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The Taming of the News: How Mass Media Affect U.S. Foreign Policy

by Dave Campbell

There is an old axiom among members of the media: All local news is news and all foreign news is foreign. While obviously overstated, this saying neatly summarizes the long-standing perception about how the American public views foreign news. Conventional wisdom has held that owing to this seeming indifference, policy makers (particularly the executive branch) were free to formulate foreign policy without much input from public opinion. They needed only to keep policy within the very broad parameters deemed acceptable by the American public (Kelleher 1994, 235).

The question to be considered in this paper is whether the ubiquity of mass media with heavy foreign news coverage like the Cable News Network (CNN), has changed how U.S. foreign policy is made. In answering the question, the utility of a model developed by O'Heffernan (1991) will be evaluated. O'Heffernan's model appears useful because it takes into account two aspects of television's possible effect on foreign policy:

• the concept labeled "pictures driving policy" (Siegel 1993, 13). This phenomenon allegedly results from graphic scenes like those from Bosnia or Somalia broadcast on television, driving public opinion which then influences the decisions made regarding U.S. action abroad.

• the immediate information available through real-time media like CNN to foreign policy makers themselves.

In brief, O'Heffernan's model proposes that (1) the media add new information, rapidly, both to what the public and elite know about foreign policy issues, particularly crises; (2) the media give high profile to nongovernmental organizations and even individuals as they report on foreign affairs; and (3) the media introduce a broader range of goals and criteria than previously considered when making foreign policy decisions (1991, 91). Following O'Heffernan's lead, for the purposes of this paper mass media will be defined as both newspapers and television.

To evaluate this model two case studies will be compared—the 1965 U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic and the 1994 U.S. intervention in Haiti.

Exposition

Before gauging the utility of O'Heffernan's model, it is necessary to review first the longstanding norms of academic opinion regarding the media's influence on the foreign policy process and then what seem to be recent changes in this opinion.

The landmark work on this subject is generally considered to be Bernard Cohen's 1963 book The Press and Foreign Policy (Taylor 1994). In his book Cohen paints a picture of an almost symbiotic relationship between key newspaper journalists and chief foreign policy makers. As Cohen saw it, prominent columnists and reporters could influence policy as "actors in the process, trying to influence the opinions of both the public and the government official" (1963, 39). Conversely, the media was also seen as an "instrument of government" (28), publishing information fed to them by high-level contacts in the State Department or White House.

The general public was viewed by journalists and policy makers as uninterested in the workings of foreign policy. Following World War Two foreign policy scholars like Cohen came to a consensus, based on the writings of Gabriel Almond and Walter Lippmann, that the general public knew little about foreign policy and policy makers cared little about how the general public felt regarding foreign affairs (Holsti 1992). Instead, scholars spoke of an "attentive public," a small percentage of the electorate who pay attention to foreign news sources like the New York Times, and offer opinions to those who formulate American foreign policy. This attentive public in turn influenced the opinions of the mass public, in what is generally labeled the "two-step" model of communication (Flanigan and Zingale 1994, 145).

With the rise of satellite-linked television services, and the overwhelming pervasiveness of
mass media outlets, these assumptions have begun to be re-evaluated.

It is clear that more and more Americans rely on television images as their international frame; the widening availability of CNN and other "instant reality" channels suggests this trend will continue. . . . The result may well be both oversimplification and a higher average level of information among attentive publics. There is clearly also a far greater emotional impact on the public as a whole. (Kelleher 1994, 233)

What Kelleher calls the emotional impact of television news is what has received the most attention of late. From the live broadcasts of Peter Arnett in Baghdad during the Persian Gulf War to coverage this April of bombs falling on a Sarajevo market, every strata of the American public is able now to experience what goes on across the sea like never before. Television is a visual medium, and images can evoke powerful responses:

More than print or radio, television news—especially as practiced with the more and more vivid and dramatic techniques of the 1970s and 1980s—provoke[s] an intense and often passionate reaction to foreign issues. (Beschloss 1994, 40)

