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THEY SAID IT

The conflict between Western liberal countries and the world of Islam remains in essence one of ideology, although over the years it has appeared in various guises and has grown more sophisticated and, at times, more insidious.

Sayyid Qutb.

In this Issue

Osama bin Laden and the Joachite Prophecy.

OSAMA BIN LADEN AND THE JOACHITE PROPHECY.

In the late 12th century, sometime between 1190 and 1195, a Calabrian abbot and hermit named Joachim of Fiore received what he believed to be a divine revelation, which would not only change his life dramatically, but change the world as well. This Cistercian monk, you see, determined – via divine revelation – that the Old and New Testaments of the Bible were important not simply for “moral or domestic purposes,” to quote the historian Norman Cohn, “but as a means of understanding and forecasting the development of human history.”

Essentially, Joachim concluded that the world could be divided into three ages, the first two of which corresponded to the existing testaments of the Bible. The Old Testament represented the Age of the Father (or of the Law). The New Testament represented the Age of the Son (or of the Gospel). And there was a third age (and presumably a third testament) the Age of the Spirit, that was yet to come. According to Cohn, this third age “would be to its predecessors as broad daylight compared with starlight and the dawn, as high summer compared with winter and spring,” – which is to say that Joachim believed that he had discovered the means for understanding the progression of history away from moral darkness and into light; away from evil and into grace; away from suffering and sin, and into the long-awaited and long-anticipated New Millennium. This “Third Age” would be “one of love, joy and freedom, where the knowledge of God would be revealed directly in the hearts of all men,” – heaven on earth, in other words.

Joachim, it should be noted, was hardly the first or the last “prophet” to claim special knowledge of the appointed time at which this “heaven on earth” New Millennium would become reality. Indeed, as Cohn describes in his 400-plus page classic *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, the entire history of Western Civilization –

from the Jews to the Greeks, from the early Christians to the Middle Ages, and well beyond – is the history of a culture searching for and yearning to find a utopian “end of history.”

This specific Christian notion of the utopian Millennium – officially rejected by Augustine of Hippo yet nevertheless persistent in fringe Christian theology – had its origins in the biblical Book of Revelations (ch 20, v. 4-6). As Cohn notes, in the scripture, the author, the Apostle John, describes Jesus’s second coming and the idyllic “messianic kingdom on earth” that He “would reign over . . . for a thousand years before the last judgment.” Obviously, this specific story and specific notion of heaven on earth gave its name to the broader phenomenon of Western eschatological yearning. But as Cohn’s book demonstrates, and as countless others have argued since, one should not mistake this story for the entirety of Hellenic-Judeo-Christian thought on the subject, as indeed it is but a small fraction of the rich tradition of Western utopian fantasizing.

In any case, even against this backdrop of literally centuries of eschatological romanticism, Joachim of Fiore fashioned a new millenarian-prophetic system that would best them all, one that would, as Cohn puts it, “be the most influential one known to Europe until the appearance of Marxism,” nearly 700 years later. And even this doesn’t give Joachim his proper due, since one could argue quite convincingly (as, again, Cohn does) that even Marx and those who influenced him – from Lessing to Schelling to Fichte and even Hegel – derived their interpretations of history directly or indirectly from Joachim’s “three ages.”

Although Joachim’s system was comprehensive and would be interpreted rather broadly by those who would succeed him, like most millenarian prophets, he also managed to focus on the near term and anticipate the almost immediate arrival of the *novus dux*, the “one supreme teacher” who would prepare the way for the Age of the Spirit. Cohn describes the typical Millenarian movement as possessing a desire for salvation that is “imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly.” Joachim’s salvation was no exception.

The Gospel of Matthew indicated that there were 42 generations between Abraham and Jesus, and using this as a guide, Joachim calculated that the new age would begin somewhere between 1200 and 1260. And lo and behold it did (sort of) . . .

