

AIR, LAND OR MARITIME STRATEGIES - WHICH IS MORE CRUCIAL ON THE BATTLEFIELD?

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ABSTRACT

Citing various historical events, the writer argues that maritime and air strategies must always be assessed and formulated in terms of their impact on land strategy. In the first half of the essay, the writer discusses how maritime strategy has to be always developed and evaluated in terms of its impact on land strategy. In the second half of the essay, the writer discusses and rebuts the belief that air strategy can be formulated and assessed on its own merits as the decisive element in war, independent of its impact on land strategy. The writings of several theorists as well as the battles and campaigns of the 20th Century, in particular from World War Two (WWII) were deliberated. Focusing the scope of his essay within the context of non-nuclear, conventional war between states in the 20th century, the writer concludes that air and maritime strategies must always be assessed and formulated in terms of their impact on land strategy.

Keywords: Seapower; Airpower; Operation Overlord; Manoeuvrist; Island-hopping

INTRODUCTION

Strategy refers to the utilisation of military force to attain political aims.¹ Land, air and maritime strategies can therefore be understood as the employment of military power in the land, air and sea domains respectively, to achieve states' political objectives. A foundational appreciation of maritime and air strategies and their perceived relation to land strategies, can be derived from key theorists of seapower—Alfred Mahan, Julian Corbett and Jeune Ecole and theorists of airpower—Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard and William Mitchell, and the land-centric concept of manoeuvre warfare.² Further insights can be obtained by applying these theories to key battles and wars of the 20th century, in particular World War II (WWII).

This essay argues for the notion that air and maritime strategies must always be assessed and formulated in terms of their impact on land strategy. History has shown how air and maritime strategies have been formulated specifically to create the necessary conditions for a successful land offensive to defeat the enemy. History has also shown how the significance of operational victories in the air and maritime domains must be assessed and contextualised in terms of the strategic significance on land strategy and the overall

military campaign. The first half of the essay discusses how maritime strategy has to be always developed and evaluated in terms of its impact on land strategy, with reference to the writings of Julian Corbett and how they can be applied in the context of the Pacific campaign during WWII, as well as the 1982 Falklands War and 1991 Gulf War. Reviewing the theories advanced by Alfred Mahan and Jeune Ecole in the context of WWII, this essays argues that maritime strategy cannot be a decisive factor in war, independent of its impact on land strategy. The second half of the essay discusses and rebuts the belief that air strategy can be formulated and assessed on its own merits as the decisive element in war, independent of its impact on land strategy. This is done by reviewing the work of key theorists and discussing how the air campaigns of WWII, the 1991 Gulf War and the 1999 Kosovo crisis impacted land strategy. In addition, in the context of land-centric manoeuvre warfare, air strategy has been formulated specifically in support of land strategy. This was epitomised in the Nazis' 'blitzkrieg' strategy in continental Europe during WWII and in the Allies' subsequent liberation of France in Operation Overlord and the follow-on land operations. For the purpose of this essay, 'strategy' will be contextualised within the scope of non-nuclear, conventional war between states.

FORMULATING AND ASSESSING MARITIME STRATEGY IN SUPPORT OF LAND STRATEGY

Feted as one of history's most renowned seapower strategists, Julian Corbett (1854-1922) believed that maritime strategy had to be formulated in terms of its impact on land strategy. Corbett emphasised that 'since men live upon the land and not upon the sea', wars are always resolved either by armies or by what the 'fleet makes it possible for your army to do'.³ From Corbett's perspective, maritime strategy involved ascertaining what the navy had to do in support of the army's land strategy. Beyond merely controlling the sea and transporting troops, Corbett understood the navy's role in amphibious operations was to support the army in getting ashore and keeping it supplied thereafter.⁴

