

# Propaganda in America: How to Recognize and Defend Against It

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Corporations and governments use modern propaganda techniques to influence and manipulate the public, incurring social and environmental consequences which are compounding over time. This paper provides both historical and modern examples of propaganda, then highlights key issues that arise as a byproduct, such as planned obsolescence, astroturfing, and the internet filter bubble. Companies like Google and Facebook use proprietary algorithms to shape the internet as well as their users' minds through dopamine-driven feedback loops. The effects of a consumer driven culture spill over into the environment, with plastic pollution and e-waste littering the shores of distant countries. This paper details how plastic pollution in the environment has made its way back into the human body, while propaganda is used to distract people with targeted advertising using techniques pioneered by Edward Bernays. Propaganda is a multifaceted subject which requires historical context to understand and identify. This is an informative paper which has the goal of arming readers with an ability to recognize propaganda and defend against its negative effects. It is vital for Americans to become aware of the propaganda being used to manipulate them. Otherwise, societal issues caused by social media and other factors will continue to erode our ability to communicate and think critically.

Key Words: astroturf, planned obsolescence, manipulation, social media, pollution

## Introduction

The politician promises change, the preacher salvation, and the businessman satisfaction. They have one thing in common: each advertises his or her wares using propaganda. Propaganda is a complex idea that has gained negative connotations over time, perhaps rightly so. Professor Sherly Tuttle Ross describes propaganda as something directed by "a political institution, organization, or cause" which is aimed at "a socially significant group of people" and has the "intention to persuade" (20). Furthermore, author Stanley B. Cunningham writes that propaganda is "primarily a twentieth century . . . mass phenomenon" (177). I define propaganda as a systematized method of packaging and disseminating information which intends to generate a specific behavior or belief in people. Its earliest forms were commonly used for recruiting troops or promoting warfare, but there has been a modernization of this multifaceted method of persuasion. Propaganda in America affects the psychological and environmental state of Americans and the rest of the world. Both corporations and governments relentlessly engage the population in what George Bernays referred to as "psychological warfare" (Bernays 155). Short-sighted corporate and political decisions yield high profits for a select few but incur devastating consequences.

A shrinking number of large corporations dominate every market and flood it with shoddy products designed to fail quickly, accumulating waste.

A good understanding of propaganda is essential for recognizing its use. My goal is to arm the reader with the tools necessary for recognizing propaganda and knowing how to defend oneself against its subtle influences. I want to bring awareness to the detrimental effects of propaganda, which affects both our psyche and the environment, and what can be done about it. This paper briefly explores some historically noteworthy examples of propaganda. The ancient world sets the stage for what comes later in modernity, which is this paper's primary focus.

This paper is organized into four sections. The first highlights a brief history of propaganda, beginning with prehistoric humans and quickly moving to Athens, where it is honed. I touch on the printing press, which introduces a powerful new medium for disseminating propaganda. Then, in the early 1900s, George Bernays would apply Freudian psychology to the American business world. This event is vital for understanding the changes occurring over time in consumer and corporate relationships. The second section explores examples of successful modern propaganda campaigns. Here, special attention is given to astroturfing, considering its massive rise and success in the spheres of social media. In the third section, I discuss some of the harmful effects of modern propaganda, notably, how internet companies have created "bubbles" that isolate users into custom echo chambers, void of dissenting or differing views. Furthermore, social media harms Americans and their ability to communicate and connect. The fourth section introduces methods for defending oneself against propaganda and its influences. Individual responsibility and awareness, seeking out opposing viewpoints, and counterpropaganda are effective ways to defend against propaganda in America.

## A Brief History of Propaganda

When our ideas first took the shape of words and pictures, propaganda lacked a name, but its presence was still evident. "Neolithic cave drawings," seen as far back as around 7000 BC, depict "perhaps the earliest form of war propaganda" (Taylor 20). There are depictions of "men using weapons against each other," which could have served various purposes, such as training, decorating, or inspiring fear or awe. They showed that from our beginning, propaganda has been a part of our culture and how we interact. At its core, it is a method people use to convey ideas, wants, or needs. When people collectively build institutions of power – like a government or church – propaganda is a potent tool. The "Assyrians [who] were challenging the Babylonians" applied propaganda beyond the military application, crafting "heroic poems and hymns" to demoralize their enemies while emboldening their troops (Taylor 22). Powerful institutions tend to concentrate power and stifle dissenting voices. These are early examples of psychological warfare, which others would emulate and expand.

