



ILLUSTRATION BY MARK ROBISON

THE FANTASY FACTOR IN CIVIL RELIGION

ASSASSINATIONS AND MASS MURDERS IN THE MEDIA AGE

THERE IS WIDESPREAD AWARENESS THAT THE INCIDENCE OF VIOLENT CRIME IN American society has increased dramatically during recent decades. No comparable recognition seems to exist, however, regarding the changed circumstances and motivations associated with some of the more sensational acts of contemporary

American violence. While most violent crimes continue to be "orthodox" in their instrumentality (performed for the sake of private vengeance or personal gain) or in their impulsiveness (performed in temporary rage or loss of inhibition), a puzzling configuration of factors surfaces in a number of recent, well-publicized incidents of mass murder and attempted assassination. These criminal acts are peculiarly "expressive" rather than traditionally instrumental, impulsive, or even ideological. Some of the mass murderers and would-be assassins—most prominently John Hinckley, Jr., Herbert Mullin, and David Berkowitz—display remarkable indifference to their own fates, as well as a peculiar sense of being possessed by a mission apparently unrelated to traditional American ideologies. Their elaborate justifying schemes, which are fantasies of retribution against wickedness, generally earn them reputations as mentally imbalanced or at least socially deviant. Yet they do not appear to fit the usual categories of the criminally insane.

In this essay we wish to develop the thesis that it is a mistake to view these assassins and mass murderers simply as the deranged products of inadequate socialization. Instead, we submit, they can be seen as "hyper-Americans," who translate into reality mythic fantasies widely shared in our culture. They attempt to live out the violently dramatic conventions of the most popular entertainments in our era. To state our thesis most abrasively: they have the courage of our mythic convictions; they are the saints of a civil religion which too often celebrates violent death. In their own destructive ways, these murderers hold up the mirror of culture to us and challenge us to recognize the self-destructive dimension of our national psyche.

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WHEN we speak of American "civil religion," we have in mind more than the public ceremonies and officially promulgated beliefs which have been studied by Robert Bellah, Sidney Mead, Martin Marty, Conrad Cherry, and others.¹ Though some of the traditional expressions of the civil religion are in a state of decline, unofficial embodiments of it in the realm of popular fantasy are prospering. People no longer attend Fourth of July parades in significant numbers, but they flock to cinemas to enjoy the heroic exploits of Luke Skywalker and Indiana Jones, or watch Superman fight for "Truth, Justice, and the American Way." Television brings similar fare directly into our homes, including the semi-comic but nonetheless bellicose crusade of "the Greatest American Hero" against forces perceived to threaten our way of life and national existence. Electronic games, such as "Space Invaders" and the phenomenally popular "Pac Man," enable us to participate even more immediately in the beguiling fantasy of resolving conflict through violence.

The notion which resounds through our modern superheroic fantasies—that violent means may be righteously and effectively employed to overcome evil—derives from a long cultural tradition.² Biblical narratives of establishing truth and justice by violence against evildoers were adapted by early American interpreters to form a new crusading consciousness. Five interlocking ideas crystallized to create zealous, militant American nationalism: a conspiracy theory of evil; a radical stereotyping of and dichotomizing of good and evil; a mystique of violence as at least potentially redemptive; a conviction that the faithful will prevail no matter what the odds; and celebration of courageous redeemer figures, who are even willing to defy public opinion and moral restraints in order to implement the divine decree of retributive justice. Each of these ideas can be traced to colonial adaptations of biblical motifs. But they emerged in increasingly secular forms in the

French and Indian War, the American Revolution, the Mexican War, in apocalyptic interpretations of the Civil War, and in the supposedly altruistic campaign of the Spanish American War. "Manifest Destiny" in its various nineteenth century guises was the secularization of a biblical interpretation of the national destiny, which stood parallel to a popular American tradition of narrative art.³

Starting with the "Indian captivity" narratives and developing through the "Leatherstocking Tales" and dime novels to the cowboy westerns, stories of violent redemption became unacknowledged expressions of the official civil religion. The publicly sponsored war to

superheroic tale, in effect, is the individuated story form of the American civil religion. Even when public expressions of the civil religion are derided, fantasies embodying the same ideals continue to capture vast audiences.

