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The RACK-TLP loss detection algorithm for TCP
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Abstract

This document presents the RACK-TLP loss detection algorithm for TCP. RACK-TLP uses per-segment transmit timestamps and selective acknowledgements (SACK) [[RFC2018](#)] and has two parts: RACK ("Recent ACKnowledgment") starts fast recovery quickly using time-based inferences derived from ACK feedback. TLP ("Tail Loss Probe") leverages RACK and sends a probe packet to trigger ACK feedback to avoid retransmission timeout (RTO) events. Compared to the widely used DUPACK threshold approach, RACK-TLP detects losses more efficiently when there are application-limited flights of data, lost retransmissions, or data packet reordering events. It is intended to be an alternative to the DUPACK threshold approach in [[RFC5681](#)][RFC6675].

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1. Terminology

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in [BCP 14](#) [[RFC2119](#)] [[RFC8174](#)] when, and only when, they appear in all capitals, as shown here. In this document, these words will appear with that interpretation only when in UPPER CASE. Lower case uses of these words are not to be interpreted as carrying [[RFC2119](#)] significance.

2. Introduction

This document presents RACK-TLP, a TCP loss detection algorithm that improves upon the widely implemented DUPACK counting approach in [[RFC5681](#)][[RFC6675](#)], and that is RECOMMENDED to be used as an alternative to that earlier approach. RACK-TLP has two parts: RACK ("Recent ACKnowledgment") detects losses quickly using time-based inferences derived from ACK feedback. TLP ("Tail Loss Probe") triggers ACK feedback by quickly sending a probe segment, to avoid retransmission timeout (RTO) events.

2.1. Background

In traditional TCP loss recovery algorithms [[RFC5681](#)][[RFC6675](#)], a sender starts fast recovery when the number of DUPACKs received exceeds a threshold (DupThresh) that defaults to 3 (this approach is referred to as DUPACK-counting in the rest of the document). The sender also halves the congestion window during the recovery. The rationale behind the partial window reduction is that congestion does not seem severe since ACK clocking is still maintained. The time elapsed in fast recovery can be just one round-trip, e.g. if the sender uses SACK-based recovery [[RFC6675](#)] and the number of lost segments is small.

If fast recovery is not triggered, or triggers but fails to repair all the losses, then the sender resorts to RTO recovery. The RTO timer interval is conservatively the smoothed RTT (SRTT) plus four

times the RTT variation, and is lower bounded to 1 second [[RFC6298](#)]. Upon RTO timer expiration, the sender retransmits the first unacknowledged segment and resets the congestion window to the LOSS WINDOW value (by default 1 full-size segment [[RFC5681](#)]). The rationale behind the congestion window reset is that an entire flight of data was lost, and the ACK clock was lost, so this deserves a cautious response. The sender then retransmits the rest of the data following the slow start algorithm [[RFC5681](#)]. The time elapsed in RTO recovery is one RTO interval plus the number of round-trips needed to repair all the losses.

[2.2.](#) Motivation

Fast Recovery is the preferred form of loss recovery because it can potentially recover all losses in the time scale of a single round trip, with only a fractional congestion window reduction. RTO recovery and congestion window reset should ideally be the last resort, only used when the entire flight is lost. However, in addition to losing an entire flight of data, the following situations can unnecessarily resort to RTO recovery with traditional TCP loss recovery algorithms [[RFC5681](#)][[RFC6675](#)]:

1. Packet drops for short flows or at the end of an application data flight. When the sender is limited by the application (e.g. structured request/response traffic), segments lost at the end of the application data transfer often can only be recovered by RTO. Consider an example of losing only the last segment in a flight of 100 segments. Lacking any DUPACK, the sender RTO expires and reduces the congestion window to 1, and raises the congestion window to just 2 after the loss repair is acknowledged. In contrast, any single segment loss occurring between the first and the 97th segment would result in fast recovery, which would only cut the window in half.
1. Lost retransmissions. Heavy congestion or traffic policers can cause retransmissions to be lost. Lost retransmissions cause a resort to RTO recovery, since DUPACK-counting does not detect the loss of the retransmissions. Then the slow start after RTO recovery could cause burst losses again that severely degrades performance [[POLICER16](#)].
2. Packet reordering. Link-layer protocols (e.g., 802.11 block ACK), link bonding, or routers' internal load-balancing (e.g., ECMP) can deliver TCP segments out of order. The degree of such reordering is usually within the order of the path round trip time. If the reordering degree is beyond DupThresh, the DUPACK-counting can cause a spurious fast recovery and unnecessary congestion window reduction. To mitigate the issue, [[RFC4653](#)]

adjusts DupThresh to half of the inflight size to tolerate the higher degree of reordering. However if more than half of the inflight is lost, then the sender has to resort to RTO recovery.

3. RACK-TLP high-level design

RACK-TLP allows senders to recover losses more effectively in all three scenarios described in the previous section. There are two design principles behind RACK-TLP. The first principle is to detect losses via ACK events as much as possible, to repair losses at round-trip time-scales. The second principle is to gently probe the network to solicit additional ACK feedback, to avoid RTO expiration and subsequent congestion window reset. At a high level, the two principles are implemented in RACK and TLP, respectively.

3.1. RACK: time-based loss inferences from ACKs

The rationale behind RACK is that if a segment is delivered out of order, then the segments sent chronologically before that were either lost or reordered. This concept is not fundamentally different from [\[RFC5681\]](#)[\[RFC6675\]](#)[\[FAK\]](#). RACK's key innovation is using per-segment transmission timestamps and widely-deployed SACK [\[RFC2018\]](#) options to conduct time-based inferences, instead of inferring losses by counting ACKs or SACKed sequences. Time-based inferences are more robust than DUPACK-counting approaches because they have no dependence on flight size, and thus are effective for application-limited traffic.

Conceptually, RACK puts a virtual timer for every data segment sent (including retransmissions). Each timer expires dynamically based on the latest RTT measurements plus an additional delay budget to accommodate potential packet reordering (called the reordering window). When a segment's timer expires, RACK marks the corresponding segment lost for retransmission.

In reality, as an algorithm, RACK does not arm a timer for every segment sent because it's not necessary. Instead the sender records the most recent transmission time of every data segment sent, including retransmissions. For each ACK received, the sender calculates the latest RTT measurement (if eligible) and adjusts the expiration time of every segment sent but not yet delivered. If a segment has expired, RACK marks it lost.

