

Teaching in the Time of Trump

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On March 4, 1801, President Thomas Jefferson delivered one of the nation's finest inaugural addresses, after participating in one of its most politically divisive election cycles. Seeking common ground in an inherently unstable democratic republic, the author of the Declaration of Independence urged his audience:

Let us reflect that, having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions.... Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.¹

What were the necessary principles of American government that transcended the vast diversity of American life? The first on Jefferson's list—and on the list of most democratic theorists ever since—was political equality: “Equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political,” he explained. Not yet equality for those whose brutal enslavement powered the economy (and his own personal fortune), nor yet for women, or the poor, or countless others, but nevertheless a principled equality that allowed for reasoned deliberation among citizens.

Even today, when the logic of democracy has propelled our society to a more inclusive (and still yet unjust and unequal) place, we take for granted that first, fundamental principle: that democracy can flourish only when democratic deliberation is guided by a norm of *reasonableness*. To be reasonable in one's conduct towards others is not the same as being guided by the facts (although facts are certainly important). It is rather about being open to other perspectives, the perspectives of one's co-citizens.

The norm of reasonableness has a long history in democratic political thought. The best known contemporary formulation is that of John Rawls, who maintains that people are reasonable when they propose standards for cooperation that are reasonable and justifiable for *everyone* to accept. Reasonable people are also ready to discuss the fair terms that others propose, and abide by the results of reasonable deliberation. Reasonableness requires respect for the opinions of others and a willingness to discuss them.²

Policy designed to apply fairly to everyone requires deliberation that takes everyone's perspective into account. Jefferson's point is that the stability of democracy as a system depends upon a well constituted state, one in which the people are not sealed off from the perspectives of their co-citizens by fear, panic, or hatred. A general belief that Jews are out to deceive will undermine reasonable public discourse, for example, because it will lead citizens to discount the actual perspective of their

Jewish co-citizens. In such a society, it would be no surprise to discover anti-Semitic policies.

We now face an election in which one of the leading candidates, Donald Trump, is using fear, panic, and division to attract support. A CNN/ORC poll from May 29–31 registered Trump at 3 percent support. In his speech on June 16 announcing his candidacy, Trump made the following, now infamous, statement: “When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Instead of being punished for such divisive and offensive speech, however, Trump was rewarded. The next CNN/ORC poll, from June 26–28, had Trump at 12 percent, behind Jeb Bush (19 percent). A poll conducted from July 22–25 had Trump leading the GOP pack with 18 percent, and subsequent polls established him as the frontrunner. Trump's lead became commanding after his suggestion that Muslims be banned from visiting the United States.

Trump's campaign is notable not only for its messages, but for its media. With over 5.5 million Twitter followers and 4.5 million Facebook fans, his campaign is unmatched in its mastery of social media. He has sidestepped more traditional vehicles, eschewing expensive television advertising, for example, for low-cost, low-production



Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump greets the crowd at a rally in Columbus, Ohio, November 23, 2015.

videos on Instagram, Vine, Youtube and Periscope. His messages reach followers instantly and are then rebroadcasted in seconds by a devoted phalanx of followers. Aggressive tweets reach millions of followers unfiltered, contributing to the speed with which his words attract attention and shift the polls. He is outpacing Republican rivals while paying a fraction of their costs.³ Despite the appearance of showmanship, however, his constant real-time use of these media is systematic and coordinated.⁴ His pioneering use of these new communications media has been compared by many commentators to FDR's use of radio in his fireside chats and JFK's television charisma.⁵

The medium and the message are fully integrated, and this integration is critical to Trump's rejection of reason

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giving and reason taking. He keeps up a steady stream of boasts, insults, and policy assertions almost entirely insulated from thoughtful public analysis.⁶ The self-proclaimed "Hemingway of 140 characters" has fully occupied and fortified his position in the social media landscape, a place where sober, idea-driven

conservative rivals flounder.⁷ When he is caught making false statements, he either denies or doubles down, and is held to no account within his media platform.⁸ His statements in televised debates thus far have been extensions of his Twitter persona; challengers are fended off not for the quality of their ideas, but through invective. While traditional media such as network television and newspapers have always had political agendas, Trump has broken the rules that tethered candidates to at least moderate claims of public reason.⁹

For a while, commentators chalked up Trump's campaign to "sideshow" political theater, in which the un-serious entertainer provokes rather than promises. In July 2015, the *Huffington Post* announced that henceforth it would put coverage of the Trump campaign in its

