

**Why Didn't I Know This Before?  
Psychoanalysis, Social Studies Education, and *The Shock Doctrine***

**H. James Garrett  
University of Georgia**

**Abstract**

In this essay, the author employs psychoanalytic inquiry (Britzman, 1998; Felman, 1992; Lacan, 1988) to think about the relationships between pedagogy, trauma, and crisis in the contexts of social studies and teacher education. The paper explores a potential space in social studies education that can acknowledge the psychic consequences of encountering “difficult knowledge” where and when pedagogy and representations of trauma meet (Britzman, 1998). To do so, the author examines a question posed by his students – *Why didn't I know this before?* – describes the context that gave rise to it, and then demonstrates a way for social studies educators to think about the psychical demands inherent in learning about the world.

Curricular documents and scholarly work ask social studies educators to help students negotiate, among other priorities, multiple perspectives on historical events. Whether this encounter with competing accounts is actualized through the interpretation of primary documents to practice “historical thinking” (Wineburg, 2001), postmodern critique (Segall, 2006; Seixas, 2001) or critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2001), when done well social studies provides students opportunities to examine competing narratives offering differing readings of events and processes. (den Heyer & Abbott, 2011). Such a stance is a necessity that becomes clear as we consider The Cold War, Vietnam, the post-Cold War nation building projects, genocides in Rwanda and Sudan, the War on Terror, recent NATO military intervention in Northern Africa, and the global economic crisis are all historical events that are part of the purview of social education and that can each be accounted for in a number of different ways. They are also issues that, because of their accounting of violence and injustice, beckon the student toward a confrontation with potentially unsettling knowledge. What happens when the alternative narrative disturbs and provokes in students a crisis of learning?

*Why didn't I know this before?* is the question that often arises across sections of a social studies methods course in which I serve as the instructor. While this question might have arisen in response to any number of texts, in this case it was articulated in response to Naomi Klein's (2007) book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise and Fall of Disaster Capitalism*. This specific text was selected to invite students into conversation with an alternative narrative of events about which most students seemed to have prior knowledge. But the alternative telling, narrating, and framing of those events provoked students to ask questions of those events and their narration: Why didn't I know this before? is the hinge around which this paper moves.

The interrogative in this question is multi-vocal. As I discuss below, the question speaks to the content in *The Shock Doctrine* as it troubles what many students have encountered in their education. It also speaks about the ways that learning about crisis has led to its own crisis; the confrontation with a learner's own ignorance (Felman, 1987), which in this sense is particular kind of relationship with knowledge rather than its lack. Further, the question speaks to and from an uncertainty about knowledge, particularly knowledge about social and/or historical trauma (Britzman, 1998; Farley, 2009; Matthews, 2009; Pitt & Britzman, 2003). It indicates that the use value of knowledge in the present indicts a past time when the knowledge either was not present or was differently narrativized so as to have quite different meanings. And finally this question reveals a complicated relationship between time, knowing, and pedagogy.

In this paper I use psychoanalytic inquiry to think about the relationships between pedagogy, trauma and crisis in the contexts of social studies and teacher education. The paper proposes and explores a potential space in social studies education that can acknowledge the psychic consequences of "difficult knowledge" revealed where and when pedagogy and representations of trauma meet (Britzman, 1998). Following Farley (2009), I consider social studies education as a "site of conflict rather than its solution" (p. 538). Whereas the predominant modes of thinking in social studies education are codified along either traditional collective story or disciplinary stances, a social studies education that "resists narrative closure" works to cultivate "a knowing that contains within it an inescapable and profound not-knowing" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 114). Social studies becomes, then, concerned with the status and activation of ignorance (Felman, 1987).

The question around which this paper revolves – *Why didn't I know this before?* – points simultaneously to various conditions of knowing and to not-knowing. Rather than attempt to answer this question, in this paper I theorize the conditions that give rise to its articulation. I begin by explaining the context in which the question was elicited. I will then move within the question by drawing from Lacan (1988), Britzman (1998), and Felman's (1992) work relating pedagogy with and within crisis – each of whom explore crisis encountered in trauma as an inherent component of learning. Finally, I will offer a discussion of why these issues are important for social studies educators and researchers.