Since the time-based logic of RACK applies equally to retransmissions and original transmissions, it can detect lost retransmissions as well. If a segment has been retransmitted but its most recent (re)transmission timestamp has expired, then after a reordering window it's marked lost.

3.2. TLP: sending one segment to probe losses quickly with RACK

RACK infers losses from ACK feedback; however, in some cases ACKs are sparse, particularly when the inflight is small or when the losses are high. In some challenging cases the last few segments in a flight are lost. With [\[RFC5681\]](#) or [\[RFC6675\]](#) the sender's RTT would expire and reset the congestion window, when in reality most of the flight has been delivered.

Consider an example where a sender with a large congestion window transmits 100 new data segments after an application write, and only the last three segments are lost. Without RACK-TLP, the RTT expires, the sender retransmits the first unacknowledged segment, and the congestion window slow-starts from 1. After all the retransmits are acknowledged the congestion window has been increased to 4. The total delivery time for this application transfer is three RTTs plus one RTT, a steep cost given that only a tiny fraction of the flight was lost. If instead the losses had occurred three segments sooner in the flight, then fast recovery would have recovered all losses within one round-trip and would have avoided resetting the congestion window.

Fast Recovery would be preferable in such scenarios; TLP is designed to trigger the feedback RACK needed to enable that. After the last (100th) segment was originally sent, TLP sends the next available (new) segment or retransmits the last (highest-sequenced) segment in two round-trips to probe the network, hence the name "Tail Loss Probe". The successful delivery of the probe would solicit an ACK. RACK uses this ACK to detect that the 98th and 99th segments were lost, trigger fast recovery, and retransmit both successfully. The total recovery time is four RTTs, and the congestion window is only partially reduced instead of being fully reset. If the probe was also lost then the sender would invoke RTT recovery resetting the congestion window.

3.3. RACK-TLP: reordering resilience with a time threshold

3.3.1. Reordering design rationale

Upon receiving an ACK indicating an out-of-order data delivery, a sender cannot tell immediately whether that out-of-order delivery was a result of reordering or loss. It can only distinguish between the two in hindsight if the missing sequence ranges are filled in later without retransmission. Thus a loss detection algorithm needs to budget some wait time -- a reordering window -- to try to disambiguate packet reordering from packet loss.

The reordering window in the DUPACK-counting approach is implicitly defined as the elapsed time to receive acknowledgements for DupThresh-worth of out-of-order deliveries. This approach is effective if the network reordering degree (in sequence distance) is smaller than DupThresh and at least DupThresh segments after the loss are acknowledged. For cases where the reordering degree is larger than the default DupThresh of 3 packets, one alternative is to dynamically adapt DupThresh based on the FlightSize (e.g., the sender adjusts the DUPRESH to half of the FlightSize). However, this does not work well with the following two types of reordering:

1. Application-limited flights where the last non-full-sized segment is delivered first and then the remaining full-sized segments in the flight are delivered in order. This reordering pattern can occur when segments traverse parallel forwarding paths. In such scenarios the degree of reordering in packet distance is one segment less than the flight size.
2. A flight of segments that are delivered partially out of order. One cause for this pattern is wireless link-layer retransmissions with an inadequate reordering buffer at the receiver. In such scenarios, the wireless sender sends the data packets in order initially, but some are lost and then recovered by link-layer retransmissions; the wireless receiver delivers the TCP data packets in the order they are received, due to the inadequate reordering buffer. The random wireless transmission errors in such scenarios cause the reordering degree, expressed in packet distance, to have highly variable values up to the flight size.

In the above two cases the degree of reordering in packet distance is highly variable, making DUPACK-counting approach ineffective including dynamic adaptation variants like [[RFC4653](#)]. Instead the degree of reordering in time difference in such cases is usually within a single round-trip time. This is because the packets either traverse slightly disjoint paths with similar propagation delays or are repaired quickly by the local access technology. Hence, using a time threshold instead of packet threshold strikes a middle ground, allowing a bounded degree of reordering resilience while still allowing fast recovery. This is the rationale behind the RACK-TLP reordering resilience design.

Specifically, RACK-TLP introduces a new dynamic reordering window parameter in time units, and the sender considers a data segment S lost if both conditions are met:

1. Another data segment sent later than S has been delivered

2. S has not been delivered after the estimated round-trip time plus the reordering window

Note that condition (1) implies at least one round-trip of time has elapsed since S has been sent.

3.3.2. Reordering window adaptation

The RACK reordering window adapts to the measured duration of reordering events, within reasonable and specific bounds to disincentivize excessive reordering. More specifically, the sender sets the reordering window as follows:

1. The reordering window SHOULD be set to zero if no reordering has been observed on the connection so far, and either (a) three segments have been delivered out of order since the last recovery or (b) the sender is already in fast or RTO recovery. Otherwise, the reordering window SHOULD start from a small fraction of the round trip time, or zero if no round trip time estimate is available.
2. The RACK reordering window SHOULD adaptively increase (using the algorithm in "Step 4: Update RACK reordering window", below) if the sender receives a Duplicate Selective Acknowledgement (DSACK) option [[RFC2883](#)]. Receiving a DSACK suggests the sender made a spurious retransmission, which may have been due to the reordering window being too small.
3. The RACK reordering window MUST be bounded and this bound SHOULD be SRTT.

Rules 2 and 3 are required to adapt to reordering caused by dynamics such as the prolonged link-layer loss recovery episodes described earlier. Each increase in the reordering window requires a new round trip where the sender receives a DSACK; thus, depending on the extent of reordering, it may take multiple round trips to fully adapt.

For short flows, the low initial reordering window helps recover losses quickly, at the risk of spurious retransmissions. The rationale is that spurious retransmissions for short flows are not expected to produce excessive additional network traffic. For long flows the design tolerates reordering within a round trip. This handles reordering in small time scales (reordering within the round-trip time of the shortest path).

However, the fact that the initial reordering window is low, and the reordering window's adaptive growth is bounded, means that there will

continue to be a cost to reordering that disincentivizes excessive reordering.

