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## A Sense of Place: An Analysis of the Role of Environmental Factors in Presidential Speeches

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# A SENSE OF PLACE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF ENVIROMENTAL FACTORS IN PRESIDENTIAL SPEECHES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
designation of University Honors with distinction

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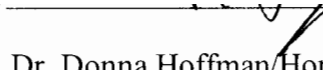
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## **Introduction**

There is much more to communicating than what we say. Factors including the environment, nonverbal gestures and other forms of communicating tell an audience as much or more than the verbal message passed on by a speaker.

Understanding what is being communicated by the environment has become more important as presidents have become essentially packaged to communicate a certain persona or type of appeal. The idea of presidential packaging has become a popular concept in recent history thanks at least in part to the idea of the perpetual campaign and governing as campaigning. This idea, forwarded by scholar George Edwards in his book *Governing by Campaigning*, looks at presidents as essentially being on one long campaign trail from the time they seek their party's nomination through the campaign and even as they are formally elected in the general election. It's after the election that Edwards' theory moves beyond what most Americans see as "The Campaign." Edwards argues that presidents are continually campaigning, the only change happens in regards to the focus of their campaign. (Edwards, 1997 41) When presidential candidates are seeking nomination and election they are campaigning for themselves. They are attempting to show why they are the best candidate, both in regards to character position on issues. Once a candidate is elected, Edwards' contends, a candidate's focus shifts from campaigning for themselves to campaigning for their ideas, programs and policies. (Edwards, 1997 256-258). Once a president knows they have a buy-in from the American public his focus shifts to making his ideas stick and be relevant to members of the general public.

## **Research Goals**

My research will address some of the unspoken communication that happens when presidents give speeches. In particular I will be addressing environmental factors encountered when presidents give speeches. I have identified a few components that are most important to the environment when a president gives a speech. First I will look at the topic of the speech and the peripheral factors that influence what a president talks about in public. I will only be looking at topic and some of the factors such as timing and other political climate factors that influence topic selection rather than what the president says about a topic. One of the most important environmental factors I'll address is the location of a speech. Places can create certain connotations and symbolism which plays an important role in the message a president conveys in their speech. Additionally, I will look at the audience composition when a president gives a speech. I'll look at things like who is in an audience, how did they come to be in the audience? How does the perceived openness of a president influence what the public thinks of a president, and how does this perception influence the president's effectiveness and his strategy of governing as campaigning. The last environmental factor I'll look at also impacts the public's perception of a president's openness, his interaction with the press and other media. Was there a question and answer session connected to his speech? Who asked the questions? How much time is devoted to questions from the media? For the most part I've stayed away from analyzing the president's responses because that delves beyond looking at environmental factors in to more of a rhetorical analysis than I want to evaluate. However, I've found it nearly impossible to not address at least some of the rhetorical information I've gathered, so while it won't be a primary focus it will be peripherally discussed.

## **Media and Public Opinion**

In his book *The Evolution of Presidential Polling* political scientist Robert M. Eisinger says, "Every president since Eisenhower with the exception of Harry Truman has used public or private polling." (Eisinger 2003, 3) Today more than ever presidents appear to be particularly interested in public opinion and how their approval ratings are playing in the public. Eisinger's work says, "President's from FDR to Nixon have learned to snatch public opinion away from the media and use it to their advantage." (Eisinger 2003, 187)

Common sense would seem to support this assumption of approval equating with support, but in reality that may not actually be true. A president must be fully aware of his relationship, not only with the American public but also congress. In fact in his book *At the Margins*, Edwards uses the example of Regan, to show that going public, bypassing congress and addressing a message to the American people, may not really be the true democracy it's purported to be. Regan was wildly popular on a personal level. He came within 3,800 votes of sweeping the country's electoral vote during his second election yet he and his policies are blamed for today's deficit. (Edwards, 1997 145-148,172)

There are a number of factors that go in to how a president is viewed by the public. Creating a political brand starts early. Presidential candidates are ascribed certain characteristics based on a variety of factors including such things as socio economic status, family name, educational pedigree and a wide range of other factors. Most people are familiar with branding in the marketplace, but the personalities of candidates.

Presidential candidates are products being sold to the American public and the currency the public uses is votes.

