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History 367  
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Take-home Final Exam  
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### **The Evolution of the Antebellum South**

Question 2—Discuss the evolution of Southern society after the American Revolution. How would you characterize the antebellum South, and how did it differ from its colonial predecessor and its Northern counterpart? What factors contributed to making the South distinctive? How did the Civil War change Southern society? Was there a Southern *nation*, as Emory Thomas claims? Why or why not?

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In Margaret Mitchell's epic novel *Gone With the Wind*, a vision of the antebellum south glistens: the sweep of hoopskirts over a rustling silk petticoat jumps off the page, while the whiff of blooming magnolias under the stars is so heady and engaging, generations of readers have been captivated by the romance of an America long since passed. But another antebellum South as fictitiously depicted is equally present: the cruelties of a "benevolent" master class, the reality of war—some of it waged against the women "chivalrous" gentlemen had sworn to protect. Though flawed, the façade in her opus only falls a little short of capturing the ironic dualities of the Old South. But the true antebellum south, the model for her work, was even more complex than what could fit on over a thousand pages of text. Between the end of the American Revolution and the outset of the Civil War, Southern society changed into this vision in many ways, each variation leading to a different path that would eventually see conflict arise between North and South, and end on battlefields dotted across the landscape. However, the changes that occurred happened incrementally and regionally, one layering on top of the last. In this exam I will explore how Southern society changed between 1783 and 1861

regionally, socially, and economically, and how those changes informed the outset of the American Civil War.

As the Revolutionary War ended in 1783 and the United States gained its independence from Britain, the creation of a national identity was beset by the previous focus on each state to maintain its own independent character.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, each colony had been founded at different times for different reasons, and generalizations abounded – Virginia was the stately, aristocratic plantation-based southern territory,<sup>2</sup> home to the founding fathers like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, and slightly lesser-known characters like William Byrd.<sup>3</sup> Families of this set might own vast swathes of the countryside, employ scores or even hundreds of slaves,<sup>4</sup> and send their children to be educated in Britain. There, Virginian wealth allowed intermixing with the elevated strata of the well-established nobility of European society.<sup>5</sup> To the western side of Virginia, however, cropped up predominantly smaller plantations, or satellites of larger, established ones to the east.<sup>6</sup>

After the War, South Carolina, as in its earlier years, had a separate identity to its neighbors, especially Georgia and North Carolina.<sup>7</sup> These two colonies-cum-states had always been relatively poorer than South Carolina, a wealthier settlement even at its foundation by the Barbadian diasporic planters seeking additional land to exploit.<sup>8</sup> Over

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<sup>1</sup> Lemaster, “Old South,” Lecture at Lehigh University, Fall 2021. The separate characteristics and distinctive factors of each southern colony that defined their identity.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> Byrd, “The History of the Dividing Line,” in Galloway, *Voices of the Old South*, 124.

<sup>4</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 55.

<sup>6</sup> Lemaster, “Old South,” Lecture at Lehigh University, Fall 2021.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. South Carolina colonial identity in Roberts and Beamish, “Venturing Out,” in Lemaster and Wood, *Creating and Contesting Carolina*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

time, Charleston became a hub of wealth and culture,<sup>9</sup> influencing the region and acting as a major port for shipping in the South, where relatively fewer natural harbors existed.<sup>10</sup> This lack of wide diversity in harbors and shipping venues would not substantially change over the course of the seventy-eight years between the end of the Revolutionary War and the beginning of the Civil War. This comparative paucity would further constrain them in their lack of ships with which to form a defensive navy during that conflict.<sup>11</sup> Thomas also points out that, “In July of 1861 the United States... was attempting to seal the 189 openings along the 3549 miles of Confederate coastline.”<sup>12</sup> Eventually, this would become a breaking point for southern survival during the Civil War.

As opposed to South Carolina, Georgia had been a colony founded on charity concerns, wherein slavery was initially prohibited. Established in 1733 by James Oglethorpe “as a refuge for debtors,” its original intent was to allow poorer people the opportunity to farm their own, charitably given, land.<sup>13</sup> However, objections to slavery by the governance of that colony were not moral or philosophical in nature, but due to the idea that the institution of keep slaves as forced labor thwarted the work effort of the whites who were creating the plantations.<sup>14</sup>

However, their plan for the colony was marginal at best. Although creating a buffer zone between South Carolina and the combative Spanish Florida, their plan for a crop was silk—a cash crop that would not come to thrive in Georgia. Following that

