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# Brexit, A Brief Historical Analysis

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## Abstract

This paper will specifically examine the historical impact of decolonization, integration and immigration on the 2020 Brexit decision. The research will identify key events that have contributed to a rise in British Euroscepticism which has continuously served as backdrop for British isolationism and anti-immigrant thought. A study of the increased movement of people attributed to mass mobilization following decolonization and integration will play a key role in highlighting the effects Brexit will have both on Britain and on an international platform. Emphasis will be placed on the implications this history and resulting policies will have on the economic prosperity and stability of future Britain. In this paper, the focus will largely be placed on the post-1973 period, after Britain's entrance into the EEC. Analysis of the latter quarter of the 20th century will contribute to a better understanding of modern events, decisions and predictions.

## Keywords

Brexit, Post-War Britain, British Integration

## Disciplines

European History | History | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration

## Comments

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Brexit, A Brief Historical Analysis

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HIST 319: Europe After 1945

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*Abstract*

This paper will specifically examine the historical impact of decolonization, integration and immigration on the 2020 Brexit decision. The research will identify key events that have contributed to a rise in British Euroscepticism which has continuously served as backdrop for British isolationism and anti-immigrant thought. A study of the increased movement of people attributed to mass mobilization following decolonization and integration will play a key role in highlighting the effects Brexit will have both on Britain and on an international platform. Emphasis will be placed on the implications this history and resulting policies will have on the economic prosperity and stability of future Britain. In this paper, the focus will largely be placed on the post-1973 period, after Britain's entrance into the EEC. Analysis of the latter quarter of the 20th century will contribute to a better understanding of modern events, decisions and predictions.

*I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity*

*in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.*

British political and societal influences of the post-war era compounded with its involvement in European integration projects, such as the European Economic Community (EEC), have culminated to define modern day British politics. This has thus drastically guided the more recent decision regarding the United Kingdom's secession from the European Union (EU). Political instances contributing to this debate include the initial rejection of the United Kingdom from the EEC on account of foreign relations, particularly those with the United States, and Margaret Thatcher's iron stance on British economic involvement. These were furthermore augmented by specific cultural and societal issues, particularly those brought on by decolonization and immigration. Such fluctuations in the movement of people across Europe drastically shaped the economic and political stance of Britain and continuously steered the country away from integration. As European attitudes shifted in the post-war era, British politics began and have continued to reflect a policy of isolationism and separatism which has translated to the current debate regarding Britain's role within the European community and on a global platform. By examining these changes and varying interpretations of their impacts, the contemporary state of Britain in regard to EU secession can be more fully understood and discussed.

A common argument for Brexit stemmed from the belief that Britain is separate from Europe and has acted as a uniquely independent nation continuously throughout history. This thought is exemplified through the organization "Historians for Britain", a collective of British historians. The group had argued for a drastic reformation of the European Union, one which would more properly highlight the United Kingdom's commonly singular and individualistic history. The group's chairman, Cambridge Professor David Abulafia, submitted in a 2015 publication that Britain's distinct past separates the country from others within Europe. In the

article, Abulafia outlined the group's platform, which focused on limited public involvement in the secession debate, renegotiation of EU membership, and further opportunity for EU member states (which Britain would remain a part of) to act more independently. He closed the article by stating that following the 1973 entry of Britain into the Common Market (EEC), the focus would have been better placed on economics rather than the creation of a stronger union.[1]

Contradictorily, David Cameron, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom between 2010 and 2016, often cited historic events in his case against British secession. Cameron called upon Britain's historic presence as a European and global power which reflected that, "From Caesar's legions to the wars of the Spanish succession, from Napoleonic wars to the fall of the Berlin Wall… Britain has always been a European power."[2] Cameron's speech, from a 2016 event preceding Britain's referendum on EU membership, emphasized the primary goal of the EU as a method of diversion from European self-destruction. Cameron even called upon key historical figures, such as Winston Churchill. Churchill was a firm believer in European autonomy to combat future wars and the communist Eastern European bloc, his policies helping to revitalize the continent following two destructive World Wars.[3] Further opposition to Euroscepticism was demonstrated in a response to the previously mentioned periodical by David Abulafia signed by approximately 250 historians, including David Andress, Richard Blakemore, amongst others. The letter directly opposed claims made by Abulafia and other like-minded scholars and detailed points, such as Britain's parliamentary history, which drew on a larger claim that Britain's history is not nearly as unique from Europe as believed.[4]

