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## The Hezbollah Myth and Asymmetric Warfare

**Adam Elkus**

Since the early 1990s, military theorists examined ways that a rogue state, substate, or nonstate actor could frustrate a conventional force. The 2006 Israeli clash with Hezbollah came to be seen as the harbinger of an era of cheap missiles, stronger defenses, and danger to conventional forces. Hezbollah's supposed success furthered a growing notion that a strong high-end asymmetric warfare defense could make a country a poison pill for foreign intervention.

But this narrative does not capture the conflict's ambivalent results, exaggerating Israeli difficulties while overplaying Hezbollah's performance. The Hezbollah myth also masks the ability of a sufficiently driven and equipped state to use conventional military power to annihilate a weaker state or substate group. While the operational challenges of high-end asymmetric threats do pose dangers for conventional forces that deserve sustained analysis, the strategic question of whether high-end asymmetric warfare can effectively deter a conventional force hinges instead on the political context of the conflict and the adversaries who fight it.

### **The Strategy and Terminology of the Poison Pill Defense**

One of the biggest contemporary anxieties in American defense debates is the operational challenge of state and non-state threats utilizing cheap but lethal weaponry to frustrate intervention by conventional forces. The old concept of a "Swiss" defense rooted in the combination of regular and irregular forces fighting to the death is reflected in new worries that new combined capabilities might make a state or a sanctuary zone a poison pill for expeditionary forces. Although this concept is as old as military history itself and also not necessarily novel in a contemporary context, it has been aided by the perception that Hezbollah was able to frustrate the Israelis in 2006 with innovative tactics and weapons.

Strategists fear—and dictators and insurgents hope—that capabilities known popularly as "high-end asymmetric threats" will prevent the projection of power abroad and limit American options. This is a valid concern, especially due to the problems it poses for expeditionary policies, whether they are full-on interventions or "strategic raids." It is also natural—and supported by military history—to note that no advantage, no matter how overwhelming, can be exercised permanently without encountering adversary countermeasures.

While uncomfortable questions ought to be asked about the tactical and operational challenges these threats pose, we should also remember the military power of the modern state, built up over centuries, to devastate the military, government, and commercial infrastructure of a target state

or sanctuary. This dynamic was demonstrated by Israel's actual conduct of the 2006 Lebanon war and Hezbollah's state of desperation upon triggering a war it neither wanted nor was truly prepared to fight.

Of course just because a state *can* annihilate a small power or non-state group, however, doesn't necessarily mean it *should*. Nor does it guarantee that the intervening power will achieve the desired political results from its usage of military force or will be morally justified in inflicting such destruction. Thus, the question of whether America's options are limited by asymmetric warfare hinges on questions of whether policy from which our strategies are formed is worth the risk, opportunity cost, and can be realistically implemented.

Before we delve into the complexities of the issue it is first necessary to briefly examine the terminology involved. One of the greatest barriers to understanding and sound decision in defense matters is language. Familiar words such as "strategy" no longer mean what they did a century ago. New words and concepts enter the lexicon that both confuse and clarify. Definitions of military concepts also are dependent on the strategic culture and requirements of the country that use and debate them.

The term "high-end asymmetric threat," drawn from the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) debate is the preferred term for a host of state and nonstate military capabilities.<sup>1</sup> There is also the older concept of "compound warfare," which describes armed cooperation between conventional and irregular forces—a timeless dynamic as old as war itself, as well as the newer concept of "hybrid warfare." Since the subject of this analysis is the overall "poison pill" defense of a country through a mixture of positional, standoff, and mobile warfare and irregular operations that exploit the usage of inexpensive but powerful munitions and compound warfighting, the inelegant concept of high-end asymmetric warfare will generally be used.

The way history, language, and theory sometimes conflict in the writing of war studies is an interesting subject in its own right and amply covered in other works.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Search for an Asymmetric Counter**

After the Cold War, some military theorists began to look again at the problem of asymmetric warfare. However, this type of theory dealt with *physical* rather than *moral* attrition. Theorists were looking at ways that technology, tactics, or organization could present challenges to conventional armies on tactical and operational levels. According to this literature, conventional forces could be defeated—or at least severely tested—by smaller state or nonstate forces leveraging cutting-edge tactics, skillful use of the terrain, and cheap but effective weapons. Physical attrition would be combined with moral attrition to create a comprehensive method of defeating conventional forces. This paralleled a growing interest in non-state threats in general as various ethnic and religious conflicts dominated the news.

