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CONNECTING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES FIELD

Louis Kriesberg

Theory and practice are two important and highly inter-related phenomena. In this chapter, I focus on them as they affect each other, in the context of the field of peace and conflict studies. The primary question I seek to answer is, how and when does good theory guide constructive practice in ameliorating social conflicts?

Basic concepts

Although I emphasize the close relationship of the two phenomena, I begin this discussion by considering how they are analytically distinguishable. In doing so, I regard both phenomena broadly. Practice refers to actions taken to command, direct, or otherwise affect the conduct of others. It may be motivated by feelings of fear, by moral passions, or by the wish to advance personal or collective interests. Practice connotes conduct that occurs in a particular sphere and follows experience or training in the activity. In the context of this analysis, relevant actions are directed to alter the conduct of other people who are in contention or about to become in contention so that the contention is less destructive than it otherwise would be. Such actions vary in their effectiveness, in whose conduct is the object of the action, and in the scale of the actions. Practice, here, is not limited to intermediary or other engagement by persons who are not partisans in the conflict. Partisans may draw on peace and conflict studies as guidance in escalating a conflict constructively. Practice is judged to be better or worse in terms of its consequences.

Everybody engages in conflicts. Sometimes the engagement is in conflicts that are between two persons acting individually. Sometimes a person represents a larger entity, a tribe, organization, or country, officially or non-officially. Sometimes a person belongs to an agency of one of the large adversaries in a fight. Sometimes a person who is not engaged as a partisan in a fight enters it as a mediator, ally, or other intervener.

Theory, here, refers loosely to ways of thinking that are manifested in spoken or written words about contentious relations and how those contentions escalate and sometimes become transformed constructively. Theory content is not the same for all the sub-fields or communities that constitute the field of peace and conflict studies. For example, it differs between the overlapping peace studies and conflict resolution communities. It is central to the closely related fields of conflict resolution and peace studies. Theory structure varies from a general approach or perspective to a set of deductively ordered propositions or principles, and most narrowly,

it takes the form of generalizations about strategies, tactics, or techniques to wage and resolve conflicts constructively.

Considerable theory relating to conflict exists largely outside the peace and conflict studies field as characterized here. It includes approaches that place powerseeking and reliance on coercion as fundamental phenomena, as in schools of international relations realism. It also includes approaches based on religious faith in various traditions. It derives from overarching broad perspectives, such as functionalism, constructivism, feminism, or economics. Elements from these approaches do contribute in varying degrees to the field of peace and conflict studies. I try to judge ideas in theory as better or worse in terms of their correctness as supported by empirical evidence and their constructive contributions. Admittedly, the evidence itself may be thin and in dispute.

Both theory and practice vary in the distinctiveness of their manifestation, and sometimes they are blended. Both also vary in the scale of contentious behavior that is the subject of examination, from large-scale national or international contentions involving violence to smaller scale disputes within regulated contests. Finally, both theory and practice vary in the standpoints from which they regard the contentions: as a mediator or negotiator, as a primary agent of a partisan entity, as a partisan supporter or dissenter, as an outsider with a stake in the conflict, or as an analytic observer.

Although theory and practice may be analytically distinguished, in reality they are highly related and can be confounded. Indeed, a person may express a theoretical observation with the intention of changing the conduct of some partisans in a fight; or, a partisan in a fight cites theoretical insights to gain agreement from followers of adversaries. Consequently, what is deemed theory or practice is determined by who is carrying out a particular action.

In this chapter, I examine how practice and theory relate to each other. One way is that theory-making about peace and conflict often derives from studying how people wage conflicts constructively and also studying when people wage conflicts destructively. Another relationship occurs when peace and conflict theory guide people who are waging conflicts. It follows that people engaged in practice and people engaged in developing good theory can learn from each other. Of course, people doing practice may act in accord with valid conflict resolution theory, but without any self-awareness that they are doing so. On the other hand, people doing practice may follow erroneous theory.

