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Grey Eminence: Fox Conner and the Art of Mentorship

Edward Cox

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**Grey Eminence: Fox Conner
and the Art of Mentorship**

by

Edward Cox

The Institute of Land Warfare
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LAND WARFARE PAPER NO. 78W, September 2010

Grey Eminence:

Fox Conner and the Art of Mentorship

by Edward Cox

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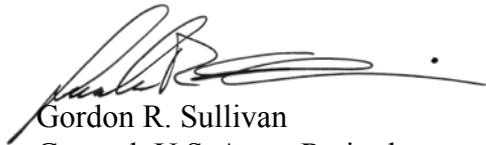
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Foreword

To those who have heard of him, Fox Conner's name is synonymous with mentorship. He is the "grey eminence" within the Army whose influence helped to shape the careers of George Patton, George Marshall and, most notably, President Eisenhower. Most of what is known about Conner comes from stories about his relationship with Eisenhower. Despite a distinguished military career that spanned four decades, Conner's life and his service to the Army and the nation are revealed primarily through passing references in the memoirs of other great men.

A study of Conner's life and his method for identifying talented subordinates and developing them for future strategic leadership positions offers contemporary readers a highly salient example to emulate. This paper combines existing scholarship with long-forgotten references and unpublished original sources to achieve a more comprehensive picture of this dedicated public servant. The portrait that emerges provides a four-step model for developing strategic leaders that still holds true today. First and foremost, Conner became a master of his craft through a process of personal and professional self-development as a lifelong learner. Second, he recognized and recruited talented subordinates. Third, he encouraged and challenged those protégés to develop their strengths and overcome their weaknesses. Finally, he wasn't afraid to break the rules of the organization to do it.



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September 2010

Grey Eminence: Fox Conner and the Art of Mentorship

Introduction

The study of officership is the study of leadership. Like all professions, the two-fold mission of the officer corps is to develop expert knowledge and to impart that knowledge to one's successors. The debate about how to do this imparting resurfaces periodically throughout our nation's history, and it is a hot topic today with the Army struggling to transform while facing massive mid-career officer shortages and fighting two counterinsurgencies. In studying the art of leadership, we would do well to recall one of the master mentors of the Army, Major General Fox Conner.

To those who have heard of him, Fox Conner's name is synonymous with mentorship. He is the "grey eminence" within the Army whose influence helped to shape the careers of George Patton, George Marshall and, most notably, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, but little is known about Conner himself. A careful study of his life with particular attention to his relationships with his three most famous protégés offers contemporary readers a highly salient example to emulate. Hailed by his peers, subordinates and superiors as a consummate master of the art of war, Conner was a respected practitioner of his craft for four decades. He had a gift for recognizing and recruiting talented protégés to work for him. He challenged each of them to develop his strengths and overcome his weaknesses, tailoring his own techniques to complement each individual's personality—and he wasn't afraid to break the rules to help them to advance professionally.

This monograph examines Fox Conner's life with particular attention to his career prior to World War I and his relationships with Patton, Marshall and Eisenhower. Today it is time for a new generation of leaders to learn from and follow Conner's example, and train future members of the profession of arms to lead the Army in the 21st century.

Becoming a Master of His Craft

In 1894, Fox Conner entered the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, on the recommendation of Mississippi Congressman Hernando De Soto Money.¹ Favoritism in Academy appointments was not uncommon in those days, and Conner may have benefited from this practice. His uncle, Fuller Fox, was a friend of Congressman Money and an active member of the Democratic Party.² The son of a Civil War sharpshooter who lost his sight at the Battle of Atlanta, Conner grew up listening to war stories and had dreamed of attending West Point since he was eight years old.³

His initial appointment to West Point in 1893 was delayed one year due to illness, and he used that extra year to prepare for the rigorous academics for which the Academy was known.⁴ Despite this, Conner was no more than an average cadet. When he graduated from West Point in April 1898, he was 17th in a class of 59 and had earned 384 demerits along the way, mostly for smoking and tardiness.⁵

By January 1899, Conner was serving as the battalion adjutant for the 2d Artillery Regiment in Havana, Cuba, as part of the Occupation Forces of the Spanish-American War.⁶ Conner's first regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel William L. Haskin, made a considerable impression on the young officer. A graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, Haskin was a veteran of the Civil War, a voracious reader and a prolific writer. In 1879, while commanding an artillery battery at the Presidio of Monterey, California, Haskin wrote *The History of the First Regiment of Artillery*, a massive 668-page tome.⁷ Inspired by this Haskin's example, Conner began to understand what it means to be a lifelong learner.

By 1905, Conner was a captain commanding a coastal artillery company in Fort Hamilton, New York.⁸ He was a newlywed, having married Virginia "Bug" Brandreth in 1902. Born to a wealthy New York family, Bug received a monthly allowance from her father that equaled Conner's salary. In the summer of 1905 Conner received orders to the Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He took a train west and reported for duty in July while Bug stayed in New York to give birth to their second child, Fox Brandreth Conner, born on 23 June 1905.⁹ Their daughter, Betty Virginia (Betsey), was 19 months old.

Perching on the western edge of the Missouri River, Fort Leavenworth had been the home of the Infantry and Cavalry School since 1881. The initial purpose of the school was to train lieutenants for duties in units larger than companies. By 1893, the school's curriculum had expanded to a two-year program taught by seven academic departments within what was now called the General Service and Staff College. The Department of Military Art taught classes in international law and military history, and the faculty used map problems to teach strategy and grand tactics at the corps, division and brigade levels.¹⁰ Franklin Bell, a veteran of the Philippines who had risen from lieutenant to brigadier general in five years, became the commandant of the college in 1903.¹¹

Until the 1905–1906 class, no artillery officers had entered the Infantry and Cavalry School or the Staff College.¹² Special orders from the War Department detailed Fox Conner and two other artillerymen, Samuel C. Vestal and Henry W. Butner, to the Staff College. These three men had the honor of being the first artillerymen to enter the Staff College. They were also the last officers to be admitted to the Staff College without completing the competitive course of the Infantry and Cavalry School.¹³ Their admittance to the College was a controversial experiment by the Army. General Bell, a Medal of Honor recipient who had been promoted directly from captain to brigadier general, was convinced that any artilleryman who entered the Staff College without "the advantage of the course in the Infantry and Cavalry School [was] seriously handicapped in his college work, and [was] rarely if ever able to overcome this handicap."¹⁴ He did not believe that the artillery officers would be able to achieve a high degree of efficiency in the work of the Staff College. Nevertheless, both General Bell and the War College selection committee were willing to make the attempt.