Presidents communicate with the public with many speeches in the course of a given year and much more goes in to their speeches than just words. Presidential brand and persona must be considered each time a president steps behind the podium. Whether they admit it or not press secretaries realize that speeches, regardless of their direct impact, do help the public conceptualize and get to know their candidate, so they continue to take advantage of TV and radio time allotted to speeches. They take advantage of this time because it helps them build the brand mentioned earlier.

When a candidate becomes branded it serves two primary purposes both of which are interrelated. First it helps a candidate shape their message. In order for voters to avoid cognitive dissonance the message a candidate, or a president for that matter, shares must match with the visual that is projected of the candidate. The message a political candidate projects helps them create a brand. Branding as a political force is not a new phenomena.

Creating a brand serves the primary purpose of helping voters quickly identify a candidate. While typical voters may not be able to cite a candidate's specific stance on an issue, psychological research tells us that people operate within schemas. These are essentially aggregate frameworks. People put concepts and ideas within certain boundaries. This even happens with candidates. Voters remember general characteristics rather than specific details. Creating a brand is a way for a candidate to communicate to quickly communicate the conglomeration of traits they want to share with voters. During the campaign a brand is created by a series of factors including advertising, stump speeches, interestingly the importance of various components of a stump speech take on

different roles throughout a candidate's career and I will explore this topic in depth later. Third party endorsements, media coverage, and a candidate's previous experience all help create a brand during the campaign.

When presidents speak the media pays attentions. Newspapers, TV stations and radio stations all seem to care about what the leader of the free world has to say. It's been said that the media doesn't tell us what to think, but they do tell us to think about. The general public uses a variety of media driven lenses to shape their view of presidents. The environment in particular, including audience composition, and by extension how it is selected, physical location of a speech, topic, the quality and quantity of interaction with the media all shape the view the public has of presidents.

Media coverage plays a particular role in how a candidate is publicly viewed. A phenomenon that I saw played out was what I'll term the "local bias." When I reviewed the 34 speeches that Presidents Bush and Clinton I paid attention to how they were reviewed in the national media, The New York Times and Washington Post as well as local newspapers in the particular towns where they spoke. Generally speaking the local papers seemed to fawn over the presidents much more than the national publications did. My findings regarding local bias are supported by a number of other studies including one done regarding President Bush's travels, done by National Public Radio(Dvotkin, 2001 and by Andrew Barret a political science professor at Marquette and Jeffery Peake at Bowling Green University. Peake and Barret's report, published in *American Politics Research* "When the President Comes to Town," (2001) supports the conclusion of local media giving positive coverage to presidential visits. Peake, Barret and Dvokin agree that the rarity of presidential visits contributes to the positive outlook. It's important for me to



take note of the local bias because location is a primary evaluative factor when addressing non verbal communication via environments.

Once a candidate is elected they are still expected to carry a particular presidential persona. Many of the same components that create personalities for candidates create personalities for presidents too. Voters want to see consistency between the personality of the person they think they voted for and the politician in power. However, one area takes much on a much greater role. Because the President of the United States is historically considered the leader of the free world, by virtue of the fact that he leads what is considered by journalists to be the most powerful nation in the world Presidential speeches are important. Whether the president's inaugural speech, The State of the Union address, speech about a national crisis or a major policy speech, both the domestic and international publics care about what the president has to say. Historically television networks, and in the past radio stations adhered to the same policy, and typically, though not always, have cleared their programming schedules to make time for the president. The idea of image making, and in turn its respective importance for presidents is essentially a modern phenomenon. This has occurred as visual imaging and the event of "hot media," such as TV according to communication theorist Marshall McLuhan have become more important. (McLuhan, 2003, 400)

Partially because of timing and also because they present an interesting contrast my research looks at current President George W. Bush and former President Bill Clinton and their use of environmental factors to create an image. For presidents in today's society, having an image is not enough. An image is an important investment of personal and political capital. Because of the importance of effectively using one's

political image I will also address how the two presidents use their image to forward Edwards' theory of governing as campaigning. Essentially how do environmental factors they select impact the public's perception of them and how does public opinion influence, positively or negatively, their success or failure in terms of reaching their goals.

