

Rumors are flying and knives are out at Lafleur SA after a key executive resigns. Michael just wants to work hard and get ahead – does he have to play politics, too?



Into the Fray

by M. Ellen Peebles

"PSST, PSST, PSST." That's all Michael Feldstein heard as he walked down the hall toward his office. "Psst, psst, psst." "What did people talk about before last week?" he asked himself. "What more can we possibly say about it?"

"It" was the sudden and mysterious resignation of Lucien Beaumont, Lafleur SA's president of U.S. operations. Everyone was imagining the worst. Financial misdeeds? Illness? An illicit affair? The rumors were flying fast and furious, each more lurid than the next. Less entertaining, though even more distracting, was the speculation about who would get Lucien's job – and what would happen to everybody else, once that question was settled. Everyone wanted to back the right horse.

It wasn't a simple race. Lafleur was a major international beverage com-

pany that had grown rapidly through acquisitions. Michael, the global category director for rums and a contender for the newly open position, was a relative newcomer; he'd joined the company two years earlier, when Lafleur acquired New York-based Campos Beverage. In his eyes, Michael's chief competitor was Danielle Harcourt, the global category director for vodkas and liqueurs, who had moved to New York from the company's Paris headquarters just after the Campos acquisition. She had been at Lafleur 15 years and was practiced at what could be called either networking or office politics, depending on where you sat.

But there were other possible candidates. The company had a fast-growing sports and health drink division that was getting a lot of media attention,

and the director in that category – he'd started in orange juice and had risen quickly through the ranks – was turning heads in Paris. The spirits business was still doing well, but growth was beginning to taper off, and Lafleur was looking for new sources of revenue.

Or the job could go to an outsider. Charles Brooke, the CFO at Cazares Laird International, one of Lafleur's competitors, had just lost out on the COO job at Cazares's U.S. business. He was highly regarded in the industry – and unhappy about having been passed over. Charles had a strong background in the wine business, which was a relative weakness at Lafleur. And then there was Genevieve Basset, a former Lafleur employee, who was running a small spirits company based in the United States but who had maintained good

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relationships with Lafleur managers in Paris and New York.

Still, Michael believed he had a good shot at Lucien's job. The only P&L experience he had was running Campos's U.S. operations for a few months just before Lafleur acquired the company, but he had a richly varied background. He'd started at Campos in sales, shifted to marketing, done a stint in production, and taken a turn in finance. He'd been classified as a "high potential" early in his career, and although Lafleur

"Yes, numbers matter, but they don't speak. Danielle – she speaks."

did not have an official program for high potentials, Campos had offered a rigorous training curriculum emphasizing on-the-job learning as well as focused skill development. As a result, Michael was one of the company's more well-rounded executives, and his brands were consistently turning a profit to boot. Knight Rum was, in fact, Lafleur's top performer. Michael could do the job—but could he convince the top brass in Paris of that?

Dismissing the various scenarios from his mind, Michael turned to his computer and got to work. "If I keep producing," he reasoned, "it'll be obvious that I have the chops for the job."

The Rumors

Outside Michael's office, the atmosphere was considerably less focused. Twenty-four months after the Campos acquisition, the dust was beginning to settle and cost cutting was in the air. The company had announced plans for a restructuring – a guaranteed morale and productivity killer, as people tried to guess who would stay and who would go. Lucien's departure had only served to fan the flames. People were sniping

at one another, and alliances began to form, divided on who should get Lucien's job and who would stand to benefit as a result. Many employees began to meticulously document their work; others publicly scorned the scorekeeping but made casual digs in meetings or in the hallway.

Francesca Reynard, category manager for U.S. rums and one of Michael's direct reports, was in her office talking quietly with her assistant, Nora Ash. Nora was worried about her job, and the stress was getting to her. "The word is that Lafleur people are going to be favored in the restructuring," she confided. "In the copy room yesterday, I overheard someone saying that the Campos people never really tried to fit in; we're a bunch of 'stuffed shirts.' They didn't know I was there, or maybe they just didn't know I came from Campos."

"I would be shocked if the decisions were made along those lines," Francesca said. "But I can't make any promises. You're right: Things are a little crazy around here right now. All I can do is hope that you'll hang in there. The work you're doing is great."