Before proceeding, I must discuss two matters in more detail. One is the field of peace and conflict studies and the other is the substance of the theory associated with that field. This field incorporates several forms. A major component is the numerous academic centers in the United States (US) and many other countries. At the undergraduate and graduate level, they offer courses, certificates, and degrees in peace studies, conflict resolution, mediation, peace research, peace and justice, and other domains. In varying proportions, individual faculty members in such centers do research, develop theories, teach, and engage in the practice of the aforementioned subjects. In addition, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also offer training and engage in the practice of the topics noted above. Further, government agencies in many domains also provide services and do research relating to the topics noted.

Theory in the field of peace and conflict studies has many sources, including diverse disciplines, and therefore displays an amalgam of ideas that are not fully synthesized. Theory, in reality, consists of many mini-theories about particular kinds of conflict at different stages. What is shared is a general approach or perspective, incorporating some general principles or ideas (Kriesberg, 2015; Kriesberg & Dayton, 2017).

In addition to such core ideas, there are domains in the peace and conflict studies field that have large bodies of research and well-grounded mini-theories. This is the case for negotiating

at different stages, with different numbers of sides, and in different contexts (Druckman, 1995; Sher & Kurtz, 2015; Lewicki et al., 2000; Raiffa, 1982). Mediation is another topic in which substantial research and theory building has occurred about different kinds of mediation in diverse settings (Moore, 2003; Bercovitch, 1996; Crocker et al., 1999). The topic of nonviolent action has also been the subject of great study, documenting its relative effectiveness and benefits (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Sharp, 1973; Ackerman & DuVall, 2000). Finally, in recent years, considerable practice and theory has been devoted to building peace in societies that are recovering from terrible destructive wars and/or oppressive regimes (Dayton & Kriesberg, 2009; Lederach, 1997; Smock, 2002).

Reference to “theory” in discussions of policy choices often takes the form of crude adages. For example, in many intense conflicts representatives on both sides assert the belief that the adversary, the bad actor, only understands force. This adage serves to mobilize support from constituents for using force or threats of force. Yet, in some instances, it may serve as a guide to practice. In any case, it certainly does not fit into any theory of the peace and conflict studies field.

There is a vast literature offering theoretical explanations for the outbreak of wars, revolutions, crises, and other severe conflicts. There also are a great number of explanations for conflict escalation and for the enemy’s defeat. Much of this literature, however, examines structural circumstances and gives relatively little attention to the agency that particular persons might have. In discussions of agency, great attention generally is given to the use of coercion and particularly the use of violence. Inferences from this literature help in constructing mini and sometimes broad theories about the course of social conflicts. Some elements of those theories are part of the peace and conflict studies field. Theories, in the field and outside it, assist people in choosing a strategy for conducting a conflict.

Of course, many people seem to choose a strategy with little or no conscious reflection on the theoretical context for the strategy. A particular strategy seems readily available and sufficiently acceptable for the situation so that it is readily adopted. It may feel emotionally gratifying as well. For example, immediately after the attack on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush’s decision to launch a military invasion of Afghanistan did not seem to require specifying the objective and considering possible consequences of alternative strategies to achieve the objective. Once undertaken, persons may explain and justify their choice by citing common-sense generalizations, past history, moral standards, or even elements of conflict theory.

In this chapter, I discuss illustrative cases where specific people chose policies that were consistent with elements of theories in the peace and conflict studies field, or were consistent with elements of other theories, or had little connection with any theories. I consider practice of officials and non-officials.

Practice not consistent with peace and conflict studies theory

This discussion of practice that is inconsistent with peace and conflict theory begins with the US decision, widely regarded as tragic, to invade Iraq and overthrow its government led by Saddam Hussein. At every step of the way, relevant theory from the peace and conflict studies field, from traditional ideas of effective decision-making, and from international relations realist theories were ignored (Fisher et al., 1996; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2003). The decisionmaking process was obscure; it seemed President George W. Bush initiated steps toward that action and then he and others put forward reasons to justify it (Beinart, 2010). They ignored, discounted, or dismissed contrary evidence and policy alternatives.

Interestingly, one empirical generalization from the peace and conflict studies field was plucked from its theoretical context and used to provide an argument for overthrowing the

Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. The generalization is that countries with democratic forms of government do not make wars against each other. Paul Wolfowitz and others inferred that peace would flourish in the Middle East if the countries were democratic, and that would follow liberating and democratizing Iraq. The evidence about the difficulties with military interventions and of democratic transitions was ignored and the consequences of invasion and occupation of Iraq were disastrous.