The sacred texts of current American civil religion should therefore be sought not merely in the impassioned words of presidential addresses. Except among true believers, such utterances are increasingly viewed by the public with suspicion as the rhetoric of propaganda. Comparable skepticism is much less easy to detect concerning the cherished lore of American fantasy. The power of *Superman I and II*, of *Raiders of the Lost*

THE FANTASY ACTED OUT BY JOHN HINCKLEY, JR., IS THUS A FRIGHTENING MANIFESTATION OF OUR MOST DISTINCTIVE AMERICAN MELODRAMA: THE VIOLENT CRUSADE TO RID THE WORLD OF VILLAINS SO THAT FREEDOM, WELL-BEING, AND LOVE MAY PREVAIL.

"make the world safe for democracy" encouraged definitive formulation of the ideal of selfless crusading that has dominated American foreign policy ever since, down to the latest of U.S. military advisors in El Salvador. During the axial period 1929-41, a still pervasive, fictionalized form of this ideal crystallized in the American superhero tale.

In our book, *The American Monomyth*,⁴ we have sketched out the heroic paradigm as embodied in the most successful comics, films, and television series of our time. Its central features are a community threatened by evil but institutionally incapable of dealing with the threat, which is saved by a selfless superhero who rises out of anonymous obscurity and who returns to obscurity once communal well-being has been restored. Some of these superheroic figures resolve problems through violence and others through psychological manipulation or uncanny wisdom, but their personality structures are similar. The American superhero is usually an isolated individual, loyal to ideals which the general public affirms but is too weak or cowardly to act upon. Renouncing marriage and often disguised within somewhat menial occupations, the typical redeemer figures enable the powerless to recover conditions of security, health, or normality. Within this popular fantasy of evil and redemption, the cause of disorder is clearly identifiable in villains. Their just annihilation is achieved by individuals who have the strength of character and conviction to transcend the legal restraints of democratic institutions. There is, to be sure, an element of democratic appeal in the superheroic tale: anyone, even the mild mannered Clark Kent, can become redeemer of the community and perhaps of the world, provided he or she has sufficient courage to attack directly the perpetrators of evil. Willingness to take the law into one's own hands, though selflessly depicted in American fantasies, is a crucial element in the most popular entertainments of the culture.⁵ The

Ark, of *Star Wars*⁶ and *The Empire Strikes Back* can be measured not only in theater attendance figures but also in the public appetite for the merchandise these films have spawned. Productions such as *Jaws*, *Dirty Harry*, the John Wayne epics, and the television series *Star Trek*⁷ achieve a popular resonance which far surpasses enthusiasm for any officially sponsored manifestation of the civil religion. Yet the ideals of selfless crusading against evil are substantially the same.

II

IT is a feature of many of these hero stories that they contain at least implicit calls to discipleship—challenging the viewer to defend communal interests against internal or external threats, through violent means if necessary. Such calls are in fact built into the dramatic structure of the American Monomyth: reluctant Everyman figures are confronted with a sense of duty and an appropriate model for fulfilling it. What we have called the "Werther effect" occurs when a member of the audience actually takes up a challenge to emulate the model of heroism which the story presents.⁸ The designation "Werther effect" derives from an 18th-century episode in which some readers of Goethe's best selling *Sorrows of Young Werther* emulated the central character's suicide—while clasping copies of the book in their hands, carrying it in their pockets, or alluding to it in suicide notes.