After Nora left, Francesca reflected on the conversation. It was true that a cultural divide remained between acquirer and acquired. Mistrust was rampant, and the tension in the office was thick. She opened her e-mail to compose a message to Michael; she wanted to pick his brain about a new campaign. To be honest, she wanted to probe his thoughts on the restructuring as well. The two were old friends. But before she had a chance to type the message, she noticed an e-mail from Danielle Harcourt – a first. It was curiously casual.

"Hi, Francesca," the message read. "Do you want to have lunch tomorrow? I'd love to hear what you're working on – wondering what you've got planned. I've got some ideas. D."

The Competitor

Before heading home that evening, Michael stopped in at a party celebrating the expansion of a line of rum-inspired malt beverages. Lafleur had

introduced Silver Knight the previous year; now it was adding vanilla-flavored White Knight, cranberry-flavored Red Knight, and low-carb Knight Light. When he stepped into the room, Michael could hear glasses clinking, jumbled conversation, and periodic laughter. "Lords" and "ladies" strolled the floor, offering samples and handing out "Tonight's the Knight" T-shirts in red, white, and silver. Michael ordered a soda water and scanned the crowd.

Before long he spotted Albert Joffroy, a buddy of his from finance, chatting with a few people from the Paris office whom Michael recognized but didn't know by name. As he approached, he noticed Danielle standing with the group as well, holding a glass of red wine. The French contingent was moving on just as Michael arrived, and he heard one woman from the pack say to Danielle, "See you next week!" Michael looked quizzically at Danielle.

"Oh, I'm heading back to the mother ship for a visit," she said. "I'll have some meetings, see some old friends, eat and drink a lot." She looked at her watch. "I have to run!" she said. "I'll see you in the office tomorrow." With that, she disappeared into the crowd.

"Interesting timing," Michael said thoughtfully, glancing at Albert.

Albert leaned in. "You didn't hear it from me, but I guess she wants to talk to Pierre about some new ideas for how we position our premium brands." Pierre Hoffman was Lafleur's CEO.

Michael raised his eyebrows. "Premium vodkas?"

"Premium brands."

"How do you know all this?"

Albert shrugged. He had a particular talent for wheedling information out of people. And he'd known Danielle for some time; they had worked together in Paris.

Michael thought for a moment. "Interesting timing," he repeated. He looked at the drink in his hand and momentarily wished it were something stronger. "She doesn't know anything about rum. Pierre knows I know what I'm doing. My numbers speak for themselves. I don't think I have anything to worry about."

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“That’s where you’re wrong, my naive friend. Yes, numbers matter, but they don’t speak. Danielle—she speaks.”

“If you’re suggesting that I get political and start trying to elbow my way into Pierre’s office ahead of Danielle, you’re talking to the wrong guy. That’s just not how I work.”

Albert was shaking his head. “It’s not politics, Michael. It’s corporate life. You think you’re above the fray, but nobody is. Roll up your sleeves! Get in there!”

The Family

A couple of hours later Michael entered his darkened house, tripped over his 12-year-old son’s trumpet case by the front door, and righted himself just in time to stumble over his nine-year-old daughter’s backpack. He flipped on the hall light and shook his head, marveling at the disorder.

Upstairs, Michael’s wife, Karen, was half asleep, a mystery novel slipping out of her grip. She was the general counsel at a regional clothing company, having given up a partnership-track position at a law firm as a concession to her family and the demands of Michael’s career. She roused when Michael entered the room.

“Hey you,” she said. “How was the party?”

“The usual,” Michael said. “Sort of.”

“What does that mean?”

“I found out that Danielle’s flying to Paris next week, and I’m not so sure her intentions are good.”

“Huh?” Karen slowly sat up and pushed her glasses back up to the bridge of her nose.

“Albert seems to think she’s got an eye on my brands—well, actually, on Lucien’s job, in the end. He also lectured

me on office politics. Apparently, I’m not playing the game right. It’s all just so stupid and unnecessary. Pierre likes me, so why should I waste the time and energy on making sure he knows my every move?”

