LONG RANGE MANNED STRIKE: IT'S TIME TO DEVELOP THE CAPABILITY WE THINK WE ALREADY HAVE

The military currently has a critical gap in its strategic force projection capability. Cruise missiles and bombs share the same limitations with target identification and discrimination, and collateral damage caused by their large blast radii. These limitations have kept us from striking targets that we would have preferred to have destroyed. Based on the continued threat posed by non-state actors operating from ungoverned areas of the world, we must be able to counter these fleeting targets with the most discriminating type of force- a human direct action team. Current limitations on platform capabilities render the U.S. military unable to act on short notice in response to these threats- we cannot quickly insert these strike elements from strategic depth; nor can we extract them. Using the prelude to the 9/11 attacks as a case study, this paper will illustrate that we did not have this capability then and that we still do not have this capability now. We must remedy this so that in future scenarios we are not bound by the same capability limitations that we faced a decade ago. We cannot continue to surrender the operational initiative to our enemies.
FUTURE WAR PAPER

TITLE:

Long-Range Manned Strike: It’s Time to Develop the Capability We Think We Already Have

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Executive Summary

**Title:** Manned Strategic Strike: It’s Time to Develop the Capability We Think We Already Have.

**Thesis:** The United States military needs to develop the capability to reliably insert and extract direct action teams from strategic or operational depth in order to effectively counter threats posed by non-state actors operating from poorly or ungoverned areas.

**Discussion:** The 9/11 Commission Report, in its investigation of the events leading up to the 9/11 attacks, highlights the actions taken by political and military leaders in the fight against al Qaeda. Key leaders, including President Clinton, knew and understand the magnitude of the threat posed by Osama bin Laden. The President’s intent was clear to all involved— that he wanted bin Laden dead. At one point, he went so far to state to General Shelton that “…it would really scare the shit out of al Qaeda if a bunch of ninjas rappelled out of helicopters into the middle of their camp.” The Secretary of Defense testified that “the problem remained how to get the ninjas into and out of theater.” He clearly identified a limitation in our capability set.

Ongoing operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Horn of Africa all provide advanced bases out of which to stage manned strikes. These forward deployments, however, are incredibly expensive both in lives and treasure. The Wall Street Journal estimates the current costs at over $1 trillion dollars as of January 2010. This is an incredibly inefficient method of power projection; ending these deployments at the earliest opportunity is in the national interest.

If the U.S. possessed the capability to project and retrieve small, direct action teams from the continental U.S., naval shipping, or from uncontested permanent overseas bases we could avoid the associated political, military, and economic costs associated with long-term force deployments.

**Conclusion:** While we currently possess many of the elements this capability would include, we do not have the integrated whole. It is time to remedy this in order to provide future political leaders a full spectrum of force options to counter future threats. Until we develop this capability, we will force our leadership to choose between suboptimal tools, endangering our national security and long-term interests in the process.
INTRODUCTION

“Looking back, we are struck with the narrow and unimaginative menu of options for action offered to both President Clinton and President Bush.”
-9/11 Commission Report

Prior to the attacks of 9/11, leaders in the Departments of State and Defense, members of the National Security Council, and President Clinton himself were aware of the danger posed by Osama bin Laden. Over a period of several years, surveillance was conducted, intelligence was gathered, options were prepared, and attempts were made to target and kill bin Laden. All failed. As a result, bin Laden was able to bring to fruition his plans to draw the United States into a protracted war that has cost the nation over a trillion dollars and thousands of lives with no end in sight. The international strategic position of the United States has seldom been weaker. Why was the U.S. military unable to destroy this known threat before the attacks of 9/11?

The answer is deceptively simple- we had, and continue to have, a critical gap in our force projection capability. We must immediately correct this by developing and maintaining the capability to deliver a manned direct action strike element anywhere in the world, within 48 hours, from operational or strategic depth in order to target non-state actors operating from ungoverned areas.

The assertion that we have a gap in our force projection set may strike some as wildly off-base. This paper will prove otherwise. Using the military effort against bin Laden prior to 9/11 as a case study, this paper will identify some of the reasons for failure. It will become apparent that the civilian leadership had a tremendous appetite for decisive military action and articulated that intent clearly. It will also be
clear that the military was unable to satisfy that intent with its existing capability set. After an assessment of current options, a recommended solution will be proposed, followed by an examination of the political and military implications that would follow from the development of such a capability.