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[1] David Abulafia, "Britain: Apart from or a Part of Europe?," History Today (History Today Ltd., May 11, 2015).
[2] Gideon Rachman, "Rival Historians Trade Blows over Brexit," Financial Times (The Financial Times Ltd., May 13, 2016).
[3] Henry Johnson, "In Brexit Debate, David Cameron Recites European History, BoJo Sings in German," Foreign Policy (Foreign Policy, May 9, 2016).
[4] David Andress et al., "Fog in Channel, Historians Isolated," History Today (History Today Ltd., May 18, 2015).

Additional commentary, particularly by Professor Neil Gregor of Southampton and Professor Ruth Harris of Oxford, incorporated history to challenge the Eurosceptic line of continuity and separation. For example, in challenging the viewpoint that Britain has remained immune to ideologies which Europe has faced over previous decades (including communism, fascism and extreme nationalism), Harris pointed out that this belief detrimentally abandons the history of the British empire. Gregor supplemented Harris' argument by stressing the UK involvement in slavery, oppression, extortion and expropriation.[5] Other such disputes have exacerbated the British debate and have highlighted the need for a historical understanding when examining the issue.

A Cambridge journal, *Contemporary European History*, sought to expound upon this truth with the analysis of multiple historians' understandings of Brexit as a historic event. Divided amongst specialties, rather than nationality, the journal identified thought along a wide historical spectrum, ranging from the pre-war era to the post-Cold War time period. Scholars such as Pertti Ahonen reflected on the two World Wars and their drastic impact on immigration and emigration. He noted that the increased flow of people often garnered negative attitudes within host countries as foreigners were increasingly seen as a threat to nationalistic communities and sovereignty as a whole. Additionally, David Motadel noted that the Second World War in particular prompted a surge in far-right wing political organizations who acted as precursors to the pro-secession movement.[6] Movements such as the National Front, led by Enoch Powell, represented the collision of anti-immigrant sentiment with increased nationalistic extremism by pushing violence as a method of activism. This particular movement was aided by

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[5] Gideon Rachman, "Rival Historians Trade Blows over Brexit."

[6] Jessica Reinisch, "Introduction: Contemporary European Historians on Brexit," *Contemporary European History* 28, no. 1 (February 2019): pp. 1-5.

members of pre-war fascist groups and successfully aided politicians in the creation of more restrictive immigration policies in the late 1960s and 70s.[7]

Additionally, historians from *Contemporary European History* commented on the impact of Cold War era events. Thorsten Borring Olesen compared the modern British stance to many of those found in the 1960s, when the United Kingdom was initially denied entrance to the European Economic Community. However, Olesen notes that consequences from contemporary divisions resulting from Brexit will be more damaging and impactful than those of the Cold War. The idea of British separation is also addressed as, with the 1989-1991 collapse of the Soviet Bloc, British absence from Eastern Europe contributed to a more abstract understanding of democracy and an increased longevity of a communist "shadow" over many nations.[8]

However, this claimed disinterest for the rest of Europe failed to hinder the flow of people to Britain from the East. Kathy Burrell of De Montfort University examined Poland as a case study for the consistent migration patterns ranging from World War Two until now. Burrell identified key motivators for such movements as interwar and postwar displacement, intensified restrictions during the Cold War, and more economic driven migration as previously communist countries often struggled to transition.[9] Drawn to the United Kingdom by its economic and political stability as well as increasingly prevalent welfare programs, these Polish immigrants reflected a larger demographic of people crossing borders. This group has reshaped cultural and societal norms of British life, their impact persisting throughout the past several decades and firmly establishing their continuous presence and influence in Britain.

