

VIEWS OF THE PRESS:

The Bigotry of Liberal Magazines

by Eunice Corfman

The Washington *Post* recently gave editorial-page space to a troubled and searching article by Ben Bagdikian, assistant managing editor, revealing an escalating behind-the-newspaper clash between *Post* editors and eight black reporters on the metropolitan reporting staff, which has resulted in legal action and counteraction. The article triggered this inquiry into the performance of some of the national liberal magazines. The magazines investigated were *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Ramparts*, *Saturday Review*, and *The Washington Monthly*. They range in circulation from 30,000 to over 300,000, from minimally-staffed to quite large, from financially up-

against-the-wall to making it.

Among contributors to these liberal magazines, the proportion of women is small and that of blacks or other racial minorities is vanishingly so. Among editors who determine what topics will have access to print, the number of women is even smaller, and that of blacks or other minorities is zero. These facts are stinging in relation to the confidence and trust that readers have invested in these magazines.

Charges of racism and sexism are sometimes thrown about these days with quick abandon. But the terms have a tolerably common, precise meaning when they are used to make the claim that within an organization, liberal intentions notwithstanding, there exists de facto numerical underrepresentation of blacks or other

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racial minorities or women, and usually the further claim that the higher in the hierarchy of the organization, the more drastic the underrepresentation.

In liberal magazines, the charge of discrimination is not only that women and blacks are grossly underrepresented as writers, but that editors, whose taste, judgment, acumen, and sensitivity determine who shall have access to publication and what is important to write about, are for the most part aging, middle-class, white males, whose perception is formed within a parochial circle of acquaintances and contacts who are very much like themselves.

These editors were asked two questions: Over a sample four-month period from January through April, 1972, of all contributors of signed articles, what proportion were women or black? What proportion of editors who determine access to print are women or black? All of the editors were invited to elaborate on why their records were what they were. I took these comments to be at least as significant as the raw "box scores," for they revealed some of the intractability of the problem.

Some may object to the meat-cleaver statistics in the box score below. They are clearly not the whole story and to that extent are misleading. But what leaps to the eye is the virtual absence of blacks (or other minorities) among both contributors and editors. *The Atlantic Monthly* is the only magazine with a black contributing editor. So much for all the editorializing about how ill and

impoverished the body politic is for excluding blacks from its mainstream. *The New Republic* registers an appalling zero for a black or woman editor of any kind. The total percentages reveal how far short of proportional representation all the magazines fall.

'Should I Have Called Ebony?'

Let us hear editors speak for themselves. At *The New Republic*, Gilbert Harrison is managing editor. A long editorial in the last December 25 issue, "Goodwill Towards Women," which I had taken as a significant commitment, called Nixon a male chauvinist and conceded that *New Republic* editors were, too. In an interview, it was dismissed by Harrison, however, as written with an irony and playfulness NR subscribers were too humorless to recognize. At least one humorless NR staff member concurs that the issue does not seem particularly important to Harrison.

Nevertheless, Harrison readily concedes that there should be more black and female contributors. The problem with black contributors is that they are difficult to find when the criterion of acceptance is excellence. Articles may be promised and then not delivered for one reason or another, and of the manuscripts submitted, the rate of failure is high. "No, we haven't been beating the bushes," Harrison says, "but we're aware there aren't enough black and women contributors. We do make an effort to solicit, but not a lot. When I want something written, I

Contributors (Jan. through April, 1972)

Legend: Women—W, Blacks—B

	Articles, Fiction, Poetry			Book Reviewers			Departments			Total %			Editors			Contributing Editors		
	Total	W	B	Total	W	B	Total	W	B	W	B	Total	W	B	Total	W	B	
Atlantic Monthly	40	4	1	23	5	0	13	2	0	14	2	9	4	0	10	2	1	
Harper's	35	4	1	-	-	-	25	1	0	8	2	5	2	0	5	1	0	
Nation	86	12	0	145	25	1	-	-	-	16	0.4	3	0	0	6	2	0	
New Republic	130	8	0	38	2	1	-	-	-	6	0.6	2	0	0	9	0	0	
New York Review	16	2	0	46	7	0	-	-	-	15	0	2	1	0	1	0	0	
Ramparts	39	6	0	-	-	-	10	1	0	12	0	5	1	0	18	1	0	
Saturday Review	157	24	0	174	22	1	142	0	0	13	0.3	8	4	0	-	-	-	
Washington Monthly	24	6	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	25	0	4	1	0	10	3	0	

John Gardner



asks:

“You know the country’s in trouble and you’re sick of political double talk. What can you do?”

