

African American Communication and Conflict Resolution:

A New Dialogue

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Bowling Green State University

1995
B. AUBREY FISHER
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I am delighted to be here tonight at the University of Utah and am honored to participate in the series of annual lectures which serve to celebrate the memory of Professor B. Aubrey Fisher.

The subject of my address is conflict resolution in inter-ethnic dialogue with an emphasis on African American and white American communication. When I first provided Professor Mark McPhail (from the Department of Communication) with this topic several months ago, I never imagined the heightened relevance that such a discussion would have and that I would be speaking to an audience on this subject a mere three weeks following the O.J. Simpson verdict (October 3, 1995) and less than ten days following the Million Man March on Washington, D.C. (October 16, 1995). I must say that the opportunity to speak before you on this topic in light of these two events is both daunting and challenging: daunting, in that any attempt to interpret the meaning of these events may be easily thwarted by their complexity; and challenging, because any steps that we might take toward illuminating the current situation of race relations in the U.S. will be worthy of our efforts as scholars and researchers in the

academy. My work in the area of intercultural communication has long been guided by the practical concern that research on African American communication should assist the practitioner in improving relationships between African and white Americans. As the divisions in our society grow wider, the kind of discussion we will

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have here together tonight takes on a new urgency.

The goal of this lecture is to examine African American communication from the perspective of inter-ethnic

communication; in particular, inter-ethnic communication between African Americans and members of the dominant U.S. culture; that is, white Americans. I will attempt throughout my talk to illuminate the theory which I present with examples drawn from the two above-mentioned events being played out on the contempo-

rary scene. I will consider both the reactions to the Simpson verdict and the Million Man March as examples of inter-ethnic "conflict episodes."

On one level, the March may be viewed as a communication event with intended interaction with the dominant, mainstream U.S. culture. Its genre as a "demonstration" illustrates this fact as does the organizers' choice of location; that is, it was held on the Washington Mall which functions symbolically as the center of the American Establishment with its

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s p e a k e r s addressing participants from the steps of the Capitol. At another level, the March was organized as an intra-ethnic event which called upon all African American

males in the U.S. to participate. Journalists described the event as a kind of "ethnic revival" and while the March functioned as a witness to the divisions and estrangements within U.S. society, it also functioned at the intra-ethnic group level as a celebration of community solidarity.

It should be noted that I define "ethnicity" here as shared heritage and an ethnic group as a self-perceived community of people who hold a common set of traditions not shared by those with whom they are in contact.¹ I define "conflict episodes" as situations whereby goals or values held by one group are thwarted or challenged by another.

I will now proceed according to the following outline. First, I will define communication in relation to ethnic identity and culture and extrapolate from this

definition that communication is, by nature, problematic. The remainder of the discussion will serve to explore the nature of problematic communication as it is demonstrated in inter-ethnic communication between African Americans and white Americans. In order to do so, I will first examine African American communication styles and norms as they are expressed in relation to intra-group interaction. Next, I will evaluate these norms and communication styles according to their appropriateness and efficacy for inter-ethnic communication with white Americans. Finally, I will suggest conversational improvement strategies that might prove effective in aligning or re-aligning the communication process in the event of a conflict episode or failure event.²

Methodologically, my approach to the investigation of African American ethnic identity and communication style may be described as an "interpretive" approach which focuses on African Americans' own perspectives and how group members conceptualize their ethnic identity and inter-ethnic interactions. Using this approach, interactants self-report on their perceptions and experiences. By collecting and analyzing African American descriptions and evaluations of

METHODOLOGICALLY, MY APPROACH TO THE INVESTIGATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ETHNIC IDENTITY AND COMMUNICATION STYLE MAY BE DESCRIBED AS AN "INTERPRETIVE" APPROACH. identity and communication we may come to understand better the social processes that loom

large before us. In my research over the past eleven years with several colleagues in the field of Communication, I have used interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and surveys in order to interpret ethnic group members' own perceptions of ethnocultural communication patterns.³