According to Cohn, the first man onto whom Joachim’s prophecies would be projected was the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II of Germany, the grandson of Barbarossa and one of the most powerful and most feared of the Holy Roman Emperors, who was born in 1194 and took the throne 26 years later. Cohn provides the details:

Already at the beginning of his career, and long before the Joachites began to concern themselves with him, Frederick was the object of eschatological expectations. All that the French had expected of the Capetians, the Germans expected of him. No sooner had Frederick I (Barbarossa) perished on the Third Crusade in 1190 than there began to appear in Germany prophecies which told of a future Frederick, who as Emperor of the Last Days would complete the unfinished work; an eschatological saviour who by liberating the Holy Sepulchre would prepare the way for the second coming and the Millennium. When, thirty years later, the imperial crown was bestowed upon Frederick II, who was Barbarossa’s grandson, these prophecies were confidently applied to him. So for the first time, the image of the Emperor of the Last Days was attached to the actual ruler of the territorial complex, centering on Germany but embracing also Burgundy and most of Italy, which had come to be known in the West as the Roman (and latterly as the Holy Roman) Empire.

There was much in Frederick’s life and personality to foster the growth of a messianic myth. He was a most brilliant

figure whose versatility and intelligence, licentiousness and cruelty combined to fascinate his contemporaries. Moreover he did in fact go on a crusade in 1229 and was even able to recapture Jerusalem and crown himself king of that city.

Cohn goes on to describe Frederick's exploits, his cult of personality and especially his clashes with the papacy and the clergy, all of which made him an attractive persona in the Joachite and other eschatological traditions. Depending on where one lived – Germany, France, or Italy – Frederick II was either the *novus dux* preparing the way for Christ, or the Antichrist preparing the way for the *novus dux*. In either case, he was a critical millenarian, messianic figure and one on whom much of the “civilized” world focused its attention as a possible harbinger of the end times.

Eventually, the Joachite devotees of Frederick determined that 1260 would be the year in which their *novus dux* would consummate his role in the initiation of the New Age. And so, needless to say, they were a little disappointed when he died a decade too soon. And though “pseudo-Fredericks” appeared and reappeared occasionally for some time afterward, the cult of Frederick essentially died with the man. How could it not?

That did not, however, deter the followers of Joachim, who assumed that their prophet merely had the math wrong, meaning that Frederick was a mistake from the start, which is to say that they simply had to find a new savior. And then another. And another. *Etc., etc., ad infinitum*. As Cohn notes, while the immediate strain of “the Emperor Frederick as Messiah” died out, the broader Joachite prophecy persisted for centuries afterward, constantly adapting, as unfulfilled prophecies are wont to do.

A similar phenomenon can be seen in a more modern context with the development and advancement of socialism over the last two centuries. Marx, obviously, is the godfather of what the political philosopher Eric Voegelin calls “scientific socialism,” which for the purposes of this example, makes him the modern

equivalent to Joachim of Fiore. Indeed, one might argue that more than merely Joachim's equivalent, Marx was Joachim's successor and, perhaps imitator. It is no coincidence, in our opinion and as Cohn notes, that Marx's renowned dialectic describes a Joachite progression, positing three stages of communist development: primitive communism, class society, and the ever-imminent “final” communism. Marx's thought is, in many ways, radical, but in many ways purely derivative.

As we have pointed out countless times in these pages, both Cohn and Eric Voegelin, among others, have noted the similarities between the socialist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries and the Millenarian movements of the Middle Ages and before. Marx may have prided himself on his rejection of traditional religion, but that does not mean that his beliefs did not, nevertheless, bear all the hallmarks of a religious movement. Indeed, the anti-clerical or anti-religious fervor of the socialist endeavor can, in many ways, be seen as just one more parallel between the medieval Millenarians and their Marxists successors. Cohn argues thusly:

The story told in this book ended some four centuries ago, but is not without relevance to our own times. The present writer has shown in another work [*Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*] how closely the Nazi phantasy of a world-wide Jewish conspiracy of destruction is related to the phantasies that inspired Emico of Leningrad and the Master of Hungary; and how mass disorientation and insecurity have fostered the demonization of the Jew in this as in much earlier centuries. The parallels and indeed the continuity are incontestable.

