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Frontiering International Relations: Narrating US Policy in the Asia Pacific

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This article reintegrates the frontier into debates about contemporary global affairs. Its analytical focus is the United States, because despite widespread agreement that it constitutes a “frontier nation,” we lack clear explanations of what the American frontier *is* today and what role(s) it occupies in US politics and foreign policy. To resolve this, the article ontologically reconceptualizes the frontier, arguing that it first constitutes a narrative, rather than a spatial, construct. Instead of conquering a once self-evident frontier, the United States has a long-standing tradition of narrative “frontiering” as the ideational (re)production of frontiers. The frontier has been most consistently understood not in terms of territory but ideas, with Washington’s modern-day “frontiers of freedom”—notably in the Asia Pacific—as real and consequential as those of the past. The frontier-as-narrative represents a performative act about what the United States is and how it should engage at peripheral borderlands of its identity. Beyond the United States, frontiers are created and actioned anew to reshape international affairs.

En este artículo se reintegra la frontera sobre los asuntos mundiales contemporáneos. Se centra en el análisis de Estados Unidos porque, a pesar de que existe un acuerdo generalizado sobre lo que constituye una “nación fronteriza,” carecemos de explicaciones claras sobre lo que *es* la frontera estadounidense en la actualidad y el rol que desempeña en la política estadounidense y en la política exterior. Para resolver esto, en el artículo se reconceptualiza ontológicamente el concepto de frontera, argumentado que, en primer lugar, constituye una construcción narrativa más que espacial. En lugar de conquistar una frontera que antes era evidente, Estados Unidos tiene una larga tradición de “fronteras” narrativas como (re)producción ideacional de las fronteras. La frontera se ha entendido sistemáticamente no en términos de territorio, sino de ideas, y las “fronteras de la libertad” de Washington de hoy en día, sobre todo en la región Asia-Pacífico, son tan reales y tienen tantas consecuencias como en el pasado. La frontera como narrativa representa un acto performativo sobre lo que Estados Unidos es y cómo debe actuar en las zonas fronterizas periféricas a su identidad. Más allá de Estados Unidos, las fronteras se crean y actúan, una vez más, para reconfigurar los asuntos internacionales.

Cet article réinscrit la frontière dans les débats sur les affaires mondiales contemporaines. Notre analyse se concentre sur les États-Unis, car malgré le consensus général sur le fait qu’ils constituent une « nation frontière », nous manquons d’explications claires sur ce *qu’est* aujourd’hui la frontière américaine et sur le ou les rôles qu’elle occupe dans la politique intérieure et la politique étrangère des États-Unis. Pour remédier à ce problème, cet article reconceptualise ontologiquement la frontière, en soulignant qu’elle constitue avant tout une construction discursive, plutôt que

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spatiale. Au lieu de conquérir une frontière autrefois évidente d'elle-même, les États-Unis ont une longue tradition de « frontiérisation » de leur discours en tant que (re)production idéationnelle des frontières. La frontière a constamment été comprise non pas en termes de territoire mais plutôt en termes d'idées, les « frontières de la liberté » modernes de Washington—notamment en Asie-Pacifique—étant aussi réelles et conséquentes que celles du passé. La frontière en tant que discours représente un acte performatif sur ce que sont les États-Unis et sur la manière dont ils devraient s'engager dans les limites périphériques de leur identité. Au-delà des États-Unis, des frontières sont créées et reconçues pour remodeler les affaires internationales.

Introduction

Within the international relations (IR) discipline, frontiers are relatively undertheorized. This seems curious given a broader consensus that frontiers constitute meaningful zones of activity and interaction between nations, empires, and other political units. The most logical explanation for this neglect is perhaps the understanding that the world's frontiers have been gradually replaced by harder borders of the Westphalian state system (Kotek 1999). With the dominant theoretical IR schools based mainly around the organizing logic of that system, processes and phenomena it seemingly replaced would always be difficult to reintroduce; what analytical value could apparently outmoded frontiers offer a neatly delimited world of interstate sovereignty?

In geopolitics, history, sociology, and elsewhere, we find more insights, but unanswered questions remain. For instance, it is commonly understood that after advancing across North America and “closing” on the west coast in the late nineteenth century, the American frontier left deep societal and political imprints on the United States and its people. “The Myth of the Frontier,” explains Slotkin (1992, 10), “is our oldest and most characteristic myth.” Spurgeon (2005, 7) describes the frontier as “one of the most powerful shapers of [US] national identity” and the notion that the United States continues to self-identify as a “frontier nation” (Agnew and Sharp 2002) is uncontroversial. Politicians use the term figuratively, in reference to traversing frontiers of science, technology, space exploration, and so on. Yet they also still celebrate a collective frontier “spirit” (Bush 1990, 1748) and “mentality” (Obama 2014a).

If the frontier retains such a prominent presence in the United States' imaginary and political culture, what exactly *is it*, and what role(s) does it occupy in American politics and foreign policy today? Clear answers seem elusive. While scholars typically define frontiers as physical spaces or zones, and as forces of the past, intellectual blind spots remain for IR with the discipline poorly equipped to explain the nature and significance of frontiers to modern-day global affairs. In the US context, some argue that the frontier remains as a historical inspiration or rhetorical device to rationalize policy by invoking a triumphant frontier past. With its true life force consigned to history, however, only the echoes of the frontier apparently endure. However, this seems unsatisfying when US policymakers have never ceased identifying frontiers where American interests and values are said to be threatened. Indeed, the loci of Washington's global network of military-security activity—in Western Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia Pacific where hundreds of thousands of troops and their resources remain—are persistently identified as the United States' “frontiers of freedom.” Are these frontiers any less authentic or consequential than those of American history?

To answer these questions, this article draws from revisionist frontier history and narrative theory to ontologically reconceptualize frontiers as narrative, rather than spatial, formations. With an analytical focus on the United States, it seeks to demonstrate that the frontier-as-narrative has always represented a manufactured storyline of the American character and those it encounters, at times even before being physically experienced. This is not to deny the material dimensions of frontiers, nor to artificially distinguish between narrative frontiers on the one hand and physical frontiers on the other hand. It is to say that territorial frontier formations are given meaning and enabled by powerful narratives, allowing their functions *as* frontiers. Understood this way, the American frontier becomes detached from the physical and temporal circumstances of pre-twentieth-century continental US expansion. This “detritorializes” the frontier, with its presumed material foundations refashioned to uncover its dynamic ideational constitutions.

