

7-28-1998

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Recommended Citation

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Hartford, Connecticut:
Discrimination, Segregation, and Urban Riots

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History of Hartford
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July 28, 1998

The 1960's were marked by several historical moments. These events included the Vietnam War, protests at Berkeley, hippie movement, and civil rights movement. The civil rights movement took on both non-violent and violent agendas. However, the urban riots of the '60s illustrated the reality of race relations in America and the frustration and reality of what the Blacks in America were faced to endure. After experiencing extreme frustration over constant discrimination and segregation, the riots were their attempt to make their voices heard and initiate change. The frustration of Blacks across the country, including those in Hartford, passed the boiling point during 1967. However, the riots did not diminish after the summer of 1967. Due the lack of response by city officials to initiate substantial change in the North End, the grievances of 1967 continued, and set the climate for riots again in 1969.

The riots of the '60's began early in the decade and the intensity of the riots magnified every year. Only in 1967, after cities nationwide experienced severe riots was there action to examine the causes of these disorders. On July 27, 1967, the worst riots occurred in Detroit and Newark which prompted President Lyndon Johnson to establish the National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorder, informally known as the Kerner Commission. Upon establishing the commission, Johnson stated, "The only genuine, long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack - mounted at every level - upon the conditions that breed despair and violence." Although Johnson stated that the conditions creating violence and despair included

¹Fred R. Harris and Roger W. Wilkins, eds. Quiet Riots: Race and Poverty in the United States, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988) 3.

unemployment, poverty and discrimination, he charged the commission with the mission to answer three questions: what was happening in the cities, why were the riots occurring, and what must be done to stop the **disorder**.²

The committee found that race relations in the United States were deteriorating rather than improving and that America was being racially divided into two societies, white society versus Black society. Yet, the two societies remained extremely unequal. The committee stated, "To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American Community and ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic **values**."³ The report cited the causes for the destruction as being continued segregation and discrimination against African **Americans**.⁴ These injustices were created and perpetuated by white society and its institutions. The committee stated:

What white Americans never fully understood- but what the Negro can never forget- is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.⁵

Although the underlying cause was identified within the commission's report, the committee attempted to explain who participated in the riots and why the disorders occurred in **specific** cities at specific times,

According to the Kerner report, those participating in the riots were African American

²Harris and Wilkins, 3-12.

³Report of the National Advisor-v Commission on Civil Disorder, New York Times ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, Inc., 1968) 1.

⁴Ibid 1.

⁵Ibid 2

teenagers who had some education, but had not completed high school. These individuals were proud of their race and eager to participate in American society. Yet, these teenagers could not find their place within American society. Society continued to seal their fate as they were cast into low paying, menial jobs. As a result, these teenagers were very distrustful of the political system.

Opposing the rioters, community members acted as counter-rioters during the disorders as they attempted to persuade their neighbors to stop rioting. These individuals often were educated and receiving higher salaries than others in the community.⁶ The severe riots of 1967 could have been prevented, as warnings were issued in response to disturbances occurring in 1963, 1964, 1965, and 1966. Rather than addressing the issue at that time, the problems of American cities were ignored, and the disorders magnified in intensity and severity each year.

The disturbances of the 1960's began in 1963 and over the next three years a pattern developed. African Americans would strike out against symbols of American society such as property and authority figures. The outbursts of disturbances would take place at night and were typically initiated by a specific incident. These disturbances would rage at night but would become subdued during the day. In the evening, the disturbances would begin with rock or bottle throwing and intensify to looting, arson, and, eventually, snipers. The Kerner commission ranked African American grievances with the level of emotion each grievance evoked. The highest level of intensity over the most common grievances included underemployment/unemployment, police brutality, and substandard housing conditions. The second level of intensity included grievances of poor education system for Blacks, substandard recreation facilities, and ineffective political structures and grievance system. The lowest intensity level included discrimination issues,

⁶Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, 1.

inadequate welfare programs, discriminatory attitudes by whites and the justice system, inept federal programs and municipalsystems.⁷

The commission reported that housing conditions for city minorities were far from equal to the conditions of white residents. The housing for Blacks was substandard and crowded, yet the rents were more expensive than in other parts of cities. The commission also found high levels of unemployment and unskilled laborers in the Black communities because African Americans were less educated due to the poor educational system provided for the Black residents. These conditions were created by segregation and discrimination by the white society which cast them into the ghettos and provided few opportunities for their escape from the desolate condition.