A clear illustration of the phenomenon has been afforded by the attempt of John Hinckley, Jr. to assassinate President Reagan. Hinckley wrote several letters to actress Jodie Foster, who played a child prostitute in the film *Taxi Driver*. Although she never replied to his letters, it was for her that a farewell note was left in Hinckley's hotel room:

Dear Jody: There is a definite possibility that I will be killed in my attempt to get Reagan. . . . Jody, I would abandon this idea of getting Reagan in a second if I could

only win your heart and live out the rest of my life with you. . . . I will admit to you that the reason I'm going ahead with this attempt now is because I just cannot wait any longer to impress you. I've got to do something now to make you understand in no uncertain terms that I am doing all of this for your sake. By sacrificing my freedom and possibly my life, I hope to change your mind about me. . . . I'm asking you to please look into your heart and at least give me the chance with this historical deed to gain your respect and love. . . .⁹

Federal investigators quickly discerned that Hinckley was living out the role of the central male character in Foster's film *Taxi Driver*; somehow he had come to the conclusion that President Reagan had "insulted Foster," as one news account stated it.¹⁰ Although many observers immediately decided that such fantasies were a transparent sign of individual aberrance and illness, perhaps the wide celebration of the film and the actor who starred in it, Robert De Niro, argue otherwise.

Like Travis Bickle, the character De Niro played in *Taxi Driver*, Hinckley is the disintegrating, alienated Everyman-Nobody figure who lives in the realm of violent fantasies. One of the tapes found in Hinckley's Washington hotel room expressed despair about the state of the world:

I just want to say goodbye to the old year, which was nothing; total misery, total death, John Lennon is dead, the world is over, forget it. . . . Anything that I might do in 1981 would be solely for Jodie Foster's sake. . . . Just tell the world in some way that I worship and idolize her. One of my idols was murdered, and now Jodie's the only one left.¹¹

In the film, Travis Bickle is a psychologically scarred veteran of the Vietnam War, disgusted with the corruption and loss of hope he sees in American society. He achieves a measure of personal intergration by patterning himself after screen cowboy heroes. He acquires a small arsenal of knives and handguns and practices the quick draw for hours in front of his mirror, while fantasizing about stalking villains in the streets of modern America. Other elements of the film story include a rebuff of Travis by the beautiful aide of an aspiring politician and Travis's unsuccessful attempt to assassinate a menacingly smooth representative of the government. When Travis's retributive urge comes to full expression, it is directed against the pimps and criminals exploiting a child prostitute, played by Jodie Foster. Travis composes a "death note," which he sends to her along with money for her to return home to Pittsburgh. In the chillingly brutal and conspicuously bloody shoot-out that frees her from bondage, Bickle is apparently killed; but he miraculously reappears in the epilogue, enjoying the acclaim of the media and the gratitude of the child prostitute's family.

Bickle achieves heroic personhood by accepting the "Werther invitation" of traditional Western dramas, gunning down the pimp (dressed in Indian attire!) along with his sinister cohorts. He becomes the killer-celebrity.¹² At the end of this powerful movie, the taxi driver is surrounded by admiring colleagues with whom he is now able to converse as a "normal" human being. So too the formerly hostile political aide is attracted to him, but he can now afford to treat her amorous interest

with the heroic indifference of a Lone Ranger or Superman. Only the rescued girl is worthy of his love, though she is too young for marriage. Violence is Bickle's substitute for sexual integration.

Given the appealing fantasy of the alienated, anonymous hero who wins fame by attacking the exponents of radical evil, the details in Hinckley's farewell letter and tape make perfect sense. He has linked himself mythically with a perennial role in American entertainment: the cowboy, secret agent, detective, or caped superhero who rescues the maiden from a villain and thus gains her adoration. The proper inference is not that Hinckley felt President Reagan personally had offended Jodie Foster; rather, the presidential office itself epitomized for him the wicked system that the hero must attack to win the maiden's love.

The fact that Hinckley has apparently tried to commit suicide in the wake of his frustrated assassination attempt, turning again to despair,¹³ does not indicate that acceptance of the Werther invitation failed to provide at least temporarily the sense of meaning for his life it promised. Still, the deed manifestly fell far short of the mythical paradigm: the general public did not applaud Hinckley; Jodie Foster did not become an admirer; and the President was not eliminated from the political arena. (Indeed, given the widespread identification of Reagan with cowboy redeemer figures, surviving the assassin's bullet has probably augmented his hold on public loyalty, even when major aspects of his administration have proved ineffectual.)