Entertainment section. By December, *New York Times* conservative columnist David Brooks compared Trump to that “pink carpet” that you ogle at in a furniture store before returning to the more sober carpets that you actually buy to go with the rest of your décor.¹⁰ However, after Trump called for the “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” Arianna Huffington announced that her website would now put Trump back in Politics, calling his campaign “an ugly and dangerous force.”¹¹

Any doubts about Trump’s commitment to a very serious and deliberate form of political theater (not a side show, but the main event) were cleared when his campaign released its first television ad on January 4, 2016. The transcript is a series of statements that he has made before, interspersed with ALL CAPS script on the screen:

“I’m Donald Trump and
I approve this message”

The politicians can pretend
it’s something else

But Donald Trump calls it radical
Islamic terrorism

[IT’S RADICAL ISLAMIC
TERRORISM]

That’s why he’s calling for a temporary
shutdown of Muslims entering the
United States until we can figure out
what’s going on.

[TEMPORARY BAN ON
MUSLIMS ENTERING U.S.]

He’ll quickly cut the head off of ISIS

[CUT THE HEAD OFF OF ISIS]

And take their oil.
And he’ll stop illegal immigration by
building a wall on our southern border
that Mexico *will* pay for.

[STOP ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION]

“We will make America great again.”¹²

The ad includes assertions that are ridiculous. It incites hostility against people who are different in ethnicity or religious beliefs from most Americans—illegal immigrants and foreign Muslims. How will we make America great? By naming and excluding undesirables, or, in the case of ISIS, butchering them.

What betrays Trump’s spectacle as very serious indeed, however, is the emotional and dehumanizing imagery he uses to accompany the words. The initial image of President Obama and Hillary Clinton during the words “the politicians” is then switched to grim photos of Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, the San Bernardino shooters, foregrounding scenes of a body on a stretcher. The ad then flips to the proposed ban on Muslims, which moves from scenes at an immigration point to men in ski masks and indistinct Arabic writing. The next shot is a warship firing missiles and aerial footage of explosions. The most disturbing, however, is the Mexican wall building footage, which shows dark-skinned people surging toward a barrier (footage from Spain, it turns out) as if they were a swarm of insects.¹³ This is a dehumanizing trope that is familiar in racist propaganda and was favored by the National Socialists, among others.¹⁴

As the opposition party to the incumbent president, Republicans would naturally want to paint our present reality negatively, and scapegoating is always easier to sell than real solutions for politicians of any party. Moreover, illegal immigration and foreign (as opposed to domestic) extremism have been long-term concerns of Republicans in particular, but Democrats as well. Nevertheless, while other candidates have followed Trump’s xenophobic direction, none have taken their tactics to such an explicitly low point. As a result, prominent conservatives have distanced themselves

from Trump’s eruptions; some have even labeled him a fascist.¹⁵

Democracy and the Challenge of Demagoguery

Ordinary citizens, used to what Princeton political scientist Tali Mendelberg has called “a norm of equality” in public political discourse, may be surprised by the support that Trump’s tactics generate. But it is no surprise to theorists of democracy.

The suggestion that divisive, shocking rhetoric is an especially powerful way to garner support dates back to the discussion of democracy in Book VIII of Plato’s *Republic*; in fact, it is Plato’s reason for thinking that democracy invariably leads to tyranny after social conflicts tear it apart. Hobbes, Rousseau, and a legion of other democratic theorists have made similar points. Hannah Arendt puts the attraction of perceived “forbidden” divisive rhetoric perhaps most pointedly when she writes, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “The mob really believed that truth was whatever respectable society had hypocritically passed over.”¹⁶ And in the still novel history of democratic states, the point has been reinforced by the trajectory of certain democracies which have transformed Plato’s prediction into prophecy, from the example of Weimar Germany that motivated Arendt’s remark, to 1990s Serbia and modern-day Russia.

Public schools exist, in part, for the political purpose of instilling the principal values of a democratic republic, training students in the skills and knowledge requisite to healthy democratic life. In a time when a major political candidate threatens the fundamental values of the nation, educators are called to explain the nature of the present threat, that is, to explain one of the oldest problems in Western philosophy, the problem of demagoguery.

Democracy has two chief values, liberty and equality. In most conceptions of liberty, demagoguery is allowed in a democracy. Controversial speech is still

free speech. The problem of demagoguery lies not in its conflict with freedom, but with the democratic value of equality.

There are different theories of democratic equality, but perhaps the most prominent regards it as a species of equal respect. A society is equal in this sense if there is equal respect among its members. Reasonableness as a norm of public political discourse is an expression of equal respect. We see the centrality of the value of equality to democracy when we consider the connection between democratic policy and reasonableness. A policy that is designed with only the perspectives of *some* citizens in mind is not a democratic one. Equality is not some kind of additional desirable value added to the democratic ideal; it is the very foundation of democratic legitimacy.

