

Summer Reading — Books Fit for the Season

Tuesday, June 1, 2010

Readers are a hopeful lot. Ask most serious readers what they intend to read over the next month, and you are likely to hear a considerable list. Books stack easily in more ways than one. The stack of books to be read beside the desk or reading chair is a statement of hope. No matter how busy we find ourselves to be, the books are there waiting.

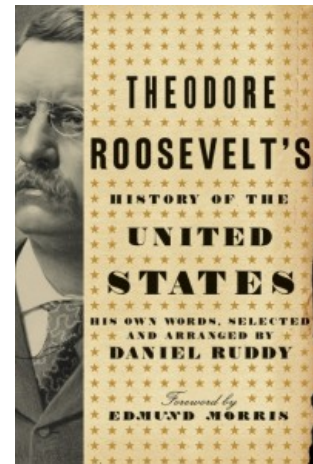


That is why summer is a special season for reading. Finally, we can read some of those volumes we have been promising ourselves to read. Hopefully, the stack for summer reading includes some books to read for sheer enjoyment. The following is a list of ten books that, in my opinion, make for great summer reading. The list is heavily weighted in history, but the kind of history I first learned to enjoy as a boy — history that tells a story worth knowing about people and times that fascinate.

This year's list also proves that boys never grow up. Among the ten books I commend this year are books dealing with cowboys, Indians, gangsters, lawmen, trains, spies, and battles. Those looking for books on birds and romance should consult some other list.

1. Theodore Roosevelt and Daniel Ruddy, *Theodore Roosevelt's History of the United States* (New York: Smithsonian Books/HarperCollins).

Why didn't anyone think of this before? Daniel Ruddy went through the voluminous writings of Theodore Roosevelt and pulled out "TR's" magnificent work on the history of the United States. Theodore Roosevelt remains one of the most admired figures in American history, and for good reason. As Edmund Morris, his most gifted biographer, noted, TR was both an "impatient man of action" and "a multicultural Renaissance man." With the singular exception of Winston Churchill, no modern figure equals Teddy Roosevelt in both making and writing history.



Theodore Roosevelt's History of the United States displays TR in all his glory, learning, and sharp opinion. He never minces words. "Impartiality does not mean neutrality," Roosevelt insisted. "The best historian must of necessity take sides." Thomas Jefferson was "one of the most mischievous enemies of democracy." William McKinley "had no more backbone than a chocolate éclair." Jefferson Davis (with whom Roosevelt corresponded) was "an unhung traitor," while Robert E. Lee was a man of "dauntless courage and high leadership."

Throughout the book, the energy and power of Theodore Roosevelt shine and seduce. "I have no right to the title of Excellency," Roosevelt wrote. "I am simply Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States. I would rather be called Colonel than anything else." Anyone who can write, "I am simply Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States," is worth reading. There is not a dull page in this volume.

Excerpt:

One of the prime dangers of civilization has always been its tendency to cause the loss of virile fighting virtues, of the fighting edge. When men get too comfortable and lead too luxurious lives, there is always a danger lest the softness eat like an acid into their manliness of fiber. The barbarian, because of the very conditions of his life, is forced to keep and develop certain hardy qualities which the man of civilization tends to lose. Unless we keep the barbarian virtues, gaining the civilized ones will be of little avail. Oversentimentality, oversofiness, washiness, and mushiness are the great dangers of this age and of this people.

2. Steven M. Gillon, *The Kennedy Assassination: 24 Hours After* (New York: Basic Books)

Millions of words have been written on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and one might wonder if anything new remains to be said. *The Kennedy Assassination: 24 Hours After* sets that question to rest. This is one of those books that reminds us just how little can be known of an event as it happened, and even for many years thereafter.

Steven Gillon is really writing about a dimension most others have overlooked, the first 24 hours Lyndon Johnson experienced as President of the United States. As Gillon reveals, that dimension is far more interesting than many of us might expect.

