
Considerations regarding the use of mission command at the tactical level

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Abstract

Mission Command is a specific component of the command and control system of military structures at all levels of leadership. Implementing the concept allows the commanders to encourage their subordinates to make quick and effective decisions. It also allows them to show their initiative and freedom of decision within the limits of the intention of the superior commander.

In this article, a doctrinal-comparative introspection will be carried out to facilitate the identification of some advantages and disadvantages of using the Mission Command concept in the process of planning, leading, and evaluating operations at the tactical level. The research is based on the assumption that adapting the act of command and control to the particularities of the operation aims to maximize the effect of the action.

Taking into account the aforementioned and not limiting ourselves to the principles of leadership, we can assert that this concept, which uses principles of military art and operational art, will become a tool at the disposal of future generations of military leaders to facilitate leading of forces with efficiency and effectiveness based on doctrinal foundations, within the limits of acceptable risks.

Keywords:

mission command; leading; command and control; initiative.

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Within this approach, a doctrinal-comparative introspection will be carried out to catch the essence of the Mission Command concept, facilitating the identification of advantages and disadvantages of using the concept in the process of planning, management, and evaluation of operations. Mission command is a specific component of the command and control system of military structures at all levels of leadership manifestation. The philosophy of the concept is to promote freedom of decision and action in the appropriate application of the principles of military art at any level of manifestation of the principles of leadership, at the strategic, operational, or tactical level.

The research is based on the assumption that adapting the act of command and control to the particularities of the operation aims to maximize the effect of the action. Under these conditions, the adoption of the concept offers the possibility to higher-level commanders to encourage subordinates to make quick and efficient decisions, whereas to lower-level commanders it offers the opportunity to show their initiative and freedom of decision within the limits of the declared intention of the higher echelon commander.

The top-down application of the concept will require a doctrinal adaptation in the sense of accepting its place and role in the act of command, through an understanding of the advantages of applying this concept simultaneously with minimizing the risks taken. At the execution level, the application of the concept will represent the fulfillment of the tasks received, to produce quantifiable effects at the upper management level.

It is foreshadowed that the manifestation of leadership in the context of mission command is achieved under the auspices of trust by promoting creative and intuitive actionable leadership.

To achieve the purpose of this endeavor, particularities of the application and use of the Mission Command concept will be addressed through a comparative study with other doctrinal approaches regarding command and control. The result will offer the possibility of identifying some advantages regarding the use of the concept, especially at the tactical level.

To solve the research equation, some of the particularities of the concept will be presented, as it was captured by the strategists of the time, from the initial use to the conceptual emergence and doctrinal evolution. As a result of identifying the state of knowledge, it will be aimed to identify the advantages of using the Mission Command concept in the planning process with implications in the force management process, by minimizing the disadvantages. These disadvantages, once identified, will allow the forecasting of risks that may occur in the process of planning, management, and evaluation of tactical-level operations.

The emergence, evolution, and philosophy of the Mission Command concept

Mission Command is a concept that has its doctrinal origin at the beginning of the 19th century, coming to the attention of military specialists, especially in the post-war period (NATO 2022). Mission Command is defined by the particularities of leadership, whereby it uses certain planning benchmarks provided by higher echelons. In this sense, for a prior understanding of the concept, in the specialized bibliography of the Alliance, it is specified that a commander exercises command and control for the conduct of multi-domain operations using mission-focused orders defined by the higher echelon commander's intent by empowering available forces based on their initiative and adaptability. „Mission command is the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of full spectrum operations” (Ancker 2013, 51).

When studying the theory from “The Art of War” (Tzu 2012, 49), it is specified that in military actions the conditions cannot be predefined, that they do not have a cycle and the fact that the inadaptability to changing conditions can lead to a deadlock in the conduct of military actions, we can emphasize that Sun Tzu captured the principle of flexibility through the prism, the dynamics of the action, and the orientation ability of the decision-making commander. He emphasized that “*for an army to gain victory, it adapts its action to the situation of the enemy*” (Tzu 2012, 49). We will note that flexibility is indeed a dominant feature of the current mission command concept.

Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke Sr. (1800-1891) got to the heart of the current concept, arguing that “*it is crucial for the subordinate to understand the purpose of the operation, and then work for realization even if it means working against the actual orders.*” (Gunther 2012, 8). Thus, von Moltke promoted the spirit of initiative among lower-ranking commanders and encouraged them to make the best and quickest decisions to carry out the orders of their higher commander.

Later, General Otto von Moser, in the manual *Ausbildung und Führung des Bataillons, des Regiments und der Brigade. Gedanken und Vorschläge* stated that cooperation between commanders at the same level is more important than the need to transmit detailed and binding orders from the echelon (Otto 1914). In other words, it also promoted the freedom of action of the lower-level commanders concerning the evolution of the actions of the collaborating commanders.

Underlying the development of the mission command concept is the essence of the concepts “*Auftragstaktik*” (Cojocaru 2024) *apud* (Gunther 2012) and “*Blitzkrieg*” (Frieser 2010), which can be considered the predecessor of the philosophy of centralized command and decentralized execution. In the case of the two concepts,

one can mention an early inadvertence of the application of the principles by involving the politician in the centralized management of the armed forces, by limiting the freedom of movement of the lower-level commanders.

¹ Trevor Nevitt Dupuy, (1916 - 1995) military theorist and historian, author of more than 20 military treatises, artillery officer – 1938 class of the West Point Military Academy, US – and military specialist on the line of professional development, was a professor at Harvard University, n.a.

Colonel Trevor Nevitt Dupuy¹, regarding action and decisional inadvertences, such as losing tempo, through inaction or avoidance, mentions that *„a favorable situation will never be exploited if commanders wait for orders. The highest commander and the youngest soldier must always be conscious of the fact that omission and inactivity are worse than resorting to the wrong expedient.”* (Dupuy 1977, 116).

Starting in 1976, the United States Army introduced, elements characteristic of the Mission Command concept, in the Doctrine for Land Forces Operations (FM 100-5 Operations), without expressly naming this concept. The document refers to leadership principles such as orientation, targeting, concentration of effort, speed, intensity, flexibility, trust in the initiative of lower-level commanders, clearly defined objectives, actions behind the front, etc.

In 2010, with the publication of AJP 01(D) Allied Joint Doctrine, the modern concept of Mission Command was defined, describing the way in which *„it generates the freedom of action for subordinates to act purposefully when unforeseen developments arise, and exploit favorable opportunities”* (NSA 2010, 6-3). In subsequent versions, amendments are made to the concept, but its essence does not change substantially.

In 2012, the Army Doctrine Publication, promoting the concept of Mission Command, stipulated: *„Mission command is based on mutual trust, shared understanding, and purpose. Commanders understand that some decisions must be made quickly at the point of action. Therefore, they concentrate on the objectives of an operation, not how to achieve it. Commanders provide subordinates with their intent, the purpose of the operation, the key tasks, the desired end state, and resources. Subordinates then exercise disciplined initiative to respond to unanticipated problems. Every Soldier must be prepared to assume responsibility, maintain unity of effort, take prudent action, and act resourcefully within the commander’s intent.”* (Headquarters Department of the Army 2012, 1-12). In other words, the decision at the command level is supported by defining elements of operative art such as intention, purpose, tasks, final state, etc., but through the prism of the manifestation of initiative, critical thinking, etc.

ADP 6-0 -Mission Command presents six principles of the Mission Command concept, which would generate the following actions:

The six principles of the Mission Command concept presented in ADP 6-0 -Mission Command (Headquarters Department of the Army 2012), are the following:

- *“competence*
- *mutual trust*
- *shared understanding*
- *commander’s intent*
- *mission orders*
- *disciplined initiative*
- *risk acceptance”* ([Headquarters Department of the Army 2012, 1-6](#))

These six principles of the Mission Command concept, in our opinion, would generate the following actions:

- *demonstration of decision-making and action competence*
- *shaping teams based on mutual trust;*
- *mutual understanding;*
- *provision of a clear intention of the commander;*
- *exercising a disciplined initiative;*
- *use of mission orders;*
- *accepting risks with caution*

In *AJP 01(F) Allied Joint Doctrine* ([NSO 2022, 84](#)), regarding the characteristic of the Mission Command concept, it is stated that this is the main command philosophy, which is based on well-defined leadership.