The fantasy acted out by John Hinckley, Jr., is thus a frightening manifestation of our most distinctive American melodrama: the violent crusade to rid the world of villains, so that freedom, well-being, and love may prevail. In this sense, Hinckley had the courage of *our* mythic convictions. It is a clear instance of the fluid boundary between popular art and audience behavior, a boundary that other assassins and mass murderers in our time are also crossing.

III

AS if to quiet scepticism about the permeability of this boundary between popular fantasy and public behavior, another would-be assassin, Edward Michael Richardson, was inspired by and tried to emulate Hinckley's attack on the President. Several days following Hinckley's assassination attempt, Richardson was arrested in the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan after having left a letter in a New Haven hotel room that revealed his intention. "I depart now for Washington, D.C., to bring to completion Hinckley's reality," he wrote.¹⁴ Subsequent investigation showed Richardson shared Hinckley's fascination with Jodie Foster. Yet he had a larger element of traditional political motivation than Hinckley, as indicated by the statement that "Ultimately Ronald Reagan will be shot to death and this country turned to the 'Left.'"¹⁵ He was armed with a .32-caliber revolver at the time of his arrest. This episode indicates the public quality of the fantasy and the ease with which it slips over into political reality.

Opposing our pattern of interpretation, Lawrence Zelic Freedman, a psychiatrist who specializes in the

study of assassins, has in effect denied this connection with public values. Writing in the wake of the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan, he rejects the idea that we are "a sick people" and that such violence is evidence of "a rotten, corrupt society." We should instead be buoyed by "a temperate but solid sense of the strength of our community, the solidity of our democracy, the tenacity of our governmental structure." The problem of "mass crime . . . should not be confused with the very special assassin problem" because, in his opinion, "each American presidential assassin politicized his private misery." The historical pattern, he insists, is that "Anonymous, powerless, unhappy men struck down the

"respectfully yours, a human sacrifice, Herbert Mullin."¹⁹ He also carried a Bible during imprisonment and urged fellow prisoners to accept his lead in "changing the spiritual nature of the world."²⁰ The bizarreness of Mullin's synthesis of astrology, Bible narratives, (he attached great significance to the story of Jonah), and earthquake mania—which led the psychiatric community to an unusual degree of consensus about his clinical "insanity"—should not distract us from the mythic premises that gave his murders coherence. In his script, he is a knowing, sacrificial hero who received a higher truth permitting him to save his culture through deeds of violence.

THESE MURDERERS HAVE THE COURAGE OF OUR MYTHIC CONVICTIONS. THEY ARE THE SAINTS OF A CIVIL RELIGION WHICH CELEBRATES VIOLENT DEATH. THEY HOLD UP THE MIRROR OF CULTURE AND CHALLENGE US TO RECOGNIZE THE SELF-DESTRUCTIVE DIMENSION OF OUR PSYCHE.

most powerful political figure in America, in an attempt to meet their personal needs."¹⁶ However, this view fails to account for the pervasive manner in which such personal needs are resolved by conforming one's actions to the heroic model that embodies the essential ideas of the civil religion itself. Irving D. Harris, another Chicago psychiatrist who has studied these issues, seems more nearly on the track in suggesting that the typical American assassin copes with the "depression and despair over one's self-worth" by making himself "a 'hero' by becoming judge and executioner."¹⁷ The significant role of publicly accepted fantasies is clearly evidenced in case after case of attempted or accomplished public murders.

IV

AS one sorts through recent incidents of mass murder, it is not difficult to find similar, culturally shared mythic visions of redemption through violence. We will discuss briefly the cases of Herbert Mullin and David Berkowitz, individuals whose deeds were followed by prolonged confession and psychological analysis.