Gillon reveals a portrait of chaos and confusion in the aftermath of the shootings in Dallas that November day. The attention of almost all concerned was directed at John F. Kennedy, who had virtually no chance of survival after the horrendous damage inflicted by his assassin. While the medical team worked diligently to save the dying President, Vice President Lyndon Johnson waited in a small room at Parkland Hospital, cut off from virtually all communication. As Gillon makes clear, the Vice President had actually become President long before he was notified and a chain of command had been re-established. Thus, the nation's vulnerability at one of the most crucial moments of the Cold War was exponentially increased by confusion, Johnson's hesitancy, and the protective obsessions of the Kennedy White House.

The story is riveting and well-told. This is a book I found almost impossible to put down. Gillon deals with the political and historical contexts well, but, above all, he tells an important story.

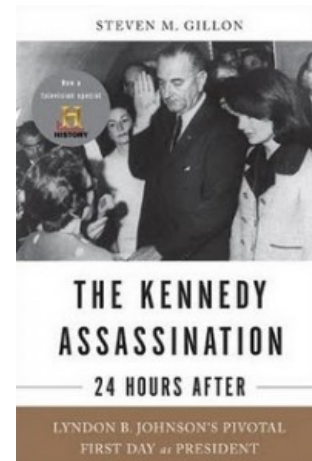
Excerpt:

Technically, the powers of the presidency transferred to Johnson at 12:30 p.m. when the fatal third bullet shattered Kennedy's brain. But because of confusion at the hospital, the understandable grief of Kennedy's close advisers and friends, and LBJ's insecurities, the United States was without a functioning head of state for nearly forty minutes. During this time, LBJ had no contact with any advisers in Washington, or with any members of the Kennedy cabinet. What if the shooting has been part of a coordinated international conspiracy? For three-quarters of an hour the functioning commander in chief was sitting in a corner of a hospital emergency room, isolated from the levers of power.

3. Christian Wolmar, *Blood, Iron, and Gold: How the Railroads Transformed the World* (New York: Public Affairs/Perseus Books Group).

When I was a young boy, both of my grandfathers would take me to the venerable train station in Plant City, Florida, where I would stand mesmerized by the sights, sounds, and overwhelming power of trains. I was fascinated by every aspect of it, from the porters carting luggage to the screeching wheels of the engines and the blast of the whistle. Other than Christian songs, the earliest songs I learned to sing were about trains, and my heart raced when Frankie Carle and his orchestra played "The Wabash Cannonball" on my grandfather's record player.

Anyone who outgrows a love for trains needs to re-examine his life. Regrettably, my generation may be among the last to grow up in a culture marked by the centrality of the



railroads to American life. The story of the trains and railroads is essential to the modern world, as Christian Wolmar makes clear in *Blood, Iron, and Gold*.

TRANSFORMED THE WORLD

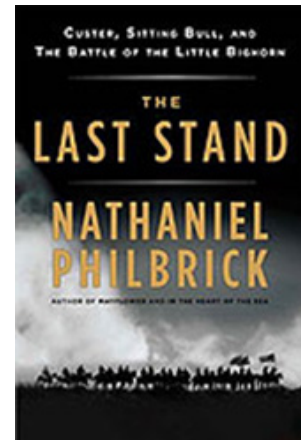
Wolmar, a British historian with a special interest in railroads and trains, offers readers a tour of railroad history — a story that spans roughly 200 years. While the narrative is not as thrilling as the story of an assassination or Indian raid, it is well told and detailed. Wolmar understands that the railroads changed history, altered the face of war, transformed cities, opened continents, and touched countless lives. *Blood, Iron, and Gold* tells a story that needs to be told.

Excerpt:

By the final quarter of the nineteenth century, railways were well established throughout the world. The sight of a steam locomotive puffing across the countryside had become commonplace, not only in towns and on the major routes between them, but also in more remote regions penetrated by the burgeoning number of branch lines. In 1880 there were 280,000 miles of railway, and that figure would rise to nearly 500,000 by the end of the century. Across the world, railways were growing at the rate of 10,000 miles per year, and they would continue to do so until the outbreak of World War I. This is the period when the railways were in their heyday, spreading everywhere with the misguided confidence that the railway age would define the twentieth century as it has the nineteenth.

4. Nathaniel Philbrick, *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of Little Bighorn* (New York, Viking Books).

