces, especially the 21st Infantry Division, did nothing to counter the enemy threat in this general area. But all government attempts at forcing the guerrillas to a decisive military showdown failed to produce the sought-after results. In the face of a superior force, the guerrillas would fade away, only to regroup elsewhere and take up the fight again more vigorously.

This seesaw battle continued well into 1968 when both sides intensified their military pressure in expectation of a decisively favorable trend of military developments. Dozens of battles were mounted by both belligerents, which now strike observers as setbacks rather than successes, for both sides recorded heavy losses without nipping a dent into each other's capabilities to wage war in this strategically most important section of the country.

As in other parts of the elongated Republic, however, the impact of the Communist Tet offensive on the insurgent movement started to be felt sometime after the May attacks and by mid-1968, government forces were in a position to step up their pressure on an estimated 20,000 Viet Cong in this region of marshes and mangroves.

STRATEGIC ERROR: It was then that the enemy High Command committed a rather serious strategic and psychological error. Faced with growing difficulties traceable in part to the loss of an important number of experienced cadres in the early part of the year, the Communists should have returned to guerrilla warfare as the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) was to wisely point out in its Resolution Number Nine.

But top Communist leaders west of the Bassac took a different strategic approach. They called for reinforcements. Within a few months' time, thousands of North Vietnamese infiltrators began arriving in the legendary forest, finding it quite difficult to adapt themselves to the living conditions there. Friction between "our brothers from the North" and local insurgent troops also grew serious, practically paralyzing the Communist alliance in this critical area of confrontation.

As the situation continued to deteriorate gradually for the insurgents, Government forces consolidated their grip on Bassac provinces, slowly but inexorably tightening their noose around one of the most important Communist centers of resistance in the country. The presence of North Vietnamese regulars failed to revert this trend. The enemy high command took the unprecedented decision of North Vietnamese the local military command, but this was to prove to no avail, too.

It was in this juncture that taking advantage of developments in Cambodia following the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, South Vietnamese forces stepped up their pressure against remaining in-country Communist base areas while doing their best to neutralize the enemy's out-country installations. This strategic approach was to become visible in the Mekong delta, where two of the region's three infantry divisions were deployed along the border while the 21st Division was given the responsibility of squeezing a weakened enemy force out of the U Minh forest.

This new strategy became evident early this year when in conjunction with other military units, troops of the 21st Division were deployed in a shrinking circle about 130 miles southwest of Saigon, slowly rooting out an enemy force the strength of which had been reduced to about 8,000 men under North Vietnamese General Sau Nam, the new commander of the Viet Cong's Third Military Region.

BEGINNING OF THE END: Sau Nam knew he and his men were to be in a difficult position if they should not do anything to halt the South Vietnamese advance. At the start of the current sweep, Government units often were pounded by Communist mortars at night and assaulted during the day in a month-long effort devised to discourage the attacking troops.

But at the difference with previous campaign in the area, the government units did not have to worry about their rear. With the defense of the neighboring provinces more or less in the hands of the Regional and Popular forces, the regular Army could continue a protracted campaign, which, according to an order from President Nguyen Van Thieu himself, should only come to an end with the entire U Minh area put under Government control for good.

Whatever the Communist resistance, the Government forces moved forward, killing thousands of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, accepting the surrender of hundreds of guerrillas, and relocating tens of thousands of persons in a system of villages made more easily defensible by the creation of a new group of fire support bases. Early this year, President Thieu himself spent a night in this once Viet Cong forbidden "city".

Probably, North Vietnamese generals in Hanoi realized the predicament of Sau Nam and his staff. Cut off from their sources of supplies since the beginning of the Cambodia operations, Sau Nam's men were instructed to "rely on the enemy for arms and ammunition." But South Vietnamese soldiers took good care of their war materiel and U Minh-based Viet Cong soon found themselves in dire need for everything from rice to rifles.

The sighting and ensuing sinking of two trawlers off the coast of South Vietnam a few months ago, thus, only indicates to some extent a large-scale North Vietnamese attempt at supplying Communist troops in the South. It rather indicates how hopeless the insurgents had become -- logically.

NEW ASSESSMENT: No wonder when Premier Khiem visited the troops in the U Minh forest last week, Major General Ngo Quang Truong, the top military commander in the Mekong delta, could tell him the Viet Cong's Third Military Region command had practically ceased to exist.

