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Cameroon: Challenges Ahead for Biya [Redacted]

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Summary

Cameroon has not experienced the political instability that has engulfed many West and Central African states in recent years, but the moderate three-year old regime of President Paul Biya continues to face persistent domestic strains that could intensify and eventually undermine his rule. Despite the country's strong economic performance and relative political calm since gaining independence from France in 1960, deep-seated rivalries fester among 220 tribes and 24 native language groups, northern Muslims and southern Christians, and English-speaking West and French-speaking East Cameroonians. Young people also increasingly demand political liberalization that the elite opposes. A review of [Redacted]

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[Redacted] a southern bilingual Christian, appears to have the loyalty of the traditionally apolitical 17,000-man military, but grumbling periodically erupts among junior officers unhappy over corruption and the greater financial benefits of their superiors. We believe that Libya may attempt to capitalize on these grievances, particularly in light of Cameroon's expanding relationship with Israel--Tel Aviv trains Biya's presidential guard--by increasing support for dissident activities or trying to stir unrest among northern Muslims. [Redacted]

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This memorandum was requested by Phillip Ringdahl, Director, Office of African Affairs, National Security Council. It was prepared by [Redacted] West Branch, of the Office of African and Latin American Analysis. The paper was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. Questions and comments are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Africa Division, [Redacted]

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During his 26 February meeting with President Reagan, Biya is likely to express concern over what he sees as the growing Libyan threat to sub-Saharan Africa and particularly to neighboring Chad. He also may express concern that US plans to aid UNITA will intensify fighting in Angola and increase Luanda's dependence on the USSR and Cuba, according to US Embassy and press reporting. In his search for greater foreign investment, Biya probably will outline Cameroon's favorable financial climate by highlighting the liberal investment code, diversified economy, and fairly well-educated workforce. As part of his effort to diversify arms suppliers and to improve Cameroon's military capabilities, Biya may inquire about purchasing such items as US fighter aircraft and anti-tank weapons. [redacted]

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Threats to National Unity

In our view, the 53-year old Biya continues to face a delicate task of balancing the competing demands of disparate ethnic and regional groups, while controlling the pace and extent of change from two decades of authoritarian rule to a more open political system favored by the rapidly growing numbers of youth. Biya's failure to maintain a consensus as he gradually dismantles the highly personalized political system--created over 22 years by the country's first president Ahmadou Ahijdo, a strong-willed Muslim northerner--could result in a dangerous narrowing of his political base of support. Although the serious problems facing Biya appear to be manageable, we believe the normally apolitical military will keep a close watch on the president's performance and could attempt to step in if he falters. [redacted]

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Regionalism. The anglophones--who constitute some 20 percent of the population of nearly 10 million--fear their gradual assimilation into the dominant francophone community, according to US Embassy reporting. Although they currently lack the leadership and unity to effectively challenge Biya's rule, we believe the anglophone minority is a potential timebomb, and should the central government fail to respect their cultural and linguistic traditions, the two-million strong community may view armed confrontation as their only alternative. Cameroon is officially bilingual, but without a perfect mastery of French, it is difficult for anglophones to gain admittance to the best schools and to enter the civil service [redacted]. According to the US Embassy, anglophone students--slightly over one-eighth of the 15,000 students attending the University of Yaounde--are a potentially volatile group. Student demands include the creation of an English-language university,

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greater government efforts to promote bilingualism, and a possible return to a federal state. Although the security services could probably handle an outbreak of violence at a series of schools, we believe it would be a significant setback blow to Biya's effort to develop national unity and reconciliation. []

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Tribalism. Ethnic suspicions permeate the government, military, and society in general. Dissatisfaction also festers among the one-million strong Bamileke tribesmen, who dominate the agricultural and commercial sectors. [] the Bamileke--who inhabit the western highlands--charge Biya with tribal discrimination. Moreover, many believe the government crackdown in the past two years on corruption has been directed at their substantial economic interests, according to US Embassy reports. The Embassy notes, however, that Biya has sought to allay their concerns by appointing a prominent Bamileke businessman last year to his inner circles of advisers. Ethnic tensions persist in the military despite Biya's efforts to maintain a balance among all groups. Bamileke tribesmen complain that military assignments and promotions favor officers and enlisted men from Biya's Boulou home region. []