(1) World War II

Corbett's articulation of the importance of formulating maritime strategy in support of land strategy was evident in the contrasting strategies and outcomes of the American and Japanese forces in the Pacific islands during WWII. Having gained sea control and air superiority in the Pacific by mid-1942, the Americans adopted an 'island-hopping' strategy of amphibious warfare. This meant the projection of assaulting forces across the maritime domain and onto the land domain to progressively and selectively capture Japanese-held islands that would support subsequent maritime and airpower projection in the Pacific. This involved specific combat techniques, landing craft and weapons, and close co-ordination between Navy and Marine forces to achieve success in land operations.⁵

In contrast, lacking a strategy of amphibious defence that co-ordinated efforts between the Services, Japan's maritime strategy was not formulated and integrated with its land strategy to defend Japanese-held islands in the Pacific. Without a coherent maritime strategy of naval and air support and supply, Japan's ground forces defended islands in isolation, which proved futile.⁶ Such contrasting maritime strategies (or lack of) and their impact on land strategies and eventual campaign outcomes support the notion that maritime strategy has to be formulated and assessed in terms of its impact on land strategy.

(2) 1982 Falklands War and 1991 Gulf War

The necessity to formulate and assess maritime strategy in terms of its impact on land strategy was evident during the 1982 Falklands war and the 1991 Gulf War. In both instances, the victors leveraged on sea control to undertake strategic transportation and operational manoeuvre from the sea to set the stage for victorious land manoeuvres.

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In 1982, the Royal Navy transported and escorted the invasion force from the United Kingdom (UK) across the Atlantic to the Falklands. The Royal Navy achieved sea control after its submarine sank the Argentine Navy's flagship, the heavy cruiser *General Belgrano*, prompting the Argentinian Navy to return to port and remain there for the rest of the campaign. The subsequent employment of the Royal Navy allowed the British Army and Royal Marines to be (1) landed ashore intact and out of harm's way, (2) supported by naval gunfire and carrier-based aircraft during their subsequent advance and attack to capture key objectives, and (3) be provided with good logistical support throughout the campaign, while preventing their enemies from being resupplied by sea.⁷

In 1991, strategic transportation by sea was necessary to convey British and American combat and support vehicles, ammunition and logistical supplies necessary for the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait. British and American air superiority allowed the deployment of ship-based helicopters to decisively engage and defeat the Iraqi navy's fast attack crafts, and achieve sea control. The 'amphibious feint' by the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade drew Iraqi attention to the Kuwaiti coastline, reinforced the impression that the attack would come across Kuwait's southern border and fixed six Iraqi divisions in the area of operations. This provided the Coalition's main effort the element of



Sinking of the General Belgrano.

surprise to launch an outflanking move deep into Iraq from 322km to the west.⁸ In these regards, the Coalition's maritime strategy was instrumental to the subsequent success of its land strategy, and therefore has to be assessed in these terms.

CAN MARITIME STRATEGY BE DECISIVE IN WAR INDEPENDENT OF LAND STRATEGY?

(1) The 'Decisive' Concentration of Naval Power in Battle

Unlike Corbett, Alfred Mahan (1840-1914) saw maritime and land strategy as mutually independent. Dubbed the 'father of the concept of seapower', Mahan viewed the navy, and the seapower it conferred on a state, as an autonomous instrument of war that operated independently of the army and land warfare.⁹ To Mahan, maritime strategy was about concentrating one's naval combat power to decisively engage and destroy the enemy fleet, thereby winning control of the sea. Such maritime dominance would engender prosperity through colonialism and trade. However, critics have highlighted that Mahan's writings ignored the impact of maritime strategy on land strategy during

his era, in terms of naval artillery and attacks on land objectives by infantry deployed from the sea. Mahan's ideas on the autonomy of maritime strategy was to be further undermined by the subsequent development of airpower and the employment of military forces in an integrated manner across the services during WWII.¹⁰

The Battles of Coral Sea and Midway in the Pacific during WWII were decisive naval encounters where the concentration of American naval power as a successful maritime strategy in defeating the Japanese fleets must be assessed in terms of their impact on American land strategy in the Pacific. In terms of maritime strategy, both battles saw the emergence of the aircraft carrier as the new capital ship, with the battle contested through carrier-based aircraft and beyond line of sight and range of the guns of the opposing fleets. The Battle of Coral Sea damaged two Japanese aircraft carriers who were subsequently not involved in the Battle of Midway, where the Japanese were decisively routed with four aircraft carriers sunk. This was the turning point that effectively granted the United States (US) with the necessary control of the sea and air for the island-hopping amphibious assaults by US Marines, commencing with Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands,

to reverse the tide of Japanese expansionism in the Pacific.¹¹ In this regard, the effectiveness of American maritime strategy has to be evaluated not only as an end in itself, but by its enabling of a land strategy of island hopping and amphibious assaults.