But one may also reflect on the left-wing revolutions and revolutionary movements of this century . . . Those who are fascinated by such ideas [egalitarian Millenarianism] are, on the

one hand, the populations of certain technologically backward societies which are not only overpopulated and desperately poor but also involved in a problematic transition to the modern world, and are correspondingly dislocated and disoriented; and, on the other hand, certain politically marginal elements in technologically advanced societies – chiefly young and unemployed workers and a small minority of intellectuals and students . . .

During the half-century since 1917 there has been a constant repetition, and on an ever increasing scale, of the socio-psychological process which once joined the Taborite priests or Thomas Muntzer with the most disoriented and desperate of the poor, in phantasies of a final exterminatory struggle against “the great ones”; and of a perfect world from which self-seeking would be forever banished.

You will note here that Cohn gives short shrift to the differences between Nazism and Communism, which to him were both merely slightly variant modern successors to the medieval utopians. And he is hardly alone in this. Voegelin too saw the two as slightly differing branches of the same Gnostic tree.

To Voegelin, the spiritual void created in the West by the advance of secularism and the modernist attack on traditional religion was filled quite nicely by the mass political movements of communism and German Nazism, which not only echoed the earlier fervor of mass religious movements, but mirrored one another quite nicely. Both addressed a yearning in the human spirit; both filled the void created by modern secularism; and both promised to harness the “new science” of socialism that “would substitute for the religious order of the soul.”

Indeed, it is worth remembering that while Nazism is generally considered a “right-wing” or “reactionary” movement in part because of its opposition to

Germany’s Communists, it was a communitarian movement as well. The German “National Socialists” embraced a socialistic vision that was, in many ways, indistinguishable from that of their communist cousins. And understanding this is, we think, critical to any understanding of the parallel between the pre-modern and the post-modern Millenarian movements in the West.

Now, if Marx is the contemporary equivalent of Joachim of Fiore, then it is fair, we think, to liken Hitler to his Germanic predecessor, Frederick II. Although Hitler may not, technically, have been the first to wear the crown of the Emperor of the Last Days in the post-modern update of the Joachite tale, trailing both Lenin and Stalin to the throne, he was clearly the first *propheta* able to manipulate the socialist narrative and the cult of personality to formulate a new quasi-religious notion of global dominance and the creation of an individual-led messianic awakening. Hitler was, in short, the first – and the most prominent – *novus dux* in the Marxian third age.

Like Frederick II, though, Hitler died before he was able to realize the Utopian/Millenarian vision. Frederick was unable to inaugurate the Third Age, while Hitler was unable fully to establish and consolidate the Third Reich – which, it should be noted, was intended to last a thousand years, just like the earthly reign of Christ.

But just like the Joachite movement more broadly, the Marxist movement survived the death of its most prominent charismatic *novus dux*/Antichrist. And like the broader Joachite movement, Marxism continued to be the dominant extremist metaphysical paradigm long after its introduction and long after the death of the early would-be messiah. Indeed, despite many setbacks and what many saw as the ultimate collapse of the ideology more than two decades ago, the doctrine persists today and even still, at least in name, animates the second-largest (and perhaps soon-to-be-first-largest) economy in the world.

Obviously, two data points are hardly enough to call anything a “pattern” or to draw much of a firm conclusion. But the similarity here between the broader

prophetic/ideological paradigm and the narrower charismatic, specific, real-world application of that paradigm is interesting, we think. And it provides food for thought in evaluating other phenomena that share similar conceptual frameworks and therefore might follow similar patterns of development.

And that, at long last, brings us to the point of this stroll down Millenarian memory lane.

In the week-plus since Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. Navy SEALs in his squalid hideaway in Pakistan, there has been considerable debate about what his death means to al Qaeda, to Islamism, to jihadism, and to the ultimate disposition of the broader war on terror.