PART 1

The Relationship between Communication and Culture

Communication and Ethnic Identity

Given that all communication exists in a cultural context, it is necessary to delineate the ethnocultural aspects of communication. Historically, politically and socially, African Americans occupy a unique position within U.S. society. Their history includes slavery and segregation, the migration north, and the civil rights and Black Power movements. Their political past involves voter disenfranchisement and separation from formal channels of power and their economic life may be characterized as disadvantaged compared to white Americans of comparable skills and training. African American culture is also socially distinctive, including a unique language/dialect, nonverbal and verbal style, and patterns of interaction. Structural, cultural, ethnic, and social distinctions thus define the African American experience and lead us to argue that African Americans constitute an ethnic culture. Ethnicity and culture thus become the frames through which we view African American communication in order to understand their experience of social reality and articulate their perspective on appropriate and effective communication.

Communication provides a unique focus by emphasizing the points of interaction through which ethnic culture is created and confirmed. These interactions, however, must be understood in the wider context of related disciplines. For example, one cannot fully understand power as it is communicated in African American ethnic culture without placing it in the historical context of victimization and discrimination derived from historical, politi-

cal, anthropological and sociological studies. Although communication is an essential aspect of culture, nonetheless we must keep in mind that ethnic culture is historically and socially emergent. This view is in sharp contrast to an "essentialist" perspective of ethnic identity. In contrast to an essentialist position, I hold the view that identity is shaped historically and socially and that ethnic identity can change; that is, a people's history is dynamic — it is a trajectory composed of both tradition and novelty.

Communication as Problematic

Furthermore, due to the fact that culture must be communicated and that we must, through discourse, negotiate a plethora of meanings and identities, we are led to an understanding of communication as "problematic." This

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view assumes that communication is a problematic part of cultural affiliation although not as caused or predicted by that affiliation. Communication is problematic because there are few "givens" or "taken for granted." As a result, specific instances of communication even among those within

the same cultural group membership are, more often than not, problematic.⁴ This process is further complicated when the persons are from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. When interactants do not share the same ethnic culture, appropriateness and effectiveness are even more problematic. For example, American and Japanese co-workers each make choices about language, nonverbal behaviors, dress, conflict management, strategies, and level of disclosure and then relationally negotiate conversational choices such as turn taking, speaking time, topic, and intimacy.⁵

PART II Communicative Competence

Situationally Defined Norms of Communication in Intra-Ethnic Communication

The conceptualization of communication as problematic changes the way communication competence traditionally has been viewed. When communication is conceptualized as problematic, the focus moves away from universal, generalized definitions of competence/incompetence toward an emphasis on the ongoing management of conversations. The fundamental areas of interest move from lists of competence skills to identification of the problematic issues that emerge in conversations and the moment-by-moment strategies used to deal with these issues. When we conceptualize communication as problematic, norms of communication are implicitly and explicitly negotiated as individuals relate to one another. Appropriate behavior is consistent with situational demands and sanctioned by the response.

Traditional theories of communi-

cation usually begin with an analysis of communication "competence" and a list of skills which demonstrates competence is provided. Let me offer an example. A key communication skill which is traditionally viewed as essential to communicative competence is referred to as "other orientation."⁶ Other orientation is treated as a communication competence skill and is included on most complete lists of how to be a good communicator. My research with Hecht and Collier (1993) shows, however, that in inter-ethnic communication between African and white Americans, white Americans who express other orientation through the introduction of "black topics" when speaking to African Americans often communicate the perception of stereotyping and/or patronizing behavior. When communication is viewed as problematic we move away from a general and universal definition of competence skills and emphasize the ongoing management of conversations. We move away from lists of competence skills to the identification of problematic issues that emerge in conversations and the moment-to-moment strategies used to deal with these issues. According to this perspective, in order to accurately portray communicative competence we need to identify the issues that African Americans find problematic in their interactions with other members of their own ethnic group and then with white Americans (and *vice versa* for white Americans).

Since norms for appropriateness are selected based on culturally informed criteria, it is important to identify intra-

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group communication norms for African Americans as well as to

examine group members' own perceptions of strategies which would be appropriate and effective for inter-ethnic interaction. To this end, the following is a description of the results of my own research with Hecht and Collier (1993).

