death trap

In one of their bloodiest operations ever, Miami-Dade cops lured robbers and gunned them down.

By Michael E. Miller
Roger Gonzalez Jr. guides the car full of thieves through the Redland, past the groves of mango trees glowing blood red against the evening sky, toward a beige building with a large yard and a black Mercedes-Benz parked in front. He slows down. His father, Roger Sr., calmly checks the ammunition in his handgun. So do the three other passengers. They’ve all done this before.

Rosendo Betancourt — a skinny, high-strung ex-con only ten months out of prison — points to the house. There are 20 pounds of yerba (marijuana) inside, he says in Spanish. Then, for the sake of the lone non-Cuban in the car — a broad-chested, 36-year-old African-American named Antonio Andrew — Betancourt translates: “The shit is in the freezer.”

Gonzalez’s father barks out the plan: Cut the chainlink fence, get in the house, tie up the pot growers, and steal the $60,000 drug stash. Junior parks the getaway car on a side street and waits behind the wheel. The four others slip ski masks over their faces. Dressed in black, they slip through a mango nursery and approach from the south. They slice through the fence with bolt cutters. Then, weapons in hand, they creep toward the house.

Andrew silently sucks the swampy air through his mask. The only sound is the squelch of his sneakers sinking into the rain-drenched lawn. The four thieves drift through the trees like wraiths. But hidden among the shadows, dozens of gunmen follow the intruders’ every step through the scopes of Colt M4 Commando assault rifles.

Miami-Dade police set up robbers and then gun them down.

By Michael E. Miller

The robbers don’t know it, but their stealth is an illusion; their surprise attack, a cruel joke. Suddenly, an unmarked van bursts through the back gate with a crack of snapping metal, tears across the lawn, and slides to a halt. A half-dozen men in black gear jump out, shouting. The panicked gangsters scatter. A volley of gunshots explodes, rapid-fire like a string of fireworks.

By the time the ambush ends, the four robbers’ lifeless bodies lie scattered across the lawn. Andrew made it the farthest. His bullet-riddled corpse is only a few yards from the fence.

It was a ruthless, professional hit. But the killers weren’t pot growers protecting their contraband; they were cops. The whole robbery had been a setup. And Betancourt — a “cooperating defendant” who had helped authorities lay the trap — was among the four dead on the grass.
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The June 30, 2011 sting was one of the bloodiest police operations in Miami history. It was also one of the most controversial. Police have yet to issue a report but admit the robbers never fired their weapons. Betancourt’s family claimed police had betrayed the informant. Cops blamed him for disobeying orders.

“He was told not to participate in this action at all,” Miami-Dade Police Department Director James Loftus said coldly. The chief showed even less sympathy for the other dead men, arguing they were responsible for a string of violent home invasions.

“This group was prone to... duct-taping their victims and even torturing [them],” he said. “This is one criminal enterprise that has been interdicted and dealt with.”

Gonzalez’s gang was, indeed, armed and dangerous. But a New Times investigation raises questions about the deadly operation that cops used to take down the group. The operation was the third, nearly identical sting to go horribly wrong in the past six years, leaving seven suspects dead, apparently with no shots fired at police. While cops claim the setup was the only way to take out the thieves’ savvy ringleader, Roger Gonzalez Sr., they neglect to mention he was out of jail only because he’d worked as their informant. The other men killed in the raid weren’t all the murderous felons Loftus portrayed. Betancourt was trying to turn his life around by ending Gonzalez’s crime spree, and Andrew wasn’t a violent criminal but a simple-minded car thief. A stray bullet to the head as a child had left him mentally impaired and easily impressionable, his family says. When money from a lawsuit mysteriously disappeared, he turned to a life of petty crime.

“I knew Antonio like the back of my hand,” says Ladonna Florence, the mother of his child. “He wasn’t a saint. But can’t nobody tell me that he was dangerous.”

Above all, the bloody, botched operation calls into question the Miami-Dade Police Department’s tactics and whether cops were too quick to pull the trigger.

“The police chose the perfect spot, led him there, and then shot him,” Ladonna says. “I feel like this was premeditated murder.”

It was a February evening in 1988 when Antonio Andrew was shot for the first time.

