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talks to Adrian Zupp



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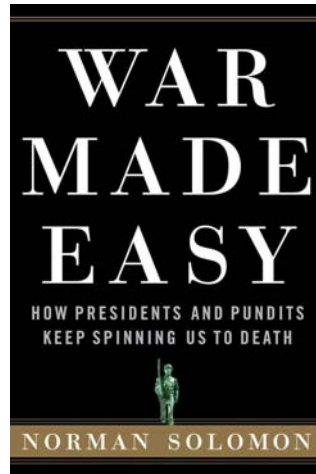
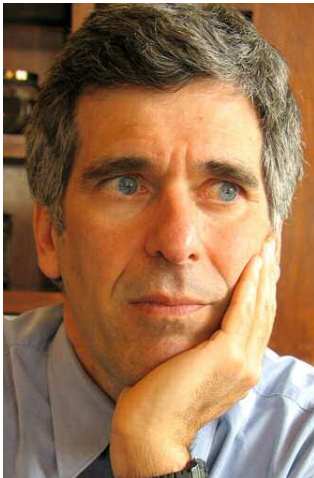
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Norman Solomon is a syndicated columnist on media and politics, as well as founder and executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy, a national consortium of policy researchers and analysts. His new book, “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death,” has been described by the Los Angeles Times as “a must-read for those who would like greater context with their bitter morning coffee, or to arm themselves for the debates about Iraq that are still to come.” Writer-journalist Adrian Zupp interviewed Solomon about the book, which was published in July.

What prompted you to write the book?

We keep getting scammed by one president after another. And it really hit me during the build-up to the invasion of Iraq that we’ve been seeing a lot of boilerplate propaganda techniques playing out. Throughout my lifetime, the first real US invasion that I was aware of was in 1965 with the marines landing in the Dominican Republic. I was really bothered, not only by the effectiveness of time-worn, manipulative, propaganda techniques coming out of the Administration and implemented, often seamlessly by the mass media, but

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also a kind of mythology that built up in 2002 and 2003, from the likes of [presidential candidate] Howard Dean. This notion that was avidly embraced for partisan reasons — but I think for somewhat comforting ideological reasons as well — that the George W. Bush Administration’s egregious lies were somehow aberrations. I quote in the book a statement that came from the Dean campaign to the effect that this has never happened before — America has always tried to find peaceful resolutions before going to war and that this record was shattered by the invasion of Iraq. “War Made Easy” as a book, among other things, refutes that mythology. I think it’s important that those myths be challenged, because when we have the delusion of a baseline of humanistic foreign policy, then the same old tried and true — or one might say tried and mendacious — techniques will simply be trotted out again and people will be largely conned into going along in the new incarnation.

One of the disturbing things that I’ve seen — I’m 53 years old — is that the slate gets wiped clean. It’s as if there’s no history that matters. And the tacit message is, “That was then but this is now.” As though the Pentagon, State Department and the White House are kind of reborn and likewise the media are reborn and the old sins are simply washed away by the passage of time or a new set of configurations of a particular situation.

I’m very mindful of that now having just got back from a trip to Iran. I’m very worried about the likelihood of a US attack, and some similar denials to what I was hearing in the summer and fall and winter of 2002 into the beginning of 2003 are echoing — “Well gee, they wouldn’t be that stupid” — “They” being the Bush Administration officials — “to go ahead with the war.” “It’s a bluff...” Well I don’t pretend to know what’s going to happen but I do feel that the likelihood of a missile strike on Iran is actually quite high in the next year or so. It’s that sort of a pattern that really prompted me to write “War Made Easy.”

There are obviously various elements to the book, but this Orwellian notion of erasing history, would you put that forward as the central thesis of the book?

It’s really at the core that history is erased, literally overnight as well as over a span of decades. And nothing is learned, because nothing is *supposed* to be learned, is the ambiance of much of what passes for media discourse. And the subtitle talks about presidents and pundits, and of course that’s a marker for politicians and journalists writ large in the mass media. We’re in a sense trapped in a dynamic that is internally consistent and externally deranged, which is leading us from one cataclysm to another, in terms of intervention.