Karen stretched and sat up further, now fully awake. “Politics...It’s everywhere, Michael. It may seem silly to you, but you do have to know what’s going on. Danielle’s probably not thinking of it as ‘stealing’ your brands; she’s just trying to play it smart. You have to do the same. But be yourself—even Albert may have his own agenda.”

The Opportunity

As Michael entered the building the next morning, he saw Danielle walking toward him. Then she stopped. She put her head down, turned abruptly, and, before long, was out of sight. “Is

she avoiding me?” he wondered, staring after her. He shook off the thought. “I’m being paranoid.” Still, he regretted not having made any effort to connect with Danielle before now – before she posed a direct threat. He remembered that she’d invited him to lunch soon after the acquisition, and he’d turned down the invitation because of another commitment. He knew he should have returned the courtesy, but time had slipped away and somehow he’d never gotten around to it.

Michael strode into his office, flicked on the light, threw his coat on a chair, and turned on his computer. He had 25 new e-mails. The first one summarized the latest financials. The numbers on the Knight line were even better than he’d hoped. The next one was from Francesca.

“Michael, do you have any time to talk about a new duty-free promotion for Knight?” she wrote. “P.S. Danielle

“Could be better,” Michael answered, leaning back and thinking to himself, “Hey, I’m not so bad off. I play golf with the CEO.”

“Listen,” Pierre said. “I have a proposition for you. You know that company we acquired in China – in Beijing? Marcel Rousseau – you know him? – he was going to run China, but he’s leaving Lafleur to join a start-up. A start-up! Who would have thought? Anyway, we need somebody smart and experienced to take over – and I think you’re the one.”

A few seconds passed in silence. “China?” Michael responded.

Of course, the dialogue inside Michael’s head had begun right away. China? He supposed it would be a feather in his cap if the office took off. It was the kind of international experience his résumé lacked. It would probably be very attractive financially. And then there was the lure of escaping New York, where politics were consuming

“I’m not telling you,” Pierre said. “I think you’re the man for the job, and I hope you think so, too.”

The Dilemma

His mind full, Michael called his wife at her office. “Are you sitting down?”

“Oh God, what is it?”

“Pierre called. He wants me – he wants us – to move to China.”

Dead silence.

“Karen? Are you there?”

“China. China?! You’ve got to be kidding me. Please tell me you’re kidding, Mike.”

“No, I’m not kidding. And yes, China.”

Karen sighed. “China. I’m late to a meeting. I can’t think about this right now. Can we talk tonight?”

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That evening, Michael and Karen planted themselves in their living room and hashed things out. The truth was, Karen didn’t want to go to China. She was willing to look past her own interests if Michael truly wanted to go, but her career would suffer a major setback. Again. She also questioned the wisdom of the move – was Pierre merely trying to sideline Michael for the time being? Karen and Michael agreed there were good arguments both for and against taking the kids overseas. For his part, Michael was torn.

The next morning he walked into the office and found an e-mail from Danielle. “I have some thoughts about the Knight line, Michael,” she wrote. “Do you have a few minutes to talk in the next couple of days? I’m going to Paris next week, and I’d like to run some things past you before I go, if you have a moment.”

Michael stared at his desk. He didn’t feel like fighting. He just wanted to do his job – that’s what he was paid to do, and it’s what he liked to do. His career was going well in New York, but would moving to China take him to the next level? In the end, would either path get him to Paris?

Should Michael go to China? • Five commentators offer expert advice beginning on page 20.

“It’s not politics, Michael. It’s corporate life. You think you’re above the fray, but nobody is. Roll up your sleeves! Get in there!”

wants to have lunch with me today. She wants to talk about my work. Is there something I should know?”

Michael sat back in his chair. He lifted his head from his computer screen and muttered, “What a –” before he stopped himself. He realized Albert was there, leaning on the door frame and wearing a bemused expression.

“A what?” Albert asked.

“I’m starting to think you were right,” Michael said. “Danielle’s making a play for my job.”

“There’s no question about that. The question is, What are you going to do about it?”

Just then, Michael’s assistant tapped on the door. Pierre Hoffman was on the line. Surprised, Michael quickly picked up his phone as Albert retreated. “Pierre! Hello!” he said.