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the concept, see Michèle Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, "The Contested Commons," *Proceedings*, July 2009, <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2009-07/contested-commons>

<sup>2</sup> William F. Owen, "The War of New Words: Why Military History Trumps Buzzwords," *Armed Forces Journal International*, November 2009, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/11/the-war-of-new-words/>

The first paper on Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW) theory, for example, principally concerned exploitation of advanced weapons by small teams moving in dispersed fashion.

“Technologically, it is possible that a very few soldiers could have the same battlefield effect as a current brigade,” the authors of the first 4GW paper wrote. “Small, highly mobile elements composed of very intelligent soldiers armed with high technology weapons may range over wide areas seeking critical targets. Targets may be more in the civilian than the military sector. Front-rear terms will be replaced with targeted-untargeted.”<sup>3</sup>

The conflicts of the 1990s fueled a growing interest in asymmetric physical attrition. The Russian military’s 1995 debacle in Chechnya was intensely studied by military professionals seeking to prepare for Chechen-like tactics in future warfare. Urban warfare was a hot topic of study in the 1990s, and the subject of large exercises such as the ubiquitous Marine Corps Urban Warrior program. Even if discussion of asymmetric warfare did not dominate defense issues, it was definitely bubbling under the surface. In short, theorists outlined a future that very much resembles today’s talk of anti-access, cyber, and “G-RAMM” (guided rockets, artillery, mortars, and missiles) threats.

Interest in asymmetric warfare exploded after the September 11 attacks, which was seen as the pinnacle of the art. The worsening Iraq campaign and the Global War on Terrorism added fuel to the fire, and the 2002 Millennium Challenge wargame entered into legend as a scenario that supposedly proved that a skilled irregular force with sound tactics could defeat a tech-heavy conventional force (although the story behind MC-2002 is still a matter of intense controversy).

American participation in irregular warfare, however, was not the only source of inspiration for the emerging concept of a high-end asymmetric threat. The controversy surrounding the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon helped revive the old concept of a defense that was neither conventional nor irregular, but a lethal mixture of the two.

## **The Hezbollah Myth**

2006 was not the first time an Israeli conflict caught the eye of Western military observers. The 1973 attrition of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) tanks by Egyptian anti-tank forces heavily influenced American military thought and doctrine. General William DePuy’s Field Manual 100-5 *Operations* assumed a high degree of weapons lethality, and some pundits at the time claimed that the missile-armed ground soldier had ended the era of the tank.<sup>4</sup> As Robert Citino points out, this view ignored an outnumbered IDF’s successful defense of two fronts and successful armor-led strategic penetrations into enemy territory. The IDF’s deficiencies had more to do with specific problems with force employment and organization as well as the proven strength of Egyptian armed forces on the defense.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See William S. Lind *et al.*, “The Changing Face of Warfare: Into the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1989, 22-26.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy*, Carlisle Barracks, Strategic Studies Institute, 2008, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm: The Evolution of Operational Warfare*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006, 183-186 and 256.

The 1973 war was closely studied because it supposedly granted a glimpse of future warfare between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Since both sides fought with equipment and doctrinal concepts supplied by the dueling superpowers, the “Chinese Farm” could be analyzed to shed light on the Fulda Gap. Similarly, the IDF fought in 2006 with concepts at least partially inspired by American defense transformation against an adversary capable of limited partisan combat and considerably more sophisticated than the Iraqi or Afghan insurgents. Thus, it was natural that Israel’s clash with Hezbollah would receive an equal amount of attention.

A definitive English-language account of the 2006 conflict that incorporates the full range of Israeli and Lebanese (government and Hezbollah) experiences has yet to be written, although there are many military analyses and journalistic accounts, just as the Third World wars of the 1980s gave impetus to exhaustive technical analyses by Anthony Cordesman and other defense intellectuals. This literature provides an imperfect set of sources to look at how Lebanon has entered into American defense debate. It is striking to see the similarities between respective American misperceptions of 2006 and 1973, as in both cases Israeli difficulties were exaggerated and the enemy’s own desperation and military failures minimized.

A popular perception emerged of Hezbollah as a strong force that leveraged inexpensive technologies and partisan warfare tactics to conventionally fight Israel to a standstill.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Hezbollah employed a mixture of conventional and irregular tactics is also cited as a harbinger of an evolved form of warfare posing a difficult problem for conventional forces.<sup>7</sup> While opinions hotly differed over whether or not the conflict was a win, loss, or strategic stalemate for Hezbollah, many agreed that they had fought in a disciplined and effective manner. As Anthony Cordesman relates, some Arabs and other international observers also saw Hezbollah’s survival and ability to continue firing rockets as a strategic victory over the IDF.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the myth of Hezbollah’s success was born.