Conner excelled at the Staff College despite his lack of training at the Infantry and Cavalry School. He particularly enjoyed working for General Bell, and would serve under his tutelage as a student, instructor and staff officer for most of the next six years. For his part, Bell saw tremendous potential in Conner. Some of that may have been a reflection of the similarities in their backgrounds. Bell was born in rural Kentucky to a family of Confederate veterans. He struggled as a cadet at West Point, graduating in 1878 ranked 38th in a class of 43. A cavalryman, Bell shared Conner's love for horses. Bell also served as a role model for Conner as a self-taught professional officer who read French, Spanish and German.

The Staff College was an extremely demanding program, and Conner studied seven days a week. When he was not in class or working with his study group, he was ensconced in his study in their small two-story quarters with his books and maps. His hard work paid off when Fox graduated in the summer of 1906. General Bell gave him a glowing efficiency report and recommended him for a teaching assignment at Fort Leavenworth, West Point or the War College.¹⁵ Then, as now, however, the Army did not always follow the recommendations of senior officers. The artillery branch had a shortage of officers at Fort Riley, Kansas, and Conner soon found himself assigned as the post adjutant.¹⁶

Though he may not have realized it then, Conner was learning the skills necessary to be a chief of operations, a position that did not exist in the Army at the time but one of which he would become the exemplar under General John J. Pershing. Today, the adjutant in an Army unit deals largely with ceremonies, protocol, personnel and finance issues. In Conner's day, however, adjutant was a catch-all position, requiring an officer who could speak authoritatively in the absence of the commander on topics ranging from logistics and supply to training and doctrine. It also required an officer who could work well with the unit chief of staff. Conner's superior performance attracted attention at the highest levels of the Army, and he was assigned to as an instructor at the War College in D.C. in September 1907.¹⁷

Created in 1903, the Army War College was located in the nation's capitol and served as both a postgraduate course in the science of war and an operational adjunct to the War Department General Staff.¹⁸ The first president of the War College was Brigadier General Tasker Bliss, a West Point graduate who had served on the faculty of the Naval War College. Bliss incorporated elements of the Naval War College and the Prussian *Kriegsakademie* into the new institution. Officers selected to attend the college had already learned the duties associated with troop units as students at Leavenworth's Staff College. Now they would learn the duties of a staff officer at the highest level of the Army, the General Staff.¹⁹

Conner graduated from the Army War College in 1908 and was assigned to the Army General Staff with teaching duties at the War College. In his first year at the War College, the institution was still evolving. Only five years old as an institution, the War College suffered from a lack of faculty members. As a captain, Conner found himself lecturing to majors, lieutenant colonels and colonels. One of his students, Colonel Hunter Liggett, had graduated from West Point nine years earlier than Conner.

Conner's superior performance as a student and instructor attracted the attention of three high-ranking officers in Washington: Wotherspoon, Bliss and Bell. Brigadier General William W. Wotherspoon had served as director of the War College under Bliss and his successor, Brigadier

General Thomas Barry. A veteran of the Philippines, Wotherspoon became president of the War College in October 1907. By this time Tasker Bliss had risen to become Assistant Chief of Staff of the Army. General Bell knew Conner from his days as a student at Fort Leavenworth. After spending the summer of 1908 on an exchange program at the Naval War College, Conner found himself working for Bliss at Bell's request.

In addition to lecturing at the War College, Conner now found himself organizing staff rides to Civil War battlefields, overseeing individual student research projects, developing artillery doctrine from his experiences in training maneuvers at Fort Riley and from serving on research committees studying how officer training was conducted at other Army posts. Conner also began writing articles for publication in professional military journals while serving on the General Staff. In May 1910 he published an article in the *Journal of the United States Infantry Association* entitled "Field Artillery in Cooperation with the Other Arms." This article became the basis for revisions to the Field Artillery Drill Regulations manual the next year and confirmed Conner's reputation as the Army's expert on artillery.

In 1911, Conner also joined Captains John Palmer and Matthew Hanna in proposing a single-list promotion bill. At that time, promotion was based on one's position on an order-of-merit list within one's branch. Palmer advocated combining the seniority lists of the artillery, infantry, cavalry and engineers into one list. He believed that as an infantry officer, his advocacy of the legislation would be suspicious to officers in the other branches because the proposal appeared to benefit the infantry branch, in which peacetime promotion was very slow. To forestall this criticism, Palmer enlisted Conner's help as an artilleryman and Hanna's help as a cavalryman. Each of the three men prepared a statement in which he expressed his approval of the single-list bill. All three statements were published in the *Army and Navy Journal* in July 1911.²⁰ The article drew a vast response, positive and negative. The majority of negative responses came from the artillery, according to Palmer.²¹

As his time in Washington drew to a close, Fox began to look for a new assignment. He was offered several positions. General Barry, the former president of the War College, was Superintendent at West Point at the time. He wanted Conner to be the senior instructor of artillery tactics. Conner was also offered a posting as an attaché in both Turkey and Mexico.²² Then General Wotherspoon offered Conner a job he could not resist: Would he be interested in serving as an exchange officer to a French artillery regiment and attending the French War College, *Le Ecole Superieure de Guerre*? Conner's answer was an enthusiastic yes, and he arrived in Europe in July.²³ His service with the 22d Artillery Regiment did not officially begin until October 1911, so he and his family spent two months traveling and getting acquainted with Paris.

With the 22d Artillery, Conner was involved daily in planning and field operations. On maneuvers he became familiar with the French 75-millimeter field gun, or *soixante quinze*. Conner was amazed by the design of the French cannon, dubbed the "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" by French gunners. Using the principle of the gun's recoiling on its carriage, the French artillery workshops secured an increase in muzzle energy more than double that of the U.S. Army's three-inch gun, which was designed on the same recoil principle. The French achieved that greater performance with less increase in weight than the American gun as

well. The American artillery piece had a slower rate of fire and lower muzzle velocity, and it required the gunner to re-aim after firing each round. In contrast, the French gunners could fire their cannon from 15 to 30 times per minute without having to re-aim the gun.²⁴ In six years, Conner would be called upon by the Army as its artillery expert, and what he knew about the relative merits of French and American artillery would have a major impact on American policy.