A master swordsman in the art of propaganda was Alexander the Great, the king of Macedonia, who reigned from 336-323 BC. Taylor discusses how Alexander's decision to have his face "replace that of Heracles, the 'real' son of Zeus" on Greece's coinage was an act of "political propaganda." Alexander sought "deification" and saturated his image in as many forms as possible throughout Greece. He further wielded propaganda by "employ[ing] Greek artists and craftsmen to depict him in . . . statues and in paintings." His efforts were successful, with people believing en masse that it was "his destiny to rule [which was] granted by the gods" (33). At the time, it would have been rather difficult to argue against his logic, considering his face was molded into the same coins commoners used – ones that previously featured gods.

In book seven of *Republic* (c. 375 BC) – the "Allegory of the Cave" – Plato describes a scenario where chained prisoners would be forced to view a wall where shadows would serve as their sole indicator of the outside world. Because they had been there their entire lives, the shadows were all they knew. The shadows the prisoners could see were controlled by "men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals" (253). One prisoner was shown the outside world and brought back. This experience was alarming

and unexplainable from that prisoner's perspective, who suffered a second sensory shock upon returning to his previous dark predicament. Instead of being welcomed back with curiosity, his fellow prisoners warned him that if he even thought to "loose another and lead him up into the light," they would "put him to death" (254). The story illustrates intellectual truth and how revelations can be alarming for all parties. Reality and truth are not always synonymous. In other areas of *Republic*, Plato writes in favor of censorship, as well as the government generating misleading information to protect society from itself. Ideas like these serve as the framework for modern governments and corporations to influence and change people's perceptions. As US Republican Party political consultant and strategist Lee Atwater (1951-1991) is credited with saying: perception is reality.

The arrival of the printing press in the 15th century revolutionized the ability of institutions like the church to mass produce propaganda. During the 16th and 17th centuries, "Protestant and Catholic propagandists" used the printing press in the Reformation, believing it to be "an important weapon" for "influencing the public" (SCARC). Aine Doyle, in the paper "Tracing 'Fake News,'" emphasizes "the importance [in the] power of controlling and manipulating information," noting how the printing press "set the precedent for the multimedia content of the present-day media" (55). Before the printing press, it was not possible to mass produce literature or art. It was an expensive item that few could afford. However, those that could afford it controlled the information people could access. The printing press drastically shifted the power paradigm between the elite and the commoner, and its effects strongly resonate today.

Propaganda was beginning to blossom at this point. Throughout history, there are those who have understood that with evolving technologies and a growing population, new methods for control must be developed to maintain the hierarchy. The coming modern world was bringing strange new ideas that would reshape how propaganda was applied. Thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, B. F. Skinner, and Leon Festinger were pushing into a new frontier: the human psyche. Edward Bernays's arrival in America heralded a new era of consumerism and corporate propaganda. By applying his uncle Sigmund Freud's psychological practices to groups of people, Bernays gained new insights into how people's minds operate. He learned how to nudge them towards something – a product or an idea. Both Bernays and the companies who would employ him would yield hefty profits.

Bernays has several noteworthy accomplishments in his life, but one stands out. Prior to the 1930s, it was "acceptable for women to smoke at home," but "a woman seen smoking in public was labeled a hussy or worse" (Bernays 386). The Lucky Strikes tobacco company wanted women to smoke, which meant overcoming a strong social stigma. Bernays was hired to overcome this social barrier. It is essential to note that women confronted discrimination practices and a lack of gender equality during that time. Bernays would associate their struggle with smoking by calling cigarettes "torches of freedom." This is an early example of a modern corporation using a psychological technique known as "transfer propaganda," which means associating one idea, value, or person with another. Word association is a powerful component of a propaganda campaign and was integral in shifting the public's attitude toward smoking. During the 1929 New York City Easter Parade, Bernays had a "parade of ten young women lighting 'torches of freedom'" and paid journalists to cover the story and news outlets to run it (387). Torches of freedom were a resounding success, with women viewing "the cigarette as a weapon in their increasing challenge to traditional ideas about female behaviour." Between this campaign and their "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet" campaign, the Lucky Strikes cigarette company's propaganda efforts were "highly effective" and "made Lucky Strike the best selling brand for two years" (Amos 4). Bernays would go on to have a successful career in marketing and consulting, changing the public's perception of things like breakfast, cake mix, soap, and more. Later in life, in his biography, he reminisced on how he learned that "age old customs . . . could be broken down by a dramatic appeal [and] disseminated by the network of the media" (Bernays 421). Corporations would exploit this idea ruthlessly in the coming race for internet attention.

