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THEY SAID IT

But perhaps the notablest god we hear tell-of is one of whom Grimm the German etymologist finds trace: the god Wunsch, or wish. The god Wish; who could give us all that we wished! Is not this the sincerest and yet rudest voice of the spirit of man? The rudest ideal that man ever formed; which still shows itself in the latest forms of our spiritual culture. Higher considerations have to teach us that the god Wish is not the true God.

Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, 1841.

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THE MADNESS OF CROWDS.

Back in the 1950s, the annual Fourth of July carnival in Clear Lake, Iowa's town park always included a Native American who sold some sort of elixir for (as I remember it) a dollar a bottle that was suppose to cure all sorts of ills ranging from gout, to intestinal tumors, to headaches, depression, diarrhea, insomnia, hemorrhoids, bad breath, and sore feet.

He was a familiar figure in Clear Lake in those days, referred to by one and all as "the old Indian," as in, "the old Indian is back." He was also a gifted speaker and never failed to attract a large audience. He told stories, spoke of tribal customs, offered medical and dietary advice, and, to the delight of the kids in the crowd, he would hold a Gila Monster in his hand while explaining the dire consequences that would result if this venomous creature were to bite him. The Gila Monster's role, I've since learned, was to bring people closer to the stage so they would be more apt to make a purchase at the end of the performance.

Each show was a battle between the common sense of the individuals in the crowd and "the old Indian's" ability to the make the incredulous credulous, which he routinely did. It was never all that clear whether the line of people waiting to buy a bottle of his cure-all after each show was a testimony to his rhetorical skills, to the naiveté of the audience, or to the fact that the elixir had a high alcohol content. In any case, in 1962, largely as a result of the Thalidomide disaster, the government began to place restrictions on the sale and content of medicines and the "old Indian" disappeared from the Fourth of July scene in Clear Lake.

Now, it is probably safe to say that this fellow's enterprise hurt no one. To the degree that there was any danger involved, it was that someone might use the Indian's elixir in lieu of an efficacious remedy, such as seeking professional help or perhaps practicing the famous proclamation chiseled above the door at

Delphi, “Nothing in Excess.” But the fact is that any significant harm was unlikely, given that the “old Indian” came to town but once a year. And this brings me to the point of the story, which is that Barack Obama and John McCain are, in our opinion, engaged in the same trade as the “old Indian,” except their potential for doing lasting harm is significantly greater.

The old Indian sold a few bottles of snake oil and then moved on, leaving the citizens of each little town behind to reestablish their link with reality, which had been temporarily severed by the excitement of the Indian’s compelling recital. Barack and John, on the other hand, sell their wares 24-7. They never let up, never leave town, never quit the stage, and never give the bumpkins time to allow reason to intercede on the behalf of common sense.

The result is that Americans are lining up by the millions to buy snake oil from these two hucksters, enchanted by the promise of a marvelous cure-all for everything from the routine problems of everyday life to the aching fear that inevitably accompanies the realization that one’s happiness is dependent on the kindness of strangers in Washington.

One wonders how thrilled Jean-Jacque Rousseau would be if he could witness vast numbers of Americans, who consider themselves to be among the most sophisticated members of the human species, rallying around his nonsensical and heretical claim that bad government is the root cause of mankind’s ills and reform of bad government is the cure-all for these ills.

In our opinion, if, as Barack Obama claims, “the audacity of hope” is the answer to this nation’s problems, then the hope must be that the ship of state, thanks to the genius of those who built it and despite years of slipshod maintenance and unwise changes in design, is still sufficiently strong to survive the coming storms even with a captain at the helm who appears to know little about the dangers extant in the sea in which he sails.

Yes, you heard right. We did say “coming storms.” Are there not always storms ahead? Is navigating through these storms not the primary responsibility of the

ship’s captain? And have not both of the candidates for the job of captain provided strong indications that they are clueless as to the nature of the turbulence they face?

One candidate seeks the love of the common people by playing the role of Robin Hood, proposing to take billions from “those who don’t need it” and giving it to “the poor.” Schemes like this used to be called “high stakes gambling with the law of unintended consequences.” The other candidate wants to establish a giant, new federal bureaucracy to suck trillions of dollars out the economy in the form of something called “carbon credits” and then distribute these funds to groups and individuals dedicated to the curtailment of something called “global warming,” which used to be called “better weather.”

