

**THE AWAKENING:
THE ZAPATISTA REVOLT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS AND THE FUTURE OF MEXICO**

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December 30, 1994

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The authors wish to thank Drs. Roderic Camp, Edward Williams, Gabriel Marcella, Steven Metz, and Earl Tilford, and Colonels William Allen and William Doll for their incisive comments on earlier drafts of this work. Needless to say, any errors of omission or commission are entirely the authors' responsibility.

FOREWORD

On January 1, 1994, an obscure guerrilla group calling itself the Zapatista National Liberation Army attacked and captured four cities and a number of towns in Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. The violence shocked the Mexican government and military, as well as the public, and ushered in a multifaceted political crisis that over the course of the next several months brought into question not only the prospects for democracy and economic development, but also for continued political stability. In this study, Drs. Stephen Wager and Donald Schulz examine the causes, nature and implications of the Zapatista uprising, emphasizing in particular its impact on Mexican civil-military relations. They argue that, together with the onset of democratization, the Chiapas rebellion has strained these relations and led to a certain mutual distancing between the Mexican army and government. Interestingly enough, however, they argue that this may actually be a good thing since it means that the military is becoming a more politically neutral institution and will likely be more open to the idea of an opposition electoral victory than in the past.

Of more immediate importance, Wager and Schulz note that there has been little progress toward resolving the rebellion, and that as long as this is so fighting could very well break out anew, with disastrous results. They therefore urge the incoming Zedillo administration to move quickly to "bring the Zapatistas in from the cold" by co-opting them and their supporters both economically and politically. This means fulfilling not only the socioeconomic promises that have been made by the government, but reforming state and local political power structures to assure the rule of law and the access of those who have been shut out of the system. They further argue that the process of national political reform should be broadened and deepened, since without democratization on the national level any other gains that might be made would probably be ephemeral.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to publish this report as a contribution to understanding events in this important country.

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SUMMARY

This study examines the origins and nature of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, the response of the Mexican government and military, and the implications for civil-military relations and the future of Mexico. It places the armed forces' reaction within the context of the institution's response to the country's accelerated transition to democracy and analyzes the implications of that democratization for the army. The main findings are as follows:

On the Zapatista Revolt.

- The Zapatista rebellion is not primarily a "military" problem. Rather, it is the product of a convergence of economic, social and political problems that exist not only in Chiapas but in much of rural Mexico.

- Unlike most traditional guerrilla movements, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) did not seek to destroy the state or take power itself, but rather to force a democratic opening. In this, it has been at least partially successful. Indeed, the Zapatistas may have done more to accelerate the process of Mexican democratization than the previous 5 years of dramatic economic reform under the Salinas administration.

- Nevertheless, since the breakdown of peace talks last spring, there has been little progress in terms of defusing a potentially explosive situation. The Zapatistas have assumed an uncompromising stance with regard to the issue of democratic reform. At the same time, they remain very weak militarily. They are largely surrounded by the much stronger Mexican army (with Guatemala being their only escape route), and any attempt to resume their offensive would likely prove suicidal. This has led to a classic standoff. Neither side wants to resume the fighting, yet their negotiating positions remain incompatible. And so unable to move forward and unwilling to surrender, the rebels risk being indefinitely consigned to limbo.

- This is dangerous, for as long as the deadlock continues, violence could break out anew; thus, the need to bring the rebels in from the cold. One of the priority tasks of the Zedillo administration should be to explore ways to co-opt the Zapatistas and their supporters, both economically and politically. That means fulfilling the promises that have been made to alleviate the poverty and desperation that drove so many people to support the guerrillas. It also means reforming state and local power structures to assure the rule of law and the access of those who have been shut out of the system in the past. Nor are these requirements limited to Chiapas. Many other areas of rural Mexico suffer comparable problems which, if neglected, may lead to social explosions.

- It is also imperative that the process of national political reform be deepened and consolidated, for without democratization other gains will likely prove ephemeral.

On Democratization and Civil-Military Relations.

- Due to a massive intelligence failure, the Zapatista uprising caught the Salinas administration by surprise. The Mexican military had ample warning of the guerrilla presence, but government officials had other concerns (most notably, NAFTA) and tended to ignore or downplay the evidence that trouble was brewing. Subsequently, civil-military relations were strained when army leaders perceived that they were being used as scapegoats for the government's failure.

- The acceleration of democratization has also strained civil-military relations, resulting in a certain amount of mutual distancing between the army and the government. With the opening of Mexican society to more pluralistic influences, there has been much greater criticism of previously sacrosanct subjects (e.g., the president and the military). The army has increasingly become a target of criticism with regard to corruption and human rights abuses and President Salinas has not always been willing to defend it. Thus, the military has become more aggressive in its own defense, especially through the use of public relations. At the same time, the army has distanced itself somewhat from the government and the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). It is becoming a more politically neutral institution, and appears to be much more open to the idea of an opposition electoral victory than in the past.

- In spite of Chiapas, the mission of the Mexican army will not change drastically in the foreseeable future. While improvements will be made in its counterinsurgency capabilities, the military will gradually return to its traditional missions of narcotics interdiction and civic action, with the latter being the mission of preference.

- The authors recommend the introduction of mandatory human rights training at all levels of the military.

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The Zapatistas Ignite a Powder Keg.

The 1994 New Year's celebration in Mexico started with a bang. A mere hour into the year, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) assaulted and captured four cities in the Los Altos region of Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas. The *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación* shocked the Mexican people and most of the world with its rebellion. Although Mexican political and military leaders adamantly denied that they were caught off guard, they were in fact totally surprised by the magnitude of the assault.