According to Gen. Truong, Sau Nam's routed hordes include at present only about 600 individuals whose main occupation "is to hide and survive". But for Maj. Gen. Nguyen Vinh Nghi, the commander of the 21st Infantry Division, "they cannot avoid destruction if they should not surrender in the near future."

The top South Vietnamese commander in the Mekong delta was also of the view that following the end of the U Minh forest as an inviolable sanctuary, the enemy will be unable to mount any offensive of sorts throughout his area of responsibility. "There will certainly be some harassment but the big action period is over," Gen. Truong also said.

However subjective these statements, the recent developments in the southwesternmost provinces of Camau, Chuong Thien and Kien Giang appear to confirm the veracity of their assessment.

CONTEXT: It is against this context that one has to understand the statements made by Premier Khiem last May Day in the depth of the U Minh forest. Speaking to troopers of the 21st Infantry Division but indirectly to the entire nation, Khiem said that "peace will not come unless we should make a positive effort to search for it."

For the Premier, however, the South Vietnamese should achieve a state of "constant military initiative" for "no political formula may be found if the balance of military power should not be definitely in our favor." This, in the view of the Prime Minister, "is now within our grasp, in consideration of the big strides we have achieved in the field of pacification."

The appointment of Maj. Cuoi as district chief of Hieu Le definitely marks the beginning of a new phase in the long conflict in the Mekong delta. With the last Communist in-country sanctuary under Government control, the unrelenting South Vietnamese pressure on the enemy appears to be yielding truly lasting results.



The White Horse Bridge on the Perfume River
in Hue

Points of view

THE SWEDISH OFFER ON VIETNAM PRISONERS

By Ronald J. Dunlavey
VOA News Analyst

May 6, 1971. - The United States and South Vietnam have repeatedly proposed an exchange of all prisoners held by both sides in the Vietnam war. The proposal was never accepted by North Vietnam. Then, a few weeks ago, the South Vietnamese came up with a variation on this proposal; they suggested that prisoners who were sick or had been held a long time be sent to a neutral country and interned there. President Nixon personally endorsed the idea as a reasonable and responsible alternative to the total repatriation of all prisoners. Then, about a week ago the United States Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, said that neutral ships were available to transport the prisoners.

According to news reports, the ships are those of Sweden. Not only that, but Sweden reportedly has also offered to allow the prisoners to be interned there. The Swedish government in a statement issued Monday, declared that it was willing to help in every way from a humanitarian standpoint - but added that there would first have to be agreement between the parties directly concerned.

Unfortunately, this proposal seems to be no more acceptable to Hanoi than earlier efforts to help the prisoners. The United States reacted warmly to the reported Swedish offer, but a North Vietnamese spokesman at Paris - without mentioning the proposal concretely - reiterated Hanoi's long-standing insistence that release of prisoners cannot even be discussed until President Nixon has set a definite date for total American withdrawal from South Vietnam. In making what amounts to a rejection of the proposal, Hanoi apparently is unmoved by the fact that Sweden has been somewhat sympathetic to its cause - or by the knowledge that North Vietnamese prisoners held in South Vietnam would be interned as part of the agreement.

There are those who feel that if the rejection is final Hanoi is making a mistake, and that by accepting the proposal the North Vietnamese might not only gain some badly credits for humanitarianism, but might even help to accelerate the American withdrawal. Total American withdrawal, President Nixon has made clear, is contingent on two factors.

First, South Vietnam must be strong enough to have a reasonable chance for survival. Second, American prisoners must be released. The internment of these prisoners in a neutral country would not mean their immediate release but it would be a long step in that direction. It would therefore practically eliminate one of the two reasons why American troops remain in South Vietnam and would probably increase American public tolerance for an early withdrawal.

But regardless of political considerations, one would hope that North Vietnam would consider accepting the proposal out of humanitarian considerations. It was the humanrian motive that dictated the internment proposal in the first place. And it is the humanitarian motive that has now moved the Government of Sweden to make its other offer of assistance. It might be added that the internment of prisoners of war in a neutral country is specifically provided for the Geneva Convention -- and international agreement to which North Vietnam is a signatory. It would be regrettable if Hanoi were to again ignore an opportunity to live up to the terms of that agreement.

WHEN THE FISH SWALLOWED THE STARS

A Vietnamese Folktale

Adapted by George F. Schultz

Vietnamese folklore has many stories about the wild animals of the jungle, especially about the tiger. In the story that follows, the farmer cleverly outwits his ancient enemy when the latter leaves his sanctuary and invades his territory. The plodding water-buffalo, long since domesticated, is loyal to his master and refuses to join the tiger in attacking him.

