

## POLITICS 1984:

TERENCE P. MORAN\* *That's Entertainment*

**W**ELCOME TO 1984. There is good news and there is bad news. First, the good news as proclaimed in numerous advertisements by United Technologies: Orwell was wrong. And indeed Orwell was wrong, if we assume that Orwell was predicting that the real 1984 would be identical to his fictional 1984, a date chosen by reversing the last two digits of 1948, the year he wrote the book. No, 1984, in America at least, is not a totalitarian world looked over by Big Brother; not a country terrorized by the Thought Police and monitored by twenty-four hour a day, two-way television; not even a society pounded ceaselessly by political propaganda with a populace drugged by cheap socialist gin. That's the good news.

Now, for the bad news. Orwell *was* wrong. But he was wrong for a reason not cited by United Technologies: Orwell was an optimist. He thought that the threats to our freedom of thought and expression would come primarily from open and naked suppression by police state power. What all too few readers of his cautionary tale fail to consider is the profound propaganda of abundant consumer products and endless diversions presented in a communication environment structured by images rather than by propositions.

As George Steiner has written of Orwell:

*1984* is not . . . a parable of the totalitarian Rule of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao Tse-tung . . . Orwell's critique bears simultaneously on the police state and on capitalist consumer society, with its illiteracy of values and its conformities. "Newspeak," the language of Orwell's nightmare, is both the jargon of dialectical materialism and the verbiage of commercial advertisement and mass media. (1)

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The dominant metaphor for our own 1984 is not Orwell's image of a boot stamping down on the race of humanity but the magical and instantaneous solutions to all our problems through technology. In this technological society we have replaced freedom with license, dignity with position, truth with credibility, love with gratification, justice with legality, and ideas with images. In our 1984, Big Brother really does love us or, at least, he is prepared to gratify our desires. Nowhere are these changes in our symbolic environments more profound than in the area we call the political process.

By its very nature, politics involves the persuasion of groups of people, largely through the manipulation of the symbol systems that form the communication environments of a society. All recorded history bears witness to attempts by politicians to use all available communication systems to move people to action: to vote for a candidate, to support a party, to fight for a cause. The communication revolution wrought by the technological society has not altered these basic goals. What it has done is to change profoundly the way in which the appeals are made.

What I am proposing is a three-part analysis of the structure of American politics: The Politics of Issue; the Politics of Party; and the Politics of Image.

Classic politics revolved around a core of major issues which united some people and alienated others. Its very nature was confrontational and agonistic. The American Revolution, for example, centered on a clash of issues and arms between those who wished to remain loyal to England and those who demanded the separation of the colonies from the Mother Country. In such a clash of great issues, the opposing sides are quite clearly separated and it is difficult at an intellectual level and virtually impossible at a behavioral level to avoid taking sides. (2)

Similarly, the American Civil War resulted from the failure to reconcile profound and basic differences between states rights and federalism, between maintaining and limiting slavery. In this century, there has been profound and bitter debate concerning America's involvement in both World Wars, in Korea and Vietnam, and, now, in Lebanon, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

What all of these clashes of issues have in common is that they involved the use of language in both its propositional and emotive functions. Appeals for support employed both logical presentation and emotional pandering. Citizens were asked to be logical and rational in analyzing propositions while simultaneously being invited to respond uncritically and emotionally to slogans, songs, and symbols. This synergism of appeals to both reason and emotion simultaneously provides the foundation of modern political propaganda — what I call

pseudocommunication; the clever disguising of persuasion as communication.

In the American Revolution, for example, colonists were exposed to both the reasoned arguments of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams and the impassioned calls to arms by Patrick Henry and Tom Paine. The Civil War offered both the reasoned propositions of Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address and the emotional appeals of Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic." In World War I the use by British propagandists of the torpedoing of the *Lusitania* helped to sink reasoned discourse about America's continued neutrality. After December 7, 1941, the cry "Remember Pearl Harbor" effectively silenced all significant objections to our entry into World War II. Korea, however, never did achieve national unity and Lyndon Johnson's attempt to create another Pearl Harbor in Tonkin Bay fooled only Congress and only for a time. Today, with El Salvador and Nicaragua we are once again being provided a diet of rational explanations and emotional appeals. But unless the Domino Theory catches on or the Salvadorian rebels attack San Diego, the debate should continue.

The point I am making is that all clashes of issues bring forth both reasoned discourse and emotional demagoguery. It is this inseparable mixture that is the stuff of modern persuasion; neither discourse alone nor demagoguery alone, it is a new entity that requires only the direct access by the politician to the mass of citizens to make it modern political propaganda.