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[] although tribal friction is not immediately threatening to military command capabilities, Biya must take into consideration these sensitivities when considering personnel changes. []

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Religious Splits. Although religious friction is not immediately threatening to regime stability, we believe the Christian-Muslim division will continue to grow deeper. According to US Embassy reporting, the northern-based Muslims--which make up some 30 percent of the population--have long feared domination by the Christians. The Embassy also reports Biya is increasingly worried that small groups of Islamic fundamentalists that have appeared recently in the far north may imitate Nigeria's Maitatsine sect, which touched off rioting in several Nigerian cities since 1980, resulting in over 10,000 deaths. These fundamentalists of northern Cameroon reportedly are recruiting among the region's poorly educated and unemployed youth, according to Embassy reporting. []

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The Military. Biya's most direct challenge was a coup attempt in April 1984 by elements of the elite 700-man Presidential Guard--originally formed and handpicked by former President Ahijdo to ensure his security. The US Embassy reports that the attempt was triggered by Biya's decision to transfer most members of the Guard--made up predominately of northerners--out of Yaounde. The military remained loyal to Biya, however, and the insurrection--in which some 1,000 people died--was crushed in two days, according to Embassy reporting. Biya has since recreated the Presidential Guard, which the US Embassy estimates now numbers 2,000-men, the majority of which are from Biya's home region. []

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Biya now appears to have the loyalty of his senior officers, and the traditionally apolitical 17,000-man military has not sought a role in decisionmaking, according to US Embassy and [redacted]. In particular, General Pierre Semengue--Chief of the General Staff who is related to Biya by tribal origin and marriage--helps ensure loyalty to the President. The Embassy observes that Biya has been responsive to the military's desire for new equipment and faster promotions. [redacted]

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Nevertheless, evidence indicates that frustration may be building below the surface, particularly among more nationalistic junior officers and enlisted men who believe the government has not moved against corrupt superiors. [redacted]

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[redacted] Moreover, junior officers may grow impatient with Biya's intention to stem corruption among senior officers. [redacted]

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[redacted] last February a group of lieutenants and captains met with Biya to express their unhappiness and complained that senior officers receive too many privileges. According to the Embassy, Biya has sought to pacify their dissatisfaction by furnishing them with inexpensive cars. [redacted]

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Pressures for Political Liberalization. The end of Ahijdo's highly autocratic rule stirred long dormant popular expectations among Cameroonians for political liberalization, according to press reports and US Embassy reporting. Although Biya has sought to respond by increasing popular participation in the politics of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement--the country's sole political party, he refuses to introduce a multi-party system for fear of aggravating tribal or regional rivalries. Moreover, Biya must contend with a restive younger generation--nearly half the population is under 20--which seeks a greater political voice, as well as with an outspoken media which is increasingly critical of government censorship. According to the Embassy, 30 members of the banned Union of Cameroonian Peoples (UPC), which is a left-of-center party and which was responsible for the protracted insurgency from 1959 to 1970, have been arrested since December for circulating anti-government tracts. [redacted]

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The Economy

Cameroon remains one of Africa's economic bright spots. According to official statistics, the economy grew around 6 percent last year and with a per capita GNP of some \$800, it is one of the continent's most developed countries. Yaounde historically has emphasized the agricultural sector and exports of cocoa, coffee, and cotton have continued to buoy the economy. As a result of fertile soil, good weather, and government incentives to farmers, Cameroon is now essentially self-sufficient in food. Cameroon's debt service ratio has remained relatively low in recent years--only 12 percent of export earnings. The government budget is balanced and funded entirely by internal resources. According to the

