Privatized Information Gathering: Just War Theory and Morality

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A pressing policy concern is the lax and haphazard way in which governments have privatized their own military services over the last decade. The simple fact that one can outsource does not always mean one should. Rather, each contract decision should be given due consideration and not be taken before a fully informed, risk-based assessment. At the higher decision-making levels the general practice of military service privatizing should be reexamined. Specifically, senior officials should critically evaluate the purported costs savings and overall implications of turning over essential military services to the private market.

—P. W. Singer¹

Contemporary conflict revolves around intelligence gathered and intelligence gathering. National security itself relies upon a nation's ability to gather intelligence about what combatants, or potential combatants, are doing and planning. Intelligence acquisition is thus clearly an issue now encompassed by the Just War tradition. With the increased use of privatized businesses within contemporary conflict, a new consideration must be addressed, as the opening passage from P. W. Singer indicates. Private businesses are now routinely used, at potentially quite a profit to those businesses, in national security endeavors, including intelligence acquisition. The influence of the introduction of business into the national security interest within the Just War tradition is the focus of the project. Here I argue that the use of private businesses to gather intelligence for the purposes of national security is a serious violation of principles developed in the Just War tradition and constitutes a serious moral wrong.

Two Principles from the Just War Tradition

Within the Just War tradition, various principles have been suggested as absolute. In Just Wars: From Cicero to Iraq, Alex Bellamy argues that two rules within the tradition should be understood as absolute: "the idea that actors are obliged to provide good reasons when they decide to wage war and the principle of noncombatant immunity."2 Intelligence and intelligence gathering are central to both proposed absolute rules. The Principle of Justification, that is, the requirement to provide good reasons to wage war, relies upon information about the actions of the combatant, or the potential combatant, which justifies the use of force on a large scale. Some of the information needed to justify waging war can only be gathered through careful work, relying upon specialized technology and expertise, for example, interpreting satellite photos, making certain inferences about what is occurring at a location based upon the composition of the location and materials entering the location, and so forth. Thus, the intelligence-gathering process and the intelligence gathered are both connected to the Principle of Justification, as intelligence is central to providing the content of the justification provided.

One difficulty must be immediately addressed. One might argue that intelligence gathering itself is not an act of war, but instead an action taken up before a war is initiated; thus, the application of principles of Just War would be premature and inappropriate and unjustified. However, the reasons for going to war are always connected to actions or policies preceding a war and are part of the waging of war itself. In addition, conceptual difficulties surround the definition of the beginning moment of a war. If a hostile nation invades another nation and the invaded nation takes defensive military action prior to the time when the national government can meet and declare the nation to be at war, it is clear that the war began prior to the moment at which the nations formally announced their relationship of being at war. When a nation begins gathering information with the understanding that certain kinds of information, if found, would likely constitute reasons for going to war, then the gathering of information itself becomes part of the activity of war, should war later occur. Thus, the principles of Just War, especially in terms of the Principle of Justification, are relevant to activities and policies relevant to the determination of going to war. Additionally, intelligence gathering is clearly a part of war and is included in wartime efforts. During any particular conflict, intelligence must be gathered and utilized for tactical decision making. Ultimately, intelligence gathered in determining whether to go to war is clearly relevant concerning the justness of a war. Intelligence gathered concerning the actions of individuals is used to determine whether that individual is a combatant. Even a minimal conception of human rights will establish boundaries concerning what can be justifiably known about a person without his or her knowledge. As the Just War tradition concerns issues related to human rights surrounding the activities of war, the application of Just War Theory is clearly appropriate.

The Principle of Justification

The status of each principle to be employed in investigating the use of private firms in gathering information must be addressed. The Principle of Justification should be conceived as an absolute principle. The Principle of Justification concerns providing justification for the waging of war; however, this does not mean only the act of declaring or going to war, but also how one wages war. In other words, what one does while involved in war must also be justified, or at least justifiable.³ Thus, intelligence gathering is clearly related to the Principle of Justification. Conceiving the Principle of Justification as absolute is not standard, as most principles are conceived in such a manner that exceptions to the principle are at least possible, if not likely. Thus, the absoluteness of this principle requires some careful attention.