Although discriminatory attitudes against Blacks inhibited them from upward mobilization, this did not suppress Blacks' aspirations to reach greater heights. The Kemer commission reported that Black Americans held the same aspirations as white Americans; they wanted "to share in both the material resources of our system and its intangible benefits dignity, respect, and acceptance."^{*} However, segregation and discrimination blocked Black Americans from these opportunities. Blacks were segregated into specific areas of the cities where conditions were poor and families crowded together due to the high rents charged. Additionally, Blacks were often prohibited from obtaining skilled jobs, therefore, they could only find jobs with very low wages. A sense of powerlessness filled the Black residents of the urban ghettos. Despite this sense of powerlessness, the ghetto youths' aspirations for better lives continued to grow. This

⁷Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, 7-8.

^{*}Ibid 204.

aspiration clashed with the ghetto mentality- that there was no escape from the ghetto. The commission reported that “in teeming racial ghettos, segregation and poverty have intersected to destroy opportunity and hope to enforce failure.”⁹ A new wave of optimism filled Black Americans as advances were made in the civil rights movement. However, the promise of a better life with new freedoms did not materialize immediately thus prolonging the poverty and discrimination suffered by African Americans.

The Sixties were a time of change and rebellion amongst all youth. White and Black youth alike were alienated from American society. Disorder was occurring all over the nation as the youth of America rebelled. Violence accompanied these disorders. The Black power movement and the Black Panthers adopted violent agendas. The encouragement of violence in American society during the Sixties created a mentality that violence was necessary to “move the system.”¹⁰

The commission reported that there was no way of concluding why riots occurred in specific cities at specific times, and frustration passed the boiling point in Hartford in July 1967. Hartford experienced severe riots in 1967 and in 1969. However, the severity of the riots in 1969 far outweighed those occurring in 1967. The Black community of Hartford had been isolated to the North End which was the urban ghetto of the city. Hartford had experienced the same trends which were occurring in all major cities. The African American population in Hartford, like other Northern and Midwestern cities, increased rapidly during the Great Migration as African American moved out of the South due to rumors of labor in Northern cities. As these cities were

⁹Report of the National Advisor-v Commission on Civil Disorder, 204.

¹⁰Ibid 205.

filled with African Americans, the white population moved out to the suburbs. The rapid change of population, in the Upper Albany area of Hartford, from white residents to Blacks occurred dramatically in 1965 when the Black population surged from 25% to 75% while white population decreased from 94% to 25%.¹¹ Blacks migrating to Hartford were segregated in the North End where they were subjected to overcrowded, substandard housing conditions. Frustration over conditions in the North End had accumulated to a point where the residents rebelled and acted out against the police. **Confrontations** between North End residents, or rather, a few youth within the North End, and police broke out because of the on-going police brutality.

On Thursday, July 14, 1967, a group of young men from the North End spoke to city officials to determine the causes of the disorders occurring in the ghetto throughout July. The young men, in their late teens and early twenties reported to officials the causes of the disorders and suggested possible solutions in slowing down the disturbances. One of the complaints from the Blacks concerned unemployment in the North End businesses, which were owned and run by white Americans. Not only did the white owners not employ Blacks, but they raised the prices of merchandise in these stores. Additionally, Black youth were blocked from getting into apprentice programs within the labor unions.¹² The mayor reassured the youths that he would work with Governor Dempsey and the state labor commissioner to address this problem. William Brown, the executive director of the Greater Hartford Urban League, suggested that the Human Relations Citizens Advisory group should meet with the owners of businesses in the North End to discuss

¹¹"A Socio-Demographic Overview of the Black Experience in the Hartford Area," Hartford Collection, 2.