The handsome 12-year-old was playing basketball with friends in Sherbondy Park, a dusty playground next to Opa-locka City Hall, when a fight broke out nearby. A young man called “Twin,” mumbling and shouting erratically, had wandered into the park’s karate dojo. Stacey Hill, a postman and part-time karate instructor, had thrown Twin out of his class. An hour later, however, he was back — and angry.

“He’s coming,” shouted one of Hill’s students, bursting through the dojo’s doors. “And he’s got a gun.”

But Hill was packing too. He walked out of the dojo and, he says, fired a single shot into the air. Twin ran off, and Hill thought the incident was over. Then he noticed a boy crumpled on the blacktop, a bloody halo forming on the basketball court. A bullet had struck Antonio in the back of his head.

“Twin wasn’t caught. A judge withheld adjudication on negligence charges against Hill and he kept his job at the post office, but he never went back to Sherbondy Park. "That was a dark day," he says.

Antonio never really recovered from that day in the park. The scar left on his skull only hinted at the true damage the bullet had done, and he never received the six-figure settlement he won from Opa-locka. Screwed over by luck and the legal system, Antonio would only make things worse for himself.

“He was a good child until he got shot,” says his great-aunt, Johnnie Mae Witherspoon, whose living room wall in Miami Gardens is a patchwork quilt of family photos, including many of Antonio. “That’s when his problems started.”

After the shooting, Antonio spent a week in Jackson Memorial Hospital. His mother, a pretty woman with pigtails named Carolyn Hill — no relation to Stacey — sat next to him, holding his hand as tubes kept her oldest son alive. The bullet had torn open the side of his head. Doctors told her he might never walk again. Antonio quickly proved them wrong. But his family nonetheless noticed a difference.

“He'd snap real quick,” younger sister Jennifer Benbow says. “All of a sudden, he had an anger problem.” He would go from laughing to shouting in seconds. And he suffered from terrible headaches after the accident.

“Sometimes he’d call me and say, ‘Auntie, my head hurts so bad I can’t hardly lift it off the pillow,” Johnnie Mae remembers. She helped raise Antonio, who was living with Carolyn and four other kids in a tiny Opa-locka apartment and surviving off food stamps and welfare. Antonio’s father, Oscar Andrew, was locked up repeatedly in the 70s and 80s on drug and weapons charges and spent most of Antonio’s youth behind bars.

A few months after Antonio left the hospital, his mother filed a lawsuit against Opa-locka. Four years later, the city settled for $120,000. Yet family members say neither Antonio nor they ever received the money.

“There were still five of us in a one-bedroom with bunk beds and shit,” says Jennifer, a feisty woman with the same wide eyes as her late brother. “So where the hell was the money at? We never saw it.”

The family had other problems. As a teenager, Antonio began disappearing after school. Johnnie Mae and Carolyn began fighting a losing battle to keep him out of trouble. “We would try to talk to him and tell him what to do and what not to do,” Johnnie Mae says. “He was so easily impressionable. He would tell me, ‘Auntie, I was there, but I didn’t do that.’ I told him: ‘Honey, if you’re with the crowd, you’re going to get in trouble too.”

That’s what happened January 25, 1992, when 16-year-old Antonio was hanging out with Calvin Dorsett, a 22-year-old who had already been arrested eight times for car theft and cocaine possession. Dorsett accosted a 69-year-old woman in a parking lot and tore the purse out of her hands. Then he jumped into Antonio’s car. Dorsett made off with only $9 but received three years of probation. Charges against Antonio were dismissed.

Antonio was behind the wheel again four months later when an Opa-locka cop clocked his white Chevy at 100 mph on NW 17th Avenue. When officers stopped him, Antonio stepped out of his car but then jumped back in and sped away. A police dog later found him after he ditched the car a few blocks away. The vehicle was stolen.

This time, Antonio — still only 17 years old — was sentenced to a year and a day in jail.