Before this age of instant access dawned, however, America experienced the Politics of Party. To a large extent, the Politics of Party existed with and fed upon the Politics of Issue. But their union was one of convenience only, for the true pursuit of party politics is not the resolution of great issues but the winning of elections. In time, party loyalty overcame issues in deciding how to vote. The Politics of Party demanded allegiance to the party, not to any cause.

As with the Politics of Issue, the party system had both its rational and its emotional appeals. Clearly, these parties did provide direct specific aid to people, frequently those most in need of help. Thus, the Republican Party served as the guardian of the newly-liberated and newly-enfranchised black citizen and voter immediately following the Civil War. And the Democratic Party built its present power base by opening its ranks to the immigrant Irish, Germans, Italians, and Jews who flocked to our shores in the late nineteenth century.

In return for their votes, the party provided jobs, money, political favors, and a sense of community. A strong advocate of the party system and the man who has remained famous for distinguishing between "honest and dishonest graft" was the legendary district leader

for Tammany Hall, George Washington Plunkitt. At the turn of the century he opposed the then emerging civil service system not only because it would endanger the party system itself but because it would result in less responsive and less efficient government since the civil service employees would not be answerable to the voters. Plunkitt viewed his job as follows:

If a family is burned out, I don't ask whether they are Republicans or Democrats, and I don't refer them to the Charity Organization Society, which would investigate their case in a month or two and decide they were worthy of help about the time they are dead from starvation. I just get quarters for them, buy clothes for them, if their clothes were burned up, and fix them up till they get things running again. It's philanthropy, but it's politics, too—mighty good politics. (3)

Despite Mr. Plunkitt's arguments, which seem reasoned and reasonable to me, the Politics of Party appears to be losing its appeal. My mother may be part of the last generation of Democratic voters who vote the straight party line even if it includes Fidel Castro or the Ayatollah Khomeini. She votes the party, not the issues or the candidates.

The communications revolution wrought by the mass media of radio and television has made the Politics of Party less effective today than in the past. Consider that in the last mayoral races in Chicago—once the Vatican of party politics—the candidates backed by the Democratic organization lost the primaries. Today, voters are as likely to vote for a candidate simply because they like him or her as on the basis of either party label or major issues.

These new candidates who have instant and immediate access to the voters are part of a revolution in American politics, a revolution with roots that can be traced back at least as far as Andrew Jackson in the 1820's but which has come into full bloom only in our electronic age. (4) Today, it is not the issue or the party but the *image* that is significant. And this image is totally different from the images created by past communication technologies. (5)

Today, the image, especially the image created and transmitted by television, is not merely a reflection of reality; it *is* reality because television itself does not reflect some reality we know from experience; television is our experience. We see the world through television.

The 1983 Nielsen Report on Television claims that 98% of all homes in America have at least one TV set; of these, 85% have color and 51% own two or more sets. The average household viewing time is about seven hours each day. (6) Add to these figures the findings of the Roper Poll on News Sources, that most people say they receive most of their news and information from television and that they con-

sider television the most believable source. (7) Now consider this: Americans spend more than half of their leisure time in front of a TV set, almost three hours per person per day. But most people pay little attention to the messages on the screen. How do we reconcile these findings? Are we being informed by a medium to which we pay little attention? Consider these other oddities: A survey by United Media Enterprises reports that every day or almost every day, 72% of us watch television, 70% read a newspaper, 45% talk to a friend or relative on the phone, 24% read a book, and 11% engage in sexual activity. As the report concludes: "Television is the new American hearth—a center for family activities, conversation, and companionship." (8)

This new American hearth, however, is more communicative than any fireplace. Television is primarily an iconic symbol system which encodes its messages in what James Joyce called the ineluctable modalities of the visible and the audible. We experience President Reagan in the Oval office exactly as we did Ronald Reagan on the "G.E. Theater." We witness the conflicts in the Middle East and in Central America exactly as we witness the World Series and the Super Bowl. We judge broadcast journalists on the basis of something called "credibility"—a sense of trust based entirely on electronic images. Television provides an illusion of reality that is so powerful that reality pales in comparison. It provides the politician with the possibility of instant and direct contact with every voter.