Both promise balanced budgets, fast automobiles that run on cheap electricity, peace in our time, free medical care, cheaper drugs for the elderly, and scads of new federal subsidies designed to promote home ownership, savings, a cleaner environment, better educated children, great supplies of abundant and clean energy, and grand improvements in the nation’s infrastructure. Coleridge’s opium-induced hallucinations were more eloquently presented than the whimsy of these two, but they were no more fantastic. “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan A stately pleasure-dome decree.”

In the meantime, the federal debt is approaching \$10 trillion and increasing at the rate of \$1.37 billion per day; tax receipts are shrinking while federal spending and borrowing are growing like Topsy; the first of the baby boomers are about to retire putting new pressures on the Social Security trust fund, which is nothing but IOUs anyway; Medicare is facing bankruptcy; there is no inclination by members of either party to do anything whatsoever about out-of-control federal spending; and the polar bears are eating the baby seals.

Now we are not going to analyze the nature of the fiscal storms that the new captain will face nor, for that matter, the geopolitical ones, some of which have the potential for making Katrina look like an

afternoon shower. We have written on both subjects numerous times over the years and both are familiar to anyone paying attention, with the apparent exception of Barack and John.

Our concern this week is the reaction of the crowd when reality intervenes, as it always does; when the public realizes that neither of these guys is any more of a miracle worker than the “old Indian” was; that neither has any more idea how to turn the federal government into a purveyor of happiness and a cure-all for the aches and pains of daily life than the last bunch of political hucksters that came through town.

This isn't a new phenomenon, of course. Post-election letdowns are a commonplace among fans of the political winners. And they always get over their disappointment, just as the people did who shelled out a buck for a bottle of “the old Indian's” elixir only to learn that it had no affect on their corns.

But it seems to us that the rubes have exceptionally high expectations this time around, particularly those who are lining up at Barack's tent, which should come as no surprise given that his rhetorical skills are clearly far superior to those of the average huckster.

Indeed, when one hears of the incidents of fainting in the audiences when he speaks and reads some of the over-the-top statements by his friends and followers about his near-divine attributes, one thinks of the 18th century preacher George Whitefield, whose oratorical powers were said to be so great that he could reduce listeners to tears by simply uttering the word “Mesopotamia,” and about whom Dr. Johnson once said he “would be followed by crowds were he to wear a nightcap in the pulpit, or were he to preach from a tree.”

Certainly, Jesse Jackson Jr. would join a crowd to hear Barack speak from a tree. On the night that it became clear that Barack had won Democratic Party's nomination, young Jackson said that he “cried all night” and would be “crying for the next four years.” “What Barack Obama has accomplished,” he said, “is the single most extraordinary event that has occurred

in the 232 years of the nation's political history...the event itself is so extraordinary that another chapter could be added to the Bible to chronicle its significance.”

Not to be outdone in the realm of hero-worship, Obama's friend Louis Farrakhan described him as “the hope of the entire world,” Maryland Congressman Elijah Cummings noted that his candidacy is “not a campaign for President of the United States” but is instead “a movement to change the world,” and Spike Lee last week noted that Barack's election would mark “a new day” for the United States. Spike added that “It's going to be before Obama, ‘B.B.,’ and after Obama – ‘A.B.’ – and some folks need to get used to this.”

Then, of course, there is Mark Morford, the award-winning columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* whose expectations for Obama appear to be based on the belief that he has qualities that transcend mere humanity.

Many spiritually advanced people I know (not coveringly religious, mind you, but deeply spiritual) identify Obama as a Lightworker, that rare kind of attuned being who has the ability to lead us not merely to new foreign policies or health care plans or whatnot, but who can actually help usher in a new way of being on the planet, of relating and connecting and engaging with this bizarre earthly experiment. These kinds of people actually help us evolve. They are philosophers and peacemakers of a very high order, and they speak not just to reason or emotion, but to the soul.

The unusual thing is, true Lightworkers almost never appear on such a brutal, spiritually demeaning stage as national politics. This is why Obama is so rare. And this is why he is so often compared to Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., to those leaders in our culture whose stirring vibrations still resonate throughout our short history.

