Recreating America

American Empire in Western Europe during the early Cold War

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In *“Empire” by Integration*, historian Geir Lundestad recounts a moment in March 1947 when United States senators William Fulbright, Elbert Thomas, and congressman Hale Boggs brought a resolution to Congress which announced, “that the Congress favours the creation of a United States of Europe.”¹ While it was never passed, this resolution succinctly explains American designs in Western Europe following the Second World War. This essay will answer the question of how US policy toward Western Europe during the early Cold War should be understood. It will begin by tracing the roots of American imperialism and exceptionalism, contextualized within the mid-twentieth century mission and interests of the United States in Western Europe. The latter half of this essay will focus on how the United States used imperial tactics to recreate Western Europe in its own image after the Second World War through military, political, economic, and cultural means. It will not render judgement on whether the United States was successful in this regard, only that these were the aims of the United States. Ultimately, this essay will argue that American policy toward Western Europe following the Second World War should be understood as empire-building, motivated by a desire to recreate Western Europe in the American image.

Geir Lundestad wrote that “Americans tend to see many features of the American model as universal, something which the rest of the world should emulate,” and referred to free markets, democracy, and the federal system as central to this “model.” These tenets became most important to American foreign policy during the Cold War.² However, the tendency to view the American model

as universal has defined and guided American foreign policy since its inception. The root of American exceptionalism, as argued by historian Antony Hopkins, is derived from seventeenth century Puritan migrants who fled Europe for the New World. They brought with them an extremist Protestant ideology which spread throughout the colonies the idea that they were pure, exceptional people.³ The American Revolution helped catalyze this ideology and imbued it with a political exceptionalism, defined by American republicanism as unique and righteous. As a result, exceptionalism began to take root in American foreign policy. For example, the Spanish-American War and the acquisition of an overseas empire, including in Hawaii and the Philippines, introduced the proliferation of “liberty” as a humanitarian justification for imperialism and war.⁴

Liberal internationalism, an ideology advocated for by President Woodrow Wilson, extended American exceptionalism to the international system. Wilson believed that liberal democracy, foundational to the United States, must be replicated in other nations to facilitate liberty and peace. Wilson’s argument for “self-determination,” outlined in his Fourteen Points, was a paternalistic vision which held liberal values and democratic government akin to the United States as prerequisites.⁵ Wilson became the original proponent of the “activist interpretation of the nation’s historic mission,” which linked leadership in the international order to the spread of American liberal values. The foundation laid by Wilson was picked up by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), and designated American leadership as an essential component of the international system.⁶

FDR's "New Deal" would play an important role in the postwar era, as the first "wholly secular reform movement in American history" with a focus on broad economic change. The United States would try to export this success to Western Europe through imperial practices.⁷

Historian John Thompson makes a distinction between "empire" and "imperial." While Thompson does not believe the United States' postwar position should be characterized as an "empire," he does believe that the United States has summarily possessed an "imperial" mentality.⁸ Lundestad takes a different approach and uses political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski's definition of empire to characterize Western Europe post-1945 as "a hierarchical system of political relationships, radiating from the center."⁹ Through these political relationships, the United States actively tried to replicate the prosperity it had achieved in Western Europe.¹⁰ Using both of these concepts in tandem more accurately describes American action in Western Europe after the Second World War, as the US-imposed imperial policy in Western Europe in an attempt to replicate itself in the region through the creation of a hierarchical transatlantic empire.