It can be said that the synergy of the principles and characteristics of the concept make this type of leadership a tool in the hands of commanders of all levels to minimize the risks of planning and leadership through decisions and actions optimized by the filters through which the process takes place. *„Mission command is enabling the maneuverist approach and their synergic dimensions provide commanders with a versatile instrument for managing future conflicts; all together facilitate operation designed to strike enemy’s center of gravity and its vulnerabilities”* ([Nistorescu 2021, 205](#))

Moreover, mission command is a combat power multiplier at the operational level and a force multiplier at the tactical level, if used correctly, meaning risks are minimized or eliminated. *„Mission command could be a force multiplier on the battlefield if it is used properly; particular operating environments, unavoidable force commanders to adopt a command style based on decentralized execution”* ([Nistorescu 2021, 205](#))

In conclusion, we can speak of a concept of command and control that developed as a result of the evolution of operative art, along with the adaptation of the principles of armed struggle to the evolution of military art. Mission command has become a force leadership philosophy that brings together creativity, initiative, freedom of decision, adaptability, and mutual trust, elements that are defined in the doctrine of modern leadership in conjunction with the principles of armed struggle and the general laws of war.

Considerations regarding the tactical particularities of the Mission Command concept

As a result of the main characteristics of the concept identified in the previous chapter, they can be customized for the tactical level of their manifestation through the application of the mission command concept by lower-level commanders during the conduct of military actions. Even though flexibility and accountability are the most convenient characteristics of the act of leadership of tactical commanders to respond quickly to changes in combat conditions and to achieve maximum operational effects as a result of the performance of specific tasks, the spectrum of dominant characteristics of the mission command concept at the tactical level is much wider.

In our opinion, the main characteristics are the following: delegation of authority and responsibility, initiative and autonomy, flexibility and adaptability, effective communication, trust and collaboration, centralization of purpose, decentralization of means, respectively evaluation and continuous learning. In accordance with the Mission Command philosophy, a brief presentation of some dominant characteristics at the tactical level will be made below.

Delegation of authority and responsibility gives commanders in the field the authority and responsibility to make decisions during the conduct of military actions at the tactical level. This delegation allows leaders to coordinate forces effectively, react quickly to changes in the field, and adapt to unexpected situations.

Initiative and autonomy – through this characteristic field leaders are encouraged to show initiative and creativity and act autonomously in achieving mission objectives by punctually completing specific tasks in an order that meets the higher commander's intent. They must be able to find inventive solutions and adapt to unstable circumstances to achieve operational success without the need for constant approval from higher command.

Realistically *effective and transparent communication*, in commonly accepted language, between all levels of command is essential to the successful implementation of the Mission Command concept at the tactical level. Clarification of objectives, orientations appropriate to the situation, specific indications, and timely information are particular elements of communication between commanders.

Trust and collaboration are based on mutual trust between commanders and subordinate personnel, being important for their motivation and moral support during military actions. Commanders at the tactical level must trust the skills and thinking of their subordinates, and subordinates must trust that they are unconditionally supported and assisted by their commanders.

Centralization of purpose refers to issues regarding the structured reformulation of the mission and the identification of general objectives and specific tasks related to them. If the overall mission and objectives are set by the higher command, the specific tasks are set by the subordinate commander. Thus, the essence of the mission command concept leaves the commander free to choose how these objectives can be achieved. In that instance, one can also use a tool specific to the act of centralized command, *the decentralization of execution*. Therefore, the concept is defined by a new characteristic of the mission command: the *decentralization of means*. Consequently, it is up to the tactical level commander to determine the means/instruments with which the mission can be accomplished, the order of their use, the place and role within the action structure, the reserve of means, etc.

Evaluation and continuous learning represent the commanders' concern to ensure the formal framework for the manifestation of knowledge, evaluation being delivered through procedures while learning through continuous training and capitalizing on lessons identified and grasped from previous similar actions.