Although a complete argument for the absoluteness of the principle cannot be provided here, a brief analysis can be provided. Bellamy argues for conceiving the principle as absolute, or the idea that the Principle of Justification can never be overridden by any other consideration, on both contractualist and utilitarian grounds. Bellamy states the contractualist argument in the following:

First, international society rests on the mutual recognition by states that they are bound by a common set of rules. Order in such a society rests on the mutual recognition of sovereignty and the Principle of Nonintervention. As such, all states have an interest in maintaining the international society that partly constitutes them. Of course, the Principle of Nonintervention has been repeatedly broken, but when states or other actors do so they feel obliged to offer special justifications.

It is necessary that they do, because failure to do so could undermine the legitimacy principles that together constitute international society.⁴

The contractualist aspect of the argument is that societies agree to be bound by these rules because it is in a society's long-term interest to agree to certain principles, for example, the Principle of Nonintervention. If the requirement for justification is not absolute and can be overridden, then the foundation for international society falls away. Thus, this rule must be absolute.

One aspect of the Principle of Justification that is important and which Bellamy does not address is that its status is a bit different than a substantive rule. The Principle of Justification functions as a metarule, or second-order rule, that stands above all others. If an individual decides to violate a rule for some reason, then that violation must be justified: That is, the reason for violating the rule must be morally sufficient. However, there is no way to provide a justification for violating the Principle of Justification. The Principle of Justification is more procedural in nature. Notice that the principle does not state what constitutes justification or what standards must be met for justification to have been provided. These standards themselves must be agreed upon, within a contractualist framework, as well. The lack of specific content is nonproblematic here for two reasons. First, the principle is procedural in nature and does not purport to be substantive. Providing the specific standards for justification would be the requirement of a substantive principle of justification, not a procedural one. Secondly, the standards of justification appear to fluctuate depending upon the action being considered. For example, justifying the use of military force against a military installation is very different than justifying the use of military force against a nonmilitary installation. Although both uses of force may be justifiable, the standards required to actually justify each will be different. Ultimately, the rule must be absolute because the process of justification cannot be overridden by any other consideration.

Second, Bellamy follows the argument provided by Jeremy Bentham when he "insisted that if political leaders were obliged to publicize their reasons for war, making them available for domestic and international scrutiny, they would be less able to wage patently unjust wars." This argument obviously needs to be much more fully fleshed out, as no standards for what constitutes a just war have yet been established; however the status of the Principle of Justification as absolute is the focus of the argument rather than the establish-

ment of such particular standards, as previously discussed. Bentham argues that due to the negative consequences, that is, patently unjust wars, of not providing reasons for waging war publicly, the principle should not only always be applied, but the results should always be publicly available. The public availability of the results is an important contribution to the status of the principle as absolute. If the results of the reasoning process must be publicly available—that is, the reasons ultimately found most compelling are opened to public scrutiny—then the reasoning process cannot be breached for any reason. If the reasoning process were breached, then there would be nothing to be made publicly available to be scrutinized. Thus, the Principle of Justification must be absolute.

Bellamy is right to insist that the Principle of Justification be absolute. Importantly, by including both contractual and utilitarian considerations, Bellamy's argument has a broader and stronger theoretic foundation. The requirement to provide justification for one's actions is the very foundation for accountability, whether that accountability be moral or political, internal or external. Part of the justification for war includes the methods to be used in the war, including both who gathers the necessary intelligence and how the intelligence is gathered. Thus, the use of privatized firms to gather intelligence would have to be justified and, following Bentham, would have to be made publicly available.

The Principle of Noncombatant Immunity

Bellamy argues that the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity should also be conceived as an absolute principle. Establishing the absoluteness of this principle is more difficult than establishing the absoluteness of the Principle of Justification. The difficulty is caused partly by the difference in the nature of the two principles. While the Principle of Justification is procedural, the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity is clearly substantive in nature. The intelligence gathering begins before it is clear which individuals are combatants and which are noncombatants. Since information is necessary to even provide the justification for war before there are any combatants, the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity also seems to have a special place, as it determines whether an individual can be placed in the category of individuals upon whom an act of war can be justifiably perpetrated. Although the principle does not appear to stand as a metarule in quite the same way as the Principle of Justification,

it clearly has a special significance that needs to be acknowledged; however, precisely how to characterize this special significance is not clear. Intuitively, the rule appears to have a special moral significance, but that is an issue beyond the scope of the present project.