When he got out, he met Ladonna Florence, a sassy 15-year-old high school student. The two made an odd couple: tall and handsome, Antonio resembled Theo Huxtable on The Cosby Show. Ladonna was short and curvy, with a sharp wit and sharper tongue.
“He was childlike in some ways,” she remembers. “He loved playing videogames and basketball. And he would eat cookies and milk for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

Within a year, Ladonna was pregnant with their first child. But Antonio wasn’t ready for the responsibility. Instead of getting an honest job, he stole more cars. In August 1994, he was caught stripping a Jeep Cherokee near Opa-locka Executive Airport. While he was awaiting trial, cops pulled him over for driving a black Chevy without a tag and discovered it too was stolen. Antonio went back to jail for another two years. He missed the birth of his first son, A.J., in 1994. “All he knew was stealing cars,” Ladonna sighs.

Antonio’s crimes were poorly planned, fumblingly executed, and never violent. Each time, he pleaded guilty, served his time, and then quickly re-offended. In 1997, cops caught him breaking into a car in the crowded lot of Traz Powell Stadium during a high school football game. In January 1998, he sold weed to an undercover cop and was sentenced to another two years. “Every time life was getting back to normal, he got arrested,” Ladonna remembers.

When tragedy struck again later that year, it wasn’t Antonio’s fault. While he was in jail, Ladonna gave birth to their second son, Anthony. But the child was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare type of cancer. Antonio was out in time to watch the cancer eat at the toddler’s muscles. “He loved his kids,” her sister Jennifer says. “He would have done anything for them.”

![Image of Antonio and Ladonna](image)

Ladonna, Antonio’s mother, holds a picture of him before he was shot in the head by a stray bullet in 1988.

Antonio Andrew’s family always knew the instant he drove down the block. The windows would rattle from the bass blasting out of his car. Then he’d burst through the door, flashing his gold-toothed smile before crushing them with a bear hug. But when he arrived at his sister’s house in Opa-locka one evening last May, he wasn’t his usual self. He looked worried as he took off his pants.

With no job to pay for Anthony’s chemotherapy, Antonio turned back to crime. When cops pulled him over January 25, 2001, for a routine traffic stop, they found a silver 9mm pistol under his back seat. He was sentenced to three years. From jail, he gave Ladonna the phone number of his court-appointed guardian and told her to use his Opa-locka settlement money for Anthony’s treatment. But the guardian told her the money was gone.

“My son’s father never would have told me to call that man if Antonio had received that money,” Ladonna says. “They stole it from him.”

(New Times has contacted half a dozen lawyers listed in court records connected to the settlement, but all claimed not to be the guardian charged with keeping Antonio’s funds or to know where the cash went. More details might emerge later this month when a probate court appoints someone to manage Antonio’s estate.)

Antonio saw his son only once more. On February 6, 2002, a judge granted him furlough to visit Anthony, then 3 years old. His cancer had returned and become inoperable. As an armed guard waited outside the Miami Children’s Hospital room, Antonio signed papers to take Anthony off life support. Then he sat with the coma-stricken child until his two hours of furlough were up. Anthony died later that day.

When Antonio was released in 2004, the first thing he did was ask Ladonna for forgiveness. His mother had died from bone cancer while he was in prison. Ladonna had moved on. But the repeat felon promised to stay out of jail to help raise their surviving son, A.J.

For seven years, he kept his word. He found work as a nightclub bouncer; then he started his own business — a lawn-care service called the Rite Choice. He even began to take care of A.J., driving him to the mall to buy school clothes and teaching him to play basketball.

“For Antonio, seven years without going to jail was a miracle,” Ladonna says. “I thought he had turned his life around.”

A few months later, a doctor told Antonio he had only a few weeks to live. He was 34 years old. His cancer had returned and become inoperable.

“He was childlike in some ways,” she remembers. “He loved playing videogames and basketball. And he would eat cookies and milk for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”
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shirt and tossed it aside. Then he asked his sister to go out and buy him a black T-shirt.

“What do you need something black for?” Jennifer remembers asking. But she already knew the answer. She felt her stomach drop.

“I ran into some crackers,” Antonio said vaguely. “They brought me in on something in Hialeah.” Then he broke into that mile-wide smile and told his sister not to worry. When she saw him a week later, he was in better spirits. He talked about renting a house with three bedrooms — one for him, another for A.J., and one for her. When he dropped Jennifer off at her house, he counted out $6,000 from a wad in his pocket and handed her a hundred-dollar bill.

A month later, he was dead.

