

The belief system and national images: a case study¹

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I. The Belief System and National Images

Even a cursory survey of the relevant literature reveals that in recent years—particularly in the decade and a half since the end of World War II—students of international politics have taken a growing interest in psycho-attitudinal approaches to the study of the international system. It has been proposed, in fact, that psychology belongs at the “core” of the discipline (Wright, 1955, p. 506). Two related problems within this area have become particular foci of attention.

1. A number of studies have shown that the relationship between “belief system,” perceptions, and decision-making is a vital one (Rokeach, 1960; Smith *et al.*, 1956; Snyder *et al.*, 1954).² A decision-maker acts upon his “image” of the situation rather than

upon “objective” reality, and it has been demonstrated that the belief system—its structure as well as its content—plays an integral role in the cognitive process (Boulding, 1956; Festinger, 1957; Ray, 1961).

2. Within the broader scope of the belief-system-perception-decision-making relationship there has been a heightened concern for the problem of stereotyped national images as a significant factor in the dynamics of the international system (Bauer, 1961; Boulding, 1959; Osgood, 1959b; Wheeler, 1960; Wright, 1957). Kenneth Boulding, for example, has written that, “The national image, however, is the last great stronghold of unsophistication. . . . Nations are divided into ‘good’ and ‘bad’—the enemy is all bad, one’s own nation is of spotless virtue” (Boulding, 1959, p. 130).

The relationship of national images to international conflict is clear: decision-makers act upon their definition of the situation and their images of states—others as well as their own. These images are in turn dependent upon the decision-maker’s belief system, and these may or may not be accurate representations of “reality.” Thus it has been suggested that international conflict frequently is not between states, but rather between distorted images of states (Wright, 1957, p. 266).

The purpose of this paper is to report the findings of a case study dealing with the relationship between the belief system,

¹ The author wishes to express his deep gratitude to Professors Robert C. North, James T. Watkins, IV, and Thomas A. Bailey for their advice and encouragement on the larger study from which this paper is derived; to Charles A. McClelland and Richard Fagen for their useful comments on this paper; and to Mrs. Helen Grace for preparing the figures.

² Although in the literature the terms “belief system” (Rokeach, 1960, pp. 18-9), “image” (Boulding, 1956, pp. 5-6), and “frame of reference” (Snyder *et al.*, 1954, p. 101) have frequently been used synonymously, in this paper “belief system” will denote the complete world view, whereas “image” will denote some subpart of the belief system.

national images, and decision-making. The study centers upon one decision-maker of unquestioned influence, John Foster Dulles, and the connection between his belief system and his perceptions of the Soviet Union.

The analytical framework for this study can be stated briefly. The belief system, composed of a number of "images" of the past, present, and future, includes "all the accumulated, organized knowledge that the organism has about itself and the world" (Miller *et al.*, 1960, p. 16). It may be thought of as the set of lenses through which information concerning the physical and social environment is received. It orients the individual to his environment, defining it for him and identifying for him its salient characteristics. National images may be denoted as subparts of the belief system. Like the belief system itself, these are "models" which order for the observer what will otherwise be an unmanageable amount of information (Bauer, 1961).

In addition to organizing perceptions into a meaningful guide for behavior, the belief system has the function of the establishment of goals and the ordering of preferences. Thus it actually has a dual connection with

decision-making. The direct relationship is found in that aspect of the belief system which tells us "what ought to be," acting as a direct guide in the establishment of goals. The indirect link—the role that the belief system plays in the process of "scanning, selecting, filtering, linking, reordering, organizing, and reporting," (McClelland, 1962, p. 456)—arises from the tendency of the individual to assimilate new perceptions to familiar ones, and to distort what is seen in such a way as to minimize the clash with previous expectations (Bronfenbrenner, 1961; Ray, 1961; Rokeach, 1960). Like the blind men, each describing the elephant on the basis of the part he touches, different individuals may describe the same object or situation in terms of what they have been conditioned to see. This may be particularly true in a crisis situation: "Controversial issues tend to be polarized not only because commitments have been made but also because certain perceptions are actively excluded from consciousness if they do not fit the chosen world image" (Rapoport, 1960, p. 258). These relationships are presented in the following figure.