As Tom Wicker of *The New York Times* puts it: "Presidential politics today . . . is television. Party politics in America has given way to media politics. . . ." In this assessment, Wicker is joined by Robert MacNeil of the "MacNeil-Lehrer Report" who writes: "[Television] has vastly increased the cost of elections; it has lured politicians into even slicker half-truths; it has made political argument the moral equivalent of marketing deodorant; it has delivered the political process to those who know that you can sell beer by suggestive imagery, not qualitative difference; that all you need is a gimmick." (9)

It seems to me that MacNeil has put his finger on the two great ingredients needed for the Politics of Image: television and big money. As Elizabeth Drew reports in *Politics and Money*, "The role that money is currently playing in American politics is different both in scope and in nature from anything that has gone before." (10) Despite the 1974 election reforms that were brought about by Watergate, campaign spending has increased. And the key to spending is found in the political action committees that were created by those same reforms. As Lee Atwater, deputy assistant to President Reagan for political affairs said of the 1982 congressional elections: "The big story of the campaign is that this is the first time the White House has really been

involved with the political action committees. . . .” What all of this means for the democratic process is spelled out most clearly by Drew:

While a good deal of attention has been paid to the growing costs of political campaigns, the real point is what the raising of money to pay for those campaigns does to our politicians — and to our political system. It is driving the politicians into a new form of political corruption. . . . The pressures of money have made it more unlikely than ever that politicians will take difficult positions, exercise leadership . . . And the methods by which money is now organized and distributed have taken the country far from the way our system of representative government is supposed to work. (12)

Change may be inevitable but if we are going to understand our society in the decades ahead we have to understand the forces that will shape that society and our lives. The Politics of Issue and the Politics of Party both relied heavily on communities of shared values, definitions, interests, and symbols. These communities were high context environments in which people understood each other to a degree that allowed for reasonably accurate predictions of future behavior based upon past and present experiences. Such predictions were predicated on the assumption that yesterday's and today's opinions, attitudes, and beliefs provided guides to tomorrow's performance. In communication terms, these were systems with well-developed feedback systems and a high degree of probability; in short, these were stable systems.

The Politics of Issue, for example, allowed Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas and their audiences to predict with a high degree of accuracy the general position advocated by each candidate during their celebrated Lincoln-Douglas debates for the United States Senate in 1858. Any marked change, let alone a reversal of position, on the part of either candidate would have been remarkable, even unthinkable.

Similarly, the Politics of Party had built into its very infrastructure a high degree of certainty concerning the voting habits of party loyalists. This story is told of Big Tim Sullivan, a leader of New York's Tammany Hall in its glory days: When the election returns were brought to Big Tim he was displeased with the vote from his own precinct: 6,382 for the Democrat and two for the Republican. When asked what was wrong, Sullivan replied: “Sure, didn't Kelly come to me to say his wife's cousin was running on the Republican line and didn't I, in the interests of domestic tranquility, give him leave to vote Republican! But what I want to know is, who else voted Republican?” The point here is that Sullivan didn't mind people voting for the Republicans, in small numbers, of course, so long as he knew the who and the why of it.

With the Politics of Image, however, we move from a community of shared context into a fragmented, present-centered world with no sense of history or shared values and goals. (13) In this world, the present has no clear connection with the past, and events are viewed individually without regard to other events. Thus, we have a president who accuses the Speaker of the House of advocating "surrender" for recommending the removal of the marines from Lebanon while he himself was planning to move these same marines from Lebanon to U.S. ships offshore (which he later did). Of course, O'Neill's "surrender" has now become Reagan's "redeployment." This bit of newspeak inspired such historical revisions as "Napoleon's Redeployment from Moscow" and "Custer's Last Redeployment."

In similar fashion our landings in Grenada were first called an "invasion" by the President, but he quickly and angrily rejected that word in favor of "rescue mission." (14) In the Age of Images, it is not events but labels that shape our perceptions of reality. Unlike events, labels are not fixed but flexible, open to manipulation, alteration, even reversal. In the real 1984, just as in Orwell's fictional 1984, the Ministry of Truth dispenses truth that the government wants to be true. Even Orwell's satirical slogan — "War is Peace" — seems perfectly at home in today's Washington. It is worth noting that the *New York Post* headlines for the Grenada stories were as follows:

"U.S. INVADES TERROR ISLAND" (15)

and

"ATTACK AT DAWN" (16)

Are these headlines for news stories or titles for two of Mr. Reagan's B-movies?