It’s still not clear how or when Antonio hooked up with the gang of “crackers” he mentioned that night. What is certain is that the group’s ringleader was a violent criminal headed for disaster. Records show that Roger Gonzalez Sr. was an intelligent but ruthless man who masterminded scores of violent home invasions, sometimes targeting drug dealers or crooks — but also robbing innocent families. He threatened rape or murder and even outright tortured victims to force them to reveal the locations of jewelry or safes. And he was training his son to do the same.

But records also reveal another reason police decided to set an elaborate trap for Gonzalez in the Redland: Not only had he been busted in a similar raid years before — leaving him well acquainted with police techniques — but he had also been let out of jail early after working as a confidential informant.

Gonzalez’s increasingly violent escapades began 15 years ago in Little Havana. On January 17, 1997, Jessica Rivera answered her front door. A smiling man held out a bouquet of flowers. When she let him inside, however, he thrust a gun in her face. Several more gunmen walked in and threatened to kill her if she didn’t open her father’s safe. When she couldn’t give them the combination, they vanished.

Soon, Florida Department of Law Enforcement officials started to notice a pattern of similar violent home invasions. The same group struck again in March, July, and several times in August. In September, they tied up a man and terrorized him with a curling iron and a knife. A few weeks later, they used flex cuffs to restrain a woman and threatened to rape her and her daughter. They stole $30,000 worth of her jewelry, according to a police report.

Police quickly determined that Gonzalez — a balding, short, sallow-skinned Cuban immigrant — was the gang’s leader. They tapped his phones and started surveillance. Then, in October 1997, they convinced an ex-con named Jesus Marrero to infiltrate the crew. Marrero told the ringleader that he knew of a warehouse where drug traffickers were storing 100 kilos of cocaine. Gonzalez cannily evaded the sting — thanks to a spy sent up to the warehouse roof who spotted the SWAT team inside — but he was arrested the next week in Collier County.

In jail, the crook began cooperating with prosecutors and police. Despite facing more than 20 counts of kidnapping, armed robbery, racketeering, and attempted cocaine trafficking, he signed a deal sentencing him to just 14 years and a chance to leave early if he helped the cops.

In 2006, that’s just what he did, spending six months helping Miami-Dade detectives with a murder case. He continued working with cops for the next three years on various other cases, cutting nearly five months off his sentence in return.

Miami-Dade will not confirm whether Gonzalez worked as an informant. But it’s clear from court records that when Gonzalez walked out of prison August 4, 2010, he had cops and prosecutors to thank for his early release.

He didn’t waste much time. On August 30, a Miami woman named Onelia Machado was baby-sitting her infant nephew when an alarm beeped. She left the bedroom to find two men with bandannas over their faces and handguns drawn. They shoved her and shouted in Spanish: “Stay face down on the bed and don’t move, or we’ll kill you!”

Just as in 1997, the home invasions kept coming: On January 16, 2011, Gonzalez’s son, Roger Jr., was released from prison for his own series of robberies. Now working as a team, they targeted drug dealers and criminals, police say, but also tied up innocent families. During one smash-and-grab, the thieves cut their victim’s boxer shorts and then slashed his scrum to steal his Mercedes SUV. A few weeks later, one of them tried to cut off a victim’s finger.

Cops soon caught a break. Rosendo Betancourt had recently finished a three-year sentence for cocaine trafficking. The wily Cuban had past convictions for stealing cars and threatening witnesses. He also had connections to Roger...
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Gonzalez Sr. Betancourt secretly approached Miami-Dade police and told them the Gonzalezes were responsible for the vicious break-ins, court records show. Cops began wiretapping the father and son’s phones and planning how to bust the gang.

After years as an informant, Gonzalez Sr. wasn’t going to fall for another warehouse trap. But police thought they could lure him into trying to rip off 20 pounds of pot from a marijuana stash house. On June 30, Betancourt gave him the address in the Redland. The trap was set.

It’s a mystery when Antonio Andrew got involved. Police claim he met Gonzalez in jail and participated in more than a dozen robberies. But Antonio’s family members say the cops are inflating his role to justify shooting him. He’d only begun working with the gang a few weeks before his death, around the same time he’d approached his sister about getting a black T-shirt, they say.