The rise of social media brings societal issues related to communication and truth. Propaganda may have its roots in warfare, but with thinkers like Bernays, new techniques were brought into modern consumerism and

corporate advertising. Tactics initially used to draw peasants into fighting for their king are now used to convince people that a product is necessary. Moreover, corporations masquerade as grassroots movements formed by regular people in disinformation campaigns designed to influence public opinion.

## Modern Examples of Propaganda

Propaganda exists all around us, from the music and art of the obscure small-time creators to global advertising campaigns. Individuals want to control their image and market themselves for personal gain. Corporations and governments want the same things.

Propaganda can be applied in positive and negative ways. Positive examples of propaganda include the anti-smoking campaigns funded by the US government, which aimed to build public awareness of the dangers of smoking. The “public attitudes regarding cigarette smoke . . . [has] changed over the past 50 years,” said Dr. Michael Cummings of the National Tobacco Reform Initiative in an article published in the NIH. He found that “in 1980, only 37% of smokers had labeled smoking an addiction,” while newer studies had shown that “by 2002 that had risen to 74%” (Cummings). This increase in awareness meant fewer people were smoking, and consequently, fewer people dying from cancer.

The state can shift the public’s perception through publicly funded campaigns. Another positive example of propaganda is the “Don’t Mess with Texas” anti-littering campaign from the late 1980s. Celebrities like Stevie Ray Vaughn, Willie Nelson, Matthew McConaughey, and others were paid to highlight the costs and damages done to Texas roadways due to littering. Studies have shown that most Texans now associate “Don’t Mess with Texas” with not littering. Michiru Nagatsu calls these types of campaigns “social nudges” in his paper “Social Nudges: Their Mechanisms and Justification.”

Good examples of propaganda exist, but this paper focuses on the negative aspects, how to be more aware, and how to defend against its harmful effects. A truism is that the modern world is full of examples of propaganda. The military presence in national sports programs is one such example. Football games have a solid patriotic theme and draw large crowds from around the country, making it an ideal place for the military to promote its image.

Any corporate jingle or slogan, from McDonald’s “Ba-da-da-da I’m loving it” to Nike’s “Just Do It” is designed to build familiarity with the brand. This type of propaganda is generally apparent in its intentions: give money; get widget. Corporate advertisers have developed sneakier methods of propaganda, many relying on emotional appeal. One effective way to promote a product is to build it around a fear-of-missing-out (FOMO) mentality. A company might suggest that you will not fit in or keep up without Widget A. This scenario can be played out on social media to influence consumers directly and repeatedly.

Many types of propaganda are harmless, but there are concerning variations. Astroturfing is a phenomenally effective and worrying example, which seems to be increasing in frequency. Astroturfing is a campaign to create and build up a false grassroots movement. Special interest groups employ others to act like concerned citizens voicing their opinions, flooding government representatives with concerns. It is designed to appear as a spontaneous and widespread phenomenon. Astroturfing helps influence public opinion and political policy. Texas Democratic Senator Lloyd Bentsen first coined the term “AstroTurf” in 1985 when he said, “a fellow from Texas can tell the difference between grass roots and AstroTurf . . . this is generated mail” (Ostler). He was referring to the many letters and cards sent to his office which appeared to be from concerned citizens pressuring their representatives. However, the reality was that they originated from the same insurance companies looking to manipulate Bentsen’s vote in their favor.

Besides Senator Bentsen’s revelation that insurance companies were inundating him with support for pro-insurance legislation, other examples of astroturfing are worth mentioning. The National Smoker’s Alliance (NSA) was formed in the early 1990s to fight against anti-smoking legislation in Congress. The NSA acted like a

grassroots movement but was “a public relations created front group funded by the tobacco industry.” Tobacco companies relied on the “public relations . . . theory of Edward Bernays” to “mold public opinion” in such a way that it favored a “client’s preferred public policy” (Givel).