The goals of American policymakers after the Second World War continued Wilson's mission to promote American values internationally.¹¹ In 1945, Truman expressed his desire to create "stable, democratic, and friendly governments which were essential for the future permanent peace of Europe," made possible by the unique position of the United States in 1945, derived especially from its strong economic potential.¹² Between 1939-1945, US Gross National Product (GNP) grew from \$210 billion to \$355 billion, and the US was privileged with a substantial relative military advantage, a broad domestic base for its foreign policy, and support in Western Europe for liberal democracy.¹³ This new power drew Western Europe into the "American sphere of influence."¹⁴

George Kennan articulated American interests in Western Europe as vital to American

heritage and tradition, noting that the deterioration of Europe would cause the United States to "suffer a cultural and spiritual loss incalculable in its long-term effects," and Truman, similarly, connected Western Europe to the maintenance of the "American way of life."¹⁵ This existential linkage had implications for racial elements within US-European relations. Hopkins notes that leaders across the Atlantic believed in Anglo-Saxon superiority, and President Truman especially believed in his race's "providential" mission. This shared mission permitted compromise on key issues which a traditional imperial power would not tolerate. For example, Britain was supported by the United States in maintaining its imperial possessions.¹⁶ There is also a cultural aspect to the relationship, whereby US officials believed that 'less work' had to be done to spread American ideals throughout Europe based on a shared heritage.¹⁷

The shared identity, heritage, and culture between the United States and Western Europe reinforced the will of American officials to commit serious resources to Western European stability and prosperity in defence against the Soviet Union. This American commitment manifested itself in support for European integration and the development of a united Europe founded on American values.¹⁸ Political scientist Giovanna Dell'Orto argues that American imperial policy found footing in Western Europe as a direct result of American exceptionalism, founded in the belief domestically and abroad that its "history and constitution" made it unique. A "deference born of respect" subsequently formed in Europe toward the US which provided headway for American imperialism.¹⁹ These factors supported American-led imperial interventions in Western Europe to transform the region into a mirror of the United States.

The immediate postwar era, featuring the collapse of both the British and French Empires, presented opportunity for an imperial United States to proliferate its ideal liberal democratic world order within the Old World through economic and cultural tutelage. However, it would first need to establish

military and political control over European affairs, cloaked in the expressed desire to defend the United States from the Soviet Union, accomplished by 'securing' Europe against communist influence. In 1945, providing this security was possible as the US had become the strongest military power in the world.²⁰ Military occupation of Western Europe was the United States' first step in establishing empire in Western Europe, beginning with the Yalta Conference of 1945 which facilitated the partition of Germany after the war, and giving the United States responsibility for military administration over a part of the former German state. The occupation of Germany must be understood as a colonial administration, as the primary American goal was to make Germany into a "replica of the United States."²¹ One way this transformation of German society was done was through an attempted restructuring of the education system. The de-Nazification process saw 50% of secondary school teachers and administrators fired by 1946, before American "experts" were brought in to initiate curriculum reform, textbook revision, and recreate American educational standards in Germany.²² The overall sentiment was to teach the Germans how to "become good democrats, and by implication, good Americans."²³ Furthermore, the United States built an enormous network of military bases across Europe, especially in Germany, establishing legal control over pieces of European territory throughout the Cold War. These bases were stark representations of American power in Europe, and allowed the United States to retain territorial sovereignty within the borders of a former enemy state.²⁴

However, the most important aspect of US military policy in Europe was the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO was founded in 1949 and brought twelve countries under American military leadership to counter the Soviet Union.²⁵ States participating in the alliance believed in the requirement of American military support to ensure their security.²⁶ The feeling was mutual for the United States. In 1963, Secretary of State Dean Rusk said that

"we believe our presence there is essential to the defence of the US."²⁷ This was reflected in the control the United States possessed over NATO. Despite being a multinational alliance, the organization was fashioned primarily by the United States, and from the United States' "common heritage and civilization" with Western Europe.²⁸ Firstly, NATO policy reflected the foreign policy of the United States. When Eisenhower altered US nuclear policy through the "New Look" and "massive retaliation," NATO did the same. When President John F. Kennedy took office and shifted to "flexible response" capabilities, NATO again modified its policy to mirror the United States.²⁹ Furthermore, the US had "authoritative knowledge" in Western Europe from the 1940s to 1960s, and could determine the results of NATO committee meetings with relative ease. Eisenhower noted that the NATO meetings were "a means by which our ideas and leadership can be exerted among other nations."³⁰