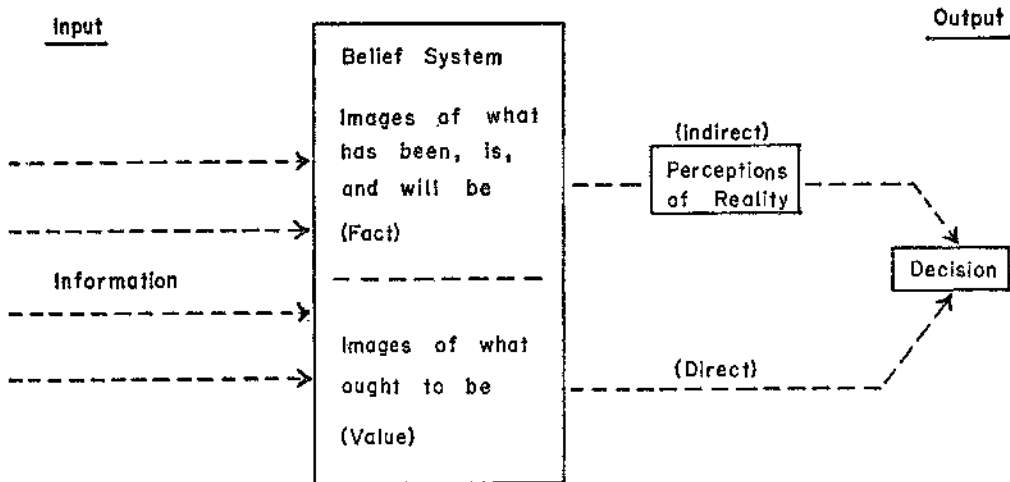


FIG. 1. The dual relationship between belief system and decision-making.

The belief system and its component images are, however, dynamic rather than static; they are in continual interaction with new information. The impact of this information depends upon the degree to which the structure of the belief system is "open" or "closed." According to Rokeach,

At the closed extreme, it is new information that must be tampered with—by narrowing it out, altering it, or constraining it within isolated bounds. In this way, the belief-disbelief system is left intact. At the open extreme, it is the other way around: New information is assimilated as is . . . thereby producing "genuine" (as contrasted with "party-line") changes in the whole belief-disbelief system [Rokeach, 1960, p. 50].

Thus while national images perform an important function in the cognitive process, they may also become dysfunctional. Unless they coincide in some way with commonly-perceived reality, decisions based on these images are not likely to fulfill expectations. Erroneous images may also prove to have a distorting effect by encouraging the reinterpretation of information that does not fit the image; this is most probable with rigid "models" such as "totalitarian communism" or "monopolistic capitalism" which exclude the very types of information that might lead to a modification of the models themselves (Bauer, 1961; Wheeler, 1960).

II. John Foster Dulles and the Soviet Union

The selection of John Foster Dulles as the central figure for my study fulfilled a number of historical and research requirements for the testing of hypotheses concerning the relationship between the belief system and perceptions of other nations. He was acknowledged as a decision-maker of first-rate importance, and he held office during a period of dramatic changes in Soviet elites, capabilities, and tactics. In addition, he left voluminous public pronouncements and

writings on both the Soviet Union and on the theoretical aspects of international politics, thus facilitating a reconstruction of salient aspects of both his belief system and his perceptions of the Soviet Union.

The sources used in this study included all of Dulles' publicly available statements concerning the Soviet Union during the 1953-1959 period, derived from a content analysis of 434 documents, including Congressional testimony, press conferences, and addresses.³ These statements were transcribed, masked, and quantified according to the "evaluative assertion analysis" technique devised by Charles E. Osgood and his associates (Osgood *et al.*, 1956; Osgood, 1959a).⁴

All of Dulles' statements concerning the Soviet Union were translated into 3,584 "evaluative assertions" and placed into one of four categories:

1. *Soviet Policy*: assessed on a friendship-hostility continuum (2,246 statements).
2. *Soviet Capabilities*: assessed on a strength-weakness continuum (732 statements).

³ The author has corresponded with a number of Dulles' close associates. They almost unanimously stated that Dulles' public assessments of various characteristics of the Soviet regime were identical with his private beliefs.

⁴ The method involves the translation of all statements into one of two common sentence structures.