(2) The 'Decisive' War on Commerce

Like Mahan, 19th century Jeune Ecole theorists conceived of maritime strategy independently of land strategy.¹² In contrast to Mahan's emphasis on decisive destruction of the enemy's battle fleet, Jeune Ecole theorists believed in a maritime strategy of war on commerce, which would force an adversary's government to sue for peace. Such a strategy involved a weaker naval fleet, i.e. 19th century France avoiding decisive combat with the adversary's much stronger fleet, i.e. 19th century Britain, and instead attack its merchant fleet. The consequent disruption to trade and industry was expected to be so severe that the adversary's government would be pressured into peace.¹³ However, Jeune Ecole theorists neglected to consider the negative impact that a war on commerce could have on an adversary's armaments industry and the resultant constraints on his military's land strategy which would lead to eventual defeat, as epitomised in the Battle of the Atlantic during WWII.

The Battle of the Atlantic between the Allies and Germany during WWII was a 'decisive' war on commerce in so far as maritime and air strategy critically impacted land strategy by shaping the conditions for the Allies' invasion and recapture of continental Europe. To counter the German U-boat campaign, the Allies adopted a holistic and effective maritime strategy of merchant convoys escorted by destroyers and carrier-based aircraft, reinforced by land-based long range surveillance and bomber aircraft, and American large-scale building of merchant ships. U-boat construction yards, manufacturing plants and bases were also attacked by bombers. By optimising Allied shipping capacity and minimising shipping losses, the Allies' maritime strategy for the Battle of the Atlantic ensured the viability of UK's reliance on trans-Atlantic conveyance of American food, raw materials and troops to sustain its economy and war effort. It also allowed the UK to be a 'staging area' for the subsequent amphibious invasion of France and liberation of continental Europe from Nazi Germany.¹⁴ Failure to prevail in the Battle of the Atlantic would have deprived

the UK and the US of the necessary means to undertake a land campaign and render its strategy for the invasion of continental Europe irrelevant.

CAN AIR STRATEGY BE DECISIVE IN WAR INDEPENDENT OF LAND STRATEGY?

The impact of air strategy on land strategy was a non-issue for the classical airpower theorists of the early 20th century, who argued that decisive victory in war could be attained through air strikes on the 'vital centres' of industry, administration, transport and population in enemy cities. These actions would destroy the physical and moral resistance of the enemy's civilian population, forcing the enemy's government into submission. Italian Giulio Douhet (1869-1930), American Billy Mitchell (1879-1936) and Briton Sir Hugh Trenchard (1873-1956) advocated for the singular importance of an independent and offensive oriented air force in winning a war. While acknowledging the relevance of air strategy in support of maritime and land strategy, they emphasised the unique mobility and reach of airpower that allowed the air force to act independently and win the war decisively. Unlike the Army and Navy, offensive action by the Air Force was not restricted by geography and enemy defence lines on the ground. Air strategy centred on attaining command of the air by destroying the enemy's combat air power on the ground, i.e., Douhet or through decisive air battles, i.e., Mitchell, and thereafter by targeting the aforementioned 'vital centres' to force the enemy's civilian population and government to capitulate.¹⁵ As far as classical theorists of airpower were concerned, air strategy was to be primarily assessed and formulated on its own singular ability to deliver decisive victory, without regard for land strategy.