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<sup>9</sup> Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 42.  
<sup>10</sup> For an engrossing look at the coastline of the Old South, especially Carolina, see “Creating and Contesting Carolina.” MapScholar, December 10, 2014. <http://mapscholar.org/carolina/>.  
<sup>11</sup> Thomas, *The Confederate Nation*, 128-29.  
<sup>12</sup> *Idem*, 129.  
<sup>13</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 25.  
<sup>14</sup> Lemaster, “Old South,” Lecture at Lehigh University, Fall 2021.

failure, the same agricultural model that was growing in South Carolina—with its well-established institutionalized slavery—became more relevant to the development of Georgia. The pro-slavery advocates, notably the Malcontents, a group led in part by Thomas Stephens, son of one of the trustees, by 1750 were successful in bringing slavery into legality in Georgia. Thus, the policy of no slaveholding in Georgia died then.<sup>15</sup> After that point, South Carolinians and others poured over the border to begin rice and indigo farming, just as they had been successful doing in the slightly more northerly colony. In his propaganda in the pursuit for slaveholding legitimacy, Stephens claimed, “[the slaves] being so near St. Augustin would desert thither. If they are as well and better treated in Georgia than they can be there, where is the Temptation.”<sup>16</sup> Although at the time that he said this it may be too early to label the remark as paternalistic, it still has a ring of hubris in its arrogance that would also later come to haunt the southern persona.

Initially, these colonies – Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia were the only established Southern colonies, however the institution that would come to separate North from South by the advent of the Civil War was slavery, and there the agricultural demand for slaves was consistently high. Moreover, in 1783 at the end of the Revolutionary War, slavery had been or was continuing to be legal and practiced in all newly-formed states.<sup>17</sup> However, that was not a situation that was planned to persist. By the late eighteenth century, moral objections began to be seen among abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic, and especially the North. As the United States negotiated for its disparate colonies to join the post-Revolutionary Union, certain compromises needed

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<sup>15</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Stephens, “The Hard Case of the Distressed People of Georgia,” in Galloway, *Voices of the Old South*, 140.

<sup>17</sup> Lemaster, “Old South,” Lecture at Lehigh University, Fall 2021.

to be made. In the north, where agricultural practices were not as dependent upon forced labor,<sup>18</sup> the phasing out of slavery from state to state was mostly planned and gradual.<sup>19</sup> An exception to this was the immediate emancipation of slaves in the Vermont constitution of 1777.<sup>20</sup> An incremental yet inevitable end to slavery, at least in the North, was in sight, but it is clear that the framers of the new laws and policies in the United States believed wholesale abolition of slavery was on the horizon, all the way to southernmost Georgia.

Shortly after the Revolutionary War, other colonies would grow to a population capable of recognition and invitation into the Union. Furthermore, the legislative branch of the government was to be based upon population, and while the North was already more urban and populous than the South, the southern states were eager to maintain dominance over their growing numbers of slaves while still keeping their “body count” of people in each state to as high a number as possible. In the newly-formed Republic, representation was linked to population, and its more rural character dealt the Old South a losing hand. What emerged was the “3/5ths Compromise” wherein each state with a slave population could count their enslaved persons to the tune of three-fifths a person, rather than none due to their enslaved status which allowed no true legal standing or rights.<sup>21</sup> This allowed the Southern representation in the nation’s capital to bolster their numbers of “citizens,” or cynically the partial numbers thereof, while maintaining the degradation of the enslaved in each state legally. Due to several factors including immigration which saw a substantially fewer number of people settle in the south, “the Southern share of the

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<sup>18</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*, 78-79.

<sup>20</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 78.

<sup>21</sup> Lemaster, “Old South,” Lecture at Lehigh University, Fall 2021.

country's total population decrease from 44.2 percent in 1830 to 35.3 percent in 1860."<sup>22</sup>

Many aspects of the Southern characteristics of life versus the Northern led to this disparity in population, among these are the deficiency of systems of education and low literacy, difficulty in transportation, and lack of urbanization.<sup>23</sup>

Moral objections drawn from the Enlightenment also challenged the peculiar institution of slavery. Thomas Jefferson, a Founding Father and wealthy Virginian slaveholder had drafted a bill that would have banned slavery from the western territories after 1800.<sup>24</sup> However, due to majority Southern interest in maintaining the institution, paired with the nation's need to protect its newly-formed Union, compromises like the "3/5ths" were key. The gradual emancipation of slaves may have happened shortly after the Revolution at that time, if, but for ingenuity and invention. Cotton, a crop that was grown moderately throughout the south due to its difficulty in harvesting, is what completely changed the trajectory of the South after the Revolutionary War.