NATO was not only just understood as a counter to the Soviet Union. Even as the Soviet threat dwindled mildly during the early Cold War, the United States saw NATO as key to its influence in Europe and its ability to keep Germany "on a leash."³¹ Furthermore, NATO command was structured so that the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) would always be an American.³² NATO command structure gave the United States almost unilateral control over the actions of the multinational, and primarily European, alliance. An early example of SACEUR being used unilaterally by the United States was in preparation for a "coal famine" in 1945 which was feared to "destroy the political and economic order in Europe." Eisenhower was SACEUR at this time, and President Truman ordered him to use NATO resources and find a way to export 25 million tons of coal from West Germany to help restore the German economy.³³ In this case, the United States unilaterally used SACEUR to advance its economic interests in Germany in support of its vision for a prosperous, united Western Europe.

The United States also attempted to alter political structures in European nations to mold them into permanent liberal democracies in the image of American democracy. President Eisenhower is referenced in official US state papers as advocating for the development of European integration based on the historical trajectory of the United States.³⁴ This demonstrates a clear psychological connection which associated Western Europe with a primordial version of the United States. To continue on this trajectory, then, the United States would have to safeguard Western Europe from the Soviet Union and from communism.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and State Department worked with the American Federation of Labour (AFL) in Western Europe in 1945 as the “spearhead of the democratic world” to “combat radicalism” in European trade unions. The AFL and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union funneled money from the US government to support the work of more conservative unions.³⁵ The intention was to undermine, through any means, actions which would threaten the development of American-style liberal democracy in Western Europe. Another example is American interference in the 1948 Italian elections. The CIA worked with the Vatican to suppress pro-communist voters and promote pro-Christian Democrat voters, provided merchant ships and arms to the Christian Democrats, and also provided substantial campaign funding to the Christian Democrats.³⁶ The success of a communist party would have been antithetical to the designs of the United States in Western Europe. These examples demonstrate the willingness of the United States to use its hard-power resources to ensure a liberal-democratic homogeneity in Western Europe.

However, economic security was the primary interest of the United States after the Second World War, painted by Truman as essential to American democracy.³⁷ To address economic security, the United States reformulated international financial structures and used economic recovery aid as a form of economic imperialism to develop an

American-style economic system in Western Europe which was amenable to American interests, preferences, and markets. Campbell et al. define economic imperialism as “economic dependency rather than overt control.”³⁸ In this case, the United States did facilitate economic dependence among Western European states.

The first pillar of American economic imperialism in Western Europe was the Bretton Woods system founded in 1944, intended to replace the pre-war international economy with something the US perceived as more durable.³⁹ This new economic system was to be more open, aided by the newly-created International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and would link the US dollar to gold at \$35/oz as the world’s new reserve currency. These reforms would make the US dollar the preeminent international currency and would act as a “crowbar to open protected trading regimes” in Europe.⁴⁰ Because of the dominance of the dollar, European markets demanded the currency. American consumers and investors were able to take advantage of this demand and could spend dollars “without the government having to worry that the dollars used in their purchases would be presented for conversion into gold,” which reduced the need to institute monetary controls.⁴¹ The United States was able to use its power in 1945 to restructure the international financial system to its benefit, and impose the American dollar on European nations. The Marshall Plan, explained below, and Bretton Woods were tightly linked; the provision of American dollars to Western Europe gave European nations the means to import American goods.⁴²