1. Attitude Object₁ (AO₁)/Verbal Connector (c)/Common-meaning Evaluator (cm)
2. Attitude Object₁ (AO₁)/Verbal Connector (c)/Attitude Object₂ (AO₂)

For example, the sentence, "The Soviet Union is hostile, opposing American national interests," is translated to read:

1. The Soviet Union/is/hostile (form 1).
2. The Soviet Union/opposes/American national interests (form 2).

The value of AO₁'s are computed on the basis of values assigned to the cm's, c's and AO₂'s. These range from +3 to -3, depending upon their direction and intensity.

3. *Soviet Success*: assessed on a satisfaction-frustration continuum (290 statements).
4. *General Evaluation of the Soviet Union*: assessed on a good-bad continuum (316 statements).

The resulting figures, when aggregated into time periods, provide a record of the way in which Dulles' perceptions of each dimension varied. From this record inferences can be made of the perceived relationship between the dimensions.

Dulles' image of the Soviet Union was built on the trinity of atheism, totalitarianism, and communism, capped by a deep belief that no enduring social order could be erected upon such foundations.⁵ He had written in 1950, for example, that: "Soviet Communism starts with an atheistic, Godless premise. Everything else flows from that premise" (Dulles, 1950, p. 8). Upon these characteristics—the negation of values at or near the core of his belief system—he superimposed three dichotomies.

1. The "good" Russian people versus the "bad" Soviet leaders.⁶
2. The "good" Russian national interest versus "bad" international communism.⁷

⁵ "Dulles was an American Puritan very difficult for me [Albrecht von Kessel], a Lutheran, to understand. This partly led him to the conviction that Bolshevism was a product of the devil and that God would wear out the Bolsheviks in the long run, whereas many consider it a perversion of Russian qualities" (Drummond and Colbentz, 1960, p. 15).

⁶ "There is no dispute at all between the United States and the peoples of Russia. If only the Government of Russia was interested in looking out for the welfare of Russia, the people of Russia, we would have a state of non-tension right away" (Dulles, 1958a, p. 734).

⁷ "The time may come—I believe it will come—when Russians of stature will patriotically put first their national security and the welfare of their people. They will be unwilling to have that security and that welfare subordinated to the

3. The "good" Russian state versus the "bad" Communist Party.⁸

That image of the Soviet Union—which has been called the "inherent bad faith of the Communists" model (Kissinger, 1962, p. 201)—was sustained in large part by his heavy reliance on the study of classical Marxist writings, particularly those of Lenin, to find the keys to all Soviet policies (Dulles, 1958b).

In order to test the general hypothesis that information concerning the Soviet Union tended to be perceived and interpreted in a manner consistent with the belief system, the analysis was focused upon the relationship Dulles perceived between Soviet hostility and Soviet success, capabilities, and general evaluation of the Soviet Union. Specifically, it was hypothesized that Dulles' image of the Soviet Union would be preserved by associating decreases in perceived hostility with:

1. Increasing Soviet frustration in the conduct of its foreign policy.
2. Decreasing Soviet capabilities.
3. No significant change in the general evaluation of the Soviet Union.

Similarly, it was hypothesized that increasing Soviet hostility would be correlated with success and strength.

The results derived through the content analysis of Dulles' statements bear out the validity of the hypotheses. These strongly suggest that he attributed decreasing Soviet

worldwide ambitions of international communism" (Dulles, 1955b, p. 329).

⁸ "The ultimate fact in the Soviet Union is the supreme authority of the Soviet Communist Party. . . . That fact has very important consequences, for the State and the Party have distinctive goals and they have different instruments for getting those goals. . . . Most of Russia's historic goals have been achieved. . . . But the big, unattained goals are those of the Soviet Communist Party" (Dulles, 1948, pp. 271-2).