Colm McKeough nicely articulates the importance of noncombatant immunity when he identifies seven ways in which the principle is important. The ways are as follows: (1) noncombatants have committed no wrong; (2) noncombatants are not participating in the fighting; (3) noncombatants are unable to defend themselves; (4) the killing of noncombatants is not militarily necessary; (5) upholding noncombatant immunity reduces casualties; (6) sparing the lives of women, children, and those who perform essential peacetime duties is necessary for the survival of the species; and (7) the laws of war prohibit the killing of noncombatants. Noncombatant immunity is of ultimate importance given all that is connected to the idea and upholding it. Importantly, its significance, be it moral or otherwise, does not entail absoluteness. Absoluteness concerns the status of the principle in relation to other legitimate principles, while significance helps to establish the legitimacy of the principle itself.

Bellamy follows Michael Walzer in holding that the absoluteness of the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity is connected to an individual's right to life and liberty. As Walzer states, "a legitimate act of war is one that does not violate the rights of the people against whom it is directed . . . [and] no one can be threatened with war or warred against, unless through some act of his own he has surrendered or lost his rights" to life and liberty. 10 Bellamy is right to follow Walzer here. The importance of the right to life and liberty is one that spans various philosophical and theoretical traditions.¹¹ The aforementioned contractualist and utilitarian traditions admit these rights, as do the deontological tradition and various religious traditions. 12 Although common assent and even universality does not entail absoluteness, as popular beliefs can be false, and a universal rule could still be overridden, they do point out the significance of the rights upon which noncombatant immunity is built.¹³ Given the importance of the right to life, as it is the foundation for all other rights, unless an individual has willingly given up that right by freely joining in war, the right to life must be respected absolutely by preserving the immunity of noncombatants.¹⁴ If the right to life is not considered absolute, then another right could override it in any particular situation. Since without this right being respected one could have no other rights, the right to life must be considered absolute.

Private Companies and the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity

The difficulties of fulfilling the requirements of the second proposed absolute principle emerge clearly. Noncombatants are to remain immune from a just war, and since intelligence gathering is an activity that is considered a part of war, noncombatants are to remain immune from such activity; however, as an activity that is part of justifying war itself and an activity that can determine whether an individual is a combatant, intelligence gathering appears to be a necessary breach of noncombatant immunity for prudential reasons. Ultimately, vagueness seems inextricably caught up in the issue of what to do to determine who constitutes the combatants and who constitutes the noncombatants. Intelligence gathering and information are central in making these determinations, but information should not be gathered on noncombatants to uphold the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity, unless perhaps an exception exists to allow the gathering of information about individuals to establish that they constitute noncombatants. A practical dilemma clearly exists. To further complicate the terrain, the individuals who are under surveillance may not even be aware that the work they are doing is part of a war-related project. For example, a chemist may not be aware that his work is a part of a chemical warfare project. Even if the chemist's work is not part of an organized war-related project, his or her work could be used for such a project. In such a situation, it is feasible to think that she could be under surveillance for security purposes. Thus, the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity can pose a difficulty for intelligence-gathering entities due to the difficulty of determining which individuals are combatants and which are not. If we accept the absoluteness of the principle of noncombatant immunity, then intelligence acquisition requires a closer investigation. The closer look entails investigating the significance of privatizing intelligence gathering itself.

Ultimately, the differences between private businesses and governments gathering intelligence reveal that a violation of the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity is more likely, and even encouraged, by the pressures and principles of business. The pressure to deliver a product, in this case intelligence, is different if one works for a profit-driven private company than if one works for a government agency concerned with national security. Governments clearly have economic concerns, but the issues are not about profit margins as they are for

businesses. For a business, if it does not deliver the product, then the business fails. In the realm of intelligence, if a government is gathering information, the goals will be a bit different. The government is concerned with getting the information right in a way that the business is not. Although the business may want to get the information right for business reasons, for example, to gain future contracts, the accuracy of the information is not an end in itself as it would be for a government, but merely a means to another end, namely profit.