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Did you have a conscious goal in writing this book? What do you hope it will achieve?

I hope it will help people to see through the lies of the present and the future, that drag the country into war. I don't think it's that complicated really but in a sense the codes need to be broken. And I mean "codes" in at least two senses: the code of reported ethics that rationalizes the next war, but also the buzzword codes that in Orwellian fashion use basically standard techniques of word manipulation and illogic to make people feel comfortable with the scenario of the next war. We see permutations of basically the same con game going on continually and we really are now in a war, I believe, with no discernible end-point. I don't just mean the war in Iraq. I mean the so-called war on terrorism. I believe that if we accept the terms of "war on terror," as presented by media and politicians, then this war will not end in any of our lifetimes because it's so open ended and so tailored to the contours of a military-industrial-media complex that the military finery will remain always in fashion for a very long time.

When I started writing this book in earnest, drawing on some research I'd already done and so forth, I wasn't particularly looking for parallels between Vietnam and Iraq at work, but those similarities just hit me between the eyes as I was writing this book. And it's reflected particularly in the last full chapter about "We can't leave now because our credibility's at stake." My goals included really confronting that because we have this media ethos that compartmentalizes and sees Vietnam as a distant, manipulable mirror. It's as though it's up for grabs; anybody can distort the mirror as they choose, or manipulate it. And the basic propaganda mechanisms are eerily similar between 1965 and 2005. I wasn't looking for it but as I read contemporaneous media coverage of the Vietnam War and analysis of it, it really seemed to be echoed by what we're in the midst of now in terms of Iraq. My goal was to, among other things, for the book to confront that.

You said that the implication there is what we've got on our hands is a self-perpetuating phenomenon that spans generations. We're talking about 40 years. George W. Bush was not a player; the captains of industry probably weren't captains of industry in 1965. The faces change but the game has stayed the same. How does that happen?

Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to what he called "the madness of mili-

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tarism.” And I do think that there is a kind of largely accepted, culturally reinforced madness that greases the wheels of the war machine. The particulars change. There was no cable television in the 1960s. Some of the dynamics are certainly different. During the Vietnam War, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the career military brass were pressuring for expansion of the war for many years. It’s the reverse now, where the Bush White House was pushing an often reluctant Joint Chiefs of Staff into the invasion of Iraq. And yet, from a media contagion standpoint, it’s very recognizable.

If Rip Van Winkle rubbed his eyes and here he is, despite all the technological and cultural differences, between the Vietnam War era and today, a lot of these similar attitudes would be readily recognizable. And some of them are summarized in the table of contents of the book: “Our Leaders Will Do Everything They Can to Avoid War,” “Our Leaders Would Never Tell Us Outright Lies,” “This Guy Is a Modern-Day Hitler,” “This is About Human Rights,” “This Is Not at All about Oil or Corporate Profits,” “They Are the Aggressors, Not Us,” “If This War Is Wrong, Congress Will Stop It,” “If This War Is Wrong, the Media Will Tell Us.” These notions are boilerplate and they’re very enduring. They’re part of a socialized psychological set of mechanisms so that we lie to ourselves about what’s being done with our tax dollars and our names, which involves slaughtering people for the benefit of a few.

So the way this is conducted, is it peculiarly American in style or just in scope, or is it completely unique to America is the only country capable of conducting its affairs this way?

Well I think there’s a commonality of militarism that many societies have experienced but it’s especially — and sickeningly — seductive when a country holds such a huge amount of military power. And frankly, if you kill people they can’t talk back. And if you drop a lot of bombs, you’re not only writing the history as victor, but you’re also silencing those who are the most victimized by your own lies and your own militarism. I think it’s a blend between generic militarism and kind of an American zeal to dominate even while denying that this is an empire-building exercise.