3.4. An Example of RACK-TLP in Action: fast recovery

The following example in figure 1 illustrates the RACK-TLP algorithm in action:

Event	TCP DATA SENDER	TCP DATA RECEIVER
1.	Send P0, P1, P2, P3 [P1, P2, P3 dropped by network]	-->
2.		<-- Receive P0, ACK P0
3a.	2RTTs after (2), TLP timer fires	
3b.	TLP: retransmits P3	-->
4.		<-- Receive P3, SACK P3
5a.	Receive SACK for P3	
5b.	RACK: marks P1, P2 lost	
5c.	Retransmit P1, P2 [P1 retransmission dropped by network]	-->
6.		<-- Receive P2, SACK P2 & P3
7a.	RACK: marks P1 retransmission lost	
7b.	Retransmit P1	-->
8.		<-- Receive P1, ACK P3

Figure 1. RACK-TLP protocol example

Figure 1, above, illustrates a sender sending four segments (P1, P2, P3, P4) and losing the last three segments. After two round-trips, TLP sends a loss probe, retransmitting the last segment, P3, to solicit SACK feedback and restore the ACK clock (event 3). The delivery of P3 enables RACK to infer (event 5b) that P1 and P2 were likely lost, because they were sent before P3. The sender then retransmits P1 and P2. Unfortunately, the retransmission of P1 is lost again. However, the delivery of the retransmission of P2 allows RACK to infer that the retransmission of P1 was likely lost (event 7a), and hence P1 should be retransmitted (event 7b).

3.5. An Example of RACK-TLP in Action: RTO

In addition to enhancing fast recovery, RACK improves the accuracy of RTO recovery by reducing spurious retransmissions.

Without RACK, upon RTO timer expiration the sender marks all the unacknowledged segments lost. This approach can lead to spurious retransmissions. For example, consider a simple case where one segment was sent with an RTO of 1 second, and then the application writes more data, causing a second and third segment to be sent right before the RTO of the first segment expires. Suppose only the first segment is lost. Without RACK, upon RTO expiration the sender marks all three segments as lost and retransmits the first segment. When the sender receives the ACK that selectively acknowledges the second segment, the sender spuriously retransmits the third segment.

With RACK, upon RTO timer expiration the only segment automatically marked lost is the first segment (since it was sent an RTO ago); for all the other segments RACK only marks the segment lost if at least one round trip has elapsed since the segment was transmitted. Consider the previous example scenario, this time with RACK. With RACK, when the RTO expires the sender only marks the first segment as lost, and retransmits that segment. The other two very recently sent segments are not marked lost, because they were sent less than one round trip ago and there were no ACKs providing evidence that they were lost. When the sender receives the ACK that selectively acknowledges the second segment, the sender would not retransmit the third segment but rather would send any new segments (if allowed by congestion window and receive window).

In the above example, if the sender were to send a large burst of segments instead of two segments right before RTO, without RACK the sender may spuriously retransmit almost the entire flight [RACK-TCPM97]. Note that the Eifel protocol [RFC3522] cannot prevent this issue because it can only detect spurious RTO episodes. In this example the RTO itself was not spurious.

3.6. Design Summary

To summarize, RACK-TLP aims to adapt to small time-varying degrees of reordering, quickly recover most losses within one to two round trips, and avoid costly RTO recoveries. In the presence of reordering, the adaptation algorithm can impose sometimes-needless delays when it waits to disambiguate loss from reordering, but the penalty for waiting is bounded to one round trip and such delays are confined to flows long enough to have observed reordering.

4. Requirements

The reader is expected to be familiar with the definitions given in the TCP congestion control [RFC5681] and selective acknowledgment [RFC2018][RFC6675] RFCs. RACK-TLP has the following requirements:

1. The connection MUST use selective acknowledgment (SACK) options [RFC2018], and the sender MUST keep SACK scoreboard information on a per-connection basis ("SACK scoreboard" has the same meaning here as in [RFC6675] section 3).
2. For each data segment sent, the sender MUST store its most recent transmission time with a timestamp whose granularity that is finer than 1/4 of the minimum RTT of the connection. At the time of writing, microsecond resolution is suitable for intra-datacenter traffic and millisecond granularity or finer is suitable for the Internet. Note that RACK-TLP can be implemented with TSO (TCP Segmentation Offload) support by having multiple segments in a TSO aggregate share the same timestamp.
3. RACK DSACK-based reordering window adaptation is RECOMMENDED but is not required.
4. TLP requires RACK.

5. Definitions

The reader is expected to be familiar with the variables of SND.UNA, SND.NXT, SEG.ACK, and SEG.SEQ in [RFC793], SMSS, FlightSize in [RFC5681], DupThresh in [RFC6675], RTO and SRTT in [RFC6298]. A RACK-TLP implementation needs to store new per-segment and per-connection state, described below.

5.1. Per-segment variables

These variables indicate the status of the most recent transmission of a data segment:

"Segment.lost" is true if the most recent (re)transmission of the segment has been marked lost and needs to be retransmitted. False otherwise.

"Segment.retransmitted" is true if it was retransmitted in the most recent transmission. False otherwise.

"Segment.xmit_ts" is the time of the last transmission of a data segment, including retransmissions, if any, with a clock granularity specified in the Requirements section.

"Segment.end_seq" is the next sequence number after the last sequence number of the data segment.

5.2. Per-connection variables

"RACK.segment". Among all the segments that have been either selectively or cumulatively acknowledged, RACK.segment is the one that was sent most recently (including retransmissions).

"RACK.xmit_ts" is the latest transmission timestamp of RACK.segment.

"RACK.end_seq" is the Segment.end_seq of RACK.segment.

"RACK.ack_ts" is the time when the full sequence range of RACK.segment was selectively or cumulatively acknowledged.

"RACK.segs_sacked" returns the total number of segments selectively acknowledged in the SACK scoreboard.

"RACK.fack" is the highest selectively or cumulatively acknowledged sequence (i.e. forward acknowledgement).

"RACK.min_RTT" is the estimated minimum round-trip time (RTT) of the connection.

"RACK.rtt" is the RTT of the most recently delivered segment on the connection (either cumulatively acknowledged or selectively acknowledged) that was not marked invalid as a possible spurious retransmission.

"RACK.reordering_seen" indicates whether the sender has detected data segment reordering event(s).

"RACK.reo_wnd" is a reordering window computed in the unit of time used for recording segment transmission times. It is used to defer the moment at which RACK marks a segment lost.

"RACK.dsack" indicates if a DSACK option has been received since the last RACK.reo_wnd change.