* * * *

A farmer was once driving his buffalo across a flooded ricefield. From time to time, he would stop and look at the sky, which was covered with dark, low-lying clouds. It was plain to see that more rain was bound to fall very soon.

Suddenly, a large tiger appeared from the jungle that adjoined the ricefield. He was so big and powerful that he could have brought down an elephant.

When the tiger saw how hard the buffalo was working, he began to laugh in a terrible manner. It seemed to him a shame that such a mighty beast would obey the commands of a poor, skinny man.

"Hey, Goggle Eyes," the tiger called to the buffalo, "you are certainly the most stupid animal on Earth".

The buffalo's ears were so full of mud that he was unable to understand the tiger's words; therefore, he only shook his massive head and continued to tread the earth.

It was different with the farmer: on hearing the tiger's hideous laugh, his knees weakened and began to knock together. He knew that if he tried to flee, the tiger would soon have him beneath his powerful paws.

"Buffalo Goggle Eyes," roared the tiger a second time, "turn around and hook your master with your horn; then trample him under foot."

This time the buffalo understood the tiger's words, but it seemed to him foolish to follow such advice. Hook his master with a horn and trample him under foot? What would he do then without a master? Who would feed him and take care of him? The buffalo shook his head negatively and continued to push ahead.

The tiger became angry at the buffalo's refusal to obey his orders. He roared his loudest and the trees of the jungle and even the huts of the village quivered.

"Blockhead," he called to the buffalo, "don't you want your freedom? Take the farmer with your horn and I will take him with my teeth."

The tiger then made a threatening lunge at the farmer; he expected to see the poor man fall to his knees and try to crawl away like a crab. But the man pulled himself together and held his ground.

"Get along," he said to his buffalo, "and pay no attention to this babler from the jungle." And he touched the buffalo's flank with his bamboo rod. "Keep moving for in a few hours the fish are going to swallow the stars."

The buffalo strained in his harness, but the tiger stopped in his tracks and looked distrustfully at the farmer and then at the sky.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said that the fish were going to swallow the stars," repeated the farmer, "and us too unless we hurry."

"The fish will swallow the stars?" questioned the tiger. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Dont you see those heavy clouds just above the mountains?" asked the farmer. "Or those hanging over the plain like the bellies of black pigs? Rain will fall, more rain than the Earth has ever seen. Fields and villages will disappear and only the tops of the tallest trees will stick out of the water."

"What will become of the animals of the jungle?" asked the tiger anxiously, his teeth chattering. "Will they too be under water?"

"Yes," replied the farmer, "everything will be under water except my buffalo and me." Then he urged the buffalo ahead. "Get along," he said, "The first drops of rain are beginning to fall."

"And how will you and your buffalo be spared?" asked the tiger, walking behind the farmer like a wet cat.

"Very simply," replied the farmer evenly. "I will build a small, wooden cabin for my buffalo and another for myself. We will rise with the water to the tree tops and wait there until it falls again."

"And what will become of me?" cried the tiger. "Listen to me, farmer: build me a cabin too!"

With feigned compassion, the farmer agreed to do so. He penetrated the jungle and cut down a great quantity of bamboos, which he bound together with strong vines to form a cage. By the time this cage was finished, it had begun to rain very hard. When summoned by the farmer, the frightened tiger quickly entered the cage and lay down in silence.

As soon as the tiger was safely inside the cage, the farmer barred the door so that the beast could not escape. Then he cut a heavy, bamboo spear, which he stuck into the tiger's side until the blood ran; the tiger howled with pain. Next, the man stuck his spear into the tiger's mouth; the animal bellowed with rage and jumped about in the cage with such force that it seemed the bamboos would break. Blood spurted from the tiger's wounds and tears streaked his face. Finally, with a last heavy blow, the farmer decided that the beast had had enough and let him out of the cage. The tiger leaped high in the air and quickly disappeared in the jungle. Since that day, he was lived in fear of the farmer, never having forgotten what happened to him on the day the fish swallowed the stars.