I'd like to talk briefly about two sets of people: the "converted" and the "unconverted." First, for the former, a couple of questions. What is the lesson, from "War Made Easy," peace workers and alternative media advocates? And what about folks from these groups who might say, "Well, we

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didn't know all of this but we had the gist of it. What can we do?"

Well I think naming the propaganda techniques and confronting them is very important. And activism against war in this country could do a lot better job of engaging with, and challenging effectively, the propaganda mechanisms that make these wars possible. Just from the standpoint of debunking the prevalent arguments in the news media for war, those of us engaged in activism — and I certainly include myself — have nothing to be comfortable about. We're losing the propaganda wars. And it's small comfort that we can point to poll numbers that indicate disquiet or opposition to a war. The war's going on and as I point out in the book, it dragged on for years during the Vietnam War even when the polls showed most people were opposed to it... It's a reticence to confront the essence of the war which is inflicting death on people on behalf of a totally illegitimate agenda, being pursued in Washington. And we have these standard techniques that are used to such great effect to restrain opposition to war, that no matter how you feel about how we got into it, now that we're there all these terrible things would happen if we stop killing people. So if you want to be considered reasonable, you'd better not insist on an end to US fueling of the flames of that war. And this has a very restraining effect. I talk about it in the book: "you're undermining our troops" and this and that, and "now that we're there, we have to stay there" — as if we have a responsibility to the people we're killing to keep killing them.

A peace activist put this to me, and I'm paraphrasing: "When people like us are for peace issues or media issues and so forth, are we really having a significant impact?" It sounds to me, if we're talking long run, that you're saying no. Is that correct?

I'm not critiquing action, I'm critiquing inaction. I think that there are huge effects that we sometimes have and don't even know it. That the activity of keeping the flame going and trying to nurture and build flames, that's an essential process. And I think that most of us feel existential despair at some time or other, but I think it's the only way to go. To be active against the war-making mechanisms of our society. Nothing that I'm saying in the book or right now is intended to discourage people. I think if people were not active then the wars would be bigger, they'd be more frequent and they'd last longer. And a classic example would be that large demonstrations in October and November of 1969 — even while President Nixon said he was ignoring them — we now know that they actually had a restraining effect on what he was doing

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in Vietnam, as horrific as what he was doing was. And we become, through our work in the streets, in communities, in electoral arenas and lobbying, we become part of the political calculus that the war-makers need to take into account. I think our problems involve how we restrain ourselves and are persuaded to be unduly restrained by our caution.

Here's something that I think most people on the left wrestle with: Everything you've said makes perfect sense and in "War Made Easy" you've laid out a very cogent blueprint of how propaganda in a democracy can be so effective. But how do we bridge that gap? I agree with you that many leftist organizations aren't blunt enough, aren't confrontational enough, they're too polite. But how do we move from this level of knowledge to getting it to a critical mass of people and then getting them to do what needs to be done. Which, to my way of thinking, might be a million people marching on Congress and kicking the doors in if they have to.

Well I suppose part of it is for us to remain aware that there are a lot of factors that we have little or no control over. There are rhythms that social movements are affected by and become part of. Why exactly, six months ago, the social atmosphere was more accepting of the war than it happens to be right now, one can't say. But if we're nurturing the flame then it is more able to really burst forth when other conditions shift. What we do have control over is our own actions and how we proceed; I think the twin hazards to try and avoid and overcome are self-marginalization and undue self-restraint. Another way to put it: I believe we should be less rhetorical and more radical, in terms of our analysis and what we have to say. And sometimes we mistake rhetoric for radicalism or we mistake in-house language with really presenting a strong critique in a way that can make a difference politically. And this is an ongoing challenge.

To find ways to speak to the broad population. And I think there's a tremendous amount of really good work that's been done and certainly much earlier in the first couple of years in this war than during the Vietnam War. Just the role of soldiers and family members of troops has been much clearer earlier on in terms of groups like Military Families Speaking Out and other really wonderful groups and individuals who've prevented — more than we were able to early in the Vietnam War — this stereotype that anti-war people are somehow not relating to the humanity of US soldiers. I think there's been a lot of good work done in that way.