Through these characteristics, the concept of mission command at the tactical level supports commanders to have an effective approach and effective action. Thus, mission command at the tactical level encourages commanders to be flexible, take the initiative, be autonomous, and make informed decisions regarding the dynamics of military actions in the field in order to achieve the tactical tasks and mission objectives set. To do this, senior commanders must ensure that plans are flexible and adaptable to environmental changes and to the dynamics of combat actions.

Conceptual differentiations of leadership typologies

Considering the particularities presented about the Mission Command, a comparative analysis will be made next with two leadership styles that we consider relevant due to the dominant particularities. From the wide range of typologies specific to management and leadership styles in management, we have chosen for comparison: Direct Command and Control-based Command (Directive control). These typologies were chosen because, in our opinion, they encompass a wide range of characteristics, some similar, and some different.

Consequently, in order to identify the most relevant characteristics of the mission command, the comparative analysis will support the approach.

For this analysis, differentiation criteria will be used such as the involvement of the superior commander, hierarchy, leadership, the involvement of tactical commanders, the contribution of forces, leadership, the typology of command and control, and critical thinking. Following this analysis, it will be possible to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of using the mission command concept in the

management act, customized for the tactical level. The result of the research will be materialized by identifying several risks regarding the use of the mission command in military actions at the tactical level. Therefore, solutions will be identified in order to minimize the risks through flexible leadership techniques.

In the authoritarian command style, *Direct Command* corresponding to the *Authoritative Leadership* concept (Moștofleu and Duțu 2007), the commander directly states the tasks, objectives, and way of executing the mission. The commander says *what to do*, *how to do it*, and *what means to do it*. Under these circumstances, the subordinates are less involved in the decision-making process and have the role of exactly executing the orders received. The rigidity of the command style imposes intolerance to indiscipline, deviations are not being tolerated, but sanctioned. Thus, a rigid profile of the organizational structure is being set up. These features will be the subject of the following comparative analysis.

In contrast to *Direct Command*, *Mission Command* encourages the delegation of authority and responsibility to lower levels of command. Commanders of combat structures, at the tactical level, have more freedom in making decisions and in planning how to accomplish the mission while remaining within the limits set by the commander's intent. This style relies on trust in the commander's competence and the reasoning of subordinates to achieve objectives, thus promoting initiative and innovation in the act of command and execution.

Directive command/Directive control (Mallick 2020) involves strict monitoring and control over the activities performed by subordinate personnel. The concept reflects the same principles specific to the German *Auftragstaktik* concept (Widder 2002, 5). "The term Directive Control comes from the German 'Auftragstaktik' (literally, "mission tactics") and was the precursor to Mission Command." (INSYNC 2021) However, in the case of *Control-Based Command (Control Directives)*, the commander expresses his intent and gives direction so as to the objectives to be achieved. The commander tells you *what to do*, and tells you *how to do it* but he *does not tell you the means* to achieve it with, which even if it gives him the authority to act in the spirit of achieving the objectives, he must strictly follow the specific tasks within the limiting parameters (INSYNC 2021). "The leader expresses their intent and provides direction to followers on the objectives to be achieved and then empowers them to achieve the necessary outcome within the parameters of a set of 'freedoms and constraints'" (INSYNC 2021). The commander controls the details of the action and makes integrative decisions. Further decisions are based on field reports and continuously updated information received from subordinate and field commanders. Under these circumstances, decisions follow plans and are based on planning procedures. The disadvantage is that there are few options for action and adaptation to certain circumstances or unexpected events can affect the expected result. Similarly to the previous style, these features will also be the subject of comparative analysis.

Compared to the *Control-Based Command* style, in *Mission Command* the emphasis is on the overall goals and intentions of the mission rather than tight control over planning details. The tactical commander has greater decision and action autonomy. The use of initiative and critical thinking in planning and executing assignments is encouraged. The senior commander exercises a coordination and support function.

Considering the main characteristics of the two leadership styles, command and control, *Table no. 1* presents a comparative structure in order to capture the differences between the three styles: Mission Command, Direct Command, and Control-based Command (Directive control) from which the advantages and disadvantages of using mission command at the tactical level can be inferred.