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Embassy, Biya has appointed highly regarded technocrats to the Finance, Commerce and Industry, Planning and Agricultural ministries. Cameroon has a liberal foreign investment code and in the past two years Yaounde has activitely sought greater US, Canadian, Japanese, and British investment. [redacted]

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Cameroon has exported oil since 1978--some 180,000 barrels per day-- but production probably will peak by the end of the decade and drop considerably in the 1990s, according to US Embassy reporting. The oil sector amounts for 12 percent of the gross national product and provides one-fourth of government revenues, petroleum industry analysts report. According to press reports, oil exploration by Western companies has all but stopped because of the government's high tax rates and a slump in world prices. Cameroon has vast reserves of untapped natural gas which may partially compensate for the expected decline in oil production, if world demand for gas strengthens. [redacted]

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Cameroon, however, does face socioeconomic challenges that may eventually erode some of Biya's political support. Foreign observers report that the increasingly well-educated youth are reluctant to return to farming after several years of study in the cities. Over time this could erode agricultural export potential. Moreover, the unemployment and underemployment facing these new job seekers in urban areas may lead to unrest. The population of 9.7 million is growing at 2.7 percent a year, while the urban rate is increasing by 8 percent annually. State-run companies--which are losing money--will continue to be a drain on the economy. Corruption, an inadequate infrastructure, and an inefficient bureaucracy may also hamper sustained economic growth. [redacted]

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Potential for Libyan and Soviet Meddling

Cameroon has not been a target for active Libyan or Soviet subversion over the last decade, but the US Embassy reports that Biya increasingly regards Libya as a growing threat to the country's stability. Although the president deeply distrusts Qadhafi's intentions, Biya has tried to maintain polite relations with Libya--primarily to avoid giving Tripoli a pretext for meddling in Cameroon's affairs, according to the US Embassy. Nevertheless, the Embassy reports that Libya may be training a small number of Cameroonian dissidents. [redacted]

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[redacted] The Embassy reports the five-man Libyan People's Bureau in Yaounde has sought unsuccessfully so far to recruit students for the fundamentalist cause. [redacted]

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Biya also worries that Cameroon's warming relationship with Israel, which maintains a small interests section in Yaounde and trains elements of Biya's new Presidential Guard, may make it an inviting target for

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Libyan destabilization efforts, the US Embassy reports. Should Biya decide to establish diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv--possibly this year--Cameroon's Muslims, could interpret this as the predominantly Christian government's insensitivity to their interests. According to the Embassy, Biya is increasingly worried that Qadhafi may attempt to exploit the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in the far north. [redacted]

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Cameroon has kept the Soviet Union and other East Bloc countries at arms length. Yaounde has no military or economic agreements with the USSR, and the US Embassy reports that trade with communist countries in 1984 accounted for less than one percent of Cameroon's commerce.

[redacted] Cameroon is not a target of current Soviet activities. The Embassy reports that Cameroon does not seek closer ties with Moscow, and that Yaounde has repeatedly rejected Soviet requests for a consulate in the port city of Douala. There are no identified Soviet front groups in Cameroon and the illegal opposition party--the United People's Congress--though originally Marxist, has modified its ideology, the US Embassy reports. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that the Soviet Union maintains contacts with Cameroonian oppositionists, possibly through European communist parties. [redacted]

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Relations with France

Ties with Paris have improved somewhat since 1984, when Cameroonian authorities suspected French support for coup attempt by the Presidential Guard. Although Biya visited Paris last year and was warmly received by President Mitterrand, US Embassy reporting indicates that suspicions of French intentions remain--especially among mid-and low-level government employees who suspect Paris still supports former President Ahidjo, who maintained close ties with France and who now lives there. Government officials see France's influence in Africa as on the decline, according to the Embassy, and Biya doubts Paris is willing to defend Chad against further Libyan aggression. As a result of these concerns, Yaounde has begun to seek new trading partners and to diversify sources of its military acquisitions. [redacted]

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Nevertheless, France will remain the focal point of Cameroon's foreign policy in the near term as a result of their historically close economic and military ties. Paris is Yaounde's largest trading partner, taking 35 percent of its exports and providing 48 percent of its imports last year. The US Embassy reports that some 17,000 French citizens reside in Cameroon and that the French presence is pervasive through the country's administration, economy, educational, and defense structures.