There have been many studies on presidential speeches. These speeches have typically looked at the content of speeches and the words presidents have used. Two reports I make particular note of are, "Examining Verbal Style in Presidential Speeches" in the Fall 2000 issue of *Communication Studies Quarterly* by John Ballotti and Lee Kaid and a "Union of Words: A Century of Presidential Eloquence" by Wayne Fields. Essentially they have been qualitative analyses of content. For the most part researchers have focused on major speeches, such as the examples like an inaugural address or the State of the Union.

## **Research Timeline**

For purposes of my research I limit the timeline for each of my subjects. I used the time element primarily as a controlling variable. First of all it limited the breadth of material I had to sort through. Timing can also impact the messages presidents share with the public. Any president in their first term must be conscious of a potential second term. This will impact what they do and don't say, both verbally and non verbally, as well as how they frame messages using the aforementioned environmental factors; and as such this could skew my research. To hopefully address concerns of seeing an overabundance of campaign rhetoric within the documents I reviewed I looked at the first year of the second term for each president. For Clinton that was 1997 and for President Bush it was 2005. Even though I'm dealing with the concept of governing by campaigning, I believe

there is a difference in regards to how presidential messages are received during the campaign season and outside of it.

While I was able to address my fears of being bogged down with "campaign speak" I created another potential problem. Right after presidents are elected to a second term their thinking shifts from thinking about reelection to thinking about issues of legacy and figuring what they will be remembered for and also how they want to be remembered. I thought that looking at the first year of a second term would take care of this issue, however I believe, especially in President Bush's situation, legacy considerations did factor heavily in the way he communicated early in his second term. While in some respects legacy and reelection concerns are similar they differ in their longevity. History is typically more kind to chief executives when compared with their treatment in the present. In this way presidents are more likely, typically, to address bigger picture issues that are many times more controversial because they know they are no longer hostage to the short term likes and dislikes of the voting public. When facing re-election presidents work more diligently to keep people happy.

## **Research Barriers**

I think President Bush's choice to tackle social security was clearly legacy driven. Social Security is known as the third rail of politics for a reason. Most leaders won't touch it because of the need to be reelected. President Bush knew he was insulated from reelection when he took it on. President Clinton I'm sure had legacy issues but in the one year's worth of speeches I researched it was difficult to identify those.

Location is one major component of speech giving that any speaker, especially one as highly sought after as the President of the United States, can use to their

advantage. History is replete with presidents using locations to their advantage when selling an idea. From Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to President George W. Bush's impromptu speech given with a bullhorn on top of the rubble at Ground Zero just days after September 11, 2001, location has played a role in the influence of presidential addresses. I've chosen to look at speeches given within the time span discussed that were outside of Washington. This also allows me to see how changing locations was used, either effectively or poorly as an environmental communication element. I chose to look at speeches outside of D.C. particularly because I can address how changes in location impact the framing of a speech.

## **Research Methods**

I used the database LexusNexus Academic as the primary research tool in finding much of my research, both media accounts and other needed textual information. Occasionally I combined information from my LexusNexus search with the internet search engine Google in order to find the qualitative data I needed. I used LexusNexus as my source for retrieving the speeches as well. George W. Bush gave 22 speeches and Bill Clinton 12. I read and reviewed copies of the speeches released by either Congressional Quarterly or those speeches directly released by the Whitehouse. I figured these sources were the most authoritative.

Because image is primarily communicated via the media, I use media coverage as the major barometer to assess the effectiveness of Presidents Bush and Clinton's use of the governing as campaigning theory. For sake of fair comparisons I'm looking at coverage of each of the speeches I reviewed in the New York Times because of its reputation as "the paper of record" and the Washington Post because of its importance as

a national media player in close proximity to Washington, D.C. I have also consulted local media outlets, newspapers, in order to get some local color and perspective from the event. In some cases I used information gleaned from these local media accounts to fill in gaps for some of my qualitative data, especially information related to audience composition. I also read each speech given by my subjects that fell within my yearlong timeline that was delivered somewhere other than Washington.

