Abstract

The exigencies of the modern media age require that presidents put great effort into the crafting and maintenance of a positive image with the American people. The power of the president to realize his agenda in Washington and indeed around the world is directly affected by his standing with the public. The presidential image has become more contested, personal, and malleable as it has become more central and puissant. The Bush administration has shown a particular talent for disciplined management of presidential image, which has led to notable successes in public approval of the president's character.

“Presidential government is an illusion. . . .”Heclo and Salamon (1981, 1).

A triumphant president lands in a jet on an aircraft carrier, to celebrate with loyal troops a stunning victory over a tyrannical despot. The sailors greet him with boisterous cheering, and he gives a speech from the deck as the sun sets perfectly in the Pacific, the last golden rays of the sun illuminating a patriotic banner reading “Mission Accomplished.”

In the midst of a photo opportunity with Florida second graders about reading, a president is told in whispers by his chief of staff that the second tower at the World Trade Center has been hit by a terrorist attack. As two other
hijacked planes speed towards Washington, the confused president picks up “The Pet Goat,” and stays on photo-op autopilot for at least seven long minutes, chatting about goats and literacy (Paltrow 2004).

Two images of the same president, George W. Bush, illustrate the challenges of presidential image management in the 24-hour video era. One shows the president in a carefully planned setting of patriotism, victory, masculinity, and daring. The other shows a president taking no actions, making no decisions, as crucial minutes tick away. The Bush administration's success at image management is demonstrated by the fact that most Americans have seen the unprecedented carrier landing, while almost none have seen the complete footage of Bush complimenting Ms. Daniels's children on their reading abilities while the towers burned.

The image of the president, the impression Americans have of their chief executive as a leader and a human being, is vitally important to the success of any modern president. Public opinion about the personal characteristics of a leader has been seen as part of successful governance since before Pericles, and it is certainly present in the long history of the American presidency. This essay will briefly explore how presidential images are created and assess how the Bush image managers are doing at their task. It will conclude by raising questions about the future of presidential image management.

The Components of Presidential Image

What is image? It is both truth and lie, both accurate perception and the gap between reality and perception. It is not policy or substance. It is, however, connected to both. Image is built up day by day, slowly accreting sediment at the bottom of the lake of public opinion. Images can be startlingly resilient, in part because of the media's tendency to reinforce whatever the public image has become. At a certain point in a presidency, it becomes easier to change policy than it is to change image, for this very reason. As one of the great presidential image managers, Reagan aide Michael Deaver, observed, “in the television age, image sometimes is as useful as substance” (Waterman, Wright, and St. Clair 1999, 53).

The public image of a president is produced in a complex interaction among four elements: the “reality” of the president's character, actions, and policies; the image management of his staff; the attempted redefinitions of his political opponents; and the cacophony of media assessments of the man in the White House. Together, they create the inchoate and shifting image within the collective minds of Americans.

The “reality” that is the supposed root of image begins with the president's character, talents, worldview, and style. It also encompasses, in the no-privacy modern era, such things as family life and sexual behavior. The president's policies and political background are relevant as well, to the extent that they color the public's perception of the president as a man. Policies that are seen as mean spirited, thoughtless, or dangerous have all affected the personal image of presidents. It also includes his physical appearance, as well as his diction and his accent. Consider how the exigencies of image politics limit who can actually be president. While the American general population is perhaps the most obese in the world, the last president to be truly overweight was William Howard Taft in 1912. The last bald man elected president was Dwight Eisenhower. Given that estimates of the number of bald or mostly bald men above 35 years old in the general public range from 40% to 70%, it should astound us that the 16 men who ran for the major party nominations in 2000 and 2004 were all follicularly gifted. Not one of them was overweight, and the eventual winner in 2000 was remarkably svelte. Washington may be, as one quip has it, Hollywood for ugly people, but at the top, it is now run by people who are quite attractive, or at least not unattractive. If we consider Kennedy the first president of the television age, the trend toward physical attractiveness becomes clear. The last four presidents (Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, Bush II) are far more attractive than the preceding four (Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter). The reality of personal appearance may be the clearest example of the power of image in politics.
The image manager's task begins with deciding which of these aspects of the president to emphasize, and which to submerge. Sometimes, reality must be directly contradicted. A divorced president who has dysfunctional relationships with some of his own children is portrayed as a benevolent father figure (Reagan). A famously unfaithful husband lectures American teenagers about sexual propriety (Clinton). A president raised in wealth and privilege lets it be known that his favorite food is pork rinds and his favorite music is the Oak Ridge Boys (Bush I). The danger in such tactics is that attempts at image manipulation that directly contradict reality may strike the public as fake, a perception corrosive to all future attempts at image repair and manipulation (Waterman et al. 1999, 186). The best image management leaves no traces, no fingerprints of public relations professionalism. Thus, the call to "let Reagan be Reagan" or its equivalent is often heard. The typical protest from image managers is that their job is to let the public get to know the "real" president. In truth, the job is to let the public believe they know the real man.

