

EXAMINING THE THREATS IN INTELLIGENCE GATHERING AND THE FIGHT AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN GHANA

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Abstract

Ghana's pursuit of stability is increasingly tested by the evolving threats of violent extremism and terrorism, where intelligence gathering stands at the frontline of national defense. This study critically examines the complexities confronting Ghana's security and justice administration, highlighting institutional, operational, and legislative dimensions in the fight against extremism. Drawing on Ghana's National Security Strategy (2020) and recent legal frameworks, including ACT 1030 and ACT 1040, the analysis underscores both the promise and the vulnerabilities of the country's counter-terrorism architecture. It argues that effective resilience lies not only in legislative scaffolding but also in fostering coordinated intelligence systems, adaptive policy, and civic trust. Ultimately, Ghana's security trajectory offers crucial insights into balancing vigilance with democratic governance in volatile environments.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, Terrorism, Intelligence Gathering, Security and Justice, Ghana.

Introduction

Ghana's security and justice administration stand as twin pillars of national resilience, tasked with preserving stability and protecting citizens from an expanding constellation of threats. In a turbulent regional environment where violent extremism and terrorism increasingly transcend borders, Ghana finds itself at a critical juncture. While the nation has long been viewed as an island of peace in West Africa, the specter of violent extremism is no longer a distant abstraction as looming realities are envisioned. Neighboring states across the Sahel, including Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have witnessed devastating insurgencies by jihadist groups whose influence steadily bleeds southward, threatening to engulf Ghana's northern frontiers. It is within this precarious context that Ghana's intelligence system assumes paramount importance, as effective intelligence gathering represents a technical function of governance as well as the heartbeat of national security.

As section two of Ghana's National Security Strategy 2020 comprehensively illustrates, the spectrum of threats confronting the state ranges from domestic vulnerabilities to globalized challenges that blur traditional security boundaries (Dambre, 2025). Yet, among these myriad threats, the menace of terrorism and violent extremism towers with profound urgency, demanding vigilance, adaptability, and decisive countermeasures. The study of Darkwah (2023) opines that the infiltration of jihadist ideologies, cross-border insurgencies, and radicalization pathways pose existential dangers not only to national cohesion but also to democratic governance. Consequently, the state's capacity to anticipate, intercept, and neutralize such threats depends significantly on the effectiveness of its security institutions, their legislative scaffolding, and the coordination of their intelligence systems.

Recognizing the gravity of these dangers, Prah & Chanimbe (2021) underscored that Ghana has undertaken important legislative reforms to reinforce its defense and intelligence framework. The enactment of the Security and Intelligence Agencies Act, 2020 (ACT 1030), alongside the National Signals Bureau Act, 2020 (ACT 1040), reflects a deliberate attempt to modernize intelligence operations while simultaneously strengthening the institutional backbone required for combating extremism (Obuobi, 2024). These legal frameworks are not mere symbolic gestures but carefully designed instruments that authorize, regulate, and empower agencies to execute intelligence operations effectively within the ambit of legal accountability. Indeed, they constitute the foundation upon which intelligence gathering, risk assessment, and counter-terrorism interventions are anchored. In this respect, Ghana's response mirrors a growing global recognition that without strong legislative underpinnings, intelligence practices risk descending into inefficiency, illegality, or fragmentation.

Nevertheless, the reality remains complex given the fact that despite these bold initiatives, structural and operational gaps persist, often undermining the very efficacy these laws seek to secure. The study of Cann (2023) underscores on how intelligence gathering in Ghana is challenged by limited technological capacity, bureaucratic overlaps, political interference, and weak inter-agency coordination. In a climate where jihadist groups exploit porous borders, under-governed spaces, and socioeconomic grievances, such weaknesses may compromise early-warning systems and delay preventive interventions (Dan Suleiman, 2023). It is within this intricate intersection of opportunity and vulnerability that the present study situates itself, asking a critical question: *What are the prevailing threats to intelligence gathering in Ghana, and how do these impede the nation's broader fight against violent extremism?*