## **Research Findings**

Timing played a major role in the speeches President George W. Bush gave during the period I reviewed. In the first State of the Union Address President Bush gave at the beginning of his second term he decided to address the third rail of American politics, social security. He spent a significant portion of time in year five of his presidency traveling the country to share his message. Timing was important because the president laid out his position in the State of the Union, thereby committing himself very publicly to pursue the issue.

Bush adopted a strategy employed by numerous presidents before him when they've had to deal with a controversial issue that was in all likelihood not going to be addressed by election conscious federal legislators. He went public. Going Public, first defined by Samuel Kernell (1997) in his text by the same name, means appealing directly with an idea or message to the American public rather than working with congress.

The president spent much of his political capital on his Social Security Tour. The tour was billed as 60 cities in 60 days. During this series of speeches that took him around the country there was a distinct style and structure to these public meetings. From an analysis standpoint these were good speeches to evaluate for the use of environmental

factors as communication tools. Using these as evaluative tools works so well looking at this certain segment of presidential speeches because the content stays essentially the same. The speech quotes the same statistics and conveys the same arguments. Even the rhetorical structure of the speech is almost identical. The only major changes to the speech are the introductory paragraph where the president thanks his hosts then introduces the legislators who are pertinent to his particular speech. Because of the similarities in content this provides an appropriate baseline for comparison of environmental factors.

When President Bush was on the stump, he was not the center of attention. While he always began his Social Security speeches he took a more community oriented approach. At each stop he invited a panel of different individuals to participate in the discussion. Typically the panels included somebody who was an expert on social security, and a Social Security expert, a younger student, who was generally college-aged, an elderly person and typically the middle generation. In four instances the collection of individuals invited by the president were families.

There are significant public relations and persona issues that stand out when looking at the panels that spoke with President Bush. The president has gone to great lengths, some would say too far, to portray himself as a down to earth good old boy. Everything from his speech patterns to the way he interacts with supporters on the rope line supports this image. By choosing to participate in his social security stops in such an informal way he is supporting this image. The president, at least in this context, isn't standing up and preaching. He is one of the people. His job is to facilitate discussion. By

inviting everyday citizens to the platform the president is trying to connect with his audience.

One shouldn't be entirely fooled by this show of humanity by the president, however. In looking at each of the social security speeches he gave, a clear pattern emerges. The composition of the panels was always the same and there was a reason for that. By inviting people with predetermined backgrounds to the stage, it gave the president the opportunity to essentially walk his way through his talking points using each participant to convey his point. It's easy to see this tactic with President Bush's social security speeches. He always asks the college aged student whether or not young people are paying attention to the social security. He uses the dialogue with the elderly representative, who in all of the speeches I looked at under the topic of social security was always female, to talk about either the longevity of social security or looking at the long term prospects of the program. In particular the president always made sure to point out to his older presenter that they were going to continue to get their check. In his interactions with the elderly Bush framed his language as hopeful and upbeat, not condescending. This assurance actually applied to anyone who at the time was over 50 years old. One of the major points President Bush also addresses with his older participants is the idea of the longevity of the program, from a structure standpoint this makes sense. By using the lens of these particular presenters the president frames the maintenance of the social security system, one of his major aims, as a humanitarian or family issue. There is the ability from a public relations standpoint to evoke emotion from people who draw the connection, whether implied or direct between supporting a family and social security. In public relations this is identified as a general claim. The

speaker draws an implied connection based on something that is assumed rather than explicitly stated. (Kruckeberg, 112) I don't mean to turn the scope of this paper to a rhetorical analysis, rather, looking at the way the president used the presence of the other actors on stage to demonstrate points of their speech. One of President Bush's major concepts related to social security was the availability of personal investment accounts. Again using his fellow presenters to make the point, typically the president talked to the middle-age parent their feelings about being able to invest their own money. Not surprisingly, they always agreed with the president's position. In most of the cases I looked at the middle presenter faced some situation, such as the death of a spouse, that would have normally caused them to lose part of the benefits guaranteed to either themselves or others. This is important because one of the primary pieces of President Bush's personal account component for social security was the idea that funds that were invested in personal accounts were transferable to heirs. Here again we see the president using someone else's experience to make his point.