As events unfolded during that first week in January, the reasons behind the seizure of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Las Margaritas, Altamirano and Ocosingo became apparent. The Zapatistas called for a nationwide movement for "jobs, land, housing, food, health, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace." Unlike many traditional guerrilla movements, the EZLN did not seek to destroy the state, but rather sought to shift "the balance of forces in favor of popular and democratic movements, thereby isolating and ultimately defeating anti-democratic tendencies within the ruling *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), the state and the rest of society."¹ Whether or not the Zapatistas will be able to accomplish their goal of making government more accountable to the people and establishing fair representation for all Mexicans remains to be seen. However, almost a year after the initial uprising, the movement has prompted some visible changes, including some positive ones, within the government and its supporting institutions. In fact, the Zapatistas may have done more to accelerate democratization than the previous 5 years of dramatic economic reform engineered by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

As the Mexican government responded to the crisis, one point became clear: the rebellion was not a "military problem." Instead, it can most properly be viewed as a concatenation of the many endemic economic, political and social problems prevalent not only in Chiapas but in most of rural Mexico. Nonetheless, the actions of the EZLN have affected the Mexican army in a number of respects. The army's involvement in restoring order in Chiapas has in some ways changed the long-standing civil-military equation in Mexico. To fully understand this change, one must examine the military's response to the conflict in light of other recent problems confronting the armed forces. This study will look at that reaction within the context of the institution's response to the nation's accelerated transition to democracy. We will also analyze the implications of this increasingly rapid democratization for the Mexican army.

The Roots of the Conflict.

What all Mexico understood when it awoke last New Year's Day . . . was that the Mexican revolution had finally arrived in Chiapas.²

The contrasts are both striking and sobering. Whereas in Mexico as a whole only 29 percent of the populace lives in rural areas, in Chiapas the figure is 60 percent. While the Mexican illiteracy rate is 13 percent, for *chiapanecos* it is 31 percent.³ A third of the households in Chiapas are without electricity, 41.6 percent are without drinking water, and 58.8 percent lack drainage. (The figures for all of Mexico are 12.5 percent, 20.6 percent and 36.4 percent, respectively.⁴) Moreover, when one looks at the data for Ocosingo, Altamirano and Las Margaritas—three of the cities captured by the Zapatistas—the contrasts tend to be even greater. In Altamirano, fully 75 percent of the households lack electricity, and the figures for Ocosingo and Las Margaritas are almost as large. In Las Margaritas, 72.7 percent are without drinking water.⁵ And the farther one moves out into the countryside, the fewer such amenities are to be found.

Yet, Chiapas is a rich land. The region contains fertile farmlands, pastures and forests, and an abundance of petroleum. It is a major source of the nation's coffee, as well as three-fifths of its electricity.⁶ The problem is that the wealth is maldistributed. The gap between rich and poor is probably as great as anywhere in the hemisphere. According to the available statistics, a little over a hundred people—just .16 percent of all coffee farmers—control 12 percent of the coffee lands. Similarly, some 6,000 families hold over 3 million hectares of cattle land—the equivalent to almost half the territory of all of the state's rural landholdings.⁷

These elites have access to the best land and infrastructure and most of the credit. Over the years, they have acquired their properties by both fair means and foul. This system dates all the way back to Spanish colonial days, when many of their ancestors received grants of land, labor and tribute from the Crown. Since that time, the members of this "Chiapas Family" have been able to dominate the local power structures and assure that their interests would be protected. In alliance with PRI *caciques* or local political bosses, they have been able to manipulate the legal system by bribing officials and securing delays and exemptions for themselves while assuring that the letter of the law would be applied to those without money or influence. Many of their estates were created illegally, through the violent seizure of *ejidos* or state-owned farms, and maintained by the use of private armies and the complicity of local judges, sheriffs and military commanders.⁸ A sign which as recently as 1971 hung in the Ocosingo Lions Club said it all: "In the Law of the Jungle it is willed that Indians and blackbirds must be killed."⁹

Though the rebellion caught the government by surprise, it had been slowly brewing for years. In the two-and-a-half decades prior to the uprising, a wide variety of groups had been active in promoting peasant organizational activities. As early as the late 1960s, Catholic priests and catechists, inspired by Liberation Theology, had begun to engage in politically oriented pastoral work, especially in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas. During the 1970s, other organizations (among them, the Proletarian Line, People United, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Independent Organization of Agricultural Workers and Peasants-Mexican Communist Party) also became involved in grassroots efforts. Beginning in 1979, moreover, a broad-based revolt of the state's primary and secondary school teachers led to the formation of a "democratic teachers' movement," which embraced the campesinos' cause and became an interlocutor with the state government on their behalf.

By then, major socioeconomic, ecological and demographic changes had begun to aggravate the already-precarious existence of the peasants. The oil boom of the late 1970s had triggered a cycle of social polarization, which was subsequently accelerated by the debt crisis of the early 1980s. After the boom ended, many highlanders who had left their homelands for more lucrative opportunities in nearby oil fields returned, bringing with them capital and new technology. They proceeded to introduce modern farming methods, including fertilizers and herbicides, which allowed more intensive and extensive cultivation of the land. Unfortunately, these changes had destructive side effects. Ecologically, they led to a dramatic increase in soil erosion and a loss of fertility which sapped the land's ability to sustain the human population. Socially and economically, they increasingly polarized communities as the new entrepreneurs expanded their wealth, often at the expense of those at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. As peasants were increasingly pushed off the land by more powerful agro-export farmers and cattle ranchers, many drifted to urban areas or the agricultural frontiers in the Lacandona lowland.¹⁰

Social tensions were further aggravated by rapid population growth (the rate in Chiapas is 4.5 percent, which means that the population doubles about every 16 years)¹¹ and the arrival of some 100,000 Guatemalans, most of whom were fleeing bloody counterinsurgency operations in their own country. Furthermore, after August 1982 Mexico entered into a period of financial crisis and economic stagnation unprecedented since the Great Depression. Over the next half-dozen years, unemployment and inflation soared, while real wages and the per capita Gross National Product plummeted. In response to the crisis, the de la Madrid administration (1982-88) adopted a neoliberal economic strategy. Government spending was slashed, and the bureaucracy reduced. As usual with such programs, the poor and the middle class suffered the most.