The objective and significance of this research are inseparably linked. At its core, the study aims to critically examine the institutional, operational, and technological barriers that constrain effective intelligence gathering, while simultaneously

assessing how these gaps weaken Ghana's counter-terrorism capacity in the face of rising jihadist activities across the Sahel. In doing so, it highlights the strengths and shortcomings of Ghana's legislative frameworks, particularly ACT 1030 and ACT 1040, probing whether they genuinely strengthen intelligence effectiveness or inadvertently reproduce inefficiencies. By interrogating these issues, the study makes a significant contribution to policy and practice, offering context-specific recommendations that can enhance intelligence efficiency, foster inter-agency collaboration, and build trust between security institutions and citizens. The study's significance is further underscored by Ghana's precarious geographic and geopolitical position. As jihadist incursions intensify across the Sahel (Aubyn, 2021), Ghana's northern borders are increasingly vulnerable to infiltration. Intelligence reports already suggest attempts by extremist groups to exploit local grievances, recruit vulnerable youth, and establish logistical networks in border communities (Dan Suleiman, 2023). Against this backdrop, strengthening intelligence gathering is not a bureaucratic luxury but a national survival imperative. As established by Aja (2023), failures in intelligence across West Africa have repeatedly preceded catastrophic terrorist attacks, undermining public confidence and eroding state legitimacy.

Moreover, the implications of Ghana's resilience transcend national boundaries. As a regional diplomatic hub and a founding member of ECOWAS, Ghana occupies a critical role in shaping collective security across West Africa (Bassey et al., 2024). Prah & Chanimbe (2021) identifies that its ability to withstand extremist threats strengthens its own stability and the credibility of regional security architectures such as the Accra Initiative. Conversely, Mensah et al. (2025) establishes that intelligence weaknesses in Ghana could create dangerous ripple effects, destabilizing the sub-region and providing extremists with new corridors of influence. Thus, the study holds significance not only for Ghana's national security but also for regional and international stability.

While legislative reforms offer a necessary scaffolding, their success depends on how effectively they translate into operational realities (Darko, (2024). Transitional perspectives highlight the need to examine whether these frameworks are genuinely implemented without political interference, resource bottlenecks, or institutional rivalries that dilute their impact. Crucially, Fagbemi et al. (2024) shows that intelligence gathering must be recognized as a technical process that is dependent on surveillance, risk analysis, and data integration and a social process built on legitimacy and trust. Communities at the grassroots level often provide the first signals of radicalization or extremist infiltration. Yet, when citizens perceive security agencies as coercive, partisan, or disconnected, this trust erodes, creating blind spots that extremists exploit. Therefore, the study's significance lies equally in advocating for intelligence systems that respect human rights and build civic confidence as it does in strengthening operational mechanisms.

Globally, Ross (2024) underscores that the fight against terrorism underscores a recurring truth as intelligence failures are often the precursor to catastrophic security breakdowns. Whether in the September 11 attacks in the United States or the insurgencies that destabilized Mali and Burkina Faso, inadequate information sharing, weak inter-agency coordination, and institutional fragmentation have repeatedly allowed extremists to outmaneuver states (Nguyen et al., 2024). Ghana must avoid such pitfalls by ensuring its intelligence systems are not only robust but also accountable, transparent, and firmly anchored in democratic governance.

In the light of the above, Kuyini Mohammed (2023) demonstrates that Ghana's experience reflects a broader dilemma confronting many African democracies on how to safeguard citizens against transnational threats without undermining democratic freedoms. The balance between vigilance and accountability is delicate, yet essential. Intelligence agencies that operate outside the law risk delegitimizing the very state they seek to protect. Conversely, those constrained by inefficiency or political manipulation risk leaving citizens exposed to extremist violence (Gondwe, 2025). This study therefore argues that Ghana's future security lies in expanding intelligence agencies while refining their ability to act with precision, coordination, and legitimacy.

Literature Review

Conceptual Foundations

Intelligence gathering, in its most elemental sense, refers to the systematic collection, processing, and analysis of information that informs decision-making in security and governance (Miller, 2021). In the Ghanaian context, Nweke & Francis (2024) demonstrates how intelligence gathering transcends the operational task of data collection to embody a vital state instrument for pre-empting and neutralizing existential threats, particularly those posed by violent extremism. Violent extremism itself has been conceptually framed not merely as an ideological deviation but as a deliberate, organized use of violence to advance political, religious, or sectarian goals (Obiagu, 2024). Within West Africa, the menace has acquired heightened resonance due to the activities of jihadist groups migrating southwards from the Sahel, thereby posing imminent risks to relatively stable nations like Ghana (Darkwah, 2023).