There is no doubt that Israel’s performance in 2006 was flawed on multiple levels. The Israelis themselves thought so—hence the Winograd Commission and the changes that followed. And Hezbollah, by all accounts, did punch above its weight. However, the war’s conduct and results are much more complex. Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, Daniel Byman, and Steven Simon have noted these complexities in their techno-tactical and strategic analyses.

First, the conflict itself started from Hezbollah’s own strategic miscalculation. Postwar interviews suggest that Hezbollah would not have launched an attack if it were aware that doing

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<sup>6</sup> See Greg Jaffe, “2006 Israel-Lebanon War Looms Large in Pentagon Debate on Future,” *Washington Post*, 6 April 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/05/AR2009040502235.html> and Steven Erlanger and Richard A. Opiel, “A Disciplined Hezbollah Surprises Israel with Training, Tactics, and Weapons,” *New York Times*, 6 August 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/07/world/middleeast/07hezbollah.html>

<sup>7</sup> See the helpful bibliography provided at the Combined Arms Center blog <http://usacac.army.mil/blog/blogs/reflectionsfromfront/archive/2009/06/01/hybrid-warfare-the-second-lebanon-war-of-2006.aspx> and Biddle and Friedman’s own citations on 1-5.

<sup>8</sup> See Anthony Cordesman, William D. Sullivan, and George Sullivan, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*, Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008.

so would have led to the sheer level of destruction it endured.<sup>9</sup> Second, as Byman and Simon observe, Hezbollah's strategic position by the end was more desperate than many believe: "[b]y the time Hizballah was pushing for a cease-fire, which winners do not normally do, its fighters were trapped in a box between the Israeli border, a blockaded coast, blown bridges and roads leading north, and a large IDF force in Marjayoun, poised to march up the Bekaa to the east."<sup>10</sup> David Ucko also argued counterfactually that the war was a strategic victory for Israel, if one saw the conflict through the Israeli strategic prism.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Biddle and Friedman give Hezbollah credit for some basic tactical skills such as cover and concealment and preparation of fighting positions, but note that "Hezbollah appears to have *attempted* a remarkably conventional system of tactics and theater operational art, but there is a difference between trying and achieving, and in 2006 at least, Hezbollah's reach in some ways exceeded its grasp." Biddle and Friedman qualify this with favorable comparisons to conventional forces with worse strategic performance, but this is not the shining endorsement seen in other analyses.<sup>12</sup>

The ambivalence of the 2006 war and its problems of interpretation aren't unique. Citino argues that the lessons of pre-World War I conflicts such as the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War or Bulgaria's 1912 campaign in Thrace are contradictory and far from clear.<sup>13</sup> Such complexity was lost in translation as Lebanon became a part of the never-ending counterinsurgency vs. conventional debate. Since predicting the wars of the future necessarily depends on interpreting the conflicts of the present, it is perhaps inevitable that the Lebanon conflict would become a proxy for something else.

Israel did not completely destroy Hezbollah, but the war turned out to be more than Hezbollah had bargained for, destroyed a large portion of Lebanon's infrastructure, and gave Tel Aviv a short respite. Fault can be—and was—found in Israel's policy, strategy, and operational conduct, but just as in 1973 an exclusive focus on those faults obscures the military power of the Israeli state and the weakness of its enemies.

## **The Problems of Asymmetric Defense**

The Hezbollah myth fed into a growing perception that high-end asymmetric defense utilizing a combination of guided weapons, the aid of complex terrain, and mixed conventional and irregular organizations could make a state or sanctuary into a poison pill for prospective invaders. One defense analyst, looking at how Taiwan could alter the balance of power against China, examined the prospects for a Hezbollah-style missile array.<sup>14</sup> Others warned about the

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Byman and Steven Simon, "The No-Win Zone: An After-Action Report From Lebanon," *The National Interest*, November-December 2006, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Byman and Simon, 56.

<sup>11</sup> David Ucko, "Israel's Strategic Victory in Lebanon," *Open Democracy*, 19 October 2006. [http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle\\_east\\_politics/israel\\_victory\\_4016.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle_east_politics/israel_victory_4016.jsp)

<sup>12</sup> Biddle and Friedman, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Citino, *The Quest for Decisive Victory: From Stalemate to Blitzkrieg in Europe 1899-1940*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Goure, "Defending Taiwan, The Hezbollah Way," *Lexington Institute Early Warning*, 28 July 2010, <http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/defending-taiwan-the-hezbollah-way?a=1&c=1171>

implications of a “post-power projection era” in which the advantage had shifted back to the defender.<sup>15</sup> A journalist for *The Atlantic Monthly* explored the possibilities for Georgia to employ a guerrilla-style defense against Russia.<sup>16</sup> However, Western defense thinkers weren’t the only ones looking at the viability of an asymmetric deterrence strategy.