In short, a combination of factors had produced a milieu that was ripe for alienation and political organization. Grass-roots intellectuals, religious catechists, Marxist organizers and other proponents of change (including even federal development agencies such as the National Indigenous Institute) helped raise the political consciousness of Chiapas' peasants and Indians, encouraging them to organize to defend their interests. The upshot was a proliferation of campesino groups, the most important being the Union of Ejido Unions (UU), the Independent Central of Agricultural Workers and Peasants (CIOAC), and the Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organization (OCEZ).¹² As campesino militance increased and calls for agrarian reform and political change intensified, so did violence. When peasants began seizing land, the ranchers unleashed their paramilitary squads. Campesino leaders were killed, and entire villages threatened and in some cases burned to the ground. Local authorities, as usual, sided with the cattlemen.¹³

Under the Salinas administration (1988-94), the situation deteriorated further. A collapse of coffee prices devastated local producers, causing both productivity and total output to fall by about 35 percent between 1989 and 1993. On average, small growers suffered a 65-70 percent drop in income. Many were forced to abandon production.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the administration was accelerating and extending the economic policies of its predecessor. In 1991-92, Article 27 of the Mexican constitution was revised and a new Agrarian Law passed. These measures formally ended the government's moribund land distribution program. *Ejido* members¹⁵ now acquired the right to sell their lands. At the same time, however, they had to confront the difficult challenges of reduced agricultural subsidies, the privatization of state enterprises, and liberalized trade policies. When import licenses were removed, many peasants found themselves unable to sell their crops because of the sudden influx of cheaper grains from the United States. While corn and beans continued to be subsidized, under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) all tariffs and import quotas were to be gradually phased out. In combination with the *ejido* reform, these measures raised the prospect that landlessness and rural inequalities might soon grow much worse, as millions of campesinos, unable to compete with foreign imports, were forced off the land. The resulting insecurity and confusion fueled discontent throughout rural Mexico, providing the Zapatistas with a base of popular support on which to launch their rebellion.

Not even *Solidaridad* (Solidarity), President Salinas' much-lauded social development program, could do much to ameliorate these fears and realities. During Salinas' first 5 years in office, federal spending in Chiapas increased more than tenfold. Solidarity funding grew 130 percent in 1989-90, 50 percent in 1990-91, 20 percent in 1991-92, and a further 1 percent in 1992-93.¹⁶ But much of this money ended up in the

pockets of local *caciques*. In the meantime, these same authorities resisted by all means available the efforts of poor Indians and campesinos to pursue their interests within the existing system. Symptomatic of the problem was that some 30 percent of Mexico's unresolved land petitions came from Chiapas.¹⁷

Salinas was the most modern of Mexican presidents. Yet, in spite of his pledges of reform and democratization, in Chiapas he chose to work with the existing retrograde power structure. Indeed, he depended on these elements--and on others like them throughout rural areas of the country--for his own political fortune. In the 1988 presidential election, this system had delivered between 85-90 percent of Chiapas' vote, one of the highest percentages of any state. In the 1991 federal elections, the PRI had won 100 percent of the vote in 50 municipalities, many of them in precisely those areas most affected by the insurrection.¹⁸

In short, the first 5 years of Salinas' term brought few substantive changes in the state's governance. The new "reform" governor, Patrocinio González Garrido, was himself from an important Chiapan family and had landholdings well in excess of constitutional limitations. Not surprisingly, he continued the repressive practices of his predecessor. Electoral fraud continued unabated. By 1990-91, social conflicts were sharply on the rise. As land invasions and protest movements proliferated, the authorities cracked down. So harsh was the repression that the Bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Samuel Ruiz García, set up a diocesan human rights center to document the abuses.

In October 1992, moreover, an extraordinary demonstration took place in San Cristóbal. During a celebration commemorating 500 years of popular resistance, thousands of peasants took to the streets, toppling and smashing the statue of conquistador Diego de Mazariegos, a symbol of white domination. For some, this catharsis of collective anger was an important psychological turning point, crystallizing "what many already felt: that armed struggle was the only path to achieve Indian demands."¹⁹

Knowing the Enemy.

One of the principal tenets of a sound military operation is to know your enemy. However, on January 1, 1994, top-level Mexican government officials were forced to scramble to identify the Zapatista insurgents. Ironically, the enemy provided some immediate assistance. Subcomandante Marcos burst onto the national scene with the now famous "Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle" that appeared in most Mexico City newspapers on January 2nd. The proclamation declared war on the Mexican army, called for the non-recognition of the Mexican president, and demanded the establishment of a transitional government. The masked EZLN commander gained immediate notoriety as well as hero status in

the eyes of many Mexicans, including many marginalized peasants and members of the middle class throughout the country. Marcos projected the image of a Robin Hood defending the rights of the downtrodden against an unjust and repressive government. His physical appearance added to his aura. Although a black ski mask remained a permanent part of his uniform, one could detect his handsome features, captivating green eyes, and light complexion. Over the course of the next few months, he became a celebrity. Marcos dolls became the latest craze in Mexico City, and many women treated him like a matinee idol.²⁰

The identity of Marcos still remains unknown,²¹ as do many other details about these rebels who call themselves Zapatistas, in honor of the famous Mexican revolutionary, Emiliano Zapata, who gave his life for the cause of agrarian reform. Recent Mexican army estimates suggest that the EZLN has about 1,500 well-armed fighters with several thousand others poorly armed and trained.²² The *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* was born in the Lacandona jungle in 1983. According to some of its leaders, the group has been recruiting and training there and in small indigenous communities in the central part of Chiapas since its inception. Most accounts indicate that the EZLN is comprised of indigenous irregulars, commanded by a trained and disciplined cadre of mestizo and caucasian extraction.²³ These are "not the most backward, or even the poorest, campesinos of Chiapas...but, rather, the innovators: adventurous frontiersmen and women who were convinced that they could make a new world."²⁴ Many of the leaders appear to be city folk, an impression that is reinforced by the fact that Marcos speaks four languages. Rumors abound about their backgrounds. There have been reports that the cadre is composed of individuals who remain from the insurgency of the 1970s and of Mexicans who fought alongside the Central American guerrillas. The movement lacks strong ideological foundations and military resources, though it may be the beneficiary of funding by undisclosed outside sources.²⁵

The deepest roots of the EZLN may in fact extend as far back as 1974. In October of that year, the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas hosted an Indigenous Congress in honor of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Spain's staunchest defender of Indian rights. The convention provided a major impetus to peasant efforts to organize. This mobilization, supported in part by Liberation Theologians from the Catholic Church, led to the development of the three major campesino umbrella organizations mentioned earlier (UU, CIOAC, and OCEZ), which in turn started an organized struggle for rights to Indian lands and against repression. From that base, the Zapatista cadre had a ready source of individuals who could be easily recruited.²⁶