George Armstrong Custer will forever be identified in death with the famous ‘Last Stand’ that marked his demise, along with the deaths of the soldiers under his command. To twenty-first century Americans, the tale of Custer and his legendary battle with Sitting Bull, the Sioux, and the Cheyenne seems distant and quaint. But, as Nathaniel Philbrick explains, for Americans alive when it happened, the massacre of Custer and his troops was nothing less than a national crisis.



Philbrick is a seasoned historian with a rare ability to tell a story well. Readers of his works *In the Heart of the Sea* and *Mayflower* know of his gifts. In *The Last Stand*, Philbrick turns to George Armstrong Custer, a man he knows is often “more a cultural lightning rod than a historical figure, an icon instead of a man.”

Philbrick presents Custer the man in all his glory, arrogance, charisma, and sheer ability to deny reality. But, importantly enough, Philbrick does not limit the story to Custer. He takes his reader into the times, and into the struggles of the Native American tribes fighting for their survival and way of life. As he makes clear, the Battle of Little Bighorn spelled the end, not only of George Armstrong Custer, but of the Sioux and the Cheyenne as well. They won on that battlefield, but the battle also precipitated the events that cost them their freedom.

Excerpt:

Custer and Sitting Bull were both great warriors. But Sitting Bull was something more. He was a leader, a prophet, and a politician. He was also convinced that he alone had his people’s welfare in view, a conviction that inevitably exasperated those Lakota attempting to meet the challenges of reservation life in their own way. As Bull Head shouted at Sitting Bull in his final moments, “You have no ears, you wouldn’t listen!” This, according to Kate Bighead, was the same sentiment the two southern Cheyenne women expressed on Last Stand Hill when they pierced Custer’s eardrums with an awl.

5. Max Hastings, *Winston’s War: Churchill, 1940-1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf).

Destiny requires a Churchill volume on this list. As I write, a bust of Sir Winston watches me from across my desk, and hundreds of books by and about Winston Churchill are in my collection. Few have been more eagerly anticipated as Sir Max Hastings’ *Winston’s War*. Hastings is one of the greatest military historians alive today, and he is a historian with a very



clear point of view. When it comes to Winston Churchill, Max Hastings understands that he is dealing with a larger-than-life character, whose virtues and faults both outweigh those of most other mortals.



The argument of *Winston's War* is simple, clear, and controversial. Hastings understands (rightly I think) that Winston Churchill was the indispensable man of history in 1940, but a military strategist of potential disaster by the end of the war. In other words, World War II would almost surely have been lost had Winston Churchill not arrived as Prime Minister in 1940. But, at the same time, the war might well have been lost if Churchill had established the military strategy for the second half of the war.

Winston's War is a rich and lengthy book that tells the entire history of World War II through the lens of Winston Churchill's leadership and personal role in history. Hastings explains the political crises, the military situations, and the vulnerability of Britain. He also understands what Churchill understood — that the end of the war also meant the eclipse of Britain by the United States. What most others did not understand — but Churchill did — was that World War II would be followed immediately by the Cold War. Readers of Max Hastings other works on World War II, *Armageddon*, *Overlord*, and *Retribution*, know what to expect with *Winston's War*. Those who start with *Winston's War* will want to read the other books as well.

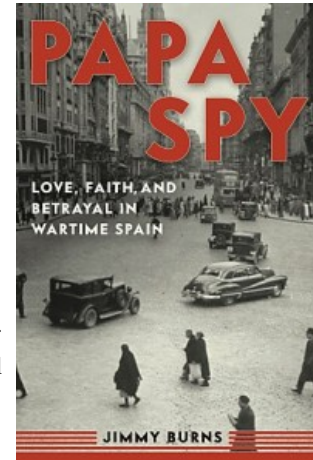
Excerpt:

He was one of the greatest actors upon the stage of affairs whom the world has ever known. Familiarity with his speeches, conversation and the fabulous anecdotage about his wartime doings does nothing to diminish our capacity to be moved to awe, tears and laughter by the sustained magnificence of his performance. He was the largest human being ever to occupy his office. If his leadership through the Second World War was imperfect, it is certain that no other British ruler in history has matched his direction of the nation in peril or, please God, is ever likely to find herself in circumstances to surpass it.

