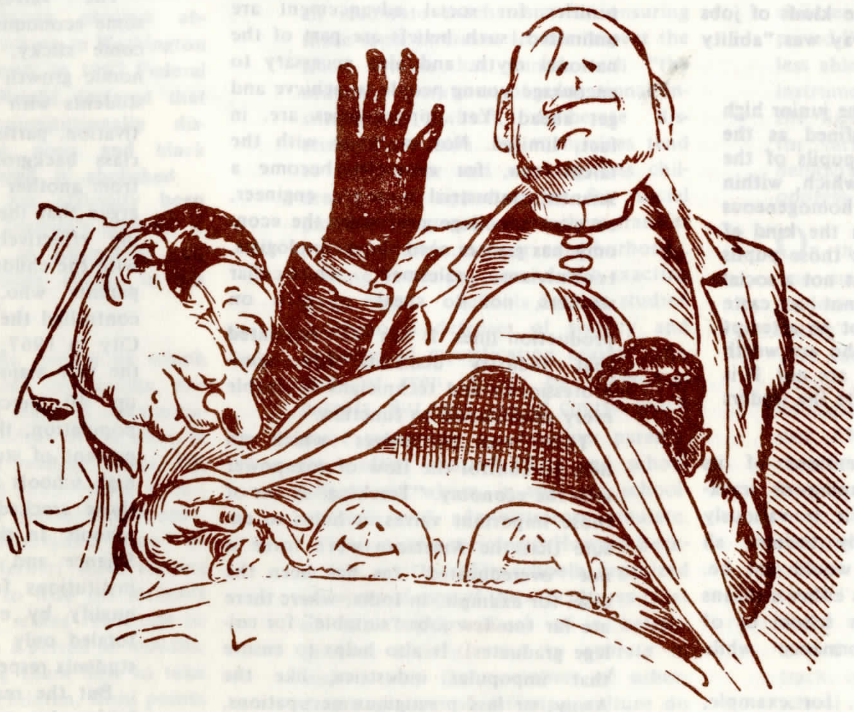
How the School System is Rigged for Failure

Florence Howe
and
Paul Lauter



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In 1927 many Americans were troubled about their society. Morals seemed to be disintegrating, crime increasing. Indeed, some felt there was a "legal bias in favor of the criminal." He "is petted and pampered and protected to a degree which makes the punishment of crime relatively rare." Educators were quick to rise to this social crisis. They urged their fellow Americans to look to the schools to train citizens not to "set themselves against the state." After all, there was "no other organized force which aims primarily at citizenship and at the same time represents the state." Schools could, moreover, satisfy the demands of industry for "the type of help that knows something, that has social graces arising from extended social experience" of the sort provided by high schools.

There was one problem, however: how to keep the children *in* school. Many dropped out because their main experience in the classroom was one of frustration. A new way of organizing schools had to be found that would not forever be confronting those most in need of schooling with failure, that might more fully "individualize" their instruction in order to prepare children more efficiently for the kinds of jobs they would get. This way was "ability grouping."

> **Ability grouping in the junior high school is to be defined as the classification of the pupils of the school into groups which, within reasonable limits, are homogeneous in ability to perform the kind of task which confronts those pupils in the classroom. It is not a social segregation. It is not a caste stratification. It is not an attempt to point out those who are worth while and those who are not. It is not a move to separate the leaders from the followers.**

Despite the best intentions of its promoters, ability grouping–or tracking, or streaming, as it is variously called–has unfortunately become all that they asserted it would not be. What it has *not* been is either a means of keeping children in school or of improving their performance while they attend.

In Washington, D.C., for example, where an elaborate track system reached far down into the elementary schools, 54 percent of the classes of 1965 and 1966 dropped out before graduation. The most extensive and careful study of ability grouping, moreover, concludes "that ability grouping, *per se*, produces no improvement in achievement for any ability level and, as an administrative device, has little merit." The study indicates further that children may learn better in strongly heterogeneous groups. Arthur W. Foshay, who wrote the Foreword, suggests also that evidence from Sweden and England "raises the dark possibility that ability grouping functions . . . as 'selective deprivation.'" Tracking may actually *prevent* children from learning, the study indicates, because "teachers generally underestimate the capability of pupils in lower track classes, expect less of them, and consequently the pupils learn less." None of this is surprising, since teachers generally concentrate on students who respond. But why, then, if tracking has not succeeded in keeping most kids in school and has succeeded in creating for those lower-tracked kids the "self-fulfilling prophecy" that they won't learn anything in school why, then, has it persisted for more than forty years?