There were two types of cotton that could grow in the south, long-staple in the low country, and short-staple further inland.<sup>25</sup> The latter of these would grow much easier, however, in processing the fiber the seeds short-staple made much of the crop too difficult to harvest.<sup>26</sup> And then, Eli Whitney invented, demonstrated, and patented his cotton gin.<sup>27</sup> A relatively simple but ingenious machine, it's likely that even if Whitney had not patented the design in 1793, another inventor would have followed close behind.<sup>28</sup> Without a doubt, the cotton gin revolutionized agriculture in the South. Now

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<sup>22</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 176.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, 79.

<sup>25</sup> *Idem*, 95.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

that the harvesting of cotton was more accessible, it began to be widely planted, and as the Mississippi valley was opened to southern settlement, it bloomed into a serious commodity for the southern states. Inland and with ideal climate and soil conditions, short-staple cotton grew readily in the deep South,<sup>29</sup> and the bolster to the economy was much needed as tobacco was waning in widespread popularity, and many planters had fallen into debt.

Although there had been those steps taken by the early Enlightened framers of the nation in order to see the gradual demise of slavery on the national level, it became a matter of contention between the two regions.<sup>30</sup> The “relaxation” of slavery in many states included things like legalization of manumission, like in Maryland, Delaware and Virginia.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, key social elites in Virginia also modeled manumission, either fantastically and publicly<sup>32</sup> like Carter, or through their will like George Washington. The cash crop that had led to the advent of institutionalized slavery in the Old South was waning in popularity and production—tobacco was no longer reigning supreme in the agricultural exchanges. Cotton would fill this gap in a big way – in the south: all hail “King Cotton.”<sup>33</sup>

What is clear is that but for the advent of the cotton gin it was very likely that enslavement in the United States would have died off within about a generation or two following the Revolutionary War. The northern states were gradually eliminating slavery. The slave trade had a timeline for complete eradication, being outlawed after 1808.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 95.

<sup>30</sup> *Idem*, 77.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> Lemaster, “Old South,” Lecture at Lehigh University, Fall 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 38.

Enlightened, moral, and religious objections were becoming mainstream, though certain abolitionists were still considered too radical for most. Fears of radical, violent abolitionists culminated with the case of John Brown.<sup>35</sup> In the South, as the nineteenth century progressed, even the whiff of abolitionist thought could result in social ostracism or worse. Disapproval for slavery was spreading, especially into Europe. The South would, of course, lean in the other direction.

From the time of the First Great Awakening around the middle of the eighteenth century, itinerant ministers did their best to spread evangelical thought around the backcountry. However, with the Second Great Awakening, zealous religiosity spread like wildfire around the antebellum frontier and beyond.<sup>36</sup> Soon, however, the volume of conversions to evangelicalism would come to influence the more than the social and cultural aspects of the region, but the political sphere as well.<sup>37</sup> Around the Southern territories, veritable concert-esque events would take place, elevating marginalized religions to the mainstream.

Aspects of these evangelical thoughts were many times in opposition to Enlightenment ideas, and rampant paternalism spread alongside the conversion after the initial phase of popularity. Kierner suggests that white southern women were participant in the growth of the patriarchal culture of the region, even as it might erode female political currency.<sup>38</sup> At the outset of the civil war, McCurry points out that of the twelve million people in the Confederacy, “four million were enslaved, and another four million, free white women, were formally citizens but possessed of none of the political rights or

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<sup>35</sup> “John Brown.” Famous Trials.

<sup>36</sup> Lemaster, “Old South,” Lecture at Lehigh University, Fall 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Najjar, *Evangelizing the South*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 213.



privileges of their male compatriots.”<sup>39</sup> This statistic demonstrates that of the Southern population, only a third of the inhabitants could enjoy full political enfranchisement, a shocking minority considering their goal of independent nationhood. Southern white women’s previous complicity in the paternalism that defined much of the culture in the region would prove corseting too, especially as the war dragged on, hunger spread, and faith was lost in the cause. In both the North and the South, the model of white womanhood included an “all-too-human desire to see women as members of a family world that was a sanctuary from the war.”<sup>40</sup> Once their men had left to fight for the Confederacy, and the land dwindled to desperation, women began to buck these gendered constraints in sometimes violent and riotous ways. This led to a departure from the “secessionists’ imagined national script,” and in some cases developed to “waging war on women.”<sup>41</sup>