(1) World War II

In reality, the above-mentioned notion that air strategy could be formulated and assessed on its own merits, independent of land strategy, was undermined by the ineffectiveness of non-nuclear strategic bombing in securing decisive victories during WWII. In the Pacific, the US' strategic bombing of Japanese shipping and cities, and sea blockade by submarines, did not break the will of the Japanese people and government. Although the Japanese fleet and air force were decimated, its industry and cities devastated, its

economy and war effort deprived of raw materials, and its people subjected to hardship and suffering, the will of the Japanese in defending an invasion of their homeland remained resolute and was only broken in the face of defenceless amidst unprecedented devastation by the two atomic bombings.¹⁶

Likewise in Europe, the Combined Bomber Offensive (CBO) (1943-1945) by the US and UK on Luftwaffe targets, German industry, raw materials and transport infrastructure in cities did not break the will of Nazi Germany and bring about a conclusive victory.¹⁷ Instead, the CBO was a critical, albeit, indirect factor in the eventual defeat of Germany. By destroying the Luftwaffe in the air, on the ground and in the factories, the CBO established and sustained air superiority that facilitated its subsequent disruption of the German war effort by attacking industry, fuel and electricity production, as well as transportation and communications infrastructure.¹⁸ For example, throughout the CBO, the Germans only achieved one-third of their planned aircraft production. The Luftwaffe lost about half of its single engine fighter force in May 1944, the month before the Normandy invasion. These actions set the conditions for successful D-day landings in Normandy in 1944 and the subsequent liberation of

France and surrender of Germany less than a year later.¹⁹ In this regard, the air strategy of strategic bombing has to be assessed in terms of its successful impact on land strategy, rather than its ability to bring about decisive victory independently.

(2) 1991 Gulf War and 1999 Kosovo Crisis

However, the successes of air strategy in the 1991 Gulf War and 1999 Kosovo crisis half a century later appeared to affirm the notion of classical theorists that air power could deliver decisive victory in war. This implied that the formulation of air strategy rested on its own merit without the need to consider land strategy. The air campaign during the Gulf War lasted 38 days, disrupting Iraqi Command and Control, Communications, Intelligence (C3I) and supply lines, destroying their air defence and eroding their will to fight. The subsequent land campaign lasted just four days, with minimal coalition casualties. More spectacularly, the 1999 Kosovo crisis was hailed as the first occasion that air strikes on political and military targets forced an adversary's capitulation, without the use of conventional land forces and at no loss of life to own forces.²⁰