Now, under normal circumstances, this would not be a cause for concern. Politicians have friends, fans, and followers, and they get angry when their guy loses, or when he wins and is criticized for his performance. But this rarely gets too personal or too socially disruptive.

But then, not only has America never had a genuine “Lightworker” on the ticket before, it has never had a “Lightworker” whose divine image was reinforced by minority status. Which leads us to wonder whether their anger will be greater, and the social reaction more disruptive, if he loses in November, or if he wins and, during his presidency comes under the kind of intense criticism that every president before him has undergone.

And will this anger at those who stand in the way of the “Lightworker’s” “mission” be fueled by charges of racism? After all, Obama himself said last week that he anticipates Republican to use racist tactics against him. “They’re going to try to make you afraid of me . . . He’s young and inexperienced and he’s got a funny name. And did I mention he’s black?” So one might be forgiven for believing that it is just a matter of time before he or some member of his fan club finds a reason to say “We told you so.”

THE PARANOID STYLE, REDUX.

Congressman Dennis Kucinich is a fun kind of guy – at least he is for political analysts such as we. He’s nuts, you know. Crazy as a peach-orchard boar, if you know what we mean. He claims to have seen a UFO on at least one occasion and discusses it openly. Back in October 2001, just a month after 9/11, he introduced a bill called the “Space Preservation Act of 2001,” which, among other things, sought to block the federal government from acquiring and using space-based “mind-control” devices, or to put it more explicitly, to prevent the use of weapons which “through the use of land-based, sea-based, or space-based systems using radiation, electromagnetic, psychotronic, sonic, laser, or other energies directed

at individual persons or targeted populations for the purpose of information war, mood management, or mind control of such persons or populations . . . ”

Kucinich is also something of a cult figure in the Democratic Party. He has competed (and we use that term loosely) for the party’s presidential nomination in each of the last two primary election cycles, running as an overtly and unabashedly anti-war candidate and promising, among other things, to abolish the Department of Defense and replace it with a “Department of Peace.” He has lead the Congressional charge against the Bush administration and the war on terror, most recently introducing 35 articles of impeachment against the president (read into the Congressional record over a span of four hours, just over two weeks ago). In short, he is a celebrity politician and a hero to many on the left, teased for his eccentricity, but lauded for his dedication and his perseverance.

Most political observers – left, right, and otherwise – consider Kucinich harmless. And, to be honest, he is. He’s a squeaky, little goofball from Ohio, who is about as much of threat to anyone or anything as are the mind control rays he fears the government is building.

Unfortunately, while Kucinich himself is harmless, the socio-political trends that he represents are not. Indeed, Dennis Kucinich is, in many ways, the personification of much that is wrong with Western society in general and with contemporary American political thought in particular. Until now, the invidiousness of the social and political thought typified by Kucinich has bubbled just below the surface of society, occasionally attracting a stray glance or a note of concern, but by and large remaining out of sight. Over the next six to twelve months, however, that could conceivably change, with pent up emotion, irrationality, and fear boiling over and further disrupting an already distressed nation.

Let us explain.

Roughly fifteen years ago, FOPF (Friend of the Political Forum) Daniel Pipes, an expert on Islam and the founder and director of The Middle East

Forum, began seriously discussing and writing about conspiracy theories and the conspiratorial mindset and their impact on Western society. To the best of our recollection, his original work was done on behalf of one or another government intelligence agency (to which both he and his father, the historian Richard Pipes, have contributed tremendously) and culminated in two books, the most comprehensive of which is *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, published a little over a decade ago.

In various pieces over the years, Dr. Pipes has identified both the two principle varieties of conspiracy theories and the two groups that are likely to be susceptible to conspiracy mongering. The following passage comes from a 1995 *Wall Street Journal* article written by Pipes. It describes the basic makeup of Western conspiratorial thought:

The West hosts two main conspiracy theories: one, mainly right-wing, fears that Jews seek world hegemony; the other, mainly left-wing, worries about secret societies such as the Jesuits and the Freemasons. Each of these phobias, in its furthest, most murky reaches, goes back to the Crusades....