The goal of this paper is not to assign blame. The author recognizes the incredibly complex legal and political environment in which the decisions were made. The world, however, is not going to get any less complex. Our ability to address threats from non-state actors operating from poorly or ungoverned areas of the world will determine, in no small measure, the future prosperity and security of our nation.

MILITARY ACTION AGAINST BIN LADIN PRE-9/11: A CASE STUDY

The attacks of 9/11 set into motion a chain of events that ultimately resulted in our current military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, estimated to have cost the United States in excess of $1 trillion dollars as of January 2010. The Hamilton-Keane working group was formed to examine how the attacks came to be planned, conducted, and executed. Its report serves as the primary source for this history.

Al Qaeda declared war on America in August of 1996 by posting an article in a London Arabic paper. Few noticed, but by the end of 1996, the CIA established the bin Ladin (hereafter referred to as UBL) unit to address this emerging threat.

In 1997, the military reluctantly became more involved with planning to counter UBL. It was mid-1998, however, before any operational plan was presented for approval. The plan, generated by Central Command at the direction of the
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), was a result of pressure applied by Richard Clarke, CIA lead planner for the UBL unit, for the Pentagon to take action.¹

In August 1998, al Qaeda struck two East African embassies simultaneously. To retaliate, the plan to strike known al Qaeda training camps with Tomahawk missiles was pulled off the shelf and presented to the White House as the primary option.² On August 8, CIA Director George Tenet presented an intelligence summary about a planned terrorist gathering and the strike was given clearance.³ On August 20 (12 days after the clearance was given), the missiles were launched. Although they struck the specified location, UBL was not killed. According to the 9/11 Report, it was suspected that Pakistani officials, briefed to clear the missile overflight, tipped him off.²

Clarke continued to push for more strikes against UBL. Neither the CJCS nor the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) were convinced, considering the training camps “primitive.”⁴ Neither thought them worthwhile targets for expensive missiles.⁵

In December 1998, CIA assets identified an upcoming trip that UBL would be taking to Kandahar. In teleconferences, the CIA urged the strike but General Zinni

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¹ Clarke developed a reputation as somewhat of a fanatic about bin Ladin in his zeal for pursuing him that led other cabinet members and leaders to question his objectivity at times. General Shelton in particular is scathing in his memoir where he says of Clarke “...frequently he would come in from watching a Rambo movie or something and present some wild-haired idea that would brief well- but when you looked at the reality of it, of what it would take to pull it off, it was far better suited for an episode of NCIS than a real-life situation where lives were on the line...While I applaud his enthusiasm, he frequently failed to connect it to capability.” Isn’t it our job to develop capability?

² There are several differing accounts of this incident. Clarke asserts in his book that the Pakistani Navy observed the pre-launch activity and notified the ISI. Shelton does not mention this. He relates that General Ralston, Vice-Chairman, had the idea to have dinner with Pakistan’s Chief of Defense the evening of the strike. This way, in case Pakistani radars detected the missiles, Ralston would be able to provide assurance that they were American missiles targeting al Qaeda and not Indian missiles inbound to Pakistan. In either case, Pakistan’s airspace was clearly and deliberately violated with no prior clearance from the Pakistani government.
voiced concerns over collateral damage to a nearby mosque and civilian casualties. The decision was made not to recommend the strike to the President. The decision was made not to recommend the strike to the President.

Following this incident, General Shelton advanced plans to deploy AC-130 gunships to theater to target UBL more precisely than cruise missiles. Clarke encouraged him to proceed, and Generals Zinni and Shoomaker (head of Special Operations Command) were directed to develop plans. This plan failed to materialize as well, because “both of them thought serious preparations for any such operations would require a long-term redeployment of SOF to the Middle East...”

In early 1999, two more opportunities to target UBL presented themselves, in February of 1999 and May of 1999. The military recommended against striking, once due to collateral damage and the other because UBL was in the close company of members of the royal family from the United Arab Emirates, who would likely have been killed in the strike. CIA officials were especially frustrated, commenting “if this intelligence isn’t actionable, it is hard to imagine how any intelligence on UBL would meet the standard.” By the end of 1999, the Commission stated, “the military route seemed to have reached a dead end.”