There is little hard information on the structure of the EZLN. Marcos has emphasized on a number of occasions that he is not the leader of the movement but is subordinate to a Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee that makes the

major decisions after polling the organization's membership. It is believed that there is a national directorate above the clandestine committee, but little about the structure has been confirmed. Reports have circulated that the EZLN hierarchy has maintained a liaison with the *Partido Revolucionario Clandestino Unión del Pueblo* (PROCUP), a longtime umbrella organization for subversive political and guerrilla groups. Mexican army sources released a schematic of the EZLN's organization, which shows clandestine committees for each of the major indigenous groups in the region and has the EZLN subordinate to those committees. According to this information, there are also local militias and popular assemblies at the community level. In short, the organization is more a political-military body than a purely military one. Some captured documents indicate that the military wing of the EZLN is organized along lines similar to those of the Mexican army, especially with regard to unit and rank designations and military regulations.²⁷

The EZLN conducted training at both special camps and within the local communities. In some cases, whole villages participated, the women preparing food while the recruits trained and the older population tended to daily chores. The Zapatistas set up bases in isolated areas marked by rugged terrain. Low-level thefts and kidnappings were employed as a means of obtaining money to buy weapons.²⁸

After more than 10 years of preparation, the EZLN was ready to take a major step. Because it was not well-armed (many Indian recruits only carried wooden sticks or machetes), Marcos realized that surprise would be critical to any success the movement might hope to achieve. Employing that principle of war, along with sound discipline and small-unit tactics, the Zapatistas launched their attack at San Cristóbal de las Casas, a picturesque colonial city with an international flavor. In addition to a Catholic Church strongly supportive of indigenous demands, many Protestant groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were in the city. This would help the movement gain extensive national and international attention, which was obviously one of Marcos' major aims. During the first week of January, the NGOs played a key role in disseminating information about the uprising.²⁹

At first, Marcos declared freedom for all as the movement's goal. Though he soon moved to articulate his objectives more precisely, there remained some confusion as to whether the group's ideology was socialist. While the Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle stated that the Zapatistas were fighting for that cause, Marcos did not demand a socialist government but merely a transitional one. In the second EZLN communique on January 1, 1994, the rebels made 10 demands. The first five (jobs, land, housing, food and health) were socioeconomic in nature, while the second five (independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace) were distinctly political. These demands would serve as a basis for negotiation after the government's unilateral cease-fire was declared on January 12th. As the

political phase of the conflict progressed, it became more apparent that the rebels were trying to force the regime to negotiate a democratic opening rather than take power themselves.³⁰ Had their uprising produced a chain reaction in other states, perhaps this goal might have been modified to allow them to compete for power at the national level. But with their severely limited resources, such a course of action was simply not viable.

The Government's Response.

The government responded to the events in Chiapas with great uncertainty. The Salinas administration was caught completely off-guard. Official sources initially tried to downplay the situation and deflect criticism by declaring the rebellion to be the work of external influences trying to destabilize Mexico. The government blamed Central American guerrillas, the drug cartels and, as a last resort, the Catholic Church. Even when the causes of the crisis became apparent, the official media attempted to suppress the news. However, word spread rapidly via telephone, computer traffic, and the NGO network, and government radio and television stations had no alternative but to report it.³¹

Patrocinio González Garrido, the interior minister and former governor of Chiapas, initially dismissed as insignificant accounts of armed groups in the four towns that were eventually captured. The rebels held San Cristóbal de las Casas for over 24 hours before abandoning it and moving ten kilometers southeast to attack the garrison of the 31st Military Zone in Rancho Nuevo. With that provocation, the army asked for and received authorization to counterattack. By midday on January 6th, military forces had dislodged the rebels from all towns and villages that they had previously occupied, forcing most of the guerrillas to flee into the Lacandona jungle. Nevertheless, the garrison at Rancho Nuevo was subjected to intermittent attacks and sniper fire until January 12th.³²

The conflict had two phases. The first was a military phase that virtually concluded on January 12th, when President Salinas declared a unilateral cease-fire. By that time, the army's presence in the region had swelled from approximately 2,000 soldiers to over 14,000, more than enough to cordon off the Zapatistas' stronghold in the Lacandona jungle. Under those circumstances, the EZLN probably welcomed the cease-fire and therefore agreed to respect it. At that point, the second or political phase began, and has been ongoing ever since. On January 10th, President Salinas fired his interior minister, Patrocinio González, because of his ineptitude and his ties to the long-standing repression in Chiapas, and replaced him with Jorge Carpizo MacGregor, the attorney general and former president of the National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH). He followed that move 2 days later by appointing Manuel Camacho Solís, the foreign minister and former presidential contender, as

his principal peace negotiator. On January 19th, Elmar Setzer, the governor of Chiapas, resigned. The next day, Congress passed an amnesty decree, clearing the way for meaningful peace negotiations.³³

By mid-January, the army had received considerable criticism for its slow response to the outbreak of hostilities. Media reports had described it as too ill-prepared and poorly equipped to carry out a successful jungle campaign. Needless to say, military leaders privately fumed over these allegations. Many felt the political leaders had taken away their prerogative to complete their operations.³⁴ In actuality, unfavorable international attention was pushing the government towards a cease-fire. On January 4th, a photo of five cadavers near the marketplace in Ocosingo hit the national and international wires. The dead men had their hands tied behind their backs and had been shot in the head, execution-style. Accompanying stories placed the blame on Mexican soldiers. After this, the government could no longer withstand the pressure. Accordingly, it sought the most expeditious way to end the fighting.³⁵