In the first place, tracking is to schools what channeling is to the draft. Its function is identical, namely, the control of manpower "in the National Interest." In democratic societies like that of the United States, individuals are encouraged to believe that opportunities for social advancement are unlimited; such beliefs are part of the national myth, and also necessary to encourage young people to achieve and get ahead. Yet opportunities are, in fact, limited. Not everyone with the talent can, for example, become a scientist, industrial manager, engineer, or even a college professor; the economy has greater need for technologists, technicians, salesmen, white-collar workers, not to speak of men on production lines. It has been estimated that industry demands five semi-professionals and technicians to enable every professional to function.

There must be "valves" which can help to control the flow of manpower into the economy. "Tracking" is one of those important valves; it helps to ensure that the American work force is not "overeducated" (as has been the case, for example, in India, where there are far too few jobs "suitable" for college graduates). It also helps to ensure that unpopular industries, like the Army, or less prestigious occupations, like sanitation work, are supplied with manpower.

Indeed, sociologist Theodore Caplow has argued that:

> the principal device for the limitation of occupational choice is the education system. It does this in two ways: first, by forcing the student who embarks upon a long course of training to renounce other careers which also require extensive training; second, by excluding from training and eventually from the occupations themselves those students who lack either the intellectual qualities (such as intelligence, docility, aptitude) or the social characteristics (such as ethnic background, wealth, appropriate conduct, previous education) which happen to be required.

Tracking is one of the educational system's major techniques for thrusting forward students with the necessary qualities of school-measured intelligence, docility, background, and the rest; and for channeling the others into "appropriate" slots. James Bryant Conant is explicit about this practice. "I submit," he writes in *Slums and Suburbs*, "that in a heavily urbanized and industrialized free society, the educational experiences of youth should fit their subsequent employment." Accomplishing this goal in cities is difficult, Conant continues, given the limitations of guidance personnel and parental indifference; therefore, "the system of rigid tracks may be the only workable solution to a mammoth guidance problem."

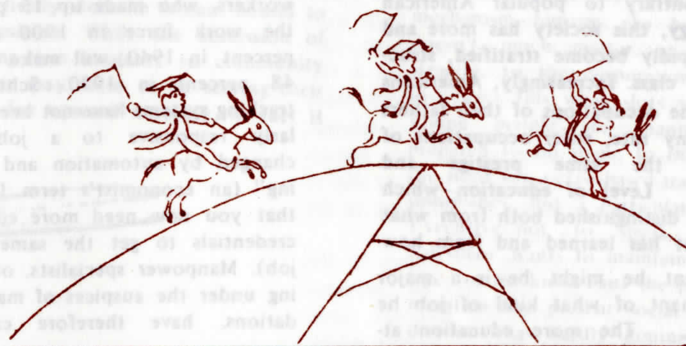
The "valves" of ability grouping, some economists complain, have become sticky, and have slowed economic growth by limiting the flow of students with middling talent and motivation, particularly those from lower-class backgrounds. In fact, however, from another point of view one might argue that the valves have been operating effectively to limit competition with the children of white, middle-class parents who, on the whole, have controlled the schools. In New York City in 1967, for example, nonwhites, the vast majority of them poor, made up 40 percent of the high-school population; they constituted about 36 percent of students in the "academic" high schools and about 60 percent of those tracked into "vocational" high schools. In the Bronx High School of Science and in Brooklyn Tech, elite institutions for which students must qualify by examination, "nonwhites" totaled only 7 and 12 percent of the students respectively.

But the real effects of tracking can better be seen in the statistics of students in the academic high schools. A majority of blacks and Puerto Ricans fill lower tracks, which lead them–if they stay at all–to "general" rather than "academic" diplomas. Only 18 percent of academic high-school

graduates were black or Puerto Rican (though they were, as we said, 36 percent of the academic student population); and only one-fifth of that 18 percent went on to college, as compared with 63 percent of whites who graduated. In other words, only 7 percent of the graduates of New York's academic high schools who went on to college were black or Puerto Rican. The rest, for the most part tracked into non-college-preparatory programs, left school with what amounted to a ticket into the Army.