In 2000, intelligence about UBL continued to identify opportunities for action. Missile strikes remained the primary option. Navy vessels were still on station in the north Arabian Sea, but the report notes that “efforts continued to be limited by the same operational and policy concerns encountered in 1998 and 1999.”

On 12 October 2000, al Qaeda struck the U.S.S. Cole. As the military scrambled to react, UBL dispersed his followers around Afghanistan in anticipation of retaliatory strikes. When no strike was forthcoming, CIA sources reported that
UBL was frustrated and that if the U.S. didn’t attack, he would do something bigger.\textsuperscript{xvii} This comment makes it clear that UBL was not striking blindly. He was seeking to draw the U.S. into precisely the kind of war we find ourselves in now.

By mid-November, plans presented to the President involved a sustained air campaign\textsuperscript{xvii}, but no strike was executed. An angry Michael Sheehan, State Department Counterterrorism representative, asked Defense officials, “Does al Qaeda have to attack the Pentagon to get their attention?”\textsuperscript{xix} The 9/11 Commission Report concludes with this indictment: “At no point before 9/11 was the Department of Defense fully engaged in the mission of countering al Qaeda, though this was perhaps the most dangerous foreign enemy then threatening the United States.”\textsuperscript{xx}

\textbf{ANALYSIS}

What lessons can be garnered from this brief history? Was it a failure of the political leadership’s will to act? Was it a question of a military unable to translate commander’s intent into tactical action, or some combination of the two?

There is no question that senior political leaders, including the President, were conscious of the threat and interested in aggressive action to remove it. The President published a series of Directives that provided for increased latitude in the effort to target UBL.\textsuperscript{xxi} President Clinton, widely accused of not taking aggressive enough action against al Qaeda prior to 9/11, voiced his frustration in 2000. He commented to General Shelton, “You know, it would scare the shit out of al Qaeda if suddenly a bunch of black ninjas rappelled out of helicopters into the middle of their
camp.” However, the Commission report notes that the SECDEF, Richard Cohen, replied in his interview before the Commission “the question remained how to get the “ninjas” into and out of theater.”

This does not sound like a President reluctant to target UBL. The 9/11 Commission Report concurs, noting that “policymakers in the Clinton administration, including the President and his national security advisor, told us that the President’s intent regarding covert action against bin Ladin was clear: he wanted him dead.” The political leaderships’ primary fault was that it was not forceful enough in directing a reluctant military to engage this threat more directly.

On the military front, the primary failure was a failure to adapt quickly enough to the threat posed by UBL and al Qaeda. The military did not have the capability set to employ ground forces at a level with acceptable risk, so by default, the only option was cruise missiles. Additionally, the military establishment was reluctant to get deeply involved with terrorism. The senior leadership considered it a criminal matter that did not warrant the military’s attention. The U.S. had well-developed elements of a counterterrorism set in the form of various special operations units, but none of these units had, or have now, the capability to project from operational or strategic depth. To those who say that they can project this kind of force from those ranges, why is it that these highly trained forces were not used a single time in the years prior to 9/11? The question is answered multiple times in the 9/11 Commission Report- deployment of these forces required too much forward positioned support, too large a supporting force package, and required too much lead time to be assured of mission success. The Commission Report notes, “(Military
officers) were dubious about a quick strike approach using SOF, which they thought complicated and risky. Such efforts would have required bases in the region, but all the options were unappealing.”xxvi A Delta team of 20 men would require a forward deployment of hundreds of support personnel to handle the logistics and support requirements based on the limitations of the transport platforms.

The decision to not recommend the employment of these forces had nothing to do with the quality of the individuals who make up these forces- the individual soldier, airman, sailor or Marine is our primary tactical asymmetry in a fight against these kinds of foes. When the operational risks, characteristics, and force packages required by the platforms available was compared to the possible results, the anticipated gain simply was not worth the assessed risk.

