The
POLITICS
of
ENVY

Statism as Theology

DOUG BANDOW

THE POLITICS OF ENVY

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THE POLITICS OF ENVY

Statism as Theology

Doug Badow

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For David and Deborah Wical, who will have to live in the world that we are making today.

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Foreword

In an odd way, though we live in a secular age, the United States is a remarkably religious nation. Our god is not the God of traditional faiths, however. It is the modern state. As the subtitle of Doug Bandow's fascinating study suggests, our society's faith in the state has become a kind of theology, an organized system of social and cultural governance built around a godhead.

The scope of the statist theology is nearly without limit. Are there problems in families' and communities' internal lives? We then expect the state to take their place. We invest the state with the authority to properly manage our economies, organize our public lives, define our private morality, educate our children, tell us what we should eat and drink, and inform businesses how to conduct their affairs.

This theology of statism has grown to crowd out our belief in an immutable moral sense, which Hilaire Belloc rightly tells us is a mark of the Servile State. Whereas we once saw the state as necessarily limited in its proper interests and practical efficacy, we now willingly embrace the new religion of the state. In doing so we have lost faith in the idea of liberty as the organizing principle of public life and virtue as the goal of our private lives.

We should not be surprised that this theology of statism is so pervasive. People are naturally religious. Something tugs at the human soul to worship magnificence. Even in the most primitive people, there is an urge to glorify someone or something outside the self. The proper end to these longings is God, but without real faith, we find substitute gods. And so it is that Americans find themselves a society religiously devoted to the products of the political process. We imbue managers with tasks we could never imagine ourselves accomplishing in our private or community lives.

At one time in our history we were a fiercely independent people. The Americans Toqueville wrote about were devoted to the Christian God and to the concept of freedom. Solutions to social problems were

dealt with on a local basis. Individuals, families, churches, and organic communities were independent of the national government. The federal purse was not theirs to draw from, and citizenship did not require paying heavy taxes.

We have come to accept levels of tyranny today that would have seemed unthinkable even a few generations ago. In 1913, for example, an amendment was proposed in Congress that would have capped federal income tax at 1 percent of income on high earners. It was rejected because many members of Congress felt it would encourage government to immediately increase the tax to that very level, creating a political and moral hazard.

Now the government at all levels extracts nearly \$2 trillion a year from the public and over 40 percent of the national income. We rarely think about what could have been produced had it been left in the hands that had labored to earn it. How much more would the private sector have produced? How much more would have been given to charity?

This new religion did not come to us in the modern equivalent of the Great Awakening. It came slowly and subtly, but nonetheless deliberately. To tell the story we could return to Nixon's wage and price controls, Johnson's Great Society, Roosevelt's New Deal, or Wilson's Progressivism. In retrospect all these seminal periods seem to form a pattern. We thought we were doing good. But, as G.K. Chesterton wrote, "in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues." We intended well, but we were pushing ourselves further into the mire of statism, giving up our individual and social autonomy for promises of virtue that were never fulfilled.

Slowly, a peculiar American version of Fabian socialism began to be accepted at all levels of our society. Every agency expected a larger budget, more power, and more employees next year than this. We began to exchange liberty for higher taxes and ever intrusive regulations and mandates, all of which diminished our freedom and changed the focus of faith from God to a new godhead centered in institutions of coercion and compulsion.

The process continues today. When an epidemic of poverty afflicted our nation, we looked to government to come up with a solution. What we got for this "solution" was another epidemic, one of out-of-wedlock births. History would have been different if we had had faith in our communities to encourage productivity and chastity. Rather, we started

to believe that the state could solve all social, spiritual, medical, and economic ills, and paid little attention to the costs of the elusive “security” it promised.

As a Christian libertarian, Doug Bandow puts forth the idea that statism is a grave threat to both traditional religion and human liberty. He encourages Christians and libertarians to find common cause in the goal of staying the false god, and returning our society to one in which both virtue and freedom flourish.

Mr. Bandow carries many topics under the theme of statism, including a dangerous and radical environmentalism, a reckless foreign interventionism, an intrusive regulatory apparatus, and an unproductive income redistribution. Among his most provocative topics is the new prohibitionism. Even as public and private morality decay, each legislative session spawns new laws for us to obey.