Although the military served as an initial scapegoat for the rebellion, it soon became evident that Mexican political leaders had blundered by underestimating the size of the threat and by ignoring a series of warning signs. Among the latter was a public statement by an opposition congressman that the army and Interior Ministry had information about an armed movement in Chiapas. In March 1993, the bodies of two junior officers had been found hacked to pieces and buried in a shallow pit outside an Indian village in the Los Altos region. The heinous nature of this crime should have served as a warning that serious problems existed. Army and police forces reportedly ransacked two villages and tortured some of the inhabitants in search of the guilty parties. This incident was followed in May by a firefight between Mexican soldiers and a group of armed men outside Ocosingo. For months thereafter, rumors abounded of guerrillas roaming the countryside. A colonel from the 31st Military Zone reported that his unit had been conducting reconnaissance missions throughout the area in search of insurgent training camps.³⁶ A Jesuit priest declared that insurgents had been active for the past 8 years. As late as October, residents reported seeing soldiers in numerous communities around Ocosingo and hearing gunfire at night. Nevertheless, there was a steady stream of denials on the part of government officials.³⁷

As events unfolded in January 1994, it became evident that the government had been following a specific agenda in attempting to cover up the guerilla presence. It needed to put on its best face for the impending vote by the U.S. Congress on the North American Free Trade Agreement. NAFTA was the key piece in Salinas' revolutionary economic reforms, and Mexico could not risk its defeat by drawing attention to potentially destabilizing developments in Chiapas. According to one political insider, a representative of the *Centro de Investigación y Seguridad*

Nacional (CISN), which is a combination Federal Bureau of Investigation and Central Intelligence Agency, had visited Chiapas on three separate occasions in May 1993 in response to the trouble reported there. This source added that the intelligence failure was attributable to the government rather than the army. The latter had been reporting on these activities and recognized the potential for an uprising, but government officials believed that the *focos* were small and could be easily controlled. These developments were kept secret so as not to prejudice the vote on NAFTA or the presidential campaign of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the assumption being that corrective action could wait until after the August 1994 presidential election.³⁸

The above suggests not so much the inadequacy of the government's response to the rebellion as it does a gross failure on the part of its intelligence apparatus. It should come as no surprise that military leaders were disgruntled. They felt that blame had been unjustly placed on their own shoulders.

The Mexican Military Takes the Offensive.

From a military perspective, the Chiapas uprising was unique because, unlike any time in the recent past, the army found itself in the eye of a political hurricane. One U.S. official in Chiapas during the first days of the rebellion reported that its leaders had been privately voicing displeasure at the ineffective and poorly planned political strategy that they were being asked to carry out. On one occasion, General Miguel Angel Godínez Bravo, commander of the 31st Military Zone and of all army forces in Chiapas, invited reporters to his headquarters at Rancho Nuevo for an interview. The general told them that the best course of action would be to go on the offensive and wipe out the Zapatistas. The next day he suggested that he had been misquoted and that he supported wholeheartedly the government's strategy of a negotiated settlement. There were also other indications of discontent. Army leaders reportedly were annoyed at the new peace commissioner, Camacho Solís, when he called for a cease-fire and asked the military to withdraw its forces from certain communities and take up positions outside towns and villages. Moreover, though the army had traditionally been the principal administrator of humanitarian aid, during the Chiapas conflict the government was pressured into replacing it with the Red Cross and assorted NGOs.³⁹

Not since 1968 had the armed forces been subjected to such harsh public criticism as during the first few months of 1994. For that reason, Chiapas represents a kind of watershed. Prior to the Salinas administration, the military had always been looked upon as an *intocable* or untouchable. The golden rule for journalists and writers had always been that everything was subject to criticism except the president, the army and the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. On those few occasions when the military was the subject of criticism, the president had always spoken out in

defense of the institution. But the Salinas *sexenio* (6-year term) witnessed the end of the army's mythical status.

The increasingly "irregular relationship" between the military and the president seems ironic in light of the first few months of Salinas' term. Back then, with the legitimacy of his electoral victory still very much in question, army leaders had organized a parade on inauguration day as a sign of support for the new president. Shortly thereafter, Salinas had called on the military to apprehend a corrupt and well-armed labor leader. He later asked for the army's help in tracking down the nation's leading drug trafficker (which it did). Those actions were followed by preemptive measures to prevent a violent strike at a copper mine in northern Mexico. Nonetheless, after relying on the army to get off to a solid start, Salinas fell uncharacteristically silent in its defense towards the end of his term.⁴⁰

The flood of recent criticism began in 1989. Numerous reports circulated throughout Mexico and the United States implicating former Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) General Juan Arévalo Gardoqui in high-level narcotics trafficking. At the time, President Salinas had remained silent and offered no disclaimers. Then, in November 1991, soldiers killed seven federal narcotics agents at a remote landing strip in Veracruz. Instead of allowing an in-house investigation, the president ordered the National Commission on Human Rights to look into the crime, and as a result five officers were imprisoned. In September 1992, the Ministry of Public Education distributed textbooks to public schools which described soldiers as having fired upon innocent students during the 1968 Student Movement. When army leaders took exception, the textbooks were recalled, but Salinas never publicly disavowed their content.⁴¹

By 1993, the public attacks had accelerated. It seemed that the army had fallen victim to the democratization process. In April, its deteriorating relations with the Catholic bishop in Chiapas received considerable publicity, and most reports sided with Bishop Ruiz. (The latter had irked General Godínez by trying to stop the army's searches of Indian villages. In addition, Godínez had been accused of collaborating with former Governor González Garrido to expel or jail two priests.) Some implied a military role in the assassination of Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo by drug traffickers in Guadalajara that May. Others used the incident to criticize what they perceived to be the army's ineffectiveness in the national anti-narcotics campaign.⁴² With the 25th anniversary of the October 1968 student deaths at Tlatelolco, moreover, many groups lobbied for the release of classified documents related to that affair. For the army, this was a case of opening old wounds. A *Comisión de la Verdad* (Truth Commission), comprised of prominent citizens and intellectuals, many of whom had been university students in 1968, was set up to investigate the events at Tlatelolco. When the final report was presented in December, the army found itself again having to

defend itself from accusations of complicity in the killings.⁴³

Finally, the case of General José Francisco Gallardo Rodríguez has proved nettlesome. Gallardo has been imprisoned since November 1993, ostensibly for defaming the military's reputation. The general had committed the sin of publishing an article in a small Mexico City magazine stating that the army had frequently violated the rights of its soldiers and officers, and he suggested creating an ombudsman to rectify some of these problems. This case has captured the attention of both Mexican and U.S. human rights groups, which have been pressuring the army for Gallardo's release. While official sources insist the case is more complex, army leaders have been made to appear as the guilty party.⁴⁴