Foreign news now receives more prominence in both the print media and on television than ever before, partly because twenty-four hour a day media outlets like CNN have a lot of time to fill, but also to a large extent because the technology now exists to broadcast events from around the globe as they happen. Newspapers too now have the capability to "receive typeset copy and digitized photographs by satellite around the world, enabling them to print same-day editions with current news" (O'Heffernan 1991, 4). It seems that more and more Americans are privy to foreign policy news, available with little effort. In 1963 Cohen estimated that the average American spent two and one third minutes reading foreign news (251). At the time, only 29 percent of Americans considered television a credible source for international news (Beschloss 1994, 39). Times have changed. In 1980, 51 percent of Americans found television news to be the most credible source for news, while the network news featured an average of ten minutes a night of foreign news (ibid.). In 1989, 25.4 percent of the American public reported watching CNN within the last seven days (Stanley and Niemi 1992, 54). This fact is particularly significant for this discussion because CNN "is deeply committed to international news coverage" (Beschloss 1994, 40).

With data like this in mind, many have now called into question whether the Almond-Lippmann view of a public largely unaware of foreign news is still accurate (Holsti 1992). Due to the ubiquity of television, the public may not necessarily be more intrinsically interested in foreign affairs but may be more aware of it. While her thoughts are by no means conventional wisdom among academics, Kelleher claims that:

Almost every general foreign policy survey shows the public is increasingly well informed about global issues, devotes attention to evolving international events, and has clear opinions on most major foreign and defense policy questions. (1994, 235)

In light of what appears to be a radical shift in the salience of foreign news in America owing to the mass media, a new model to explain the relationship between media coverage of foreign matters and foreign policy decisions seems needed. In reference to advances in the technology used by the mass media, Snow and Brown have written:

In subtle ways that neither practitioners nor theoreticians yet understand, these advances are changing the international affairs that are the substance of foreign and defense policy, as well as the way policy is made. (1994, 227)

Considering this perceived lack of understanding, let us turn to an analysis of a new theoretical framework specifically developed in contradistinction to Cohen's conclusions, that of O'Heffernan.

Analysis

O'Heffernan's model is far too extensive to deal with completely here. For the sake of space, this paper will address only how the media provide input to the foreign policy process. Areas left unexplored include how the government uses the media as an outlet to persuade the public to support policy and how real-time television coverage (CNN especially) has changed the once fairly closed and deliberative world of diplomacy.

Media as a source of information

Perhaps the most apparent effect of the mass media's foreign news coverage is the sheer amount of information they make available. As Cohen saw it, the media relied on government sources exclusively for most of their foreign news. While today's media certainly still rely on information supplied by policy makers (apparent
in the Persian Gulf War), they are also able to shoot video, take pictures, and write stories at the scene of a foreign story, crisis or otherwise. Only with the technology available in the last few years--satellite hook-ups, miniaturized television cameras, etc.--has this been possible.

Turning to the comparison between the Dominican Republic invasion in 1965 and the Haiti intervention of 1994, we can see how technology has changed the manner in which the media cover foreign stories. The comparison between these two military invasions is particularly suited to this study for a number of reasons. They both involve approximately the same number of U.S. troops, twenty thousand (Collins 1991, 155). Both nations share the island of Hispaniola, and are therefore the same distance from U.S. borders. While the circumstances surrounding the two interventions are not identical, they both involve an American force landing in a small Caribbean nation to ensure the installation of a government friendly to the U.S. In 1965 the U.S. was worried that the Dominican Republic would fall to Marxist revolutionaries; in 1994 the U.S. was ostensibly worried about human rights violations by the Cedras regime. Beyond these broad similarities, there is an important difference between these two invasions. In 1965, the technology needed to link continents with TV signals bounced off of a satellite was only in its infancy. Ironically, the first test of such a system occurred five days after the U.S. troops landed in the Dominican Republic (Gould 1965, A1).

Without today's technology allowing for real-time broadcasting, the media were forced, as Cohen's model suggests, to rely upon the American Ambassador to the Dominican Republic for information. In retrospect, the information provided was highly inaccurate; the crisis was terribly exaggerated.