"RACK.reo_wnd_mult" is the multiplier applied to adjust RACK.reo_wnd.

"RACK.reo_wnd_persist" is the number of loss recoveries before resetting RACK.reo_wnd.

"RACK.rtt_seq" is the SND.NXT when RACK.rtt is updated.

"TLP.is_retrans": a boolean indicating whether there is an unacknowledged TLP retransmission.

"TLP.end_seq": the value of SND.NXT at the time of sending a TLP retransmission.

"TLP.max_ack_delay": sender's maximum delayed ACK timer budget.

Per-connection timers

"RACK reordering timer": a timer that allows RACK to wait for reordering to resolve, to try to disambiguate reordering from loss, when some out-of-order segments are marked as SACKed.

"TLP PTO": a timer event indicating that an ACK is overdue and the sender should transmit a TLP segment, to solicit SACK or ACK feedback.

These timers augment the existing timers maintained by a sender, including the RTO timer [[RFC6298](#)]. A RACK-TLP sender arms one of these three timers -- RACK reordering timer, TLP PTO timer, or RTO timer -- when it has unacknowledged segments in flight. The implementation can simplify managing all three timers by multiplexing a single timer among them with an additional variable to indicate the event to invoke upon the next timer expiration.

6. RACK Algorithm Details

6.1. Upon transmitting a data segment

Upon transmitting a new segment or retransmitting an old segment, record the time in Segment.xmit_ts and set Segment.lost to FALSE. Upon retransmitting a segment, set Segment.retransmitted to TRUE.

```
RACK_transmit_data(Segment):  
    Segment.xmit_ts = Now()  
    Segment.lost = FALSE
```

```
RACK_retransmit_data(Segment):  
    Segment.retransmitted = TRUE  
    RACK_transmit_data(Segment)
```

6.2. Upon receiving an ACK

Step 1: Update RACK.min_RTT.

Use the RTT measurements obtained via [[RFC6298](#)] or [[RFC7323](#)] to update the estimated minimum RTT in RACK.min_RTT. The sender SHOULD

track a windowed min-filtered estimate of recent RTT measurements that can adapt when migrating to significantly longer paths, rather than a simple global minimum of all RTT measurements.

Step 2: Update state for most recently sent segment that has been delivered

In this step, RACK updates the states that track the most recently sent segment that has been delivered: `RACK.segment`; RACK maintains its latest transmission timestamp in `RACK.xmit_ts` and its highest sequence number in `RACK.end_seq`. These two variables are used, in later steps, to estimate if some segments not yet delivered were likely lost. Given the information provided in an ACK, each segment cumulatively ACKed or SACKed is marked as delivered in the scoreboard. Since an ACK can also acknowledge retransmitted data segments, and retransmissions can be spurious, the sender needs to take care to avoid spurious inferences. For example, if the sender were to use timing information from a spurious retransmission, the `RACK.rtt` could be vastly underestimated.

To avoid spurious inferences, ignore a segment as invalid if any of its sequence range has been retransmitted before and either of two conditions is true:

1. The Timestamp Echo Reply field (TSecr) of the ACK's timestamp option [[RFC7323](#)], if available, indicates the ACK was not acknowledging the last retransmission of the segment.
2. The segment was last retransmitted less than `RACK.min_rtt` ago.

The second check is a heuristic when the TCP Timestamp option is not available, or when the round trip time is less than the TCP Timestamp clock granularity.

Among all the segments newly ACKed or SACKed by this ACK that pass the checks above, update the `RACK.rtt` to be the RTT sample calculated using this ACK. Furthermore, record the most recent `Segment.xmit_ts` in `RACK.xmit_ts` if it is ahead of `RACK.xmit_ts`. If `Segment.xmit_ts` equals `RACK.xmit_ts` (e.g. due to clock granularity limits) then compare `Segment.end_seq` and `RACK.end_seq` to break the tie.

Step 2 may be summarized in pseudocode as:


```
RACK_sent_after(t1, seq1, t2, seq2):
    If t1 > t2:
        Return true
    Else if t1 == t2 AND seq1 > seq2:
        Return true
    Else:
        Return false

RACK_update():
    For each Segment newly acknowledged cumulatively or selectively:
        rtt = Now() - Segment.xmit_ts
        If Segment.retransmitted is TRUE:
            If ACK.ts_option.echo_reply < Segment.xmit_ts:
                Return
            If rtt < RACK.min_rtt:
                Return

        RACK.rtt = rtt
        If RACK_sent_after(Segment.xmit_ts, Segment.end_seq,
                           RACK.xmit_ts, RACK.end_seq):
            RACK.xmit_ts = Segment.xmit_ts
```

Step 3: Detect data segment reordering

To detect reordering, the sender looks for original data segments being delivered out of order. To detect such cases, the sender tracks the highest sequence selectively or cumulatively acknowledged in the RACK.fack variable. The name "fack" stands for the most "Forward ACK" (this term is adopted from [\[FACK\]](#)). If a never-retransmitted segment that's below RACK.fack is (selectively or cumulatively) acknowledged, it has been delivered out of order. The sender sets RACK.reordering_seen to TRUE if such segment is identified.

```
RACK_detect_reordering():
    For each Segment newly acknowledged cumulatively or selectively:
        If Segment.end_seq > RACK.fack:
            RACK.fack = Segment.end_seq
        Else if Segment.end_seq < RACK.fack AND
            Segment.retransmitted is FALSE:
            RACK.reordering_seen = TRUE
```

Step 4: Update RACK reordering window

The RACK reordering window, RACK.reo_wnd, serves as an adaptive allowance for settling time before marking a segment lost. This step documents a detailed algorithm that follows the principles outlined in the ``Reordering window adaptation'' section.

If the sender has not yet observed any reordering based on the previous step, then RACK prioritizes quick loss recovery by using setting `RACK.reo_wnd` to 0 when the number of SACKed segments exceeds `DupThresh`, or during loss recovery.

Aside from those special conditions, RACK starts with a conservative reordering window of $\text{RACK.min_RTT}/4$. This value was chosen because Linux TCP used the same factor in its implementation to delay Early Retransmit [[RFC5827](#)] to reduce spurious loss detections in the presence of reordering, and experience showed this worked reasonably well [DMCG11].