It is, we think, critical to note in any discussion of bin Laden that his “movement” was, in many ways, a pale imitation of a great many that came before him, both secular and religious. His desire to establish a “new caliphate,” for example, was a tiresome reproduction of the pan-Arabist compulsions that met the end of colonialism and were advocated by the likes of Sharif Hussein ibn Ali, Sharif of Mecca; King Abdullah I of Jordan; Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt; and, of course, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya and Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Nor were bin Laden’s religious fervor or tactics particularly unique. In both cases, he was an imitator, not an innovator, a follower not a leader. Even in his choice of targets, Obama was anything but original. He did not choose the Twin Towers. Omar Obdel Rahman did – eight years earlier. Last week, the journalist and author Reuel Marc Gerecht addressed bin Laden’s banality this way:

Bin Ladenism – its leitmotif is a preference for attacking the “far enemy,” the United States, to weaken the “near enemy,” the despised Westernized autocrats of the Middle East—is essentially the same religious doctrine of rebellion propagated by the Egyptian revolutionary Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) and the Iranian revolutionary Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989). Although

bin Laden took suicide bombing to new heights, death-wish holy warriors have a long history in Islam, among Shiites and Sunnis. What really made bin Laden special was his success in striking the continental United States. The Iranian-backed Shiite bombers in Lebanon who took out the U.S. embassy, French paratroopers, and American Marines in 1983 never launched a bombing run in America; the Palestine Liberation Organization, the mothership of media-savvy Islamic terrorism, eagerly killed Americans abroad, but they never dared to bomb Washington and New York City.

Bin Laden gained eminence among holy warriors because he dared to do what others only dreamed of. The Egyptian blind sheikh, Omar Abdel Rahman, who spearheaded the attempt to fell the World Trade Center in 1993, and who became a spiritual mentor to bin Laden, didn’t obtain the same jihadist status as the Saudi because he failed. Even more than the Palestinian suicide bombers of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, bin Laden made suicide attacks sexy among Sunni Muslims.

Intellectually, however, the Saudi contributed nothing to the jihadist cause . . .

Given who bin Laden was, what he did, and what he actually contributed, it might be a stretch even to equate him with Hitler or Frederick II. Nevertheless, we don’t want to diminish his accomplishments – if “accomplishment” is the right word to describe mass murder – and we don’t want to diminish the importance of his death. But it is clear, we think, that bin Laden’s view of himself and the Muslim world’s view of him in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 were both profoundly exaggerated.

It is also clear, we think, that in this case of Islamism or radical Islamist terrorism, the role of the paradigm founder is far, far removed from bin Laden. Indeed, while we think there are a handful of potential candidates for the role, like Gerecht, we think the likely frontrunner is the Egyptian revolutionary and philosophical standardbearer of the Islamic Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb. At worst, Qutb shares this distinction with his Shiite counterpart Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, though we think Khomeini's role is secondary. In any event, Qutb is, we believe, to Islamism, what Joachim of Fiore was to medieval Millenarianism or what Marx was to Socialism, the founding "prophet." As the author Paul Berman explained back in 2003:

To anyone who has looked closely enough, Al Qaeda and its sister organizations plainly enjoy yet another strength, arguably the greatest strength of all, something truly imposing – though in the Western press this final strength has received very little attention. Bin Laden is a Saudi plutocrat with Yemeni ancestors, and most of the suicide warriors of Sept. 11 were likewise Saudis, and the provenance of those people has focused everyone's attention on the Arabian peninsula. But Al Qaeda has broader roots. The organization was created in the late 1980's by an affiliation of three armed factions – bin Laden's circle of "Afghan" Arabs, together with two factions from Egypt, the Islamic Group and Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the latter led by Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's top theoretician. The Egyptian factions emerged from an older current, a school of thought from within Egypt's fundamentalist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, in the 1950's and 60's. And at the heart of that single school of thought stood, until his execution in 1966, a philosopher named Sayyid Qutb – the intellectual hero of every one of the groups that eventually went into Al

Qaeda, their Karl Marx (to put it that way), their guide . . .

In the early 1950's, everyone in Egypt was veering in radical directions. Gamal Abdel Nasser and a group of nationalist army officers overthrew the old king in 1952 and launched a nationalist revolution on Pan-Arabist grounds. And, as the Pan-Arabists went about promoting their revolution, Sayyid Qutb went about promoting his own, somewhat different revolution. His idea was "Islamist." He wanted to turn Islam into a political movement to create a new society, to be based on ancient Koranic principles. Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood, became the editor of its journal and established himself right away as Islamism's principal theoretician in the Arab world.