Voting is important — but it isn’t enough. Very little will change after election day.

The candidates want to please you — of course. There’s nothing they wouldn’t promise to make you happy. NOTHING!

Stop the war? Of course!

Cut taxes? Immediately!

Increase Social Security payments? Right away!

Soak the rich? Naturally.

But you’ve heard it before. Every fourth year comes the Year of the Big Promises. And the promises are always just great. But it turns out they were made to be broken.

What can we do to turn promises into performance? What can you do? There’s an answer. Not an easy one. Not glamorous. Not quick. But effective.

The biggest political surprise in recent years has been the emergence of citizen action as a significant force. Common Cause built a nationwide membership of 200,000 in its first year of life, and has been praised as the best organized, most professional movement of its kind in history.

Discover your power as a citizen and learn how to use that

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— Common Cause was the chief citizen organization lobbying for the Constitutional Amendment to give 18-year-olds the right to vote.

— Common Cause worked successfully for a new law to control campaign spending.

— Common Cause is credited by members of Congress and the press with helping to produce the first real crack in the archaic, tyrannical seniority system in Congress.

— Common Cause helped to bring the House of Representatives to its first recorded vote on the Vietnam War, and continues to work to bring a legislated end to the war.

— Common Cause has played a major role in fighting for federal laws to protect the environment.

But we’re just at the beginning. Today Common Cause is tackling the problems that no candidate is willing to tackle — the issues of money and secrecy that are corrupting public life in this country.

It is fighting for laws to control lobbying so that the citizens can know precisely what entrenched

special interest is spending how many dollars for what purpose.

It is working for laws to prevent the kind of conflict of interest in which a public official has a personal financial stake in the legislation he is voting on.

It is working for laws to end government behind closed doors, to require that the public business be done publicly.

Until we get at these problems of money and secrecy, we won’t achieve any of the social goals we all want. We’re licked before we start.

It’s time to give this nation back to its people. The “boys in the back room” have had their day. It’s time to open the doors and let the fresh air and the people in.

As you have gathered by now, we don’t just take positions. We enter into battle. And there are a lot of battles that need to be fought. For more jobs. For lower prices. For better housing. For peace. But I don’t need to tell you about the problems. *You* breathe the dirty air. *You* see the breakdown in both the administration of justice and in law enforcement. *You* feel the economic squeeze. *Your* children attend crowded schools. *You* pay the cost of inflation.

If you are one of the millions of Americans today who feel a sense of powerlessness, frustration, and anger over what is happening in and to this country . . . then join us. We need you. You need Common Cause.



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think who can do it well. The market known to NR is mostly male." Precisely.

As for the editors, the circle is even more closely circumscribed, though in the past it has included women. Most of *The New Republic's* contributing editors are people who have repeatedly submitted manuscripts, finally had them accepted, and over time become relied-upon for a particular specialty. Sheer persistence in a buyer's market appears to be a necessary condition for elevation to contributing editor, and blacks and women have not survived this long winnowing process toward elevation. (I want to insert a caveat here about possible sour grapes. I have a modest pile of NR rejections.) Relying on editors to emerge by this route, though convenient, puts a high premium on doggedness and seniority—serviceable virtues usually more valued in mortgage bankers than in liberal journalists.

At *Harper's*, within the last few months, radical editorial reorganization has occurred, and it's too early to say what changes will be lasting. Managing Editor Lewis Lapham objects that a box score based on a four-month span isn't fair to a monthly—the June issue alone, for example, will have four long articles by women, while the box score gives credit only for a four-month total of four. During the span, only one article by a black was published. Pieces have been assigned to blacks, four within the last six months, but haven't come back usable. It was not a question of content but a lack of writing ability.