Before a reader thinks that intelligence gathering does not affect him or her, consider the "no-fly list" and how one finds out she is on that list. In "Ensnared by Error on Growing U.S. Watch List, with No Way Out," Mike McIntire reports on various individuals, including U.S. citizens with no ties to terrorist organizations or foreign governments, who have been placed on the list and found out only when they were detained at various airports. The story reports not only about how individuals are affected by being on the list but the lack of recourse individuals have due to the amount of secrecy maintained by the government. One short passage in the story makes reference to the use of private firms, but it illustrates the problem nicely, as McIntire describes a woman who found out she was on the list only after she was detained and handcuffed at an airport, by saying the following:

Ms Ibrahim's case has also raised legal questions about detaining people whose names appear on the no-fly list, and it casts light on the role of private contractors in deciding whether someone should be held. The police in San Francisco said they had acted on the instructions of a contractor working for the Homeland Security Department.¹⁶

This story, in combination with the quotation from Russell E. Travers, deputy director of the National Counterterrorism Center, provides an alarming picture. Travers states, "The entire federal government is leaning very far forward on putting people on lists . . . [and] I never had anybody tell me that the list was too small. . . . It's getting bigger, and it will get even bigger." The accuracy of information is clearly not the concern here, although that too raises problems, but the focus of the intelligence-gathering activity which concerns us. Private companies under contract with the government gather information about noncombatants for the purpose of maintaining and expanding a no-fly list. The intelligence gathering in this case seems to violate the rule of noncombatant immunity, even when we recognize the vagueness and conceptual difficulty of applying the rule.

Markets and Morality

The secondary emphasis upon the accuracy of the information gathered becomes evident due to the willingness of private companies to work for the highest bidder, not necessarily any particular government. Although private firms have suggested that they work closely with their home countries, so they know which countries they should and should not be working with, this suggestion leaves out important market-related points. Companies may be willing to work closely with their home countries, not so that they are aware of which countries are considered by the home government as good candidates for work relationships, but to try to influence their home country's policies concerning international business relations. P. W. Singer points out the following concerning the actions of Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI):

In fact, sometimes the firm's influence is enough to wear down its home government's objections over time and overcome the original normative concerns. . . . [Consider] MPRI's two-year lobbying effort to work with the military dictatorship of Equatorial Guinea. Ultimately the fear of an American [private military firm] losing a contract to a foreign firm overcame the relevant policy desks' concerns over aiding a repressive dictatorship allied with foes of the United States. 18

Thus, the very existence of these companies is affecting policy decisions in often unknown ways. Such policy influence is a clear violation of the notion of public scrutiny discussed earlier. Importantly, the policy decision was made only because of profit considerations that would not exist if such private military firms were not in existence and being utilized by governments.

An important objection must be addressed at this point. Companies, including private military firms, rely upon the idea that market forces will regulate actions to prevent serious wrongdoing. Companies "dismiss accusations that they would work for 'rogue' governments, prolong conflicts for financial gain, work for two warring parties simultaneously, or commit heinous human rights abuses, by referring to the constraints of the market." Although one need only look to a myriad of business scandals to see the difficulty with maintaining this position, for example, Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, and so forth, a clear example of how market forces do not constrain the behavior of private military firms is available from operations in Zaire/Congo. Consider the following passage concerning the firm Executive Outcomes (EO):

In 1997, the director of EO stated explicitly that the firm would not work for the Mobutu government, since Zaire was supporting hostile acts against Angola, its employer at the time, and that the Mobutu regime of Zaire was, in his words, 'politically suspect.' However, despite his public stance, the firm is, in fact, reported to have contacted President Mobutu for work. By the time the Mobutu regime fell, several military firms found themselves working for both sides of the conflict, including EO, Stabilco, and Omega Support Ltd.²⁰

The pressure to be profitable pushes these firms to not be concerned about whom they work for, and the market pressures do not provide the necessary guidance here. The market forces seem to be pushing such companies to actually work for governments with unjust policies, or to work for both sides of a conflict. Although the conflict of interest in doing so is obvious, the conflict is apparently not amenable to correction by market forces either. Thus, relying upon market forces to ameliorate wrongdoing is not sufficient.