In addition to foreign interference, the 2020 American elections saw several prominent financial players spend enormous sums of money to influence it. According to a press release by the Director of National Intelligence, China, Iran, and Russia were “seeking[ing] to compromise [the] election” to “undermine the American people’s confidence” (Evanina). There were also several domestic players who helped muddy the water with incredible sums of money (Wang). One such player was Michael Bloomberg who spent over a billion dollars during his 100-day election run, according to a Report of Receipts and Disbursements by the Federal Elections Committee (“Form 3P for Mike Bloomberg 2020, Inc.”). In 2016, then-candidate Donald Trump utilized a now-defunct company, Cambridge Analytica, to analyze “millions of Facebook users’ personal data” in order to help “aid [his] political campaign” (Kozłowska). Not only did this bolster his support, but Trump effectively employed propaganda to build his cult of personality. Each of these candidates benefitted from flooding the entire system with propaganda, some more effectively than others. Studying the effects of domestic and foreign interference on the election would be worthwhile to discern if one had more weight than the other.

Companies like Twitter have become integral to communication in the United States, thanks to people like Donald Trump. He would speak directly to his constituents only through the online media platform. Twitter also has power because a large portion of the population is using its platform and the company, like all companies, is not beholden to the Constitution. Say something against their terms and agreements, and you can find yourself without a platform to speak on. A common refutation is that anyone is free to go out and start their own media platform. However, this is moot, considering the competition is a billion-dollar company controlling the central connection between people. A computer programmer possessing all the necessary skills could not create a platform to compete because they ultimately lack the audience that Twitter or other social media giants have garnered.

Although this is not an all-encompassing catalog of propaganda techniques and employments, I hope that readers are now more aware of how things might not be as they appear. Forces unseen are at work manipulating people’s emotions, nudging them towards something which benefits those unseen drivers. Newer technologies like social media have enabled foreign and domestic actors to manipulate large population segments while skirting around the Constitution. So, what are the effects of modern propaganda in America?

## Harmful Effects of Propaganda

Initially, the internet was a small network of computers, each with an address. Users could send information back and forth, provided they knew the proper address. As the internet grew and more computers came online, it became necessary to index and keep track of all of these addresses. In the internet’s early days, sites like AskJeeves, WebCrawler, Lycos, AltaVista, and Yahoo indexed websites based on keywords and presented the results to inquiring users. Each engine used algorithms to determine rank order. Before search engines, unless a user knew the specific address of a website, it would have been nearly impossible to find it. Search engines connected the dots and gave order to the internet. Then came Google, which would quickly dominate the search engine world, providing accurate and helpful search results by indexing sites according to its search engine algorithms. A *Wall Street Journal* investigation revealed that “every minute, an estimated 3.8 million queries are typed into Google.” In that same report, the authors point out that “Google’s algorithms are subject to regular tinkering from executives and engineers.” Companies as large as eBay and as small as DealCatcher – a 12-employee company owned by Dan Baxter – have seen their websites temporarily blacklisted. Consequently, their website will not appear in any of Google’s search results. In Baxter’s case, his website traffic was “suddenly



down 93% for no apparent reason” and did not return for a month (Grind). When Google suddenly changes its algorithm, eBay might survive a month-long blacklisted period on Google, but smaller businesses may not fare as well.

The so-called internet filter bubble emerged slowly over the past three decades. People’s attention is valuable to an advertising company like Google. When users like something, they engage with it for longer; when they dislike it, they disengage. Google began designing its algorithm to keep users engaged by avoiding things that would reduce screen time. This forms an echo chamber that wraps itself around each of us every time a search engine request is made. Unfortunately, this acts as an enabler for confirmation bias, where people tend to believe sources that confirm their bias and disregard sources that go against it. Google unintentionally entrenches people into their beliefs and silently navigates users around the things that might disinterest them for fear of lost revenue.