Editorially, four men and two women ultimately determine what will appear in *Harper's*, and Lapham insists it is a very much a non-autocratic, pooled procedure. Three readers, all women, have considerable authority in preselecting and making judgments not only about the slush manuscripts, but solicited ones as well. No black is either an editor or reader. The New York literary market is glutted with laid-off editorial talent. The main criterion in restaffing a few editorial

slots from among dozens of applicants (no blacks applied) was experience. "Should I have called *Ebony* and asked?" Lapham wondered, rhetorically. But as we both thought about it, it didn't seem such a bad idea.

Open Letters, Closed Doors

William Honan is the new managing editor at the even more recently reorganized *Saturday Review*, now subdivided into specialized supplements, each with its own staff. A book review editor and a supplement co-editor are women (as are several of the second- and third-rank editors, some of them promoted up from secretaries, the rank at which many overeducated women have lived out their careers in publishing). According to Honan, masthead title-levels are no sure index of contribution. To maintain a seat at the weekly editorial conference table, you have to come up with two new article ideas per week, whatever your title. Honan is looking for black editors because he believes the black viewpoint ought to be heard at the weekly council table, but they are hard to find, partly because able black writers prefer writing to editing.

Robert Hatch, executive editor of *The Nation*, is another who objects with some justice to the four-month box score span. In this case, I do not believe a quantity count of contributors for any span is fair to the early and open hearing *The Nation* has given emerging issues before they were popular: James Baldwin's first published manuscript, among the first pieces on women's lib, contributions by American Indians and Chicanos. Though all three senior editors are male, three of four past literary editors were women, and Freda Kirchwey edited the magazine for many years. Presently, only the dance critic and a sporadic UN correspondent are women. No blacks are or have been editors. Hatch claims not to be embarrassed by this, the staff is small and not that much hiring goes on. He and

Carey McWilliams have been *The Nation's* editors for over 15 years, so that the literary editor slot is the only editorial position open to rotation. If the best available person is female, the box score looks good—and if male, it swings to very bad.

Barbara Epstein, co-editor of *The New York Review*, was the only editor who did not wish to be interviewed, perhaps because the *Review* has been burned by a spate of critical articles over the last year. The editorial box score—15 per cent women and no blacks—seems to be a fair reflection of contributors over the past two years, although in 1966 the *Review* published Stokely Carmichael's "What We Want," and in 1971, James Baldwin's "Open Letter to Angela Davis" and a book review by a black. Ms. Epstein gives the *Review* proportional sexual editorial representation.

The Atlantic has perhaps the most impressive current track record of all the magazines considered here. Black contributing editor James Alan McPherson's long article on the Lawn-dale Contract Buyer's League in the April issue is a paradigm of close, investigative reporting that could be one kind of model for other journals. This article is not the result of looking for some black to tack on the masthead—managing editor Michael Jane-way disowns quota-picking arguments. The magazine's subject matter has been divided into areas and the best available writer assigned. But an additional premise has been that the best will include blacks as well as females, and the representation has followed. Editorially, men occupy the top layers and women the lower ones, but Jane-way claims that though Editor-in-chief Robert Manning makes final decisions, all levels of editors participate to some extent.

Dismal White Power

For *Ramparts*, the box score is somewhat misleading. The magazine was crucial in bringing the Black Panthers to prominence, and, for a

time, Eldridge Cleaver was an editor. Former *Ramparts* editors were instrumental in helping Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and Cleaver put together their books. Of the five editors that make editorial decisions, one is a woman.

Ramparts editor Peter Collier doubts the premise he believes implicit in this article—that it is possible or desirable at this time to have a representative, integrated magazine staff with any degree of political common cause. *Ramparts* cannot now attract blacks, who are not busy at integration.

The Washington Monthly is notable not only for the percentage of women contributors, but also for the heretical views of chief editor Charles Peters about how to hire an editorial staff. Now there are three editors besides Peters, two men and a woman, all still in their twenties, all contributing writers, none with prior editorial experience. For Peters, what's wrong with recruiting in publishing is an unwillingness to make editorial gambles on what looks like talent, regardless of experience. Some writing samples and a brief working tryout period are worth any amount of impressive curriculum vitae. You look for people who believe in the objectives of the enterprise and share its ideals and values—and let them stimulate each other.