Political opponents of the president know if they can increase the number of Americans who hold unfavorable impressions of the president as a person, they will have much greater success at defeating his policies. Many observers have commented on the increasingly vituperative tone of politics in the nation; the main cause is the emphasis on personal image. Politics had to become more personal because the personal is far more potent today than ever before. Because so many partisans in both parties have come to believe that the leadership of the opposition party is not just wrong on policy but are actually bad people, it is difficult for leaders to reach across the gulf between the parties without potentially alienating core supporters. Campaign finance reform also has much to answer for. By making parties and candidates dependent on thousands of individual donors, rather than the ultra-wealthy few, campaign finance reform has forced fundraisers to demonize their opponents. A Democratic letter emphasizing the positive aspects of John Kerry's platform will raise much less money than one that disrespects and demeans the personalities of George W. Bush and Tom DeLay. The politics of personal destruction pays as well as plays.

The ability of a White House to maintain a relatively neutral or positive personal image for the president has been changed by these increased incentives for his opponents to wage war against the president as an individual. This can be done through a number of different venues. First, changes in the media permit "narrowcasting" messages to partisan groups. When Americans watched three broadly marketed television networks, the need to at least appear objective and indeed, respectful, toward the office of the presidency limited the degree to which truly egregious and partisan characterizations of the president were widely distributed. Those who seek to distribute a negative image of the president will find many willing viewers on the Internet if not somewhere on cable television.

The media serves as a referee of the ongoing fight over the image of the president, adjudicating which depictions are credible through its decisions about what to broadcast. The media has also changed its standards as to what is news and what is private. In 1962, a woman picketed outside the White House, carrying a sign stating that John Kennedy was an adulterer and that she had photographic proof. Not a single media outlet broadcast her allegations, or even investigated them, even though many reporters and editors were aware of such rumors, and some knew them to be accurate (Reeves 1997, 242-43). Today, a half-baked, nearly unsourced allegation of adultery is on the Web within a few hours of its emergence, as occurred with John Kerry in 2004. The quality of a president's marriage is widely discussed in parts of the media, down to the sincerity of a kiss between husband and wife (Tipper and Al Gore in 2000, as well as the media's obsessive interpretations of public physical gestures between Bill and Hillary Clinton). While the partisan press era of the early republic did feature some scandalous assertions about the sexual practices and characters of occupants of the White House, the personalized coverage today is far more intrusive.

Some of the most powerful shapers of presidential image are not even journalists. The monologues and sketches on Leno, Letterman, and Saturday Night Live are at least as important as the nightly news broadcasts.
when it comes to the image of our leaders. These shows, which focus on the most simplified aspects of the public face of the president, are both an influence on presidential image and perhaps the best barometer of the public's current judgment about him.

These media depictions of presidents and their challengers quickly become hardened into almost irrefutable realities. George W. Bush—dumb. Bill Clinton—letch. Al Gore—wooden prig and serial liar. Bob Dole—old and cold. The media's own practices help set these images in concrete, through selective reporting. Perhaps the best example of this is the case of the grocery store scanner and Bush I. Widely perceived as an aloof patrician, Bush found this image particularly damaging when the economy was doing badly in 1990-1992. Examining new grocery store technology, Bush was alleged by the media to have looked at a checkout laser scanner with the wonder befitting a multi-millionaire insulated from the daily concerns of average Americans. While the first reporter who wrote of Bush's apparent bewilderment was not even there, it quickly became a hardened "fact" repeated endlessly, even by scholars (Waterman et al. 1999, 61-62). However, a videotape of the event shows Bush was not surprised at all by the scanner, as an apology from the publisher of the New York Times conceded (Kurtz 1992). It was simply too good not to be true; it hit Bush on his media sweet spot.