Conner returned home in 1912 and spent several more years at Fort Riley. He then commanded an artillery battery near Laredo, Texas, before returning to Washington, D.C., to work in the Inspector General's Office (IGO). Within the Army staff, the task of ensuring adherence to regulations fell to the IGO. Since 1901, the IGO had followed a practice of borrowing officers from line units for a specified tour of duty and then returning them to their branches. The IGO benefitted from each officer's expertise, and the Army benefitted from the ability to keep the permanent staff of the IGO small.

A major by this time, Conner received orders detailing him to the IGO in June 1916 as an inspector of field artillery. His principal duties involved inspecting units in and around Washington, D.C. and helping to compile an annual report on the Regular Army and Army National Guard field artillery units. When Congress declared war against the Central Powers on 6 April 1917, Britain and France each sent a delegation to Washington to consult with their new ally. The French Foreign Affairs minister, René Viviani, and Marshal Joseph Joffre of the French Army led the French delegation, which arrived in Washington on 25 April. One week earlier, Conner had received orders to serve as a liaison officer to the French commission.

Conner was uniquely suited for this new assignment. Though he was fluent in French, he was not selected merely for his translating capabilities. His assignments at Fort Riley and the War College had made him the foremost expert in American artillery doctrine. His time with the 22d Artillery in Versailles meant that he also knew more about French military policy, regulations and protocols than any other officer in the American Army. He developed a close relationship with his French counterpart on the commission, Colonel Louis Remond, and with the French liaison to the General Staff, Colonel Édouard Requin. Their friendship and ability to work well together helped the commission to quickly decide matters of organization, supply and strategy as America geared up for war.

President Wilson selected General John J. Pershing to lead the American forces. Pershing had less than a month to select a division staff and outfit them for the trip to Europe, where they would become the nucleus of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). He needed a strong chief of staff to organize this massive undertaking; he picked Major James Harbord, an old friend from the Tenth Cavalry, and tasked him to select the rest of the staff. Conner's boss, Colonel Andre W. Brewster, became the Division Inspector General and selected Conner to accompany him.²⁵ Conner had spent 19 years mastering his craft. Now he would get to put his knowledge to use.

Lieutenant Colonel John Palmer, Conner's co-author on the single promotion list article six years earlier, was in charge of General Pershing's Operations Section. Pershing gave Palmer and his assistant, Major Hugh Drum, a special mission. Pershing wanted them to compile a report on the port facilities of France to prepare for the massive American

troop movements that were to come. Though the initial estimate the previous month for the American force was 9,000, Pershing had decided to plan for a force of around one million men. Desperately undermanned, Palmer began to look around for assistance. He did not have to look farther than his table companions on the S.S. *Baltic* en route to Europe.

Palmer was familiar with four of the five officers he dined with on the *Baltic*. He had served with Major Dennis Nolan on the General Staff, and Hugh Drum worked for him. Major Arthur Conger had taught Palmer at Fort Leavenworth. He had known Conner since 1911. As Palmer tells it, "Fox Conner was my man; I needed no prolonged period of trial to determine this. I had seen him at work on the General Staff and well knew what substantial abilities he possessed."²⁶

Palmer wanted Conner reassigned from the Inspector General's staff to his own Operations Section. He pressed his case with Harbord, who agreed to present the matter to General Pershing. After discussing it with Pershing, Harbord called Palmer to his stateroom later that day and brought up only one objection. The possibility existed that Fox Conner, as a field artillery officer, would be promoted before Palmer. If that occurred, Palmer would find himself subordinate to Conner in the Operations Section. Palmer replied, "If that should happen, I would be very glad to change desks with Conner. I recommended him for the job because I believe that nobody else is so well fitted to serve in that capacity and I certainly would not revoke the recommendation even if it should prove prejudicial to my own fortunes."²⁷ This recommendation was especially prescient; Fox Conner, having sailed to England in May as a lieutenant colonel, found himself promoted to colonel by August. One year later he was a brigadier general and had replaced Palmer as Pershing's chief of operations.

Conner and Patton – Unleashing the Tanker

Captain Fox Conner and his wife, Virginia, settled into their seats. Their train slowly pulled away from the station in Kansas City, gaining speed as it rolled across the plains towards Fort Riley, Kansas. It was October 1913, and the Connors were returning to the Army post following their annual trek to visit Virginia's family in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. As they sat in the gently rocking passenger car, Conner and his wife noticed a young Army officer seated at the other end of the car. The man's appearance fascinated Mrs. Conner. Eyes front, the young officer sat erect, swaying with the motion of the clattering car, holding the largest cavalry saber she had ever seen. In all the time she watched his stern face, it never changed expression. Fox also had been intently eyeing the man, and halfway to Fort Riley he walked down the train car aisle and introduced himself to George Patton.²⁸

Though only a lieutenant, Patton was already a celebrity within the Army. He was the only American officer to compete in the 1912 Olympics in Sweden, finishing fifth in the modern pentathlon. While stationed at Fort Myer, Virginia, Patton had published articles about his profession and attracted the attention and patronage of such important officials as Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Major General Leonard Wood, the Army Chief of Staff.

While Conner was returning to Riley, Patton was reporting there for the first time to attend the Mounted Service School, having spent six weeks in France at his own expense studying swordsmanship.²⁹ As they talked on the train, they discovered that they had many

interests in common, the most important being the Army, horses, family and their country. This chance meeting blossomed into friendship, and as the years passed they discovered a shared ardor for hunting and fishing.

In Patton, the older Conner found a compatible, ambitious young man who shared his regard for history, literature and knowledge in general. As a child, Patton had suffered from dyslexia, but his family had compensated for his reading disability with intense exercises of oral lessons and reading aloud to him. As a result, Patton had developed the habits of an earnest listener. He recognized in Conner a master strategist and eagerly sought his advice and counsel. Conner in turn was a willing and able teacher who transformed lectures into conversations of equals.