### **Context(s) of Inquiry**

#### **What is it that students don't know?**

In the social studies methods course that I teach, I often utilize *The Shock Doctrine*, whose thesis is that the major geo-political events of the last 50 years were not born in freedom and motivated by democracy. Instead, *The Shock Doctrine* holds that events that precipitate social breakdown, whether natural or man-made, were used to push through anti-democratic measures fitting in with a neo-liberal agenda of economic and political policy. Crises become opportunities to advance particular 'solutions' according to neo-liberal agendas. Most commonly, these solutions are comprised of elements of what Milton Friedman called "economic shock therapy": rapid privatization reforms and their concurrent cuts to social spending and welfare programs. The "shock" of the shock therapy is often massive unemployment, skyrocketing food prices, and massive protest. Then, another series of shocks are needed to quell dissent. This is where the shock of fear tactics, imprisonment, and even torture are brought become affective. Klein illustrates this set of practices in Argentina with the

U.S. backing of Pinochet's government, Iraq after the US invasion in 2002, post-Katrina New Orleans, post-Apartheid South Africa, and post Cold War Poland. In each of these cases, large crowds convened in protest of neoliberal policies and in each case such demonstrations were met by authorities with violence. In her thesis, a crisis is utilized not to invigorate democracy, as we are commonly told, but instead to implement unpopular free-market policies.

Three ideas come together to substantiate the thesis put forward in *The Shock Doctrine*. First is the idea that those in power have used that shock strategically to further cement their power and status. The second is that radical free market policies are so wildly unpopular that they can only be instituted when populations are in states of shock and presumably unable to resist. Finally, after the populations begin to resist, then the "shock" of war, imprisonment, and economic/political calamity take effect. *The Shock Doctrine* essentially states that only through often-violent enforcement of anti-democratic processes can the kinds of changes that we often are encouraged to celebrate as free and democratic actually take place.

The radical free market project described in *The Shock Doctrine* is to place as much of the state apparatus into the hands of private companies as possible. While the reader encounters documentation of mass protest, Klein, narrates the fact that such policies have always been wildly unpopular, as they result in high levels of unemployment and soaring prices. What the reader is asked to understand is that only in a post-crisis state of shock are such policies able to be implemented:

Take a second look at the iconic events of our era and behind many you will find [the shock doctrine's] logic at work. This is the secret history of the free market. It wasn't born in freedom and democracy. It was born in shock. (Klein & Cuaron, 2007)

The text takes the notion of shock, illustrates it as an archaic and misguided attempt at personal therapy, and makes it more frightening due to the way it was taken from the context of the clinic into the realm of political and economic policy making. There, the use of shock is deployed on the societal scale within the logics of neoliberal theory of the market. Instead of using shock therapy to take individuals into a regression such that they can be reprogrammed, it is used as a moment of implementation, one that lends itself to the unpopular programs of making every service a function of markets rather than governments or public institutions.

I use the text for several reasons. One is that it presents an alternative narrative to historical events. Alternative tellings, or multiple perspectives, are structured parts of the social studies curriculum. However, this alternative telling is not what students are used to when they think of multiple perspectives, which are most generally relatively "safe" (e.g. First Nations' peoples must have thought it was bad that Europeans were here, but the Europeans must have thought it was OK). *The Shock Doctrine*, on the other hand, is a complete re-organization of the events. It completely reframes the telling of the history through a different lens. The second reason for utilizing this text is that in reading it students are invited to learn about events about which they had little or no knowledge. However, the perspective it offers also constructs a different narrative, doing something different than adding another instance that easily fits existing narrative frameworks. For some students, then, the events seem new. Other students, though, are familiar with the geopolitical contexts of the case studies offered in *The Shock Doctrine*, but the different "emplotment" (White, 2001; see also den Heyer & Abbott, 2011) makes familiar events strange. That is, students may have had knowledge of the events but contextualized in starkly different plots that organize their existing narrative sense of geopolitics and history. Examples of this new content is the US support or direct involvement in the

overthrow of democratically elected governments in Chile, Argentina, and Guatemala and the record of U.S. foreign policy being often deployed in direct and knowable opposition to, rather than support of, democracy. These ideas seem curious, even troubling, to many students.