Herbert Mullin was a twenty-five year old resident of Santa Cruz, California. In a period of five months from 13 October 1972 to 13 February 1973, he killed thirteen individuals. Mullin thought these murders would spare California from the earthquakes that were widely predicted at the time. He claimed authoritative appointment to his role as earthquake-preventing murderer: "I Herb Mullin, born April 18, 1947, was chosen as the designated leader of my generation by Professor Dr. Albert Einstein on April 18, 1955. . . . His hope was that the April 18th people would use this designation and its resulting power and social influence to guide, protect, or perfect the resources of our planet and universe. . . ."¹⁸ Mullin recognized that his own role was sacrificial; the letters he wrote from imprisonment were signed

David Berkowitz was a twenty-three year old man who terrorized New York City for a period of thirteen months in 1976-77. He killed six people and wounded seven others in a series of eight attacks. Most of his victims were physically attractive young women. Men became targets only if they were accompanying the female victims. From the time of his military service, Berkowitz had begun to speak of using guns to create a "better world."²¹ As Berkowitz killed his victims he sought publicity for himself, and his efforts were richly rewarded by the "celebrity" status he attained. His acts were worthy of public acclaim because he was, in his own eyes, purifying the city of its corruptions and warning it of the "conspiracy of evil" with which it was afflicted. Berkowitz saw the evil in what he did and sometimes wondered whether he served God or Satan.²² But he persisted in his view of himself as the "Wicked King"-savior-prophet. At the time of his trial, he stunned the court by screaming at the mother of one of his victims: "Stacy was a whore!" and "I'd kill her again. I'd kill them all again."²³

In his jail cell, Berkowitz wrote statements in his best prophetic style, recasting himself repeatedly as the violent savior of a corrupted civilization:

I know who has whored and pimped. I know who has committed grevous [sic] sins and who has spit on their mother and father. Where is the great one who can cast me away into darkness? Where is his coming? I suppose that he likes me at my temporary place—in David the shit the filth. . . . I am he the Son of Sam who fears nothing. I destroy! I kill and stomp to pieces the people of earth in the name of that wretched. . . . Who is like the Son of Sam, me, a fallen angel who has come to kill and to establish the kingdom of terror and misery. . . . Who is Stacy who sells her soul for a penis? Let us make war with civilisation and destroy and cause terror.²⁴

The themes of violent redemption familiar from catastrophe films are linked here with the rhetoric of biblical apocalypse. The task of purifying the world

through violence provides a powerful justification for mass murder.

V

OUR suggestion that contemporary mass murderers and assassins attempt to act out the role of violent redeemer celebrated in the civil religion is consistent with the insights of Ernest Becker and Edmund Leach. Becker describes the "demonic" as a characteristic feature in modern mass society: "... the demonic comes into being for man whenever he is manipulated by large impersonal forces beyond his control; forces that he is actively and uncritically contributing to."²⁵ Although he has in view the evil caused by "fast and powerful, faceless organizations," the phenomenon is equally visible in individual actions such as those performed by Hinckley or Berkowitz. Taught by the culture to view the world in bi-polar terms, they place themselves in the role of the good superheroes who struggle against absolutely evil forces. Their actions, though viewed by others as socially destructive, result from the uncritical adaptation of the heroic models that are ubiquitous in modern American culture.

Edmund Leach has commented on the strange congruity between heroism and criminality. "Notice too," he writes, "that in the folk mythology of our age the divine heroes of comic strip, television, and cinema are James Bond-type characters who exult in their criminal violence while demonstrating a god-like invulnerability to all forms of mortal onslaught from others."²⁶ Although he is dealing primarily with ideologically motivated terrorists, Leach is aware of the wide reaching implications of the moral justifications that currently popular heroic models provide. Whereas crime may or may not be more prevalent today than in earlier times, "what seems new, at least so far as the modern Western world is concerned, is that such a high proportion of today's violent criminals should be political or religious fanatics who see themselves as potential martyrs in the cause of some highly bizarre and improbably political Utopia, and who certainly do not recognize themselves as criminal at all."²⁷ "In this context of politicised violence, hero, prophet, madman, criminal, have become totally confused."²⁸ He attempts to account for this confusion by suggesting that the fanatic and terrorist fail to share the beliefs of the social majority. Our conclusion differs from his in that we are convinced that the prevailing heroic models in the culture provide the justification for violent retribution, so that it is not so much a matter of lacking a single moral system as sharing a deeply flawed one. To speak as we have of mass murders and assassins as the saints of the American civil religion, is aimed at bringing the underlying flaws in the civil religion to light.