Social media exacerbates several issues. One issue is that social media companies use tactics that hijack our brain’s reward system. Chamath Palihapitiya was Facebook’s Vice President for User Growth and left in 2011. Since then, he has been raising concerns about the “short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops” companies like Facebook use to keep users engaged. Palihapitiya said that “bad actors” use companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat to “manipulate large swaths of people.” Those unaware of social media dangers are more susceptible to manipulation. Sean Parker, an early investor in Facebook, became a “‘conscientious objector’ to social media” and said the company is “exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology.” In addition to psychological manipulation, fake information can also be an issue. Disaster can result when large segments of the population believe the propaganda. In India, “several men who were falsely accused” were lynched when a “hoax . . . spread through WhatsApp” (Wang). Being able to recognize propaganda reduces its ability to have an influence and can reduce these kinds of incidents.

Another harmful effect of propaganda is a byproduct of the consumer culture: planned obsolescence. Readers can look at commercials for older widgets and find simple advertisements that emphasize quality. As time passed, companies realized that making one widget that lasts a lifetime was less profitable than producing many widgets that fail after a preset amount of time. Since more widgets sold equals more profit, “there’s little incentive to design for durability, longevity, [or] repairs.” In 1924, a “group of lightbulb manufacturers called the Phoebus Cartel” created planned obsolescence, which had the specific goal of “limiting the life span of bulbs” to sell more. The decades to come would see countless “plan[s] to stoke consumption,” such as IKEA’s 1996 campaign to “encouraging British women to dispose of their stodgy old furniture” or “Apple’s . . . unreplaceable battery” in 2001 (Goldmark). However, what of all those failed widgets? Where do they go, and what does this do to the environment? Some end up in a landfill, and a large portion of waste is shipped out of the US. Ana Singh, in a Berkeley Political Review article, points out that there could be “up to 43 shipping containers full of e-waste . . . leaving the United States every day” (Singh). Several countries like China have started refusing waste from countries like the United States. Forbes Senior Contributor Kenneth Rapoza writes “China . . . first introduced new rules banning the import of ‘foreign garbage’ in 2017.” His article points out that much of the US lacks the waste infrastructure necessary to handle the garbage we produce because we usually export it.

Companies produce subpar goods and export the consequences of their manufacturing processes to “create both physical and psychological distance” between consumers and businesses (Goldmark). This is a growing problem that “undermine[s] global public health initiatives” and allows dangerous and toxic chemicals like lead, arsenic, and mercury to leech into soil and water reservoirs (Singh). Scientists are also raising alarms about the increasing plastic in our bodies. A June 2019 study by the World Wide Fund for Nature notes that the average amount of plastic a person could be ingesting is around “5 grams” (Hakizimana). This is the equivalent of a credit card worth of plastic every week. Companies use propaganda to distort reality and present consumers with an alternative that lacks all the facts. The lack of accountability and poor manufacturing processes cannot continue

without dire consequences for our environment and us.

Finally, how does social media impact American society? Consider that we are all participating in shared propaganda on social media websites: I see what you want me to see, and you see what I show you. We are, however, not viewing just our friends and family but also the projections and fabrications of governments, corporations, special interest groups, and more. These deep-pocketed players generate an online presence that might not reflect reality nor have our best interests in mind. And when we cannot agree on what is real, there can be no meaningful or productive communication. It is difficult to determine what percentage of online content a human being creates and how much is generated by technology like automated scripts or bots. More research is needed on this topic.

## Combatting Propaganda

Up to this point, I have explored the idea of propaganda and its history and applications. Examples of both positive and negative employments of propaganda have been selectively laid out to build familiarity with the reader. The situation in modern America might also reflect that of different world areas. This section presents several tactics for individuals to increase their awareness and protect themselves against the emotional tug indicative of propaganda.

Conscious awareness and understanding ensure a continuation of life and enable a more honest expression of the self. In George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* (1949), people spoke a language called Newspeak. It was a simplified language designed to limit people's communication and ability to express themselves. A person living in the environment of this novel would not possess the knowledge or awareness of how to express their thoughts or feelings. The result is misery and subjugation. Before civilization, a lack of awareness would provide some opportune hunters with an easy meal. Since modern society does not require constant alertness for predators lurking behind buildings, we pay less attention. Cell phones and digital tech exacerbate this problem by distracting people from their surroundings. Becoming more aware of one's surroundings and what is subjectively happening mentally and emotionally is crucial to fighting the effects of propaganda. Emotions are the hooks and triggers that companies seek to exploit. You can be manipulated and controlled by failing to maintain awareness of your emotions. Emotions can be stirred up or elicited by external stimuli, and unless recognized for what they are, they can quickly compound into something unexpected, like an outburst.