To be fair, a consistent theme throughout the 9/11 Report and from the senior generals themselves is the feeling that the intelligence was never good enough to justify the risk involved with putting boots on the ground. There is no doubt that gathering and analyzing intelligence is, and will remain, a tremendous challenge. But the intelligence at one point was sufficient to launch multi-million dollar missiles and violate the airspace of a neighboring nation. The intelligence was, in the opinion of senior CIA officers, actionable. The determination of acceptable level of risk will be influenced by the platforms and capabilities used to deliver and retrieve Americans from theater. If a new capability set can lower the associated risk and raise the likelihood of success based on the characteristics of the platforms, we can lower the threshold for what is considered actionable.
COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT

The U.S. military has recognized the need for short-notice strategic reach for years. “Prompt Global Strike” is a DARPA project to modify existing ICBMs to target fleeting high value targets within hours.\textsuperscript{xxvii} The extraordinarily high price (an estimated $60 million dollars PER MISSILE), the estimated casualty radius of 3,000 feet, and the not-inconsequential risk of accidentally triggering a nuclear exchange raise serious questions about the wisdom of even considering this as an option.

Helicopters will not provide the solution. First, their range is limited. This requires establishing refueling points in foreign territory or multiple aerial refuelings. Second, helicopters are notoriously fickle and fragile machines, prone to frequent mechanical breakdown. They are not capable of anything even approaching intercontinental travel. Finally, helicopters are noisy. Even with the best attempts to silence them, their acoustic signature is still pronounced. This noise cedes the advantage of surprise at the micro-tactical level, which in turn drives the need for a larger supporting escort package to provide close in fire support. The best Delta team in the world is vulnerable to poorly trained tribal fighters as a helicopter approaches a hover to discharge the team in the landing zone. Even poorly trained soldiers with basic small arms are capable of inflicting punishing damage on hardened helicopters flown by elite pilots. Using helicopters gives away a large portion of our tactical advantage. MV-22 Ospreys, although their range and speed offset some of the drawbacks of helicopters, still have a significant acoustic signature and still have to come to a hover to discharge a team. They would be ideal for delivery of a supporting Quick Reaction Force but not as the primary delivery
vehicle.

Some will argue that various parachute techniques satisfy this capability. Even under the best of conditions, a parachute jump is an extremely physically demanding evolution highly dependent on near-ideal weather conditions. Cold or inclement weather seriously degrades combat effectiveness. Additionally, dropping anything heavy or bulky is difficult and requires additional time on the ground to link up with the gear. Finally, getting the team out remains a challenge—anything can be dropped, but getting it back is normally much more difficult. Parachute delivery may work in some scenarios, but not in enough to be a viable solution for this problem.

Finally, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, or UAVs, are another option. There are scenarios where these would undoubtedly be appropriate, but many of the same operational restraints—range, collateral damage, target identification, and flexibility—apply to UAVs as well. Additionally, it is difficult to quantify the reaction generated in an enemy when they know they are being targeted by robots instead of by humans. Our tactical asymmetry remains our cadre of highly trained human special operators.

**RECOMMENDED SOLUTION**

In order to deliver a combat ready team to a precise location from long range, we need to combine seemingly mutual exclusive characteristics: a flexible, responsive airframe capable of intercontinental travel with the capability to land on a point target. Additionally, it must be large enough and rugged enough to hold a
team of 20 people, land silently and precisely, yet still provide a means for extraction. Including these capabilities in a single vehicle would require extensive research and development. To view the capability as a system, however, allows us to combine multiple platforms to satisfy the requirement. These platforms, far from the realm of science fiction, exist in basic form today and could be readily adapted to full mission capability. We could bridge this capability gap by pairing a long range jet airliner with a modern, ruggedized glider.

The range, speed, and flight ceiling of a 747 would make it an ideal platform to tow or launch a combat glider. Its reliability has been proven over decades of air travel, it currently exists in multiple configurations, and it has a robust support infrastructure for parts and maintenance. It can travel in existing civilian air traffic routes, minimizing overflight concerns. 747s have externally mounted and lifted the space shuttle before- a small glider, mounted on the fuselage for efficient long-range travel, would present no challenge. The interior of the plane would allow for crew planning and rest, similarly to how a submarine provides the same features for the SEALs using a SEAL Delivery Vehicle.