When students encounter this information, much of it what might be termed “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998; Farley, 2009; Garrett, 2011; Matthews, 2009; Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Salvio, 2009) due to the violent and traumatic ways in which these processes have been carried out, they have several reactions. Many students disavow Klein’s thesis altogether as conspiratorial garbage<sup>1</sup>. Others read the text as a measured analysis of world events and a helpful framing reference to understand our current geopolitical landscape. Despite the wide range of reactions, in my teaching of this text over several semesters there has been one common reaction that is articulated by at least one of the students at some point during our conversation of *The Shock Doctrine: Why did I not know this before?*

### **Why Didn’t I Know This Before? A Psychoanalytic Reading of the Question**

#### **What is the “this”?**

What we find in this question, “*Why didn’t I know this before?*”, is a relationship between politics and pedagogy, crisis and learning. To exemplify this process of the changing structure of knowledge I will draw on the current financial crisis and how the text reconfigures dominant modes of inquiry relating to it. Every student understands that we are in the midst of a financial crisis. However, *The Shock Doctrine* helps students understand that such a crisis is being addressed in a way that has foreclosed upon the possibility of alternative courses of action. Such a stance counters dominant narratives most students find familiar. Furthering the thesis that the most widely circulated accounts of the financial crisis fail to address the issue from any other discursive location than from inside the logic of capital, Žizek (2009) writes “it is as if recent events were staged with a calculated risk in order to demonstrate that, even at a time of shattering crisis, there is no viable alternative to capitalism” (p. 16). Recall that rather than protecting those to whom the greatest material risks were posed with the immediate provision of state money, the US government gave hundreds of billions of dollars to the financial corporations themselves. Thus, moments of crisis are used to further entrench the same actors, policies, and processes that gave rise to the crisis in the first place. The students reading Klein’s text are confronted with the challenge of coming to terms with, what is for many, a new way of considering economic systems and the policies and ideologies that regulate them.

On an initial read, the students’ question could be an acknowledgement of what is felt to be “new information”. It seems apparent in the articulation of the question that there is information within Klein’s work (the “this”) that brings the free-market project into sharp relief in ways that reveals connection between economic policy and social reality. Students, we might say, have added some discreet bits of content knowledge to add to their arsenal. In addition to being a text that helps student acquire new content knowledge, *The Shock Doctrine*, as I mentioned above, also works to re-contextualize and reframe what many students already know or have at least heard of. There are, of course, many texts that operate along a similar axis of disrupting normative conceptualizations of a host of topics (e.g. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,

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<sup>1</sup> It is the case that Klein’s thesis is presented as a universalizing one. This can be problematic in many ways and while I do not discuss these problems with the “master narrative” that is offered in this paper, I do take this issue up in class discussion.

Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*). Each of those texts work in relationship different narrative structures (slavery and colonialism, respectively). In the case of *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein provides an interpretive lens that will bring critical processes of democracy, marketization, neoliberalism, and corporatism into relief. In this sense, it is not necessarily the case that the student articulating the question of knowledge is not familiar with content, it is that the particular framing and narration of the content is felt as novel and, as indicated by the simple articulation of the question, important to have said out loud, in language, or in the psychoanalytic vocabulary "symbolized". If students already knew "this," they may not have known it in this particular way. It may be, in other words, that the student has changed not what they know but how they know it (see, for elaboration on learning as difference, Ellsworth, 1997, p. 60-61). As we pull the question back, we see that it indicates a change in the structure or emplotment, rather than the status or location, of knowledge.

### **Moving within the Question: Figuring crisis with pedagogy and learning**

Put simply, in coming to terms with "the this", a student who articulates the question of knowledge may be in a struggle with accommodating what seems to be new information into old frameworks of knowing. Such an event, when read psychoanalytically, alludes to relationships between learning, crisis and trauma. For Pitt and Britzman (2003), the learning that comes from encountering representations of social and historical trauma – difficult knowledge – can instantiate a kind of crisis for the learner in that "questions of knowledge are made and broken" as old ideas are painfully confronted and as "beautiful substitutes" for that knowledge emerge (p. 761). This breaking of knowledge occurs in pedagogy when old stories are called into question, as I believe is the case here as signified by the question posed by students.