¹²James O'Hara, "Gripes Listed By Residents," The Hartford Courant, 14 July, 1967: 7.

employment of Blacks and racist attitudes by white owners.¹³ Additionally, the city agreed to keep recreational facilities open at night to keep youth off the streets. It was also suggested that a committee of youth be organized in the North End to notify City Hall of any abuse by police or white employers. Both sides acknowledged a severe communication gap between the services offered by the city to the ghetto residents and those who needed the help.¹⁴ The negotiations between the ghetto youths and city officials were positive and cast a ray of optimism over all those involved, however, the problems were not solved.

Flare up in the North End occurred again in September 1967. The Hartford Courant cited these riots as being the most severe since the riots in July. The riots lasted for two nights and police resorted to using tear gas to disperse crowds of teenagers in the streets. Although the tear gas would disperse the crowds, the teens would regroup on a different street. Street hopping became a pattern of rioting in Hartford. Although Mayor Kinsella had originally characterized the youth counter-rioters in July as “dedicated, nice young men,” those youth Kinsella encountered on the streets in the aftermath of the September riots were reclassified as “hoodlums” and Kinsella stated, “I don’t know why those kids are doing it.”¹⁵ Evidentially, goals to improve ghetto conditions in July had not been carried out or at least the changes were not being felt by the residents of the North End.

While the Mayor claimed bewilderment over the violence, Police Chief Kerrigan stated

¹³O’Hara, 7.

¹⁴Ibid 7.

¹⁵“Teen-Agers Toss Rocks, Loot Stores: Guard Officials Placed on Alert,” Hartford Courant, 20 Sept. 1967: 6.

that these disorders would not be tolerated. Kerrigan stated, "We will continue to break up any gangs that are formed and we will move rapidly to restore law and order."¹⁶ Mayor Kinsella appealed to families within the North End to keep their children off the streets and agreed to keep recreation facilities open until 10 p.m. to keep teens occupied and off the streets. The members of the Black Caucus, a new group of counter-rioters, came forward to state that "violence was inevitable and grew out of white harassment and frustration suffered over the years by minority groups,"¹⁷ Despite the strong warning issued by Police Chief Kerrigan, a third night of violence occurred in Hartford. Approximately 40 African Americans went into the police station during this third night and demanded to see Mayor Kinsella. Kinsella met with the group and listened to their complaints, which still included police brutality against African Americans. Kinsella suggested that the group list these grievances at an opening meeting at City Hall the following evening.

The Black Caucus members attended the meeting the following night and their claims of police brutality were backed up by white witnesses. The Black Caucus asked Mayor Kinsella if those arrested during the earlier disturbances could be freed from prison. Many believed that the continuation of violence in the North End was due to these arrests. In their own power, the Black Caucus established the Black Citizens Review Board to investigate all police brutality

¹⁶"Police Set, Reinforce Strength: Crews Remove Debris of Riots," The Hartford Courant, 21 Sept. 1967: 1.

¹⁷"Not Guilty, Says Black Caucus - Violence was Already There," The Hartford Courant, 21 Sept. 1967: 1.

complaints.¹⁸ Members of the Black Caucus continued to push for change in Hartford as they appealed to city officials for funds to establish a self-help program, similar to one in New Haven. The Black Caucus reported that they needed to take control of these programs since the Community Renewal Teams failed to provide services to North End residents. The new self-help program would not only bring the services directly to those in need, but also provide employment for North End residents. The Black Caucus believed that North End residents were afraid to approach social workers, but that a better connection could be made with workers of the same race and backgrounds.¹⁹ Unfortunately, city officials stated that they would only consider the proposal.

The Black Caucus served not only as a negotiation team for North End residents, but also led peaceful demonstrations as an alternative to the violence occurring in the North End. Although the first few marches were stopped by police, the Black Caucus made successful marches downtown and to the South end. A peaceful pray-in was conducted at Constitution Plaza. A triumphant march to the South End symbolized Hartford's Black population's **refusal** to remain segregated in the North End of the city. Although the disturbances of 1967 cooled off as the summer passed, Hartford's turbulence was not over. Police brutality persisted and served as the impetus for the riots in 1969,

Riots ravaged Hartford in 1969, however, this time the Puerto Ricans took center stage. These riots climaxed in June and again in September of 1969. Similar to the 1967 riots, a single

¹⁸"**Black** Caucus Has Own Police Review Board," The Hartford Courant, 24 Sept. 1967: 4B.