Conner's relationship with Patton resembled that of an older brother. He did not have to ignite a passion in Patton for studying strategy as he had with Eisenhower. Likewise, he did not expect the same level of intellectual discussion that he shared with Marshall. Patton was not a scholar, though he did have a piercing intellect. He was not a coalition builder, as Eisenhower grew to be. Patton was a warrior, pure and simple. Conner recognized that in his character and sought to develop and hone that warrior spirit. The trick with Patton would not be urging him forward, it would be holding him back from damaging his own career.

Though their time together at Fort Riley was brief, Patton and Conner would keep in touch and occasionally their paths would cross before they worked together at Chaumont in 1917. They had dinner together before boarding the *Baltic* as part of Pershing's American Expeditionary Force. And they spent a lot of time together in Chaumont, where Patton served as the company commander for Pershing's headquarters and his occasional aide. Perhaps Conner's greatest contribution to Patton's career was introducing him to a new invention called the tank.

A British colonel named Ernest Swinton first conceived of an armored vehicle to break the stalemate of trench warfare. He was inspired in 1914 by the sight of American caterpillar tractors, the same type of tractor that Conner had inspected for the American Army that year. The first British tank, known as the Mark I, saw action in the Battle of the Somme in September 1916. By the time the Americans declared war, both the British and the French had tanks. Before the AEF headquarters moved from Paris to Chaumont, Conner directed Patton's attention to this new war machine. As Patton wrote in his diary,

One hot July day in 1917 I was drowsing over the desk of the Concierge at GHQ [General Headquarters] in Paris (at that time I was holding this high office on the staff). Suddenly my slumbers were disturbed by an orderly who told me to report to the Operations Officer. There was a certain Major . . . [Fox Conner] introduced me to a French Officer and directed me to listen to his story and report my conclusions. This Frenchman was a Tank enthusiast who regaled me for several hours with lurid tales of the value of his pet hobby as a certain means of winning the war. In the report I submitted . . . I said, couching my remarks in the euphemistic jargon appropriate to official correspondence, that the Frenchman was crazy and the Tank not worth a damn.³⁰

Like Conner, Pershing found the idea of an armored vehicle intriguing. The AEF study group he created to investigate the idea of an American tank force recommended the immediate

creation of a Tank Department and a plan to procure 2,200 tanks modeled on both British and French designs. Pershing appointed Lieutenant Colonel LeRoy Eltinge from his operations section as the head of a newly formed Tank Department. In October, Patton was hospitalized for jaundice. He found himself sharing a room with Fox Conner, and their conversation turned to tanks.³¹ The next day, Eltinge visited and offered Patton the chance to command the Tank School being created in the town of Langres. After talking to Conner, Patton accepted the job.³² He departed Chaumont the next month to form the AEF Tank Corps.

In March 1917, two months before he sailed on the *Baltic*, Patton had passed his examination for promotion to captain. One year later, in April 1918, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and was poised to make a name for himself in the battles of Saint-Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne. By the end of the year, though he was only 32 years old, Patton was a colonel with a Distinguished Service Cross for valor in battle. He had worked hard and been lucky, but he also owed a debt to the man who had first whispered “tanks” in his ear—Fox Conner.

A decade would pass before Patton would find himself working with Conner again. On 25 January 1928, Major General Fox Conner assumed command of the Hawaiian Division and Hawaiian Department, Hawaii.³³ Patton was the division intelligence officer, or G-2. His assignment as G-2 was a punishment, and a step down from his former position as the division operations officer, or G-3. The cause for the punishment was Patton’s outspoken nature.

In November 1926 Patton became the G-3 of the Hawaiian Division. As the G-3 he was responsible for all aspects of training and operations within the division. Though equal in rank to the heads of other division staff sections, the G-3 is often seen as first among equals. Patton’s habit of speaking his mind showed itself in several incidents where he wrote scathing reviews of training by subordinate units, earning the fury of brigade commanders and senior staff officers alike. Many felt that Patton, reduced after the war back to the rank of major, had crossed a line in his criticism of colonels and brigadier generals. The division commander, Major General William Smith, sought to defuse the situation by reassigning Patton. He was consequently moved from G-3 to G-2.

This demotion infuriated Patton. Fortunately for him, his new commander was his old friend and mentor General Conner. Conner assuaged Patton’s feelings somewhat with his comments on Patton’s last evaluation in Hawaii. Colonel Francis Cooke, the Division Chief of Staff, rated Patton. Conner’s endorsement of the evaluation reads, “I concur in the above report. I have known him for fifteen years, in both peace and war. I know of no one whom I would prefer to have as a subordinate commander.”³⁴

Conner and Marshall – A Mutual Admiration Society

On Wednesday, 17 July 1918, George C. Marshall reported for duty at Pershing’s headquarters in Chaumont at around 9 p.m.³⁵ Chaumont was a relatively young town by European standards, being only one thousand years old. By selecting Chaumont as the location for the American Expeditionary Force’s General Headquarters, or AEF GHQ, Pershing took advantage of the town’s strategic railroad station.³⁶ The AEF at the time numbered in the tens of thousands but would swell to over a million men over the next year as the Americans helped

their allies to smash the German army. Marshall reported to Pershing's chief of operations, Colonel Fox Conner.

Marshall had attracted Conner's attention while serving as the operations officer for the 1st American Division seven months earlier. Conner believed in walking the ground rather than relying on reports sent back to Chaumont from the division headquarters. It was through one of these observation trips that he heard about Marshall from Major Robert Lewis, a liaison officer to the French Army.³⁷ Conner arranged to meet Marshall and was very impressed. A busy man himself, Conner began devoting one day each week to working with Marshall at the 1st Division headquarters in Menil-la-Tour.³⁸ Following the 1st Division's success at Cantigny, Conner had Marshall transferred to the staff at Chaumont.