Further, there is an expressed desire codified in that question that points to an indictment of the state of prior not-knowing. In this sense the learning itself occurs in the trauma's wake (which is, again, the location of significance of trauma, the "afterwards" of it) and manifests itself as a crisis of encountering one's existing structure of understanding as insufficient. To put this differently, with Lacan (1991) we might say that "truth causes a collapse of knowledge" (p. 186; See also, Cho 2009). Truth, for Lacan, is not a static object of knowledge, rather it is a situation that results from a new awareness of old situations that, as he also writes, "creates a production" (Lacan, 1991, p.186, cf Cho, 2009; for truth as a production or generative process see den Heyer & Conrad, 2011). Klein's narrative may not be "the truth" as we traditionally use the term, but in relation to students' allusion toward the insufficiency of their prior understanding it may function as a Lacanian truth. The encounter is productive in that understanding might be differently structured; already known facts/events become 'new' as one's relationship to their previously taken for granted meanings change. Thus, we are presented with a theory of learning where history (personal, as in psychoanalysis, and social, as in social studies education) is made present through these processes of collapse and confrontation between old and new ways of experiencing and articulating what counts as knowledge and to know.

It is possible that what the students knew before as "history" is undergoing the kind of revision that psychoanalytic theory would refer to as deferred knowledge, or "the revision of experiences, memories, and impressions [that] are made to fit new circumstances" (Britzman, 2000, p. 30, see also Britzman, 2003). However, they might also be confronting a version of a "before" that lacks, at least immediately, a prior context. What a learner encounters upon their exposure to *The Shock Doctrine*, then, is not just another history lesson. It is the lesson of

another history altogether, one that places the events into a context provided by violence, not peace, and imposition rather than democracy. It may be that such learning is jarring due to the preponderance of messages that promote a narrative framing of Western democracies as being promoters of peace, democracy and justice<sup>2</sup>. The learner, just as the citizen, is subjected to the inadequacy of dominant discourses and indeed the inadequacy of language itself experienced with the necessity to make new meanings possible through the alternative narrative framing of the familiar. The world, in this moment, in this particular pedagogical interaction, is not what the learner thought it was and are compelled to ask, “Why didn’t I know this before?” Quick on the heels of this is another question that may follow, what am I suppose to “do” with this knowledge (if) experienced as a potentially productive awareness.

### **Learning as Crisis when Learning about Trauma**

Psychoanalytic thinking may help us think productively about the terrain around this question. In psychoanalysis learning is constituted “with the curious ways in which ideas and affect organize *and reorganize each other and attach themselves to new experiences*” (Pitt, 1998, p. 541). Many students react to Klein’s thesis, with disbelief, denial, and shock. *Why did I not know this before? Is this true? If this is true, then what else that I don’t know is true? What else is going on? What am I supposed to do about/with this? What now?* Such questions point us to the student confronting his or her own ignorance requiring both a recognition and reorganization of his or her history of knowledge. The student recognizes the absence of knowledge and then reorganizes the history in such a way as to condemn the same absence. Such questions indicate a relationship between trauma, pedagogy, crisis, and knowledge that Felman (1992) has theorized as being a crucial pedagogical moment.

Felman, a noted literary critic whose work fuses psychoanalysis with literature, examines a different crisis of pedagogy and learning, this time the crisis her students had of witnessing the testimony of two Holocaust survivors. She writes of how students were unable to “move on” in the face of their own pedagogical crisis of witnessing. Her students were thrown into crisis because of their shock at seeing what they could not put into language. The crisis is borne of a confrontation with representations of massive trauma. The crisis is made pedagogical which Felman (1992) takes note as she formulates a radical notion of pedagogy:

Teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly been taught: it has perhaps passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which the students or the audience – the recipients – can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but that no one