With the election of Donald J. Trump to the US presidency, many domestic and international policy actions have been proposed and some have been undertaken, which are at great variance from peace and conflict studies theory. Whether they are consistent with any comprehensive theoretical perspective is uncertain. Clearly, he believes in the reliance on force and threats of violence as central in foreign relations. Even his emphasis upon negotiation incorporates viewing it as heavily coercive. Persuasion and possible mutual benefits play limited roles in his policy choices.

Still, there are signs of some general orientations underlying Trump's use of slogans. Consider his efforts, taken immediately after beginning his presidency, to ban immigration and other legal entries (e.g., people with green cards and valid visas) into the US from seven predominantly Muslim countries. He justified this effort as a necessary policy to fight terrorist attacks in the US. However, evidence from the peace and conflict studies field as well as from most researchers and practitioners working against terrorism indicate that such bans are counterproductive. They lessen the likelihood that Muslims in the US and outside will cooperate with US officials out of fear and mistrust. Also, radical Islamic organizations can use them in spreading their ideology and seeking recruits.

It is difficult to know with certainty the reasons for Trump insisting upon such a misguided policy. A likely source is the constituency he mobilized in his campaign for the presidency. He sought to attract some traditional right-wing Republicans, such as the big-government antagonists, the white supremacists, the foreign policy unilateralists, and the celebrators of US military force. Once elected, he selected persons from these groupings to major positions in the government, often ignoring the preferences and concerns of the mainstream Republican Party. Significantly, Stephen K. Bannon briefly was a link to some of that constituency and he had been highly influential to Trump. He offers broad doctrines and presumed intellectual heft. He claims a grand political perspective about the primacy of national sovereignty and borders, about disrupting the established order and the deconstruction of the administrative state, and about ethnonationalism, which entails economic matters and cultural expressions related to Western civilization being at war against Islamic civilization.

This analysis suggests reasons for Trump failing to adopt approaches that probably would be more effective in fighting terrorist attacks in the long run, such as enhanced persuasive efforts, increased humanitarian and economic assistance, and more diplomatic activity to deny support to terrorist organizations. Such activities might seem weak and Trump sees his emphasis on crude power and ethnic nationalism as attractive to his base supporters. Trump can believe that the theoretic approach he has somewhat adopted and the policies that are consistent with it work for his personal goals, at least in the short run.

Before discussing policies that are consistent with the approach of workers in the peace and conflict studies field, I must note the role of NGOs. They have increased greatly in number and significance at national and transnational levels. In conjunction with many global trends, numerous NGOs are based on religious or ethnic identities. For various reasons, leaders of some of these organizations have mobilized followers via exclusive identities and xenophobic threats that support the choice of coercive and even violent strategies. Various governments lend support to particular ones engaged in extreme conflicts against hated enemies. External interventions

by governments seeking to advance their own expansionist ambitions then escalate and prolong violence. Such escalations result in very many losers. Finally, I want to note that the strategies pursued by government leaders to popular challenges to their policies are very often oppressive, ruthless, and self-destructive, as was evident in recent years in Syria and Libya.

Practice consistent with peace and conflict studies theory

Fortunately, the end of the Cold War and how it was accomplished contributed to many years of expansion in the practice and theory of the peace and conflict studies field. International wars and deaths in conflict have declined. Even with some setbacks in recent years, many instances of effective practice consistent with peace and conflict studies theory were achieved.

After years of tensions between Iran and the US, a transformation in an important component of that antagonism was achieved. Iran had been making progress in its program to produce nuclear weapons, despite US imposed sanctions during George W. Bush's presidency. President Barack Obama "fractionated" the complex antagonism between the two countries and isolated the contentious nuclear weapons element, in accord with an early conflict resolution idea (Fisher, 1964). Even before Obama was elected, a channel of communication was opened to high-level, conservative Iranian leaders who came together with leading figures in Obama's presidential campaign (Parsi, 2012). Foreign policy experts from Europe and Canada also participated. The intensive talks made progress in mutual understanding about nuclear issues and in reducing mistrust between the two sides. Further, domestic changes in Iran contributed to the conflict transformation. In the Iranian presidential election of June 14, 2013, the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had withdrawn his support of the ultranationalist president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani won. He had campaigned pledging "reconciliation and peace."