The statistics for Washington, D.C., are even more striking, in part because figures are available on the basis of income as well as race and ethnic background. In the nation's capital, where, in 1966, 91 percent of the students were black, 84 percent of those black children were in schools *without any honors track*. In areas with a median income of $3,872 a year, 85 percent of the children were in a basic or general track, neither of them college-bound; while in areas where the income was $10,374 or better, only 8 percent of the children were in the general track, and in such areas there was *no basic track at all*. Theoretically, tracking ranks students according to their ability to achieve. Yet Washington's statistics suggest that the children of the poor have less than one-tenth of the ability of the children of the well-to-do—an obvious absurdity. Indeed, tracking in Washington was more than absurd: in 1967 Federal Judge J. Skelly Wright declared that the system unconstitutionally discriminated against poor and black children and ordered it abolished. But although it has officially been disbanded in the District's schools, it lingers on subtly in placement and curriculum, and more openly in the way teachers teach.

If one studies the means by which students are selected into tracks, one discovers a further layer of discrimination against the children of the poor. It is on the basis of reading scores, IQ, and other standard achievement tests—as well as teachers' recommendations—that children are determined "slow" or "superior." Yet Herbert Kohl reports that he was able to help his students raise their reading scores from one to three years, within a period of months, simply by teaching them how to take tests. Middle-class children, Kohl points out, learn about tests early in their school careers; indeed, a "predominantly white school located less than a mile down Madison Avenue [from Kohl's Harlem school] even gave after-school voluntary classes in test preparation." But in the Harlem schools it was "against the rules" to provide copies of old tests so that teachers could help their pupils prepare for them; Kohl had to obtain such copies from friends who taught in white, middle-class schools, where back files were kept and made available. Recent studies have suggested, moreover, that the content of "standardized" tests conforms to the experience and norms of white, middle-class children, thereby discriminating in still another manner against able children of poor or black parents.



Thus, just as the establishment of high schools in the nineteenth century promoted the interests of middle-class parents, so ability grouping has become an elaborate mechanism for ensuring those same interests. In this respect the track system has joined with "the ordinary operations of educational institutions," which, deliberate discrimination aside, by themselves tend to deny poor and working-class children equal opportunities for social mobility. Experienced teachers transfer out of schools in poor neighborhoods, seeking better-paying and less exacting assignments. Schools develop studied institutional defenses of secrecy and professional mystification against criticism or even inquiry by lower-class parents. But they are, of course, much more responsive to wealthier parents, who often control PTAs and school boards and whom, in any case, schoolteachers and administrators emulate.

Thus, as the sociologist Howard Becker has written, "The schools, organized in terms of one of the subcultures [that of the middle class] of a heterogeneous society, tend to operate in such a way that members of subordinate groups of differing culture do not get their fair share of educational opportunity, and thus of opportunity for social mobility." Which is an elaborate way of saying that schools institutionalize and maintain privilege in America.

But statistics and abstractions may obscure the lives of children trapped in what has been called "programmed retardation." A group of New York City parents, whose children have been tracked into the special "600" schools for allegedly "difficult" children, has begun to prepare a suit to challenge the compulsory-attendance law. While the state has the right to make laws for the health, welfare, or safety of children, they claim, it has no right to subject children to a system that deprives and injures them. Their point is that tracking is not simply a neutral "valve" to control manpower flow, as our initial image might at first have suggested. Rather, tracking harms some children, depriving those we call "deprived," making them less competent, less able to reach, let alone to use, the instruments of power in US society. In the light of tracking, schools become for such children not the means of democratization and liberation, but of oppression.

On the other hand, tracking is also one means of controlling middle-class students. The Selective Service's "channeling" system benefits the young man who can afford to go to college, and whose culture supports both higher education and avoiding the draft if he can. Channeling helps him, however, only so long as he lives up to the draft board's standards of behavior and work. Just as the threat of loss of deferment drives draft registrants into college or jobs in the "National Interest," so the threat of losing privileged status within the school system is used to drive students to fulfill upper-track, college-bound requirements. In a school in which students are tracked from, say, "12-1"—the twelfth-grade class for college-bound students—down to "12-34"—the class for alleged unteachables—demotion not only would threaten a student's social position, but his entire future life. Having a child placed in a lower track is a stigma for

a college-oriented family, as every principal faced with angry parents pushing to have their children in the "best" classes will testify. Moreover, entry into prestige colleges, or even into college at all, normally depends upon track and other measures of school status. Thus though the threat, like that of channeling in the past, has been largely unspoken, it continues to push students to behaving and achieving as required by the system.