As government bureaucrats oversee invasions of private property and individual consciences, people are increasingly being suspected for their thoughts and not their actions. New sins are created by government bureaucrats to replace the old sins of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The ministers of our modern religion condemn not fornication, but “unprotected sex.” They banish smokers from the public square the way adulterers were once treated.

Similarly, in today’s drug war we see an age-old tendency among government officials to ban harmful substances. Our nation should know better. Not so long ago, the country experienced a moral decline as dry laws were erected under Prohibition. In the desire to ban public choices, no one can doubt the good intentions of these who thought demon rum was bad for society. But by making alcohol illegal, government glamorized the illegal liquor trade and made the bootleggers rich. Today’s drug dealers are the glitterati of our ghettos, and they have the Drug Enforcement Agency to thank in part for their elevated status.

Such are the results of centralized and statist strategy to deal with what are essentially community problems. Mr. Bandow’s opposition to the drug war, argued on both Christian and libertarian grounds, calls to mind a great figure from the 1920s and 1930s, Father James Gillis, a member of my own religious community, the Congregation of Saint Paul (the Paulist Fathers). As the editor of the monthly *The Catholic World*, Father Gillis undertook a fierce campaign against liquor. Yet his sense of moral outrage at alcohol abuse never clouded his reason.

Father Gillis saw government action as a threat to the reforms he was undertaking. "It is my own conviction," he wrote, that the prohibition was the greatest blow ever given to the temperance movement. Before prohibition, the people at large were becoming more and more sober. Total abstinence had become the practice, not of a few, but of millions.... Under the Volstead Law, drinking became a popular sport. The passage of the law was a psychological blunder, and a moral calamity.

For the most part, as Mr. Bandow makes so clear, our public policy failures are not due to a lack of good intentions. Consider the welfare state. It was built in an attempt to help the poor, but ended up punishing productive work, creating a bloated and impersonal bureaucracy, and drafting the poor into a dependent relationship with the state. Far from relieving poverty, welfare has merely entrenched a whole segment of society in it.

Welfare affects the character of all of us, not just the recipients. When welfare bureaucracies take over caring for the poor, what becomes of the personal virtues of love and compassion? Charity is supposed to represent obedience to the dictates of conscience; its character changes when it disintegrates into simple obedience to government agencies. It is no longer an act of free will.

What we need in this battle against moral decline and state dependency is not ideology, but ancient wisdom and contemporary facts. To this end, Mr. Bandow is a national treasure. From some books of political economy, you get ideological bombast. But this work offers relentless logic, hard facts, and the reasoning of an informed conscience. The cumulative effect is to give his readers a renewed understanding of how the expansion of government authority threatens both liberty and personal virtue.

One of the impediments to reform toward market-oriented societies in the ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has been the loss of the independence of spirit. Subjects invariably become used to the state providing for them. Life was gray under the communists, but for the most part people could depend on a government job and a government check. We are not immune from such social temptations. There is, after all, a modicum of security in slavery.

Yet we must ask ourselves—and Mr. Bandow encourages us to do so—do we value freedom from responsibility more than freedom itself? If we decide that we do not, then we must revive our own, uniquely American enterprising spirit and bring it to those who have been per-

suaded and pressured to abandon the ideal of the American dream. Only by rekindling a love of liberty, which is in itself a virtue, will we struggle free from the theology of statism, and strengthen ourselves and our weakened republic.

ROBERT SIRICO

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Coast-to-Coast Federal Dole,” “Environmentalism: The Triumph of Politics,” “The Pharmaceutical Industry: Problems or Solutions?”; John Locke Foundation: “Whither Health Care in the Age of Clinton?”; *Liberty*: “Libertarians and Christians in a Hostile World”; *Tabletalk*: “Should Christians Be Statists?”

Finally, I owe much to the members of my church, Christian Assembly, and the many friends and family members who’ve helped sustain me in my quixotic quest to save the world. Perhaps the most important lesson that I’ve learned from them is to be more realistic about my goals—while still doing my best to make things a bit better for my niece and nephew, and everyone else who will inherit an increasingly polarized and politicized planet. Special thanks go to my parents, Don and Donna Bandow, for their love, friendship, and spiritual support.