There are two primary schools of thought on using others as the mouthpiece for the speaker. One point of view contends that the approach increases the credibility of the presenter because the outside panelists are essentially offering third party endorsements. On the other hand some scholars feel that any additional presenters crowd the stage and draw attention away from your main presenter. Apparently members of President Bush public relations felt it was more important, at least on this issue, to portray the president as part of the group.

The places the Bush Administration chose to give the social security speeches about social security were wide ranging. One of the most interesting choices I think was



when the President Bush gave his social security speech at Tulane University in New Orleans. As might be expected on a college campus the audience was mostly students. I was perplexed by this choice because the college student demographic doesn't appear overly concerned with social security. It's difficult to decide whether the President was just trying to impress on this group the importance of social security or if he was trying to counter popular assumptions portrayed in the media. In a number of instances pundits and editorial pages around the country criticized the president, particularly during his social security tour, for preaching to the choir. By deliberately stepping out to an environment where at best the president might encounter apathy and at worst he might be faced with opposition, was there an implied public relations statement by choosing this particular crowd?

Social Security wasn't the only issue the president talked about during the first year of his second term. His other speeches covered a wide range of issues. They ranged from the War on Terror to economic development and a range of issues though the majority were social security oriented. He also talked frequently seven times about the War on Terror. Geographically the president picked militarily oriented locations for talking about the war. Chosen locations included the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, certainly a favorable audience. Other choices included a number of east coast locations in towns where there were military basis or other Department of Defense related operations. Timing also played a part in the president's more nationalistic speeches. For example President Bush gave a speech in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, He took advantage of the setting to invoke the importance of civilian operations that support the military. In the same speech he also talked about the patriotism of fallen soldiers.

Here the location and the occupation of those in the crowd, both environmental factors played a part in not only the feeling the crowd was left with but also the favorable coverage the speech received in the *Wilkes Barre Times Leader*, the local newspaper. The paper used terms like "gracious and confident" in explaining the president's demeanor. The coverage called the speech "patriotic....dramatically appropriate given the circumstances."( President Bush Visits Wilkes Barre, A1)

Economic development was also a topic that came up frequently in 2005 for President Bush. He gave speeches to groups like the Detroit Downtown Economic Club and various groups of entrepreneurs.

Just like his social security speech circuit in both of these other two instances the president took heat for only talking to favorable audiences. In both the military and economic development speeches the crowds appeared to be very well controlled, almost hand picked in some cases. In either setting there were particular either explicit or implied credentials that someone would need to have, either a military connection or status and wealth depending upon which setting you are referencing. It wasn't as if these were completely open forums. The fact that the President operates in what was characterized by Newsweek's Richard Wolfe as Bush's Bubble. (Wolfe, 2005 18) It's no secret that Bush values his inner circle of trusted advisors. However, Wolfe's story and other reports challenge the President to get out of his comfort zone. Tying this idea back to Edwards idea of governing as campaigning, it is easier to understand at least a connection between President Bush's effectiveness as a leader and the connection with his low approval ratings. Essentially there is a question about his ability to govern by campaigning, an idea predicated on sharing and gaining widespread support, as you

would in a campaign, for your platform and policy ideas when you only communicate with a small subset of the population. In addition, what is gained by only campaigning in front of people who already agree with you? Because of questions and uncertainties, I believe Edwards would connect the dots and use President Bush as support for his theory that effective governing is based on constant campaigning.

Taking a step back in time, let's look back at former President Bill Clinton. Clinton is viewed as a gifted orator and someone who could connect with constituents on a very personal level. Given his personal strengths and characteristics, looking at the ways Clinton used environmental factors to help with his process of governing.

The first thing I noticed about President Clinton's collection of speeches from his first year of his second term was that he covered a lot of ground from a policy perspective. Unlike his Republican counterpart, the former President wasn't pushing a particular issue with his speeches. In some ways this makes evaluating at best different and at worst more challenging. In some ways Clinton's scattered approach to speaking contributes to his public persona. Because of the way the former president spoke he was able to do two things at once. Clinton is considered a policy wonk by many who study modern presidencies, but his wandering style allowed him the freedom to appear like the common man.

President Clinton gave speeches on everything from labor relations, in a speech to the AFL-CIO, to education and wide range of topics in between. Generally speaking President Clinton made, in that first year, many convention or event type speeches where he was the keynote speaker. In these convention speeches the crowd was very controlled and the common interests of the audience generally make it a favorable response.