¹⁹Jean Tucker, "'Caucus' Asks Funds 'To Reach People,'" The Hartford Courant 23 Sept. 1967: 1.

incident sparked the raging violence. Yet, the single incident was reinforced by the feelings of resentment against Hartford police and a white **Hell's-Angles** group, the Con, had been boiling before the incident occurred. The riots began on June 5 and lasted until June 7. In an attempt to restore peace, Mayor Uccello issued a city wide curfew and imposed a state of emergency on Friday, June 6.²⁰ The announcement of the **curfew** was broadcast over television and radio in multiple languages: Spanish, French, Polish, Italian, and English.*' Additionally, sound trucks made the curfew announcement in neighborhoods in Spanish and English. The community and national leaders endorsed the curfew as they drafted and circulated a flyer urging other community residents to abide by the curfew. This flyer was signed by NAACP, the Tenant Relations Division of the Hartford Housing Authority, Neighborhood Service Centers, Catholic Interracial Council, Community Renewal Team, High Noon, Black Democratic Caucus, and the Blue Hills Civic Association.**

The mood of violence was dissipating **from** the United States as the Sixties drew to a close. This attitude was reflected by Black Panthers who attempted to quell the Hartford disorder and **African** American and Puerto Rican leaders who supported Councilman Allyn Martin who condemned North End violence. A group of North End leaders issued a statement which stated, "It is unanimous and unequivocal consensus of this body of citizens that the chaos in our city streets is unconscionable and should not and will not be tolerated by the law-abiding citizens of

²⁰"**Curfew** Stops Violence: Decree Continues Tonight," The Hartford Courant 7 June 1969: 1.

²¹Ibid 9.

²²Ibid 9.

at gang members.²⁶ While many arrests were made regarding the Sunday rioting, the first arrested were Puerto Ricans.²⁷ The Puerto Rican community swelled with anger as they were the group which had been attacked, yet also arrested. Bottles were thrown and windows smashed as rioting continued for four days. Police retaliated by tear-gassing the crowds. Maria Sanchez, the only Puerto Rican member of the Democratic Town Committee, finally suggested a meeting between city officials and the Puerto Rican community. However, Elisha Freedman, the city manager, responded, "This seems to be a problem that can be resolved through existing neighborhood organization."²⁸ Freedman's statement indicates the lack of commitment by city officials to strengthen the relationship with ethnic communities and help those in impoverished areas. These remarks also exemplified the poor race relations within Hartford and, unfortunately, the diminishing hope of improving these relations.

A meeting was finally granted and the Puerto Ricans were able to voice their grievances. One man complained he had been arrested while encouraging other community members to stop throwing rocks at police car. Police Chief Thomas Vaugh replied that he would hire more Puerto Rican policemen and provide interpreters at headquarters.²⁹ Yet, in the midst of improvement, Puerto Rican crowds were tear-gassed and dogs were unleashed upon small groups. Two of the four Spanish speaking officers, Jose Garay and Jose Rivera, abhorred brutality being inflicted

²⁶Cruz, Jose E. "A Decade of Change: Puerto Rican Politics in Hartford, Connecticut, 1969-1979," Journal of American Ethnic History, 16.3 (1997): 47.

"Ibid 47.

²⁸Cruz, 48.

²⁹Ibid 48.

the Hartford community."²³ Most businesses endorsed the curfew and one businessman stated, "we will gain a lot more than we will lose."²⁴ Anyone found violating the curfew would be arrested. However, Bergstrom, the general assistant to the city manager, stated that the goal of the curfew was to clear the streets to restore order, not to make arrests. He noted, "We're using an iron fist in a velvet glove."²⁵

The curfew continued for a second night on Saturday, June 7. During this second night, many more arrests were made for curfew violation. In spite of numerous arrests, the city manager declared that the curfew was a success, however, the curfew would be cancelled for the third night. Most witnesses noticed that residents were reluctant to obey the curfew on the second evening, hence the increased arrests. Although the curfew was over, the state of emergency remained in effect on Sunday. While scattered incidents were reported, the worst of the June riots seemed to be over. However, violent flare-ups would return before the summer was over..