TABLE 1

Period	Hos- tility	Suc- cess	Capabil- ities	General Evalu- ation	
1953: Jan-Jun	+2.01	-1.06	+0.33	-2.81	
Jul-Dec	+1.82	-0.40	-0.30	-2.92	
1954: Jan-Jun	+2.45	+0.46	+2.00	-2.69	
Jul-Dec	+1.85	-0.25	+1.93	-3.00	
1955: Jan-Jun	+0.74	-1.81	-0.80	-2.83	
Jul-Dec	+0.96	-1.91	-0.20	-2.33	
1956: Jan-Jun	+1.05	-1.68	+0.37	-2.91	
Jul-Dec	+1.72	-2.11	-0.22	-3.00	
1957: Jan-Jun	+1.71	-2.10	-0.28	-2.79	
Jul-Dec	+2.09	-1.01	+0.60	-2.93	
1958-1959 Jan-Jun	+2.03	+0.02	+1.47	-2.86	
Jul-Feb	+2.10	-1.20	+1.71	-2.90	
<i>Correlations</i> ³					
Hostility-Success (Friendship- Failure):			<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>P</i>
6 Month Periods (Table Above)			12	+0.71	0.01
12 Month Periods			6	+0.94	0.01
3 Month Periods			25	+0.58	0.01
Hostility-Strength (Friendship- Weakness):					
6 Month Periods (Table Above)			12	+0.76	0.01
12 Month Periods			6	+0.94	0.01
3 Month Periods			25	+0.55	0.01
Hostility-Bad (Friendship- Good):					
6 Month Periods (Table Above)			12	+0.03	n.s.
12 Month Periods			6	+0.10	n.s.
3 Month Periods			25	+0.10	n.s.

hostility to the necessity of adversity rather than to any genuine change of character.

In a short paper it is impossible to include all of the evidence and illustrative material found in the full-length study from which this paper is derived. A few examples may, however, illuminate the perceived relationship presented in Table 1.

The 1955-1956 period, beginning with the signing of the Austrian State Treaty and ending with the dual crises in Egypt and Hungary, is of particular interest. As shown in Figure 2, Dulles clearly perceived Soviet

hostility to be declining. At the same time, he regarded that decline to be symptomatic of a regime whose foreign policy had been an abysmal failure and whose declining strength was forcing Soviet decision-makers to seek a respite in the Cold War. That he felt there was a causal connection between these factors can be suggested by numerous statements made during the period.¹⁰

The process of how Soviet actions were reinterpreted so as to preserve the model of "the inherent bad faith of the Communists" can also be illustrated by specific examples. Dulles clearly attributed Soviet actions which led up to the Geneva "Summit" Conference—notably the signing of the Austrian State Treaty—to factors other than good faith. He proclaimed that a thaw in the Cold War had come about because, "the policy of the Soviet Union with reference to Western Europe has failed" (U.S. Senate, 1955, p. 15), subsequently adding that, "it has been their [Soviet] system that is on the point of collapsing" (U.S. House of Representatives, 1955, p. 10).

A year later, when questioned about the Soviet plan to reduce their armed forces by 1,200,000 men, he quickly invoked the theme of the bad faith of the Soviet leader-

¹⁰ "It is that [United States] policy, and the failure of the Soviet Union to disrupt it, and the strains to which the Soviet Union has itself been subjected which undoubtedly require a radical change of tactics on the part of the Soviet Union" (Dulles, 1955a, p. 914).

"Today the necessity for [Soviet] virtue has been created by a stalwart thwarting of efforts to subvert our character. If we want to see that virtue continue, I suggest that it may be prudent to continue what produced it" (Dulles, 1955c, p. 8).

"The fact is, [the Soviets] have failed, and they have got to devise new policies. . . . Those policies have gradually ceased to produce any results for them. . . . The result is, they have got to review their whole creed, from A to Z" (U.S. Senate, 1956, p. 19).

³ Correlations, based on rank ordering of variables, were computed using Spearman's formula:

$$r = 1 - \frac{6 \sum D^2}{N(N^2 - 1)} \quad (\text{McNemar, 1955, p. 208}).$$

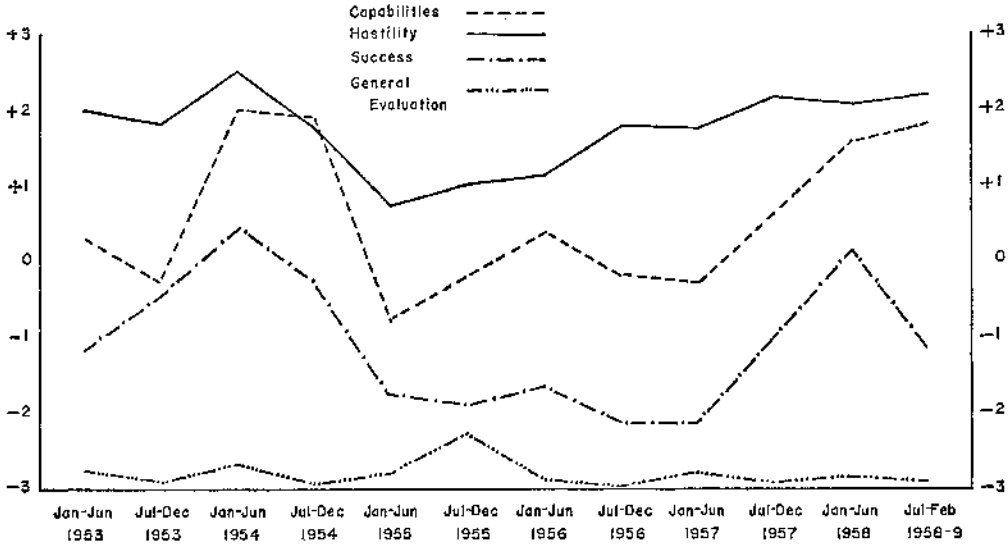


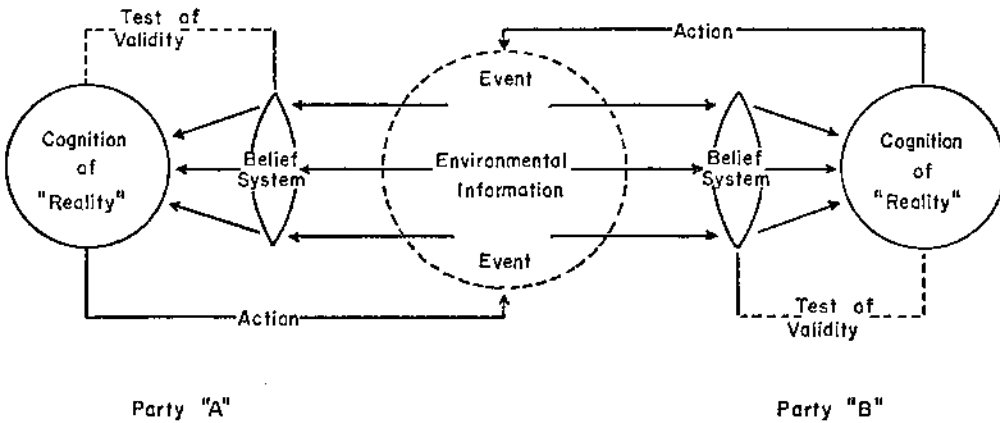
FIG. 2. Dulles' perceptions of the Soviet Union, 1953-1959.

ship. After several rounds of questions, in which each reply increasingly deprecated the value of the Soviet move in lowering world tensions, he was asked, "Isn't it a fair conclusion from what you have said this morning that you would prefer to have the Soviet Union keep these men in their armed forces?" He replied, "Well, it's a fair conclusion that I would rather have them standing around doing guard duty than making atomic bombs." In any case, he claimed, the reduction was forced by industrial and agricultural weakness: "I think, however, that what is happening can be explained primarily by economic factors rather than by a shift in foreign policy intentions" (Dulles, 1956, pp. 884-5).

There is strong evidence, then, that Dulles "interpreted the very data which would lead one to change one's model in such a way as to preserve that model" (Bauer, 1961, p. 227). Contrary information (a general decrease in Soviet hostility, specific non-hostile acts) were reinterpreted in a manner which did not do violence to the original image. In

the case of the Soviet manpower cuts, these were attributed to necessity (particularly economic weakness), and bad faith (the assumption that the released men would be put to work on more lethal weapons). In the case of the Austrian State Treaty, he explained the Soviet agreement in terms of frustration (the failure of its policy in Europe), and weakness (the system was on the point of collapse).

The extent to which Dulles' image of the Soviet Union affected American decision-making during the period cannot be stated with certainty. There is considerable evidence, however, that he was the primary, if not the sole architect of American policy *vis à vis* the Soviet bloc (Adams, 1961; Morgenthau, 1961; Davis, 1961). Moreover, as Sydney Verba has pointed out, the more ambiguous the cognitive and evaluative aspects of a decision-making situation, and the less a group context is used in decision-making, the more likely are personality variables to assert themselves (Verba, 1961, pp. 102-3). Both the ambiguity of information concerning



Source: (Ray, 1961, p. 21)
 FIG. 3. The indirect relationship between belief system and action.