In a complicated and shifting interaction, these four forces (reality, image management, image attack from the opposition, and the media) shape the image of every president. What methods has the Bush White House used to convince Americans to perceive Bush positively?

**The Bush Image Team: Discipline and Set Design**

The Bush White House was tremendously successful at image management for almost three years in office. Two components stand out as worthy of procedural praise: the message discipline of the White House and the quality of the set design that has served as the backdrop for the president.

Although Bush seldom makes claims to having profited from his sterling education, it is unquestionably to his advantage to be our country's first MBA president. Bush runs his administration like a CEO, delegating widely but punishing swiftly. "This is the most disciplined White House in history," said an admiring Michael Deaver (Auletta 2004). Particularly in its staff conduct and ethos, a White House reflects the values and priorities of the president. Clinton, famously addicted to open-ended debate, had a White House that leaked constantly. Bush, by contrast, is a martinet for loyalty and discipline. Nearly every account of the internal operation of Bush's White House includes a testimony to its leak-proof nature (Millbank 2002). How has Bush managed to do what every president attempts? In addition to his MBA and his obvious administrative talents, Bush is the only modern president to have had a ground-level view of the operations of a White House staff. (During his father's term in office, Bush was an informal enforcer of discipline and a loyalty checker; York 2001a.) He has inspired a tremendous sense of personal loyalty in staffers, as well as some level of intimidation, which work together to stop self-aggrandizing or policy-based leaking. The Bush White House also wisely limits the number of people who regularly interact with the press. In previous White Houses, top aides were frequently made available to give interviews or at least make comments on stories. At the Bush White House, top staffers boast about being inaccessible to the media. President Bush has somehow inspired a selfless White House staff that puts his image ahead of their celebrity (Auletta 2004). Indeed, the men and women of the Bush White House come closer to achieving the ideal “passion for anonymity” than any other recent presidential staff. 4

The Bush White House has also been remarkably successful at convincing the rest of the executive branch to work with the White House on image management. The centrifugal forces of Washington bureaucracies and the personal ambitions of Cabinet secretaries often defeated such efforts in the past (Maltese 1992). To combat these tendencies, the Bush administration has appointed loyalists throughout the communications offices of the various agencies and departments (Kumar 2003a, 384). Adding to the uniformity of positive depictions of the
president and his policies is a new level of coordination and control of message with the Republican leadership on Capitol Hill and with linked interest groups.

All of the discipline on image control gives the White House extraordinary ability to force the media to cover the pictures and narratives it provides. If no one from the White House contributes to a negative image of the president, then the media are almost forced to cover the portrait of the president designed for them by Bush's image handlers.

**Presidential Set Design**

How a president should be shown to the public is the heart of presidential image management. Believing that most Americans will not read a newspaper article on any given day, or perhaps even watch through an entire news story, the Bush staff crafts an image of the president that suits the person flipping channels (Kumar 2003a, 387). The attention to detail, which has become legendary, is thus to be expected; if Americans only see one picture of their president each day, it better be a good one. At some events, wealthy Republican supporters in the shot behind the president have been instructed by the advance team to remove their ties, so that an image of normal Americans supporting Bush will be conveyed (Shella 2003). The backdrop is often composed of repetitive slogans, far too small for the live audience to see, but just right for television. Whether there is any marginal "subliminal" effect on the viewer of seeing slogans associating Bush with jobs, security, and strong families is unknown, but it again serves the busy channel-shifting American, who gets the White House message of the day. As Dan Bartlett, communications director put it:

> Americans are leading busy lives, and sometimes they don’t have the opportunity to read a story or listen to an entire broadcast. But if they can have an instant understanding of what the president is talking about by seeing 60 seconds of television, you accomplish your goals as communicators (Bumiller 2003).

In pursuit of the perfect video shot, events are scheduled like Hollywood movies, to get the cherished director's "golden hour" of setting sunshine. When the timing or weather prevents this, the staff has been known to spend tens of thousands of dollars on renting rock concert quality lighting sets for single televised events (Bumiller 2003).