Gliders have been shelved by the military since the late 1950s. After the experience with gliders in World War II, the U.S. military has been skeptical at best of the worth of the vehicle in a military sense. The Germans, however, were able to capitalize on its strengths in the seizure of Eben Emael in the opening stages of the invasion of France for many of the same reasons this paper advocates. With the

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3 “The Fall of Eben Emael” by James Mrazek, provides an excellent account of the planning and execution of a gliderborne operation that leveraged a tactical asymmetry against a conventional defensive position to achieve decisive operational and strategic results.
current state of aviation technology, it is feasible to create a ruggedized glider with modern flight controls that would allow for near all-weather insert capability. Gliders have a host of operational characteristics that make them ideal candidates.

First, gliders are nearly silent. The noise of the tow vehicle would be no different than the signature of a standard civilian airliner at altitude. Once launched, the only noise a glider creates is the rush of air over the control surfaces. This silence allows for near complete tactical surprise, especially in darkness. This would minimize the risk to the team from enemy forces in the target area as they could land and exit the vehicle before anyone could detect or target it mid-air, giving our forces the initiative and subsequent tactical advantage through the entire operation.

Second, gliders allow a landing in cohesive tactical formation and the transportation of heavy gear to support that operation. Crew-served weapons, bulky equipment, and even small vehicles can be easily and safely transported in gliders. It would be no stretch of the imagination to include a long-range communications suite, basic medical equipment, thermal optics, acoustic gunfire sensors, remote controlled weapons stations, and a micro-UAV capability in the platform design.

Finally, a glider provides its own means for extract - the vehicle itself. Using a modified version of the Fulton System developed in the late 1950s for emergency extract of downed pilots behind enemy lines, the same tow vehicle that delivered the glider would be able to loiter, return, and retrieve the glider. A small hydraulic pump would be sufficient to raise the nose of the craft skyward. A thousand feet of reinforced cable, anchored to the fuselage of the glider, would be attached to a weather balloon inflated with a cylinder of compressed helium to carry a retrieval
line into the sky to be hooked by the tow aircraft for retrieval. Even with damage to the wings of the glider or complete destruction of the wings, the power inherent in the 747 would be able to lift the fuselage of the glider and winch it back to the tow aircraft for return.

Sound unreasonable? The technical requirements are well within the scope of existing technology and are no more far-fetched than requiring a high-performance jet aircraft to land vertically or a 35-ton metal personnel carrier to travel fast enough through the water to get up on plane and still be able to transit ashore. The simple fact is that the solution is right in front of our faces if we have the imagination to put the pieces together— all for a fraction of the cost of a single ICBM converted to a conventional warhead without the risk of nuclear war.

This is not to say that a combat glider is the panacea for every ill faced by the U.S. military. Like an amphibious assault craft, it is a tool designed for a specific purpose under a specific set of circumstances. There is no doubt that the current state of glider technology is not capable of meeting this requirement off the shelf right now. Consider, however, the original prototype Japanese landing craft that Brute Krulak observed prior to World War II. These were fragile, primitive craft that likely would not have fared well in an opposed landing. The concept behind the craft, however, drove the development of a fleet of vehicles that were much more capable and were instrumental in winning the war. This analogy holds for gliders in our fight against non-state actors today.

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4 Types of aviation cable combine relatively light weight (800 pounds per thousand feet) with incredibly high tensile strength (over 47,000 lbs). From the website: [http://www.wwewirerope.com/aircraftcable/](http://www.wwewirerope.com/aircraftcable/), accessed 16 April 2011.
The gliders would be used as insert vehicles against the type of targets typically presented by non-state actors—small, elusive groups without an integrated air defense system or area denial capability. Non-state actors sheltering in states with the resources to develop, maintain, and operate an air defense network make the sheltering state itself vulnerable to targeting by U.S. forces and weapons. A sheltering state advanced enough to have an integrated air defense is also more vulnerable to a wider range of coercive diplomatic and economic pressure and is more likely to curtail the non-state actor’s activities. Ultimately, a state that allows non-state actors to plan and conduct operations from within their territory cedes the right to cry foul over violations of their territorial integrity.