Venezuela and Iran both were influenced by the concept of a high-end asymmetric warfare defense that would make the most of their unimpressive military capabilities. As Max Manwaring detailed in a series of monographs, Venezuela has been moving its armed forces toward both offensive and defensive usage of asymmetric warfare that draws on Hugo Chavez’s favorable readings of modern irregular warfare theory and its perceived validity in the wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> In Iran, the situation is similar, as the regime has developed the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as an irregular attack force and utilizes the Quds Force as a paramilitary arm for special operations and active measures.

However, the concept of the asymmetric defense is as old as military history itself--and it has a mixed record in practice. There are countless examples of militias in military history operating with regular forces in defense of the homeland, and some states’ national security strategies make a “Boer” or “Swiss”-style defense the keystone of their conventional deterrent. As Sandhurst lecturer Claus Telp notes, revolutionary France’s grand strategist Lazare Carnot combined conventional operations with extensive irregular skirmishing against enemy communications in the desperate war of annihilation to preserve the Revolution.<sup>18</sup> The perceptive analyst Ka Po Ng also observes that for a while, China’s overall national security strategy under Mao was to “lure the enemy into the deep”—letting an enemy overextend itself in China’s vast heartland where it would be encircled and destroyed by a combination of conventional and irregular forces.<sup>19</sup> The operational theorist Richard Simpkin suggested a guerrilla-style net of dispersed anti-tank hunter-killer teams in complex terrain as a means of frustrating the Soviet invasion of Europe during the 1980s.<sup>20</sup>

The problems with this concept are legion. First, although irregular forces are often romanticized as brave and inventive warriors, there is a reason why professional militaries tend to predominate in the defense of nation-states. Crispin Burke thus recounts Saudi Arabia’s negative reaction to Osama Bin Laden’s offer to defend the kingdom against Iraqi armored forces in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein’s Kuwaiti conquest: “[B]in Laden was reported to have claimed that he would fight the Iraqi tanks with ‘faith.’ Unfortunately, faith doesn't really hold up well against T-72s (though it is, admittedly, difficult to clean off the treads).”<sup>21</sup> There is something to be said for

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<sup>15</sup> Greg Grant, “Defense is Best Again,” *DOD Buzz*, 15 June 2010, <http://www.dodbuzz.com/2010/06/15/defense-is-best-again/>

<sup>16</sup> Reihan Salam, “Georgia’s Guerrilla Option,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, 13 August 2008, <http://thecurrent.theatlantic.com/archives/2008/08/following-hezbollah-lessons-in.php>

<sup>17</sup> See Max G. Manwaring, *Latin America’s New Security Reality: Irregular Asymmetric Conflict and Hugo Chavez*, Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Claus Telp, *The Evolution of Operational Art, 1740-1813, From Frederick the Great to Napoleon*, New York: Frank Cass, 2005, 44-47.

<sup>19</sup> See Ka Po Ng, *Interpreting China’s Military Power: Doctrine Makes Readiness*, London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Simpkin cited in John A. English, *Marching Through Chaos: The Descent of Armies in Theory and Practice*, Westport: Praeger, 1996, 168.

<sup>21</sup> Crispin Burke, “Black Swans and Butterflies,” *Wings over Iraq*, 8 August 2010, <http://wingsoveriraq.blogspot.com/2010/08/black-swans-and-butterflies.html>

sheer numbers, combat power, and technological advantage, however unromantic this might seem to T.E. Lawrence's "dreamers of the day."

An asymmetric defense does not work for every country in every circumstance. As the example of Saudi Arabia demonstrated, some countries simply do not have the terrain to carry out such a layered asymmetric defense. Militia--as opposed to professionally trained militaries—also often lack basic soldierly skills, equipment, and weapons that would make them more likely to survive intense fighting. Saddam's *fedayeen* guerrillas in the conventional phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom, for example, fought hard but were insignificant to the overall outcome. Coordination between irregular and conventional arms is also more difficult in practice than it seems in theory. Finally, the "Swiss" strategy, by default, leaves the defender's countryside and urban centers open to terrible destruction.