The conceptual debate surrounding violent extremism emphasizes its multidimensionality. While some scholars like Babatunde et al., (2021) and Abdul-Razak et al., (2025) interpret it primarily through a security lens, others underscore its socio-economic undercurrents, pointing to poverty, marginalization, and governance deficits as fertile grounds for radicalization (Mensah, 2024). This duality renders intelligence gathering not just a technical function of surveillance but also a socio-political instrument of governance. The ability to identify early warning signals, map radicalization pathways, and decode extremist propaganda

becomes central to safeguarding Ghana's internal security. Thus, intelligence is not confined to the clandestine corridors of security agencies but also involves community-driven mechanisms that bridge the gap between state and society (Temprano, 2024).

Conceptually, Ghana's challenge lies in balancing the imperatives of security with the preservation of democratic norms and civil liberties. The enactment of the Security and Intelligence Agencies Act (Act 1030) and the National Signals Bureau Act (Act 1040) provides the legal scaffolding, yet these instruments also ignite debates about the potential overreach of state power (Tuffour & Adjanor, 2024). The discourse illustrates the inherent tension between strengthening intelligence infrastructure and avoiding a securitized state that undermines human rights. At this conceptual intersection, the fight against violent extremism becomes a test of resilience, legitimacy, and governance capacity.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The study of intelligence gathering and violent extremism in Ghana is best illuminated through carefully chosen theoretical lenses that bridges security practice with socio-political realities. Two frameworks stand out in particular, that is the securitization theory and resilience theory.

Securitization theory, as developed by Buzan et al. (1998), highlights how issues become framed as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures. In Ghana, violent extremism has been deliberately securitized through official narratives, policy frameworks, and legislative reforms such as the Security and Intelligence Agencies Act, 2020 (Act 1030) and the National Signals Bureau Act, 2020 (Act 1040). These legal instruments exemplify securitization in practice: political elites construct extremism as a fundamental danger to national survival, thereby legitimizing the expansion of intelligence powers and resource allocation. This framing not only structures public discourse but also shapes institutional behavior, ensuring intelligence gathering remains at the forefront of counter-terrorism strategies. Yet, securitization also raises tensions with justice administration and civil liberties, demanding careful balancing between vigilance and democratic accountability.

Resilience theory, articulated by Holling (2001), offers a complementary and forward-looking perspective. It shifts focus from mere containment of threats to the adaptive capacity of states, institutions, and societies. In Ghana, resilience is cultivated through robust intelligence systems that anticipate extremist incursions, empower communities to resist radical ideologies, and sustain cohesion in the face of external pressures, particularly from jihadist groups advancing from the Sahel. Intelligence gathering here is not only defensive but anticipatory, embedding resilience within the fabric of national security. It enables Ghana to withstand

shocks, recover quickly, and integrate counter-extremism into broader development and governance agendas.

Together, securitization and resilience theories produce a powerful analytical framework. They capture how Ghana frames violent extremism as an existential crisis, while also underscoring the necessity of adaptive capacity to ensure long-term stability. This dual perspective situates intelligence gathering as both a legitimized security imperative and a cornerstone of sustainable national resilience against terrorism.

Empirical Perspectives

Empirical research across Africa underscores the magnitude of challenges facing states in harnessing intelligence to combat violent extremism. The studies of John (2022) and Walther-Puri (2025) reveals that West African nations have become the epicenter of jihadist incursions, with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger experiencing relentless attacks that have spilled across borders into coastal states. In Ghana, while no major attack has yet occurred, intelligence reports highlight attempted infiltrations and recruitment activities along the northern frontier, particularly in border regions such as Bawku and Bolgatanga (Gyimah, 2023). These realities illustrate the empirical necessity for vigilance and pre-emptive intelligence strategies.