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[redacted] provides some \$18 million a year in military aid and 75 French military advisors serve in the country. [redacted]

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Ties with the United States

Cameroon pursues a moderate, pro-Western foreign policy and has generally supported US positions in international forums, according to US Embassy reporting. Biya, however, has expressed concern that US plans to aid UNITA will intensify fighting in Angola and increase Luanda's dependence on the Soviet bloc. The Embassy reports that Biya seeks closer ties with Washington in part to supplement French influence and has expressed interest in acquiring US fighter aircraft, such as the F-5, as well as equipment for the Presidential Guard. The US Embassy also reports that trade and business ties between Washington and Yaounde are good. In 1983--the last year for which figures are available--US exports to Cameroon were valued at \$92 million and imports at more than \$500 million. The US Embassy notes the American business community in Cameroon has expanded rapidly in the past 10 years--some 100 US firms maintain a presence or representation and US private investment totals some \$790 million. The US presence is dominated by oil companies and engineering and construction firms. Cameroon reportedly is seeking greater US investment, particularly to shore up some of the faltering state enterprises, which it hopes to privatize with foreign capital. [redacted]

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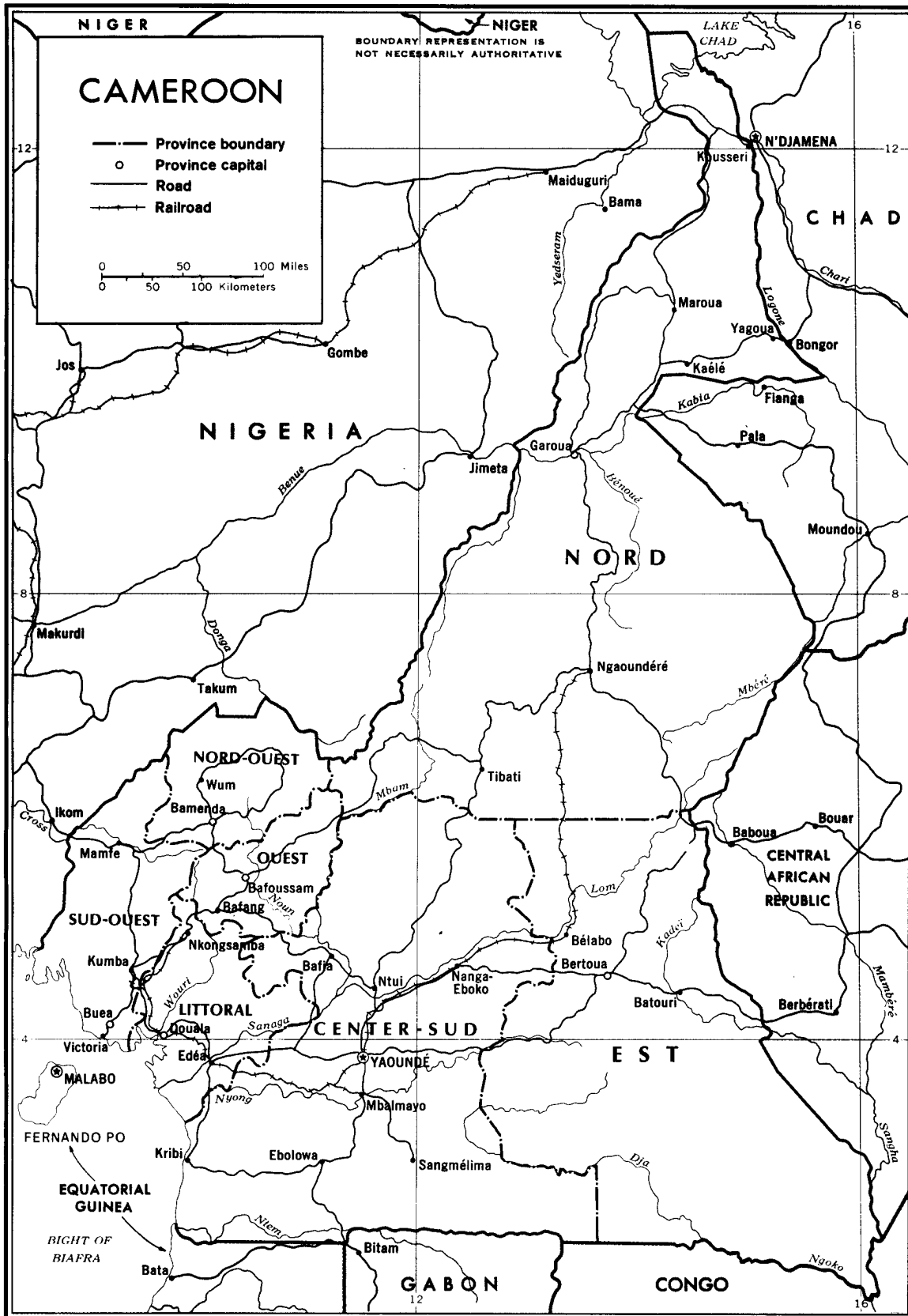
Outlook