The *Monthly's* record on minorities, however, is dismal. So far, no black has been invited to try out for an editorial position, though there has been one black applicant and one temporary training-intern. And no black has ever made it into print.

The Quality Problem

What are the arguments against discrimination as it shows up in these journals? To begin, of course, there is the matter of hypocrisy in advocating things on the magazine's pages that you don't reflect in the masthead. It is legitimate to expect deeds to fit words.

There is also the second argument that blacks and women are entitled to compete for writing and editing jobs and that they are now hindered in doing this by racist and sexist discrimination. They cite de facto underrepresentation as evidence. The connection between the charge and the evidence is ambiguous and should be examined. Few editors these days would admit to overt discrimination, most would deny they discriminate at all. Asked to explain de facto underrepresentation, editors can make several replies.

They can say that excellence is their sole criterion in hiring, judging submissions, and making assignments; and that blacks and women just don't, or don't yet, cut the mustard. But we have grounds to be suspicious. The fact that people can be shown to discriminate unawares suggests that editors, even though sensitive to giving blacks and women their due, may likewise discriminate in favor of white males like themselves.

There is a further rejoinder to the editor who claims that he accepts only what is excellent, without discrimination: it is legitimate to ask whether the list or circle of writers he uses for assignments also shows de facto underrepresentation. If it does, he preselects who will be invited to display excellence. Most editors candidly admit that when they have a subject in search of a writer, they start calling their recognized regulars, their friends, and friends of friends. This process is understandable, but the limitations are obvious and troubling.

A second reply an editor can make is that de facto underrepresentation occurs because blacks and women make proportionately fewer submissions to him and that he can hardly be faulted for not publishing excellence that is not submitted. But this leaves unasked whether blacks or women would submit in greater number if they thought their chances were better. If a field is massively dominated by white males, then few blacks or women will think seriously to aspire

to it. Thus, fewer will enter and be successful, and it will be even more massively dominated by white males.

A third reply an editor can make is that there is nothing wrong per se with underrepresentation. It is only when it is linked with a quota concept that it appears wrong and the quota idea is a spurious one, reduced to absurdity by showing that new classes of underrepresented attributes—Poles, Midwesterners, day laborers, and so on—can always be introduced no matter how many quotas are filled.

The Equal Opportunity Idea

It seems to me correct that de facto underrepresentation is not itself proof of discrimination, but that linked with other claims that appear true, it becomes a useful index of discrimination. (Consequently, a rough quota objective isn't unreasonable for a while.)

Consider the fact that someone whose work is personally known, experienced, reputable, is far more likely to be given assignments than someone who is none of these, and that the former group is overwhelmingly white and male. Link in the fact that discrimination is often unconscious and favors those most like oneself. Link in all we have learned in the last decade about social conditioning and the relation of image and expectation to performance. The force of these added considerations is that in the case of blacks and women, underrepresentation has occurred in liberal magazines *because of* discrimination. If this is so, it's a reason for cutting it out.

Blacks and women may have a special competence, and liberal journals may become narrow and self-defeating by ignoring it. Sometimes the notion is simply that where the subject matter is blacks or women themselves, the article should be written by a black or a woman. Thus, ghetto-rioting for a black and daycare centers for a woman are reasonable

writing assignments. It is not difficult for an editor to chip away at this argument—you might need a black to go where a white face isn't safe, or a woman to do the actual babysitting, but to write about causes of rioting or daycare legislation, you need a honed analytical mind, command of presentation, perspective, some political savvy, and you don't always get *that* from your blacks and ladies. Or an editor might concede the point, realizing that rioting and daycare are only sporadically important issues, and it's noblesse oblige to give away a few assignments.

A more intrusive form of argument is that blacks and women may have a special view or special preoccupations about almost any issue—war, work, welfare, foreign policy, anything. Implicit in this is the radical and threatening intimation that there may be distinctively white or male preoccupations buried in the mass of journal writing now overwhelmingly written and edited by white males. This argument, here only adumbrated, suggests that to be white and male is to be different in sensibility and perception from lots of other people. And this in turn suggests that editors, in selecting what and who shall have access to print, are not at all the impartial distributors of rewards of space in proportion to excellence, but in still unrecognized ways are predisposed and partial beings like the rest of us. They are biased and value-conditioned and molded by their whiteness and maleness—sensibilities which somehow define part of what we perceive and what we are, and which leach into the sensibility of the rest of us. And this suggests that liberal journals could become the places where diverse sensibilities are pooled, brought to awareness, the white male's being one among others. To the extent that this argument, fully developed, is sound, it is strong grounds for actively soliciting black and women writers and editors.