Research on Ghana's institutional responses reveals a mixed record in accordance with the studies of Tetteh et al. (2021) and Sefa-Nyarko (2022). The establishment of the National Counter Terrorism Centre and the enhancement of intelligence agencies under Acts 1030 and 1040 demonstrate political will, yet structural limitations persist. Empirical studies like the studies of Ikeanyibe et al. (2023); Arumede & Edwin (2024) and Olowonihi & Musa (2024), all show that inter-agency rivalry, inadequate technological capacity, and limited resources undermine intelligence coordination. Moreover, civil society reports caution against the securitization drift, noting that excessive surveillance risks alienating communities whose cooperation is vital for intelligence gathering (Yimer & Subaşi 2024).

Empirical studies from Kenya provide instructive lessons. For instance, the study of Jirásek (2023) illustrates that despite substantial investment in counter-terrorism, Kenya has struggled with intelligence failures leading to attacks such as the Westgate Mall siege and Garissa University massacre. Analysts attribute these lapses to institutional fragmentation, corruption, and the alienation of marginalized communities, which weaken the flow of actionable intelligence. These experiences resonate with Ghana, where community trust remains a decisive factor in detecting extremist threats before they metastasize (Ndinda, 2025).

In Nigeria, the fight against Boko Haram offers sobering empirical evidence of the consequences of weak intelligence capacity. Poor coordination between military

and intelligence agencies, compounded by political interference, enabled the insurgency to expand unchecked for years (Egbuta, 2024). Ghana's proximity to Nigeria accentuates the urgency of learning from these failures, particularly in ensuring that intelligence remains professional, depoliticized, and community-anchored.

Southern Africa offers contrasting insights. Putter (2025), for instance, illustrates how South Africa's intelligence framework, though relatively sophisticated, has grappled with credibility crises linked to politicization and corruption. This highlights a cautionary lesson for Ghana: legal frameworks alone cannot guarantee effective intelligence; institutional culture and accountability mechanisms are equally critical.

In empirical terms, Ghana's intelligence infrastructure faces five pressing challenges. First, porous borders create vulnerabilities that extremist groups exploit for movement and recruitment (Prah & Chanimbe, 2021). Second, limited technological capacity hampers real-time surveillance and analysis, leaving gaps in detecting cross-border communications. Third, inter-agency fragmentation dilutes the efficacy of intelligence-sharing mechanisms. Fourth, political pressures risk undermining the professionalism and independence of intelligence agencies. Finally, the socio-economic fragility of border communities creates fertile ground for extremist infiltration. Nevertheless, there are grounds for cautious optimism as the study of Haafiz (2021) further establishes that Ghana's proactive legislative reforms, combined with community engagement initiatives such as the "See Something, Say Something" campaign, have fostered public awareness and enhanced resilience. These initiatives reflect a growing recognition that intelligence is not merely the purview of state actors but a shared responsibility involving citizens, civil society, and local governance structures.

The literature reveals a convergence around the recognition that intelligence gathering is indispensable to countering violent extremism, yet it also exposes significant gaps. Conceptually, intelligence in Ghana remains under-theorized beyond the security domain, with limited attention to its socio-political and developmental dimensions. Theoretically, while securitization and resilience frameworks offer useful insights, there is limited integration of these perspectives into a comprehensive analytical model tailored to Ghana's context. Empirically, the scarcity of Ghana-specific studies leaves much of the discourse extrapolated from broader West African experiences, underscoring the need for focused research that captures the peculiarities of Ghana's institutional frameworks, community dynamics, and legislative environment.

In the light of the empirical review here, this study seeks to fill these gaps by examining the threats inherent in intelligence gathering and counter-extremism efforts in Ghana. By situating Ghana within the broader West African security

landscape while foregrounding its unique legislative and institutional trajectory, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how intelligence can be strengthened to safeguard national security in an era of rising jihadist threats.