Demagoguery causes problems in the absence of equal respect; it feeds off of and strengthens divisions in society. The popularity of divisive rhetoric is in the first instance a sign of an underlying failure of democratic equality. But to leave it here is to absolve the demagogue of responsibility; it suggests that the demagogue is just taking advantage of pre-existing fissures in society. The demagogue is, however, doing considerably more. When there are fissures and divisions in society, the demagogue strengthens and gives legitimacy to them in myriad ways. Trump is not merely representing deep-seated anxieties—he is feeding them.

Problematic ideological divisions do not immediately disappear in a society, even when wars are fought to overcome them. Divisions fade gradually, starting initially with a public ethos that rejects them. Antidemocratic divisions still exist, and are held and discussed privately. But when a public ethos arises that repudiates them, even when the majority still cleaves to these divisions, it becomes less acceptable to endorse them explicitly in public.¹⁷ This does not mean that the problematic ideological fissures become politically neutralized. It does, however, mean that politicians who wish to exploit

them must do so in a way that does not trigger the public's sense that they are violating the norm of reasonableness. This dialectic, concerning the ideological fissure of racism in the United States, is aptly reflected in a 1981 interview with Lee Atwater, later to lead George H.W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign (with the notorious Willie Horton ad):

You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites.... "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger."¹⁸

When a politician uses language that explicitly represents a group in negative terms, such as Trump's description of Mexican immigrants as "rapists," or his repeated association of Muslims with terrorists, it undercuts the norm that keeps such ideological fissures part of the private sphere. It makes such ideas part of legitimate public discourse. Since legitimate public discourse is guided by a norm of reasonableness, this gives the description of Muslims as terrorists or Mexican immigrants as "rapists" an aura of reasonableness. Demagoguery legitimizes problematic ideologies by making them appear to be reasonable moves in public discourse.

The norm of reasonableness enjoins us to consider, in devising policy in a democracy, the perspective of the diverse range of groups that comprise the citizens of that democracy. But it is surely too much to require considering the perspectives of each and every citizen.

Some citizens have perspectives that are, by their nature, unreasonable; perspectives according to which only members of their group have perspectives that should be valued. These are what we can consider *unreasonable* perspectives, group perspectives that have, as a criterion for membership, rejection of other perspectives. For example, neo-Nazi perspectives, or the perspectives of ISIS supporters, are of this character. To give unreasonable perspectives such as these equal political weight would involve a kind of contradiction; one would have to significantly diminish the weight given to other perspectives in order to accommodate them (of course, what is and is not an unreasonable perspective is subject to democratic contestation).¹⁹

A perspective can be reasonable to greater or lesser degrees. To call someone "a jerk" is to not suggest that their perspective on a topic should be completely discounted; to call them "vermin" discounts their perspective entirely.²⁰

To say that unreasonable perspectives should not be considered in the formation of public policy is not to suppress their expression. To suppress the expression of such perspectives would be a violation of the other value of democracy, freedom (in this case, freedom of speech). It is rather to say that in deciding whether a policy is democratically legitimate, we do not need to 'check' whether the discussion has included unreasonable perspectives. A democratically legitimate policy is one that is forged by the inclusion of all reasonable perspectives; but in a democracy, this fact cannot lead us to suppress undemocratic perspectives. Rather, as Jefferson urged, we should "let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it."²¹

Trump's discourse legitimizes negative stereotypes of certain minority groups, representing immigrants as lazy criminals, blacks as violent (in a notorious instance, Trump tweeted an inaccurate graphic claiming that 81% of whites who

were murdered were killed by blacks; the real number in 2014 was 14%),²² and Muslims as terrorists. Such rhetoric makes it appear reasonable to discount the perspectives of the groups it targets. In effect, it places Mexican immigrants, blacks, and Muslims on a continuum of people whose perspectives it is legitimate to downgrade (or in some instances ignore entirely) in democratic decision making.²³

The decision to reject Trump's rhetoric is not a neutral decision. It means taking a stand on the question of whether being a Muslim is a reasonable way to conduct one's life, or if it is rather more like association with a neo-Nazi group or, more relevantly, a supporter of ISIS. Silence in response to Trump's assaults on public reason is not a neutral decision either, though it is an easy one to make. The realm of public reason belongs to us all equally and we are each responsible for its upkeep. Silence is at best an acquiescence; it is at worst a tacit agreement that being Muslim, or a Mexican immigrant, or black, is to deserve exclusion from reasonable consideration.