First of all, the use of "Black English" is a prominent feature of African American communication. Although African Americans constitute a pluralistic

speech communication community in which regional and social class differences are evident, nonetheless, within this diversity, a creole language or dialect (commonly referred to as "Black English") has been identified as a distinctive characteristic of African American ethnic culture. Black English was created by African slaves as they merged their native African language with English. Due to this lan-

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guage difference, there is a need to switch between their own cultural language code and that of the dominant society in inter-ethnic communication. This phenomenon is referred to as "code" or

"style" switching and African Americans demonstrate this language mobility in their selective use of Black English and mainstream American English depending on the situation. Among the throngs of people who greeted one another during the Million Man March, this kind of code-switching was evident as African Americans from all classes and walks of life intermingled during this major in-group event.

Our research also shows that intra-group conversations among African Americans are likely to include the use of slang, lots of laughter, in-group gestures, and other behaviors of assumed intimacy. In inter-ethnic communication with white Americans, however, African Americans demonstrate restraint and emphasize the proper use of mainstream American English grammar. Studies show that from the perspective of white American interactants, African Americans who are able to adopt more "culture-general" (i.e. dominant culture) discourse strategies are perceived more positively.

Another aspect of African American communication is an emphasis on oral tradition. African American com-

munication often exhibits elements borrowed from a "preaching style." This style of communication was evident in the speeches of Louis Farrakhan during the Million Man March on Washington and in Jesse Jackson's rhetorical style as well. During the O.J. Simpson trial, defense lawyer Johnnie Cochran frequently exhibited this distinctive African American communication style. Performance and narrative are also important aspects of the African American oral tradition and provide an opportunity for the display of assertiveness among African Americans.

Collier (1988) has identified several general norms of communication in relation to intra-ethnic interpersonal communication style among African Americans.⁷ Supportiveness, expressiveness, respect for the individual, intimacy, and an appreciation of a shared culture are all highly valued. An emphasis on the family and close relationships as well as on the giving and receiving of advice is also evident.

I noted above that the recent Million Man March on Washington may be viewed as both an intra-ethnic and an inter-ethnic communication process. At the intra-ethnic level, the March illustrates many of the communication styles and norms which have been described above. Consider the following description of the event as reported in the *The Washington Post*:

*The Mall, America's meeting place, was overcome yesterday with the sights, sounds, and spirit of a community renewing itself in a daylong, myth-shattering celebration of smiling faces, slapping hands, upbeat voices, hugs and goodwill.*⁸

And furthermore:

They were decked out in business suits and dashikis, baseball caps and kufis, braids and Afros. Dreadlocks fluttered in the breeze.

They waved flags from Africa and the Caribbean and unfurled the Islamic star and crescent from atop the classical statues near the Capitol. They beat drums, praised Jesus, worshipped Allah, raised exultant fists in the air, and napped in the sun, leaning back-to-back against each other to recover lost sleep.

And finally:

Sun glinted off the Capital dome, rising in the background like a promise. Tears welled in the eyes of Samuel Herbert, a cancer research technician from Buffalo. Around him was a sea of black men and black culture free of the myths so prevalent in American society. Herbert said: "I have never been so proud as I am today."

The communication styles described above indicate an intra-ethnic group event which is both highly expressive and supportive of all interactants. Furthermore, a high level of sharing of a common culture is evident, along with respect for the individual. And although the Million Man March on Washington was organized with the exclusion of African American females, many male participants traveled to Washington with their sons or daughters in tow thus demonstrating the value in the African American community of sharing one's life with close interpersonal relations. In summary, the Million Man March exhibited group pride, a shared identity and culture, and a strong sense of togetherness and bonding in mutual support.

At the same time that the March demonstrated a spirit of solidarity among the African American community, the March also witnessed to the divisions and estrangements within U.S. society. This leads us to the examination of reactions to the March from the perspective of an inter-ethnic communication event. Prior to this examination, however, it is important to describe the issues which African Americans identify as important to satisfactory inter-ethnic communications with white Americans.