This second passage comes from a 2004 book review written by Pipes and identifies those most prone to conspiracy theories:

The politically disaffected: blacks (Louis Farrakhan, Cynthia McKinney), the hard right (John Birch Society, Pat Buchanan), and other alienated elements (Ross Perot, Lyndon LaRouche). Their theories imply a political agenda but lack much of a following.

The culturally suspicious: these include “Kennedy assassinologists,” “ufologists,” and those who believe a reptilian race runs the earth and alien installations exist under the earth’s surface. Such themes enjoy enormous

popularity (a year 2000 poll found 43 percent of Americans believing in UFOs) but carry no political agenda.

We should note for the record that Pipes has written that he believes that the power and influence of conspiracy theories are on the wane, particularly in the United States. The trauma of World War II and the Nazi and Stalinist murders of tens of millions were enough, he has argued, to inoculate Western democracies against conspiratorial theorizing. “Voters and politicians in democratic countries no longer act on the basis conspiratorial beliefs;” he wrote in 1995, “the core is solid.”

We wish we could agree. But we don’t. The political madness of the last eight years has left us with the sense that this purportedly mature democracy is not quite as stable as Pipes argues and may be headed for tough times over the short-to-medium term.

For starters, we worry that the two subsets of conspiracy mongers noted above might actually be moving toward and allying with one another. Indeed, one of the reasons that we are thusly concerned is because of Pipes himself, who in 2004, wrote about and reviewed a book by Syracuse professor Michael Barkun, which discusses just this development. In that book, *Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Barkun discusses the spike in activity, in cross-affiliation, and in the mainstreaming of these conspiratorial schools of thought.

It is in the context, then, that Dennis Kucinich becomes a little less “harmless” and a little more troublesome. Kucinich is, on the one hand, your run of the mill UFO-seeing, mind-control-wave-fearing nut. But on the other, he is the guy who thinks that President Bush and Vice President Cheney have conspired to undermine the government of the United States, to take the nation needlessly to war, and to generally screw-up the world to suit their own personal and political ends. And he has introduced articles of impeachment in the United States House of Representatives alleging as much. If ever one man served as proof-positive of a political scientist’s theory, Kucinich does so for Barkun.

It seems a little strange to us that Dr. Pipes is not more concerned about the mainstreaming and merging of these streams of conspiracy thought. After all, one of the most prominent, widespread, and invidious conspiracy theories of our times not only echoes the great conspiracies of the past, but also includes him among the conspirators.

As we have discussed in article after article in these pages, the opposition to President Bush and to his administration's efforts to stem the tide of radical Islam has bordered on madness for years now. Frighteningly, though, this madness is anything but harmless and reflects both the historic conspiratorial fear of Jews and the blurring of lines between leftist and right-wing conspiracy theorists. While it is true that a handful of those who have advised and/or supported the Bush administration in its efforts have intellectual roots that may be called "neoconservative," a great many more do not and, in many ways, that term "neocon" has become code over the last seven years for "Jews," those who are controlled by Jews, or those who put the needs and interests of the Jews (mainly in Israel) ahead of those of the United States.

Right-wing nuts and anti-Semites like Pat Buchanan, David Duke, and others have long feared and railed against the "neocons" and the "Straussians," whom they have accused of dual loyalty, at the very minimum. Since 9/11, the ranks of the neocon-haters and enemies of the so-called "Israel-lobby" have swelled, reinforced by various isolationists, neo-Marxists, leftists, and even mainstream Democrats and media types, all of whom joined the effort to identify and "out" the neocons who have taken the nation down the proverbial road to ruin.

Anyone associated with neoconservative thought, with opposition to radical Islam, with support for a military solution to the problem of Islamist terrorism, or who happens to be Jewish and conservative has been singled out and charged with being part of a vast conspiracy to undermine the United States and to carry water for the "Zionists." And this includes Daniel Pipes, who has been repeatedly disparaged and defamed for having the gall to study Islam and discuss it honestly, all the while being Jewish.

What concerns us most, we guess, is that we see this tendency to believe in malevolent forces that are unjustly and furtively controlling circumstances in this country as escalating. The Bush administration has been an enormous magnet for conspiracy theories since Day One. Before it, actually. The mess with butterfly and punch-card ballots in Florida was exacerbated by false but well circulated urban legends about black voters being sent intentionally sent to the wrong polling stations and state law enforcement (under the direction, naturally, of Florida Governor Jeb Bush) unjustly detaining or turning black voters away from the polls. And it has been downhill ever since.