That claim is bolstered by the police’s own press releases. In a statement issued the morning after the Redland shooting, cops identified everyone in the gang except Antonio. It took four more days for them to release his name. “They didn’t even know who he was when they shot him,” Ladonna says. However he got involved, this much is clear: On June 30, Antonio drove his ‘93 Oldsmobile from Opa-locka to a secluded ranch two miles southwest of the Redland stash house. There he met the Gonzalezes, Betancourt, and an ex-con named Jorge Lemus. Antonio and the men piled into a microphone-wired SUV that cops had given Betancourt and drove to the Redland house. Police call what happened next a successful sting. Antonio’s family has another name for it: a death trap.

It’s getting more violent out there again, that’s for sure,” Maj. Raul Ubieta says. The mountainous cop wearily rubs his salt-and-pepper buzzcut. He was up until 3 a.m. last night after two of his men shot a teenager who had pulled a gun on them in Liberty City. “I think the pendulum is swinging again,” he says with a sigh. “And these,” he adds, putting a thick stack of police reports on his desk, “are all uses of force by my folks.”

Ubieta habitually calls suspects “the bad guys,” and few were worse, he says, than Gonzalez and his crew. As head of the Miami-Dade Police Department’s robbery bureau, Ubieta ranks home invasions just behind rape and murder on his list of heinous crimes. More than anyone else, he is responsible for green-lighting the sting operation in the Redland. And although he says he can’t discuss the details of that deadly night, he insists all the robbers had it coming.

“These guys were armed,” he says. “They were going to do a home invasion, a rip. These guys had been involved in torture. Not a one of them was innocent in going in. Not a one of them.”

Ubieta and his fellow cops say stings such as the Redland operation take violent career criminals off the streets, one way or another. Gonzalez’s crew alone was responsible for 19 robberies in six months, he says. Miami-Dade’s Street Terror Offender Program (STOP) has busted 53 home invasion gangs since 2005, Ubieta boasts.

But three of those stings have gone wrong, and all in a disturbingly similar way: with suspects getting shot despite apparently never firing at police. In all three cases, cops chose the location and positioned dozens of officers with sniper rifles nearby. Each time, they seemed better prepared to kill than to capture their prey. And the same officers were involved in several of the killings.

The first STOP operation that turned deadly happened September 7, 2006. Detectives staged an elaborate setup. Using a confidential informant, they tricked six career criminals into thinking a tractor-trailer with 80 kilos of cocaine was parked behind a Medley warehouse. The robbers arrived wearing fake FBI and DEA shirts. Two of them, with guns in their hands, approached the truck and screamed “DEA” and “FBI.” That’s when the real cops opened fire.

Jorge Torres, 21, was shot five times and died at the scene. Joe Guevara, 23, was shot but survived. He and four other suspects were convicted of gun and drug charges. The Special Response Team (SRT) officers who fired their weapons said they saw Torres and Guevara raise their guns as if to shoot. All eight cops were cleared of wrongdoing.

A year later, STOP detectives planned another, nearly identical ambush. This time they targeted a seven-member gang led by three brothers. Again, a confidential informant suggested a drug heist, telling the gang that a tractor-trailer parked in another Medley warehouse was packed with 70 kilos of cocaine. Even better, he told them, the driver would be asleep on the job.

The gang drove in a black Ford Expedition to the warehouse district, where at least two dozen cops were waiting for them. As they pulled into the parking lot, 12 snipers followed them from perches on surrounding buildings. Three Ryder moving trucks were ready to pull out and block the vehicle’s escape. But there was no need. The Expedition’s driver stopped the SUV and ran up to the cab of the trailer. He had a nickel-plated pistol in his hand and a mask over his face. As soon as he pointed it at the cab, an SRT officer hidden inside a metal box on the roof gave the “takedown” command. Lt. Luis Alavez then stood up and shouted, “Police! Put your hands on your head and don’t move.”

The man turned and raised his gun. Suddenly, bullets struck him in the head, chest, and abdomen, killing him instantly. Four more snipers — believing they were being shot at — opened fire. They rattled off more than 20 rounds in ten seconds. When one of the would-be robbers climbed out of the Expedition to apparently take refuge behind it, the snipers shot him in the face, stomach, and wrist. When cops later searched his dead body, they discovered he was unarmed. The two other men in the SUV were also shot multiple times but survived.