But for the difference of a few weeks, Marshall and Conner could have met 12 years earlier. Conner graduated from the Staff College at Leavenworth in 1906. The faculty of the college recommended him for a teaching assignment there, but instead he was assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas, as the post adjutant.³⁹ Marshall arrived at Leavenworth to begin his studies at the General Service and Staff College the same summer that Conner left for Fort Riley.⁴⁰

Conner and Marshall became very close, and the two were often referred to as a "mutual admiration society."⁴¹ Conner and Marshall began developing plans for the Saint-Mihiel offensive. This offensive through the Lorraine region of France had been on Conner's mind for almost a year. To him, the reinforcement of the British in the Somme and the battle of Belleau Wood fought by the 2d Marine Division were distractions from the main objective of reducing the German salient at Saint-Mihiel. The area in question was a historic invasion route into France and Conner hoped that a successful attack would threaten to envelop the German line.⁴²

Conner had brought Marshall to Pershing's staff with this offensive in mind. Marshall's grasp of operational planning and strategy rivaled Conner's, and he appreciated the flexibility of having such a capable subordinate. By this time, Conner was an invaluable asset to Pershing because of his language skills and his familiarity with the both the French Army and the AEF. He often traveled with Pershing and was grateful to have someone with Marshall's capabilities back at Chaumont overseeing the planning of the Saint-Mihiel salient.

On 10 August 1918, the First Army of the American Expeditionary Force became operational. Tired of administrative battles and diplomatic skirmishes, Pershing longed for action. He made himself commander of the First Army despite Conner's objections. Conner vehemently opposed the idea because he felt Pershing's attention would be split between two distinct jobs, each with a separate headquarters. In this instance his objections did not sway Pershing. Ever the obedient staff officer, Conner sought to mitigate what he felt was a poor decision by detailing Marshall to the staff of the First Army. Marshall was promoted to colonel on 27 August.⁴³ As a member of the operations staff for the First Army, he found himself in the unique position of reviewing the plans for the Saint-Mihiel offensive that he had personally written while on the AEF staff at Chaumont.

On 30 August, only one more obstacle stood between Pershing's First Army and the battle of Saint-Mihiel. Surprisingly, it was the French Army. More specifically, it was Marshal Ferdinand Foch. He visited Pershing at his Army headquarters and suggested a change.

Instead of proceeding with the attack on Saint-Mihiel, why not join the French Second Army in an attack further west, in the Argonne region? As Foch talked, it became increasingly clear to Pershing that he meant to use the American forces not as a single unit but in piecemeal fashion. Having spent over a year creating a distinct American force, Pershing was not about to parse it out as reinforcements for the French. He refused and they exchanged heated words before Foch departed.

Frustrated, Pershing appealed the next day to Marshal Phillipe Pétain, who mediated a compromise during a meeting with both Pershing and Foch on 2 September. The Americans could proceed with the attack on Saint-Mihiel, provided they joined the French forces in the Meuse-Argonne offensive before the end of the month. That meant the First Army would conduct two major operations within three weeks' time. It also meant that success at Saint-Mihiel could not be exploited with further movement toward Metz. This seemed like a monumental task and consequently appealed to Pershing's vanity. He agreed, and on 12 September 1918, more than 500,000 American troops began the battle of Saint-Mihiel.⁴⁴

The Germans had anticipated an attack on the salient for months and had already begun to withdraw. Seeking an overwhelming victory, Pershing sent 12 divisions of American and French troops against the eight German divisions trying to leave Saint-Mihiel intact. In the end, the AEF captured more than 14,000 German prisoners in two days. As with Cantigny,⁴⁵ however, the Americans found their success to be more significant than their allies. The First Army staff immediately turned to planning for the campaign in the Meuse-Argonne region. The First Army chief of staff, General Hugh Drum, tasked Marshall with devising a plan for moving 400,000 men and their equipment from Saint-Mihiel to the Meuse-Argonne, a distance of about 50 miles. Two factors added a level of complexity to his planning: First, there were only three main roads into the designated sector. Second, troops could travel only at night to avoid detection. Conner was undoubtedly impressed with his protégé's performance of this complicated maneuver, balancing the movements of three separate corps.

The war ended at the 11th hour of 11 November 1918 with Germany's signing of the Armistice agreement. Marshall rejoined Conner on Pershing's staff at the AEF-GHQ at the end of January 1919. For the next eight months, they had the unenviable task of overseeing the return of almost two million American Soldiers and equipment to the United States, while simultaneously preparing various after-action reports on the war overall and special reports on the Saint-Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives.

The Peace Treaty was signed in Versailles on 28 June 1919. Fox Conner accompanied Pershing to the signing ceremony. Later, he confided to Marshall that the terms of the treaty practically guaranteed another war. In much the same way that Palmer and Harbord had lobbied on his behalf to Pershing, Conner now recommended Marshall as an aide to Pershing.

Upon his return to the United States, General Pershing was called upon by the President and Congress to give his views on the future of the military. Brigadier General Conner helped to form those views. Anticipating the call to testify before Congress, he and Marshall prepped Pershing in Europe throughout the summer of 1919 and continued to work with him throughout the fall after their triumphant return to America.

On 7 October 1919, Pershing met Conner in Utica, New York, and proceeded to the Brandreth lake camp. Conner's sister-in-law Paulina and her friend Elsie Robinson provided companionship for Pershing.⁴⁶ From 7 October to 25 October, Pershing and Marshall were sequestered at the Brandreth family compound finalizing Pershing's testimony on the reorganization of the Army.⁴⁷ On 31 October 1919, Pershing appeared before a combined meeting of Senate and House military committees. The testimony lasted three days, with Marshall sitting on one side of Pershing and Conner on the other.⁴⁸ That winter, Conner and Marshall accompanied Pershing on a tour of Army installations.⁴⁹

The friendship between Conner and Marshall, forged in the stress and strain of combat, would continue for 30 years. Conner had a very high opinion of George C. Marshall, and he later told Eisenhower that Marshall "knows more about the techniques of arranging allied commands than any man I know. He is nothing short of a genius."⁵⁰ For his part, Marshall appreciated the opportunities that working for Conner had created for him. Because of his work with Conner, Marshall became Pershing's aide after the war when Pershing was the Army Chief of Staff. Marshall visited the Conners in Panama in August 1924 and narrowly missed meeting Eisenhower, who had left Panama that summer.⁵¹

Upon Conner's retirement in 1938, Marshall wrote,

*I am deeply sorry, both personally and officially, to see you leave the active list, because you have a great deal yet to give the Army out of that wise head of yours. General Pershing was talking about you a few days before he sailed for France, and as always in the most complimentary terms possible regarding your wisdom and judgment.*⁵²

Marshall would go on to become Chief of Staff of the Army during World War II, Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State. The plan he devised for rebuilding Europe in the 1950s would influence American foreign policy for decades. But even after all of his successes, Marshall would maintain that he owed his greatest debts to the lessons he learned from Fox Conner.