6. Jimmy Burns, *Papa Spy: Love, Faith, and Betrayal in Wartime Spain* (New York: Walker and Company).

Children often imagine that their parents are not what they appear to be. How many boys have conjured the imaginary conception of their father as a spy — a man who only seems to be a stockbroker, grocer, or insurance agent, but is actually a secret agent? In the case of young Jimmy Burns, the truth was more exciting than his imagination.

In *Papa Spy*, Jimmy Burns tells the story of his father, Tom Burns, a young publisher who became the British press attaché in Madrid during World War II. Jimmy Burns was born after the war, but as he grew up, he discovered the kinds of clues about which other children dream. He found a pistol and a miniature camera, which, along with a great deal of other data drawn from his parents, led him to suspect that his father had been a secret agent during the war.



After his father's death in 1995, Jimmy Burns set out to discover the truth. Trained and experienced as a journalist, Burns conducted interviews and spent hours in the archives of both Britain and Spain — including the personal archives of Francisco Franco. Along the way, Burns tells the story of Spain's collusion with Hitler and of his father's ties to figures ranging from Leslie Howard to Soviet spies Kim Philby and Anthony Blunt. He also takes readers into the world of British literature before, during, and after the war, revealing the great divide that emerged between the secularist and socialist Bloomsbury group and the Roman Catholic writers and publishers such as his father.

Sometimes, your father really *is* a secret agent. But, as Jimmy Burns' story of his father reveals, that is a morally complex discovery which includes shadows that can never be fully explained.

Excerpt:

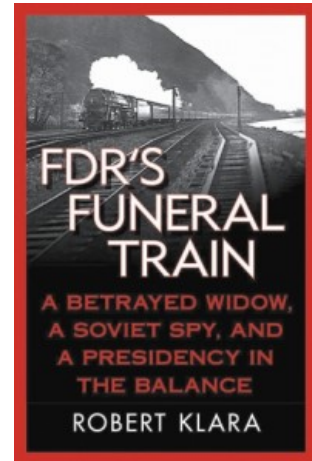
Before VE Day was over, Burns was taken by a group of officials from the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the

German embassy to officially “liberate” it from Nazi occupation. The Nazis had vacated the building in an operation staggered over a number of months, the exodus seemingly completed just hours before Burns arrived. Missing were works of art, and documents which had been removed or destroyed. The only remaining pieces of furniture were some chairs, office desks and filing cabinets, all of which were empty. In one of them Burns found a Mauser pistol and a large number of Iron Crosses, many of them apparently intended for the Spanish volunteers who had fought for the Blue Division on the Eastern Front. Burns pocketed them all, then climbed on to the roof and hoisted the Union Jack.

7. Robert Klara, *FDR's Funeral Train: A Betrayed Widow, a Soviet Spy, and a Presidency in the Balance* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan)

“There is something almost terrifying in the transition of a presidential train into a funeral train.” So wrote reporter Thomas F. Reynolds of the *Chicago Sun* as the nation grieved the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The nation was shocked by the President’s sudden death, but Roosevelt’s deteriorating health had been a closely-guarded secret. Then again, anyone who saw him in the weeks preceding his death had the sense that they were looking at a dying man.

In *FDR's Funeral Train*, Robert Klara takes his readers back into 1945 and the tumultuous world-changing events that took place as the Allies were pressing forth to win the victory in Europe, the stage was set for dropping the atomic bomb on Japan, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt was trying to stay alive. His death, assumed to be from a massive brain hemorrhage, set in motion one of the strangest and most unprecedented series of events in the nation’s history.



In a brilliant move, Klara takes his readers on the Presidential train that was so quickly transformed into a funeral train. *FDR's Funeral Train* is one of those books that surprises on page after page, revealing the great vulnerabilities the nation experienced during the days before and after Roosevelt’s death. Virtually the entire government of the United States rode on a single train to the funeral at Hyde Park — a single train that carried almost all the nation’s leaders while the nation was at war.

The cast of characters in *FDR's Funeral Train* includes Eleanor Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and a host of others. Additionally, Klara offers fascinating details about such things as the Presidential railroad cars and the habits of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. The book resists being put down.