“*Michel! Comment ça va?* How is your golf game?” came the booming voice of Lafleur’s chief executive.

the office. But he would effectively be handing Danielle his job – and maybe Lucien’s, too. Senior managers were increasingly groomed in New York these days, and he’d be off the radar screen entirely. Would he ever get to Paris?

And could he make it in China? The competition was formidable. Soft-drink giant Alia had moved in two years earlier and had taken the youth market by storm. Several of Lafleur’s most impressive competitors were making significant inroads in the wine and spirits markets. Then, of course, there was Michael’s family. Karen had already sacrificed a lot professionally. And how would the kids feel about leaving their schools – and their friends?

But – China! A chance for the kids to learn a new language and experience a different culture. His head was spinning.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” he asked Pierre. “It sounds exciting, but I don’t know how my wife will take it.”



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Michael Feldstein should go to China. The issue isn't whether Michael *can* do Lucien Beaumont's job, or even whether he *should* get it given his qualifications. It's pretty clear he's not going to get it, and the opportunity in China is a great one.

The clearest indication that he won't get the job is coming from the CEO himself. Most likely Pierre Hoffman already knows whom he's going to put into Lucien's position, and if he'd chosen Michael, China wouldn't be on the table. There are several contenders for the job. They're all successful, and they're all talented; at the level of business Michael has reached, *everyone* is talented. The winners play a better game of politics, and Michael hasn't shown himself to be terribly adept in this area. What's more, a couple of Michael's competitors are from the purchasing company, which more often than not gets to appoint the key players. Acquirers usually don't do it immediately following a deal because it's demotivating, but as jobs open up, they tend to put their own people in place. The fact is, Michael was acquired, and now he's at a disadvantage no matter how talented he is, especially because he has made little effort to build relationships with his new colleagues.

All that said, Michael has every reason to feel optimistic about his future with the company. China is strategic to Lafleur's future—an important source of new revenue—and Pierre wouldn't be offering him the job if he weren't confident in Michael's abilities

Michael is in a wonderful bargaining position.

and concerned about losing him. That puts Michael in a wonderful bargaining position. He should sit down with the CEO in Paris and reach a written agreement on certain terms before he accepts the job.

First, he should put a time limit on the contract; two years is about right. He may want to extend the contract at some point, but initially he needs the option to leave China and be considered for a job at head-

quarters. Second, he should get a clear definition of what will constitute success over the course of the contract, whether it's a certain percentage increase in sales, a measure of brand recognition, or a given market share. And he should not simply ask Pierre how he defines success but also propose his own measures.

Third, Michael needs to negotiate a certain number of trips per year to both New York and Paris. This will help him maintain his visibility in the more established offices and ensure that he remains on the radar screen should other senior management positions open up. Fourth, he should negotiate a job for his wife at a multinational corporation in China. His children are at an age where they can relocate relatively easily, but his wife isn't. She's sacrificed a lot already, and he needs to find a way to make it worth her while to go. And finally, he should consider requesting that certain trusted members of his current staff go along with him.

Once he's got his contract nailed down in cold, hard terms, he needs to repair his relationship with Danielle Harcourt. She was smart enough to reach out to him early on, and it wasn't reciprocated. But now that she no longer poses a threat, they can be great allies. Michael needs a peer in New York with whom he can touch base regularly. If Danielle gets Lucien's job—and it looks as though she's a serious contender—she can learn a lot from Michael about the Campos businesses. Michael should not get on that plane until he has Danielle in his camp.

Once he gets to China, Michael needs to promote his accomplishments. Whether it's by hiring a publicist or a personal manager or working through a PR agency, he needs to make sure that people in the industry—not just within Lafleur—are tuned into what he's doing. He needs exposure in trade magazines and in the general media so industry players can see that he's a pioneer in this new market. Search firms will start paying attention, as will Lafleur's competitors. Regardless of how his career works out at Lafleur, Michael's star will be much brighter because of his experience in China.

If Michael's going to continue to move up at this company, he's probably going to need to go overseas.

Many people working in multinationals find themselves, at some point in their careers, in the situation Michael is facing. I know because I've been through it.