Trump's rhetoric also exhibits another characteristic of demagogic speech. If political speech ought to be guided, in liberal democracy, not just by reasonableness but also by truth, then Trump's seeming willful disregard of it is also illiberal, whether it was his efforts as a "birther" to discredit President Obama by demanding his birth certificate or his recent claims about Muslims in New Jersey celebrating the World Trade Center attacks. Such disregard for truth is a mark of the rise of history's worst tyrants. George Orwell expressed this through his character Winston, who wrote desperately in his diary, "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows."²⁴ Arendt grimly observed this axiom in action: "Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such...."²⁵

Pedagogical Issues

Teaching in the time of Trump raises a fundamental pedagogical question: is it permissible for a teacher to adopt a non-neutral political stance in the classroom, either through explicitly addressing the problems with Trump's rhetoric or, conversely, by remaining silent in the face of it? How can teachers balance the much cherished value of political impartiality (protecting the students' freedom of expression and autonomous political development) against the much-cherished liberal values threatened by Trumpish demagoguery?

Public school classrooms are training grounds for liberal democracy, where students learn democratic skills and knowledge. This role is often misunderstood as merely learning facts—usually from a textbook—that ostensibly define public reason with precision. Yet public reason is, itself, not fixed. (And on this point, Jefferson's generation's unshakable faith in pure reason was misplaced.) The norms of the public ethos, where reasonable claims to equality and freedom are weighed, are constantly negotiated and redefined against fundamental principles that are, themselves, slowly shifting. Students must learn the bounds of reasonableness by interacting with apparently fixed knowledge—such as that in their textbooks—and also by applying knowledge to their engagement with other students in the process of analysis of public issues. In that process, teaching for democracy is not the same as giving free rein to all perspectives so that all are treated as equally reasonable. Rather, teachers lead conversations and set reasonable parameters so that all students can safely participate and learn what is reasonable and what is not reasonable. This is the fundamental political purpose of a public education.

Democratic principles and ideals are not themselves neutral. Neither is teaching students to become citizens in a society that aspires to these ideals. Because of the value of liberty, one should not suppress the speech of those who argue that

one religion should have a preference over others, for example. But it is reasonable for a teacher to observe that Trump's rhetoric is a contemporary example of a violation of the democratic ideal of equal rights for all religions. Trump advocates demoting the perspectives of Muslim citizens in deliberation. Trump's rhetoric attaches negative social meaning to affiliation with Islam. And he advocates barring Muslims who may be members of the families of U.S. citizens from visiting the United States just on the basis of their religious affiliation. These proposals conflict with the liberal democratic ideal of equal rights for all religions.

Teachers also cannot be neutral about the misrepresentation of facts or the violation of norms of truth in public speech. They should emphasize to students the importance of evaluating the accuracy of statements made by candidates. Some examples of websites that check these are FactCheck.org, the Washington Post Fact Checker, and PolitiFact.²⁶ The latter provides summaries of the degree of truthfulness and falsity of the statements of each of a number of candidates. (As this article went to press, the statements by Trump evaluated by PolitiFact included a much higher proportion of falsehoods than the statements of any other presidential candidate.²⁷) Students are free to decide that they accept Trump's antidemocratic rhetoric, but if they do not understand why it is antidemocratic, or if they think that his rhetoric is reasonable, their public school education has failed them.

Trump's presidential campaign invites a second pedagogical consideration as well, one more comfortable and familiar to social studies and history teachers. This approach would focus less on drawing out the undemocratic nature of Trump's rhetoric, and more on its causal origins. Here are some different approaches one could take with students on the topic.

One approach would examine the material conditions leading to a situation in which voters are attracted by

undemocratic rhetoric. Perhaps the institutions of democracy have failed them. A state that promised its citizens a raft of goods, but in fact never delivered them, would in so doing lay the groundwork for a protest candidate who proved his or her credentials by violating its norms of respectability. Perhaps Trump is using shocking rhetoric merely to signal his intentions toward the norms keeping in place a broken social contract.

A second approach involves a comparison of the current material conditions to those present at other times in U.S. history at which demagogues achieved some measure of success through the politics of division and exclusion based on religion, race, and political belief. In short, one could compare the political environment that gave rise to Trump to the ones that gave rise to Father Coughlin in the 1930s and George Wallace in the 1960s, by examining similarities or differences in the state of the economy, social tensions, and disagreements over controversial government policies.

A third approach would track the genesis of Trumpism to the shift in rhetoric brought into public debate by partisan news media.²⁸ This would involve a historical project comparing previous media norms to the ones at work in contemporary partisan media. Students might examine the impact of the growth of stridently conservative radio and TV programs and electronic media during the last 25 years, and consider whether they prepared the way for the political rise of Donald Trump.