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[7] Bonnie G. Smith, "Europe's Empire Comes Home," in *Europe in the Contemporary World: 1900 to the Present*(Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2007), pp. 512-529).

[8] Jessica Reinisch, "Introduction: Contemporary European Historians on Brexit," 1-5.

[9] Kathy Burrell, "War, Cold War, and New World Order: Political Boundaries and Polish Migration to Britain," History in Focus (The Institute of Historical Research, March 1, 2006).

The history of British integration within Europe is one fraught with internal debate and external factors. Although the majority of European integration began in the late 1950s, with the signing of the Treaty of Rome which established the EEC, Britain did not fully commit until 1973. The United Kingdom first applied for membership in 1961 yet was denied on account of their close relationship with the United States. French President Charles de Gaulle believed that those relations would conflict European interests, instead resulting in a "colossal Atlantic community under American dependence and direction."[10] However, even after obtaining membership, internal disputes threatened continued involvement. A 1975 referendum reported that approximately 67% of citizens wanted to remain within the EC. However, splits both along and within party lines reflected the polar sides of the debate. Those in favor focused on Britain's influence on international affairs, issues of defense, and economic considerations which would be aided by integration.[11] Opposition instead was concerned with sovereignty, financial responsibilities and societal problems (such as immigration). The referendum, although victoriously in favor of membership, demonstrated a growing divide that would only be exacerbated in the following decades.

During the first wave of migration, between 1950 and 1975, the United Kingdom saw one of the greatest increases in the proportional population of immigrants. In 1950, the minority population was around 1,573,000 people, second only to France. However, by 1975, this number rose to around 4,153,000, falling behind France by only 40,000. By this point, approximately 80% of foreign laborers were concentrated in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Switzerland. However, in following years, several key events altered economic and political

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[10] Charles de Gaulle, "French President Charles DeGaulle's Veto on British Membership of the EEC," *French President Charles DeGaulle's Veto on British Membership of the EEC*(January 14, 1963).

[11] James Walsh, "Britain's 1975 Europe Referendum: What Was It like Last Time?," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, February 25, 2016).

landscapes which in turn motivated migration control policies. The 1973 oil crisis, for example, reduced labor needs as economic growth was stalled.[12] In turn, the growing unemployment levels in preceding years increased hostility towards foreigners.

Tensions once more mounted in 1984 when the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher began hard-liner negotiations for a restructuring of economic policy. In a speech presented in Bruges, Thatcher argued that the EC's emphasis on the development of a "social Europe" beyond single markets and currencies would ultimately "suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate."[13] This thought has been perpetuated ever since and has served as a backdrop for modern arguments. Nine years after Thatcher's speech, the creation of the European Union through the Maastricht Treaty created more defined sectors and policies for European integration. One major change included the establishment of a common currency. As it had with the EEC, the creation of the EU reignited skepticism and reluctance within Britain, reflected in the UK's decision to forego the adoption of the Euro.[14] This rejection is a key representation of a fundamental divide between British thought and that of the European Union.

Following the creation of the EU, new dilemmas arose as its power extended towards other sectors such as foreign policy and citizenship. These two areas specifically played a dramatic role in shaping British opinion following decolonization and during a period of consistent increases in immigration. Post-decolonization, people from former colonies increasingly left their homelands in search of the benefits of the metropole. Previous decades saw movement attributed primarily to guest-worker programs, specifically in countries like

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[12] Christof Van Mol and Helga de Valk, "Migration and Immigrants in Europe: A Historical and Demographic Perspective," Springer Link (Springer Nature , January 1, 2016).
[13] Margaret Thatcher, "The Bruges Speech," *The Bruges Speech*(September 20, 1988).
[14] Sarah Pruitt, "The History Behind Brexit," History.com (A&E Television Networks, March 29, 2017).