Major aid began during the Second World War through the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, to which the United States contributed \$3 billion between 1943 and 1947, constituting approximately three-fourths of the organization’s funds.⁴³ The most consequential aid package would come in the form of the Marshall Plan, also called the European Recovery Program, beginning in 1947. Michael Hogan notes that the Marshall Plan attempted “to remake Europe in

an American mode.”⁴⁴ The Marshall Plan was announced by Secretary of State George Marshall at Harvard University’s 1947 commencement, telling students that “foreign food and other essential products—principally from America—are so much greater than [Europe’s] present ability to pay that she must have substantial additional help, or face economic, social and political deterioration.”⁴⁵ To prevent this deterioration, the US sent over \$100 billion in credits and grants from 1945 to 1965, and had two major aims.⁴⁶ Firstly, it was to boost European recovery and create a large market for American goods, and secondly, it was to protect Europe and the United States from communism by entrenching “quintessentially American” liberal-capitalist institutions and economic practices within European states.⁴⁷ On this second aim, there were conditions which recipient states were required to meet, designed to check a “leftward drift” in European politics. Recipient states had to ban communists from government and curb socialism, had to push for balanced budgets, convertible currencies, guarantee trade with the United States, and required the reindustrialization of Germany.⁴⁸ These requirements matched the American homefront and American interests, “Americanising” Western Europe through the use of economic coercion. These reforms resulted in the development of a mixed economy in Western Europe which was “similar to the US.”⁴⁹ The Marshall Plan had numerous other tangible impacts on Western Europe: European budgeting and economic planning benefited from American methods, trade was liberalized, and European integration efforts were supported.⁵⁰

The primary reason the United States could take control of the international financial and economic system was the decline of the British and French Empires after the Second World War. The United States was promised pound sterling by Britain for participating in the war which its dollar and gold reserves could not uphold. The United States leveraged this promise and ended Lend-Lease, which provided American dollars and ships in exchange for British military bases

in its colonies, and forced the liberalization of trade and elimination of exchange controls.⁵¹ The ensuing instability indicated to the United States that it would have to support the pound sterling and the flailing British Empire in order to ensure Britain could rebuild and become more secure.⁵² The Marshall Plan would facilitate this, as 25 per cent of the aid would go to Britain between 1948 and 1951. Furthermore, much of these funds were redirected within national governments to imperial commitments in both Britain and France.⁵³ The effort to support British and French imperialism was a conscious choice made to ensure the United States not only had liberal allies in Europe, but also to subjugate the British and French Empires under American influence to prevent their resurgence.⁵⁴ Examining the US-Western European relationship as a political hierarchy with the United States at its apex, there is a clear dependency hierarchy created through the Marshall Plan from the United States, to Britain and France, and to their respective overseas empires. Examples of this are evident in the control the US could exert both on Britain during the Suez Crisis, and on France during its war in Algeria.⁵⁵ Therefore, the United States did acquire some form of overseas empire by replacing Britain and France as the primary economic determinants driving overseas imperialism, accomplished through American economic imperialism and control in Western Europe. Postwar British and French Empires should be understood as a direct extension of American power and interests.⁵⁶

There is an important connection between American economic and cultural imperialism in Western Europe. The desire to establish overseas economic dependencies in Europe was accompanied by the desire to exert cultural influence and make Western Europe resemble the United States.⁵⁷ Because of this linkage, a large part of opening markets in the United States was for the purposes of changing Europeans to view themselves foremost as consumers.⁵⁸ Lundestad supports this connection between economic and cultural influence, and notes that the central task of the State Department post-1945 was to open

national borders so that "America's culture could flow as freely as possible around the world."⁵⁹ Hopkins also argues that part of American support for Western European integration was to open the West European economy to the world and create "loyal customers" through Americanization. The Americanization of Western Europe was accomplished through a growth in trade with Europe in the 1950s, made possible due to the effects of both the Marshall Plan and Bretton Woods as aforementioned.⁶⁰