Situationally Defined Norms of Communication in Inter-Ethnic Communication

In my own research with Hecht and Collier (1993) seven primary issues emerged which African Americans perceived as salient to their communication satisfaction in inter-ethnic communication with white Americans: (i) acceptance; (ii) authenticity; (iii) emotional expressiveness; (iv) negative stereotyping; (v) understanding; (vi) goal attainment; and (vii) powerlessness.

Three of the positive ideals of communication satisfaction for inter-ethnic communication described above (acceptance, emotional expressiveness, and understanding) reflect the norms for communication satisfaction which African Americans seek to fulfill in their own intra-group conversations. For example, one of the more powerful media accounts of the Million Man March describes this ideal communication event as follows:

A day of spontaneous embraces, public tears and straight-in-the-eye greetings — the opposite of the nervous, sidelong glances that some men said they customarily employ to avoid confrontation.

Unfortunately, negative stereotyping and powerlessness are often the more prominent features affecting inter-ethnic communication satisfaction in the African American experience. For example, reactions to the impending March among public service employees in the nation's capital included fears of violence with crowds of African American males converging on Washington. Media accounts of the event were quick to note that the March was turning out to be a "peaceful" expression of solidarity. Journalists reported fears that a gathering of so many black men in one place might lead to violence and many whites in the Washington area expressed private reservations about the safety of going downtown during the day. Many media observers of the event noted that the March was important in order to chal-

lenge negative stereotypes of black men.

Given that the ideals of communication satisfaction in inter-ethnic relations are often out of reach, it is important next to examine conversational improvement strategies as efforts to adjust or change the conversational flow.

Conversational Improvement Strategies

Just as communication norms should be identified as situation-specific, conversational improvement strategies should also arise from specific communication situations. In my research with Hecht and Collier (1993), African American interactants identified six strategies which are used to improve inter-ethnic communication. At the same time Hecht, Collier, and I expanded the list

to include conversational improvement strategies that we, as researchers, identified from our own observations. These include: (i) assertion of point of view; (ii) positive self-presentation; (iii) openness and

friendliness; (iv) avoidance; (v) interaction management (e.g. take turns, work toward a compromise); (vi) other orientation; (vii) inform/educate (e.g. provide more information); (viii) internal management (i.e. the ability to handle one's own internal response); (ix) confrontation (e.g. confront stereotyping); (x) treat as individual (i.e. equality category); (xi) express genuineness (i.e. "be real"); and (xii) employ language management (e.g. refrain from using unfamiliar jargon). If effectively employed, these strategies might diffuse potential conflict situations and obviate the need for formal resolution techniques.

While studies in the field indicate that African Americans use assertion as a communication style in intra-group processes, the research suggests that the use of assertion as a communication norm in inter-ethnic communication is largely absent. The Million Man March on Washington, however, might be viewed as an act of group self-assertion and therefore evaluated as a conversational improvement strategy. As I noted above, the media responded to this act of self-assertion by the African American community in a positive way, so that we might assess this communication improvement strategy as being highly effective in this situation.

In a speech before the University of Texas at Austin on the same day of the Million Man March on Washington, President Bill Clinton responded to this group act of self-assertion with a major address on race relations. President Clinton articulated for the nation the racialized reactions to both the Simpson verdict and the Million Man March. He stated the following:

In recent weeks every one of us has been made aware of a simple truth. White Americans and black Americans often see the same world in drastically different ways. Ways that go beyond and beneath the Simpson trial and its aftermath, which brought these perceptions so starkly into the open.

The President eloquently described the rift we see before us in black-white relations in this country today. Furthermore, he appealed to a "history of racism" which is now "so clearly out in the open." He spoke of a history in the African American community of abuses which extend from

lynchings
and trumped up charges to false arrests and police brutality.

"THE WOUNDS HAVE BEEN DEEP. THE PIT HAS BEEN DARK. THE WALLS HAVE BEEN STEEP."