These operations of tracking and channeling (and of racial segregation, for which tracking is often an administrative substitute) help to explain why, contrary to popular American mythology, this society has more and more rapidly become stratified, structured by class. Increasingly, Americans follow the occupations of their fathers or, at any rate, enter occupations of roughly the same prestige and income. Level of education—which must be distinguished both from what a student has learned and from how competent he might be—is a major determinant of what kind of job he can get. The more education attained, on the whole, the better the job; and, of course, the more prestigious the college the better. There is a direct correlation between a student's social and economic class and the likelihood that he will enter *or* graduate from college. A recent study by the Carnegie Commission of Higher Education found that children from families whose income is above the national median have a chance of getting into college three times greater than that of children from families below the median. And only 7 percent of college students come from families in the bottom quarter of national income. "The passage from school to college, in fact, seems to depend more upon socialization, life experience, and opportunity than upon intellective factors."

The track system provides a formal basis for translating these class-based factors into academic criteria for separating students into different groups: those who will drop out; those whose diplomas will not admit them to college; those who will be able to enter only two-year or junior colleges; and the lucky few in the honors classes who will go on to elite institutions and to graduate or professional schools. Thus while tracking may assure the "failure" of lower-class students, as a system it allows the schools to "succeed" in serving middle-class interests by preparing their children to fill the technological and professional needs of corporate society.

In several cities during the past few years, as the contradictions between systems of tracking and the rhetoric of social mobility have become especially apparent, some groups have begun to pressure for the abolition of tracking and others, in the meantime, for "open" admissions to colleges. It is clear enough to students and their parents that there are fewer jobs available for young men who have not completed high school or who have emerged from "basic" or other lower tracks. Jobs requiring no secondary education have decreased 25 percent in the past ten years; and white-collar workers, who made up 15 percent of the work force in 1900 and 28.5 percent in 1940, will make up about 48 percent in 1970. Schools with tracking systems have not been particularly responsive to a job market changed by automation and "upgrading" (an economist's term for saying that you now need more educational credentials to get the same level of job). Manpower specialists, often writing under the auspices of major foundations, have therefore called on school systems to change their practice so that their products will suit a modernizing industrial economy. But of course, the pressure to maintain a system segregated by class has not abated.

The clash between those upholding tracking and those wishing to end it has taken particularly dramatic forms in several cities. In Washington, D.C., for example, tracking was a primary issue in the battle over former Superintendent Carl Hansen's job. In New York City, the issue of whom the schools will serve has been fought over "community control." Experiments designed to make schools more responsive to the needs of blacks and Puerto Ricans by giving them direct control over the education of their children through the creation of community school boards have been financed by the Ford Foundation and supported by politicians, including Mayor Lindsay and Governor Rockefeller, who have been sensitive to the changing needs of large industry as well as the demands of black voters.

In opposition to community-controlled decentralization, the New York Teachers' Union and much of the white, middle-class electorate correctly understand the demand for community control as a demand that the schools help the children of poor blacks and Puerto Ricans to compete with their own children instead of preventing them from doing so. Jewish teachers remember their battle against WASPs and Irish Catholics entrenched in the schools before them. Odd alliances between the Ford Foundation and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville local board, on the one hand, and the liberal Jewish and conservative Italian communities, on the other, as well as the bitterness of the struggle in New York City suggest how fundamental are the social and economic stakes at issue in the control of the schools.