Introduction: The Age of Politics, Continued

Ours is a secular age. But faith has not disappeared. Rather, the gods have changed. Today the reigning theology is statism: government has become god, charged with the people's salvation.

Not that this religious experiment has worked very well. What historian Paul Johnson calls "the age of politics" has unleashed untold death and destruction while solving few of mankind's most vexing problems, such as poverty. To the contrary, all too often it is government policy, usually inadvertently, but sometimes intentionally, that has created and/or exacerbated social problems. Yet politicians of all ideological stripes refuse to accept that their time is drawing to a bloody, calamitous close, and therefore continue to fight to preserve their positions. The worst do it by inflaming ancient ethnic passions and demonizing traditional scapegoats—immigrants and Jews, for instance. The more subtle seek support by endorsing "change," proposing to "reinvent" their institutions, and pledging to offer "meaning" to people's lives.

It is difficult to predict whether these stratagems will succeed. In the short term they have worked for men as different as Slobodan Milosevic and Bill Clinton, but the positions of these officials, and of the raft of thugs and mediocrities who run the vast majority of governments around the globe, are hardly secure. In the long term most of these people will be consigned to the ash-heap of history. The only question is whether they will be alive to see their memories execrated and their monuments desecrated.

But, as Lord Keynes said, in the long run we are all dead. Today we have to contend with an age of politics that has not yet fully wound down. And that politics, in the United States, at least, has increasingly been based on envy, the desire not to produce more for oneself, but to take as much as possible from others. Of course, all of the proponents of the politics of envy proclaim themselves animated by public-spiritedness: who in Washington would admit that the higher taxes he advocates will

be used to pay off the interest group of the day, whether farmer, corporation, or union? Who would suggest that he has anything but good will toward those who he is intent on mulcting?

Indeed, the problem of envy has always been much more serious than that of greed. Those who are greedy may ruin their own lives, but those who are envious contaminate the larger community by letting their covetousness interfere with their relations with others. Moreover, one can satisfy greed in innocuous, even positive ways—by being brighter, working harder, seeing new opportunities, and meeting the demands of others, for instance. In contrast, envy today is rarely satisfied without use of the state. True, some people pull a gun and heist the nearest person's wallet or purse. But for the otherwise law-abiding, the only way to take what is someone else's is to enlist one or more public officials to seize land, impose taxes, regulate activities, conscript labor, and so on. Statism, then, is integral to the politics of envy. Statism has become the basic theology for those committed to using government to coercively create their preferred version of the virtuous society.

The impact of what might at first glance appear to be esoteric philosophizing has been dramatic. Between 1950 and 1990 those supposed evidences of greed, corporate profits, and personal incomes, rose 757 percent and 1870 percent respectively. However, government spending, one of the best measures of envy, grew 3163 percent. Virtually no human activity today is outside the jurisdiction of politics. What you ingest, where you work, how much you earn, from whom you receive medical care, how you have sex, what people in other lands do—all of these and more are now matters of grave concern to government at one and often several levels.

It is this continuing expansion of the state even as the luster of the age of politics fades at which *The Politics of Envy: Statism as Theology* is directed. Section I questions the moral basis of statism: put bluntly, virtue is hindered rather than advanced by government coercion. Section II focuses on one of the great moral challenges of our time—abortion. Section III takes up an issue, the environment, that has been increasingly distorted by the moral and quasi-theological arguments put forth by devotees of politics. Section IV considers the direction of American foreign policy in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. Section V contests the conventional wisdom that foreign aid “aids” anyone other than corrupt elites in recipient nations. Section VI considers perhaps the

most pernicious manifestation of state power today, regulation—of doctors, pharmaceutical manufacturers, students, the poor, drug users, and most everyone else. Finally, Section VII covers the classic weapon of the envious: redistribution through tax-and-spend policies, a weapon wielded by Democrat—new as well as old—and Republican alike.