Costigliola defines culture as "a shared model of national or transnational identity," and Campbell, Davies, and McKay define cultural imperialism as "domination by cultural influence."⁶¹ The combined effect of American cultural goods created a "transnational identity" across the Atlantic, and came to dominate culturally because of the dependency of European nations on American goods resulting from the restructuring of European economies. "Americanisation" is the name assigned to this process, defined as "the propagation of American ideas, customs, social patterns, language, industry and capital around the world."⁶² The effects of Americanisation in Europe impacted numerous aspects of European society. Hollywood and American sports entered Western Europe through radio and television; Coca-Cola, jeans, jazz, American food, and computer operating systems were imported. Furthermore, American models of consumption proliferated, European political and scientific elites travelled to American universities, and English was adopted almost universally as a second language. Lastly, new franchises like McDonalds and theme parks like Disneyland were developed.⁶³

The Americanisation process is subordinate to the broader concept of "Globalization," defined as the "imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, and organizations and their desire to impose themselves on various geographic areas."⁶⁴ The United States fits this definition perfectly as a power which imposed itself on Western Europe to spread liberal-capitalism, propagate its cultural

empire as a form of "marketing," and grow its economy.⁶⁵ Transnational corporations play a role in "Globalization," as they have a symbiotic relationship with national governments. The prosperity of domestically-grounded transnational corporations contributes to economic growth and job creation for the state, while a favourable political and economic environment for corporations, created in Western Europe through the Marshall Plan, increases profit. American transnational corporations were especially prevalent as cultural actors in Western Europe in the 1960s and 70s.⁶⁶

There were also more targeted efforts made by the United States to spread American values through cultural organizations in Europe. The Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) was a CIA-run organization which funded American-centric cultural initiatives and waged a "cultural Cold War." The organization was funded by the government through "respectable front organizations" like the Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Time, Inc.⁶⁷ The objective of this organization was not cultural freedom, but cultural transformation as its primary task was to prevent communist influence in Europe while promoting American liberalism. This objective was accomplished through anti-Communist publications like *Der Monat* in Germany and *Encounter* in Britain, and a month-long cultural festival held in Paris to showcase the "vitality of Western European and American culture."⁶⁸ The CCF was directly tasked by the American government to acculturate Europeans to the United States.

Another similar initiative was the Fulbright Program established in 1946, which intended to bring foreign exchange students to study at American universities and send American students abroad. The program was broadly successful, as it increased foreign students studying in the US from only 7,000 in 1943 to 26,000 in 1950. The Smith Mundt Act of 1948 further weaponized education, authorizing the use of the United States' "educational, information, and propaganda resources in the struggle against the Soviet

Union.”⁶⁹ This allowed the State Department to “sell the United States to the Europeans,” and used the Fulbright Program to accomplish this. In the 1950s, grants were given to vast amounts of American professionals and intellectuals to travel to Western Europe and promote American interests within elite circles.⁷⁰ Similarly, foreign students studying in the United States brought back home an Americanised English language, American brands, and American understandings of the world.

Cultural imperialism can also stem from less obvious actors. In *Not Like Us*, Pells comments on the use of American intellectuals throughout history to carry out the foreign policy goals of the United States. These intellectuals would include, for example, the diplomacy of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams in Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁷¹ Herring similarly recounts the work of these officials in Europe, describing them as elements of American soft power and representations of what an “American” was to the Old World.⁷² There is continuity in this concept through to General Eisenhower as SACEUR in Europe. Eisenhower had built up a reputation during the Second World War as a “liberator of Europe” and became a strategic cultural figure for the United States, functioning as an extension of American identity and exceptionalism in Western Europe. Eisenhower was instructed to tour every NATO country over twenty days in 1951, intended to inflict “maximum psychological impact” on Europeans regarding the “existential threat” the Soviet Union posed to all of Western Europe and the United States. Eisenhower served as the American “salesman/preacher,” uniformly spreading the interests of the United States to Western Europe through cultural imperialism.⁷³