Germany. New immigrants, however, were drawn more permanently by Europe's national

stability, economic opportunity and better welfare systems. These vast movements of people

opened new debates regarding citizenship and immigration policies.[15] Immigrants in Britain

predominantly came from newly independent Commonwealth nations such as India, Jamaica,

Australia and Nigeria and shifted the cultural fabric of Britain indefinitely.[16] With this influx of

people came changes in the geographic makeup of Britain. In cities, segregated pockets of

immigrants formed into communities of support. This community life helped to sustain culture

and served as origin points for the spread of diversity. Food preferences became polymorphous

as the quality of English food declined and restaurants serving foreign cuisine began to take hold,

helping to bridge the gap between cultures. These restaurants and shops were vital in providing

economic opportunity for migrants and helped to establish their role as integral components of

British society.[17]

Yet, despite their contributions, concerns over job security paired with the strain on

infrastructure and welfare systems (i.e. Britain's National Health Service) led to a surge in anti-

immigrant political organizations. Founded in 1967, the previously mentioned National Front

(NF) movement gained traction in the 1970s, promoting a strict and often violent platform.

Aided by pre-war fascists and racialized conservatives, the NF often galvanized politicians into

incorporating harsher immigration policies in their campaign platforms.[18] A 1977 *New York*

*Times* article by Roy Reed expounded upon the NF's tendency to capitalize on "white anxieties"

to garner support and highlighted the group's advocacy for sending non-Caucasian immigrants

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[15] Bonnie G. Smith, *Europe in the Contemporary World: 1900 to the Present,* 512-529.
[16] Ben Butcher and Wesley Stephenson, "How Has Immigration Changed in Your Area?," BBC News (BBC, January 20, 2020).
[17] Bonnie G. Smith, *Europe in the Contemporary World: 1900 to the Present,* 512-529.
[18] John Gabriel, "National Front," Wiley Online Library (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., December 30, 2015).

back to their home countries.[19] Although the group eventually lost momentum after its loss in the

1979 elections, many far-right, anti-immigrant citizens and political parties have connections to

the organization to this day.

The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was officially founded in 1993. Much

like the National Front, this party was based primarily on anti-immigrant sentiment and far-right

leanings. Yet in contrast to the NF, the UKIP's objectives extended also to issues of foreign

policy and economics. Its platform focused solely on the secession of the United Kingdom from

the European Union and drove the Eurosceptic debate that ultimately culminated in the 2020

Brexit decision. The party failed to gain parliamentary support until 2014, when a rise in

Euroscepticism across Britain delivered the party to their first victory in a national election with

approximately 27% of the popular vote.[20] Their mission was effectively adopted by Conservative

Prime Minister David Cameron in 2016 when he introduced a referendum much like that of

1975. Although the UKIP virtually collapsed by 2017, the party's legacy would continue to

signify a drastic shift in British thought which would redefine politics both internally and

externally in subsequent years.

Throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, another wave of migrants entered Europe as they

fled conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Once more these immigrants found themselves

segregated into neighborhoods and cities that were predominantly foreign, such as Leicester,

England. The responsive growth in concern over welfare programs and social services continued

to fuel animosity towards these newcomers.[21] This movement compounded with the collapse of

the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s caused the number of people entering Britain and Western

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[19] Roy Reed, "National Front: British Threat?," The New York Times (The New York Times, August 18, 1977).
[20] Michael Ray, "United Kingdom Independence Party," Encyclopedia Britannica (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., December 13, 2019.
[21] Bonnie G. Smith, *Europe in the Contemporary World: 1900 to the Present,* 512-529.

Europe to increase dramatically. The Maastricht Treaty's abolition of borders further charged

Euroscepticism as it allowed for easier internal European movements. Because of this increased

intra-EU mobility, the number of migrants from other EU countries living in Britain tripled

between the years 1995 and 2015. [22] The accession of the 'A8' Eastern European countries such

as Poland in 2004, contributed to one of the most significant increases in EU immigration of the

21st century.