The Islamists and the Pan-Arabists tried to cooperate with one another in Egypt in those days, and there was some basis for doing so. Both movements dreamed of rescuing the Arab world from the legacies of European imperialism. Both groups dreamed of crushing Zionism and the brand-new Jewish state. Both groups dreamed of fashioning a new kind of modernity, which was not going to be liberal and freethinking in the Western style but, even so, was going to be up-to-date on economic and scientific issues. And both movements dreamed of doing all this by returning in some fashion to the glories of the Arab past. Both movements wanted to resurrect, in a modern version, the ancient Islamic caliphate of the seventh century, when the Arabs were conquering the world . . .

Qutb wrote bitterly about European imperialism, which he regarded as nothing more than a continuation of the

medieval Crusades against Islam. He denounced American foreign policy. He complained about America's decision in the time of Harry Truman to support the Zionists, a strange decision that he attributed, in part, to America's loss of moral values . . .

Islam's apparent weakness was mere appearance. Islam's true champions seemed to be few, but numbers meant nothing. The few had to gather themselves together into what Qutb in "Milestones" called a vanguard – a term that he must have borrowed from Lenin, though Qutb had in mind a tiny group animated by the spirit of Muhammad and his Companions from the dawn of Islam. This vanguard of true Muslims was going to undertake the renovation of Islam and of civilization all over the world. The vanguard was going to turn against the false Muslims and "hypocrites" and do as Muhammad had done, which was to found a new state, based on the Koran. And from there, the vanguard was going to resurrect the caliphate and take Islam to all the world, just as Muhammad had done.

Qutb's vanguard was going to reinstate shariah, the Muslim code, as the legal code for all of society. Shariah implied some fairly severe rules. Qutb cited the Koran on the punishments for killing or wounding: "a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear." Fornication, too, was a serious crime because, in his words, "it involves an attack on honor and a contempt for sanctity and an encouragement of profligacy in society." Shariah specified the punishments here as well. "The penalty for this must be severe; for married men and women it is stoning to death; for unmarried men and women

it is flogging, a hundred lashes, which in cases is fatal." False accusations were likewise serious. "A punishment of 80 lashes is fixed for those who falsely accuse chaste women." As for those who threaten the general security of society, their punishment is to be put to death, to be crucified, to have their hands and feet cut off, or to be banished from the country."

But Qutb refused to regard these punishments as barbarous or primitive. Shariah, in his view, meant liberation.

What's interesting about this, we think, is a handful of things. First, as noted above, this demonstrates rather conclusively that bin Laden was not an originator of anything. He was, more or less, one of countless followers of the paradigm essentially developed by Sayyid Qutb. Or as Reuel Marc Gerecht put it, "compared with Qutb, bin Laden is a gadfly." Bin Laden was a nice charismatic leader. He fabricated a great myth about himself. He raised money quite effectively. And, of course, he succeeded magnificently, if fortuitously. Al Qaeda was and may still be a fearsome organization. But it was never the driving force behind Islamism or even global terrorism.

Second, with bin Laden now out of the picture, it would appear that the influence of the paradigm's originator will actually grow, rather than diminish. It is worth remembering, we think, that bin Laden's second-in-command and the new presumptive leader of al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is not only Egyptian but is a devotee of Qutb's and is presumed by many to be his intellectual heir. So while the charismatic *novus dux* may be gone, al Qaeda itself may now return to its Egyptian roots and may indeed find its way out of the Central Asian fortress bin Laden fabricated from the remnants of the mujahedeen-Soviet clash and back to the Arab peoples among whom Sunni Islamism began.

Third, and perhaps most important, as luck would have it, just as bin Laden turns up mysteriously on the CIA's radar and then turns up dead, his organization

ends up in the capable hands of an Egyptian man who is a devotee of one of the big shot forefathers of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Egypt itself is in a life-or-death struggle for its future with one of the leading contenders for control of that future being none other than the Muslim Brotherhood. Whouda thunk it?