However, following the Second Great Awakening, the landscape of the Old South continued to grow and change. As each territory opened itself up to statehood post-Revolutionary War, further checks were placed upon the intricate situation with creating a balance of power that would keep the legislation of the Southern states content. Even after the Louisiana Purchase, for each slave state admitted to the Union, a non-slave state would be admitted as well, allowing for stability in Congress. In this attempt to mitigate the differences of philosophy, economy, society and culture in the political realm of the country, politicians then further politicized and illuminated one aspect of the colonial era that would continue to divide them: slavery. Although the slave trade was illegal by 1808,

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<sup>39</sup> McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*, 87.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

natural increase meant slaves were in the South for good, and enslavement of humans remained steadfastly essential to Southern planter life.

Further territories opened up following the American Revolution included Kentucky and Tennessee to the west, and Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi to the southwest. As mentioned, the further inland region of the deep South saw cotton flourish, and elevated the idea of the importance of slavery among Southerners. Again, as each Southern slave-holding territory grew to a sustainable population, wherein the benefit of admission to the Union outweighed the liability of membership, a Northern or non-slaveholding state would be admitted to counterbalance. Southern politicians held very strong beliefs in their ability to remain independent and govern themselves, even outside the dominance of the federal government. The fight for states' rights in the new Republic would be tested in the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of 1798 and 1799.<sup>42</sup>

In response to the Alien and Sedition Acts, which were seen as a backslide towards a despotic monarchy, emerged this as a political vehicle to prevent criticism of the federal government. A clear challenge to the First Amendment to the Constitution, Kentucky and Virginia both passed Resolutions to constitutionally exclude themselves from this mandate. Politically, it is clear that as a region Southern values differed from those in the north; the divisions deepening as each decade passed.

Andrew Jackson, president from 1829-1837, came to the executive office after a long career of being an established, popular character. After winning political currency in his Bank War, he was challenged by the Nullification Crisis. No longer able to contend with the growing tariffs for Northern interests, southern politicians led by South

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<sup>42</sup> See e.g. "Kentucky Resolution." Avalon Project - Kentucky resolution - alien and sedition acts, and "Virginia Resolution." Avalon Project - Virginia Resolution - Alien and Sedition Acts.

Carolinian Calhoun sought to reestablish their political empowerment at the state level. Jackson, however, did not allow this to happen. Surely, if states could establish the power to resist one federal law, then they could have the power to resist all laws. Appeals to the Supreme Court notwithstanding, Jackson saw the need to maintain federal power, claiming that as each law could potentially be injurious to some interest, then surely Nullification could render every law unconstitutional. Although as a southerner Jackson was sympathetic with the argument, he saw it as a threat to the Union and he got Congress to pass the Force Bill.<sup>43</sup>

All of these issues that divided the north and south arguably led to a distinctive southern identity.<sup>44</sup> Slavery, paternalism, widespread evangelical beliefs, rural characteristics of the landscape, and an economy dominated by cotton were crystallized in the Southern narrative, alongside their belief in political autonomy and states' rights. As Abraham Lincoln, a widely-believed "abolitionist" president was elected in 1860, the South was already beyond belief in their continued participation in the Union. Secession, which had been bandied about for decades came back, and in 1861 a long crisis with Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor led to the outbreak of the war.<sup>45</sup>

However, as the war carried on, the Confederacy was one-by-one forced to shelve the beliefs that created their identity. The imagined "gentility" of southern society was broken once tested by the trials of war.<sup>46</sup> Although many southern politicians explicitly stated the need to continue slavery to maintain their economy and way of life, once

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<sup>43</sup> LeMaster, "Old South," Lecture at Lehigh University, Fall 2021.

<sup>44</sup> The debate between the emergence of a Southern nation, national character, can be studied in both Thomas' *The Confederate Nation* who argues for it, and McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning*, who argues against.

<sup>45</sup> McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 68-9.