To make this case, it is argued that the United States, rather than having conquered a once self-evident frontier, has a long-standing tradition of “frontiering.” In geopolitics, frontiering describes how those in liminal spaces experience surrounding authorities (Meier 2020). Human geographers explore frontiering as the migration of peoples into frontier zones (Cohen 2000). In this latter sense, frontiering—or frontier-making—is “the materialisation of new frontiers” (Ioris 2020, 2). Here, frontiering similarly represents the construction of frontiers, but with a shift of attention from their physical to their imaginative renderings. Frontiering is thus conceived as the discursive production and reproduction of frontiers, and the ideational processes by which frontiers are made.

The case for frontiering is made by tracing the development of the American frontier-as-narrative, from the supposed advancement of a physical frontier across the “old West” to modern-day formulations of the frontiers of freedom with a focus on the Asia Pacific. The value to IR of such a reconceptualization comes primarily from demonstrating that frontiers are most clearly and consistently understood by their architects (or narrators) not in terms of space or territory, but ideas; rather than expiring when North American land “ran out,” the United States’ frontier-*as-narrative* remains ideationally ripe. This helps to explain what the oft-cited, but rarely delineated, American frontier represents in the modern US political/foreign policy imaginary. Rather than just a historical episode of continental expansionism, or a cultural-political memory to motivate policy goals, it has always been an active and evolving narrative that sets out what the United States is and how it should act at perceived peripheral borderlands of its identity. Today’s frontiers of freedom are ultimately no less real or consequential than those of American history. This exposes frontiers as living and malleable frameworks for policy; rather than relics of the past, frontiers can be created and actioned anew to redirect and reshape global affairs. As observed by O’Dowd (2012, 165), it is on frontiers where new geopolitical orders can still be generated.

The first section unpacks the existing wisdom on frontiers, showing that a traditional focus on their material and historical qualities leaves questions unresolved. The second section outlines the contributions of narrative theory and reconsiders the American frontier as a construction of narrative design. It distinguishes between the culturally ingrained political frontier myth and the more contemporary strategic narrative of freedom’s frontier, explaining how both serve in achieving policy goals. The third section introduces and develops the concept of frontiering as being made up of three essential dimensions: space, self, and time. Each dimension is examined, with a focus on how they collectively reveal the narrative foundations of the (American) frontier and serve in the advancement of US foreign policy, especially in the Asia Pacific. The article concludes with thoughts on the value of frontiering for IR beyond the case of the United States.

Unpacking Frontiers

Frontiers are widely defined as spaces or zones, often of equivocal dimensions, and distinguishable from more precisely demarcated boundaries (House 1980; Machado, Novaes, and do Rego Monteiro 2009). Longo (2018) explains that frontiers are at the “thick” end of the border spectrum, away from “thinner” lines of delimitation like state borders. Korf and Raeymaekers (2013, 12) define frontiers as “diffuse zone[s] of transition” between political or geographic units. Some classify frontiers into typologies. For Maier (2006, 93–101), tributary frontiers host exchanges between communities. Anti-incursive frontiers stabilize and contain territory to regulate engagements. Anti-adversarial frontiers are more overtly defensive between competing states or empires. Proto-territorial frontiers are those of expanding territories that absorb the lands of indigenous populations. For Rieber (2001), consolidated state frontiers specify the limits of public authority. Dynamic frontiers advance across the lands of others. Symbolic frontiers—which perhaps come closest to a classification of ideational frontiers—are where distinctive civilizations meet.

Across this frontier and wider border studies literature, we find two common themes. First, frontier scholarship tends to begin from, and privilege, their core material properties, as the peripheral zones of states or other political formations. The definitions above illustrate how the analytical value of frontiers is commonly tied to assessments of their tangible characteristics and purposes. Frontiers, then, are “territorialized” in that their meanings are derived from the physical forms they are said to take (as dynamic, anti-adversarial, etc.).

Second, frontier studies are often grounded in the past, with frontiers themselves argued one way or another to be *of* the past. Prescott and Triggs (2008, 31) argue that with frontiers largely replaced by state boundaries, frontier research “must have a strong historical and anthropological basis.” The contemporary relevance of frontiers is not typically dismissed, however, and their place in a modern bordered world is explored in such intra-regional contexts as Europe (Germond 2010) and South America (Machado, Novaes, and do Rego Monteiro 2009), and state-specific contexts such as Iraq (Meier 2020) and Afghanistan (Manchanda 2017). Still, as O’Dowd observes, “[f]or mainstream Euro-American border studies and social science generally, empires and their frontiers seem to belong to the past” (O’Dowd 2012, 159).

These two themes broadly apply to assessments of the American frontier. With regard to its material formations, in Maier’s (2006, 99) typology “what US literature terms the American frontier” is a proto-territorial frontier. For Rieber (2001), it is a dynamic frontier. Walter Prescott Webb (1953, 2–3) argued that the American frontier was a mobile area of length and breadth. So too is the American frontier located in the past. Many argue that the frontier disappeared around the turn of the twentieth century, when the expanding United States exhausted consumable land. “Though there is some quibbling about the date” notes Webb (1953, 4), “1890 does approximate the end of the frontier process.” Others then assert the enduring influence of the “frontier era” on US politics and foreign policy today. The Communications literature shows how the frontier is rhetorically invoked for political agendas (Dorsey 1995; Carney and Stuckey 2015). West and Carey (2006), for example, explore the Bush administration’s framing of the war on terror as frontier justice akin to that found in the old American West (see also, Holland 2012). Historians and political geographers explore frontier legacies in US expansionism (Williams 1955) and globalization (Agnew and Sharp 2002), and US policy in the Antarctic (Howkins 2013) and Asia Pacific (Gibson and Whitehead 1993).