To those looking for them, the entire first Bush term was one conspiracy after another, from Florida to the "demolition" of the Twin Towers; from the aforementioned Jewish cabal to the Halliburton fix in Iraq; from forgeries about yellow cake uranium in Africa to rigged Diebold voting machines in Ohio. The conspiracy-mongering hit its apex, though, just a few months into Bush's second term, in September 2005, with the Hurricane Katrina debacle. Since Katrina, there has been a significant segment of the population that has been willing to believe almost anything about Bush, Cheney, and anyone else connected to the administration. And it's likely to get worse.

A large part of the problem here is that the type of thinking that fosters a susceptibility to conspiracy theories is not merely tolerated by today's educational establishment, but is actively encouraged, held up as the ideal, the very height of educational success. America's schools are incapable of turning out graduates who can write a coherent sentence, make change, or find Florida on a map, yet they excel at producing students who are purportedly "creative", who "think outside the box," and who "question authority" or "convention."

The author, editor, and publisher Roger Kimball argued recently that this fetishization of contrariness has not only replaced the actual formation of minds and the development of students able to

think rationally and constructively but has become the predominant, if not the sole, objective of the educational establishment. He wrote:

What we are dealing with here is an educational watchword, not to say a cliché, that has roots in some of the Enlightenment values that Kant espoused. It's a voracious, quick-growing hybrid. A search for the phrase "critical thinking" using the Google search engine brings up 2,290,200 references in .08 seconds. The first match, God help us, is to something called "The Critical Thinking Community," whose goal is "to promote essential change in education and society through the cultivation of fair-minded critical thinking." (Why is it, I wonder, that the conjunction of the phrase "critical thinking" with the word "community" is so reliably productive of nausea?)

Everywhere you look, in fact, you will find the virtues of "critical thinking" extolled: Colleges and universities claim to be stuffed with the thing, and even high schools – even, *mirabile dictu*, primary schools – brag about instilling the principles of "critical thinking" in their charges. There's "critical thinking" for bankers, for accountants, for cooks, gardeners, haberdashers, and even advanced toddlers. A couple of summers ago, my wife and I took our son, then 5 years old, to an orientation meeting for parents considering sending their children to a local kindergarten. School officials enthusiastically told us about how they would bring the principles of critical thinking to Sally's play pen and little Johnnie's sport. Absolutely everyone is enjoined to scrutinize his presuppositions, reject conventional thinking, and above all, to be original and/or "creative."

(Ponder, if your stomach is strong enough, a "Creative Critical Thinking Community.")

To some extent, we owe the infestation of "critical thinking" to that great twentieth-century movement to empty minds while at the same time inflating the sense of self-importance, or, to give it its usual name, Progressive Education. It was John Dewey, after all, who told us that "education as such has no aims," warned about "the vice of externally imposed ends," urged upon his readers the notion that "an individual can only live in the present." (The present, Dewey said, "is what life is in leaving the past behind it," i.e., a *nunc stans* of perfect ignorance.)

The first thing to notice about the vogue for "critical thinking" is that it tends to foster not criticism but what one wit called "criticismism": the "ism" or ideology of being critical, which, like most isms, turns out to be a parody or betrayal of the very thing it claims to champion. Criticismism is an attitude guaranteed to instill querulous dissatisfaction, which is to say ingratitude, on the one hand, and frivolousness, on the other. Its principal effect, as the philosopher David Stove observed, has been "to fortify millions of ignorant graduates and undergraduates in the belief, to which they are already only too firmly wedded by other causes, that the adversary posture is all, and that intellectual life consists in 'directionless quibble.'"