Conner and Eisenhower – Growing a Supreme Commander

On one sunny but cold Saturday in October 1920, George Patton found himself escorting his old friend and mentor as he inspected the Infantry Tank School at Camp (now Fort) Meade, Maryland. Brigadier General Fox Conner was serving as chief of staff to General Pershing in Washington, D.C. During a break from inspecting the post, Conner mentioned over coffee that he was due to take over command of Camp Gaillard in Panama and needed to find a capable young officer to serve as his executive officer. His time on the Army staff during and after the war had left him out of touch with young officers, so he asked Patton for a recommendation. Only one name came to Patton's mind, that of his good friend and next door neighbor, Major Dwight David Eisenhower.⁵³ Intrigued, Conner asked to meet Major Eisenhower (known to his friends as Ike).

George Patton had graduated from West Point in 1909, six years ahead of Ike. After his return from World War I, Patton began studying for the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He invited Ike to help him study, and together they spent many evenings working out the solutions to problems from previous years' curricula

while their wives chatted.⁵⁴ Though Mamie Eisenhower and Beatrice Patton were not close, they remained friendly to each other because of the close friendship their husbands shared. Mamie's only sports interest was watching football, while Bea maintained an interest in sailing, deep-sea fishing and horseback riding. Bea had travelled widely and had many wealthy and influential friends, while Mamie preferred a quieter domestic life. The instant and transient friendship they shared was a common feature of Army wives of the day: they were friends mostly because their husbands were friends and because they were neighbors. The Eisenhowers lived next door to the Pattons and spent long hours fixing up the former barracks building that comprised their duplex. Mamie often found herself scrimping and scraping to fix up their home while Bea Patton would host dinners on fine china next door.⁵⁵

The Pattons were known for their weekly Sunday dinners and followed the tradition of hospitality and social gatherings common in the officer corps at the time. Both Mamie Eisenhower and her husband Ike have often maintained that the introduction of Ike to Fox Conner at one of those Sunday afternoon dinners was the pivotal moment in determining Ike's future success in the Army.⁵⁶

Conner made no mention of the position in Panama as the three couples ate that Sunday, but he found the young major very impressive. After dinner, Conner asked Eisenhower and Patton to show him around and give him a tour of their tank training site. Patton slyly took things a step further and offered to give General Conner a ride in a tank. Patton was always trying to stress the advantages of tanks and had even enlisted his wife as a willing passenger on one occasion to impress visiting dignitaries.⁵⁷ On hearing this, Bug Conner spoke up and asked to come along. The whippet tanks that Patton was eager to show off carried only two people, so Ike was tasked with driving Bug while her husband rode with Patton. Aware of the dangers inherent in giving tank rides to a civilian, and a general's wife to boot, Ike drove slowly and cautiously, but Bug was still rattled by the ride and regretted insisting on it.⁵⁸

After the Conners left, Patton confided to Ike that he had recommended him for the job as Conner's executive officer and encouraged him to take it when it was offered. The fact that Patton had recommended him carried great weight with Conner, and a few weeks later a formal offer arrived in the mail.⁵⁹ Moved by his friend's recommendation and excited about the opportunity, Ike accepted.

Eisenhower had professional and personal reasons to want to leave Camp Meade. After Conner's visit, Ike had written an article for the *Infantry Journal* in which he argued that tanks would be an important force in their own right in future conflicts instead of playing a supporting role to the infantry as they had in World War I. He went so far as to theorize about entire units based around tanks, which could take advantage of their great speed and armor to exploit success on the battlefield, leaving infantry units far behind. Understandably, this kind of writing angered the Infantry Chief, who made it clear that Eisenhower was now *persona non grata* in his own branch. His career in the future would be limited to coaching the Army football team at Camp Meade, an important source of bragging rights during the interwar period.

Personally, the Eisenhowers needed a change of scenery to help soothe the pain brought by the loss of their son Doud. Two months after the Conners' visit, Doud Dwight "Icky"

Eisenhower had contracted scarlet fever on 26 December 1920; he died one week later. The Eisenhowers were devastated at the loss of their only child, a vibrant and active three-year-old. Around every corner at Camp Meade were memories of their Icky, and they saw Panama as a new beginning. Despite their desire to leave for Panama right away, the Chief of the Tank Corps, Brigadier General Samuel Rockenbach, refused to let Ike go because of his success coaching the base football team. It took a personal appeal from Conner to the Infantry Chief, General Charles Farnsworth, to get Ike to Panama. A year after his visit to Camp Meade, Conner wrote to Eisenhower:

October 6, 1921

My Dear Eisenhower,

I enclose copy of the letter I sent the Chief of Infantry on October 4. As you will see I decided it was best not to wait until you could be consulted.

I am more than glad you are willing to come. I hardly expect any great trouble in getting the order. I wrote on the 4th to Col. G.C. Marshall Aide to Gen P. [Pershing] asking him to steer the matter. It might be advisable for you to drop in on Col. Marshall, State War and Navy Building, Room 270, and tell him your desire to go, or, if you can not get into the city, to telephone him.