President Clinton's public relations staff knew how to take advantage of their time in the spotlight. One of the advantages the Clinton image-makers had was with speeches that are given as standalone events is that they can digress from the stated topic without a negative reaction from the media. While the media typically values spontaneity digressing too far can waste journalists' time. Two places I saw this happen were in a speech the president gave at Georgia State University and a speech delivered to the National Association of Black Journalists. In the July 18, 1997 speech to the journalists the president went to them. At the time they were meeting in New Orleans at the Hyatt Hotel. He wanted to be welcomed as part of their group. This tactic, as we saw from President Bush too, creates the feeling that a president is part of the people.

In President Clinton's case in the speech to a minority group like the NABJ it gives off the public relations vibe of breaking down a racial divide. Here is a Caucasian president taking time to connect with a visible minority group. Not only did President Clinton get a positive reaction for his single speech but he was talking to members of the media. No doubt there was hope in the Clinton camp that warm feelings would rub off on the audience and lead to more positive reaction in typically African American media. Going further, we know that the media is a conduit to the rest of society. If the journalists who write for these media have a positive view on the president, especially columnists who have more editorial freedom than typical beat reporters, then positive sentiments will be conveyed to readers. Without ever explicitly tipping his hand, President Clinton used the media to improve his public image. Rather than do it by typical means though Clinton cut out the middle man and went to talk to the sources themselves, a highly effective message delivery tactic. Clinton gave an ego boost to the journalists. He made them feel

important. His being at their convention gave the reporters and photographers unprecedented access. Journalists who feel they got the inside scoop are more likely to offer positive coverage of a particular event.

Instead of just talking about media issues in his speech to the NABJ the president used the platform to talk about education. He talked about opportunity and the importance of creating a system where everyone could fulfill the American dream. Again, I don't want to digress too far in to rhetorical analysis, however I see another great public relations move by the Clinton White House. Journalists have been given the defacto role of being society's social advocate. As the Fourth Estate journalist are the independent and unbiased guardians of society's conscience Using this crowd to his advantage President Clinton could use this audience as a medium to amplify his message and get it to resonate with the public.

President Clinton knew his public's well. When he traveled to Pittsburg to his speech at the AFL-CIO National Convention he knew what he was doing. Traditionally labor has been a strong supporter of Democratic politics. By including the AFL-CIO on his speaking agenda the president made it clear that the support of unions was important to him and the party. He underscores this support by going to their convention. He's meeting the group on their turf, an unspoken show of support. During this speech President Clinton did venture from his topic as I noted he did occasionally. He chose to link labor and education and spent much of the speech talking about the need to improve education. One possible explanation is that Clinton and his speech writers expected that the message of needing to create an equal education system in America would resonate with such a blue collar crowd.

In contrast with President Bush, President Clinton interacted much more freely with the press. During two of his speeches Clinton spent at least a portion of his speech answering questions from the media. Based on the reading I've done it is difficult to determine if these were planned or impromptu interactions. It's interesting to note that in both speeches one a October 14, 1997 speech in Brazil and a May 29 speech in London, the President was joined by Fernando Enrique Cardoso, the Brazilian President and Tony Blair the British Prime Minister. In both speeches there was a large number of foreign media. Did President Clinton choose to take questions to counter the belief held in some foreign countries that Americans, especially the president are arrogant and aloof. In all of the American media I consulted there was little reference to the question and answer sessions, so it is difficult to gauge reaction to these interactions.

Sometimes we can learn as much about presidents by what they don't say as often as we can by what they do say. After looking at the ways former President Clinton and President Bush used environmental factors to communicate the jury is still out on its effectiveness. Each used different tactics to frame and convey parts of their message. Everything I evaluated seemed to supported ideas already published or portrayed in the media. At the very least it's clear that both presidents had clear personality brands, similar to the concept referenced earlier and used their speeches to continue to build their public personalities. In regards to judging each president's effectiveness based on Edwards' criteria in governing as campaigning, it might be unfair to judge. To begin with George W. Bush is still in office so the historical perspectives of judgment are not equal. Additionally judging policy effectiveness is a highly subjective and personalized enterprise.

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