When the correspondents were finally allowed to visit the cities and countryside, they discovered that none of the horror stories that they had reported were true. Instead of the 1,000 and 1,500 bodies which, according to President Johnson, had made the intervention imperative, there were fewer than a dozen. (Graber 1984, 324)

Contrast this with Haiti. There the networks had set up broadcast equipment days before the U.S. troops landed. As one example, CNN had four locations in the tiny country from which it could transmit video. In the words of David Bohrman, an executive with NBC News, "This is the first event of this kind where the news organizations are not relying on the military for primary access. If the invasion is in Port-au-Prince, we'll see all there is to see" (Carter 1994, A8). There is little doubt that President Clinton wanted to avoid the broadcast of U.S. troops either getting shot or shooting others, providing impetus for the Carter-Nunn-Powell delegation to negotiate with Haiti's ruling junta and avoid a bloody invasion.

The first aspect of such media saturation is that the public knows more about the effects of foreign policy decisions made, and perhaps most significantly, can see more of those effects than at any time in the past. Recent research has shown that, contrary to Cohen's description of the limited effect public attitudes have on foreign policy decisions, contemporary policy makers do heed what they perceive public opinion to be. Having conducted extensive interviews with officials from both the State Department and the National Security Council, Powlick concluded in 1991 that there is "virtually a cultural norm within the foreign policy bureaucracy, that the best policy is one which accounts for public opinion" (625). Lloyd Cutler, White House counsel to both Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, has repudiated the Almond-Lippmann consensus (upon which Cohen based his work) that the opinions of only a select few in the electorate are considered when foreign policy is made.

To sustain its foreign and national security policies, an administration must not merely satisfy the minority of print readers who care about such issues, it must now satisfy the entire national television audience as well. This is especially true of policies that place U.S. forces at risk. (1984, 114)

More recently, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake has admitted that engagement of U.S. troops does depend on public pressure (Hoge 1994, 138-39).

Thus far, I have attempted to demonstrate that blanket media coverage of foreign news has affected mass U.S. public opinion, which is then taken into consideration by policy makers. Another implication of the constant barrage of new information provided by the mass media is that foreign policy makers themselves are often directly affected by what they see. In a questionnaire administered to top policy makers in the Reagan administration, 83 percent said that "they knew first or second hand of a case where
TV directly impacted policy by providing information that either contradicted official information or provided a visual element so powerful it affected policy officials who saw it" (O'Heffernan 1991, 73). Of that 83 percent, most commented that what they saw was broadcast on the network news or CNN.

With both policy makers and the public being saturated with so much information, O'Heffernan has identified a "fast-forward effect." No longer can policy makers have a time frame like the six days President Kennedy had during the Cuban Missile Crisis to mull decisions over. Instead, decisions must be made rapidly as new information becomes available. In looking at the Haiti intervention we have seen a textbook case of this "high speed" policy making. Originally, the troops sent to Haiti were under strict orders not to become a police force. This led to the spectacle on television of U.S. troops standing idle while Haitian police brutally beat Haitian civilians. Predictably, after only a few days of such pictures being beamed into America's homes, the Clinton administration quickly changed the policy. The troops were instructed to halt such atrocities. Referring to coverage of U.S. soldiers being unable to stop Haitian-on-Haitian violence, one White House aide said "four or five nights of it on television would have undone us politically" (Jehl 1994, A1). Note that the decision to change the policy was made after U.S. forces had been in Haiti for only a few days. In the Dominican Republic incident, the decision to send troops was based on what is now generally considered to be bogus information. The media were not able to verify what they were being told by government officials for over a week (Graber 1984, 323). Unlike Haiti, there was no media presence to force the Johnson administration to reconsider its policy quickly.

To this point, O'Heffernan's description of the effect of the rapid information provided by the media on foreign policy matters seems to be accurate. However, while O'Heffernan has dealt with whether foreign policy makers consider public opinion, he has skirted the question of whether the public is more knowledgeable now than they have been in the past about foreign affairs. Because he has explicitly stated that this work is designed to update that of Cohen, and Cohen based his work on the assumption of an uniformed public, this seems to be a glaring omission. Powlick, whose work is very similar to O'Heffernan's, admits that no one has yet deter-

med if such a "change hypothesis" is accurate (1991, 637). This question requires further research along the lines of the following discussion.

Earlier I noted that some academics have predicted that with the amount of foreign news available, Americans have overcome their notorious ignorance regarding overseas matters. While Kelleher (1994, 235) is confident of such an assertion and Snow and Brown (1994, 231) hypothesize that this is so, the evidence to date is hardly conclusive. In a comprehensive study of U.S. public opinion from the 1930s to the 1980s, Page and Shapiro (1992) concluded that there has been no noticeable increase in public attentiveness to foreign policy matters. Wittkopf (1990) conducted a similar analysis of public opinion data over thirteen years and likewise has noted no upswing in the percentage of the American electorate attentive to foreign affairs.