Obama recognized Iran's right to develop nuclear power and spoke respectfully of Iran's culture. This approach made an agreement with Iran plausible and the permanent Security Council members and Germany (P5+1) joined in tightening sanctions against Iran. Consequently, negotiations produced an interim agreement, the Joint Plan of Action (JPA), which went into effect on January 20, 2014. According to the agreement, Iran would roll back parts of its nuclear program in exchange for relief from some sanctions. The terms of the JPA were fully implemented. Ultimately, on July 14, 2015, Iran and the P5+1+EU signed a long-term agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The agreement has been carefully monitored and fully implemented by all signatory parties. Iran without a nuclear weapons development program helps avoid nuclear proliferation in the Middle East region. But Trump took the US out.

Another case is the progress starting in 1999 to end the decades-long violent conflict between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* or FARC), the largest of the guerrilla groups in Colombia. The progress included using some ideas in the peace and conflict studies field. Earlier, peace negotiations in 1990 and 1991 with several smaller guerrilla movements resulted in demobilization and the surrender of weapons in exchange for blanket amnesty for actions committed in the conflict. However, repeated attempts to negotiate a settlement between the government and the FARC were not successful. The government of President Andrés Pastrana conducted peace talks with the FARC in 1999–2002, but no agreement was reached. Pastrana broke off all talks and one of the most violent periods in recent Colombian history erupted.

Widespread popular frustration led to the election of Álvaro Uribe in May 2002, who ran as a hawkish candidate. As president, Uribe pledged to dismantle terrorist organizations and restore the government's control throughout the country. He also instituted several demobilization

programs accepted by some militia groups, providing pardons for political crimes and humanitarian assistance to guerilla fighters who demobilized. FARC, however, rejected Uribe's proposals. The government waged a large-scale military offensive, which greatly reduced FARC's military capacity, and it retreated to its hinterland. Uribe was re-elected in a landslide in 2006. Although he initiated no formal peace talks with the FARC, secret informal contacts were made.

In 2010, the former defense minister, Juan Manuel Santos, was elected president, with Uribe's support, and he promised to continue Uribe's tough policies. However, Santos soon indicated a change and made clear that he was open to negotiations with armed groups who also were open to that. In 2011, the Santos administration secured congressional approval of a Victims and Land Restitution Law, which officially recognized victims of the armed conflict and entitled victims to reparation measures. President Santos also improved relations with the leaders of Venezuela and Ecuador who joined Cuba in advocating that the FARC seek a negotiated settlement.

In March 2011, exploratory talks began between the government and the FARC leaders. In the following years, Henry Acosta, a Colombian who had experienced a chance meeting with a high-ranking FARC leader, in 1998, aided the negotiations. Acosta is an economist who had served as an agriculture expert at the United Nations. In his mediation to help break deadlocks, he traveled back and forth between Colombia and Cuba where the negotiations took place. He explained his effectiveness in classic terms: "I was patient, confident, discreet, resolved and above all transparent with both sides of the conflict."¹

The negotiations, which were publicly announced in August 2012, were extremely difficult. Constituents on both sides had deep concerns about matters of trust, justice, and compensation for damages. Soon, each side began taking substantive, confidence-building steps.² For example, in October, the government lifted arrest warrants for 29 FARC negotiators. In November, FARC announced a two-month unilateral ceasefire and the government launched a website for the negotiations and invited suggestions from citizens. In 2013, slow progress was made on terms of an agreement and for holding a public referendum on the Peace Accord when it was reached. Despite some disruptive actions by elements on both sides, especially in the summer of 2015, negotiations continued and cooperative steps were taken. Negotiations in the context of coercive contention are possible and frequent (Sher & Kurtz, 2015). Leaders of many foreign countries and international governmental and NGOs urged perseverance in the negotiations and promised assistance in implementing the conditions of a peace accord. Various outside persons and groups played useful roles in advising and overseeing ceasefires and moves toward transitional justice.