The phrase "directionless quibble" is from Jacques Barzun's *The House of Intellect*, and a fine book it is, too, not least in its appreciation of the ways in which unanchored intellect can be "a

life-darkening institution.” I suggest, however, that the phrase “directionless quibble” is not entirely accurate, since the habit of quibble cultivated by “critical thinking” does have a direction, namely against the status quo. The belief, as Stove puts it, “that the adversary posture is all” is at the center of “critical thinking,” of criticismism. Lionel Trilling spoke in this context of “the adversary culture of the intellectuals.” I well remember the day I received word of a long article in *Teachers College Record*, a journal from Indiana University which describes itself as “the voice of scholarship in education.” The featured article is a 30,000 word behemoth by a professor of “inquiry and philosophy” called “Ocularcentrism, Phonocentrism and the Counter Enlightenment Problematic: Clarifying Contested Terrain in our Schools of Education.” I am too charitable to subject you to a sample of its almost comically reader-proof prose . . . but it is worth pausing to note that such work is absolutely typical in the academic establishment today. It really is “the voice of scholarship,” or what’s become of scholarship.

All of this has contributed heavily to a population that is highly susceptible to conspiracy mongering. In *Culture of Conspiracy*, Barkun notes that the conspiratorial mindset springs from two principle premises. The first of these is that “any widely accepted belief must necessarily be false.” The second, a corollary of the first, is, in Pipes’s words, that “rejected knowledge – what the establishment spurns – must be true.” In other words, the conspiratorial mindset is, in large part, a product of “criticismism.” Conspiracism is criticismism writ large.

What we are left with, then, is a population that is unable to differentiate fact from fiction and that is predisposed both to disbelieve official explanations of events and willing to believe any kooky idea that is

somehow varies from the conventional view – all the better if the purveyor of this conventional view, the “establishment” itself is somehow implicated. Add to this the merging and mainstreaming of conspiracy streams noted by Barkun and the result is a heady, if not downright volatile, brew. All that is necessary to set it off is some sort of trauma or otherwise inexplicable occurrence.

We have seen combustion of this sort already in the wakes of both 9/11 and Katrina. What concerns us, though, is that the worst may be yet to come. As we note in the accompanying piece today, the expectations for and of an Obama presidency have grown so extravagant and so preposterous that disappointment cannot help but result.

Heaven help us, as a nation, if Obama is somehow beaten this November by the old, curmudgeonly, insufficiently ideological, and manifestly phony John McCain. The list of conspirators responsible for this erstwhile impossibility will range from the media to Washington insiders to McCain to George Bush and Dick Cheney to the Clintons to the Ku Klux Klan to the Mossad and eventually to practically every white person who had the temerity not to vote for Obama. If the left could get as upset and paranoid as it did about the defeats of insufferable bores like John Kerry and Al Gore, then one can only imagine (and shudder at) the unhappiness and conspiracy-mongering that would accompany the defeat of the young, charismatic, black Messiah. The fact that Obama is now a heavy favorite to win, opening up a sizeable lead in a number of recent polls, will only contribute to the sense of disbelief and the unwillingness of his supporters to accept defeat this fall.

Even more troubling, an Obama victory won’t necessarily defuse the threat. The expectations for Obama’s presidency, should he win, are so absurd, that he can’t help but fail. No one could do what he claims to be able to do or what his followers expect him to do. He is, by nature of the office (and frankly, by human nature as well) guaranteed to disappoint. And his disappointments will all but certainly fuel anger and frustration with the political establishment.

Rather than blame the man and his inexperience or the utter impracticality of his political and policy-related aspirations, blame will fall on the establishment, fearful of the outsider, which will be charged with abetting and even creating his failure. In short, the “madness” demonstrated by the left and the far-right over the last eight years, may well be a mere prelude to the real rage and madness of the next four.

Our friend Daniel Pipes writes that he is “optimistic” about this nation’s ability to withstand widespread and mainstream conspiracy mongering, “trusting the stability of a mature democracy and noting that Americans have survived previous conspiracist bouts without much damage.” We wish we could be as sanguine.

If we were forced to make a prediction about the outcome of all of this over the long-term, we guess we’d probably have to agree that Pipes is right that the United States will overcome such nonsense, as it always has. In the meantime, though, things could get pretty ugly.

When all is said and done, Congressman Kucinich may wish the government did indeed have some sort of mind-control ray and could use it to put a quick and painless end to the unrest and unhappiness triggered by the fear of and belief in a vast government conspiracy. And who knows? Maybe the aliens will bring us one just in time to stop things from getting truly out of control.

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