Excerpt:

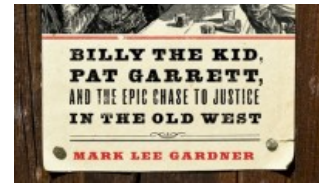
Ferman White, a foreman for the Southern Railway, clocked off his shift at Atlanta's sprawling North Avenue Yards around 4:30 p.m. On his way home, White decided to stop and buy some groceries. It was in the store that he learned the news, and raced to the nearest phone. White had one thought on his mind as he called the roundhouse. It was a piece of knowledge that few men in Atlanta possessed and one that White guarded closely. On a layup track in the yards, a special train—the president's train—had been parked for two weeks. It would not, White knew, stay parked for long now. Charles Craft, another foreman, picked up the phone. “Charley,” White shouted into the receiver. “We’ll need two light Pacific [engines]. What you got in sight?” “The 1262 and 1337 are on the cinder pit,” Craft answered. “Get them going,” White said.

8. Mark Lee Gardner, *To Hell on a Fast Horse: Billy the Kid, Pat Garrett, and the Epic Chase to Justice in the Old West* (New York: William Morrow).

Of all the legends of the Old West, none has the lasting power of the story of Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett, the lawman who chased him down. In *To Hell on a Fast Horse*, Mark Lee Gardner tells the story more completely than has been done in the past, and along the way he uses the skill of a historian to strip away the legends from the truth — except where he admits that this is impossible.



“You can feel the ghosts as you speed down the long, lonely roads of eastern New Mexico,” Gardner writes. “The land is little changed, except for endless strands of wire fence and an occasional traffic sign.” As he explains, Gardner has “made the ghosts give up a few more of their secrets.”



And the truth is both compelling and hard. Those hoping to find a burnished reputation for Billy the Kid will be disappointed. The truth is that he was a baby-faced, but cold-blooded killer. As for Pat Garrett, he is seen as the prototype for the Western lawman — a man running from his own past with a clear and almost equally cold-blooded sense of justice. The intersecting lives of Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett tell the story of the Old West in a way no other lives can. Gardner traces the story from the arrest of Billy the Kid at the end of 1880, through his bloody breakout and escape on April 28, 1881, to his fatal encounter with Pat Garrett on July 14 of that year.

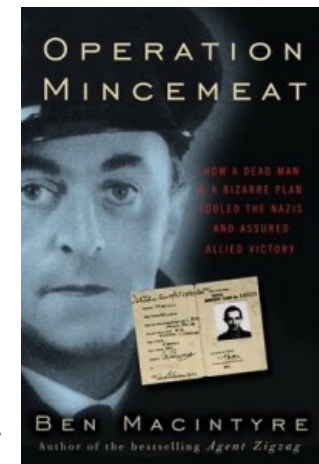
The story is powerful, well-told, and instructive. Gardner concludes with a consideration of the roles Billy the Kid [Billy Bonney] and Pat Garrett have played in the American imagination. Is it not strange that America remains fascinated with Billy the Kid rather than Pat Garrett? With the murderer, rather than the lawman?

Excerpt:

The Kid and Pat Garrett are forever linked, and rightly so, in legend, but historically, in the memories of their friends and enemies. “I knew both these men intimately,” Sally Chisum told Walter Noble Burns in 1924, “and each made history in his own way. There was good mixed with the bad in Billy the Kid and bad mixed with the good in Pat Garrett. Both were distinctly human, both remarkable personalities. No matter what they did in the world or what the world thought of them, they were my friends. Both were real men. Both were worth knowing.”

9. Ben Macintyre, *Operation Mincemeat: How a Dead Man and a Bizarre Plan Fooled the Nazis and Assured an Allied Victory* (New York: Harmony Books).

Some stories are worth the wait. Other stories are almost too strange to believe. *Operation Mincemeat* is both, but the story is true. Students of World War II are at least partially familiar with the story of “Operation Mincemeat,” the effort to deceive the Nazi’s about the Allied plans to invade Sicily. The espionage operation involved dropping the body of an already deceased man into waters just off of Spain. A briefcase filled with erroneous Allied war plans was handcuffed to the body and an elaborate cover story was constructed — all with the intent to fool the Nazis. The operation was stunningly successful, fooling even Hitler, but it almost fell apart at several key turns.