The United States follows, compared to what might be considered the non-Western world, very unique rules of engagement concerning irregulars. This enlightened approach, however, can sometimes blind us to the historical record of guerrilla warfare and the more sanguinary policies of other states. Throughout military history, irregular resistance has triggered harsh reprisals. Antoine-Henri Jomini and Carl von Clausewitz both stressed the horrific nature of this type of warfare, and anyone with even a cursory familiarity with the history of guerrilla warfare in the American Civil War will understand what atrocities they speak of. The devastation wrought by Russia in Chechnya and Sri Lanka among the Tamils is a contemporary example of a dynamic well-known to both conventional and irregular soldiers throughout history.

## Operations and Policy

The question of anti-access and asymmetric defense as a barrier to conventional power projection, despite its lack of novelty, is a valid operational concern. William F. Owen's scenario of the "Toyota Horde," for example, correctly notes that the ability to mount a basic combined arms defense has been executed by irregulars in the past and can be done today through a "Do-It-Yourself" method.<sup>22</sup> G-RAMMS and other high-end asymmetric weapons pose a real danger to military forces and deserve sustained operational thought. Dr. Robert Bunker has been a pioneer of these studies, beginning with his 1998 operational analysis of how a group utilizing complex tactics and technologies could frustrate the Army After Next force concept.<sup>23</sup> But as Owen notes, it is not surprising that small states and substate powers have manifested these abilities.

No military advantage, no matter how vast, remains undisputed for long. In the struggle between the natives and colonists in the Western Hemisphere, technological advantages possessed by Europeans were quickly negated as natives acquired Western arms and used them to augment their own unique style of warfare. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is no different. However, in the past such challenges have been surmounted by sound concepts of operation, combined arms capabilities, and soldiers trained to handle unique "Boer"-type challenges. There are a large number of

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<sup>22</sup> William F. Owen, "The Toyota Horde: Examining a Lost Military Capability," *Small Wars Journal*, 7 April 2010, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/04/the-toyota-horde/>

<sup>23</sup> See Robert Bunker, *Five Dimensional (Cyber) Warfighting: Can the Army After Next Be Defeated Through Complex Concepts and Technologies?*, Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 1998.

theorists and practitioners currently examining the operational implications high-end asymmetric warfare, and hopefully they will find solutions or at least means of mitigating the threat.

But while the operational questions have justly received attention, the policy and strategy dimensions have been ignored. Wars are not solely decided by technologies and operational methodologies. The question of whether high-end asymmetric warfare can effectively deter a conventional force hinges instead on the political context of the conflict and the makeup of the adversaries who fight it. Clausewitz, often stereotyped as a theorist of absolute war, in fact strongly counseled analysts to remember that in practice wars are limited by all kinds of political and material circumstances.

As previously mentioned, different states have vastly differing conceptions of proportionality and usage of force. Russia's conduct in Chechnya, for example, could never be duplicated by a Western state. Moreover, all state fight wars with limited and unlimited objectives differently. In the stereotypical Hollywood scenario of a rogue state colluding with non-state groups to terrorize the American homeland, a retaliatory war with unlimited objectives is fought in which greater losses and collateral damage is more acceptable. However, risk-taking in limited war is by no means uncommon. In 1991, we accepted the risk of potentially high conventional losses from Saddam Hussein in order to accomplish the limited objective of restoring the Middle Eastern balance of power.

Beyond the narrow operational questions of how, for example, to revive our doctrines for things such as opposed landings or the employment of AirSea Battle against China, there is the unanswered policy question of what rationale force will be employed under. In other words, it is not enough to talk about "anti-access" without explaining what we are attempting to acquire access to and why.

Just because a state can use its power to devastate a "Swiss" defense does not mean it is wise to do so. Force does not automatically generate favorable political results because it is ultimately a tool whose results are dependent on the utility of the policy aims it seeks to achieve. As Robert Bunker recently noted, "it is far easier to wreck the position and power of a state by undertaking the wrong international policies, especially as it pertains to undertaking foreign wars, than to build up or regain the power and prestige lost."<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the ability to completely destroy or severely damage a state with conventional force does not necessarily come prepackaged with a handy moral justification for doing so. But we should be aware that the capability exists—both Sherman (and Vladimir Putin) made Georgia howl.

## Conclusion

The Hezbollah myth, and the growing idea of asymmetric defense against conventional power-projection has been a dominant thread of contemporary defense theory. It satisfies both warring camps in the future warfare debate between counterinsurgency and conventional advocates. But a look at the complexity of Israel's clash with Hezbollah, military history, and the strategic

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Bunker, "The Ugly Truth: Insurgencies are Brutal," *Small Wars Journal*, 15 August 2010, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/08/the-ugly-truth-insurgencies-ar/>



context of modern irregular warfare will not only shed light on the problem but also lead back to questions of policy that should be front and center in the debate.

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