Perhaps any White House would adopt this strategy today. Surveys suggest that amid the cacophony of the Internet and dozens of cable options, few Americans watch presidential speeches, and even when they do, few retain more than one simple message from a 30-minute speech (Welch 2003, 353). If the public has a bias toward absorbing information through pictures, then the White House will work to feed that preference. But it is also an inevitable response to the weaknesses of Bush's presentation of self. Unlike Reagan or Clinton, Bush is a poor public speaker. On rare occasions, he can fill a room with passion and inspire a nation with his vision and courage, as he did in his seminal September 20, 2001, speech to Congress. With a good speech, a supportive audience, and inspiration, Bush is frequently competent. He is, however, at his worst in unscripted interactions with non-supporters. Thus, perhaps the most crucial image-handling decision has been to insulate the president as much as possible from questions and conflict (Suskind 2004, 147-48). When Bush held an economic conference in Waco early in his administration, the president "spontaneously" wandered from panel to panel, with his comments prepared for each session. The conference was a Potemkin's village of discourse. Instead of actually discussing the economic issues of the day, as presidents as diverse as Ford and Clinton had done at similar events, the points to be made were prescreened, the conclusions about the policies already reached
before discussions began (Suskind 2004, 269-73). How could there be any debate at this “conference”? Almost all participants were fervent Bush supporters.

Deft awareness of Bush’s limitations explains why Bush has had fewer solo press conferences than any other recent president (Kumar 2003b). But it goes beyond avoiding tough questions from John King or Dana Millbank. Bush has enveloped himself in a security bubble in all of his public appearances. Those with anti-Bush signs or chanting anti-Bush slogans are relegated to distant areas with the Orwellian title of “free speech zones,” far from television cameras. Although the claim of security is made, Bush supporters with similar-sized signs are permitted to stay on the motorcade route, or outside a presidential event (Lindorff 2003). If the danger is assassination, surely those who wish the president harm are smart enough to carry a sign that says “Four More Years.” The claim that the post-9/11 security environment requires such control of dissent also rings hollow in that Governor Bush was known for forbidding protesters outside his mansion in ways no previous occupant had ever done (Baldauf 1999). The picture of Bush confronting a hostile demonstrator or even driving by angry crowds has rarely if ever been on American television. This image management conveys, wordlessly, subtly, and powerfully, the impression that those who disagree with the president are irrelevant and weak. They must be a fringe movement—they are physically on the fringe of every presidential event.

Presidential Image Management in the Bush White House

What images has the Bush White House conveyed of the president of the United States? While several have been tried, such as First Christian, Racial Uniter, and President CEO, the two major ones have been the Average American and the War Leader.

Average American with Common Values

President Bush has one of the most elite backgrounds of any president, and is only the second son of a president to become president. By November of 2004, the Bush family name will have been on six of the last seven presidential ballots. Bush also has an educational record far above the American norm, or even the average for presidents: Andover, Yale, and a Harvard MBA. Yet this man of such rarefied background has successfully sold himself to the public as a man of the people, a person of typical values and simple small-town beliefs.

In part, the reality of Bush makes it easy for the image to be conveyed. Even in comparatively harsh accounts of his presidency, the fact that he makes time for secretaries, cooks, and others shines through. Bush is not pretending to dislike intellectuals in order to woo voters. Dislike of intellectuals, particularly East Coast intellectuals, is one of the most constant themes in biographies of Bush, dating back to his time at Yale if not earlier. Unlike his father, who had to shield the fact that he spoke French from the press until after his election, Bush shows little evidence of academic gifts in need of hiding. Confronted with questions about the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Bush brushes them aside as of concern only to those in “elite circles” as if Bush had not spent his life in such circles.