However, despite anxieties involving pay and employment opportunities, a Brexit

Analysis report by the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) argued that increased immigrant

populations often lead to more consumption of goods and services, furthering demand which in

turn creates more jobs. The report opened discussion that contradicted the growing belief that

immigration poses more negative economic challenges than positive. Statistically, it was

reported that areas with the most significant growth in immigrant populations actually did not

account for the greatest declines in job opportunity. Rather, the wage collapse of 2008 was

attributed to the "global financial crisis and a weak economic recovery, not immigration." The

analysis continued to discredit popular far-right thought by pointing out that EU immigrants tend

to contribute more to taxes than they draw away from social welfare and public service

programs. In regard to intra-EU migration, for example, a study found that between 2001 and

2011, A8 immigrants paid approximately 15 billion euros more than they took from public

spending. Furthermore, referring to refugees, the CEP claimed that the Syrian refugee crisis was

actually less related to EU membership than commonly thought. Because there was already a cap

on the number of refugees allowed into Britain and because the then current policy prohibited

refugees in other EU countries from living or working in the UK, Brexit reportedly would not

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[22] Christof Van Mol and Helga de Valk, "Migration and Immigrants in Europe: A Historical and Demographic Perspective."

make curtailing the refugee crises any easier. Conclusively, although the report acknowledged that immigration had not recently had major positive effects on Britain, there also had not been major consequences for native citizens or the country as a whole. The article emphasized the importance of these immigrants in reducing the deficit through work, taxes and their commonly younger demographic. In fact, specifically in reference to intra-EU migration, the article predicted a negative overall impact on the national level when such migration will fall. [23]

As Britain continues the process of seceding from the European Union, that free movement of EU citizens will cease, leaving non-British citizens in the UK to wonder about their future. However, the government has promised the implementation of a new system based on Australia's "point-based program". This program aims to attract more educated and highly skilled citizens to fuel the shifting economy. As of January, migrants make up a little over 15% of the total British workforce, their numbers spreading across varying sectors and skillsets. Certain industries, including construction, hospitality and manufacturing, have become increasingly reliant on this migrant workforce. Britain's cherished NHS itself has consistently relied on foreigners to supply vast numbers needed in their daily operations, ranging from doctors to support staff. In London alone, more than 25% of NHS operations are conducted by foreign staff.[24] Therefore, as employers and industries raise concerns regarding future gaps and vacancies caused by Brexit, much of the government's focus has shifted to planning ways to supplement these industries as immigration and citizenship policy is restructured. Starting in January of 2021, this new system will treat EU and non-EU citizens equally and will specifically focus on those with the most potential to benefit the British economy. Skilled workers who are

[23] Jonathan Wadsworth et al., "Brexit and the Impact of Immigration on the UK," The London School of Economics and Political Science (Centre for Economic Performance, 2015).
[24] Ben Butcher and Wesley Stephenson, "How Has Immigration Changed in Your Area?."

sponsored by a government-approved employer and who meet certain skill, language and salary requirements will be offered a streamlined path towards citizenship. However, for low-skilled workers, no specific immigration plan has been introduced nor will be. Though seasonal agricultural immigration will be permitted, as this sector relies heavily on temporary, low-skilled employees, the lack of specific planning has been met with many open-ended questions regarding the future of other industries.[25]

Policies regarding asylum-seekers and refugees also have sparked concern. In 2019, the EU Home Affairs Committee published a detailed report on the potential implications for asylum policies and offered recommendations on how to best combat these issues. Such recommendations included a continuous agreement on standards and procedures at a minimal level as well as shared access to certain security data. A key point of contention in this document revolved around the United Kingdom's Home Office plan to send asylum seekers back to their initial European entry country.[26] This plan was highly criticized by UK Member of Parliament Claude Moreas, who argued that "Brexit should not be at the expense of asylum seekers and their children." Rather, Moreas emphasized the necessity of Britain and the European Union to share responsibility throughout this process. Specifically stressing the possible complications this plan would have for children, Moreas adamantly opposed any policy which would hinder the possibility of familial reunification or child security. Instead, Moreas encouraged further negotiations to establish a process more synonymous with the Dublin regulation, which would allow for easier and more efficient family reunification.[27] Whether Britain will take this