There are, I believe, more important things in life than politics. That is not a widely held view in Washington and the capitals of most other nations, however; American opinion leaders spent months in 1993 debating “the politics of meaning,” a philosophy, held by some people of enormous influence, that government can fill people’s every need, spiritual as well as material. This epitomizes the theology of statism and is almost certainly both idolatrous and pernicious, aiding and abetting the expansion of the state into precisely the areas of people’s lives through which they should find meaning. No one book, let alone this one, is likely to bring the age of politics to a close. But my hope is that *The Politics of Envy: Statism as Theology* will help generate some serious debate over fundamental issues, such as the moral basis, or lack thereof, for what amounts to legislated theft. And if the book contributes in even a small way to making a society that is both freer and more virtuous, then I will be well satisfied.

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The Transcendent Questions

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1

Virtue versus Freedom? Allies or Antagonists?

Both freedom and virtue are under assault today. The attack on economic and political freedom is obvious enough. Government takes and spends roughly half of the nation's income. Regulation further extends the power of the state in virtually every area—how one can use one's property, what occupation one can enter, who one can hire, what terms one can offer to prospective employees, with which countries one can trade. Increasing numbers of important, personal decisions are ultimately up to some functionary some where, rather than the average citizen.

The problem only got worse during the 1980s, despite the election of avowedly conservative presidents. Spending and regulation rose particularly dramatically during the Bush administration. Alas, government is likely to expand even more quickly during the next four years.

Virtue, too, seems to be losing ground daily. Evidence of moral decline was evident enough in the 1992 presidential election. Bill Clinton's widely reported promiscuous adultery made a mockery of his church attendance; his evasions and lies regarding his draft avoidance suggested that his commitment to the truth was weak at best. George Bush, while apparently leading a more exemplary personal life, thought nothing of making a promise on taxes that he never intended to keep and appeared to have dissembled badly regarding his knowledge of the Iran-Contra affair. The shamelessness and viciousness of his attacks on his opponent on the campaign were also not the stuff of which virtue is made.

Things are scarcely better elsewhere in society. Promiscuity is not just a twentysomething phenomenon; even many preteens are sexually active. Illegitimacy rates continue to rise not only in the inner-city but also in middle-class America. Dishonesty and theft are the rage: the en-

tire political system is geared to facilitate special interest looting of the taxpayers. Employees as well as customers shop-lift—everywhere. A university band recently distinguished itself by stealing more than \$30,000 worth of merchandise while visiting Japan. Business, too, suffers from a corrupt core, demonstrated by Ivan Boesky and his ilk.

Freedom and Virtue under Attack

Some elements of our society have attacked both freedom and virtue. Much of the left, for instance, believes in “choice” if it means moral relativism and escape from responsibility, but abhors “choice” if it means private individuals making informed decisions about their children, kids’ educations, jobs, and other aspects of their lives.

Alas, some advocates of liberty and virtue have compounded the problem by unnecessarily setting the two against each other. A number of members of the more “libertarian” right dismiss virtue as a matter of concern, while some more traditional conservatives want the state to circumscribe individual freedom to promote “morality.” Both of these groups see freedom and virtue as frequent antagonists, if not permanent opponents. At the very least, they suggest, you cannot maximize both of them, but, instead, have to choose which to promote and which to restrict.

However, it is a mistake to assume that one must be sacrificed for the other. They are related, but are complementary. That is, liberty—the right to exercise choice, free from coercive state regulation—is a necessary precondition for virtue. And virtue is ultimately necessary for the survival of liberty.

Virtue cannot exist without freedom, without the right to make moral choices. By virtue I mean the dictionary definition: moral excellence, goodness, righteousness. Coerced acts of conformity with some moral norm, however good, do not represent virtue; rather, the compliance with that moral norm must be voluntary.

There are times, of course, when coercion is absolutely necessary—most importantly, to protect the rights of others by enforcing an *inter*-personal moral code governing the relations of one to another. The criminal law is an obvious example, as is the enforcement of contracts and property rights. But is coercion justified to promote virtue, that is, to impose a standard of *intra*-personal morality? At stake are some of the

most controversial issues: drug use, pornography, homosexuality, and the like. All of these activities have some social impact and some people argue that it is precisely this impact that justifies state intervention. Usually more powerful, however, is the contrary case against intervention—that most of the ill consequences, such as drug-related crime, are primarily a product of legal prohibition rather than the activity itself. If, in fact, government regulation makes the social problems worse, then the only justification for intervention is to promote virtue.