The disturbances returned in August 1969. On Sunday, August 10, riots were sparked by rumors that the Comancheros, a Hell's-Angels group, had assaulted an elderly Puerto Rican on the South Green. Hostility already existed between Puerto Ricans and the Comancheros as the motorcycle gang had been bullying the Puerto Ricans who, in response, would throw bricks back

²³"Curfew Stops Violence: North End Violence Condemned," The Hartford Courant 7 June 1969: 1.

²⁴"Firebomb Incidents Reported," The Hartford Courant, 8 June 1969: 1.

²⁵"Curfew Stops Violence: Decree Continues Tonight," The Hartford Courant 7 Jun 1969: 1.

upon the crowds, refused to obey orders to disperse the crowds, and formally filed a complaint against the brutality. On August 19, after fifty-three arrests were made during the previous week, Puerto Ricans gathered in a church to issue complaints of police cruelty. Arthur Johnson, Director of the Human Relations Commission, quickly became aware that many individuals issuing complaints had already filed charges, of which no action had been taken.³⁰

To further anger the Puerto Ricans, it was reported that officers **Rivera** and Garay would face disciplinary hearings for refusing to obey orders. City Manager Freedman announced he would launch a full investigation into the current uprisings. While this placated Puerto Ricans for the time being, no investigation ever took place. The lack of the investigation again illustrates the lack of commitment by city officials to improve the poverty-stricken areas of the city and to improve race relations.

The extent of racism was glossed over as city officials continued to ignore the underlying cause of the disorders which were occurring. Hartford Times reporter Bill Ryan brought racism to the spotlight when he published an article which exposed Hartford's racist attitudes and ignited massive rioting which would last for a full week. A South End resident stated, "They insult women on the street. They ought to go back to hell where they came **from**."³¹ A fireman was also quoted, stating, "They are all pigs. that's all pigs. A bunch of them will be sitting around drinking beer and when one if finished.. .he just throws the bottle anywhere..**They** dump garbage out of their windows. They live like **pigs**."³² These remarks ignited the most severe riots in

³⁰Cruz, 49.

³¹Ibid 50.

³²Ibid 50.

Hartford's history, but clearly showed that the main battle city officials would need to fight to prevent further riots would be racism.

Massive destruction began by Blacks and Puerto Ricans on Monday, September 1 in the North End and continued until Tuesday evening. The Black population became involved when a 16 year old teen, Dennis Jones, was shot and killed by a West Hartford police officer on August 29.³³ Starting Monday, rioting crowds destroyed a 40 block area in the North End in a day and half. The city issued its second **curfew** effective at 7 p.m. Tuesday, September 2, however, this **curfew** was not as effective as the first in June. The North End was destroyed as fires were set, buildings looted, and shots fired in the North End. Between 8 a.m. on Tuesday and 12:30 a.m. on Wednesday, 50 people had been injured and 50 fires were set. By 8 a.m. on Wednesday, the number of people arrested had climbed to 266.³⁴ By Friday, September 5, arrests had reached 500 and the Hartford jail could no longer handle these numbers.³⁵ The jail in Haddam was used for the **overflow**.³⁶ Many stores were looted several times over the first two days of riots. One liquor store was wiped clean of all alcohol and reports of snipers occurred for the first time. It was not until Monday, September 8 that Mayor Uccello lifted the state of emergency.

African American leaders in Hartford denounced the violence but cautioned city officials to look for solutions to avoid future unrest. One NAACP leader stated:

The violence and lawlessness is due to the reprehensible

³³Cruz, 50.

³⁴Ibid 53.

³⁵Ibid 54.