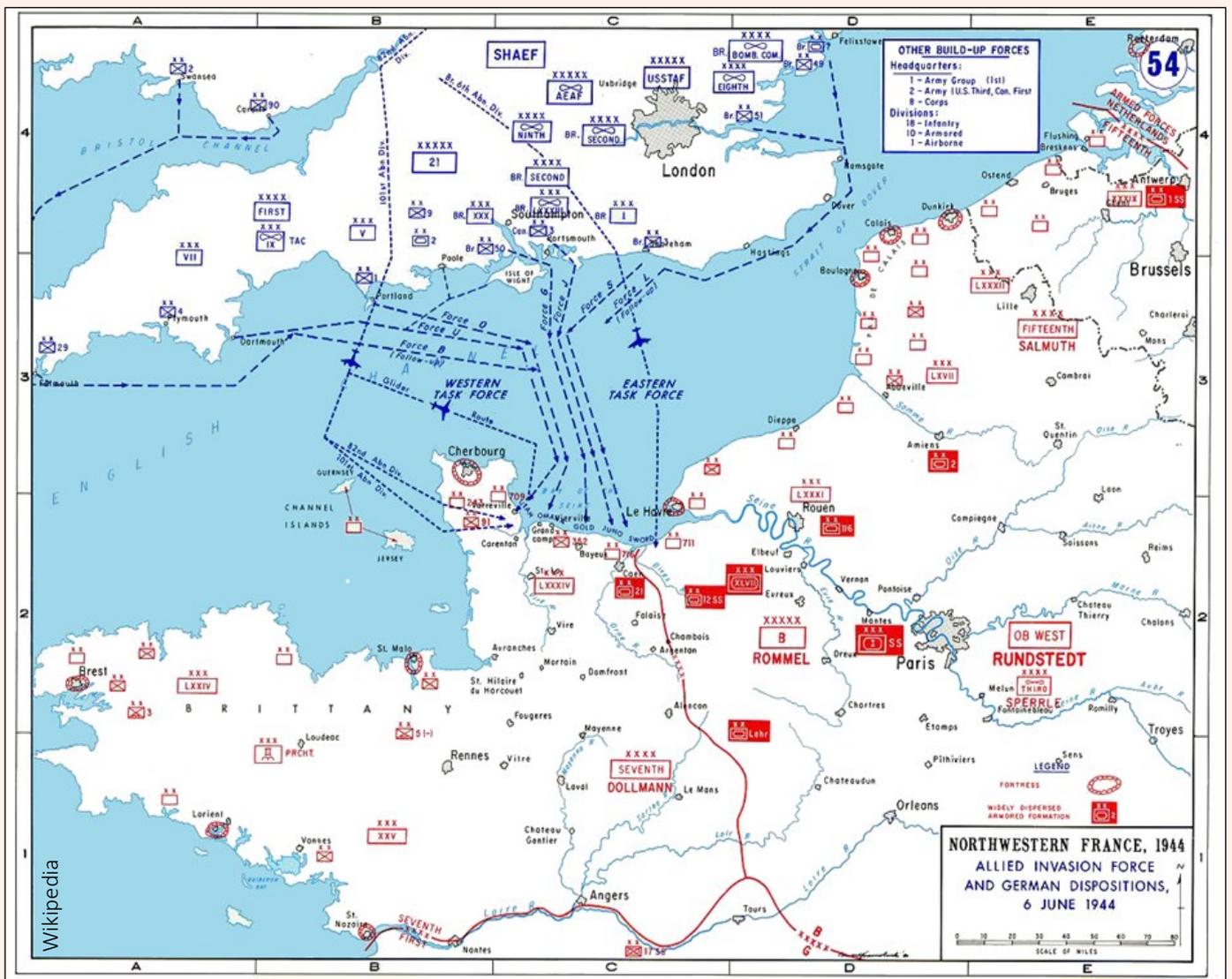


B-29 Superfortress bombers dropping incendiary bombs on Yokohama during May 1945.

Without ground intervention, in the 78 days that it took for the NATO air strikes to compel Milosevic's surrender, ethnic cleansing continued unabated, displacing nearly a million ethnic Albanians and killing thousands within Kosovo.

In so far as the achievement of war objectives necessitated physical occupation of enemy territory, the success of the air strategy adopted in each instance should be assessed in terms of its impact on land strategy. Strategic air strikes did not trigger the capitulation of Saddam Hussein in 1991, but created the conditions for an overwhelming and swift victory on land. The 1999 Kosovo crisis highlighted both the

success and limitations of an air strategy of strategic strikes that was not executed in support of an actual land intervention. Without ground intervention, in the 78 days that it took for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) air strikes to compel Milosevic's surrender, ethnic cleansing continued unabated, displacing nearly a million ethnic Albanians and killing thousands within Kosovo. On success, the coercive effect of NATO air strikes in triggering President Milosevic's surrender must be contextualised with two other complementary and important factors, namely Serbia's failure to obtain Russian support to counter NATO pressure and Milosevic's perception of a growing possibility of a NATO ground campaign. For the latter, the air strategy of strategic bombing can be assessed as an effective one that allowed for a land strategy of posturing and threatening a ground invasion, without deploying boots on the ground in Kosovo. This minimised loss of life and sustained domestic support for American intervention in Kosovo.²¹



D-Day assault routes into Normandy.