The Chiapas uprising added more fuel to the fire. The army has had a much more difficult time in fending off accusations from human rights organizations than it had in forcing the Zapatistas back into the Lacandona jungle. Since the beginning of hostilities, it has been subjected to a barrage of criticism. The picture of the five dead bodies in Ocosingo opened the floodgates.⁴⁵ In the face of these accusations, the SECDEF, General Antonio Riviello Bazán, has remained steadfast in his defense of the army. In March, for instance, he reported that 40 of 46 complaints delivered by the National Commission of Human Rights had been investigated, and there was no evidence of wrongdoing. General Godínez in Chiapas has also emphatically denied that any of his troops were guilty of human rights violations.⁴⁶

The army has not been without its defenders. The director of the principal human rights center in Chiapas (*Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas*) stated that while some soldiers may have engaged in abuses, there exists no systematic pattern of violations.⁴⁷ Speaking for a group of nonpartisan legislators, a Mexican senator declared that the military had responded admirably to a difficult challenge in Chiapas, and that the institution's behavior with respect to human rights had been beyond reproach.⁴⁸ A group of almost 500 grateful citizens from the now famous town of Ocosingo demonstrated in favor of the army and denounced human rights organizations said to be unjustly tarnishing the military's reputation.⁴⁹

Despite the support from outside sources, President Salinas chose not to dispute many of these accusations. After the first few weeks of the conflict, General Riviello recognized that the army could no longer depend on the president to defend it. Instead, the military would have to begin defending itself. The SECDEF took the first step in establishing a new public relations *modus operandi* in a speech commemorating the anniversary of the Loyalty March of February 9, 1913. Fed up with seeing Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas glorified by the press, the SECDEF spoke aggressively in defense of the army. He proclaimed that the military had not digressed from its best

traditions of loyalty to the president and the Constitution, or to its mission of guaranteeing internal order. He said that Mexican soldiers had been the victims of violent aggression by the EZLN, and added that the army stood firmly behind the government's efforts at peace and reconciliation. He followed that speech with another on Army Day (February 19) in which he reiterated the institution's commitments and described it as "an army in search of peace."⁵⁰

General Riviello clearly understands the new rules of the game that are being established in countries making the transition to democracy. He promptly appointed a public relations expert to deal with the press and set out to form new alliances. The SECDEF set up meetings with journalists and academicians who had been critical of the army and made overtures to establish a more open dialogue. Nevertheless, these efforts have not stopped the criticism. Perhaps the press views the military as a target that had long been off-limits and senses a public interest in learning as much as possible about it. In February, army sources had to refute unsubstantiated allegations that the leadership was attempting to obtain U.S. military aid in order to escalate the conflict in Chiapas. A few months later, it was reported that the army had obtained at least two dozen armored riot-control vehicles in anticipation of increased violence. The most recent uproar concerns overtures made to the United States to buy AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters. Some journalists implied that there would soon be a step-up of repression.⁵¹ (In turn, a high-ranking officer explained the riot-control vehicles and attack helicopters as part of the army's ongoing modernization program. With regard to the former, he remarked that water was a lot safer than rifles. As for the latter, he seemed surprised that the request for only three helicopters would create such a reaction.⁵² In the end, the request for the Cobras was denied.)

Looking back over the present administration, army leaders acknowledge that the traditional political-military situation has begun to change significantly. While the army continues to adhere to its most sacred traditions—loyalty to the president and the Constitution and unwavering defense of the nation's sovereignty—the traditional perception of the institution by the Mexican people has probably changed forever. Public relations reforms are just the beginning. Greater changes lie ahead. The challenge of adapting to an increasingly democratic society will be a difficult one.

Chiapas and the Future of the Mexican Military.

After examining events in Mexico during the first 9 months of 1994, the prescient observer might ask whether the Mexican military is at a crossroads. In fact, there are indicators that it may undergo significant changes in the not-too-distant future. Some analysts anticipate substantive alterations in its mission and structure.⁵³ At this point, political leaders are

beholden to the military for its response to the Zapatista threat. At the same time, accusations of army human rights abuses have helped to take some of the pressure off already overburdened political leaders who have been trying to rectify their flawed strategies.

Political leaders will most likely try to compensate the military with increased salaries (which have remained at uncharacteristically low levels during the Salinas years) and new equipment. The latter has already been evident with the reports on the U.S. attack helicopters. A new military zone has been established in the state of Tabasco,⁵⁴ and some new battalions have been added to the army's inventory.

Some analysts have suggested that the military may soon begin a second professionalization process to shore up some of its deficiencies. On an operational level, the army will move to improve its counterinsurgency and jungle operations. Another area that begs for improvement is human rights instruction. If nothing else, Chiapas proved that the army no longer possesses immunity from criticism. Political leaders, including the president, have become increasingly involved with trying to deflect media attacks and no longer possess the credibility or influence to defend the military. The army has been introduced rather rudely to the long-neglected field of public relations. One means of reducing unfavorable press is to pay closer attention to human rights. The first step should consist of mandatory human rights training at all levels. The military has transitioned, perhaps somewhat reluctantly, into a new and highly competitive environment, and its leaders now find themselves scurrying to defend its interests. They must expeditiously formulate a strategy to function effectively in this transitional period. If they fail to do so, the army could be seriously weakened. The recent improvements in public relations suggest that the leadership now understands the need for change.⁵⁵

There are also strong indications that the relationship between the PRI and the military may undergo substantive alteration. The "irregular relationship" during the Salinas administration points to a distancing by the military from the PRI. Uncontrollable events brought on by accelerated democratization seem to be forcing military leaders into a more neutral corner with respect to politics. In the past, the Constitution has served as justification for the army's unique relationship with the PRI. Since the president was head of both the legitimate government and the PRI, the military invariably favored the latter. Given the traditionally weak opposition, this relationship was seldom questioned. The past decade, however, witnessed the growth of more viable opposition parties, and this has led the SECDEF to declare, on more than one occasion, that the army would remain at the margin of the presidential succession and would uphold the results of the August 1994 election. In addition, he denied his partiality for the PRI candidate.⁵⁶