Foreign companies will often insist that a U.S. employee go overseas and run a small business before that person can come back and run the parent's U.S. operation; they want to be sure that the person running the U.S. is "one of their own." If Lafleur were based in the United States, the dynamics would be different, and it might be less attractive for Michael to move: U.S.-based multinationals have a harder time bringing expats home and an even harder time reabsorbing them into their succession plans. Foreign companies seem to do a better job.

With that as a backdrop, the first thing Michael and his wife have to decide is whether they both want him to build a career at Lafleur. If he's not so sure about staying with the company, and if he wants to build his professional capability as a marketer, he should stay in New York and look for opportunities outside of Lafleur. But if he's going to continue to move up at this company, he's probably going to need to go overseas; if not now, then at some point. It's important that Karen be part of the goal-setting process and willing to make the necessary commitments. When people move into different environments, they tend to rely heavily on their partners for strength and support. If Karen is unhappy about the move, the job becomes more risky for Michael. It's very important to have balance between personal life and work life. Michael should not sacrifice one for the other.

Assuming that accepting the China job is consistent with Michael's ultimate ambitions, there are significant advantages to it. First, he'll have the chance to be a "mini-CEO." He'll be in charge of sales, marketing, manufacturing, new product development, government relations – all the aspects of a general management role. Second, once he's

successfully done the work in China (at the CEO's request) he'll become an insider at Lafleur. And third, no matter what happens with Lafleur, he'll have broadened his and his family's world view.

Now, the question of politics is a separate one. Rather than look at China as an opportunity to run away, Michael needs to grow up. In any large organization, you are going to see a lot of complicated power dynamics. If and when he gets to Paris—which is what he seems to want—ambitions may be even more apparent; it's headquarters, after all.

Management is more art than science, and dealing with the human side of an enterprise is a very large part of a manager's career progression. Having a capacity for empathy is very important to a leader's success. Michael thinks he should be rewarded for keeping his head down and getting his job done. He thinks he shouldn't have to deal with Danielle – that she's a distraction. But just because he plays golf with the CEO and produces strong business results doesn't mean he's going to do well at Lafleur.

Like Michael, I had to weigh the opportunities available to me at a multinational. I was working for a global Swiss company, initially at U.S. headquarters in New Jersey. I made two significant moves, both of which forced me into totally different environments. The first was within the United States – from New Jersey to one of the company's divisions in Lincoln, Nebraska. In New Jersey, I had been primarily involved in corporate planning and finance; in Nebraska, I was more involved in operations. The second move was to go to a country in Asia to manage a problem subsidiary. I got to be a mini-CEO—at the age of 35—and it was an opportunity to show that I could make a difference. After those two assignments, the company made me head of U.S. operations, which would not have happened had I not gotten the broader experience and made the most of my opportunities.



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Michael's focused on the wrong things. Instead of defining healthy competition as bad and avoiding a colleague like Danielle – who has reached out to him more than once – he needs to, first, think about what he really wants to do with his career and his life and, second, gain a greater appreciation for the social alliances that make an organization run. You can call those aspects of organizational life “politics,” but they aren't necessarily nasty and can be quite productive.

Does Michael really want Lucien's job – is advancement in that direction really that important right now – or is his frenzied desire for it just an automatic response to a sudden opening? Does Michael really want to manage outside of his sales and marketing expertise and become a general manager, a position in which networking and relationship building are even more essential than they are in his current position? There's no shame in deciding not to seek a promotion, even if it seems like the next logical move.

In making this calculation, Michael has to consider the needs of his family. He and Karen should define and discuss their individual and collective needs and aspirations. If Michael continues up the ladder at Lafleur, he will inevitably have to travel a lot. Is that what he wants, given that he has young children? The couple should also investigate what, if anything, Karen could do in China to further her learning and career connections.

Michael isn't the first manager to wish that office politics would simply go away. Any large organization will have its politics – many different units and people, each pursuing goals that may be at odds with one another. This process is natural and not necessarily destructive. And the further you advance within an organization, the more political your job becomes. The time horizons needed to judge your individual contributions become longer, and other factors come into play in assessing your performance – intangibles such as trustworthiness, initiative, the talent for coping with ambiguity, and the

ability to look beyond functional interests. People can play tough – as some at Lafleur may be doing – but unless they are lying outright, deliberately trying to make others look bad, or applying illegitimate pressure on people, they aren't being underhanded or acting inappropriately. If behavior gets vicious, use the sunshine law: Get as much as possible out in the open. Despite the discomfort felt by some at Lafleur, it doesn't seem like the company is at that point.