<sup>46</sup> *Idem*, 86.

isolated due to this belief—no longer popular outside the Old South—they claimed it had always been about states’ rights. The paternalistic belief that women were to be held aloft of the fighting and hardships of war was broken as war was waged on womenfolk looking for food to feed their starving families.<sup>47</sup> The trope of protecting women, whose womanhood had been interwoven with their nationhood, was challenged as men were being called away to military service. Thus, “the private duties of husband and father [was] antagonistic to the political obligation of the citizen-soldier.”<sup>48</sup> Once left to flounder alone in the agricultural cycle that was expected to continue to thrive unchallenged by the war, women fought back only to be suppressed.<sup>49</sup>

Several political conflicts led to the secession of the Southern states. The 900,000 square miles of landscape was, by 1861, both created and defined by slavery.<sup>50</sup> It was a peculiar institution that from the colonial era evolved to reach into the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious spheres to beat as the heart of the south. The wealth of many planters was tied up in human bondage. For all these reasons it lends a distinctive character to the region that seceded to form the Confederate States of America in 1861. However, it was not a heart that would prove to outlast the challenge of the dominant North, or be proven as righteous philosophically, morally, or politically. Therefore, as each and every test of battle eroded the reasons the South ceded from the Union—the war against women, the eventual freedom given to slaves, a “Lost Cause” mentality would spring up to light a fire of self-righteous indignation in the minds of continued Confederate sympathizers, at times years after the war had been lost.

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<sup>47</sup> McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 174-75.

<sup>48</sup> *Idem*, 95.

<sup>49</sup> *Idem*, 130.

<sup>50</sup> *Idem*, 2.

Maybe we should blame Margaret Mitchell.<sup>51</sup> There is a vision of the antebellum south. Woven into the popular culture of Scarlett O’Hara’s corset and hoop-skirts and Rhett Butler’s cavalier attitude punctuated with a cigar, the idea of the Old South between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War stems from one locus point—plantation slavery. Institutionalized, invasive, and insidious, slavery was the foundation for southern society in matters regional, economic, and social, it’s tentacled grip squeezed the free and capitalist potential from the south even as it flourished substantially despite the dependency upon forced labor. By the outset of the Civil War, slavery itself was under fire. Abolitionists in the north, emancipation in most other Atlantic World colonial nations, but with the masters’ cognitive dissonance of religious paternalism in taking care of their “people,” and the cruel brutality of enslavement, the South did not understand their isolation in belief of the peculiar institution.

The cotton gin changed everything. It might be a truth universally acknowledged that counterfactual history is rarely a fruitful exercise for an historian to engage with, but the exercise allows for probing questions that might better inform the study. Following from Gary Kornblith’s essay<sup>52</sup> on the topic as it pertains to the Civil War, it may be argued that the invention never found the light of day perhaps slavery would have died within a generation of the American Revolution.

With the demographic peculiarity of the south, only about one third of the population able to exercise political empowerment, it is surprising how the rhetoric of “fire eaters” and anti-abolitionist movements would be marshalled to argue for Southern

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<sup>51</sup> Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind*.

<sup>52</sup> Kornblith, “Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War,” 76–105.

cession. Therefore, the romanticized notion of Mitchell's south was extant long before she put pen to page.

In reality, not all Southern households owned slaves.<sup>53</sup> To the contrary, many white people did not own slaves at all, and the majority of those who did had less than ten on their plantations.<sup>54</sup> The romanticized notion of large, sprawling plantations worked by hundreds of enslaved laborers was not the norm, or truly indicative of the Southern landscape. In reality, the vast majority of American slaves in the Old South lived on farms where the enslaved numbered less than fifty.<sup>55</sup>

Above, a vast survey of the landscape in the antebellum Old South is depicted. It was a land of small planters punctuated by vast plantations, with enslaved being a hugely important part of the workforce driving the economy. This economy became increasingly dependent upon cotton, and it is also part of the picture of what gave the South their identity. In a nation of different states where Northern hegemony would consistently displace their political preeminence, the south disingenuously deceived itself into the belief in the infallibility and righteousness of their institutions, especially the enslavement of people of African descent. Between the end of the Revolutionary War and the outset of the Civil War the South grew enormously in size. All these variables which changed the demographics and the landscapes of the south, but what is hardly considered are the indigenous Americans who were still trying to maintain their lives as they were inevitably pushed further west along the frontier. When the cotton gin allowed for the crop to be more accessible and profitable, to the point where the phrase "King Cotton"

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<sup>53</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> Lemaster, "Old South," Lecture at Lehigh University, Fall 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 30.

became interwoven with the south and a point of pride in southern society, any hope for gradual erosion of slavery in the south alongside the northern neighbors was gone. Southern society, so painstakingly built, would take four years of brutal war to be disassembled completely. Both, in the end, were gone with the rightful winds of emancipation, morality, and time.

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