At the same time, military leaders have probably questioned the allegiance of the president and the PRI to the armed forces. Here one has to understand how a Mexican army officer thinks. The institution's ideology stresses six core concepts: revolutionary heritage, loyalty, discipline, patriotism, nationalism, and apoliticism. These values comprise a creed by which the Mexican officer lives.⁵⁷ Since the 1920s, the army has maintained steadfast loyalty to the president and the institutions of government. Yet, the president's "silence" at numerous times during this *sexenio* has raised doubts about the system's loyalty to the armed forces. As a result, the army has become less willing to bail the government out of problems emanating from failed and heavily criticized economic, political, and social policies.⁵⁸

Since the 1968 student movement, the military has been extremely reluctant to engage in repressive actions against the Mexican people. Army leaders learned their lesson the hard way at Tlatelolco. Many of the junior officers who took up arms against the students on that occasion now serve in the upper echelons of the armed forces. The conflict in Chiapas once again forced the military to take up arms against the people, and one of the casualties was its reputation. Army leaders can dismiss their current dilemma as unavoidable, but they do not want to be forced into similar situations in the future. In recent months, there has been a fair share of private expressions of dissatisfaction over government policies. The military has grown increasingly disenchanted with having to clean up after politicians' mistakes. Consequently, one anticipates that its leaders may become more assertive on national security issues that have a direct impact on their institution.⁵⁹

There is no easy solution for Mexico's military leaders. But in a truly democratic system, the army will no longer be able to take sides. Some of its leaders have begun to understand this, and they seem to fear the opposition less than in the past.

Despite the winds of change, however, there are indicators that suggest a high degree of continuity for the military. Alterations in its structure and budget may prove temporary once the Chiapas conflict is resolved. In this era of downsizing, it would be difficult for Mexico, which has traditionally had one of the poorest armed forces in Latin America, to justify a major military build-up. Improvements will be made in counterinsurgency capabilities, but the mission of the army will not change drastically. Rather, it will gradually return to narcotics interdiction and civic action on a full-time basis, with the latter being the preferred mission.

In the not-too-distant future, Chiapas may be viewed as a brief distraction from the army's well-established traditional missions. In 1980, then Secretary of National Defense, General Félix Galván López, became the first military leader in years to

speaking out on national security, which he defined as "the maintenance of social, economic and political equilibrium guaranteed by the armed forces."⁶⁰ That has become the accepted army definition of national security, and it clearly suggests that military force is not a solution to national problems. The Mexican approach has been and will continue to be negotiation, thereby obviating the need for a large and totally modern armed forces. In their present state, those forces could not be seriously challenged by any internal opposition group.

As in most military institutions, leadership in the Mexican army is a function of hierarchy. Since the 1950s, the position of SECDEF has been filled by men well into their sixties. After more than 40 years in the military, these leaders have put aside aspirations for political power. They have become totally consumed with ensuring that their organization adheres strictly to its proud traditions of loyalty to the institutions of government and service to the Mexican people. Only in that way can each SECDEF hope that his legacy will be favorably judged. In addition, most SECDEFs view their position as the achievement of a life-long dream and would never consider ruining their good fortune by becoming embroiled in political struggles. This system of military succession has become well-entrenched. At present, there is no move to modify it by bringing in younger military leaders who might seek an active role in political decisionmaking.

Because the present *sexenio* is drawing to a close, it is difficult to speculate about the future. As with the political system itself, the military experiences a major internal transformation every 6 years. The direction in which it moves will depend principally on its new leader. As one insider remarked, "the military has many arms and many legs but only one head." At this writing, the PRI candidate, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon, has just been elected president. Relations between the military and Zedillo will likely be a bit tense during the early months of his administration. Mexico's new leader will have to mend some fences, for his past actions have not endeared him to the armed forces. Zedillo was the minister of education who authorized publication of the textbooks that accused the military of repressing the student movement in 1968. Early in his career, he worked for the army's bank, and after leaving that position, he made some untoward and imprudent remarks about the military's efficiency.

All this suggests there will be changes in civil-military relations in Mexico. How the new president and SECDEF proceed at the outset of the administration will go a long way towards determining whether the relationship only needs a minor tune-up or whether a major overhaul is in order. At this point, it seems likely that Zedillo will work quickly to win back the support of the armed forces, since the military remains one of the crucial pillars upon which the entire system rests.

War or Peace?

And what of the Zapatistas? In the months prior to the August elections, they had repeatedly warned that a PRI victory, if fraudulent, would lead to a resumption of hostilities. The EZLN had retained its weapons during the cease-fire. Moreover, Subcomandante Marcos claimed to have been contacted by "armed groups in the four corners of the country." There were reports of guerrilla activity in Guerrero, Oaxaca, Jalisco, Nayarit, Durango, Veracruz, Puebla, Hidalgo, Michoacán, and Chihuahua.⁶¹ The image being cultivated was that of a peasant army ready to resume the offensive not only in Chiapas but throughout rural Mexico.

At the same time, Zapatista leaders gave few indications that they were willing to temper their militance or abandon their more extreme and unrealistic demands. When the government offered sweeping socioeconomic concessions (including land redistribution, aid to impoverished farmers, the creation of new industries, job-retraining programs, schools and roads) designed to ameliorate the hardships and inequities of Chiapan society, the terms were rejected. Nothing less than fundamental political reform on a national level would do. The rebels renewed their call for Salinas' resignation and the formation of a transitional government to organize "democratic and free elections." In addition, they demanded an end to central government control over indigenous communities and a renegotiation of NAFTA.⁶²

Not even Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the major presidential candidate most supportive of the rebels' demands, seemed pure enough to merit their support. In May, Cárdenas had journeyed to Chiapas in search of favorable publicity, hoping to bask in the glow of Subcomandante Marcos' charisma. Instead, he was publicly humiliated. Marcos accused Cárdenas' party of pursuing the same economic policies and undemocratic practices as the PRI. The candidate was subjected to a series of staged harangues by guerrilla commanders. In the end, the photo opportunity turned into a nightmare, undermining the campaign (which was already shaky) of the very contender most likely to come to terms with the rebels.