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Turning to the media specifically. Speaking as a foreigner, I was amazed in the past — though now I suppose I take it as a given — by the extent to which Americans have bought into this whole belief system and these falsehoods and misconceptions that make up the chapters of "War Made Easy." And it's been built on a foundation of "this is God's country" and so forth, which to many foreigners is a very arrogant thing. But many Americans seem blindsided to it. Noam Chomsky has said that "they don't know that they don't know." Now specifically: Reporting on the current invasion has been more open in Europe, how is it that that can't permeate the American psyche? Is it just effective filtering or is it a sort of self-indoctrination...Why is it that America, in the age of the Internet can still be so resistant to outside messages?

I think it was Will Rogers who said "It's not what they don't know that bothers me, it's what they know that just ain't so." Deeply held beliefs can be almost intractable and very resistant to other messages. Many Americans, if you showed them the catch-phrase titles of the book chapters, many would say — especially those who were of more liberal mindsets — "Oh I don't believe that!" But in fact in many cases, perhaps a little more subtly stated, those titles do reflect some basic assumptions, when push comes to shove. You know, is America a great and noble superpower? There's a very powerfully held belief that that's true. Even though, if it's stated too boldly people will feel a little embarrassed about it. So there's a constant need to try to undermine the false belief.

The reasons why so many Americans have such a willingness to accept such outrageous militaristic policies out of Washington are multi-factoral. It's in the culture, it's in the mass media environment, it's constant messages from politicians and news outlets, and part of the political economy that reinforces it. I received an email a couple of years ago from a TV columnist of a major American newspaper. He'd read a column I wrote questioning the extreme double standards of how the media use the word "terrorism." I had simply suggested a single standard for terrorism. And he said, "If my newspaper adopted such a standard there would be an uproar from advertisers and many subscribers and it would quickly become a financial disaster." And this is where the simple economics of the corporate system intersects with what we often think of as something quite distinct, which is war propaganda. So when Colin Powell says, as he did on the day of 9/11, we condemn people who are willing to blow up buildings for political ends — well if Osama Bin Laden is a terror-

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ist, then George W. Bush is a terrorist. That would be a logical conclusion if one takes what Powell said at his word. And that's where it can get Orwellian, because that kind of assessment can't be allowed psychologically. So Americans are constantly exposed to media that simply cannot follow certain trains of thought in what Orwell called "heretical directions" very far.

A major premise of the book — at least by implication, and you more or less said it in your last answer — is that US presidents by and large are precisely the kind of people that they profess to despise and wish to eliminate. But is this something that you can foresee the American public, en masse, ever being able to face. And I ask that, remembering vividly, at least as the media presented it, the sympathetic outpouring when Richard Nixon died. Is America ever going to be ready to see presidents for what they are and not be so forgiving or fall for the hokey one-liners of a Reagan and so on?

Well the United States has such a diversity of population and the cliché is red states and blue states. But if you were going to look at the percentages, you have pretty marked regional differences. For the most part, the South is extremely militaristic and the militarism is coded with religiosity. And yet there are enclaves of the country where a large proportion of people already see the president as a war criminal. But in terms of the overall population, I think for most people, the president as a war criminal is an oxymoron. It's just beyond a concept that seems plausible. But the proportion of people who are open to considering the evidence, those proportions may shift. And part of the task of people who are doing progressive work is to find better ways to explore publicly the essence of what's at stake. What's the human cost? What are the logical fallacies and deceptions involved in setting an agenda for war and then trying to justify a war's perpetuation. I think this is ongoing work that needs to be done.

In the 40-year window that you spoke of, 1965 to the present, do you believe there's been a positive shift in terms of popular perceptions and public knowledge of what's going on?