Anecdotally, however, a comparison between survey responses about Haiti in 1994 and the Dominican Republic in 1965 does lend credence to the assertion that Americans are more likely to have cogent opinions about foreign policy. When Gallup asked Americans in May of 1965 (a few weeks after U.S. troops landed in the Dominican Republic) whether they thought the troops were likely to stay there for a year or two, 32 percent said they had no opinion (Gallup 1972, 1943). But in 1994, a Time/CNN poll found only 7 percent of Americans were not sure when asked how long they thought U.S. troops would stay in Haiti (Time, CNN, and Yankelovich Partners 1994). Why would 25 percent more of the public have a fairly substantive opinion (beyond merely supporting or opposing the troops’ presence) about Haiti than the Dominican Republic? A likely reason is the media's far more extensive coverage of one than the other.

While I was not able to compare television coverage thirty years apart, an analysis of New York Times coverage does show the much higher profile Haiti has had recently than that of the Dominican Republic in 1965. There is a likely link, however, between what the elite print media and television news cover. Robinson and Sheehan hypothesize that there is a "new" two step model of communication—"from the New York Times to Dan Rather [and television news outlets generally] to the public" (in O'Heffernan 1991, 62). In looking at the International section of the Times from the day U.S. troops landed and then six days after for both invasions, a greater
pervasiveness is apparent for Haiti than the Dominican Republic. In 1965, the *New York Times* ran forty stories about the Dominican Republic in that time period, none having a full banner headline. By way of contrast, in 1994 the *Times* ran fifty-four stories about Haiti during the first week of the troops' presence there. More significantly, four consecutive days saw Haiti take a full banner headline across the top of the front page. Indeed, on the twentieth of September stories about Haiti filled five full pages in the *Times*. After only a few days, the *Times* began running a regular Haiti section of one to four pages of stories, diagrams, and pictures entitled "Mission in Haiti." The Dominican Republic invasion received no such treatment.

Even taking into account Viet Nam as a rival story in 1965, at least one media outlet, and one of the leading ones at that, gave far greater prominence to the 1994 events in Haiti than those in the Dominican Republic twenty-nine years ago.

I mention this disparity in media treatment of the Dominican Republic case compared to the Haiti example because of the conventional wisdom among some scholars that while the media do not tell people what to think, they are able to influence what people think about (Fry, Taylor, and Wood 1994, 119). As Entman has pointed out, these two effects may not be as mutually exclusive as has been generally assumed. "[T]he media make a significant contribution to what people think--to their political preferences and evaluations--precisely by affecting what they think about" (1989, 347). Public opinion appears to grow out of an interaction between media messages and what audiences make of them. When the messages the media present are framed exclusively by government sources, the public is inclined to support the administration's decisions. No better example exists of this phenomenon (which could perhaps be labeled the "limited information effect") than the 1975 Mayaguez incident.

Throughout the crisis, [President Gerald] Ford was able to frame issues in his own way and present information in a fashion that supported his actions. Most Americans considered the liberation of the Mayaguez crew a triumph for the President, despite the fact that roughly twice as many Americans were killed in the venture as those rescued. (Beschloss 1994, 46)

In Haiti, the American public could see what was happening there first-hand and hear commentators compare it to the recent U.S. troop engagement in Somalia (another event covered extensively by the media). In the Dominican Republic, there was very limited television coverage, and relatively restricted newspaper coverage. All of this may help explain why 76 percent of Americans supported President Johnson sending troops into the Dominican Republic (Gallup 1972, 1942), but of a more jaded 1994 public, only 43 percent supported an invasion of Haiti (Gallup/CNN/ U.S.A. Today 1994).

**New actors**

In his model, O'Heffernan goes further than simply point out that the media provide a lot of information rapidly in the course of a foreign policy event. He also notes that the media provide visibility for nongovernmental actors and players with a narrow interest in various facets of foreign policy.