Considering the characteristics that have resulted, we can say that the philosophy of the Mission Command concept differs from other command styles by promoting autonomy and initiative at the lower levels of the hierarchy, involving subordinates in the process of planning, decision-making, and self-evaluation of actions. This command and control style is designed to promote flexibility, critical thinking, adaptability, and innovation, thus summing up the optimal dominant

TABLE NO. 1

Comparative analysis table (authors' conception)

Comparison criteria	Mission Command	Direct Command	Directive control
THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE SUPERIOR COMMANDER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coordinates • supports • sustains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • directly leading • imposes tasks • imposes objectives • follows the mission execution directly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitors • controls • intervenes • follows the effects
THE HIERARCHY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vertically: coordinative • Horizontally: collaborative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vertically: direct tasks • Horizontal: synchronized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vertically: direct orders • Horizontally: collaborative
THE INVOLVEMENT OF TACTICAL COMMANDERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decisional and action autonomy • freedom in planning • freedom of decision • freedom of action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of decision-making and action autonomy • less involved in the decision-making process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • submits reports • updates the information • receives new assignments
CONTRIBUTION OF FORCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus on the commander's intent • performance of tasks • achievement of objectives • achievement of expected effects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exact execution of received orders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • performance of tasks • follow the progress of the actions and report the change
LEADERSHIP	Delegation (<i>laissez-faire</i> ²)	Rigid - authoritative	Bureaucratic
TYPOLOGY OF COMMAND AND CONTROL	Decentralized	Centralized	Semi centralized
CRITICAL THINKING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • say who does • tell what to do • do not tell how to do it • do not tell what to do with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • say who does • tell what to do • tell how to do it • tell what to do with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • say who does • tell what to do • tell how to do it • do not tell what to do with

² The notion was introduced by Kurt Lewin (1891-1947), a German-American psychologist and researcher, considered the founder of social psychology, n.a.

characteristics of effective decision-making with successful effects.

In light of the ensued results regarding the dominant characteristics of the Mission Command concept, stemming from the analysis that had been carried out and as a result of the interpretations of these dominants, the advantages and disadvantages of using the concept during the act of leadership, command and control at the tactical level can now be ascertained.

Next, we set up to identify some possible risks in fulfilling the mission using this leadership style. The outcome of applying the mission command could be threatened by these main risks: bias; wrong decision; lack of cohesion, lack of synchronization, lack of coordination, misinformation, misinterpretation of information, hesitation or delay in decision-making, lack of involvement, inaction, etc.

Bias, as a systematic error that can appear during a commander's decision-making and action, in the field of military art can be theoretical or operational. So, if the theoretical ones are based on knowledge and can be easily minimized, the action ones depend on the personal experiences of the commanders. That is why there is a need for decision-making attention, validation of the decision also through other accepted, less intuitive methods, and adequate advice from the headquarters.

The wrong decision. Delegating authority to lower levels of management can lead to incorrect or inappropriate decision-making. The tactical commander and unit must be well-trained and have a clear understanding of the overall objectives in order to avoid decisions that could lead to mission failure. Access to information, resources, and capabilities favors optimal assessment of response options and can also lead to making a correct and timely decision.

The lack of cohesion represents a very important risk because its manifestation can generate a series of other risks, lack of synchronization, and lack of coordination. Lack of cohesion can be generated by too much autonomy at lower levels of management. Lack of cohesion can be minimized by proper coordination of actions and effective timing of actions at the tactical level. Thus, risks such as non-synchronization and non-coordination can also be minimized if offset by judicious planning, an understanding of the common mission, and effective contribution to higher-level objectives.

Communication between different levels of command and control is critical to mission success. The risk of *misinformation* and *misinterpretation of information* increases the risk of failure to fulfill the intentions of the higher-level commander, which can lead to incorrect decisions or misunderstandings during the implementation of the plan. It is essential to have clear and effective communication channels to ensure the correct transmission of information and its timely employment.

Hesitation and *delay in decision-making* are cognitive risks with effects at the action level. Because of the decentralized nature of Mission Command, there is a possibility

that some decisions may be made more slowly than in a centralized command. These delays can affect operational adaptability to enemy course of action changes or unexpected situations on the field.