Since March 1994, there has been a growing sense of unreality and irrelevance about the Zapatistas. With the March assassination of the PRI presidential candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, the selection of his successor, Ernesto Zedillo, and the relaunching of the election campaign, public attention was increasingly diverted from Chiapas. Whereas during the first months of the crisis, Marcos' communiqués had been front-page headlines, by spring they were largely being consigned to the back pages of Mexican newspapers. Meanwhile, the government moved to undermine the rebels' popular support through massive social spending. In less than 6 months, over \$220 million was poured into the state's social development and infrastructure projects, a 44 percent increase over what had been budgeted. By far the

largest recipients were San Cristóbal, Altamirano, Ocosingo, and Las Margaritas. By now, too, the military's treatment of the Indians had improved, and the latter were becoming more vocal about the hardships and abuses (especially forced recruitment) of guerrilla rule. For their part, the Zapatistas seemed increasingly divorced from those whom they purported to represent. After May, they virtually dropped their socioeconomic demands, calling instead on Mexican "civil society" to rise up and demand national political reform.⁶³

The culmination of this shift was the convocation of a "National Democratic Convention" in Chiapas in early August. The gathering, part of which was held in Marcos' jungle hideout, was attended by several thousand representatives from a broad spectrum of left-wing groups. Proclaiming the PRI "the common enemy of us all," the delegates called for a nationwide campaign of civil disobedience to push the ruling party from power.

On election day, however, the voters cast their ballots overwhelmingly for Zedillo and the PRI. Though the process was not free from irregularities, the magnitude of the victory was such as to leave little doubt as to who had won. The Mexican people might be unhappy with the PRI's long record of authoritarianism, corruption and violence-or for that matter with the weak state of the economy-but they were unwilling to risk more instability and violence by turning power over to the opposition. The events of the preceding 8 months had left deep insecurities in the national psyche. Mexicans were not yet ready to make such a transition.⁶⁴

The election results left the Zapatistas in a difficult position. Obviously, the Mexican people did not reject the existing system and did not support the kind of violence that the EZLN represented, even when they were sympathetic to many of its proclaimed objectives. (Significantly, the presidential candidate favored by most of the delegates to the "National Democratic Convention"-Cárdenas-had finished a poor third. Moreover, in Chiapas the PRI gubernatorial candidate had handily defeated the candidate favored by the Zapatistas. Subsequently, the EZLN refused to recognize the validity of that election and threatened to resume fighting if the governor-elect assumed office.) For the moment, at least, the PRI had snatched the cloak of legitimacy away from the rebels, and it was by no means clear that they could recapture it.

The critical question that remains unanswered is whether the Zapatistas will carry out their threats to resume fighting. Certainly, it would be difficult-if not impossible-for them to regain the moral high ground they had held the previous January. (Even many of their supporters have balked at the leadership's militant challenge to the gubernatorial election results.) Nor would they any longer have the strategic advantage of surprise. Indeed, over the preceding months the Mexican army, with some 20,000 troops in Chiapas,⁶⁵ had carefully surrounded the

Zapatista forces in the Lacandona jungle, leaving the Guatemalan border as the only possible escape route. Given the limited resources of the guerrillas, a resumption of their offensive would likely prove suicidal.

As for the threat of "other Chiapas" in states like Veracruz and Guerrero, where there have been reports of guerrilla activity, one can only speculate. Most of these accounts are sketchy. The numbers and viability of these groups remain very much in doubt. Where they exist at all--and some of them are probably nothing more than rumor--they appear to be small, based on local land disputes, and lacking a national political agenda.⁶⁶

And so we are left with a classic Mexican standoff. Thus far, at least, the military has been willing to play a waiting game and avoid subjecting itself to more accusations of human rights violations. It continues to stand behind the government's negotiation strategy and seems unlikely to attack the Zapatistas unless provoked. The latter have also exhibited caution. Notwithstanding some of their rhetoric, they clearly understand that they are in a very weak position militarily; thus, their shift away from a military strategy to a political strategy based on public relations and popular mobilization.

The problem, however, is that the strategy does not seem to be going anywhere. The rebels are increasingly isolated and trapped. Unable to move forward and unwilling to surrender, they risk being indefinitely consigned to limbo. Still, as long as the deadlock continues, the potential for violence remains. There is a streak of martyrdom in the Latin American political culture that could very well be activated by prolonged frustration. Moreover, the army and the guerrillas are not the only potentially explosive elements in the equation. Since January, traditional local elites have seen their properties and power threatened as never before. They are angry, afraid and prone to violence. Many are not above taking the law into their own hands to recapture stolen cattle or occupied properties. Some may even be tempted to provoke a resumption of all-out war in the hope that the army may help them retrieve their losses.

Thus, the need to defuse the conflict by bringing the rebels in from the cold. One of the priority tasks of the Zedillo administration should be to explore ways to coopt the Zapatistas and their supporters, both economically and politically. On the one hand, that means fulfilling the promises that have been made to alleviate the poverty and desperation that drove so many *chiapanecos* to support the guerrillas. On the other, it means reforming state and local power structures to assure the rule of law and the access of those who have been shut out of the system. Nor are these requirements limited to Chiapas, for there are many other areas of rural Mexico with comparable problems which, if neglected, may lead to social explosions.

Finally, it is imperative that the process of national political reform be deepened and consolidated. On this point—even if not on all of their specific demands—the Zapatistas are quite right. Without democratization, other gains will likely prove ephemeral, since what can be so easily given can also be taken away. Here, then, may be the rebels' ultimate contribution: that at a critical moment in Mexican history they forced reform on a reluctant president and an even more reluctant political system. On the other side of the ledger, the Mexican army has done its part to keep the system afloat and restore an environment of stability and security. But whether these developments will be enduring or merely a passing illusion remains to be seen. On that issue rests the future of Mexico.

ENDNOTES

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14. Harvey, "Rebellion in Chiapas," p. 11; Luis Hernández, "The New Mayan War," p. 9.
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