These literatures offer valuable insights and the physicalities of frontiers are not dismissed here. Still, as already noted, the two prominent scholarly themes of frontiers as objects of materialism and history leave questions for the study of global

affairs, exemplified by the United States' frontiers of freedom. The significance of these frontiers is found in the distribution of overseas US troop deployments and military resources, which are clustered in the Asia Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East. As of September 2021, approximate numbers of US military and civilian personnel stationed in these regions were approximately: 90,000 (Asia Pacific); 65,000 (Europe); and 45,000–65,000 (Middle East).¹ For decades, these heavily securitized sites have been consistently identified by US presidents and policymakers—Republican and Democrat—as the “frontiers of freedom,” or “freedom’s frontiers,” as the most established centers of Washington’s global military-security activity.

The argument could be that the frontiers of freedom do not exist as frontiers in a conventional sense, and that US political elites have simply created an enticing fiction to justify vast overseas deployments. However, this assumption can be inverted: were (American) frontiers of the past any less fictionalized for political purposes? If not, should today’s frontiers not be afforded comparable attention? To answer these questions, we must engage with the historiography of the American frontier, to establish “how it was written” and determine the value of its reconceptualization as a narrativized construct.

Narrating the American Frontier

Narratives are stories formulated to establish “truths” and “realities” about ourselves and the world around us. They are characterized by plots that give them purpose and direction. They are also defined by agency, primarily of characters that occupy roles in the story being told. Narratives typically communicate the perspective of the narrator(s), including their understanding of what is right or fact (Patterson and Monroe 1998). Narratives are thus “crafted and selective, omitting certain parts while emphasizing others” (O. Turner and Nymalm 2019, 410). Indeed, the most successful narratives are typically uncomplicated and straightforward (Autesserre 2012). Narratives can be formulated by individuals, but their interpersonal nature means they connect with others to form “webs” of narrativity” (Turner and Nymalm 2019, 410). As such they connect and align with those already embedded within the public consciousness (Autesserre 2012). Finally, they are organized along sequential timelines (Hom 2020), even if manipulated or falsified. Not all texts can be subjected to narrative analysis, with many lacking character agency, sequential timing, and so on (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019). However, narrative enquiry, or narratology, reveals how stories are constructed, in whose interests, and to what effect (with the relationship between narratives and policy outlined shortly).²

What justifies the reconceptualization of the American frontier as a narrativized construct? Frederick Jackson Turner’s *Frontier Thesis* is argued to represent the United States’ “most influential single piece of historical writing” (Webb 1953, 6). From 1893, the *Thesis* examined the importance of an advancing frontier for the developing United States. Turner argued that overcoming the continental wilderness gave settler Americans a distinctive national character; “American democracy ... came out of the American forest, and it gained new strength each time it touched a new frontier ... Not the constitution, but free land and an abundance of natural resources ... made the democratic type of society in America” (Turner 1920, 293).

¹ Figures for Asia Pacific and Europe are calculated from Department of Defence (DoD) (2021). Hawaii is excluded from Asia Pacific figures. Afghanistan figures are absent from September 30, 2021, data, so also excluded. Middle East figures are incomplete in DoD data but estimated as between 45,000 and 65,000. See Gibbons-Neff (2020).

² Narratology is heavily intertwined with critical variants of geopolitics and concerns for the symbiosis of power/knowledge in the “geo-graphing” of peoples and places (Ó Tuathail 1996, 2); to narrate the world is to actively engage in its spatialization. If the critical geopolitical tradition aims to “challenge militarist mappings of global space” (Dalby 2010, 281), it offers additional pathways to resolving the unresolved questions posed by frontier scholarship already described.

The core plotline of the Turnerian frontier story is well known: a hard-won victory by intrepid American frontiersmen over inhospitable people and terrain. The frontier was “the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” and “the line of most rapid and effective Americanization” (Turner 1920, 3–4). It is thus of a clash of civilizations, or rather the deliverance of civilization onto a cultural *tabula rasa*. It explains how a uniquely enlightened vision of development and modernization proved its superiority. Turner’s was a celebratory account of American history and a warning that as “available” territory ran out, stagnation loomed. The *Thesis* was embraced by US society, becoming *the* model by which its frontier was to be conceived and shaping wider comparative study of the world’s frontiers (Rieber 2001).

Objectors argue, however, that Turner’s claims are framed more by personal convenience than analytical clarity. He variously identified the frontier as marked by defensive forts, zones of settlement, and population density, leaving its physical compositions unclear. “[W]hat was it that Turner meant when ... he wrote the word ‘frontier’?”, enquired Pierson (1940, 454). Turner (1920, 3) himself stated that the term frontier “does not need sharp definition”. This makes sense when his intellectual motives were not actually toward a more sophisticated understanding of the frontier. His ideas provided a “tidy” (Limerick 1987, 21) vehicle—or narrative—for advancing his theory of US domestic advancement.

To do this, the Turnerian frontier story is highly selective. For instance, Turner implied that his abstract vision of the frontier—as an outer margin of sparsely populated territory—had always been dominant in the United States when in fact multiple meanings, including zones of national security, were evident (Juricek 1966). Turner effectively wrote alternative formations out of history, simplifying both European and American understandings of the frontier (Juricek 1966, 30). His narrative ensured that the frontier became “an unsubtle concept in a subtle world” (Limerick 1987, 25).

Members of the revisionist New Western History (NWH) movement argue that the notion of an American frontier is intellectually anemic because the “truths” it carries are radically removed from the lived experiences of the old American West (Cronon 1987; Limerick 1987).³ Limerick (1994, 68) explains that casual observers of the frontier “know” what it is: “the edge of Anglo-American settlement, the place where white Americans struggled to master the continent.” However, this traditional frontier history only makes sense to white America by dismissing the perspectives of others. It also proposes a mono-directional (east–west) frontier movement, when migrants flowed in numerous directions, and offers no meaningful sense of where the frontier existed and where it did not (Limerick 1994, 68). Others argue that powerful gender dynamics are absent from the established frontier story, including advancing Western missionaries’ preoccupation with disciplining and civilizing sexual and marital practices across the continent, particularly of women (Hurtado 1999). While efforts have been made to reassert the gendered motivations of the frontier, “missing women ... could not merely be inserted into the traditional Turnerian scheme of individualistic male achievement” (Walsh 1995, 246). Finally, the conventional frontier story presents violent settler colonialism—of the type we call by name elsewhere—in the language of national exceptionalism and progress. “[T]he popular understanding of the word ‘frontier’ and ... the complex history of cultural encounters in colonization share almost no common ground” (Limerick 1994, 79).