However, the reordering detection in the previous step, Step 3, has a self-reinforcing drawback when the reordering window is too small to cope with the actual reordering. When that happens, RACK could spuriously mark reordered segments lost, causing them to be retransmitted. In turn, the retransmissions can prevent the necessary conditions for Step 3 to detect reordering, since this mechanism requires ACKs or SACKs for only segments that have never been retransmitted. In some cases such scenarios can persist, causing RACK to continue to spuriously mark segments lost without realizing the reordering window is too small.

To avoid the issue above, RACK dynamically adapts to higher degrees of reordering using DSACK options from the receiver. Receiving an ACK with a DSACK option indicates a spurious retransmission, suggesting that `RACK.reo_wnd` may be too small. The `RACK.reo_wnd` increases linearly for every round trip in which the sender receives some DSACK option, so that after N distinct round trips in which a DSACK is received, the `RACK.reo_wnd` becomes $(N+1) * \text{min_RTT} / 4$, with an upper-bound of `SRTT`.

If the reordering is temporary then a large adapted reordering window would unnecessarily delay loss recovery later. Therefore, RACK persists using the inflated `RACK.reo_wnd` for up to 16 loss recoveries, after which it resets `RACK.reo_wnd` to its starting value, $\text{min_RTT} / 4$. The downside of resetting the reordering window is the risk of triggering spurious fast recovery episodes if the reordering remains high. The rationale for this approach is to bound such spurious recoveries to approximately once every 16 recoveries (less than 7%).

To track the linear scaling factor for the adaptive reordering window, RACK uses the variable `RACK.reo_wnd_mult`, which is initialized to 1 and adapts with the following pseudocode, which implements the above algorithm:

RACK_update_reo_wnd():

```

/* DSACK-based reordering window adaptation */
If RACK.dsack_round is not None AND
    SND.UNA >= RACK.dsack_round:
    RACK.dsack_round = None
/* Grow the reordering window per round that sees DSACK.
Reset the window after 16 DSACK-free recoveries */
If RACK.dsack_round is None AND
    any DSACK option is present on latest received ACK:
    RACK.dsack_round = SND.NXT
    RACK.reo_wnd_mult += 1
    RACK.reo_wnd_persist = 16
Else if exiting Fast or RTT recovery:
    RACK.reo_wnd_persist -= 1
    If RACK.reo_wnd_persist <= 0:
        RACK.reo_wnd_mult = 1

If RACK.reordering_seen is FALSE:
    If in Fast or RTT recovery:
        Return 0
    Else if RACK.segs_sacked >= DupThresh:
        Return 0
Return min(RACK.min_RTT / 4 * RACK.reo_wnd_mult, SRTT)

```

Step 5: Detect losses.

For each segment that has not been SACKed, RACK considers that segment lost if another segment that was sent later has been delivered, and the reordering window has passed. RACK considers the reordering window to have passed if the RACK.segment was sent sufficiently after the segment in question, or a sufficient time has elapsed since the RACK.segment was S/ACKed, or some combination of the two. More precisely, RACK marks a segment lost if:

```

RACK.xmit_ts >= Segment.xmit_ts
    AND
(RACK.xmit_ts - Segment.xmit_ts) + (now - RACK.ack_ts) >= RACK.reo_wnd

```

Solving this second condition for "now", the moment at which a segment is marked lost, yields:

$$\text{now} \geq \text{Segment.xmit_ts} + \text{RACK.reo_wnd} + (\text{RACK.ack_ts} - \text{RACK.xmit_ts})$$

Then $(\text{RACK.ack_ts} - \text{RACK.xmit_ts})$ is the round trip time of the most recently (re)transmitted segment that's been delivered. When segments are delivered in order, the most recently (re)transmitted segment that's been delivered is also the most recently delivered,

hence $\text{RACK.rtt} == \text{RACK.ack_ts} - \text{RACK.xmit_ts}$. But if segments were reordered, then the segment delivered most recently was sent before the most recently (re)transmitted segment. Hence $\text{RACK.rtt} > (\text{RACK.ack_ts} - \text{RACK.xmit_ts})$.

Since $\text{RACK.RTT} \geq (\text{RACK.ack_ts} - \text{RACK.xmit_ts})$, the previous equation reduces to saying that the sender can declare a segment lost when:

$$\text{now} \geq \text{Segment.xmit_ts} + \text{RACK.reo_wnd} + \text{RACK.rtt}$$

In turn, that is equivalent to stating that a RACK sender should declare a segment lost when:

$$\text{Segment.xmit_ts} + \text{RACK.rtt} + \text{RACK.reo_wnd} - \text{now} \leq 0$$

Note that if the value on the left hand side is positive, it represents the remaining wait time before the segment is deemed lost. But this risks a timeout (RTO) if no more ACKs come back (e.g., due to losses or application-limited transmissions) to trigger the marking. For timely loss detection, the sender is RECOMMENDED to install a reordering timer. This timer expires at the earliest moment when RACK would conclude that all the unacknowledged segments within the reordering window were lost.

The following pseudocode implements the algorithm above. When an ACK is received or the RACK reordering timer expires, call `RACK_detect_loss_and_arm_timer()`. The algorithm breaks timestamp ties by using the TCP sequence space, since high-speed networks often have multiple segments with identical timestamps.


```
RACK_detect_loss():
    timeout = 0
    RACK.reo_wnd = RACK_update_reo_wnd()
    For each segment, Segment, not acknowledged yet:
        If Segment.lost is TRUE AND Segment.retransmitted is FALSE:
            Continue /* Segment lost but not yet retransmitted */

        If RACK_sent_after(RACK.xmit_ts, RACK.end_seq,
                          Segment.xmit_ts, Segment.end_seq):
            remaining = Segment.xmit_ts + RACK.rtt +
                        RACK.reo_wnd - Now()
            If remaining <= 0:
                Segment.lost = TRUE
            Else:
                timeout = max(remaining, timeout)
    Return timeout

RACK_detect_loss_and_arm_timer():
    timeout = RACK_detect_loss()
    If timeout != 0
        Arm the RACK timer to call
        RACK_detect_loss_and_arm_timer() after timeout
```

As an optimization, an implementation can choose to check only segments that have been sent before `RACK.xmit_ts`. This can be more efficient than scanning the entire SACK scoreboard, especially when there are many segments in flight. The implementation can use a separate doubly-linked list ordered by `Segment.xmit_ts` and inserts a segment at the tail of the list when it is (re)transmitted, and removes a segment from the list when it is delivered or marked lost. In Linux TCP this optimization improved CPU usage by orders of magnitude during some fast recovery episodes on high-speed WAN networks.