NEWS IN BRIEF

POW RELEASE OFFER

Saigon, May 13, 1971. - South Vietnam last week offered the release of 570 sick and wounded North Vietnamese prisoners of war at present detained on the island of Phu Quoc. In a press release made public on this occasion, the Minister of Foreign Affairs also suggested the transfer of thousands of POW's who had been detained for a long time to a neutral country in awaiting a more propitious moment to organize their repatriation to North Vietnam. It was also learned in the meantime that two score POW's had been transferred from the penitentiary island to Saigon, where they would be shipped North and released in the foreseeable future.

Against these gestures of goodwill, the North Vietnamese have remained totally silent. As on previous such occasions, Hanoi and the Viet Cong tried to ignore the South Vietnamese suggestion but some neutral governments have expressed the desire to serve as provisional custodians of these prisoners of war. U.S. Ambassador David Bruce also followed up the South Vietnamese suggestion with the proposal to appoint some international organizations to ensure the security of prisoners presently detained by both parties to the Vietnam war.

SEATO BACKS THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

Saigon, May 13, 1971. - The United States and five of its allies in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization last Wednesday endorsed in London the current allied effort to negotiate a Vietnam peace settlement and accused the Communist rulers in Hanoi of demanding complete capitulation. The final communique winding up the two-day SEATO conference also declared: "The trends in the military situation in Indochina were encouraging. The Republic of Vietnam had further developed its capability to defend itself effectively, thus enabling its allies to proceed with their troop withdrawals."

On the Indochinese situation generally, the allied foreign ministers observed that the Cambodian people and government "continue to show a firm determination to resist North Vietnamese and Viet Cong aggression" and they recognized the necessity for the action taken in Southern Laos by South Vietnamese forces "in response to the continued abuse of Laotian neutrality, sovereignty, and territorial integrity by North Vietnamese forces."

Earlier, Foreign Minister Tran Van Lam of South Vietnam, who took part in the meeting as an observer, had told the participants that his country can now defend itself but that Western powers are still needed in Southeast Asia to help maintain regional stability. Lam had said: "The reality in Vietnam is that we are now capable of defending ourselves and achieving greater security. But SEATO is still needed for bolstering the defense capabilities of the free nations in the treaty area."

SECURITY ON

Saigon, May 13, 1971. - The Lam Son 720 Operation along the border of Laos continued last week shrouded in secrecy with practically no official announcement on its developments. It was simply learned the campaign was on in the western half of northern Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces with the attention of the allies mainly concentrated on the notorious Ashau and Aluoi valleys.

According to Major General Pham Van Phu, who commands the crack First Infantry Division, at least five North Vietnamese divisions had had heavy casualties in the fighting during the past three months in southern Laos and the provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien. The 320th NVA (North Vietnamese Army) Division is reportedly the hardest hit with 80 percent casualties. Next come the 304th and 324th Divisions, which have lost about 50 percent of their manpower. The 308th reportedly can only become operative again early next year.

Probably to hide such verities, North Vietnamese troops have made a big effort to make their presence felt in the northern provinces. Following a rather savage attack on Duc Duc town in the last days of March, the North Vietnamese last week tried their chance on Dai Loc, a small district town 15 miles southwest of Danang. But once again, they were repelled with 92 killed and two taken prisoners.

U.S. INVESTMENT PROMISING

Saigon, May 13, 1971. - Some of America's largest industrial corporations have serious thought of investing in war-torn South Vietnam and this has been considered as a most meaningful development, according to sources at the Economy department. Among these potential investors are such giants as Ford, General Electric, Coca-Cola, Kaiser Cement, and others. Ford has reportedly proposed the installation of a US \$ 6,000,000 plant for the assembly of cars, tractors, and other types of agricultural machinery.

Details of the Ford proposal have remained secret, but informed sources said the U.S. company wants no local participation in the venture. The proposal, it was also said, is being studied by the Ministry of Economy, whose policy is still conditioned by a ten-year-old law on foreign investment. An effort is being made in Congress to amend this law but nothing promising has so far emerged from the congressional debate.

A year ago, all U.S. companies operating in South Vietnam were solely here on contract with the American government. Only when the U.S. troop redeployment process began, resulting in the termination of some of their contracts, did U.S. businessmen come to Saigon to study other possibilities. They were surprised by the peaceful conditions they found and since then have explored the advisability of new industrial ventures here.

During the past five years, the surplus of U.S. dollars enjoyed by South Vietnam thanks to American economic aid and military spending has mainly benefited the Japanese, whose goods sold on the Vietnamese market represent one in every four dollars paid by Saigon to foreign manufacturers. America has averaged only 11 percent of a yearly rainfall of some US \$ 750 million.

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