Ingrained knowledges of the American frontier, then, are consciously (re)arranged into a compelling but uncomplicated story, and not only by Turner. *The Law of Civilisation and Decay* by Brooks Adams echoed Turner’s central claims as a “frontier thesis for the world,” advocating expansionism abroad (Williams 1955,

³For a recent review of the Movement, see Massip (2021).

384). Despite—or rather perhaps because of—its simplicities and selectivities, the American frontier narrative has endured as that powerful shaper of US identity (Spurgeon 2005, 7). Indeed, the frontier-as-narrative argument is explicitly reinforced by the NWH movement. Cronon explains that supporters and critics of Turner's *Thesis* alike defer to its basic timeline. "He still allows us to narrate our story from east to west... However much we understand his *analytical* shortcomings, we still turn to him for our *rhetorical* structure" (Cronon 1987, 170, emphases in original). White (1994, 11) asserts that frontier educators like Turner and notable others like the popular entertainer Buffalo Bill "erased part of the larger, and more confusing and tangled, cultural story to deliver up a clean, dramatic, and compelling narrative."

Finally, the link between frontiers and empire justifies a brief discussion. Longo observes that as borders become thicker and begin to resemble frontiers, "sovereignty starts to resemble imperium" (Longo 2018, 26; see also, Boozer 2013). In this reconsideration of the frontier-as-narrative, the American frontier represents a narrative of empire. These narratives rely upon past imperial successes to drive post-imperial policy (see Turner 2019). The American frontier narrative is a narrative of empire by simultaneously embracing and denying US empire. It requires US expansionism to make sense, by accepting ingrained "knowledges" that an advancing frontier delivered modernization and democracy, while denying that this made it an imperial power. The narrative, including that of freedom's frontier, is also facilitated by such interconnected and "benevolent" storylines as American exceptionalism and the United States' Manifest Destiny to civilize barbarous others (see Restad 2015).

From Political Myth to Strategic Narrative: Writing Freedom's Frontier

It has been argued so far that dominant understandings of the American frontier constitute a subjective (and problematic) narrative of a frontier experience. That frontier is commonly identified as a cultural or political myth (Slotkin 1992), and myths are at their core stories, or narratives. Political myths are narrative formations that circulate within political communities, becoming embedded over time. Their fluid dimensions generally make their origins impossible to precisely trace, but they serve community interests nonetheless (Schmitt 2018). These are also termed state narratives or autobiographies (Subotić 2013). Sala (2016, 524–25) describes political myths as "sacred narratives"; "By providing an overarching framework to events, they seek to make sense of why the political community came together, why it excluded others, and how political authority should govern." American society's frontier myth explains how pioneering founders collectively replaced wilderness and savagery with civilization, installing enlightened democracy.

Political myths are processes of continually working and reworking narratives. To become a myth, a narrative must perpetually demonstrate its significance. If it cannot, it ceases to represent a myth (Bottici 2007, 5–8). This makes the myth of the American frontier a cumulative outcome of narrative processes, but one that is never complete. Narrators like Frederick Jackson Turner and Brooks Adams were not original authors of the frontier. It was a set of narratives to which they and others came late, to remodel and popularize, and ultimately transform into a national myth.

This dominant frontier narrative found high-profile political admirers, including "crusading democrat" president, Woodrow Wilson (Williams 1955, 388). Wilson said of the First World War that "a cloud of dark purpose" had enveloped Germany and emerged at France's border, "[f]or she did stand at the frontier of freedom." As "one of the champions of liberty," France had "stood at the chief post of danger ... [for] ... all those who love freedom" (Wilson 1919, 38–39). Narrated from the perspective of the American self, this frontier of freedom separated characters deemed to share

the core elements of its identity—democracy, freedom, and liberty—from those who challenged it. The story was later promoted by Britain's US ambassador Edward Wood, who wrote of "a vast curve, stretching from the Baltic eastward to the North Pacific. That curve ... shows the frontier of freedom" (Wood 1952, 9). On the other side of this frontier, Wood saw a singular communist threat from the Soviet Union.

The frontier of freedom became a prominent narrative of US Cold War security discourse and policy, not least in Asia. President Eisenhower (1960) explained that in South Korea the United States maintained "a bulwark on the frontier of the free world." Army pamphlets (Department of the Army 1964, 2) informed troops that in Korea they stood "face to face with our enemies on the edge of freedom's frontier." President Johnson (1966, 1084) argued that "Viet-Nam is today on the frontier of freedom—a frontier which exists wherever force and violence attempt to subvert a nation's independence." Cold War leaders additionally located the frontier of freedom in places like East Germany (Kennedy 1961). Edward Wood (1952, 9) speculated that it might come to appear in Yugoslavia, the Persian Gulf, Hong Kong, and elsewhere.

Almost every post-Cold War, US administration has contributed to, and perpetuated, the frontiers of freedom narrative. Today they are identified in Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia Pacific, where Washington retains its most significant overseas troop deployments. In Asia, it is commonly located on the Korean Peninsula between the authoritarian North and democratic South. President George H. W. Bush (1991, 812) explained that for decades "the Republic of Korea has stood fast at the frontier of freedom." President Obama (2010a) argued that "the men and women of the US Armed Forces [in Korea] are standing watch on freedom's frontier." Presidents Clinton (1993) and George W. Bush (2002), and Vice Presidents Biden (2014) and Pence (2018), each spoke of the frontier of freedom, or freedom's frontier, as a site of national security significance.

A product of internarrativity, freedom's frontier emerged from the established American frontier myth, the precise origins of which are more difficult to trace. Such hegemonic narratives, as "overpowering, dominant stories," can become so uncontested as social fact that they frame the limits of political (im)possibility, providing leaders with opportunities and constraints by determining which policies are socially acceptable and which are not (Subotić 2013).

However, freedom's frontier is distinguishable in important ways, not least by representing a strategic narrative primarily of policy elites. Strategic narratives are more identifiably the products of those with authority, including presidents. By capturing domestic audiences, they too facilitate the implementation of policy preferences. Strategic narratives, in short, can operationalize political myths (Schmitt 2018). As Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) affirm, "[s]trategic narratives are ... a communicative tool through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives."⁴ Crucially then, strategic narratives are also more than descriptive accounts of events.