Insiders perceive that the strength of these groups comes from their ability to publicize their issues widely through the mass media, and to use the media to develop the resources necessary to operate multilaterally. The media coverage gives these issues salience and occasionally becomes a channel for political influence. (O'Heffernan 1991, 93)

In the case study of Haiti, such a role has been played by Randall Robinson of TransAfrica, a group concerned with the immigration of refugees from mostly black nations. During April and May of 1994, Robinson conducted a twenty-seven day hunger strike to protest what he saw as unfair treatment of Haitians fleeing the Cedras regime. Robinson's fast certainly had the media's attention. And remembering Entman's observation, if the media are influencing what people think about, they are affecting what they think.

Over the twenty-seven days of his hunger strike, a search on a computer database (Lexis/Nexis) found that CNN ran fifty-six stories featuring Randall Robinson. During and following the hunger strike, Robinson and other Haitian advocates became regular features on CNN talk shows whenever the topic of Haiti was to be dealt with.

The rise of prominent individuals and special interest groups as influencing factors in foreign policy matters is a relatively new phenomenon. In the contemporary policy making process 'policy officials perceive that these or-
ganizations are effective in placing global issues on the foreign policy agenda and maintaining their salience" (O’Heffernan 1991, 93). It was reported in May that President Clinton was very aware of the opposition to his Haiti policy resulting from Randall Robinson’s hospitalization (Fenyevsi 1994, 24).

Note that the coverage of Robinson’s fast also matches the two previously discussed aspects of the media’s information barrage. Both the general public and elite policy makers saw the same news broadcasts.

At the time of the Dominican Republic invasion, there was no equivalent advocate and/or special interest group pushing Dominican Republic issues onto the agenda of either the public or decision-making elites. This is hardly surprising. While newspapers were able to give coverage of such actors in print, television had not yet developed the inclination to provide the regular video images necessary to mobilize mass opposition to government policy. Many observers posit that not until the Viet Nam War’s Tet Offensive in 1968 was there an “end of media trust in the government’s conduct of defense and foreign policy” (Snow and Brown 1994, 224).

Broader range of goals and criteria
The third element of O’Heffernan’s model is the ability the media now have to "broaden the range of goals and criteria used for policy by interconnecting causes and effects that normally operate outside agency purview or perceptions” (1991, 91). In other words, the media can take an issue like overseas military intervention, which thirty years ago would have been perceived strictly as a foreign policy matter, and make a connection to domestic issues. This interconnection is why Randall Robinson’s concerns about Haitian refugees reaching U.S. shores are relevant to a discussion about U.S. military involvement in Haiti. The refugees represent the domestic side to a foreign issue. Indeed, in laying out this facet of his model, O’Heffernan comments that "military and diplomatic policies in Central America may create refugees in Texas and California” (ibid.). Substitute "Haiti" for "Central America" and "Florida" for "Texas and California" and we have an almost prophetic description of a key factor in the decision to intervene in Haiti.

Clearly the refugee issue has had salience. A survey of CNN transcripts from January 1, 1994 to November 1, 1994 found 274 stories about Haitian refugees. Comparatively, the Dominican Republic intervention was cast simply as a battle to thwart the spread of communism, to prevent another Cuba (Wiarda and Kryzanek 1982, 127). The media presented no domestic angle to compare to the connections made in the Haitian case to Haitian refugees and wealthy expatriates.

By way of analysis, it is difficult to determine whether this broader range of goals and criteria showcased by the media is a cause or an effect of the trend toward "intermestic" politics. At the time of the Dominican Republic intervention, foreign policy was viewed through Cold War glasses by both policy makers and the media. In the post-Cold War era, U.S. foreign policy formulation has been made far more difficult now that there is no longer a zero-sum competition for influence between the Americans and Soviets. With this complexity, many issues, like Haiti, are viewed as both international and domestic. Whether the media has facilitated this mixing of once separate policy spheres, as O’Heffernan asserts, or instead only reported on what would have happened even without their coverage is difficult to say. Further research is needed to strengthen this element of O’Heffernan’s model.

Prescription
O’Heffernan’s model, developed to update Cohen’s work of over thirty years ago, seems to be a useful analytical tool. However, more work is needed to refine it. Specifically, future research should be directed at determining whether or not media pervasiveness has made the American public more aware now of foreign issues than in the past. Meta-analyses of cumulative public opinion polls, along the lines of the work by Wittkopf (1990), seem to be a good place to start. Similarly, while O’Heffernan’s model incorporates the interconnection between foreign and domestic issues, the jury is still out on whether the media coverage of such is a cause or an effect.