This takes us into the heart of editorial responsibility. It is by no means clear, to me at least, how the

ambiguous claim, "As an editor, I'm responsible for what appears in my magazine," ought to be interpreted. Consider the range of kinds of possession implicit in this string of expressions: "My God, my country, my views, my friends, my wife, my crew, my stamp collection, my garden, my old slippers." For an editor, where along this mixed spectrum does "my magazine" fit? Is a liberal magazine for general readers a sacred trust where an editor's autonomy is virtually nil, or a pair of slippers to be used virtually as he darn well pleases, or what in-between? I wish I were surer in my own mind. Then it would be clearer what claim uppity blacks and females have upon him. Are *they* a constituency of his sacred trust deserving representation, or not? Does his responsibility to his magazine include a paternalistic resolve that only what he approves shall appear in it? Only what is within his ken? Only what meets his standards of excellence and relevance?

For example, *The Washington Monthly's* editorial premise is that it is an "advocacy" magazine, printing nothing that its editors would not stand behind. To some extent, there is a conflict between advocacy and representation—between the desire of these magazines to pioneer their own beliefs and passions on the one hand, and their desire to expose their readers to a widely representative spectrum of comment on the other. This is a difficult question, for there must be points at which an editor's right and desire to express "my views" runs into the demand that he make the magazine representative of different perspectives and attributes on the part of writers. Editors may feel threatened when the focus shifts from their own right to speak out to the exclusionary result this engenders, when the spirit of the First Amendment seems to clash with that of the Fourteenth.

Advocacy magazines are in the tricky position of not wanting their readers to be limited to the same kinds of people as their writers. No

magazine wants just men or whites to read it—and yet, if advocacy should be a kind of shared discourse between a magazine and its readers, between people of common concerns, no editor should be comfortable admitting that neither blacks nor women can be found to express “our views.” If their views are that culture-bound, then perhaps the readership should be equally selective. Editors deny such boundaries, of course, returning to the quality problem, which in turn raises the “circle of friends” limitation and the other reasons why white male magazines tend to perpetuate themselves.

The editors’ quality argument is at least partly genuine. But this argument also raises some of the thorniest questions, which deserve thought. Does the narrow makeup of an editorial board render it incapable of making fair judgments, free of cultural blindnesses, about the quality of writing or expression in articles? More importantly, can such a board make fair judgments about the quality of ideas? When businesses were first accused of discrimination in hiring, they replied that their standards were adequate and that they alone could objectively evaluate the quality of their employees’ work. This defense was gradually beaten down, as the law said that the same quality could be achieved with a representative work force, given our assumptions about race and sex, and that underrepresentation is a sign of discrimination. The cars rolling off equal opportunity assembly lines don’t seem of lower quality.

Magazines which go through the same process might find phrases and ideas and expressions of equal quality rolling off the presses of equal opportunity editorial boards. Discrimination in the realm of ideas may well be an impossible territory to chart, since it is difficult to measure quality of thought. But if such discrimination exists, our belief in the power of thought and ideas should make it an even more invidious bias.

Morsels for Nourishment

For editors who want to find more women and minority writers and editors, here are some suggestions that might help chip away at underrepresentation:

1. More affluent magazines sometimes offer a “kill fee” for assigning an article, even though it may turn out unpublishable, to pay the writer for his time and effort and expenses. Editors could use this device selectively to make assignments to promising blacks and women.

2. Foundation money could be solicited by editors for target recruiting and subsidizing. Jules Duscha’s Washington Journalism Center and Philip Stern’s Fund for Investigative Journalism might be two places to start. An immediate objective would be to broaden the circle of writers an editor uses in making assignments by making “gamble money” available.

3. Literary agents could see to it that a portion of their “stable” is black and female, undertaking the process of making them knowledgeable about the market, persuading editors that they ought to be more hospitable, and introducing the work of specific writers to them.