By ascribing meaning to the world through the construction of satisfying characters and seductive plotlines, narratives are performative acts that operate directly in the service of domestic and/or foreign policy (Subotić 2016). Patterson and Monroe (1998, 315–16) explain that narratives provide explanations of our political selves as a tool for navigating everyday life. Ringmar (1996, 73–74) envisions this tool as a "narrative theory of action," whereby storytelling not only helps us make sense of the world and our place within it, but gives us the rationale to act in line with the plot perceived to be playing out around us; good stories activate our interests, providing a crucial link between intention and execution. "We tell ourselves what kind of a person we were/are/will be; what kind of a situation we

⁴ See also, Dimitriu and de Graaf (2014).

were/are/will be in; and what such people as ourselves are likely to do under these particular circumstances” (Ringmar 1996, 73).

Space, Self, and Time: the Trilateral Dimensions of Frontiering

To recap, rather than having conquered a once self-evident frontier, it is argued here that the United States has a long-standing tradition of frontiering or frontier-making. Frontiering is introduced here to represent the discursive production and reproduction of frontiers, and the ideational processes by which frontiers are made. Over time, and rather than closing or disappearing, the frontier has been (re)written for new political settings and policy agendas: for the old American West, to early twentieth-century European conflict, to the Cold War, and into the present day where the traditional frontier myth coexists with the elite-driven strategic narrative of freedom’s frontier(s). This section develops the argument that the foundations of the American frontier have always been not of land or territory, but of pre-existing narratives, by exploring what are proposed to be the three essential dimensions of the frontiering process: space, self, and time. These dimensions reveal not only the fundamental constitutions of frontiering, but also its continual service toward foreign policy aims.

Space

This article argues for the de-territorialization of frontiers to uncover their core ideational—and specifically, narrative—constitutions. Still, narratives give sense and meaning to the world to determine how peoples and places should be spatially organized. Thus, while frontiering is the construction of frontiers through discursive or productive power, that power establishes “truths on the ground,” determining the range of conceivable policy options and legitimizing actions that transform physical geographies. “Basic categories of classification, like ‘civilized’, ‘rogue’, ‘European’, ‘unstable’, ‘Western’, and ‘democratic’ states,” explain Barnett and Duvall (2005, 56) “are representative of productive power, as they generate asymmetries of social capacities.” Reconceiving the American frontier as a narrative, then, is neither to deny the destructive events brought by US continental expansion nor to suggest that the strategic narrative of freedom’s frontier is entirely removed from spaces it is said to occupy. It is to say that frontiers do not exist separately from ideas about them, and cannot be adequately conceived in their absence or by affording them secondary importance. As Lattimore (1962, 471) argued:

“Frontiers are of social, not geographic origin. Only after the concept of a frontier exists can it be attached ... to a geographic configuration. The consciousness of belonging to a group ... that includes certain people and excludes others, must precede the conscious claim for that group of the right to live or move about within a particular territory.”

De-territorializing the frontier does not abandon notions of space or territory. It emphasizes their contingency upon ideas, and their arrangement into narrative formations by which they are geo-graphed, and which establish and legitimize their existence. From here, as we have seen, our core “knowledges” of the American frontier can be reassessed, such as that it advanced neatly from east to west. This presents an overly simplistic (Eurocentric) picture of migrant flows, when, for example, Asian immigrants commonly flowed west to east, and Spanish-speaking peoples south to north (Limerick 1994). Neither does it even accurately capture the ordered accession of states into the union; California and Oregon achieved statehood decades before territories further east.

Frontiers, then, exist where they are said to exist, for the political project of any given moment. Prior to the twentieth century, multiple US frontiers were identified

across North America. President [George Washington \(1912a, 1912b\)](#) assessed “Western,” “Northwestern,” “Southern,” and “Southwestern” frontiers. President [James Madison \(1837\)](#) spoke of “maritime frontiers” on the Atlantic coast. Over time, national attention concentrated upon the imagined Western frontier as US territory most dramatically accumulated in that direction. Writers presented this frontier as *the* frontier. Others including Frederick Jackson Turner and his contemporaries adopted this consensus of a singular American frontier, writing others out of the story and misleadingly “reading a late nineteenth-century world view back into the past” ([Juricek 1966](#), 31–33).

Reconceptualizing the American frontier as a narrative and exploring its dynamic evolutions, such as into the strategic narrative of the frontier of freedom, reveals that the frontier has never simply been “there” as an objectively verifiable space or zone. Just as the territorial manifestations of the continental American frontier are critiqued as vague and imprecise, those of the frontiers of freedom are persistently enigmatic. Where, exactly, does the frontier of freedom in the Asia Pacific begin and end? Logically perhaps, along the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea, but this is rarely, if ever, stated. Moreover, US personnel identified as guarding freedom’s frontier are stationed across the country, including in the west, south, and the capital, Seoul. Freedom’s frontier in Asia has also been located in Afghanistan ([Pence 2017a](#)) and Vietnam ([Johnson 1966](#)).

These vagaries are no oversight; it has never suited the interests of the frontier’s principal narrators to avoid them. Just as the nineteenth-century frontier was presented in seemingly contradictory forms, so the frontier of freedom remains conveniently nebulous. During a trip to Romania, Vice President [Joe Biden \(2014\)](#) spoke of “an unbroken chain of patriots who’ve stood guard since World War II over freedom’s frontier, right here in Europe.” Three years later Vice President [Pence \(2017b\)](#) rearticulated the story in Estonia. In doing so they operationalized the frontier myth to remake the frontier where it suited Washington’s interests. This process, along with the policy of sustaining military resources in Europe, continues to be facilitated by the fact that frontiers-as-narratives are so ideationally mobile, with territorial foundations that are so weak. Today, the American frontier retains such influence in US politics and society not because it furthers our intellectual understandings of a seminal frontier experience, but because it represents a still-living narrative and a serviceable device. “The history of the Frontier did not ‘give’ Roosevelt or Kennedy or Reagan the political scripts they followed,” [Slotkin \(1994, 658\)](#) explains. “What they did ... was to selectively read and rewrite the myth according to their own needs, desires, and political projects.”