³⁶"**Disorder** Flare for Second Day," The Hartford Courant, 3 Sept. 1969: 1.

behavior of a small number of blacks and Puerto Rican citizens..
The NAACP deplors and condemns theseactions.³⁷

While it was acknowledged that only a few were responsible, cityofficials generalized all Puerto Ricans as being responsible for the disorders and issued “blanket indictments” against African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Mayor Uccello stereotyped the Puerto Rican population as hoodlums and stated to the press, “This activity was instigated by agitators and carried out by hoodlums.. .who would steal no matter what the socialconditions.”³⁸ Councilman Collin Bennett correctly assessed the situation as he stated:

[the] riot was evidence of ‘poor relationships and lack of communication between the city government and members of the Spanish-speaking community. This segment of our society feels that there is no one to represent their interests in city hall, and this has been partly responsible for the increased tension.. .’³⁹

Despite this insight by Councilman Bennett, other city officials would continue to turn a blind eye to the discrimination occurring within the city. The events of 1969 launched Puerto Ricans into politics. However, communication lines between North End residents and city officials continued to remain weak. Mayor Uccello maintained a hard line regarding the situation and those involved. She stated:

damage is considerably more than in June.. .we are prepared, should it take a turn for the worse, to meet the situation with state police, national guard, or any necessary fore. I do not want to rush terminating the state of emergency. I will not cut the cur-hew until I feel confident that the situation is completely under control.I

³⁷“Violence Condemned by Black Leaders,” The Hartford Courant 3 Sept. 1969: 1.

³⁸Cruz, 54.

³⁹Ibid 54.

want people to know we are not going to stand for this kind of violence.⁴⁰

After a calm had been reached, Puerto Ricans expressed their anger over the racism in Hartford as one remarked, “Americans called us pigs so we started throwing **garbage**.”⁴¹ This statement is very indicative of how little change was made since 1967 and the continuation of troubled race relations occurring in Hartford, and throughout the nation.

Similar to Hartford, nationally, conditions in American cities remained unchanged. The Kerner commission distributed surveys in order to form an opinion about conditions in urban cities since the disorders subsided. The most common reaction was “nothing much **changed**.”⁴² Employment, or lack thereof, remained the same. Disorder continued throughout the summer in most cities. The commission report, “In several cities, the principal official response was to train and equip the police and auxiliary law **enforcement** agencies with more sophisticated **weapons**.”⁴³ However, this solution did not resolve the precipitating cause of the disorders. The Kerner Commission reported:

Virtually every major episode of urban violence in the summer of 1967 was foreshadowed by an accumulation of unresolved grievance by ghetto residents against local authorities.. **Coinciding** with this high dissatisfaction, confidence in the willingness and ability of local government officials to respond to Negro grievances was **low**.⁴⁴

⁴⁰“Disorder Flare For Second Day,” The Hartford Courant 3 Sept. 1969: 22.

⁴¹Ibid 22.

⁴²Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, 15 1.

⁴³Ibid 151.

⁴⁴Ibid 284.

American cities needed to examine the services of the city in relation to the grievances of the ghetto residents, begin to formulate programs which would address the grievances, and improve living conditions.

The Kemer Commission reached the conclusion that the problem of urban America was based in the ghettos, specifically blaming the lack of communication between the residents and city officials. The commission reported:

The racial disorder of last summer in part reflects the failure of all levels of government - federal and state as well as local - to come to grips with the problems of our cities. The ghetto symbolizes the dilemma: a widening gap between human needs and public resources and a growing cynicism regarding the commitment of community institutions and leadership to meet these needs.⁴⁵

Cynicism was alive in Hartford as North End residents continued to face discrimination and Hartford city officials continued to make empty promises.

African Americans tried to install self-help groups in the ghettos after the riots. From a historical perspective, any change has been very slow as ghettos continue to exist. A strain of relations continued to exist between Blacks and whites, especially those in power positions. Police brutality has continued and minorities have been the target of this brutality. Even in the '90s, reports surface of needless beatings of minorities by police. As the commission noted, the cause of the riots in 1967 was the discrimination and segregation which Blacks and other minorities had endured. Substantial progress would only result with changes of attitudes. Unfortunately, the uprisings in 1967 had little effect because the "hoodlums" only reinforced the stereotypes created by whites thus propagating racist attitudes in the United States. Much has

⁴⁵Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, 283

improved, but we are far**from** a truly equal society. As in the 1960's, race relations continue to be strained. The riots allowed minorities in the ghettos to voice their grievances to city officials, yet, the means did not achieve improved conditions.

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