In which 1984 do we call the MX nuclear missile "the Peacekeeper"? In which 1984 do we have a president advocating a constitutional amendment for a balanced budget while submitting the most unbalanced budget in the history of the Republic? In which 1984 do we have a president calling for another constitutional amendment to allow prayer in public schools while admitting to his own rare and infrequent attendance at public worship? In which 1984 do we find the President of the United States quoting a line from a movie? Mr. Reagan pleased an audience of fundamentalist ministers in Washington by reciting these lines from *Chariots of Fire*: "God made me for a purpose, and I will run for His pleasure." I am not qualified to judge whether or not that is blasphemy but I can ask: What kind of politics is this?

Before I am accused of partisan politics in my examples, allow me to focus on the Democratic primaries.

The upsetting of Walter Mondale's carefully planned campaign by

Senator Gary Hart is surprising only to politicians, journalists, and political scientists who insist on looking at 1984 as though it were 1948. Mondale is a candidate dependent upon the Politics of Party, expecting the majority of his supporters to share his traditional Democratic Party values, interests, and goals. He draws his support from party regulars, from organized labor, and from other such traditional Democratic allies.

Gary Hart, on the other hand, is clearly a candidate who relies on the Politics of Image for his impact. He is judged not by a public record identifying his commitments but by something more fleeting — an image of newness, a politics of hope. The reasons given by people for supporting Hart are quite revealing. Consider these: (17)

"I don't know anything," said Gretchen Wills, a senior chemistry major at Birmingham-Southern, "except that he's from Colorado, is a Democrat, and is young."

"I can't explain it," said Cosmo Re, a homemaker from Tampa who turned out at an airport rally early this week. "I just like him. It's something that my heart tells me."

"It's been love at first sight since last Monday," said Nancy Tosado of Huntsville, a mother of three. "That's it, nothing else."

"I like his ideas," said Darla Doyle, a Tampa homemaker. "He's a good man. His ideas are fresher than Mondale's are. I like the way he comes across."

A reporter asked Mrs. Doyle to identify the ideas that appealed to her. "That's an unfair question," she said, asking for a moment to consider her answer. Then she replied, "He wants to talk to Russia."

As a 72-year-old retired social worker put it, "He's generating so much enthusiasm that it makes voting a lot more exciting."

These responses clearly belong not to the Politics of Issue or of Party but to the Politics of Image. These responses would once have belonged to the universe of discourse associated with advertising and show business; now they have become politics.

My point here is that television has done to politics exactly what it has done to every other aspect of American life that it has embraced: television has made politics another form of entertainment, subject to the same forces that shape show business in America. If the perplexed politicians, journalists, and political scientists seek guidance in understanding presidential campaigns in 1984 and beyond, they should turn not to those who examine politics but to those who follow show business. In *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, William Goldman, who wrote screenplays for such films as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *A Bridge Too Far*, *Marathon Man*, and *All the President's Men*, offers these words of advice:



Compounding the problem of no security in the decision-making process is the single most important fact . . . of the entire movie industry:  
**NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING.**

Again, for emphasis—

**NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING.**

Not one person in the entire motion picture field *knows* for a certainty what's going to work. Every time out it's a guess—and if you're lucky, an educated one. (18)

What is true of movies is now true of politics in 1984: Nobody knows anything. And the reason that nobody knows anything is that the shared context that is needed for making accurate predictions about the future simply does not exist. When polls, such as the Gallup poll showing Hart leading Mondale and Glenn, reveal dramatic changes in public opinion there are usually two explanations put forth: the first is that the polls are inaccurate and unreliable, which may well be true; the second is that people are not being honest about their opinions, which also may well be true. But I should like to offer a third possible explanation: it is that people have no enduring opinions about the candidates and that the shifts in the polls reflect very real shifts in public opinion.

With no context of a shared community of interest, bits of information cannot be integrated into an intelligent and consistent whole. Two decades ago, the Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan predicted that television would favor the least defined candidate, the candidate who required the audience to make meaning of his image. I submit that this was true of John F. Kennedy in 1960, of Richard Nixon in 1968, of Jimmy Carter in 1976, and of course Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Of course, it remains to be seen whether Gary Hart's iconic echoes of John F. Kennedy—complete with youthful appearance, going without a topcoat, hands thrust into jacket pockets, the quick smile, and the appeals to a new future—can overcome the outdated but still workable party politics of the Mondale campaign. Given enough money, Hart has at least a chance. In considering this possibility, remember that the Gallup poll for late January 1984 showed that Hart was the preferred nominee of only two percent of registered Democrats. When the same question was asked during the week of March 2-6, 1984, this figure had risen to thirty percent. Had Hart changed or had people's perceptions of Hart been altered by the media? (19)

If Hart should overcome the odds and upset Mondale, the November election will offer voters the choice between two great images: Reagan the Cowboy versus Hart the New Kennedy, the Old West in a shootout with the Newest Frontier. Meanwhile Jesse Jackson is running not

so much *as* Martin Luther King but *for* Martin Luther King. Only Walter Mondale is attempting to rely on the Politics of Party to win the Presidency. If the fall choice is between Mondale and Reagan, then we will have a classic confrontation between the Politics of Party and the Politics of Image—the past against the future.