Additionally, the wrongdoing is not only at the larger corporate level, but at an individual level as well. The pressure for profitability and the emphasis on seeing one's duty as primarily directed toward maximizing production frequently causes employees of private businesses to violate ethical principles, and even laws, as we have seen in recent cases involving banking and finance. The problem is certainly not removed if a company is publicly traded due to pressure from and commitment to shareholders. Even if one accepts triple bottom-line reporting for a business in which a business's success is measured in terms of economic, environmental, and ethical standards, the dominant perception remains that when there is a conflict between the standards, priority is usually given to economic considerations. From a business point of view, the justification is that without economic success, there will be no business to conform to environmental and ethical standards. Thus, economics comes first.

The pressure to make a profit fundamentally changes the goals of intelligence gathering. Governments are concerned about not only the intelligence they gather, but upholding various international laws and relations in a manner that a business is not. Whereas a government has pressure to uphold international laws and human rights, a business has a direct economic incentive to disregard these if it is helpful to gather more information to increase profitability. Although the details are different due to the differences in duties performed, these problems are evident in the Blackwater situation. If a firm is working for a government who does not like international

law and is not concerned about international treaties, then the firm will have even less incentive to respect such laws. When you combine the added pressure of profitability and remove the pressure to uphold international relations that a government has, then you have a situation in which violations are more likely to occur.

Additionally, these private firms often act outside the realm of public oversight in which governments act. The significance of this should not be underestimated. When governments act in the public realm they are committed to the action in a way that entails a level of responsibility, not necessarily due to moral qualities of leaders, but because of calls for accountability from citizens and other nations. When a company, or an individual, is able to act outside of that realm, then that level of commitment and the feeling of responsibility declines. When individuals are allowed to do things with less oversight, then the possibility for wrongdoing increases. By contracting out intelligence gathering, governments are removing a significant level of oversight that occurs when governments themselves are doing the intelligence gathering. The immunity of noncombatants is more likely to be violated by individuals who lack oversight, as they do not feel the commitment to follow the rules of just warfare. Thus, even if one does not accept the absoluteness of noncombatant immunity but does accept the principle as prima facie, then one can still see that violations of the principle are more likely to occur if private firms are contracted by governments to gather intelligence.

One might argue that the governments are still responsible for how information is gathered if a private firm is contracted, as the government provides the oversight and, thus, is responsible for what the firm does. This may be true, but it is easier for the government to distance itself from any wrongdoing and even tacitly, or actively, encourage wrongdoing depending upon how they do or do not punish such breaches of noncombatant immunity. A company could widely violate noncombatant immunity by gathering information on large groups of people with no connection to any war efforts, and the government could claim ignorance and provide little if any punishment for the company. With the variation of international laws and privacy laws, it is unlikely that appeals to those protections will be effective, as is evident by the need for principles of Just War themselves.

Finally, one particular difference is that the methods of evaluation will be markedly different for individuals who work for a business and those who work for a government, especially as one

moves up the organizational chain of command. The evaluation of governmental employees will certainly focus on productivity, but as governments are not for-profit entities, that part of the evaluative equation disappears. Persons promoted to executive levels of private businesses face intense pressure to deliver profits, whether to shareholders or the proprietor(s), and to ignore ethical principles. Failing to do these things can result in unemployment due to poor production. If the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity is absolute, then allowing private companies to gather information is a clear violation of morality, since executives and others involved in for-profit intelligence gathering will see the principle as overridden by economic considerations, even if they employ triple bottom-line reporting, as previously stated.