We have written several times this spring about the deteriorating situation in Egypt, about the likelihood that the Muslim Brotherhood will win at least a share of power come September, and about the fact that all this is terrible news for Israel, for the United States, and for the greater “global community.” The Brotherhood is tacitly allied with Shiite Islamists in Tehran. It is seeking control of the largest Arab state in the world. And now, either by pure luck or by some measure of treachery, it presumably has the aid of the post-bin Laden al Qaeda in its attempts to solidify Islamist rule in the immediate neighborhood of Arabian Peninsula. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia face an almost immediate future surrounded by an Islamist Egypt, an Islamist Palestinian government dominated by Hamas, an Islamist Lebanon dominated by Hezbollah, Islamist Iran, and ongoing – sometimes Islamist – unrest in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Jordan. In short, bin Laden may be dead, but the dream of an Arabian caliphate and an Islamist dominated Middle East is alive and well and indeed may be more alive and well because of his death.

Nearly six years ago, in a piece entitled “Islam and the Pursuit of the Millennium,” we made the argument that, for a variety of reasons, the Millenarian spirit that was once thought to be a source of constant tension in the Western world alone actually explains a great deal of tension within the Islamic world as well. As Cohn demonstrated in his follow up to *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, which was titled *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come*, the Hellenic-Judeo-Christian eschatology is, in some ways, derivative of the even more ancient Persian-Zoroastrian eschatology and Zoroaster’s interpretation of the “great combat myth.” The influence of this myth, we argued, is undoubtedly identifiable in the Millenarian Shiite Islam practiced by the modern Persians in Iran, but is also likely discernible in much of Sunni Islam as well and the broader Islamic concept of

the Mahdi. The Mahdi, according to the Koran, will assume much the same role as Jesus does in the Bible in preparing the earth and its people for the Final Judgment.

Additionally, the process of globalization and the influence of Western culture on various indigenous cultures through both global trade and colonialism have contributed to the expansion of Western ideas. For decades, the Third World was the most fertile soil for Millenarian Communism/Utopian Socialism, and it should come as no surprise whatsoever that the Muslim world should likewise have absorbed many of the West’s religious notions about salvation and the paths to the earthly expression of it.

None of this is particularly new, insightful, or even controversial. Indeed, we’d argue that it’s hardly worth mentioning at all – except for the fact that it is all relevant anew in light of the death of Osama bin Laden. Now everyone is discussing the future of terrorism, the future of al Qaeda, and the future of America’s wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, trying to figure out what it all means and how it all fits together.

We’d argue, based on what we know about utopian/Millenarianism, what we know about the history of these movements in the West, what we have witnessed with regard to the relationship between broad movements and the specific applications of those movements, what is happening in Egypt today, what has been happening in Iran for three-plus decades, and the state of the current leadership of al Qaeda that “what it all means” is that the war on terror is about to take a very serious, very unexpected, and perhaps very dangerous turn.

Bin Laden’s death is an unalloyed good in the war against al Qaeda and in the war to bring justice to the victims of 9/11. Make no mistake about that.

But his death does not represent the end of the war by any stretch of the imagination. Over the last two years, the central front in the war on terror has shifted from Iraq back to Afghanistan and Pakistan, largely

because of American will. If we had to guess, we'd guess that bin Laden's death means that the central front will shift again, this time to Egypt, then to the Arabian Peninsula and on to Israel. And this time, the shift will come as a result of the Islamists' will.

The Taliban will be allowed, we suspect, to fend for itself and to protect its meaningless "sanctuary" alone, while the real prizes – Cairo, Giza, Alexandria, and the Nile – will be up for grabs. From there, control of the Hajj, Islam's holiest sites, and the world's largest oil reserves will be on the table. And in this effort the alleged mortal enemies – Shia and Sunni Islam – will work together to advance Islam and to destroy the infidels.

Bin Laden – like Hitler and Frederick II before him – is dead. But the visions of Sayyid Qutb and Ruhollah Khomeini will live on, just as the visions of Joachim of Fiore and Karl Marx lived on after their deaths.

In short then, regarding the death of Osama bin Laden, we quote the great moral philosopher Han Solo: Great shot, kid. Now don't get cocky.

The real war may just be getting started.

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