FORMULATING AND ASSESSING AIR STRATEGY IN SUPPORT OF LAND STRATEGY

Classical theorists of land warfare saw air strategy as subordinate to land strategy, with air power employed in support of a successful land strategy of manoeuvre-centric warfare. Britons J.F.C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart envisaged land strategy as ‘... after heavy tanks breached the enemy’s forward defences, massed squadrons of light tanks supported by aircraft would roam at large behind enemy lines, rapidly over-running essential command and logistical infrastructure.’²² In a similar manoeuvrist vein, as prescribed by the Soviet ‘deep battle’ doctrine, the quick and sustained advance of mechanised forces on multiple axes was to be complemented by airborne landings in the enemy’s depth and supported by air strikes from the forward to the depth of the enemy. Such an air strategy sought to support the sustained advance of land manoeuvre forces by disrupting the enemy’s Command and Control (C2), and through positional dislocation of his mobile reserves.²³ Air strategy, by delivering combat power both directly—air strikes on enemy C2, interdiction of enemy armour and close air support, and indirectly—airborne insertion of troops, would be instrumental in the success of the overall land strategy.

German Blitzkrieg warfare in Europe during WWII is a prime historical example of how air strategy was formulated specifically in support of a manoeuvre-centric land strategy. The Luftwaffe was not structured in terms of doctrine and equipping to operate independently in long-range air operations to secure decisive victory over an adversary, as desired by Hitler in the Battle of Britain. Rather, its combat aircraft, transport aircraft and airborne troops were all conceived to support the armed forces’, i.e. Wehrmacht’s operations. The development of the Ju 87 Stuka dive bomber was one key example. Blitzkrieg strategy centred on close co-ordination between air attacks and columns of tanks and motorised infantry breaking through enemy defence lines and advancing into the enemy’s depth. In this regard, air strategy was formulated in support of land strategy and ought to be assessed in terms of supporting the Nazis to rapidly overrun countries such as Poland in 1939 and France in 1940.²⁴

Air supremacy over the area of operations gave Allied commanders the confidence and the ability to launch the Normandy landings and prosecute subsequent operations in France.

The notion that air strategy has to be always formulated and assessed with reference to its impact on land strategy was also exemplified by Operation Overlord, the invasion of Normandy by the Allies in June 1944. The Allied air superiority campaign had eliminated an average of 50% of available German fighters in each of the months of March, April and May 1944. Air supremacy over the area of operations gave Allied commanders the confidence and the ability to launch the Normandy landings and prosecute subsequent operations in France. On 6th June, 1944, 102 Allied fighter squadrons dominated the skies above the invasion fleet, landing areas and above France to prevent interference by German warplanes. The destruction of bridges and railroads, and patrolling of roads by Allied fighters, forced many German units to move on foot and effectively isolated the landing areas from external enemy reinforcement. Following the break-out from Normandy, Allied air power was employed to seek and engage German armour in the path of advancing Allied armoured forces.²⁵ In these respects, air strategy was formulated in support of land strategy and was effective in enabling the success of Operation Overlord and the liberation of France.

CONCLUSION

Situating its argument within the context of non-nuclear conventional war between states in the 20th century, this essay has argued for the notion that air and maritime strategies must always be assessed and formulated in terms of their impact on land strategy. Maritime strategy, as proposed by Julian Corbett and applied to the Pacific campaign during WWII, the 1982 Falklands War and 1991 Gulf War, was about leveraging on sea control to make a critical difference to land strategy and campaign outcomes. This involved strategic transportation of troops and assets, launching of

expeditionary operations and projection of air power from aircraft carriers. Unlike the theories of Mahan and Juven Ecole, maritime strategy, as applied in the destruction of the Japanese fleet at Battle of Midway and facing off the German U-boat threat in the Battle of the Atlantic, was not decisive in and of itself. Rather, it had a decisive impact on the Allies' land strategies and campaign outcomes. This essay has also discussed how air strategy cannot be formulated and assessed on its own merits as the decisive element in war, independent

of its impact on land strategy. In contrast to the notion of the singularly decisive impact of air power advanced by theorists, the air campaigns of WWII and 1991 Gulf War brought victory by positively shaping land strategy. In the context of land-centric manoeuvre warfare, air strategy was formulated specifically in support of land strategy, as epitomised by the Nazis' successful blitzkrieg strategy in continental Europe during WWII, and the Allies' subsequent Operation Overlord and liberation of occupied France.

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