4. Finally, since beyond reading what is directly submitted to them, editors are too busy to spend much time in affirmative recruiting or canvassing to enlarge the circle of good black and women writers they know about, one aid might be to draw up an open-ended list of such writers, what they’ve written, and how they can be reached. I’m working on one that I hope will be ready in a few weeks for editors to use.

In all of this there is a point begging to be made explicit: journals, too, must be qualified or they bilk the confidence and trust of readers. To claim, under the conditions described here, to be a liberal journal is to offer a product to readers that is mislabeled, falsely merchandised, and, in the end, undernourishing. □

POLITICAL BOOK NOTES

*Public affairs books
to be published in June.*

America Can Make It: A Senator Rejects Safe Politics. Sen. Abraham Ribicoff. Athenaeum, \$6.95.

American Nonpublic Schools: Patterns of Diversity. Otto F. Kraushaar. Johns Hopkins, \$10.

Anatomy of an Undeclared War: Congressmen and Others Respond to the Pentagon Papers. International Universities Press, \$8.95.

Bella! Mrs. Abzug Goes to Washington. Mel Ziegler. Saturday Review, \$7.95. A disappointing book from the promising Representative. The emptiest ego trip since *I, A Woman*.

Black Tide. Robert Eastman. Delacorte, \$10. A thorough, intelligent account of the controversy surrounding the Santa Barbara oil spill.

Challenges for Business in the 1970s. The editors of *Fortune*. Little, Brown, \$6.95, \$2.95.

Citizen Power. Sen. Mike Gravel. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$6.95. Like Gravel himself, this book is a mixture of eloquence, insight, and real clinkers. After arguing that our "overconcern with employment is harmful," giving us porkbarrel jobs and meaningless work, Gravel concludes that we should reexamine our attitudes on wealth and work because "it is the way to stay rich and powerful."

Cops and Rebels: A Study in Provocation. Paul Chevigny. Pantheon, \$7.95.

Counsel for the Deceived: Case Studies in Consumer Fraud. Philip Schrag. Pantheon, \$5.95. New York City's first counsel for consumer rights spins out excellent tales of fraud, detailing how he became mired in litigation and hopeless trivia in trying to do something about them. Reader depression is relieved by his humor. A convincing brief for a consumer class-action bill.

Several passages capture the culture of bureaucracy. For example, the author tells of his visit with Hebert Schwartz, the grizzled old man in charge of writing job specifications for the New York civil service. Schrag had written job descriptions to attract lawyers interested in consumer affairs, but Schwartz objected:

"We can't have people like that working for the city. We want career people, who will stay 20, 25

years, not these kids on their way through. Ya know why?"

"Actually, I don't," I admitted.

"Because in just one or two years they don't build up any equity in the pension fund."

Now I was mystified. "So what?"

"We don't want people with no equity in the pension fund," he said. "We want people who build up 10, 15 years equity, a substantial amount of money due them from the pension fund."

"But what difference does that make?"

Schwartz answered slowly, beating his words out with one finger. "A man with 10 years' equity in the pension fund doesn't put his hand in the till, 'cause he can lose his pension rights."

"But these young lawyers aren't thieves!"

"Everyone near the till is a potential thief," said Schwartz. "That's why we have civil service. We lock 'em in; they have to stay with the city forever."

Crisis in Watertown. Lynn Eden. Univ. of Michigan, \$6.95. An absorbing account of the polarization of a community.

Dark Horse. Fletcher Knebel. Doubleday, \$7.95. A novel about what happens when a presidential nominee dies three weeks before the election. The book's leading character is suggested by Harold Hughes, its key incident by Chappaquidick.

Doctor Spock: Biography of a Conservative Radical. Lynn Z. Bloom. Bobbs-Merrill, \$10.

From the Dead Level: Malcolm X and Me. Hakim A. Jamal. Random House, \$6.95.

The Governance of Metropolitan Regions. A

A "witty, readable and penetrating tale of the strange political events of our most recent Presidential election. . . . After all the New Politics razzmatazz we have been subjected to . . . *Ward Number Six* is politics, new and old, in the raw."

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co-author of *The Real Majority*

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by David Lebedoff

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