One of the ways Bush demonstrates his everyman status is through his eager and sincere enthusiasm for sports, in particular baseball. One of the major image initiatives of the first nine months of his presidency was hosting tee ball games at the White House. By inviting small children to play an iconic American sport on the lawn of the White House, Bush was sending a simple message, according to a senior administration official:

... tee ball isn’t the reason people like him, but it's initiatives like this ... that show the wholesomeness factor and will allow him to be one of the more successful presidents (York 2001b).
The percentage of Americans who believe that Bush “shares your values” has never dropped below 50 percent, according to Gallup, and has often ranged much higher. The cause lies not only with the adroit handling of his image by his staff. Rather, it is also a product of his opponents' inability to broadcast a consistent counter-image. Those who oppose Bush cannot decide whether he is a dumb man pretending to be sophisticated and failing, or if he is a more sophisticated man pretending to be dumb for political reasons. It seems likely that Bush's tendency to fail at subject-verb agreement, to mangle relatively simple words, and to regularly demonstrate an inability to handle nuance serves as much to insulate him from the charge of privilege as it does to support the charge that he is lacking in the intellectual depth some see as vital to the presidency. The best image for a president suits his personality as well as his political needs. Bush clearly believes that he is in many significant ways a typical American, and this lends sincerity to the depiction, regardless of its accuracy.

War Leader

One of the chief constitutional duties of president is to lead the armed forces. Every recent American president has had to deploy the American military into hostile areas. However, the scope and intensity of the conflicts that Bush has launched make it a far more central part of his presidential image, perhaps more so than any president since Roosevelt. As the president during the most significant attack on the country since Pearl Harbor, Bush's image inevitably became mixed with the perception of his handling of military leadership. Bush has put himself into many positive military settings, including the high-profile aircraft carrier landing. When “major hostilities” were ended in Iraq in April of 2003, President Bush's communications staff wanted to put together a compelling event to celebrate the good news of rapid victory over Iraq. They chose to put the president on an aircraft carrier full of returning sailors from the region. In an unprecedented step, the commander in chief landed on the deck of the carrier in a pilot's uniform. Shifting to civilian gear, Bush spoke in front of a banner reading “Mission Accomplished” and the entire event was full of the mood of victory and celebration. Some Democrats complained initially about the jingoism and use of the military for partisan purposes, alleging that the event unnecessarily delayed the sailors return to port, and that Bush had been showboating to land by airplane. However, the event was generally viewed as wonderful politics, and evidence of the skill of the White House image team. As television pundit Chris Matthews asked: “Why are the Democrats so stupid to attack the best presidential picture in years?” (Whitney 2003).

The other iconic image of Bush as War President occurred in Thanksgiving of 2003. The president secretly traveled to Iraq to celebrate the classic American holiday with the troops, an act of personal courage given the security situation in Baghdad. The trip resulted in the perfect photo of Bush offering the troops a turkey on a platter. In this dramatic image, most of the tactics of the Bush image management team are on display. Few White Houses would have had the discipline to permit such a surprising and risky gesture to take place with no leaks. As with Bush's economic conference or the words posted behind him at public events, the turkey on the platter did not actually nourish any living person at the event—a display turkey, it only nourished the president's image at home. Finally, the military screened all non-Bush-supporting troops out of the event, thus extending Bush's no-dissent bubble even to the overseas environment (Sealey 2004). Had a single soldier challenged the president about weapons of mass destruction, extended deployments, or simply said, “Send me home, Mr. President,” all the positive outcomes for the president's image would have evaporated. Instead, the president's standing in polls improved significantly following the trip (Jacobson 2003).

Bush's image as a war leader has been an essential aspect of his popularity. Bush hovered just above 50 percent approval in the polls for the first eight months of his presidency. Following the attacks of 9/11, his popularity soared to unprecedented heights, and remained lofty for months as he led a successful and remarkably swift and low-casualty invasion of Afghanistan. A few months after the removal of the Taliban, a slow bleed began in his popularity. Just at the point where it was reaching its pre-9/11 levels, hostilities with Iraq
The Future of Presidential Image Management

The centrality of image to the American presidency is likely to grow. We may be only at the dawn of the era of the “short attention span presidency,” in which substantive policy proposals become entirely props in the pursuit of effective image conveyance. It is difficult to think of a countervailing political, technological, or cultural force which could stop the increasing salience of images to the voting preferences of the American public. In this sense, the gloomy jeremiad of Neil Postman (1985) and other communication scholars appears to have only been confirmed in the decades since his baleful predictions were first aired.