Non-involvement and *inaction* represent more than risks because they are the result of not manifesting a decision or lack of action and decision contrary to the philosophy of the mission command concept. They become moral hazards related to the profile and education of the tactical-level commander.

It can be stated that the risks identified are effects of command style vulnerabilities and can weaken the effectiveness of actions. Therefore, in order to optimize a mission command model, appropriate in any situation, the identification of risk minimization solutions in this command and control style will be considered.

A measure to minimize these risks is to increase mutual trust, by knowing and recognizing the virtues of commanders, training in conditions similar to those in the field, assuming responsibility, knowing some risk management methods, etc.

Mission command requires a culture of trust between commanders and subordinates. Thus, achieving this requires time and training to develop mutual trust and to ensure that subordinates are prepared to make decisions under uncertain conditions.

Applying the concept at the tactical level can boost morale, and adopt a balanced approach that encourages initiative and innovation at lower levels of leadership without compromising force cohesion and the will to fight. To maximize the effort, careful management of the challenges and minimization of the vulnerabilities generated by the identified risks is necessary.

Following the above, we can say that the effectiveness of the Mission Command concept can bring significant benefits to military actions, improving the flexibility, adaptability, and effectiveness of combat forces.

Complementarily, personal development is an appropriate way of training military leaders in situations of uncertainty, in this case, the risk of making mistakes is minimal, therefore “continuous training of military personnel, in general, and of those entrusted with the responsibility to lead, in particular” ([Chiorcea and Cioranu 2021](#), 163) is recommended. As follows, we can assert that adequate training of the staff, commanders, and subordinates, can contribute to minimizing the risks and maximizing the benefits of this style of command.

Conclusions

The Mission Command concept addresses military commanders at any level who are responsible for planning and directing military actions, especially those in the execution group, basically tactical-level commanders. Commanders must be prepared to foster a culture of trust and facilitate open communication and collaboration between all levels of command.

The philosophy of the Mission Command concept provides the tools to delegate authority and responsibility at any level, and at the tactical level encourages initiative and autonomy. Commanders at all levels of the military hierarchy must understand and adopt the principles of the concept in managing the action of forces and resources.

The Mission Command concept involves continuous assessment of the situation and progress in accomplishing mission objectives by senior commanders, as well as continuous adaptation of plans and strategy to changes in combat conditions and evolving terrain. At the lower level of the chain of command, an understanding of the overall context is needed, identified by deciphering the higher commander's intent and reformulating the mission received.

Therefore, the concept of Mission Command addresses the entire chain of command and control and involves close collaboration between commanders, leaders, command and control units, subordinate units, and involved personnel. This collaboration ensures efficient leadership and effective action by promoting a synergistic approach oriented towards clearly established objectives with the main aim of successfully accomplishing the entrusted mission.

Along with assuming responsibility, managing the risks of biases, erroneous decisions, non-synchronization, non-coordination, misinformation, and misinterpretation, invokes extensive delegation of authority, so senior commanders must be prepared to manage the risks associated with the interference of command and control levels. This involves constantly assessing the situation and managing the risks associated with the decisions and actions of subordinates.

Risks of cognitive nature, which appear already during the planning process, are bias, erroneous decision, and erroneous interpretation of information.

Risks of actional nature: non-synchronization, non-coordination, hesitation or delay in decision-making, non-involvement, inaction, and lack of cohesion.

Risks of information nature: misinformation, lack of communication, etc.

Of the risks identified, the easiest to manage are those in the area of planning because those are based on knowledge and depend on a deliberate decision-making process. Action risks are based on the experience and a developed tactical sense of the lower-level commander in command of a structure in the tactical field.

Therefore, at whatever level of command and control a commander is, he is encouraged to constantly learn from previous experiences, to adapt to new challenges, to continuously improve the performance of the decision-making act, to achieve a level of efficiency of the actions at the tactical level and achieving the associated degree of effectiveness ($E_f=1$).

To support what has been stated, it can be proposed that this concept be further developed in the doctrines of the categories of forces, the main purpose being the promotion of a more flexible, adaptable, and efficient approach in the management of military operations.

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