6.3. Upon RTO expiration

Upon RTO timer expiration, RACK marks the first outstanding segment as lost (since it was sent an RTO ago); for all the other segments RACK only marks the segment lost if the time elapsed since the segment was transmitted is at least the sum of the recent RTT and the reordering window.

```
RACK_mark_losses_on_RTO():
    For each segment, Segment, not acknowledged yet:
        If SEG.SEQ == SND.UNA OR
            Segment.xmit_ts + RACK.rtt + RACK.reo_wnd - Now() <= 0:
            Segment.lost = TRUE
```


7. TLP Algorithm Details

7.1. Initializing state

Reset `TLP.is_retrans` and `TLP.end_seq` when initiating a connection, fast recovery, or RTO recovery.

```
TLP_init():  
    TLP.end_seq = None  
    TLP.is_retrans = false
```

7.2. Scheduling a loss probe

The sender schedules a loss probe timeout (PTO) to transmit a segment during the normal transmission process. The sender SHOULD start or restart a loss probe PTO timer after transmitting new data (that was not itself a loss probe) or upon receiving an ACK that cumulatively acknowledges new data, unless it is already in fast recovery, RTO recovery, or the sender has segments delivered out-of-order (i.e. `RACK.segs_sacked` is not zero). These conditions are excluded because they are addressed by similar mechanisms, like Limited Transmit [[RFC3042](#)], the RACK reordering timer, and F-RTO [[RFC5682](#)].

The sender calculates the PTO interval by taking into account a number of factors.

First, the default PTO interval is $2 \times \text{SRTT}$. By that time, it is prudent to declare that an ACK is overdue, since under normal circumstances, i.e. no losses, an ACK typically arrives in one SRTT. Choosing PTO to be exactly an SRTT would risk causing spurious probes, given that network and end-host delay variance can cause an ACK to be delayed beyond SRTT. Hence the PTO is conservatively chosen to be the next integral multiple of SRTT.

Second, when there is no SRTT estimate available, the PTO SHOULD be 1 second. This conservative value corresponds to the RTO value when no SRTT is available, per [[RFC6298](#)].

Third, when `FlightSize` is one segment, the sender MAY inflate PTO by `TLP.max_ack_delay` to accommodate a potential delayed acknowledgment and reduce the risk of spurious retransmissions. The actual value of `TLP.max_ack_delay` is implementation-specific.

Finally, if the time at which an RTO would fire (here denoted "`TCP_RTO_expiration()`") is sooner than the computed time for the PTO, then the sender schedules a TLP to be sent at that RTO time.

Summarizing these considerations in pseudocode form, a sender SHOULD use the following logic to select the duration of a PTO:

```
TLP_calc_PTO():
  If SRTT is available:
    PTO = 2 * SRTT
    If FlightSize is one segment:
      PTO += TLP.max_ack_delay
  Else:
    PTO = 1 sec

  If Now() + PTO > TCP_RTO_expiration():
    PTO = TCP_RTO_expiration() - Now()
```

7.3. Sending a loss probe upon PTO expiration

When the PTO timer expires, the sender SHOULD transmit a previously unsent data segment, if the receive window allows, and increment the FlightSize accordingly. Note that FlightSize could be one packet greater than the congestion window temporarily until the next ACK arrives.

If such a segment is not available, then the sender SHOULD retransmit the highest-sequence segment sent so far and set TLP.is_retrans to true. This segment is chosen to deal with the retransmission ambiguity problem in TCP. Suppose a sender sends N segments, and then retransmits the last segment (segment N) as a loss probe, and then the sender receives a SACK for segment N. As long as the sender waits for the RACK reordering window to expire, it doesn't matter if that SACK was for the original transmission of segment N or the TLP retransmission; in either case the arrival of the SACK for segment N provides evidence that the N-1 segments preceding segment N were likely lost.

In the case where there is only one original outstanding segment of data (N=1), the same logic (trivially) applies: an ACK for a single outstanding segment tells the sender the N-1=0 segments preceding that segment were lost. Furthermore, whether there are N>1 or N=1 outstanding segments, there is a question about whether the original last segment or its TLP retransmission were lost; the sender estimates whether there was such a loss using TLP recovery detection (see below).

The sender MUST follow the RACK transmission procedures in the "'Upon Transmitting a Data Segment'" section (see above) upon sending either a retransmission or new data loss probe. This is critical for detecting losses using the ACK for the loss probe. Furthermore, prior to sending a loss probe, the sender MUST check that there is no

other previous loss probe still in flight. This ensures that at any given time the sender has at most one additional packet in flight beyond the congestion window limit. This invariant is maintained using the state variable `TLP.end_seq`, which indicates the latest unacknowledged TLP loss probe's ending sequence. It is reset when the loss probe has been acknowledged or is deemed lost or irrelevant. After attempting to send a loss probe, regardless of whether a loss probe was sent, the sender **MUST** re-arm the RTO timer, not the PTO timer, if `FlightSize` is not zero. This ensures RTO recovery remains the last resort if TLP fails. The following pseudo code summarizes the operations.

`TLP_send_probe()`:

```
If TLP.end_seq is None:
    TLP.is_retrans = false
    Segment = send buffer segment starting at SND.NXT
    If Segment exists and fits the peer receive window limit:
        /* Transmit the lowest-sequence unsent Segment */
        Transmit Segment
        RACK_transmit_data(Segment)
        TLP.end_seq = SND.NXT
        Increase FlightSize by Segment length
    Else:
        /* Retransmit the highest-sequence Segment sent */
        Segment = send buffer segment ending at SND.NXT
        Transmit Segment
        RACK_retransmit_data(Segment)
        TLP.end_seq = SND.NXT
```

7.4. Detecting losses by the ACK of the loss probe

When there is packet loss in a flight ending with a loss probe, the feedback solicited by a loss probe will reveal one of two scenarios, depending on the pattern of losses.