Some might agree with Postman that Americans are thus amusing themselves to death, to paraphrase the title of Postman’s most important book. Will modern presidents pursue the gossamer and ephemeral image, at the expense of long-term historical accomplishments? Consider Truman and Eisenhower, the last two presidents before the image became the dominant means of political communication. No American president has been lower in the polls at the point of leaving office than Truman was in 1953. Yet despite the image of a country bumpkin too small for the presidency, which he took with him back to Independence, Truman's stock has risen in the esteem of historians in every poll on presidential greatness since 1953. In Eisenhower's case, he was apparently content to let the public think he was less sharp than he actually was, in order to achieve substantive policy goals of moderate conservatism. One might observe that Truman and Eisenhower correctly put their time and efforts into matters of substance. Yet their presidency is not the one George W. Bush was sworn into on January 20, 2001. Image is so directly linked to the ability to achieve substantive policy goals that tactics such as Eisenhower’s may no longer be feasible. Even a president committed to achieving substantive goals will have to follow the logic of image management.

Yet there is another possibility, more hopeful than the inevitable subjugation of substance to image. Critical theorist Walter Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, made two key claims for the virtues of mechanically reproduced images: They would free the masses from elite filters because of the immediacy of their conveyance, and they would reveal previously hidden aspects of life. In the case of one iconic image of George W. Bush, we can see evidence of Benjamin’s prescience: the carrier shot. Although widely viewed at the time as a brilliant exploitation of Bush’s victory over Saddam, by April of 2004, many more Americans had died in the occupation of Iraq than in its liberation. Unlike the largely positive pictures that came out during the initial war in Iraq, the images of Americans massacred and humiliated in March and April of 2004 were very tough for the Bush White House to spin; their immediacy was far less subject to elite filtering, as Benjamin would have anticipated.

Similarly, one aspect of life that has been largely hidden from most citizens during the nation-states era is the true face of warfare and occupation. No matter how vivid the text of a Crane, Tolstoy, or Hemingway, video takes a nation to the frontlines in a way that the printed word never did and never will. Previous presidents could occupy, for example, the Philippines, and fight a long bloody guerrilla war, secure in the knowledge that the public would have little immediate reaction or even knowledge. Long before the more than 100 deaths and thousands of maimed American troops of April of 2004, the images of death and upheaval in “liberated” Iraq had forced a slow retreat from “Mission Accomplished” by the Bush White House. What had looked like the acme of image management began to resemble a blunder. At first, the president implied that the Navy had chosen the banner and that they were responsible for selecting it, not his staff (Conason 2003a). Eventually, the White House admitted that they had planned and produced the banner, although the Navy had physically put it up on
the ship (Conason 2003b). As the bodies piled up in April, Karl Rove, the man who more than anyone is responsible for Bush's image, conceded in an interview that “Mission Accomplished” was not a wise move. Contra Postman, the triumph of image over substance, of spin over reality, may be farther off than it initially seemed.

Footnotes

Jeremy D. Mayer is assistant professor in the School of Public Policy at George Mason University. He is the author of Running on Race as well as the brief textbook 9-11: The Giant Awakens.

1. Although our anorexic media (particularly David Letterman) often labeled Clinton as “fat,” in fact, he was among our more telegraphic presidents. Indeed, his image handlers probably did not mind the label, because it gave him something in common with millions of Americans, much the same way Bush's fractured diction does. Clinton got the best of both worlds—he did not look fat on television, which would have been disastrous, but got to be seen sympathetically by obese Americans regardless.

2. Obviously, we are not considering the two female candidates, and we are also not getting picky about those two candidates with thinning hair problems.

3. And as seen by the rumors of plastic surgery swirling around John Kerry, even this reality is subject to alteration.


5. See, for example, the letter by former White House staffer John DiIulio, which makes clear Bush's common touch, as well as Paul O’Neil’s account as told in Ron Suskind, The Price of Loyalty (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

6. The White House denies that it knew the decorative turkey would be there, or that Bush picking it up for the cameras was planned. Mike Allen, “The Bird Was Perfect but Not for Dinner: In Iraq Picture, Bush Is Holding the Centerpiece,” Washington Post, December 4, 2003, p. A33.

7. The Bush administration may also be controlling the image of the president at war in a subtle way, by enforcing with new vigor a policy denying media access to the arrival of military casualties from Iraq and Afghanistan at Dover Air Base. These images of coffins draped in flags had been emblematic of the costs of previous military conflicts.


9. It has even been compared to Michael Dukakis's head bobbling over the top of an M-1 tank, the previous nadir of self-inflicted image wounds.

References

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