Yours,

*Fox Conner*⁶⁰

Conner's persistence prevailed and in late December 1921, Eisenhower received orders to Panama.⁶¹ He and Mamie joined the Conners at Camp Gaillard on 7 January 1922.⁶² The living conditions in the Canal Zone in the 1920s were spartan at best. Camp Gaillard was named for Colonel David Gaillard, a West Point graduate (Class of 1884) and the chief engineer of the Panama excavation. The camp sat on the edge of the Culebra Cut of the Canal, a portion of the passage that was defined largely by mudslides. Ike's granddaughter Susan writes of Camp Gaillard that "tons of land often fell into the canal, which would then have to be dredged, while mudslides interrupted traffic and undermined the stability of the locality."⁶³

"A double-decked shanty, only twice as disreputable," was how Mamie described her first impression of their quarters in Panama.⁶⁴ The two-story house on stilts was at least 20 years old and had not been occupied in the previous decade. The wooden walls and roof of the shack were rotting and full of holes that let in the seasonal rains. On top of that, the quarters were infested with tropical insects and bats. One of Mamie Eisenhower's first impressions of Camp Gaillard was the rat that gnawed on the leg of a chair in her house all night on that first night.⁶⁵ The local area was crawling with snakes and lizards.⁶⁶

Mamie might not have even set foot in the house but for the quick actions of Bug Conner. The general's wife saw the dismay in the Eisenhowers' faces upon their arrival and rapidly escorted them to her own quarters less than a hundred yards away. A point of particular interest to Mamie was the piano in the Conners' living room. Bug invited Mamie to avail herself of the piano during their stay in Panama. Bug herself played the violin, and the two of them would often provide music for church services on Sundays. After seeing how a little paint

and hard work had transformed the Conner quarters into something passable, Mamie and Ike were less discouraged about their new assignment.⁶⁷

As with each of his protégés, Conner saw an aspect of his own personality in Ike. Both of them had grown up on farms in rural America, far from the politically and culturally sophisticated East Coast Establishment. Like Conner, Eisenhower had graduated in the middle of his class at West Point, ranking 61st out of 164 classmates. As a couple with three children of their own, the Conners took a special interest in the young Eisenhowers and were sensitive to their recent loss.

Fox Conner took Ike under his wing. Both avid horsemen, they would take long rides through the jungle together and fish on the weekends. It was not unusual for them to spend eight hours a day on horseback inspecting the camp and the canal. Conner's brigade, the 20th Infantry, was a Puerto Rican regiment. Although the officers were mostly Caucasian, the enlisted men and sergeants were all Puerto Rican. This was partly due to American attitudes about segregation at the time, and partly out of the mistaken belief that "brown" people would do better in a tropical climate because it more closely approximated their native island. There is no record of overt discrimination by Conner or Ike. Though both seemed to accept the segregated aspect of the Army at the time, both were seen as caring and effective leaders who sought to ensure a decent quality of life for the Soldiers under their care. There were weekly dances at the camp club and a swimming pool. On clear, hot nights movies were projected on an outdoor screen.⁶⁸

For her part, Bug Conner took Mamie aside and helped her to cope with both the loss of Doud and the resulting emotional distance with Ike. In her memoirs Bug says she advised Mamie to "vamp him." A mature mother of three children who'd been married 20 years, Bug wanted the young couple to succeed. Her advice worked. Mamie cut her hair and turned her feminine wiles on Ike. She joined the other wives in daily shopping excursions to buy fresh produce from a barge on the canal. She walked the rickety catwalk across the canal lock gates to Panama City to barter with local merchants for candlesticks, furniture and silks.⁶⁹ She worked with Bug to establish a maternity hospital for the wives of the enlisted men on the camp, raising money with the serendipitous help of a pair of movie stars.

When Mamie heard that Lila Lee and Thomas Meighan were in Panama filming a movie, she hurried down to the Tivoli Hotel and invited them to Camp Gaillard.⁷⁰ Lee and Meighan, two of the few silent film stars who would later make the successful transition to "talkies," graciously agreed to bring a copy of their latest movie, *The Ne'er-Do-Well*, and give the camp an advance screening in addition to being the guests of honor at a fundraising dinner for the maternity ward.

General Conner was not satisfied with Eisenhower's disdain for military history, a product of the methodology in use at the time for teaching it at the Academy. In those days, students were forced to memorize the positions of units and their commanders at all points throughout a battle. This amounted to learning of a sort, but did nothing to explain why decisions had been made or how those decisions affected the outcomes of the battles themselves. Conner recalled how he had struggled as a cadet, and how his first regimental commander, Colonel Haskin, had revived his interest in military history and strategy. He resolved to follow the same strategy with Ike, using the vast library in his quarters as his training aid.

Conner's quarters in Panama were filled from floor to ceiling with books on military history and strategy. Half of the volumes were in French. In the first two decades of the 20th century, far more was written about the study of war in Europe than in America. Conner had started studying French and Spanish as a cadet; he taught himself German as a captain in order to read about strategies being created in the Prussian *Kriegsakademie*. He began a deliberate campaign to turn his executive officer into a military history aficionado like himself.

He started Eisenhower on military fiction, handing him interesting books to read that they would then discuss. Over time, as Ike's interest in the subject grew, Conner shifted the selections to more serious works. His assignments were eclectic, ranging from Shakespeare to Nietzsche, with Matthew Steele's *American Campaigns* thrown in.⁷¹ Steele's work, the authoritative volume on the Civil War at the time, had first appeared in print in 1909, but Conner was familiar with it from the detailed notes he took of Steele's lectures at the Staff College in 1905.⁷² After a long day's work, Conner and Ike would read biographies of Civil War generals and spend long hours discussing their decisions. Frequently their conversations would continue after dinner long into the night. Conner assigned the writings of the Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz, still a military staple, on three separate occasions. Each time he would question Ike about the meanings and conclusions of Clausewitz's seminal work, *On War*.

Conner would often talk about the signing ceremony of the Treaty of Versailles. According to both Bug and Ike, Conner was convinced that the structure of the treaty ending World War I all but guaranteed another war. He theorized that it would happen within a quarter century, and he presciently understood that the next war would be fought, as the last one had, with allies. Having seen firsthand the difficulties that allied warfare posed in his time on Pershing's staff, Conner was determined to pass on the lessons he had learned.

He urged Eisenhower to learn everything he could about fighting as an allied force, and he even suggested another man from whom to learn it. George C. Marshall, Conner said, "knows more about the techniques of arranging allied commands than any man I know. He is nothing short of a genius."⁷³ Conner believed that the next war would truly be a world war, and that the men who fought it would have to think in terms of world strategy rather than single-front strategy.⁷⁴ Another thing Conner taught Eisenhower was never to have a personal enemy on his staff, since he would sabotage his commander.⁷⁵ In 1924, when his time as Conner's executive officer came to a close, Conner wrote on Eisenhower's efficiency report in that he was "one of the most capable, efficient, and loyal officers I have ever met."⁷⁶

Eisenhower left Panama motivated and enthusiastic about his chosen profession, but orders to return to Camp Meade disheartened him. He sought a coveted slot at the Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, but instead found himself coaching the Army football team again. Conner knew that attendance at the Command and General Staff College was a necessary step for Ike's career, but the old animosity of the Chief of Infantry toward Ike seemed to make it unlikely that he would ever get a slot. Attendance at the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, was a prerequisite for Leavenworth, and General Farnsworth seemed determined to prevent Ike from attending either school. Conner decided to use his connections to intervene on Ike's behalf.