I think we start with a stronger base of skepticism towards war. If one were to compare the lead-in to the Vietnam War, and the lead-in to the Iraq war, we had a vastly larger number of people in the streets, we had a lot of dissent,

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even in the media until the invasion of Iraq began and then there was a hiatus for many months. We've learned, but at the same time the militarists have learned too. They're very slick and they've learned to use cable television, for instance. Learned to drive the war train in a way that can deal with the bumps involved from public skepticism. And the capacity of the war planners to navigate some strong public opposition is pretty evident. I mean I'm really struck by how any time a president really wants to go to war, he has been able to do so. And that record remains.

Your answer raises an issue that I noted in the book. You talk quite a lot — directly and tangentially — about war as reality TV. Which is a phenomenon of the cable age. Could you talk a little about that, because that definitely is a newer and very powerful tool in the tool belt of the propagandists. How do you see that playing out and do you see things like the Internet as perhaps being tools that might be used to combat these media monopolies?

The embedding of reporters for the Iraq invasion was a brilliant propaganda mechanism. The Pentagon simply flipped over what happened during the Gulf War a dozen years earlier. I remember some nauseating interviews with US troops on television, including on "The NewsHour" with Jim Lehrer — then called the "McNeil-Lehrer NewsHour" — for the Gulf War. So it's not new that you would have this kind of human interest sandwich that is served up with reporting on the carnage, as limited as that reporting is. But there were appreciable media complaints — not very vigorous — but still appreciable media complaints about the limits set on the Gulf War coverage. Just in terms of logistics and access. And so the embedding process implemented by the Pentagon was a way to make grand use of cable television, in particular, and turn the war into a more multi-dimensional TV show. So it wasn't just the briefings and the screened videos of 2001 and the selected interviews at discreet locations...

The embedding gamble, if it was even a gamble, certainly paid off for the Pentagon. And part of it was just their knowledge of how the major networks would turn the entire exercise into a way of pandering to the kind of jingoism and human interest patriotism that was fairly predictable. Naturally there was not really any embedding of US journalists in the homes that were being bombed by US troops, and so it became just this kind of illusionary painting that was splashed across TV screens that reinforced what really is one of the

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key myths — as I talk about in the title of one of the chapters — that the Pentagon fights wars as humanely as possible. And by accentuating the human interest appeal of “our” troops, it simply heightens the contrast with the basically unseen “enemy” troops.

Would it be fair to say that in breaking down these myths that you've discussed in your book, we're visual creatures...Is it going to require people actually seeing certain horrendous things for themselves for things to really change? Will it take television: seeing is believing. With the presidents and pundits so capable of spinning the facts, as you point out in the book's subtitle, just what will it take for the truth to get through?

I think that any effective anti-war movement needs to combine the emotional with the intellectual. People respond in a wide variety of ways. What one person may be changed by, may be a totally intellectual argument, with the marshalling of facts and historical evidence. Another person may be moved by the story of a mother who lost her child. I'm really in favor of trying to combine all of that because I think it's part of the picture. And television and visual images, in and of themselves, may reinforce militarism as much as undermine it. I'm pretty convinced by an argument that Susan Sontag made which I quote in “War Made Easy,” about the imagery of war — and depending on the mindset of those who see and the political environment — how it may be interpreted as the need to continue with this heroic struggle: “Look at all that has been lost” and “May these people's suffering not be in vain due to our determination for the future.” I think there has been an assumption that if only we can convey the suffering from war, that people will be repelled by it enough to oppose the war. We need it all. There's a real deficiency when we just make intellectual arguments, but there's also a real gap if we rely only on the human suffering of war.

You're talking about social change. Well in talking about the reinforcement of these myths that form your chapter titles, and multi-factoral social forces being in play, obviously things like patriotism are very powerful tools in propping these things up. But what do you think about this notion that Michael Moore and others have propounded: Are Americans too afraid? Is fear a powerful tool that helps prop up this propaganda status quo as well?