As already suggested, the frontier of freedom could be interpreted as linguistic recycling, with latter-day policymakers devising persuasive rhetoric of a successful frontier past to win support for policies in the present ([Dorsey 1995](#); [West and Carey 2006](#)). However, this would require a historical American frontier somehow more real than one later fantasized through political language. And as we have seen, the continental American frontier was never simply “there” either. It was, and remains, a product of interpretation, with one dominant frontier narrative becoming accepted as truth. A persistent lack of conceptual clarity about how American frontiers are physically manifest, and of where they begin and end—in the nineteenth-century “old West” as much as the modern-day Asia Pacific—reveals that the frontier has always been identified most clearly and consistently not in terms of space or territory, but ideas. These ideas are often expressed as functions of self, argued here to be the second essential dimension of frontiering.

Self

Narratives communicate narrator perspective, and the American frontier myth is written by individuals and institutions. That myth conveniently supported Frederick

Jackson Turner's theory of American development, with his aim "to provide a unifying theme which ran through the whole history of the American people ... [and which] clearly differentiated America from Europe" (Juricek 1966, 32–33). His separation of the US experience from Europe served broader nationalist narratives of American exceptionalism and the understanding that the United States boasts a superior national character and a duty to advance its core ideals (Juricek 1966). Williams (1955) agrees, arguing that Brooks Adams' *The Law of Civilisation and Decay* similarly legitimized US expansionism. Other scholar-narrators like Walter Prescott Webb (1953, 280) centralized a noble American character over others; "the beacon fire of the Great Frontier was luring men outward, stirring them to mighty deeds, achievements and sacrifices."

During the colonization of North America, indigenous Americans were attributed meanings that invalidated their territorial claims. This separated them from settler Americans, enabling the assertion of frontiers. After all, indigenous Americans are not objectively different from European Americans but subjectively so. Their customs, beliefs, and values could all have been interpreted as valuable to, and complementary with, the new United States. Instead, they were deemed incompatible and threatening, necessitating partition. Frontiers between the two sides, self and other, were imaginatively—narratively—frontiered into existence.

The claim that frontiers constitute "markers of identity" is found elsewhere (Anderson 1997, 2). The argument here, however, is that, as narrative constructs, frontiers represent not merely sites or indicators of identity, but their dynamic (re)producers. The US frontier is thus a projection of American identity *onto* territory and peoples, creating the ideational conditions for frontiers prior to their palpable manifestations. To re-invoke Lattimore (1962, 471), such conditions precede claims to occupy land and exclusionary frontier functions. Processes of frontier-making stall without understandings of identity to give them meaning.

There was therefore nothing inevitable about the American frontier. Its narrative functions of distinguishing civilized from uncivilized were an identity-driven political project organized into instrumental, character-driven plotlines, rather than facts of nature. George Washington (1793) asserted of indigenous Americans that "these savages were committing daily inroads upon our frontier" and that responsive measures there drew "them nearer to the civilized state" (Washington 1796). James Madison (1812) spoke of "blood-thirsty savages" on the frontier and the resistance they met from brave US forces. In doing so they wrote the frontier and, as already noted, the most effective narratives are typically the most straightforward. Simple plotlines identify pressing issues, separate "us" from "them," and signal appropriate action. Ultimately, the story most likely resonates "if it includes well-defined good and evil individuals, or clear-cut perpetrators and victims" (Autesserre 2012, 207–8). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the leading US narrative was already of a buccaneering new nation and its fight for civilization, overlapping with those of national exceptionalism, religious duty, scientific racism, and others.

Indeed, US (and wider Western) frontiering has historically been highly racialized, primarily because the frontier story is told from the dominant perspective of a white self. As Limerick (1987, 21) explains, "English-speaking white men" are the stars of the story with other ethnic groups "at best supporting actors." Some frontier narrators wrote non-white groups out of the story entirely. Others grant them agency, though typically as opposing foil to celebrate their "pacification" (White 1994). Narrativizing the American frontier demonstrates that it has always been a partly racialized discursive construction, projected onto the world and its peoples.

As explained in the previous section, the uncomplicated nature of the frontier's elemental ideational features grants it spatial flexibility, but in a broader sense facilitates its transference to alternative environments for new political aims. Frederick Jackson Turner reimaged the frontier for his own purposes, as a measure of population density and something altogether more abstract, as that "line of most rapid

and effective Americanization.” Rewriting the story helped him to foment a political myth in which a singular (Western) frontier could represent his “meeting point between savagery and civilization” (Turner 1920, 3–4). Subsequent rewritings of the frontier affirm its dynamic, ideational constitutions, with new narrators guiding the story. When Woodrow Wilson observed that France had stood “at the frontier of freedom” during the First World War (Wilson 1919, 38–39), he privileged this more ideological reading of the frontier as a global battleground for values, in large part to support his international policy agenda.

To write the frontier of freedom, then, conceptions of American identity—as they had done before—needed to be reworked. By now, the frontier myth was a national autobiography of how Americans had established a uniquely enlightened polity. However, its alluring convenience kept it ripe for political appropriation and operationalization. Throughout the Cold War, in which frontier-making became a consistent and bipartisan feature of US foreign policy, the frontier of freedom retained the narrative cornerstones of the myth from which it emerged. NSC-68, Washington’s Cold War foreign policy blueprint, outlined the traits of its two main protagonists. The United States was tasked with assuring “the integrity and vitality of our free society.” The Soviet Union and international communism desired to “solidify their absolute power ... and the ultimate elimination of any effective opposition to their authority.” The central character fundamentally remained a virtuous United States with a duty to pacify frontier savagery.⁵ Indeed, the threat from communism to American individualism and private ownership was code for distinguishing civilized from savage (Campbell 1992, 139–40). However, identities, like frontiers-as-narratives, are neither fixed nor static.

To engage in frontier-making, individuals and institutions draw selectively from understandings of identity according to their aims. In the narration of the American frontier, we find shifts in dominant constructions of the American self. For example, while frontiering may always have been a partly racialized process, today’s frontiers of freedom are less explicitly grounded in assessments of race (of self and other) than those of the pre-twentieth-century American West. Moreover, Woodrow Wilson’s frontiers of freedom were value-laden, but his 1919 address made no reference to institutionalized separations between democracy and its political oppositions, instead telling a human-centered story of international “brotherhood” in a battle between “liberty” and “peril.” In contrast, when Obama (2015) argued that American troops stand “sentinel on freedom’s frontier,” he articulated a (post-1945) frontier whose meaning is framed more directly around competition between democracy and non-democracy/authoritarianism, with the United States “a powerful force for freedom and democracy around the world.”