The two deadly ambushes shed light on what likely happened last summer in the Redland. If anything, records show that the firepower used in 2011 was even more overwhelming: Eleven SRT marksmen fired their assault rifles that night, according to a use-of-force report for one of the officers involved.
As Andrew, Gonzalez, Betancourt, and Lemus crept toward the house, there were no warehouses for snipers to perch on. Instead, interviews with neighbors suggest the officers were hidden inside and perhaps inside the house. More snipers were in the van that burst through the gate. As in 2006 and '07, police apparently didn't wait for the suspects to shoot before opening fire. There is “no evidence that shows that the subjects fired their weapons,” a police spokesman told New Times.

There was also a concerning overlap between the ill-fated operations. Records show three of the officers who fired their weapons in the Redland had also pulled the trigger in the 2006 shooting. Two other officers discharged their guns in both the '06 and '07 stings.

Yet as troubling as it seems for cops to lure criminals into a trap and then mow them down, police have the right to open fire whether they're being shot at or not, says Maki Haberfeld, chair of John Jay College’s Department of Law, Police Science, and Criminal Justice Administration. In fact, the more cops know about a suspect's criminal record — like Gonzalez's violent past — the likelier they are to perceive a threat and use deadly force.

“The police subculture is well defined as black and white: the good guys and the bad guys,” she says. “When you know for sure that you are facing the bad guys, then you have zero hesitation in how you respond. The moment you think they are reaching for their gun, there are no more qualms about reading the situation wrong.”

Police seemed to have no qualms about shooting Antonio Andrew that night in the Redland. His corpse was so shredded from bullets that morticians weren't sure they could prepare him for his funeral.

“His body was like a bullet pail,” funeral director Lori Hadley Davis says. “He had more wounds than you could close up. There wasn’t a spot on him that wasn’t shot: his chest, abdomen, and head.” But what Hadley Davis immediately noticed were Antonio’s hands. They too were shot.

“He died a horrible death,” says Hadley Davis, who has seen hundreds of murders in her day. “For you to shoot someone like that, you must have a hatred for them.”

Every time a cop kills someone, they claim it’s self-defense — they claim that it’s justified,” Ladonna Florence says. Sitting in the dark living room of her house in Miami Gardens, she lets the last word hang in the air with a sarcastic sneer. Her son A.J., now a 17-year-old with a striking resemblance to his father, fidgets anxiously beside her. A copy of his black Miami Heat jumpsuit and spiky braids. “They say, ‘But how good of a relationship do you have with the bad guys,’ he says. “They say, ‘pledged to protect the informant.’

“The police promised, ‘Don’t worry — he’s working with us,’” says Grisel Perez, Betancourt’s mother-in-law. “Then he was dead. We don’t understand how they could have let this happen to him.”

The bodies may be long buried, but both families are still living in fear. Michael Xavier, Betancourt’s brother-in-law, claims that people have driven by his sister’s house honking and yelling, “Snitch!” “My sister felt like she was being snitched on,” says A.J., wearing a black Miami Heat jumpsuit and spiky braids. “I blame the police because they could have arrested him,” says A.J., wearing a black Miami Heat jumpsuit and spiky braids. “I don’t trust the police.” He has already started mourning off to cops, Ladonna says. She fears that Antonio’s death will push A.J. into repeating his father’s mistakes instead of avoiding them, just as Antonio followed his own father into prison.

“A.J. is a good father,” Ladonna says. “But how good of a relationship can you have when you keep going to jail?”

After the shooting, Antonio’s family finally received something from the City of Opa-locka. It wasn’t a check for $120,000 but a plaque that read, “On behalf of our community, we wish to record our deep sorrow over the passing of Antonio Lee Andrew.”

The mystery over what happened that night in the Redland might be over in a few months, when police release their investigation into the fatal shooting. The lone surviving suspect, Roger Gonzalez Jr., has cooperated with authorities. He signed a plea agreement admitting to at least 11 robberies and was sentenced to 27 years in federal prison on April 13.

But his conviction only ranksles the families of those who have no court dates to attend, only tombstones.

“It’s not the cops’ decision who should be on Earth and who shouldn’t,” Ladonna says. “Doing crime doesn’t give them the right to take somebody’s life.”

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