MAYA ANGELOU

He spoke of the tragedies of Emmett Till and Rodney King. He conceded that "still today, too many of our police officers play by the rules of the bad old days." Whereas

many in the media had portrayed the African American community as “duped by Johnnie Cochran into letting O.J. go,” Clinton recognized in his speech the reality of the history which has shaped the identity and experiences of the African American community in relation to the judicial system and law enforcement.

For Clinton, “communication satisfaction” in relation to the inter-ethnic conflict between black and white Americans would be met if “white Americans were to

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION ALSO REQUIRES THAT INTERACTANTS BE MOTIVATED TO COMMUNICATE AND HAVE KNOWLEDGE OF THE SITUATION.

acknowledge blacks’ pain and black Americans would understand white fear.” This statement of the problemat-

ic is echoed by Cornell West, professor of African American Studies at Harvard University when he states:

*The demonstration is about matters much bigger than he [Farrakhan] is. I have in mind the general invisibility of, and indifference to, black sadness, sorrow and social misery, and the disrespect and disregard in which blacks are held in America and abroad. We agree on highlighting black suffering.*⁹

In a similar vein, poet Maya Angelou addressed the crowd on the steps of the Capital on Monday, October 16, calling for African American men to “clasp hands” and come together with these words:

The wounds have been deep. The pit has been dark. The walls have been steep.

It is important to stress that the pain of African Americans has its roots in unequal treatment at the hands of the law and in terms of opportunities to pursue the American Dream. Andrew Hacker, professor of political science and author of *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (1992) describes well the divisions of color and class in 1990s America.¹⁰ Hacker addresses the specific problems that constitute our racially constructed society: crime, unemployment, drugs, illiteracy, teenage pregnancy, and

so on as he elucidates why rage about race is closer to the surface now than at any time in the history of post-World War II America.

President Clinton’s use of the metaphor of the “Great Divide” in his October 16 speech to describe ethnic relations among African Americans and white Americans is a good description of the cultural chasm which separates black and white Americans. We need to be aware of the complexities of life in a segregated America and the elements that fundamentally shape people’s lives. The African American community negotiates the challenges of daily life in a context of institutional racism and discrimination which is communicated in both subtle and overt ways.¹¹

Finally, beyond having a repertoire of requisite communication skills, effective communication also requires that interactants be motivated to communicate and have knowledge of the situation. Furthermore, members of different ethnic communities are often dissimilar in their willingness to shift their norms in order to adjust to the ethnicity of their conversational partners. The question needs to be raised as to “who should do the adjusting” in situations of failure events or conflict episodes. With the great power differential in American society, members of the mainstream culture have often assumed that other groups would adjust to their style. Where adjustment is made in the face of communication conflict, it will consist of a range of behaviors which include strategies to change the environment, exit from the interaction, or the application of communicative strategies to deal with problematic issues. It is important to note, once again, that these behaviors will be selected based on culturally informed criteria and norms of appropriateness. Studies show that, all too often, avoidance and other orientation are the preferred modes of communicating in events of inter-ethnic conflict. The strategy of avoidance usually means exiting from the interaction and the strategy of other orientation usually means that we expect the other party (parties) in the conversation to assume responsibility for resolving the conflict.

Conclusion

There are many ways to view conflict resolution whether it be from a management perspective, a legal/jurisprudence perspective, through political or sociological analysis, or according to psychological theory. The view that I have presented here tonight has focused on conflict resolution from a communication perspective.

I have attempted to demonstrate how a particular theory of communication might illuminate our understanding of the conflict resolution process cross-culturally. First, I have defined communication as an expression of ethnic identity. Furthermore, as communication seeks to express cultural meaning and identity it presents itself as fundamentally problematic. Through this identification of communication as problematic, I have emphasized the general nature of all communication as oriented-toward-conflict (with application to both intra-group and inter-ethnic group communication). Second, I have identified communicative norms and described how they emerge from the ethnic identity of group members according to situation-specific criteria of appropriateness. Third, I have attempted to identify potential problematic events that might arise in inter-ethnic communication and explored possible strategies for conversational improvement.