Nation's Moral Tone

Our nation's moral tone is not good; America does not seem to be a particularly virtuous place. And the moral environment seems to have gotten worse in recent days, though, of course, one should have no illusions that a perfect age ever existed. Still, if things have deteriorated, one has to ask: is that because we have become more free, and would becoming less free make America more virtuous? The answers to both questions, I think, are no.

The natural human condition, certainly in Christian theology, and in historical experience, too, is not one of virtue. "There is no one righteous, not even one," Paul wrote in his letter to the Roman church, citing the Psalms (Rom. 3:10). This explains the necessity of a transcendent plan of redemption.

But societies can be more or less virtuous. Did ours become less so *because* government no longer tried so hard to mold souls? Blaming moral shifts on legal changes mistakes correlation for causation. In fact, America's onetime cultural consensus eroded even during an era of strict laws against homosexuality, pornography, and even fornication. Only cracks in this consensus led to changes in the law. In short, as more people viewed sexual mores as a matter of taste rather than a question of right and wrong, the moral underpinnings of the laws collapsed, followed by the laws. Only a renewed moral consensus could allow the reestablishment of the laws.

But government is not a particularly good teacher of virtue. The state tends to be effective at simple, blunt tasks, like killing and jailing people. It has been far less successful at reshaping individual consciences. Even if one could pass the laws without changing American's current moral ethic, the result would not be a more virtuous nation. True, there might

be fewer overt acts of immorality. But there would be no change in people's hearts: Forcibly preventing people from victimizing themselves does not automatically make them more virtuous, righteous, or good. As Christ instructed his listeners, "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5: 28). A country full of people lusting in their hearts who don't consummate the lust out of fear of arrest is scarcely better than one full of people acting on their sinful whims. It is, in short, one thing to improve appearances, but quite another to improve society's moral core. And God, Jeremiah tells us, looks at the heart (Jer. 17: 10).

Making Society Less Virtuous

Indeed, attempting to forcibly make people virtuous would make society itself less virtuous in three important ways. First, individuals would lose the opportunity to exercise virtue. They would not face the same set of temptations and be forced to choose between good and evil. This approach might thereby make their lives easier—it might also make them less vulnerable to a number of diseases. But they would not be more virtuous and society would suffer as a result. In this dilemma we see the paradox of Christianity: a God of love creates man and provides a means for his redemption, but allows him to choose to do evil. While true Christian liberty means freedom from sin, it seems to be tied to a more common form of freedom, the opportunity to choose whether to respond to God's grace.

Second, to vest government with primary responsibility for promoting virtue shortchanges other institutions, or "governments" in Puritan thought, like the family and church, sapping their vitality. Private social institutions find it easier to lean on the power of coercion than to lead by example, persuade, and solve problems. Moreover, the law is better at driving immorality underground than eliminating it. As a result, moral problems seem less acute and people may become less uncomfortable; private institutions may therefore be less likely to work as hard to promote virtue.

Third, making government a moral enforcer encourages abuse by majorities or influential minorities that gain power. If one thing is certain in life, it is that man is sinful. "There is no one righteous, not even one" states a biblical passage that bears repeating. The effect of sin is

magnified by the possession and exercise of coercive power. Its possessors can, of course, do good, but history suggests that they are far more likely to do harm. Even in our democratic system majorities are as ready to enact their personal predilections—okaying the use of such dangerous substances as alcohol and tobacco while outlawing marijuana—as uphold real morality.

And as America's traditional Judeo-Christian consensus crumbles we are more likely to see government promoting alternative moral views—teaching that gay unions are normal, and so on. This is possible only if government is given the authority to coercively mold souls in order to “promote virtue.” Despite the best intentions of advocates of statecraft as soulcraft, government is more likely to end up enshrining immorality as morality. All told, an unfree society is not likely to be a virtuous one.