Still, with today’s frontiers of freedom first and foremost securitized sites of American identity, however, a basic underlying storyline can still endure. When President Donald Trump (2017) argued that the United States was engaged in Afghanistan “on a modern-day frontier between barbarism and civilization,” he adhered to the type of pre-twentieth-century storyline written by leaders like Washington and Madison. For Obama (2014b) too, the frontier has also been a boundary not simply of ideology but cultural enlightenment; the division between North and South Korea, he explained, “exists as much as a contrast between worlds as it does a border between nations.” In 2010, Obama explained that “the world can take comfort in knowing that the men and women of the United States Armed Forces are standing watch on freedom’s frontier.” This frontier, he explained, left North Korea outside the mythical “international community” (Obama 2010b), which today constitutes a newly imagined exemplar of global civilization; “that global binary of inside/outside

⁵ Narratives that separate the world’s actors into “heroes” and “villains” are persistent within US security discourse. See Homolar (2021) ‘A call to arms: Hero-villain narratives in US security discourse’, online first: <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106211005897>.

is embodied in such fantasized institutions as the international community of which the US is its self-appointed figurehead” (Turner 2016, 936).

As a strategic narrative rather than a political myth, freedom’s frontier is a comparatively streamlined and concentrated story about defending democracy from authoritarianism, with a more neatly compartmentalized set of (elite) narrators. Still, frontier-making remains driven most consistently not by assessments of the landscape, but autobiographically narrativized *constructions* of the landscape and its inhabitants, from the vantage point of a “free,” “democratic,” and still more “civilized” American self. Moreover, when Obama, Trump, and others engage as narrators of the United States’ frontiers today, they (like others before them) invoke American identity to activate the link between intention and foreign policy execution (Ringmar 1996). The US military’s “selflessness and generosity” (Obama 2010b) compels it to defend others on freedom’s frontier. With civilization itself said to be at stake, little space is left for alternative courses of action from the hegemonic influence of the frontier-as-narrative.

Time

As already established, the American frontier—along with frontiers in a broader conceptual sense—is typically treated as a force of a bygone era. De-territorializing the frontier and approaching it as a narrative construct shows it is not simply the case that frontier legacies transcend particular moments, but that narrative processes of frontier-making operate now as at any time in the past. This additionally challenges the notion embedded within existing revisionist frontier scholarship that the (American) frontier has only been narrativized retrospectively.

The NWH movement shows how the colonization of the American West was fictionalized by figures like Frederick Jackson Turner, who reworked history through contemporary lenses. But although the frontier may now constitute a narrative myth, it did not merely become so after the fact of a frontier experience. Claiming that a frontier story came in the wake of its supposed closure or existence limits our understanding in ways already described, by misleadingly consigning a “real,” physical frontier to history (even if its political legacies are said to endure). Rather, the American frontier has *always* been a narrative construction, with no meaningful separation between some authentic frontier of the past and a frontier myth or narrative thereafter. In short, the frontier is less a product of narratives than it is an ongoing narrative in itself. Indeed, while narration is sometimes understood as a retrospective activity, others refute the idea that storytelling only follows lived experience (Hom 2020, 83–84). From this latter point of view, narratives are more than recollections or retellings of history. They also construct the moment, giving us a sense of the present and future as much as of the past; narratives, to reiterate, represent “tools for navigating everyday life” (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 315–16) or theories of (future) action (Ringmar 1996).

Narrativizing the frontier allows us to explore the processes of narrative frontier-making in real time. As argued above, there was nothing inevitable about the separations and violence between colonizers and indigenous Americans, with differences between them subjective and securitized. Settler Americans constructed a frontier narrative of action to explain who they and native populations were to “successfully” navigate the circumstances in which they found themselves. Still, the argument is not that the frontier narrative was always as developed or comprehensive as it later became. It is for good reason that critics and supporters alike identify Frederick Jackson Turner as the most influential American frontier historian and a principal narrator of the frontier myth. Pre-Turnerian frontier narratives may have been less organized and less compelling, but contained the required plot, characters, and timeline to constitute ongoing narrative(s).

From the beginning, the frontier narrative was an operating framework for present *and* future policy. Frontiers can thus acquire meaning before being physically experienced. As Ringmar (1996, 74) explains, “If we only accept the context of the narrative, and tell the story to ourselves, then, *when and if the occasion arises*, we have a compelling reason to act” (emphasis added). We see this in Thomas Jefferson’s notion of an Empire of Liberty, through which the frontiers of US territory and identity would expand indefinitely. In 1824, Jefferson described stages of civilization between the “savages of the Rocky Mountains” and US Atlantic port cities, with the frontier somewhere in the middle. As ever, the location and dimensions of the frontier were largely unimportant. What mattered was what it represented. “Where this progress will stop no-one can say” Jefferson (1999, 590) explained. “Barbarism ... will in time, I trust, disappear from the Earth.” We see it too in Edward Wood’s (1952) articulation of a frontier of freedom roughly along the land borders of the Soviet Union, Korea, and Vietnam, and then speculatively in Hong Kong, Greece, and elsewhere. In neither case were the frontiers necessarily expected to more physically reify, and nor would it likely matter greatly if they did, since their constitutions and functions were first and foremost of ideational design.

The American frontier, then, has always been a temporally floating narrative of the future just as much as of the past or the present. To define frontiers as “tributary” or “proto-territorial,” we seek out their observable formations on the ground. But, as we have seen, the American frontier has been defined most consistently not by physical features but by ideas, and the most powerful ideas are often considered timeless. In the case of the United States, the imagined pillars of the American self—democracy, freedom, and liberty, and at times Whiteness and civilization—are what have defined the frontier, as articulated by leaders from George Washington and James Madison to Woodrow Wilson, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump.

In the end, as a performative theory of action, the narrativized frontier connects intention with implementation. When Obama (2014b) explained to US troops in Seoul that they represented “the tip of the spear on freedom’s frontier” and that they “carry high the legacy left by all those who fought and served here,” he did more than rhetorically invoke a “glorious” past. The story he narrated was still both of what came before and of what is to come. That story remained consistent when he affirmed that “our commitment to our friend and ally will never waver ... on freedom’s frontier” (Obama 2015). Rather than an identifiable feature of Korean soil, the frontier remains—as it did throughout the era of North American colonial expansion—an actionable responsibility of current and future US foreign policy and internationalism.