Soviet intentions and Dulles' *modus operandi* appear to have increased the importance of his image of the Soviet Union.¹¹

III. Conclusion

These findings have somewhat sobering implications for the general problem of resolving international conflict. They suggest the fallacy of thinking that peaceful settlement of outstanding international issues is simply a problem of devising "good plans."

¹¹ "Nor was the Secretary of State, in either his thinking or his decisions, much affected by what the Department of State knew and did. Dulles devised the foreign policies of the United States by drawing upon his own knowledge, experience and insight, and the Department of State merely implemented these policies" (Morgenthau, 1961, p. 305).

"He was a man of supreme confidence within himself. . . . He simply did not pay any attention to staff or to experts or anything else. Maybe in a very subconscious way he did catalogue some of the information given him but he did not, as was characteristic of Acheson and several others of the Secretaries of State with whom I have worked, take the very best he could get out of his staff" (Anon., 1961).

Clearly as long as decision-makers on either side of the Cold War adhere to rigid images of the other party, there is little likelihood that even genuine "bids" (North *et al.*, 1960, p. 357) to decrease tensions will have the desired effect. Like Dulles, the Soviet decision-makers possess a relatively all-encompassing set of lenses through which they perceive their environment. Owing to their image of "monopoly capitalism," they are also pre-conditioned to view the actions of the West within a framework of "inherent bad faith."

To the extent that each side undeviatingly interprets new information, even friendly bids, in a manner calculated to preserve the original image, the two-nation system is a closed one with small prospect for achieving even a desired reduction of tensions. If decreasing hostility is assumed to arise from weakness and frustration, and the other party is defined as inherently evil, there is little cause to reciprocate. Rather, there is every reason to press further, believing that added pressure will at least insure the continued good conduct of the adversary, and perhaps

even cause its collapse. As a result, perceptions of low hostility are self-liquidating and perceptions of high hostility are self-fulfilling. The former, being associated with weakness and frustration, do not invite reciprocation; the latter, assumed to derive from strength and success, are likely to result in reactions which will increase rather than decrease tensions.

There is also another danger: to assume that the decreasing hostility of an adversary is caused by weakness (rather than, for example, the sense of confidence that often attends growing strength), may be to invite a wholly unrealistic sense of complacency about the other state's capabilities.

In such a closed system—dominated by what has been called the “mirror image”—misperceptions and erroneous interpretations of the other party's intentions feed back into the system, confirming the original error (Ray, 1961).¹²

If this accurately represents the interaction between two hostile states, it appears that the probability of making effective bids to break the cycle would depend upon at least two variables:

1. The degree to which the decision-makers on both sides approach the “open” end of Rokeach's scale of personality types (Rokeach, 1960).
2. The degree to which the social systems approach the “pluralistic” end of the

¹² “Herein lies the terrible danger of the distorted mirror image, for it is characteristic of such images that they are self-confirming; that is, each party, often against its own wishes, is increasingly driven to behave in a manner which fulfills the expectations of the other. . . . Seen from this perspective, the primary danger of the Soviet-American mirror image is that it impels each nation to act in a manner which confirms and enhances the fear of the other to the point that even deliberate efforts to reverse the process are reinterpreted as evidence of confirmation” (Bronfenbrenner, 1961, p. 51).

pluralistic-monolithic continuum. The closer the systems come to the monolithic end, the more they appear to require the institutionalization of an “external enemy” in order to maintain internal cohesion (North, 1962, p. 41; Wheeler, 1960).

The testing of these and other hypotheses concerning the function of belief systems in international politics must, however, await further research. Certainly this looms as a high priority task given the current state of the international system. As Charles E. Osgood has so cogently said,

Surely, it would be a tragedy, a cause for cosmic irony, if two of the most civilized nations on this earth were to drive each other to their mutual destruction because of their mutually threatening conceptions of each other—without ever testing the validity of those conceptions [Osgood, 1959b, p. 318].

This is no idle warning. It has been shown empirically in this paper that the characteristics of the reciprocal mirror image operated between the two most powerful nations in the international system during a crucial decade of world history.

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