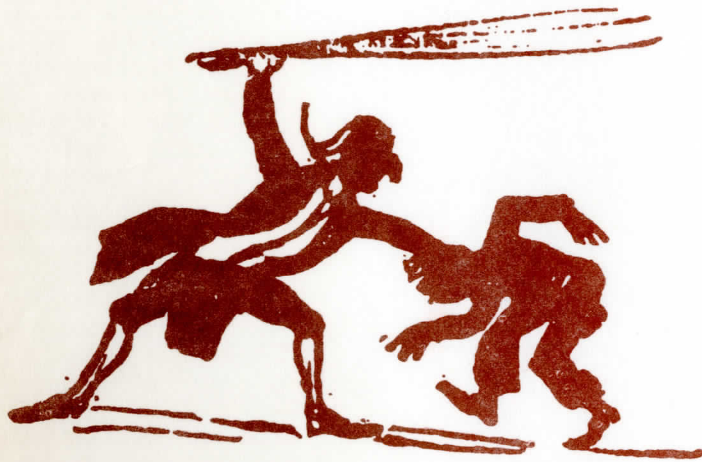
The issue is also powerful and divisive for higher education. Encouraged by US society to believe that young people can rise to the top, whatever their race or class, blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and some working-class white students are beginning to press into colleges. Higher education in the United States has had to manage an elaborate and delicate technique for diverting many of these students from goals toward which they have been taught to aspire, but which a stratified society cannot allow them all to reach. "Cooling" them "out," the term openly used in higher education and now beginning to become as familiar to students as "channeling," means that certain students are deliberately and secretively discouraged from aspirations middle-class youth take for granted. Working-class students are tracked into second-class or "junior" colleges, "cooled out" and counseled into substitute curricula (a medical technician's program rather than a premedical course), or, if they get to a university, programmed for failure in large "required" courses.

California's three-tiered system of higher education has provided a model for other states: the "top" eighth of high-school graduates may be admitted to the university system, the "top" third to the state colleges; the rest are relegated to what one writer has described as "those fancied-up super high schools, the local two-year 'community colleges.'" Factors closely related to race and economic class—students' high-school track, grades, and College Board scores—determine placement into a particular level of higher education, though the fees students pay are relatively similar wherever they may go in the state. Like tracking in high schools, state-subsidized higher education channels students into distinctly inequitable systems. In Maryland, for example, the average per pupil expenditure during fiscal year 1966 was $802 in community colleges, $1,221 in the state colleges, and $1,724 (excluding research funds) in the University of Maryland.

Another significant index of discrimination is the relative teaching load of faculties: at the University of Maryland, an English professor teaches three courses, at state colleges four, and at community colleges five. Theoretically, at least, university students are taught by professors with better credentials, higher salaries, and lighter teaching loads than at state or community colleges. It is not surprising, therefore, as Todd Gitlin has pointed out, that from the university campuses come

"high professionals and managers for the great corporations. At the bottom, the two-year junior colleges take on all comers, and process them into clerks, punch-card operators, foremen—the dregs of the white-collar labor force."

gan, only 25 percent of the fathers of entering freshmen had less than a college education, only 4.8 percent less than a high-school diploma; consequently, only 1.8 percent of the students were from families with incomes under $4,000. The circular process is obvious: just as the economic class of a student's family largely determines his admission to a particular college or university in the first place, so does his placement at that college determine his future. Indeed, money is destiny! Given the process of "upgrading" jobs, one might find suitable the image of a squirrel in a circular cage: the faster he runs, the more firmly does he remain bound to his position. While the admission of working-class students to community colleges may seem to be serving their desire for upward mobility, in fact it



But it is not only that the student attending a junior college will have far less public money spent on his education than the student attending Berkeley, Michigan, or the University of Maryland. It is rather that tracking at public colleges also benefits the children of the rich at the expense of the children of the poor. Patricia Cayo Sexton has stated the case: "In general the more money a student's parents make, the more money will be spent on his education, despite some efforts at public 'compensatory' expenditures for the disadvantaged." In New York City, for example, tuition-free colleges with "'high standards'... have...subsidized many middle-income students and virtually excluded most impoverished ethnic groups." "Low college tuition," Mrs. Sexton writes, "offers few opportunities to lower-income students if entrance 'standards' are too high to hurdle."

Significantly, her statistics bear out the relationship between income and admission: at the University of Michi-

may barely be keeping the lid on potentially explosive campuses.

Demonstrations throughout the nation during the spring of 1969 arose from students' increasing awareness that tracking, and its methods of cheating and controlling the poor, have been translated into new campus forms. Demands for "open admissions" of black and "third-world" students, prominent first at San Francisco State College, attempt to strike at the heart of the tracking system by negating the streaming process of earlier school years. Students at San Francisco State, at City College in New York, and elsewhere, in lengthy strikes and demonstrations, have first paralyzed the institution, then divided it irrevocably on principles similar to those we have described with relation to high schools.