On June 23, 2016, President Santos and the FARC leader Timochenko signed a definitive ceasefire.³ On July 26, former president Uribe announced that he and the Democratic Center party would oppose the peace deal in the forthcoming referendum. On October 2, 2016, the peace deal was very narrowly defeated. Those voting no believed that the peace terms were too lenient regarding the guerrillas. The government and FARC leaders quickly modified the deal and Santos won Congressional support for the amended deal on November 30, 2016. The Democratic Center party remained opposed and boycotted the vote. The government and FARC are implementing the terms of the agreement, as this is written. Clearly, much work needs to be done by many people to actualize a widely supported peace. Fortunately, numerous NGOs have functioned to build peace in communities across the country.⁴ Peacemaking actions were taken at many different levels. Integration of demobilized militia fighters into society is difficult but its importance was recognized (Laporte-Oshiro, 2011). Recovery from the trauma of decades of war will take many decades. Implementation has been faulty.

The struggle to end apartheid in South Africa also took many decades and the realization of its potential benefits will also take decades. For apartheid to have ended in South Africa as

peacefully as it did surprised many people. The process took many years and there were setbacks, but many people, at many levels, and from different communities, engaged in policies that produced an immense transformation of South African society. I cite a couple of elements among the many that combined to initiate a fundamental transformation of South Africa.

First, I write of the practice of one person, Hendrik van der Merwe, who grew up on a farm as a conservative Afrikaner. When he was young and refused to shake hands with a black person, he abruptly recognized how wrong he was and he changed. He explained his confidence that apartheid would end peacefully, saying, "If I could change, I knew others could."¹⁵ Van der Merwe studied intergroup relations at the University of California in Los Angeles, where he earned his Ph.D. in sociology in 1963. He returned to South Africa and in 1968 became the founding director of the Centre for Intergroup Studies, based in Cape Town. In 1981, he led the first courses in applying conflict resolution to community conflicts and led in organizing conferences and associations related to conflict resolution methods.

He directly initiated communication between various adversaries. He arranged regional, national, and international workshops bring together political opponents who had not been meeting. For example, in 1984, he arranged the first meetings between government supporters and African National Congress (ANC) leaders in exile. He also mediated in local, regional, and national conflicts, including between Inkatha and the United Democratic Front in Natal in 1985-6.

The course of South Africa's transition away from apartheid entailed social movements and numerous NGOs, acting in concert and in opposition. It was not without violence. Between mid-1990, when negotiations for the transition had already begun, and April 1994, when elections were held, about 14,000 South Africans died in politically related incidents (Mandela, 1994, p. 530). Some deaths resulted from lethal force used by security forces in their policing. However, many of the deaths occurred among rival black groups, particularly between the Xhosa and the Zulu ethnic groups, and two political organizations, the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), associated with the Zulu. Significantly, a "third force," consisting of right-wing white elements linked to the government security forces, for a time supported violence perpetrated by some of the IFP. Peacemaking practice had to include resolving contentious rivalry within the primary adversaries as well as between them. Sustainable peace generally requires peacemaking activities at the grassroots level in conjunction with peacemaking at the elite level (Mitchell & Hancock, 2012).

The extensive violence endangered the progress toward a democratic transformation of South Africa. Appeals to stop the violence and even the meetings of Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders with Mangosuthu Buthelezi and other IFP leaders failed again and again. No single person or organization could end the violence or even had the legitimacy to convene a conference that might open a path to finally end it. The South African Council of Churches joined together with the Consultative Business Movement to arrange such a conference (Gastrow, 1995). They invited representatives of all major groups in society to a closed meeting in June 1991. A preparatory committee established five working groups and tasked them to write reports for the National Peace Convention, meeting in September 1991. The reports were discussed at the convention and the result was the National Peace Accord (NPA). Twenty-seven government, political, and trade union leaders signed the NPA; only three white, right-wing parties would not participate; and two leftist, Africanist groups declined to sign, but declared their support for the objectives of the accord.