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<sup>2</sup> One reviewer offered an alternative reading of this situation: “The key point here is that trauma – psychoanalytically speaking – is never “new information” but always the return of something old, and that has yet to be thought. Could the trauma of reading return to the student the feeling of helplessness of being born into a world organized in unequal ways by others? What if Klein returns the reader to the tyrannical mother, the baby’s first world, who decided when and where nourishment would come?” I refer to the primal scene below, but find it important to include here the reviewer’s interpretation.

could *recognize*, and that one could therefore truly *learn, read or put to use*. (p. 53, emphasis in original)

For Felman, then, crisis is something of a profound recognition without which the pedagogical act seems to lack efficacy. She presents us with a fundamental need for the instantiation of crisis in order to do any true pedagogical work. While *The Shock Doctrine* is an indictment of the manipulating of crisis and the uses of mass social trauma, Felman requires us to rotate our vantage point on crisis. Crisis now takes on a crucial pedagogical dimension and allows us to see the student crisis not only as disruptive, and perhaps felt to be dangerous or risky, but also as the prerequisite to the work of learning, the work of re-symbolizing.

Here, then, and read more psychoanalytically, the question of *Why didn't I know this before?* indicts my own knowledge, implicates my self and within the query places its indictment on the "I" instead of the "this": my worldview, my experiences, rather than the text or the messenger. The question is indicative of a force of turning focus back on a personal history in which what structured my knowledge is no longer adequate. Learning about crisis has hit upon yet another crisis, this time one in which the learner has no prior context in which to articulate or accommodate what it is that they are expected to learn other than the earliest of contexts; contexts where the radically dependent infant feels the pushes and pulls of helplessness (Farley, 2009) and fulfillment in a world not of his or her own making.

For a significant and productive learning encounter to take place, Felman (1992) argues, the pedagogue is in the business of writing an invitation to crisis. She writes:

To seek reality is both to set out to explore the injury inflicted by it – to turn back on, and to try to penetrate, the state of being stricken, wounded by reality – and to attempt, at the same time, to reemerge from the paralysis of the state, to engage reality as an advent, a movement, and as a vital, critical necessity of moving on. It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible. (pg 28)

Here we are asked by Felman to take the experience of being stricken by crisis as the object of inquiry, folding experience back onto itself in the hope of moving through modalities of understanding about the nature of the crisis itself. If we are expected to learn anything about the world, Felman teaches, we had better be prepared for the injuries that this learning might inflict. In the moments of that encounter with what Felman here is calling "reality" we are encouraged to recognize the ways in which we are made to feel paralyzed by it and to think about that moment as a moment of "becoming". Such a stance helps me wonder about the degree to which students asking 'Why didn't I know this before?' indicates the status of this particular engagement.

### **Discussion: Psychoanalytic Considerations in Social Studies Education**

Lacan (1988b) acknowledged the ways that the very process of learning is a process of reconstituting what was known before:

When something comes to light, something which we are forced to consider as new, when another structural order emerges...it creates its own perspective within the past and we say – This can never not have been there, this has existed from the beginning. (p. 5)

In this paper, I have written about a time when for some students something new has come to the light of their attention. *Why didn't I know this before?* becomes a trace of that other structural order where the status of knowledge as it existed before the encounter is now rendered differently. It is now deficient, indicted. Thus, knowledge has been deferred.

What these considerations imply for social studies teachers is a consideration of the loose and nonlinear chronology of learning and knowledge combined with the dynamic nature of historical work and the manner in which students attach meaning to that work. In this process of deferred knowledge, the experience, a memory, comes to take new meaning in our lives. The psychoanalytic stance toward history privileges the reworking of our historical narratives (see den Heyer & Abbot, 2011 for an example of such reworking as the pedagogical opportunity necessary in learning to teach). In this sense, through the psychoanalytic idea of deferred action, history changes so that we, too, can change. It is, then, a position that includes the possibility for difference.

Knowing that students will in many pedagogical instances encounter and necessarily move within and through crisis need not necessarily make the pedagogue a sadist whose focus is on producing crisis for its own sake. Rather, the pedagogical implication of taking Felman (1992) seriously is to understand that in enacting a responsible pedagogy we ought to expect (though not force) students to encounter various states of crisis. This should be so particularly in social studies classrooms, where so much of the content consists of potentially traumatic knowledge. When a student asks, "*Why didn't I know this before?*" in response to reading *The Shock Doctrine*, their past knowledge is indicted as having always been flawed or incomplete, but that history of learning is only constituted in the very moment of learning articulated by that question.