There are several methods for gaining awareness of oneself, including meditation, yoga, philosophy, etc. Whichever of these appeals to any individual, becoming more in tune with what is happening within is just as important as paying attention to the environment. This is not to suggest that a person attains an emotionless mind, but instead not to allow oneself to be dragged unaware down an emotional path. American society has a stigma that mental health should not be discussed. However, America is suffering from a mental health crisis, which is partially a result of propaganda by people and groups who do not have anyone's best interest in mind except their own. It is imperative to communicate with others and allow them to communicate since this breaks down the illusions created by propaganda. It is crucial to acknowledge problems, then seek out support and help for what ails. Becoming a more conscious individual raises the consciousness of the collective group by some tiny iota. Each of us has a responsibility to play our part.

Without awareness it would not be possible to progress in the fight against propaganda and its influences on an individual. Awareness is vital to the next step, which is intentionally seeking out opposing viewpoints. When presented with a subject that has a side, first consider the idea of belonging to that side. Did you choose this side yourself, of your own volition, or were there influencing factors worth considering? Seek out the opposing side with curiosity and work to understand why its purveyors believe what they believe. People have come to act as if there is no distinction between a person and their beliefs. To criticize one is to attack the other, and

the internet has reinforced this. Separating a belief or a view from the individual allows for closer inspection. You might ask, why seek out what you know or believe is wrong? Unless it is an absurd claim that would be more of a waste of time – sorry flat-Earthers – hearing out the opposition will result in one of two things: it will either reinforce your belief and understanding of your position, as well as gain you a better understanding of your opposition, humanizing both sides in the process; or it might influence you just enough to consider a shift in consciousness. This is how successful ideas and relationships are formed and grow over time. Awareness of oneself and one's tendencies allows for a more objective analysis of the internal and external world. An awareness of the propaganda, how it makes you feel, and how you are being led to respond, as well as an open mind to opposing viewpoints – all of this leads to an empowered position in the modern world. Part of this process involves limiting exposure to some sources of propaganda, like social media or the news. Most power is derived from the audience paying attention. Deprive them of attention, and you deprive them of influence over yourself and those around you.

Lastly, counterpropaganda can help combat propaganda. Counterpropaganda is based on truth and targets the same audience as the propaganda. Because of the internet, rapid deployment of information is possible almost anywhere. However, I am tepid about this suggestion, due to the increase in noise. The internet and media already flood the American psyche with so much propaganda that to add to it, even with the best intentions, might not have much effect. Alternatively, worse, it might serve to confuse people further. Ultimately, I believe it is most effective to disconnect from the noise source. Social media, the 24-hour news cycle, politicians, corporations, and more – much of it is unnecessary and can be minimized or cut out completely. Combine this with increasing awareness among a population and this is the recipe for clarity and truth.

## Conclusion

Propaganda poses new challenges in the digital age. Bad actors can use increasingly powerful technologies to manipulate large swaths of the population anonymously. Becoming more aware of emotional manipulation in media and the corporate-driven digital world is crucial to maintaining mental health. Propaganda is a tactic that has been honed and sharpened over centuries. This latest iteration is brought to you by corporations employing psychologists, sociologists, scientists, data scientists, and more to manipulate and control you. And they are deeply invested in you believing what they are peddling because their paycheck depends on it.

I believe more research is necessary to better understand the social issues. But those long-term views are inadequate for combating the issue immediately and directly. Humans, especially Westerners, think in terms of a dichotomy: this and that. We believe that there are two sides to everything, whether good vs. evil, up vs. down, or left vs. right. Our thinking leaves no room for ambiguity, despite life being ambiguous by nature. A society is not independent of its citizens, and a person is not independent of their environment. Changing one changes the other.

I hope that this paper can resonate with others who find their power in choosing to become more conscious, open, and aware. One may use the tools of this paper to raise one's level of awareness and perception of both the analog and digital worlds. Making a difference is possible, one responsible person at a time



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