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I think fear is definitely powerful. And the antidote to fear has been pedaled as the military fist that Uncle Sam can keep swinging to keep adversaries at bay. Many people around the world have much more reason to be fearful than Americans in terms of their own physical well-being. And yet our national narcissism is cranked up to such an extent that, with a straight face, media outlets could say that 9/11 changed everything everywhere. We are the world. Our pain dwarfs the pain of anybody else. And so our fear must trump anybody else's fears, which are often simply unrecognized in media. One can go into a kind of psychological mode and say that fear drives so much of what goes on in American life, including the fascination with wealth and the kind of delusional, tacit belief that if we can gain enough wealth and own enough expensive things, that we're going to be protected. Well, we're all going to die and these are very ephemeral comforts at best. At a kind of very overt level, the Pentagon is the agency that is supposed to make sure that if anybody dies, it isn't Americans. And this is just a very human and very pernicious dynamic. And you hear it sometimes in its raw form — I think often it's more subtle — which is, "Who cares if those people are incinerated? Who cares if they're tortured? They're not going to do it to us, that's for damn sure!" That's the point of the entire enterprise of what's called "national defense." I

personally refuse to call the military budget the defense budget. It's interesting that so many anti-war activists and peace advocates will refer to this as a "defense budget." It's wrong. I'm not against a defense budget. If it were a real defense budget it would be much much much smaller than we have. But apropos of your question, the fact that we have this department spending well over — in routine appropriations, let alone on supplemental — more than one billion dollars a day under the rubric of defense. I mean, if you've got to spend all that money and have all these thermo-nuclear weapons and everything else under the heading of "defense," then you must be really terrified. And of course an irony is that we are terrifying a lot of other people.

And of course the Defense Department used to be called the War Department but the government changed it.

Yes that's right. Around 1947.

In many ways, in reading your book I felt it was necessarily bleak, but if I might read the closing paragraph of the Afterword: "Conscience is not on

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the military's radar screen and it's not on our television screen but government officials and media messages do not define the limits and possibilities of conscience. We do." That's rather empowering. It throws the ball back to us and it reminds us that we are capable of free thinking and taking action. Are you optimistic?

I like to quote something I heard Eduardo Galeano at the World Social Forum in early 2001. He recalled walking down a street of a Latin American city and written in big letters on the wall was the graffiti "Let's save pessimism for better times." I think that's quite relevant to where we are. There's the statement written by Antonio Gramsci when he was in prison under Mussolini that translates something like: "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." Those are, so to speak, the two legs that I feel we need to be walking on.

Thank you very much for your time.

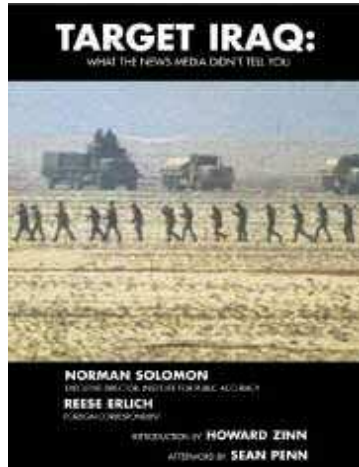
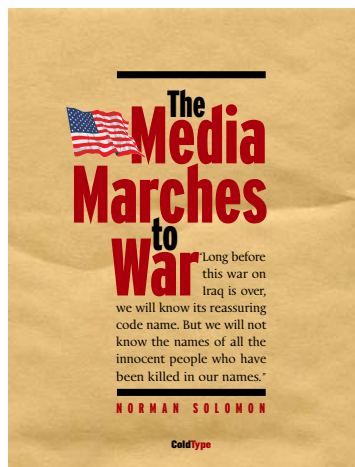
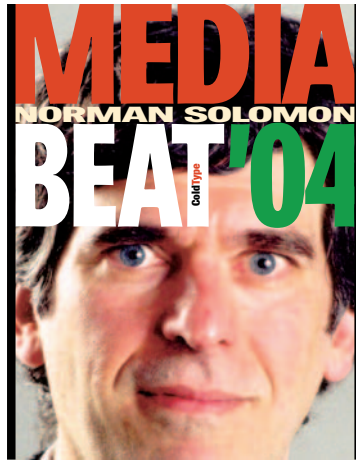
Thank you.



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Norman Solomon's new book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," is now available. For further information go to www.WarMadeEasy.com

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