In the official catalogue of San Francisco State, a passage claims that the curriculum ought to satisfy "existing student interests" and "the technical and professional manpower requirements of the State." But interests of students and those of manpower specialists often diverge fundamentally. they are obviously most divergent with respect to working-class students' aspirations for the alleged room at the top and industry's needs for a highly differentiated work force.

Can the track system survive this new and deeply outraged onslaught of college students? The "valves" of tracking in high school may be sticky, at once denying both reasonable opportunity to poor and black students and better trained manpower to industry. But the demand for dividing the work force by some tracking mechanism remains. To be sure, it doesn't much matter, at least abstractly, to the corporation manager just *who* fills what slots so long as young people are channeled and prepared to fill them. In this respect, the need for a class-based track system diminishes. But a particular John D. Executive—not to speak of Jack Salesman—wants to maintain *his* privilege for *his* kids. Thus the pressure to maintain the present social and class divisions has hardly diminished. Colleges are, on the one hand, pressed from below by poor, black, and radical students to end discriminatory admissions practices. On the other hand, they are pressed from above by politicians, trustees, and contributors to "maintain standards," not to "capitulate to the demands of demonstrators." Implicitly, they are of course urged to maintain the present system of class and economic privilege embodied in those "standards."

In March, 1969, Rutgers University agreed to an "open admissions" policy for disadvantaged students from the three cities in which its campuses are located. Almost at once, opposition to the program developed in the New Jersey legislature, partly because the plan would reduce the number of students eligible to enter the state university who were not from those lucky three cities. Similarly, an announcement by New York City's Board of Higher Education that it would attempt to implement an "open admissions policy by 1970 was greeted with opposition by key state legislators."

More sensitive to the complexities of New York City's educational politics, a conservative Democratic candidate for mayor in 1969, Mario A. Procaccino, "hoped" that money could be found so that all city youths would have access to "free education," but warned "against any lowering of academic standards at the university." The New York City plan by no means envisaged

an end to tracking. As initially presented, it pictured only 19 percent of graduating high-school seniors entering the senior colleges, some 26 percent going on to community colleges, and another 20 percent or more being channeled into "educational skills centers," where, presumably, they would be trained to fill vacancies in low-paying hospital, teaching-aid, and clerical positions.

The revised plan now being implemented considerably increased the proportion of high-school graduates entering senior colleges. But more ingeniously, it changed the standard of admission to the senior colleges from high-school grade-point average alone, adding as an alternative criterion a student's rank in his high-school class. Thus the student from ghetto schools, where grade-point averages are notoriously low, will be able to enter one of the senior colleges by finishing in the top half or so of his class.

The competition for places in the city's colleges will thus be increased even for middle-class students, since the compromise tries to placate white, middle-class advocates of "standards" by saying to them that their children can be admitted to a senior college if they maintain high standards. At the same time, the compromise attempts to placate ghetto residents by opening the senior colleges to more of their children—those, on the whole, perhaps, with middle-class aspirations. What the plan does, rather neatly, is to turn a threatening racial and ethnic crisis into a division of students by class; it is precisely such school-maintained divisions that Americans have in the past chosen not to contest.

New York City's response to the pressure for open admissions and an end to tracking seems a likely harbinger. It shifts part of the burden of tracking upward to "education beyond high school," now available for "all who want it," and held out as a carrot for disaffected minorities. The plan expands Upward Bound and SEEK programs to permit more individuals of "high potential but weak background" to flow into higher educational streams. In short, it places the valves higher in the educational system and lets them function a bit more freely. It gives the needs of the economy for a screened, differentiated, and controllable work force somewhat higher priority than the wishes of white middle-class parents that the schools perpetuate their privilege. But it by no means destroys the mechanisms by which schools have maintained class privilege. Now students will be separated—according to grades and class standing—into senior college, community college, and "other" categories.

Not surprisingly: for the systems of tracking are so closely tied to those who control American education and to the qualities of American schools that it is hard to imagine their replacement altogether—certainly not by a system which would permit children to develop according to their own needs and abilities. □

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