He sent Eisenhower a telegram with instructions that, whatever happened next, he was to trust Conner. Next, Conner called on his friend and classmate, Major General Robert Davis. Robert “Corkey” Davis and Conner knew each other as classmates and as colleagues, having served together on Pershing’s staff during the war. Davis was Pershing’s adjutant general, or G-1, while Conner had served as the chief operations officer, or G-3. In 1922, Davis became the Adjutant General of the Army, the officer in charge of all personnel actions. Ike soon found himself transferred from the infantry branch to the Adjutant General’s department and assigned to recruiting duty at Fort Logan, Colorado. The Adjutant General’s Corps at that time had two slots at Leavenworth each year; as a favor to Conner, Davis gave one of them to Ike.

When he learned of the plan, Eisenhower expressed concern about his ability to succeed at Leavenworth because he had not attended the Infantry School at Fort Benning. Conner’s response was meant to reassure:

You quit worrying. You are better prepared for Leavenworth than any other man that has graduated from Benning because you have had to do the work required at Leavenworth. I know; I’ve been through that school, I’ve been an instructor there. You just go on and keep still when an order comes putting you on recruiting duty. Accept it and don’t kick.⁷⁷

The work he referred to was Conner’s habit of making Ike write a daily order for the operations of Camp Gaillard. Eisenhower later attributed much of his success at Fort Leavenworth to this practice. When Eisenhower graduated first in his class in 1926, Conner sent a congratulatory message to his protégé.⁷⁸ He then arranged to have Ike transferred back to the Infantry Branch, thus circumventing Farnsworth once again. Graduating first at Leavenworth had the effect of marking a man for future distinction, and Ike’s performance at Leavenworth attracted the attention of men like General Douglas MacArthur and General Mark Clark. General Clark recommended him to Marshall for the War Plans Division in 1941, and it was from this position that he left to take command of the European theater of operations.

Conner and Ike continued corresponding on matters both personal and professional for more than two decades. In a letter from September 1934, Ike commented on the general’s habit of spending the fall at Brandreth camp:

It must be about time for you to start your annual pilgrimage to the Adirondacks to bring down a buck. I don’t think you have ever reported a complete failure on one of those expeditions, but I have my suspicions that some of the buck you shoot are possibly the kind without horns. Anyway I hope you have fine weather and good hunting.⁷⁹

Ike wrote to Conner throughout his time as Supreme Allied Commander, sharing his concerns and frustrations. On 4 July 1942, he wrote that

more and more in the last few days my mind has turned back to you and to the days when I was privileged to serve intimately under your wise counsel and leadership. I cannot tell you how much I would appreciate, at this moment, an opportunity for an hour’s discussion with you on problems that constantly beset me.⁸⁰

Ever the mentor, Conner offered wise counsel in return. He advised Ike to “relieve the pressure on Russia,” and all else would follow. He sought to encourage him by writing that “your present detail was, and is, widely approved. No better choice could have been made.” Conner closed his letter “with all best wishes and great pride in you. As always yours, Fox Conner.”⁸¹

Ike would go on to become President of Columbia University in 1948 and President of the United States in 1952. He met distinguished leaders from all over the world, but he would often describe Fox Conner as “the ablest man I ever knew.”⁸²

Conclusion

Conner served the nation in uniform for 40 years. After commanding the Hawaii Division, Conner accepted command of the First Corps Area in October 1930 and moved to his new headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts.⁸³ Three years later, in the midst of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt assigned him the task of supervising the New England Civilian Conservation Corps, and he spent four years overseeing the mobilization of young men into 125 Civilian Corp Companies.

Even Conner, however, could not escape the ravages of time. A lifelong smoker, Conner suffered frequently from illness in his later years. While recovering from an operation in the spring of 1938 he developed coronary thrombosis. Hospitalized at Walter Reed, his room was across the hall from his old boss and friend “Black Jack” Pershing. Conner accepted that his physical condition would not allow him to continue in the profession he loved, and he departed the Army on terminal leave on 13 July 1938.⁸⁴ In the year of Conner’s retirement, Pershing told him, “I could have spared any other man in the A.E.F. better than you.”⁸⁵

When his health permitted, Conner still sought to serve the Army. The clouds of war gathering over Europe seemed to validate the concerns he had in Paris in 1919. He continued to write and speak on the subject of his expertise—war. Eight months after his retirement, he gave a lecture at the Army War College, as he had every year since 1934. During the height of World War II, classified couriers journeyed to his Brandreth camp with bulging envelopes full of war plans, sent by both Marshall and Eisenhower for his review. The old master looked over maps and orders with names like OVERLORD and TORCH and made copious notes before sending them back to their authors. His star pupils, who were now masters of war in their own right, could not pass up the opportunity to ask his advice or to respond to a request for a personal favor.

Ike’s son, John S. D. Eisenhower, visited Conner in December 1943 and reported to his father that “the General” seemed subdued and weakened from a series of strokes.⁸⁶ His condition continued to deteriorate. He would live to see the end of the war and to see Ike become president of Columbia University but not President of the United States. Conner passed away on 13 October 1951 at the age of 77 at Walter Reed. The memorial service held at the hospital chapel was small and inconspicuous. The only VIP in attendance was recently retired Secretary of State George C. Marshall, who stood by Bug’s side and honored his friend and mentor. Conner’s family carried his ashes to the family camp at Brandreth Lake. A few newspapers carried his obituary, but he was mostly forgotten even in his own time. The model he followed for developing strategic leaders, however, would live on. Each of

his protégés developed subordinates of their own who would go on to face new challenges during the Cold War, fighting once again in distant lands like Korea and Vietnam. Today it is time for a new generation of leaders to learn from and follow Conner's example, and train future members of the profession of arms to lead the Army in the 21st century.

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