7.4.1. General case: detecting packet losses using RACK

If the loss probe and the ACK that acknowledges the probe are delivered successfully, RACK-TLP uses this ACK -- just as it would with any other ACK -- to detect if any segments sent prior to the probe were dropped. RACK would typically infer that any unacknowledged data segments sent before the loss probe were lost, since they were sent sufficiently far in the past (at least one PTO has elapsed, plus one round-trip for the loss probe to be ACKed). More specifically, `RACK_detect_loss()` (step 5) would mark those earlier segments as lost. Then the sender would trigger a fast recovery to recover those losses.

7.4.2. Special case: detecting a single loss repaired by the loss probe

If the TLP retransmission repairs all the lost in-flight sequence ranges (i.e. only the last segment in the flight was lost), the ACK for the loss probe appears to be a regular cumulative ACK, which would not normally trigger the congestion control response to this packet loss event. The following TLP recovery detection mechanism examines ACKs to detect this special case to make congestion control respond properly [[RFC5681](#)].

After a TLP retransmission, the sender checks for this special case of a single loss that is recovered by the loss probe itself. To accomplish this, the sender checks for a duplicate ACK or DSACK indicating that both the original segment and TLP retransmission arrived at the receiver, meaning there was no loss. If the TLP sender does not receive such an indication, then it MUST assume that either the original data segment, the TLP retransmission, or a corresponding ACK were lost, for congestion control purposes.

If the TLP retransmission is spurious, a receiver that uses DSACK would return an ACK that covers TLP.end_seq with a DSACK option (Case 1). If the receiver does not support DSACK, it would return a DUPACK without any SACK option (Case 2). If the sender receives an ACK matching either case, then the sender estimates that the receiver received both the original data segment and the TLP probe retransmission, and so the sender considers the TLP episode to be done, and records that fact by setting TLP.end_seq to None.

Upon receiving an ACK that covers some sequence number after TLP.end_seq, the sender should have received any ACKs for the original segment and TLP probe retransmission segment. At that time, if the TLP.end_seq is still set, and thus indicates that the TLP probe retransmission remains unacknowledged, then the sender should presume that at least one of its data segments was lost. The sender then SHOULD invoke a congestion control response equivalent to a fast recovery.

More precisely, on each ACK the sender executes the following:


```
TLP_process_ack(ACK):
  If TLP.end_seq is not None AND ACK.seq >= TLP.end_seq:
    If not TLP.is_retrans:
      TLP.end_seq = None      /* TLP of new data delivered */
    Else if ACK has a DSACK option matching TLP.end_seq:
      TLP.end_seq = None      /* Case 1, above */
    Else If SEG.ACK > TLP.end_seq:
      TLP.end_seq = None      /* Repaired the single loss */
      (Invoke congestion control to react to
       the loss event the probe has repaired)
    Else If ACK is a DUPACK without any SACK option:
      TLP.end_seq = None      /* Case 2, above */
```

8. Managing RACK-TLP timers

The RACK reordering, the TLP PTO timer, the RTO and Zero window probe (ZWP) timer [[RFC793](#)] are mutually exclusive and used in different scenarios. When arming a RACK reordering timer or TLP PTO timer, the sender SHOULD cancel any other pending timer(s). An implementation is to have one timer with an additional state variable indicating the type of the timer.

9. Discussion

9.1. Advantages and disadvantages

The biggest advantage of RACK-TLP is that every data segment, whether it is an original data transmission or a retransmission, can be used to detect losses of the segments sent chronologically prior to it. This enables RACK-TLP to use fast recovery in cases with application-limited flights of data, lost retransmissions, or data segment reordering events. Consider the following examples:

1. Packet drops at the end of an application data flight: Consider a sender that transmits an application-limited flight of three data segments (P1, P2, P3), and P1 and P3 are lost. Suppose the transmission of each segment is at least RACK.reo_wnd after the transmission of the previous segment. RACK will mark P1 as lost when the SACK of P2 is received, and this will trigger the retransmission of P1 as R1. When R1 is cumulatively acknowledged, RACK will mark P3 as lost and the sender will retransmit P3 as R3. This example illustrates how RACK is able to repair certain drops at the tail of a transaction without an RTO recovery. Notice that neither the conventional duplicate ACK threshold [[RFC5681](#)], nor [[RFC6675](#)], nor the Forward Acknowledgment [[FACK](#)] algorithm can detect such losses, because of the required segment or sequence count.

2. Lost retransmission: Consider a flight of three data segments (P1, P2, P3) that are sent; P1 and P2 are dropped. Suppose the transmission of each segment is at least `RACK.reo_wnd` after the transmission of the previous segment. When P3 is SACKed, RACK will mark P1 and P2 lost and they will be retransmitted as R1 and R2. Suppose R1 is lost again but R2 is SACKed; RACK will mark R1 lost and trigger retransmission again. Again, neither the conventional three duplicate ACK threshold approach, nor [\[RFC6675\]](#), nor the Forward Acknowledgment [\[FACK\]](#) algorithm can detect such losses. And such a lost retransmission can happen when TCP is being rate-limited, particularly by token bucket policers with large bucket depth and low rate limit; in such cases retransmissions are often lost repeatedly because standard congestion control requires multiple round trips to reduce the rate below the policed rate.
3. Packet reordering: Consider a simple reordering event where a flight of segments are sent as (P1, P2, P3). P1 and P2 carry a full payload of MSS octets, but P3 has only a 1-octet payload. Suppose the sender has detected reordering previously and thus `RACK.reo_wnd` is `min_RTT/4`. Now P3 is reordered and delivered first, before P1 and P2. As long as P1 and P2 are delivered within `min_RTT/4`, RACK will not consider P1 and P2 lost. But if P1 and P2 are delivered outside the reordering window, then RACK will still spuriously mark P1 and P2 lost.

The examples above show that RACK-TLP is particularly useful when the sender is limited by the application, which can happen with interactive or request/response traffic. Similarly, RACK still works when the sender is limited by the receive window, which can happen with applications that use the receive window to throttle the sender.

RACK-TLP works more efficiently with TCP Segmentation Offload (TSO) compared to DUPACK-counting. RACK always marks the entire TSO aggregate lost because the segments in the same TSO aggregate have the same transmission timestamp. By contrast, the algorithms based on sequence counting (e.g., [\[RFC6675\]](#)[\[RFC5681\]](#)) may mark only a subset of segments in the TSO aggregate lost, forcing the stack to perform expensive fragmentation of the TSO aggregate, or to selectively tag individual segments lost in the scoreboard.