The story was told, incompletely, in the film “The Man Who Never Was,” and has been the subject of considerable speculation and legend. Now, Ben Macintyre of the *The Times* [London], author of *Agent Zig-Zag*, tells the whole story — and what a story it is.

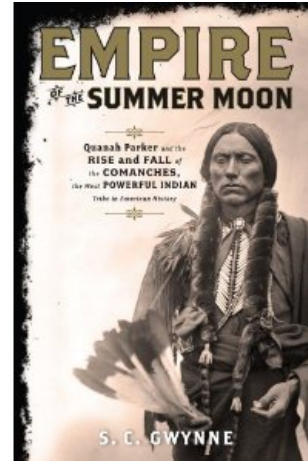
Macintyre gained access to the papers of Ewen Montagu, the mastermind of the operation. He was able to put the story together with details never before known. It is a page-turner that is better than fiction. As Macintyre relates: “The plan was born in the mind of a novelist and took shape through a most unlikely cast of characters: a brilliant barrister, a family of undertakers, a forensic pathologist, a gold prospector, an inventor, a submarine captain, a transvestite English spymaster, a rally driver, a pretty secretary, a credulous Nazi, and a grumpy admiral who liked fly-fishing.” As has been said, truth is stranger than fiction.

Excerpt:

One by one, Hitler’s key advisers were being drawn into the deception, either by access to the documents themselves or through independent “confirmation,” as the same intelligence arrived by other routes: Canaris, Jodl, Kaltenbrunner, Warlimont, von Roenne. By May 20, Mussolini “had come round to the same view.” A collective willingness to believe seems to have gripped the upper reaches of the Nazi war apparatus, driven by Hitler’s own belief. It takes a brave man to stand up to the boss in such circumstances. The men around Hitler were not made of such stuff.

10. S. C. Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History* (New York: Scribner).

Empire of the Summer Moon caught me by surprise. Sam Gwynne tells the story of the battle between the white settlers and the Comanches, the most fearsome and skilled warriors of the Native American tribes. He takes his readers into frontier life in the “Comancheria,” most of which is in modern-day Texas. Time and time again, soldiers and settlers would learn the lessons of the Comanches the hard way as the war continued from 1836 to 1875. Like the ancient Spartans, the Comanches trained their sons to do one thing — to be warriors. Comanche boys rode horses bareback by age 6. As Gwynne remarks, “No tribe in the history of the Spanish, French, Mexican, Texan, and American occupations of this land had ever caused so much havoc and death. None was even a close second.” By the middle of the nineteenth century, this much was clear — either the Comanches would be defeated or the westward expansion would be stopped dead.



But as well as Gwynne tells this story, what makes *Empire of the Summer Moon* so enthralling is his telling of the story of Cynthia Ann Parker, a nine-year-old member of the pioneering Parker clan, who was taken as a hostage in a massacre. She became known as the “White Squaw” of the Comanches, refusing to go back to her native world until captured by Texas Rangers. She became the mother of Quanah, the most fearsome and legendary of the Comanche warriors and leader of the Quahadis, their most savage band — a man never defeated in battle who became the crucial leader for the transition of the Comanches in a new age. *Empire of the Summer Moon* tells a story that will not only captivate the reader, but will reveal a largely unknown dimension of the nation’s history.

Excerpt:

The logic of Comanche raids was straightforward: All the men were killed, and any men who were captured alive were tortured to death as a matter of course, some more slowly than others; the captive women were gang-raped. Some were killed, some tortured. But a portion of them, particularly if they were young, would be spared (though vengeance could always be a motive for slaying hostages). Babies were invariably killed, while preadolescents were often adopted by Comanches or other tribes. This treatment was not reserved for whites or Mexicans; it was practiced just as energetically on rival Indian tribes. Though few horses were taken, the Parker’s Fort raid must have been deemed a success: There were no Indian casualties, and they had netted five captives who could be ransomed back to the whites for horses, weapons, or food.

I will release a second reading list later in the summer. For now, enjoy this list and its suggestions. Don’t wait too long to get started on your summer reading. Otherwise, you will be staring at the same stack of books on Labor Day.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

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