The NPA provided a vision of democracy, peace, and stability for South Africa, and it also established an ongoing national network of structures to serve those objectives. It included a code of conduct for political parties and organizations, a code of conduct for security forces,

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a national peace committee, a national peace secretariat, regional and local dispute resolution committees, a commission of inquiry about preventing public violence and intimidation, socio-economic reconstruction and development, and a police board. These structures usefully offered settings for persons from opposing sides to get to know each other and to work together at the national, regional, and local levels. The work to build a democratic, egalitarian, and just South Africa continues as new setbacks arise and must be overcome.

Conclusions

Theory and practice are forever interactive. Some practitioners' actions are shaped by considering a repertoire of possible strategies housed in a broad approach to conducting and transforming conflicts. But in applying ideas from that approach to a particular unique situation, some improvisation is inevitable. Thereby, interpretations of that experience may modify, elaborate, or generate novel bits of the approach.

Other practitioners, inattentive to any broad, abstract conflict theory, do what seems reasonable in terms of what appears to be common sense. Over the years, many practitioners develop a body of experience that becomes their guide to future practice. Persons seeking to develop theory examine such actions and use them to test existing theory and to generate new elements of theory. There also are practitioners, who are trained in the field and are engaged most of their time in applications of the ideas. They often are members of NGOs, which are funded by governments, foundation grants, and by charitable contributions.

Still other persons work as scholar/practitioners. They self-consciously do research and write abstractly about applications in the peace and conflict studies field. Alongside that, they engage in practice, employing the techniques of that field. Some of the pioneers in the field engaged in such practices, for example, John Burton, Adam Curle, Elise Boulding, Herbert Kelman, and Johan Galtung. They tried out their new ideas and developed them further as a result of their experience. Most of these scholar/practitioners also taught and trained the other people coming into the emerging field.

Many workers in the field are primarily academics, doing research and teaching. Their students are not limited to those planning to pursue careers in the peace and conflict studies field, and many will work in a wide array of fields. The diffusion of the peace and conflict studies approach throughout a society certainly enhances the likelihood that the approach will be put in practice and be supported. Many of these scholars, themselves, are also engaged in practice as advocates and activists (Kriesberg, 1999; Wittner, 2007). They may do that as partisans for one side in a fight or as concerned interveners seeking to transform a destructive contention. Furthermore, individuals, in the course of their life, shift from one kind of engagement to another, from academic roles and governmental and non-governmental policy-making roles.

In this chapter, I have sometimes written that a particular strategy that was employed in practice was "consistent with" the peace and conflict studies approach. In doing so, I acknowledge that the practitioner may or may not have had any such idea in mind. He or she may be drawing from experience or from widely held conventions. Of course, popularly held ideas include ideas that are part of the peace and conflict studies field. Some elements of the approach have become commonplace in much of American and other societies.

Having a broad theoretical approach in mind and at hand can be very helpful. It can exist in books and articles, which makes them accessible in meeting challenges and unfamiliar circumstances. Joyce Neu, a person with many years of experience in mediation and other conflict resolution work around the world, spells that out vividly.

In my last years at The Carter Center when I was leading mediation efforts, I found it helpful to travel with a few CAR books that served as a kind of talisman or blanket (not sure what to call them). I felt such responsibility in leading these efforts that even though I'd read the literature, in the midst of the stress of the mediation process, I would often feel like I was forgetting everything I knew and not being creative enough or not drawing on what others had already done or proposed. So, it was helpful to have a few books to sift through to ground myself and to help get my feet under me again.⁶

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Notes

- 1 www.reuters.com/article/us-colombia-rebels-mediator-idUSKCN11S23X?il=0
- 2 <http://colombiareports.com/colombia-peace-talks-fact-sheet/>
- 3 www.nytimes.com/2016/10/03/world/colombia-peace-deal-defeat.html?_r=0; www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/01/colombias-government-formally-ratifies-revised-peace-deal
- 4 www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/colombia; www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/uncertainty-peace-colombia
- 5 Personal conversation, June 1998. (van der Merwe, 1989, 2000; Botes, 2013)
- 6 Personal email, May 9, 2017.

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