However, one might object to the idea that the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity is absolute based upon prudential and pragmatic considerations. After all, it seems that intelligence must be gathered about some individuals to determine whether they are combatants. One need only look to antiterror efforts for such cases. If an individual who is researched by intelligence gatherers turns out to be a terrorist with plans to engage in acts of terrorism, then the intelligence that has been gathered can be used to establish that the individual is a combatant; hence, the intelligence gathering can be justified given the results. Even if the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity is merely prima facie, when an executive or company overrides the principle to increase profit, a serious moral violation occurs, since financial profit is not sufficient reason for overriding a prima facie Principle of Noncombatant Immunity. Learning that an individual is a terrorist can constitute a justification of the violation of the principle, but deciding that the violation is necessary for the sake of profit cannot be justified. One need only remember that the foundations for noncombatant immunity are the values of life and liberty. Any justification for overriding the principle must be based on either claims to the values of life and liberty, or on values at least as important. Although profit is undoubtedly important in the modern business world, its importance remains less than that of life and liberty.

Thus, the use of private businesses to gather intelligence for the purposes of national security is a serious violation of the Just War tradition and constitutes a serious moral wrong. The moral violation is clear, as noncombatant immunity is based upon the rights to life and liberty, while private businesses subjugate the claims of life and

liberty to the value of profit. Although the moral violation is more apparent if the Principle of Noncombatant Immunity is an absolute principle, even if the principle is prima facie, the moral violation is serious, as the same subjugation occurs. Ultimately, any morally defensible intelligence gathering must be done by governments and governmental agencies and not by private businesses.

Notes

- 1. P. W. Singer, Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 235.
- 2. Alex Bellamy, Just Wars: From Cicero to Iraq (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 117.
- 3. The ideas here concerning justification are highly influenced by the work of John Rawls. For the classical discussion of his views on public justification, see A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), revised edition printed in 1999. Additionally, for a concise and expanded version of Rawls's views, I highly recommend Justice as Fairness: A Restatement (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).
 - 4. Bellamy, Just Wars, 131.
- 5. The purely procedural moral framework provided by Jürgen Habermas provides a model for how a procedural account of justification can be provided and how such an account relies upon particular content and does not abstract from that content. See *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).
 - 6. Bellamy, Just Wars, 131.
- 7. The ability to draw upon multiple foundational theoretical accounts to support a position is an important strength. The convergence of the various approaches upon a single conclusion is the focus here, not the adequacy or inadequacy of any particular theoretical approach.
- 8. The requirement of public availability is also supported in the very notion of justification as conceived here following that of John Rawls. See *Justice as Fairness*, 26–38.
- 9. Colm McKeough, Innocent Civilians: The Morality of Killing in War (London: Palgrave, 2002), 7–11.
- 10. Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars: A Philosophical Argument with Historical Illustrations (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 135.
- 11. The work of J. S. Mill has most influenced my ideas concerning personal liberty. See J. S. Mill, On Liberty (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978).

- 12. I obviously cannot provide a defense of the foundation, or foundations, of human rights here; however, the fact that the notion of human rights is upheld by various traditions, including the rights to life and liberty, in combination with the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," including these specific rights in Article 3, makes the assertion of these rights relatively noncontroversial. This is not to say that a more complete defense is not important or cannot be given, but only to say that it is not needed here.
- 13. A universal rule is simply a rule that applies to everyone and applies to everyone equally.
- 14. Importantly, the notion of the "right to life" here is significantly different than the concept given the same name in the abortion debate. The right to life here applies only to actual persons and not potential persons. Whether a fetus is an actual person may be debatable, but even if one holds that a fetus is an actual person (which I do not), that a fetus is a noncombatant is obvious.
- 15. Mike McIntire, "Ensnared by Error on Growing U.S. Watch List, with No Way Out," New York Times, 7 April 7 2010, National Section, Washington Edition.
- 16. McIntire, "Ensnared by Error on Growing U.S. Watch List," National Section.
- 17. Russell E. Travers, quoted in McIntire, "Ensnared by Error on Growing U.S. Watch List," National Section.
 - 18. Singer, Corporate Warriors, 223.
- 19. Patrick J. Cullen, "Keeping the New Dog of War on a Tight Lease," Conflict Trends, no. 6 (July 2000), http://www.accord.org.za/publications/ct6/issue6.htm (accessed 7 March 2009).
 - 20. Singer, Corporate Warriors, 224.

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