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[25] "New Immigration System: What You Need to Know," GOV.UK (The National Archives, January 28, 2020).
[26] House of Lords, "Brexit: Refugee Protection and Asylum Policy," United Kingdom Parliament Publications (European Union Committee, October 11, 2019).
[27] Martin Banks, "Claude Moraes: Brexit Should Not Be at Expense of Asylum Seekers," The Parliament Magazine (Dods Group, January 28, 2020).

recommendation into account will drastically shape the future of policy surrounding asylum

seekers and refugees both in Britain and Europe.

Ultimately, the impact of immigration historically and currently has had profound

impacts on British political thought, policy and international relations. Although the British

government remains hopeful that this decision will benefit the country's economy, there are

evident ramifications which could pose a threat to Britain. Negotiating a new trade agreement

could potentially increase tariffs and thus generate undesirable inflation, the cost of both travel

and communications may rise, and the aforementioned new restrictions on the movement of

people may pose serious threats to the labor force and economy. In addition, the "Divorce Bill"

which established a series of payments that the UK must make to the European Union will be a

financial burden for the country in coming years. Totaling nearly 35 billion euros, this money

will be funneled into the 2020 EU budget, pay for previous financial commitments, and help to

cover the staffing costs incurred throughout the Brexit process.[28] The majority of this money will

be paid through installments over the next six years, though a smaller portion of the payments

will extend until 2064.[29] This payment plan is part of the withdrawal agreement which is hoped

to ensure a smoother economic transition for both Britain and the European Union.

Moving forward, the most important obstacles Britain must face revolve heavily around

the agreement on a new trade deal with the EU. Trade discussions however, which would impact

economic relations with Europe, the United States, and the world, are facing delays due to the

Coronavirus outbreak. This is increasing pressure on both the EU and Britain, who hoped to

solidify a new deal quickly to ensure continuously smooth trading and limited inferences with

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[28] Kimberly Amadeo, "Brexit Consequences for the UK, the EU, and the United States," The Balance (The Balance, March 14, 2020).
[29] Abbas Panjwani, "What Do We Have to Pay to the EU for Brexit?," Full Fact (Full Fact, December 11, 2019).

Britain's massive service sector. Other concerns moving forward include United Kingdom security, the stability of the food industry, the development of Britain's new role on the global stage, and the necessity of proving to both citizens and a world-wide audience that Brexit was worth it.[30] This final consideration remains a major point of debate. Many still regard the decision negatively, drawing on previous arguments surrounding immigration, labor and economics. These arguments will have to be addressed as Britain attempts to navigate the transitional period which is set to conclude on December 31st of this year.

Having a historical understanding of British integration and immigration policies is imperative in fully comprehending the backdrop of Brexit and its current position. Although historians across all nationalities and specialties have varying interpretations and predictions regarding Brexit, a close examination of events including decolonization, increased immigration and the economic impacts of these two processes is vital. It is evident that the British government and the European Union will need to collaborate to best address the implications that have risen as the Brexit transition continues. The drastic shifts in the demographic structure of Britain as immigration and migration policies are changed will play a crucial role in dictating the economic, societal and political fabric of the United Kingdom. As serious questions regarding immigration and economic policies are posed, the remainder of the year will be critical in easing internal and international apprehension and criticism that has remained consistent throughout the process. The country's economic and political success depends heavily on how smoothly and effectively the government can negotiate for a better future for Britain and its people.

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[30] Chris Morris et al., "Brexit: Five Things the UK Needs to Resolve after Leaving the EU," BBC News (BBC, February 2, 2020).

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