Understanding the Threats of Violent Extremism and Terrorism

Violent extremism and terrorism constitute multidimensional challenges that deeply permeate Ghana's security architecture, threatening both national stability and socio-economic development (Khalil & Dawson, 2023). Recent years have witnessed an alarming expansion of extremist influence, particularly from jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Operating largely from the Sahel, these groups exploit porous borders, weak state presence, and community grievances to extend their reach southward, placing Ghana firmly within the trajectory of their violent expansion (Borum, 2023). Their strategies include recruiting disaffected youth, weaponizing religious ideologies, and capitalizing on local grievances, thereby nurturing environments conducive to radicalization and insurgency.

The transnational character of these threats magnifies Ghana's vulnerabilities. Border regions in the north, particularly those adjacent to Burkina Faso, have become gateways for cross-border incursions, illicit trafficking, and recruitment networks. This reality illustrates how Ghana's security challenges are inseparable from wider regional instability, underscoring the urgency of robust defensive and adaptive strategies (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023).

Here, securitization theory provides a useful lens to interpret Ghana's evolving response. By framing violent extremism as an existential threat, the state has mobilized public legitimacy and enacted legislative instruments such as the Security and Intelligence Agencies Act (Act 1030) and the National Signals Bureau Act (Act 1040). These measures expand intelligence mandates and institutionalize counter-terrorism as a matter of national survival, thus reflecting the securitization of extremist threats. Yet securitization alone is insufficient without embedding resilience.

Resilience theory complements this narrative by emphasizing the adaptive capacity of states and societies to withstand and recover from extremist shocks (Holling, 2001). For Ghana, resilience is cultivated through intelligence-led strategies that not only disrupt terrorist networks but also empower communities, strengthen inter-agency coordination, and foster regional cooperation. By merging securitization's urgency with resilience's adaptability, Ghana is better positioned to confront jihadist threats while safeguarding democratic governance and long-term stability. Ultimately, the convergence of these two theoretical perspectives underscores a central truth: violent extremism in Ghana is not merely a technical security problem, but a test of institutional legitimacy, social cohesion, and national resilience in the face of evolving terrorist networks.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, rooted in interpretivist philosophy, to unravel the complexities of intelligence gathering and the fight against violent extremism in Ghana. Through in-depth literature review, policy review, and border community leaders, coupled with document analysis of legislative frameworks, intelligence reports, and counter-terrorism strategies, the study captures nuanced perspectives often hidden in quantitative accounts. Thematic analysis is employed to trace patterns of institutional strengths, operational gaps, and resilience mechanisms. This approach illuminates the lived realities of intelligence work while situating Ghana's counter-extremism strategies within the broader West African dynamics.

Role of Intelligence Agencies in Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism

Ghana's intelligence agencies remain the vanguard of national defense, occupying the frontline in the battle against violent extremism and terrorism (Ateku & Owusu-Mensah, 2023). Their role is not only technical but existential, as the state increasingly confronts the mounting threat from jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). These groups, entrenched in Burkina Faso and Mali, have staged over 800 attacks across the Sahel in 2022 alone, claiming more than 4,000 lives (Mynster Christensen, 2023). With Ghana's northern frontier sharing porous borders with Burkina Faso, the spillover risk is acute, making intelligence work indispensable for national survival.

Anchored in the Security and Intelligence Agencies Act, 2020 (Act 1030), Ghana's intelligence system is empowered with the legal mandate and operational latitude to monitor, detect, and counter extremist operations. Through surveillance technologies, communication interceptions, and human intelligence networks, agencies gather actionable data on the covert strategies of jihadist cells. More importantly, Act 1030 institutionalizes inter-agency collaboration, ensuring that intelligence gathered by the National Intelligence Bureau, the Defence Intelligence, and the National Signals Bureau is systematically shared and analyzed for rapid response (Cann, 2023).

Here, securitization theory illuminates how intelligence agencies operate within a national discourse that frames violent extremism as an existential threat requiring extraordinary countermeasures. By securitizing the jihadist menace, Ghana legitimizes enhanced surveillance powers and resource allocation to intelligence operations. Yet, securitization alone cannot guarantee long-term security.

Resilience theory complements this by underscoring the importance of adaptability and community-centered responses (Holling, 2001). Ghana's intelligence agencies thus integrate resilience into their strategy by fostering local vigilance groups, engaging border communities, and building regional partnerships within ECOWAS

and the Accra Initiative. These efforts enhance societal capacity to withstand extremist infiltration while reinforcing institutional agility in the face of rapidly evolving threats.