Delivery of a glider will at some point require overflight of neighboring countries’ borders. Depending on the situation, it is our choice whether or not to respect those borders. At some point, our interest in security will override our concern for another state’s chagrin, particularly if that state does not have the capability to target the vehicles or offensively strike the United States in retaliation. We have already demonstrated our pragmatism on this front by launching missiles over countries without their knowledge or consent. The future will be no different.

Given these considerations, what can we expect to gain from developing this capability? The potential gains cover a range of political and military benefits.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Politically, this capability would allow us to pursue more attainable objectives without damaging our credibility worldwide. The perception that the U.S. is going
to change societies by force damages our standing in the international community and makes other countries suspicious of our motives and intentions. When we do respond to provocation as was the case in Afghanistan, we are faced with a task an order of magnitude more complex than before. Instead of simply targeting terrorists and removing a threat to our interests, we are now using the military to attempt to reconstruct a nation and society that has no desire for change. All we need to do is look at what a decade of effort has produced to assess the suitability of the military tool for this task. Initially, all we really needed to do was kill terrorists. Instead of a lightning raid, we wind up instead with a protracted counterinsurgency with no hope of a return on our investment. Pursue societal change with long-term diplomatic and economic initiatives and leave the military to do what it does best—apply force against threats to our security.

We would also remove a significant propaganda theme from the Islamic extremists— that we are anti-Islamic and want to establish something counter to their culture. Any large-scale, long-duration troop commitment or occupation in a preemptive, preventive, or retaliatory fashion simply plays into bin Ladin’s hand and helps creates the next jihadi training ground. A small manned strike capability would allow us to surgically cut out the terrorist cancer instead of trying to cure an endemic sickness, a task well beyond the range of our national interests or capabilities. Additionally, targeted strikes are an order of magnitude cheaper than a full military intervention. It would return force as a usable tool in the toolbox without removing the deterrent potential for threats along the rest of the spectrum.

Militarily, this capability would allow us to leverage the small-unit close
combat asymmetry inherent in our direct action units. Currently, every link in the chain that delivers a direct action unit to a target area compromises that advantage. Helicopter delivery is vulnerable to every small, medium, and heavy weapon in an enemy arsenal. Helicopters are by nature complex, accident-prone machines. Couple this with the relatively short refueling range, acoustic signature, and unstable aerodynamics and the risk quickly passes all but the highest acceptable political risk threshold. The support package infrastructure required to conduct these operations is one of the primary reasons SOF elements were not employed in the pre-9/11 options to address UBL.xxviii

This capability could also be sea-based for shorter range missions. Stowing gliders on one of the ships currently in the inventory would mitigate some of the physical concerns of transporting a team halfway around the world and expecting them to fight upon arrival. Having the tow vehicle launch from the continental United States, rendezvous with the ship mid-ocean, and fly-by to pick the glider up off the deck of one of our current amphibious ships would require minimal modifications to our force structure or existing equipment set. Adding this capability set to the current Marine Expeditionary Unit force structure complements our existing role as the nation’s expeditionary force in readiness, capable of projecting power from the sea. A team already in the geographic region would be adjusted to local time and positioned to coordinate with the unit that would likely serve as its quick reaction force.

The threat posed by non-state actors is not fading anytime soon. Having the capability to address these threats surgically will benefit our nation economically
and politically. It will preserve our military capability for those threats that warrant a complete commitment. We must ensure that no investigative body ever finds the need to use following words to describe our military again: “Government agencies also sometimes display a tendency to match capabilities to mission by defining away the hardest part of their job. They are often passive, accepting what are viewed as givens, including that efforts to identify and fix glaring vulnerabilities to dangerous threats would be too costly, too controversial, or too disruptive.”
ENDNOTES


vi  The 9/11 Commission Report, 120.

vii  The 9/11 Commission Report, 120.


x  The 9/11 Commission Report, 137.

xi  The 9/11 Commission Report, 140.

xii  The 9/11 Commission Report, 140.

xiii  The 9/11 Commission Report, 141.

xiv  The 9/11 Commission Report, 188.

xv  The 9/11 Commission Report, 190.


xxiv  The 9/11 Commission Report, 133.

xxv  Richard A. Shultz, Jr. “Showstoppers”


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