First Do No Harm

The fact that government can do little to help does not mean that there is nothing it should do. We would all be better off if public officials adopted as their maxim “first, do no harm.” Although the community-wide moral breakdown most evident in the inner-city has many causes, government policy has exacerbated the problem. Welfare, for instance, has made illegitimacy and family break-up financially feasible and often profitable. The ever-worsening drug war has robbed urban residents of hope and created well-funded criminal gangs that offer male role models and wealth to fatherless, ill-educated ghetto youth. Economic restrictions, such as the minimum wage and occupational licensing, have made it difficult for residents to find even ill-paid legal work. Monopoly government schools don't train inner-city residents for remunerative, satisfying employment even if it existed. Finally, housing regulations—rent control, zoning, and the like—have helped trap the poor in slums. The synergistic impact of all of these factors operating together has been devastating.

Governments also punish both marriage and thrift through their tax policies. The state has spent years attempting to expunge not only churches but also religious values from the public square; localities war against religion through everything from zoning restrictions to private school regulations. Indeed, government at all levels has proved itself to be the greatest of imperialists, constantly expanding—all the while displacing or regulating private activities.

Beyond doing no harm, public institutions can perform an educative role, but the moral discourse needs to be carried on at the broadest level of consensus possible. It is unreasonable, for instance, to expect a state government to launch a crusade against homosexuality, as Proposition 9, on the ballot in November 1992, would have directed the state of Oregon. Not only are gays taxpayers, but there seems little reason to single them out while ignoring adulterers and fornicators, for instance. The broader issue, with greater social consequences, is promiscuity. Similarly, there is general agreement from across the philosophical spectrum that teens should not be having children: therefore abstinence can be promoted in public schools for reasons other than adherence to traditional Jewish and Christian moral teachings.

However, advocates of virtue must be careful in using the state in even this modest fashion lest they abdicate their own essential roles in the educative process. Moreover, while the government may help buttress private instruction, it remains a very imperfect tool and subject to misuse by officials and influential special interest groups with their own, usually very political, agendas. Indeed, in the end, what goes around tends to come around again. Once advocates of virtue use the state to politicize the process, they lose their strongest argument, on principle, to prevent other forces from using government for immoral ends.

Freedom Is Not Enough

Nevertheless, freedom is not enough. While liberty is the highest political goal, it is not life's highest objective. Moreover, while a liberal, in the classical sense, economic and political system is the best one available, it will operate even better if nestled in a virtuous social environment.

For instance, a market system will function more effectively if people are honest and voluntarily fulfill their contracts. People who believe in working hard, exercising thrift, and observing temperance will be more productive. Economic life will function more smoothly if employers treat their workers fairly. Fewer social problems will emerge if families, churches, and communities organize to forestall them in the first place. Greater personal responsibility will reduce welfare expenditures and tort litigation. And so on. A lush lawn of a compassionate, cooperative, and virtuous society will make it harder for weeds of government encroachment to flourish.

Thus, advocates of a minimal state need to be concerned about both liberty and virtue. Freedom is important both as an end in itself and as a means of allowing people to exercise virtue. Virtue, too, is critically important in its own right. It also plays a critical role in undergirding a free society. How best can we promote them together? First, as noted earlier, government should do no harm. We need radical changes in policies that today restrict freedom and undermine morality. Second, private mediating institutions, particularly churches and community associations, need to retake their leading role in teaching virtue and meeting social problems. Third, people need to be more willing to tolerate the quirks and failings, even serious virtuous lapses, of their neighbors, so long as such actions have only limited effect on others. The punishment of most sins should be left to God.

Fourth, moral-minded citizens should turn to the state only as a last resort. The issue needs to be important enough to warrant government intervention; the activity involved also needs to have a significant impact on nonconsenting parties. And *private alternatives must be clearly inadequate*. For example, religious believers should lead their children in prayer at home rather than foisting that duty onto atheist teachers in the public schools. Opponents of pornography should organize boycotts before demanding the arrest of buyers and sellers. And, perhaps most importantly, vocal supporters of the importance of virtue need to exhibit morality in their own lives before suggesting that government send cops into other people's bedrooms.

Those of us who believe in both a free and virtuous society face serious challenges in the coming years. We need to respond by finding ways to strength both, not play them off against each other. In the end, neither is likely to survive without the other.

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