While debate exists as to best approaches to learning in social studies education (Evans, 2004), there is often a general agreement regarding the "ideal" product of a social studies education: the productive citizen. As a school subject, history works most commonly as a vehicle for structuring a national identity by teaching not only the "right" version of the story, but the "right" way to think about it (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Seixas, 2001). Used in this way, working with (learning) history is used to "define who we are in the present, our relations with others, relations in civil society – nation and state, right and wrong, good and bad – and broad parameters for action in the future" (Seixas, 2001, p. 21). History is contentious, though, and so deciding on this best version will often require negotiating (or silencing) different social visions and agendas. History is always and already mapped onto and inscribed within broader social and historical processes as well as supposed outcomes, power relations, and competing discourses. In social studies education, the status of history is always at stake.

In psychoanalysis, the status of history is also at stake. There, we hear that learning history helps us understand our historical present in ways that allow us a more rich understanding of the conditions that give our lives context. History is understood as in flux and in motion through the transference, in fantasy work and associations. In analysis we are asked to play with history, symbolize our memories, affects, and experiences in order to associate around and through them. As history becomes tabled for examination, the analyst and analysand (patient) organize and reorganize the narratives that provide cohesion to the analysand's experience of self. History is less about the events as it about how events are narrated, ordered, and emplotted. What is more, those interpretations are always subject to undergoing further change and continued interpretation through the ongoing analysis. Or, as Lacan (1988a) warned: "to interpret and to imagine one understands are not at all the same. It is precisely the opposite"



(S I, p. 73). As such, the psychoanalyst might say to the history teacher that they have it somewhat wrong to say, “we learn history so that we do not repeat our mistakes” – a common parlance that I hear history teachers pronounce. Instead, the analyst (or, I think the psychoanalytically-informed history teacher) might point to our propensities for repetition, misrecognition, and other defensive postures in historical ruptures that feel unprecedented. This teacher might ask students to study the ways that, because we are human, we *resist* learning, and how learning might itself require resistance to begin.

### Conclusion

With the purpose of multiple perspectives in mind, I selected Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* as a course reading in the social studies methods courses that I teach. That the paper references and relies upon *The Shock Doctrine* is not to mean that I am suggesting wide adoption of the text for social studies teachers. I am, though, suggesting that challenging the narrative frames students bring with them to the classroom is of the utmost importance if we care to invite students into spaces in which creative and just social situations are to be cultivated. Because Klein’s narrative often disrupts their preexisting narrative understandings, students across sections of the course have responded to the text by asking: *Why didn’t I know this before?* Any text that counters the existing narratives frames students bring with them to the classroom could provoke this question.

In this paper I began by discussing the content of the text and why it may have seemed strange to some students. By drawing on psychoanalytic vocabulary, I read the question as being indicative of crisis, one that brings the relationships between chronology, learning, crisis and pedagogy to the surface. By taking multiple passes over the question around which the paper revolves, my attempts are aimed at a way to consider how we make sense of our selves, our students, and our modes of relating in pedagogy. Finally, I made an effort to bring the overlapping concerns between social studies education and psychoanalytic notions of learning into focus.

There are frequent and loud debates about the content that we offer in social studies education, and similarly contentious conversations about pedagogies and “best practices.” What I hope to have offered here is a way we can, as Segall (2004) writes, “blur the lines between content and pedagogy” and further illuminate the dynamics between them. Neither content nor pedagogy was at issue in the question students posed. Rather, the issue was about the ways in which the content was activated not only in a pedagogical relation, but also in a psychical relation with an already existing structure of knowledge. What taught, what gave the eliciting motivation to *Why didn’t I know this before?*, was something about which I am speculating. But in that speculation, I hope, is a productive way of looking and listening, of an attunement to the ways that students understand their relationships between each other, their students, and within the world. And as a social studies educator, that relationship between self and other and the ways that knowledge structures that relationship remains of primary concern.

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