What's more, any large organization will have a grapevine and unofficial speculation. When a key player is suddenly removed without explanation, in the wake of an acquisition and an announced but unexplained restructuring, anxiety levels soar. Michael and others are interpreting events and behaviors – including Danielle's legitimate ambitions – as ominous and threatening. Danielle and Michael are both looking for ways to get ahead, but while he frets and looks for excuses, she is coming up with new ideas and connecting with people in many different directions. His belief that his numbers should do the talking is not unusual, but it restricts him to a very limited view of how organizations select higher-level managers. Doing a good job is the price of admission for advancement but not a guaranteed pass. Smart managers know that a network of connections – providing support, information, and resources – is critical to their success. Even if Danielle gets the promotion Michael wants, wouldn't it be better to be on good terms with her? He may need her support in the future.

The chance to lead a business in China is a stellar career-development opportunity for Michael and a real test of his abilities. He will have to work without clear guidelines, improvise, negotiate across cultural barriers, and create from scratch rather than carry out others' plans. If he doesn't build the proper connections, he will fail. It is just such crucibles – taking on jobs beyond your proven skills and somehow finding ways to deliver – that forge leaders' abilities and reputations.



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To make this decision, Michael needs more information. For one, he needs to know more about the China job before he can think about his future. What are Lafleur's expectations for growth in China? How much authority and control would he have over personnel, budget, and other operating decisions? If we can assume that Pierre is a straight shooter, I would want to hear more from him about how he thinks going to China would strengthen Michael's ability to compete for a top-level job in this company.

Michael's also making some assumptions about his current position that might not pan out. He believes that since he's been asked to go to China he has no chance at Lucien's job. He should check that out with Pierre before he makes any decisions, especially since he seems to have a relationship with Pierre that would allow him some degree of candor.

He's also making some assumptions about Danielle's motives. We don't know that she has the inside track on Lucien's job, and neither does Michael. We don't know why she's asked to meet with Michael. Based on feedback from a colleague, he's decided her intentions are not good, and he's gone so far as to validate that with his wife. He needs to give Danielle the benefit of the doubt and learn more about what makes her tick.

All that said, if Michael wants to get ahead at Lafleur, he needs to go to China. To be a successful global executive, you have to have lived somewhere other than your homeland. We don't know the extent of Danielle's experience, but we know she's done some managing in at least two cultures, which may work to her advantage. That's not playing politics; such experience is what it takes to be effective in a global company. China will pose some unique challenges for Michael because the cultural differences are so great. But this is a region that promises significant growth opportunities in nearly every industry, so he's in an enviable position.

I've worked with people in Michael's position, and I've seen people struggle with this very decision. In one case, my client was competing for a COO job. One contender had global experience, having lived and managed

abroad. My client held a more strategic position within the local organization but hadn't worked in other countries. When he didn't get the coveted job at headquarters, he went overseas. He didn't end up in the general management job he was shooting for, but he got impressive experience nonetheless, which led to a great position as an executive vice president for production and quality control, a first-rate job in its own right. Perhaps even more important, he rounded out his résumé so he will be more attractive to potential employers. It was a strategic career move in the long run. Now he has more options than he ever had in the past, and, in today's economy, such options matter more than any current position.

Finally, it's important to note that the dynamic that Michael considers "politics" is merely a normal state of affairs and not necessarily an unhealthy aspect of organizational life. He seems reluctant to talk to people directly, and he's making decisions based on hearsay rather than fact. I would recommend that he have a straight-up conversation with Danielle, since he's not giving her the benefit of the doubt. Every organization has its political aspects, and if Michael wants to get ahead, he has to learn how to

The dynamic that Michael considers "politics" is merely a normal state of affairs and not necessarily an unhealthy aspect of organizational life.

participate in that world and how to pursue his own agenda in an intelligent way.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter whether Michael thinks his agenda is political or not. The hard lesson for him—as it is for all of us—is that performance alone is not enough. Performance is essential, but it is never a ticket to the top job. ▢

Reprint R0501A

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