Conclusions

Frontiers are neglected within the study of modern-day IR. This is illustrated by a consistent lack of clarity over exactly what the American frontier represents in US politics and policymaking, despite a consensus that it remains central to the national cultural and political imaginary, and internationalism. With frontiers traditionally defined according to their supposed physical properties and as outdated or defunct forces of history, we are ill-equipped to resolve such contemporary questions. To address this problem, and with a focus on the American frontier, this article ontologically reconceived frontiers as being in the first instance narrative, rather than spatial, constructs. By “de-territorializing” the frontier and dissecting its central plots, characters, and timelines, we can recognize them as constructions of narrators authored via processes of ideational frontiering, or frontier-making, and their three essential dimensions of space, self, and time.

From here, it was shown that the American frontier has always been most clearly and consistently understood not in terms of land or territory, but ideas. Political elites of the formative United States discursively manufactured a frontier between

themselves and indigenous populations, narrating a seductive political myth. From this emerged the strategic narrative of freedom's frontier, rewritten to suit new political circumstances and foreign policy agendas but retaining its core protagonist of a virtuous United States facing the "savagery" of uncivilized others. American frontiers tend to be spatially indeterminable and defined more robustly by autobiographical understandings about the United States and how the boundaries of its imagined identity are challenged at the peripheries. As a dynamic retelling of the frontier myth, today's frontiers of freedom are no less real or consequential, and no less central to the advancement of US foreign policy as a present and future framework for action. From securing itself against indigenous populations to containing communism, the story now compels Washington to maintain enormous overseas military deployments at what are (loosely) perceived as the contemporary borderlands of the American self.

When leaders today refer to the United States' "frontier spirit" (Bush 1990, 1748) or "frontier mentality" (Obama 2014a), they speak less *to* a historical legacy than *of* a lived and living frontier, simultaneously contributing to the narrative. Policy-makers will inevitably engage in varying intensities with any political narrative, and in recent times the Obama administration was a comparatively active narrator of freedom's frontier, despite those of Bush and Trump also perpetuating the story. Ultimately then, the frontier narrative is more than a re-invoked historical memory of a past authentic frontier. During the Cold War, the narrative became of the American military "standing firm on the frontiers of freedom for one hundred and ninety years," since the birth of the country itself (Department of the Army 1965). Writing newly manufactured frontiers (in this case, of "freedom") back into the past was performed by other prominent narrators like Frederick Jackson Turner, who reorganized accepted understandings of a supposedly definitive frontier to suit his contemporary interests. The American frontier, then, has never been a static tool from history for use in the present, but an ongoing storyline written and rewritten as required.

Of what use is the framework of frontiering proposed here for the wider study of IR and foreign policy? The American frontier narrative is unusual for attaining the status of political myth; in few cultures do frontiers hold quite such sociopolitical prominence. Yet frontiers still matter. China's western Xinjiang region, for example, has long been known as a "new frontier" by the country's rulers, with the capital Urumchi a "frontier city." Today, Beijing continues this tradition to help legitimize nation-building projects in a peripheral part of China it considers ethnically and civilizationaly distinct from the center (Bovingdon 2010). Importantly, "[t]hese are not immutable, civilisational fault lines. They are performative boundaries, maintained and reinforced by the power of official ethnocentric historical narratives, which frame the city as a frontier point between civilisation and barbarism" (Tobin 2020, 46). Just as the differences between settler and indigenous Americans were subjective and relative, rather than objective and absolute, so we see this in China, where "[t]he very idea of Xinjiang was a geopolitical invention of a 'new frontier'" (Tobin 2020, 40). Indeed, the name Xinjiang/new frontier only appeared in 1884 when the region was captured and renamed by the Qing dynasty.

The ideational processes of frontiering are fluid; as we have seen, the stories of key narrators can emerge and become challenged, and plotlines commonly evolve over time. So too can the three essential dimensions of frontiering—space, self, and time—be more or less influential than one another in different contexts. Xinjiang is more distinctively demarcated on the map than, say, freedom's frontiers for example, and so in spatial terms that former narrative can be correspondingly more rigid. However, from the perspective of frontiering outlined here, frontiers remain primarily contingent not on the observable landscape, but on the viewpoint of their narrators and their assessments of what the world is and should be. Xinjiang is not treated as a frontier because of objectively observable features, but because from

the perspective of China's center it is imagined to represent a site of ethnocultural difference on the edge of imperial civilization (Tobin 2020).

Elsewhere, Manchanda argues that Afghanistan has repeatedly been socially constructed by imperializing authorities needing to make sense of the space between India and central Asia. Understandings of Afghanistan today as a failed state or regional buffer, Manchanda argues, emerge in large part from persistent deployments of the frontier trope and "frontier thinking" among political elites. In this reading of Afghanistan, Manchanda invites more serious engagement with the ideational foundations of the frontier and its enduring place in twenty-first-century global affairs. Indeed, Manchanda stresses in the production of Afghanistan what are argued here to be some of the core dimensions of frontier-making, not least the self: "In this vivid colonial imagination, the frontier demands a specific kind of response because it is delineated as a particular space constituted by a certain breed of person" (Manchanda 2017, 391).

In both cases, and in line with the arguments of this article, frontiers are best conceived neither historically nor by privileging their material over ideational formations. In the United States, China, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, frontiers-as-narratives are autobiographical creations that say at least as much about the center as the periphery.⁶ They can be written and rewritten anew to spatialize and discipline landscapes and their inhabitants, and the integral dimensions of frontiering outlined here offer a framework to show how frontier-making continually operates to narratively manufacture the "reality" of frontiers, irrespective of how effectively they are territorially located or defined. Reconceived as narratives, frontiers can be seen as evolving and dynamic forces of modern global affairs and foreign policy processes that retain the types of geopolitical agency we typically only attribute to them in the past.

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⁶ American narratives of the "frontier of freedom" have recently been co-opted by the UK government. As ever, this frontier is narrated in ideational rather than physical terms, with the process of frontier-making here servicing notions of a "network of liberty" (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office 2021)

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