Including public opinion in a discussion of foreign policy frightens many analysts. Since the days of the Founding, mass public opinion has been feared as irrational, especially in the sphere of foreign policy. However, this fear is unfounded. As Page and Shapiro (1992) have concluded, the American public has demonstrated an historical rationality about policy issues, not the capriciousness and volatility it is often as-
sumed to have. This is true even in an age with ever increasing foreign news coverage. If anything, television's fast-forward effect can simply speed up policy makers' accounting for the opinions of those who ultimately employ them—the general public. In the words of Lloyd Cutler:

TV news can provide a useful early warning that a policy course that costs American lives or jobs will be very difficult to sustain over an extended period. It can force an administration to calculate fully the costs and benefits of such a policy before it casts the die. (1984, 118)

Sadly, in interviewing State Department and NSC staffers, Powlick (1991) has found that while most acknowledge the need for public approval of their policies, most also resent the role it plays. Such elitism is not only undemocratic, but misguided. While I admit that the average American may not know many of the niceties, nuances, and details of foreign policy matters, the average American does seem to be skeptical of the need to risk the deaths of U.S. soldiers when the nation's vital interests are not at stake. That hardly seems to be irrational. In fact, had the public been made more aware of the real situation in the Dominican Republic in 1965, objections likely would have been raised, U.S. troops would not have invaded, and U.S. relations would not have been damaged throughout the Caribbean and Latin America (Collins 1991, 156). In 1994, if the threat that the mass media would cover an invasion of Haiti kept President Clinton looking for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, then perhaps the fourth estate has filled the role it was meant to play.

This is not to say, however, that all is well in Washington. As Lee Hamilton, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has commented:

Television ... encourages policy makers to react quickly, perhaps too quickly, to a crisis. ... Television, critics say, leads not to sound policy, but to sound bites masquerading as policy. (U.S. Congress 1994, 1)

Hamilton is right. While it can provide opportunity for the public to see the effects of foreign policy decisions in all their graphic detail, the mass media (television especially) must not become the sole agenda setter in the sphere of the international affairs of the United States. Instead, policy makers themselves must have an agenda on which the media can report. Otherwise the media will create one, often to the detriment of sound policy. Take Bosnia for example. When CNN broadcast pictures this April of a bombed out market in Sarajevo, policy makers felt forced to respond by ordering NATO airstrikes. But the pressure to respond, driven by CNN's pictures, was only felt because the Clinton administration had a weak policy on the Balkan War. In Somalia we had a similar situation--TV pictures prompted George Bush to send U.S. troops in, and TV pictures spurred Bill Clinton to pull them out. World politics abhors a policy vacuum. In the absence of real leadership on an issue, the media, not policy makers ultimately accountable to the electorate, will influence what the public thinks about, and therefore what they think.

Thus, if the current administration wishes to staunch the threat of having CNN's pictures drive policy, it must act now to formulate policy that can be explained to the American public. In Korea, where I believe the United States runs a higher risk of war than the Clinton White House admits publicly, sound policy must be developed and communicated to the public. The same must happen in Bosnia. Ted Koppel, the man pundits have called TV's Secretary of State (Snow and Brown 1994, 229), has put it this way:

To the degree ... that U.S. foreign policy in a given region has been clearly stated and adequate, accurate information has been provided, the influence of television coverage diminishes proportionately. (U.S. Congress 1994, 5)

In closing, it should be noted that the media have long affected U.S. foreign policy. A century ago, William Randolph Hearst's muckrakers helped foment U.S. public opinion in favor of the Spanish American War. The difference today comes in the speed in which the media report, the visceral impact of the visual images they broadcast, and the very pervasiveness of media outlets. Whether it is CNN at the barbershop or the New York Times at the bus stop, the media are everywhere. The model outlined here offers promise in making sense of how the new technology of the mass media has affected foreign policy. However, the opportunity presents itself for this and subsequent administrations to ensure that pictures do not drive policy. The media need not set America's foreign policy agenda. If the administration has already set and communicated one, they need only report on it.
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