Although Biya's position appears secure for the short term, we believe this second generation leader will face serious problems that could start to weaken his position over the next two years. He will probably have to contend with conflicting pressure from within his own party, as the older generation, accustomed to his predecessor's authoritarianism, attempts to block the efforts of a younger generation to gain greater freedom of expression and a more democratic selection of leaders. Moreover, Biya is likely to face persistent and possibly growing regional and ethnic pressures, particularly if Libya decides to stir unrest among northern Muslims or dissident groups. [redacted]

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Although Biya appears to command the military's loyalty, we believe senior officers may increasingly demand a decisionmaking role if he fails to stem tribal dissent and violence erupts. While unlikely in the next one to two years, we cannot discount the possibility that some of the younger, more nationalistic officers, frustrated over slow advancement and tribal grievances, could attempt a coup. Should they come to power, there is always the risk that junior officers probably could steer Cameroon on a more non-aligned course, which could include confrontations with the West and warming relations with Libya. Should a pro-Soviet or pro-Libyan government come to power, the neighboring moderate states of Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and Central African Republic could be subjected to further destabilization. Moreover, a pro-Libyan regime probably would allow Chadian dissidents to operate out of Cameroonian territory to further strain the limited resources of President Habre's neighboring pro-Western regime. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: Challenges Ahead for Biya



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- 1-- Ambassador K. Bishop, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, Department of State
- 1-- Frank Wisner, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of African Affairs
- 1-- Ambassador Howard K. Walker, Director, Office of West African Affairs, Department of State
- 1-- Robert Cabelly, Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of African Affairs
- 1-- Byron Jackson, Intelligence Liaison, Department of Commerce
- 4-- Anthony Dalsimer, Director INR/AA, Department of State
- 1-- Noel Koch, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, International Security Affairs, Department of Defense
- 1-- Margaret Greenwood, Acting Defense Intelligence Officer, for Africa Defense Intelligence Agency
- 1-- Edward L. Killham, Director, Central African Affairs, Department of State
- 1-- T. Dennis Reece, Cameroon Desk Officer, Office of Central African Affairs, Department of State
- 1-- DDI
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- 1-- DDO/Africa
- 1-- PDB Staff
- 1-- ILS
- 1-- C/DDI/PES
- 1-- D/ALA
- 1-- ALA Research Director
- 2-- ALA/PS (one sourced copy; one clean)
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- 4-- ALA/C 
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