Notes

This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the April 2-3, 1982 Mid-West Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, (Rockford, Illinois). Although the voluminous testimony at the subsequent trial of John Hinckley amply supports the authors' thesis, none of this evidence has been incorporated into the present essay.

1. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1-21; *Idem*, *The Broken Covenant: American Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1975); *Idem* and Phillip E. Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980); Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Martin E. Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); *Idem*, *The Public Church: Mainline-Evangelical-Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel* (Englewood Cliffs:

Prentice-Hall, 1971); Phillip E. Hammond, "The Sociology of American Civil Religion: A Bibliographic Essay," *Sociological Analysis* 17 (1976): 169-82; Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Cushing Strout, *The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Catherine L. Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976); John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in the American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979).

2. The tradition was traced by Robert Jewett in *The Captain America Complex: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973); a revised edition of the volume will appear with Bear and Company, Sante Fe, in September, 1982.

3. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

4. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977).

5. Cf. John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1970); and also Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, "Mythic Conformity in the Cuckoo's Nest," *Psychocultural Review* 1 (1977): 68-76; "Beyond the Pornography of Violence," *Religion in Life* 46 (1977): 357-363; "Psychohistory of the Cinema," *The Journal of Psychohistory* 5 (1978): 512-20.

6. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, "Pop Fascism in *Star Wars*—or Vision of a Better World?" *Des Moines Register* (Sunday, November 27, 1977); "The Problem of Mythic Imperialism," *Journal of American Culture* 2 (1979): 309-320.

7. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, "Star Trek and the Bubble Gum Fallacy," *Television Quarterly* 14 (1977): 357-363; cf. also Frederick A. Kreuziger, *Apocalypse and Science Fiction: A Dialectic of Religious and Secular Soteriologies* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982).

8. Jewett and Lawrence, *Monomyth*, 23-39, p. 251.

9. "Text of Letter to Actress," *Des Moines Register* (March 30, 1981): 7a.

10. Philip Taubman, "Letters Hint Suspect Acted Out Fantasy," *New York Times* (April 1, 1981): 1.

11. "Hinckley Tape Shows a Lennon Obsession," *New York Times* (May 15, 1981).

12. Cf. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, "Hinckley's 'Werther Effect' Fantasy," *Des Moines Register* (Sunday, April 8, 1981).

13. "Is He Crazy About Her?" *New York Times* (October 12, 1981): 30.

14. Joseph B. Treaster, "Man, 23, Is Arrested in Manhattan For Threatening the President's Life," *New York Times* (April 8, 1981).

15. *Idem*.

16. Lawrence Zelic Freedman, "No, We're Not a Sick Society," *Chicago Tribune* (April 2, 1981).

17. Jane E. Brody, "Researchers Trace Key Factors," *New York Times* (April 1, 1981).

18. Donald Lunde, *Murder and Madness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 76.

19. *Ibid.*, 71.

20. *Idem*; cf. also Donald Lunde and Jefferson Morgan, *The Die Song* (New York: Playboy Paperbacks, 1981).

21. Larry Klausner, *Son of Sam* (New York: McGraw, 1980), p. 73.

22. *Ibid.*, 103, 131.

23. *New York Times* (May 23, 1978): 1.

24. Klausner, *Son of Sam*, Appendix.

25. Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil* (New York: Braziller, 1968), p. 142.

26. Edmund Leach, *Custom, Law and Terrorist Violence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977), p. 19.

27. *Ibid.*, 21.

28. *Ibid.*, 22.

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