This essay argued that the United States attempted to establish empire in Western Europe during the early Cold War and recreate the region in its own image through military, political, economic, and cultural imperial practices. The root of America’s mission in Western Europe

can be traced to migrants who came to the New World in the seventeenth century, bringing with them a universalistic and exceptionalist worldview. Woodrow Wilson and FDR are the most notable inheritors of this, whose policy combined with the hegemonic position of the United States after the Second World War to produce the imperial policy which defined its pursuit of empire in Western Europe. The United States used all facets of its power to establish empire; through military power in Germany and NATO, political power to influence European elections, economic power to impose a hierarchical dependency in the pursuit of open markets, and cultural power to change Western Europe into an extension of the United States. The imposition of American empire in Western Europe has had mixed results in replicating the American polity. European culture has resisted broad Americanisation, and the economic power of the United States has declined markedly since 1945. Conversely, the European Union currently resembles a “United States of Europe” better than any US official during the early Cold War could have imagined, and NATO is still guided by American leadership. American imperialism in Western Europe during the early Cold War offers a valuable lesson on the historical continuity of American empire, suggesting that the pursuit of empire has been a central aim of American foreign policy to at least the mid-twentieth century, and possibly beyond.

ENDNOTES:

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2. Lundestad, *“Empire” by Integration*, 14-16.
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6. John A. Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America’s Global Role* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 282.

7. Mark Beeson and Richard Higgott, "Hegemony, institutionalism and US foreign policy: theory and practice in comparative historical perspective," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 7 (2005): 1177.
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9. Geir Lundestad, *United States and Western Europe Since 1945: From "Empire" by Invitation to Transatlantic Drift* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.
10. George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 618.
11. Thompson, *A Sense of Power*, 237.
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13. Lundestad, *United States and Western Europe*, 27-28.
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15. Thompson, *A Sense of Power*, 255.
16. Hopkins, *American Empire*, 470.
17. Lundestad, *United States and Western Europe*, 12.
18. Ibid., 11-12.
19. Giovanna Dell'Orto, *The Hidden Power of the American Dream: Why Europe's Shaken Confidence in the United States Threatens the Future of U.S. Influence* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2008), 3.
20. Hopkins, *American Empire*, 708.
21. Hopkins, *American Empire*, 472; Richard H. Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 41.
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24. Hopkins, *American Empire*, 708.
25. Ibid.
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36. Ibid., 621.
37. Paul L. Atwood, *War and Empire: The American Way of Life* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 161-162.
38. Neil Campbell, Jude Davies, and George McKay, "Introduction: Issues in Americanisation and Culture," in *Issues in Americanisation and Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 15.
39. Atwood, *War and Empire*, 161.
40. Hopkins, *American Empire*, 474.
41. Barry Eichengreen, *Exorbitant Privilege: The Rise and Fall of the Dollar and the Future of the International Monetary System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40.
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43. Thompson, *A Sense of Power*, 239.
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48. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 618.
49. Ibid., 619.
50. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 620.
51. Hopkins, *American Empire*, 469-471.
52. Ibid., 469-475.
53. Ibid., 475.
54. Ibid., 472-474.
55. Hopkins, *American Empire*, 489.
56. Ibid., 708.
57. Pells, *Not Like Us*, 55.
58. Ibid., 54.
59. Lundestad, *United States and Western Europe*, 34.

60. Hopkins, *American Empire*, 701-709.
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 62. George Ritzer and Michael Ryan, "Americanisation, McDonaldisation, and Globalisation," in *Issues in Americanisation and Culture*, ed. Neil Campbell, Jude Davies, and George McKay (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 47.
 63. Ibid.
 64. Ibid., 42.
 65. Ibid., 43.
 66. Hopkins, *American Empire*, 701; Pells, *Not Like Us*, 189.
 67. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 649.
 68. Pells, *Not Like Us*, 66-74.
 69. Lundestad, *United States and Western Europe*, 34-35.
 70. Pells, *Not Like Us*, 58-63.
 71. Ibid., 31.
 72. For the story of Benjamin Franklin in France, see: Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 19-21.
 73. Costigliola, "Culture, Emotion, and the Creation of the Atlantic Identity," 26-30.
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