The main drawback of RACK-TLP is the additional states required compared to DUPACK-counting. RACK requires the sender to record the transmission time of each segment sent at a clock granularity that is finer than 1/4 of the minimum RTT of the connection. TCP implementations that record this already for RTT estimation do not require any new per-packet state. But implementations that are not yet recording segment transmission times will need to add per-packet

internal state (expected to be either 4 or 8 octets per segment or TSO aggregate) to track transmission times. In contrast, [\[RFC6675\]](#) loss detection approach does not require any per-packet state beyond the SACK scoreboard; this is particularly useful on ultra-low RTT networks where the RTT may be less than the sender TCP clock granularity (e.g. inside data-centers). Another disadvantage is the reordering timer may expire prematurely (like any other retransmission timer) to cause higher spurious retransmission especially if DSACK is not supported.

9.2. Relationships with other loss recovery algorithms

The primary motivation of RACK-TLP is to provide a general alternative to some of the standard loss recovery algorithms [\[RFC5681\]](#)[\[RFC6675\]](#)[\[RFC5827\]](#)[\[RFC4653\]](#). [\[RFC5827\]](#)[\[RFC4653\]](#) dynamically adjusts the duplicate ACK threshold based on the current or previous flight sizes. RACK-TLP takes a different approach by using a time-based reordering window. RACK-TLP can be seen as an extended Early Retransmit [\[RFC5827\]](#) without a FlightSize limit but with an additional reordering window. [\[FACK\]](#) considers an original segment to be lost when its sequence range is sufficiently far below the highest SACKed sequence. In some sense RACK-TLP can be seen as a generalized form of FACK that operates in time space instead of sequence space, enabling it to better handle reordering, application-limited traffic, and lost retransmissions.

RACK-TLP is compatible with the standard RTO [\[RFC6298\]](#), RTO-restart [\[RFC7765\]](#), F-RTO [\[RFC5682\]](#) and Eifel algorithms [\[RFC3522\]](#). This is because RACK-TLP only detects loss by using ACK events. It neither changes the RTO timer calculation nor detects spurious RTO.

9.3. Interaction with congestion control

RACK-TLP intentionally decouples loss detection from congestion control. RACK-TLP only detects losses; it does not modify the congestion control algorithm [\[RFC5681\]](#)[\[RFC6937\]](#). A segment marked lost by RACK-TLP MUST NOT be retransmitted until congestion control deems this appropriate.

The only exception -- the only way in which RACK-TLP modulates the congestion control algorithm -- is that one outstanding loss probe can be sent even if the congestion window is fully used. However, this temporary over-commit is accounted for and credited in the in-flight data tracked for congestion control, so that congestion control will erase the over-commit upon the next ACK.

If packet losses happen after the reordering window has been increased by DSACK, RACK-TLP may take longer to detect losses than

the pure DUPACK-counting approach. In this case TCP may continue to increase the congestion window upon receiving ACKs during this time, making the sender more aggressive.

The following simple example compares how RACK-TLP and non-RACK-TLP loss detection interacts with congestion control: suppose a sender has a congestion window (cwnd) of 20 segments on a SACK-enabled connection. It sends 10 data segments and all of them are lost.

Without RACK-TLP, the sender would time out, reset cwnd to 1, and retransmit the first segment. It would take four round trips ($1 + 2 + 4 + 3 = 10$) to retransmit all the 10 lost segments using slow start. The recovery latency would be $RTO + 4*RTT$, with an ending cwnd of 4 segments due to congestion window validation.

With RACK-TLP, a sender would send the TLP after $2*RTT$ and get a DUPACK, enabling RACK to detect the losses and trigger fast recovery. If the sender implements Proportional Rate Reduction [[RFC6937](#)] it would slow start to retransmit the remaining 9 lost segments since the number of segments in flight (0) is lower than the slow start threshold (10). The slow start would again take four round trips ($1 + 2 + 4 + 3 = 10$) to retransmit all the lost segments. The recovery latency would be $2*RTT + 4*RTT$, with an ending cwnd set to the slow start threshold of 10 segments.

The difference in recovery latency ($RTO + 4*RTT$ vs $6*RTT$) can be significant if the RTT is much smaller than the minimum RTT (1 second in [[RFC6298](#)]) or if the RTT is large. The former case can happen in local area networks, data-center networks, or content distribution networks with deep deployments. The latter case can happen in developing regions with highly congested and/or high-latency networks.

9.4. TLP recovery detection with delayed ACKs

Delayed or stretched ACKs complicate the detection of repairs done by TLP, since with such ACKs the sender takes longer time to receive fewer ACKs than would normally be expected. To mitigate this complication, before sending a TLP loss probe retransmission, the sender should attempt to wait long enough that the receiver has sent any delayed ACKs that it is withholding. The sender algorithm described above features such a delay, in the form of `TLP.max_ack_delay`. Furthermore, if the receiver supports DSACK then in the case of a delayed ACK the sender's TLP recovery detection mechanism (see above) can use the DSACK information to infer that the original and TLP retransmission both arrived at the receiver.

If there is ACK loss or a delayed ACK without a DSACK, then this algorithm is conservative, because the sender will reduce the congestion window when in fact there was no packet loss. In practice this is acceptable, and potentially even desirable: if there is reverse path congestion then reducing the congestion window can be prudent.

9.5. RACK for other transport protocols

RACK can be implemented in other transport protocols (e.g., [QUIC-LR]). The [[Sprout](#)] loss detection algorithm was also independently designed to use a 10ms reordering window to improve its loss detection.

10. Security Considerations

RACK-TLP algorithm behavior is based on information conveyed in SACK options, so it has security considerations similar to those described in the Security Considerations section of [[RFC6675](#)].

Additionally, RACK-TLP has a lower risk profile than [[RFC6675](#)] because it is not vulnerable to ACK-splitting attacks [[SCWA99](#)]: for an MSS-size segment sent, the receiver or the attacker might send MSS ACKs that SACK or acknowledge one additional byte per ACK. This would not fool RACK. In such a scenario, RACK.xmit_ts would not advance, because all the sequence ranges within the segment were transmitted at the same time, and thus carry the same transmission timestamp. In other words, SACKing only one byte of a segment or SACKing the segment in entirety have the same effect with RACK.

11. IANA Considerations

This document makes no request of IANA.

Note to RFC Editor: this section may be removed on publication as an RFC.

12. Acknowledgments

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