In the process of any of these three inquiries, students might better understand why others (or they, themselves) find demagoguery so appealing, and consequently, develop a richer understanding of the historical and contemporary challenges of democratic life.

Silence is not an acceptable strategy. As teachers, we should advocate no particular political party, candidate, or public policy. But we are all obligated, deeply, to hew to the basic principles of democratic life in order to help our stu-

dents discern what is reasonable. Public school teaching is not neutral and has never been intended or understood as such. Public schools are places where reason and reasonableness must be cultivated in the best traditions of liberals and conservatives alike, striking the balance between the principles of equality and freedom, preparing students for the maelstrom that awaits them. 🌍

Notes

1. Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 493.
2. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 49.
3. Hannah Jane Parkinson, "Can Donald Trump's Social Media Genius Take Him All the Way to the White House?" *The Guardian* (Dec. 23, 2015), sec. Technology.
4. Paul Schwartzman and Jenna Johnson, "It's Not Chaos. It's Trump's Campaign Strategy," *The Washington Post* (Dec. 9, 2015).
5. Van Jones, "Trump: The Social Media President?" - CNN.com, CNN (Oct. 26, 2015).
6. Amber Phillips, "The Surprising Genius of Donald Trump's Twitter Account," *The Washington Post* (Dec. 10, 2015); Michael Barbaro, "Pithy, Mean and Powerful: How Donald Trump Mastered Twitter for 2016," *The New York Times* (Oct. 5, 2015).
7. Parkinson, "Can Donald Trump's Social Media Genius Take Him All the Way to the White House?"
8. Jones, "Trump"; Barbaro, "Pithy, Mean and Powerful"; Phillips, "The Surprising Genius of Donald Trump's Twitter Account."
9. Barbaro, "Pithy, Mean and Powerful"; Philip Bump, "Donald Trump: The Ernest Hemingway of Twitter," *The Washington Post* (Nov. 20, 2015).
10. David Brooks, "No, Donald Trump Won't Win," *The New York Times* (Dec. 4, 2015); Chris Cillizza, "The Problem with David Brooks's 'Pink Rug' Theory of Donald Trump," *The Washington Post* (Dec. 4, 2015).
11. "A Note on Trump: We Are No Longer Entertained," *The Huffington Post* (Dec. 7, 2015).
12. www.donaldjtrump.com/media/great-again-tv-spot
13. Amy Davidson, "Donald Trump's First, Ugly TV Ad," *The New Yorker* (Jan. 4, 2016).
14. Lynne Tirrell, "Genocidal Language Games" in *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*, Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 174–221.
15. "Why Some Conservatives Say Donald Trump's Talk Is Fascist - CNNPolitics.com," CNN (Nov. 25, 2015). Ross Douthat, "Is Donald Trump a Fascist?," *The New York Times* (Dec. 3, 2015).
16. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt Brace and Company: San Diego, 1973), 35.
17. The story in the case of racial prejudice against blacks in the United States is brilliantly told in Tali Mendelberg's, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

18. See *The Nation* (Nov. 13, 2012), www.thenation.com/article/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/.
19. On the tension between demagoguery and reasonableness, see chapters 3 and 4 of Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015).
20. There is important recent literature on dehumanizing language; see for example David Livingstone Smith, *Less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011).
21. Jefferson, *Writings*, 493.
22. See Judd Legum, "Donald Trump Tweets Fake, Racist and Wildly Inaccurate Murder Statistics," (Nov. 22, 2015) at <http://thinkprogress.org>.
23. Trump has a history of incendiary, dehumanizing rhetoric. In 1989, he took out ads in several New York newspapers after the Central Park Five jogger case, in which five teenagers were arrested for the brutal rape of a jogger, denouncing the "crazed misfits" on the street who were responsible for crime and calling for the death penalty to be brought back (the five teenagers served their sentences and were subsequently discovered to have been innocent). Such language contributed to the brutal wave of punitive sentencing of juveniles in the 1990s, a time during which violent crime was dropping.
24. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2003, originally published in 1949), 83.
25. *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 350.
26. See www.FactCheck.org; www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/; and www.politifact.com.
27. As of January 26, 2016, on its page www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump/, PolitiFact listed 76% of the statements by Trump that it reviewed as either "mostly false" (16%), "false" (40%), or "pants on fire" (20%).
28. See, for example, Jason Stanley, "The Ways of Silencing," *New York Times Opinionator Blog* (June 25, 2011) "Media and Mistrust" at http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/06/25/the-ways-of-silencing/?_r=1.

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