Together, securitization and resilience provide a dual lens through which Ghana's intelligence agencies transform from mere information collectors into strategic defenders of national stability. By intertwining urgency with adaptability, they ensure that the state is not only shielded against extremist incursions but also strengthened to endure and recover from them.

Cooperation with Regional and Global Partners

Given the transnational nature of violent extremism, Ghana acknowledges that no single nation can stand resilient in isolation. The surge of jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) from the Sahel has created an expanding arc of instability. According to ECOWAS (2024), over 7,000 deaths from extremist attacks were recorded in West Africa between 2022 and 2023, underscoring the urgent need for collective defense mechanisms. Ghana, though yet to suffer large-scale attacks, remains highly vulnerable due to porous borders and growing extremist propaganda infiltrating northern communities.

The National Signals Bureau Act, 2020 (ACT 1040) provides the scaffolding for robust intelligence sharing with regional and global partners, thereby ensuring early detection of cross-border militant movements (Kalu, 2023). Here, securitization theory illuminates how violent extremism is framed as an existential threat, legitimizing extraordinary measures such as expanded intelligence cooperation. Simultaneously, the intelligence cycle theory reveals how systematic processes of collection, analysis, and dissemination must extend beyond national borders to be effective, particularly when confronting jihadist groups skilled at exploiting weak state linkages.

Through joint operations, situational awareness is amplified, enabling Ghana to not only deter infiltration but also anticipate emerging threats. Thus, regional collaboration transforms intelligence into a collective shield, weaving national resilience into the broader security fabric of West Africa. Ultimately, Ghana's intelligence agencies stand as both custodians of national security and pillars of transnational solidarity in the war against violent extremism.

Preventive Measures and Community Engagement

In addition to intelligence gathering and law enforcement efforts, Ghana emphasizes preventive measures and community engagement as essential components of its counter-terrorism strategy. By fostering trust and collaboration between security agencies and local communities, Ghana seeks to identify early warning signs of radicalization and extremism, address underlying grievances, and

promote resilience against extremist ideologies (Schumicky-Logan & Alves Dos Reis, 2023). Community outreach programs, religious dialogue initiatives, and youth empowerment projects are some of the strategies employed to prevent radicalization and promote social cohesion.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Ultimately, this study is both urgent and transformative speaks directly to Ghana's contemporary struggle against violent extremism and provides insights that resonate across the continent. By examining the threats in intelligence gathering and their implications for counter-terrorism, the study illuminates pathways for strengthening resilience in an increasingly volatile environment. The convergence of its objectives and significance rests in one simple truth, in that without effective, legitimate, and coordinated intelligence systems, Ghana's fight against violent extremism will remain vulnerable. But with them, the nation can safeguard its people, preserve its democracy, and stand as a bulwark of stability in West Africa's turbulent security landscape.

Finally, the performance of Ghana's intelligence agencies and the broader security and justice administration is essential for countering the threats of violent extremism and terrorism outlined in Chapter Two of Ghana's National Security Strategy 2020. Through effective intelligence gathering, regional cooperation, community engagement, and legal frameworks, Ghana is better positioned to mitigate these risks and safeguard its citizens' safety and well-being. However, addressing the root causes of extremism, promoting inclusive governance, and addressing socio-economic disparities remain long-term challenges that require sustained efforts and collaboration across sectors. By building resilient communities, enhancing institutional capacities, and fostering international partnerships, Ghana can confront the evolving threats of violent extremism and terrorism and contribute to regional stability and global security. To effectively combat violent extremism and terrorism, it is recommended for Ghana to continue to strengthen its legal and institutional frameworks to address emerging threats and challenges. The Security and Intelligence Agencies Act, 2020 (ACT 1030) and the National Signals Bureau Act, 2020 (ACT 1040) provide legal mandates and operational guidelines for intelligence agencies to conduct their functions within the boundaries of the rule of law and respect for human rights (Mensah, 2023). These legislative frameworks ensure accountability, transparency, and oversight in the conduct of intelligence activities, thereby safeguarding against abuses of power and ensuring respect for civil liberties.

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