Notes

¹ G.A. DeVos and L. Romanucci-Ross, editors, *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

² "Conflict" understood from the perspective of communication theory may be described in terms of a "failure event." Speech *divergence* rather than *convergence* leads to a failure event. In African American-white American communication interactions, if interactants do not share common knowledge, motivation, and styles then conversational effectiveness is problematic. Such speech divergence may be viewed as a failure event.

³ Michael L. Hecht, Mary Jane Collier, and Sidney A. Ribeau, *African American Communication: Ethnic Identity and Cultural Interpretation*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993.

⁴ N. Coupland, J.M. Wiemann, and H. Giles, "Talk as Problem and Communication as 'Miscommunication': An Integrative Analysis," in N. Coupland, H. Giles, and J. M. Wiemann, editors, *Miscommunication and Problematic Talk*, Newbury Park: CA, Sage, 1991, 1-17.

⁵ G. Gudykunst, editor, *Intercultural Communication Theory: Current Perspectives*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983, 21-44.

⁶ B.H. Spitzberg and M.L. Hecht, "A Component Model of Relational Competence," in *Human Communication Research* 10 (1984), 575-600.

⁷ Mary Jane Collier, "A Comparison of Intracultural and Intercultural Communication among Acquaintances: How Intra- and Intercultural Competencies Vary," in *Communication Quarterly*, 36 (1988), 122-144.

⁸ "A Sea of Black Males Swells with Pride," *The Washington Post*, October 17, 1995.
⁹ *New York Times*, October 14, 1995.

¹⁰ Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992.

¹¹ T. A. van Dijk, *Communicating Racism: Ethnic Prejudice in Thought and Talk*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987.

B. Aubrey Fisher

B. Aubrey Fisher served as a faculty member in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah from 1971 to 1986. He began his professional career as a high school teacher and radio announcer in South Dakota. After receiving his Masters and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Minnesota, he spent four years on the faculty at the University of Missouri.

Professor Fisher was a prominent scholar in interpersonal communication and communication theory. His published work includes three books and more than 35 articles and book chapters. He was considered one of the most notable and influential communication scholars of his time. He held numerous offices in professional organizations, including President of the Western Speech Communication Association, President of the International Communication Association and Editor of the *Western Speech Communication Journal*.

The B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture was established by the Department of Communication in 1986 to recognize Professor Fisher's outstanding achievements and to provide a forum for presenting original research and theory in communication.

Sidney A. Ribeau

In April 1995 Sidney A. Ribeau was selected as the ninth president of Bowling Green State University. He served previously as the Vice President for Academic Affairs, California State Polytechnic University at San Luis Obispo; as Dean for Undergraduate Studies, California State Polytechnic University at San Bernardino; and as Professor of Communication Studies and Chair of the Pan African Studies Department at the California State Polytechnic University.

A native of Detroit Dr. Ribeau received his B.S. from Wayne State University and M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Illinois. His research interests range from public discourse to race relations, higher education issues, popular culture and educational reform. His audiences have included community groups, professional organizations, churches, schools and colleges. His work has been published in such journals as the *Journal of Black Studies*, *Communication Monographs* and the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. He is co-author with Michael Hecht and Mary Jane Collier of *African American Communication: Ethnic Identity and Cultural Interpretation*.

In addition to an extensive background in university administration, strategic planning, faculty development, fund raising, program planning, and university relations, Dr. Ribeau has continued to teach and make scholarly contributions in the areas of intercultural communication, African-American culture and relational communication. His work offers an integrative vision of communication and culture, exploring the importance of recognizing human diversity, and emphasizing the role of symbolic interaction in the creation of social cooperation. In summer 1994 he delivered the keynote address, "I, Too, Dream America," at the Chautauqua Institute in New York.

Last but not least, Dr. Ribeau is recognized as a fine human being. As John Laskey, president of Bowling Green State University's Board of Trustees observed: "He has a warm and easy manner that portrays the confidence he has in himself. I think Dr. Ribeau will not only do things right — he will also do the right things. That is a leader."

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1993
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1994
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1995
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