In such a contest, my bet is on the image candidate for one fundamental reason: in the image-centered, instantaneous environment structured by television and other mass media, it is not ideas or loyalties but images that count. As President, Ronald Reagan has managed to rise above accountability. As Steven R. Weisman notes:

He has committed untold political bloopers and has been caught in dozens of factual mistakes and misrepresentations. He has presided over the worst recession since the Great Depression. The abortive mission in Beirut cost 265 American lives and there has been a sharp escalation in United States military involvement in Central America. An extraordinary number of Mr. Reagan's political appointees have come under fire, with many forced to resign, because of ethical or legal conflicts. Yet he is the Man in the Teflon Suit: nothing sticks to him. (20)

If John F. Kennedy was the first true television President, then Ronald Reagan is the first true show business president. As such he poses a challenge not only to his opponent but to the political process as well:

. . . given the success of his strategy to date, the political marketing of Mr. Reagan's personal qualities may change the nature of the 1984 election. To a degree unknown in recent elections, the challenger will have to meet the incumbent's personality head on, matching his style and countering his overarching message with one of his own.

The Reagan approach may also have a more lasting effect. He has fashioned a new chemistry of image, message, and personality—a presidential persona—that could change the boundaries of the American presidency itself. (21)

My thesis, then, is this: Politics in the Age of Television is not communication but pseudocommunication. (22) Given the prevailing needs of politicians to gather votes rather than to take positions and the semiotic and structural biases of television, I cannot conceive of how it could be anything else. My point here is not to bemoan the present or to yearn for some Golden Age of our political past. If the Politics of Issue brought forth profound debate it also encouraged demagoguery and conflict. If the Politics of Party allowed for a close relationship between politicians and voters, it also promoted favoritism and corruption.

What we need today is what Jefferson said a democracy always needs: an informed citizenry. The modern mass media may have made us the *most* informed electorate in history but it has not made us the

*best* informed. Television and other mass media may not be the total reason for the rise of the image candidate, but they certainly have contributed to our present political process. Despite the debunking by some analysts, (23) no candidate has made a serious attempt to capture the White House since 1952 without extensive buying of television time to sell his message to the public.

As television is used to carry the candidate's message to the voters, we need to examine exactly what kind of message system television creates. The language of politics has always contained both reasoned discourse and emotional appeal, but as an extension of the mind, language lends itself to critical analysis.

Television, however, is more an extension of the senses, an extension of the eye and the ear. As such, it provides not a sense of reconstructed and abstracted reality but a sense of reality itself. The overall message of television politics is not to think but to feel; the purpose is not to *inform* our minds but to *form* our perceptions. As no less an authority than our pardoned former President Richard Nixon advised Senator Edward Kennedy in June, 1982: "He's got to lose twenty pounds." Good advice, but only in the age of the Politics of Image.

To be sure, issues are still with us. And party loyalty does linger. But the mass media, especially television, have made the political process a form of popular entertainment. And if Ronald Reagan is brought to us in 1984 not from Warner Brothers or General Electric Theater but from the White House—well, as the Irving Berlin song has it, "There's no business like show business." (24)

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. George Steiner, "The Writer and Communism," *Language and Silence; Essays in Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 361.
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3. Plunkitt's political wisdom can be found in William L. Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics, Delivered by Ex-Senator George Washington Plunkitt, The Tammany Philosopher, from his Rostrum—The New York County Court-House Bootblack Stand—and Recorded by William L. Riordan* (New York, 1905; Reprinted by Dutton, 1963); see also M.R. Werner, *Tammany Hall* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, 1928). The present state of the party

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  9. See Robert MacNeil, *The People Machine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968; see also Sig Mickelson, *The Electronic Mirror: Politics in an Age of Television* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972).
  10. Elizabeth Drew, *Politics and Money, the New Road to Corruption* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1983), p. 1.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
  12. *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.
  13. In this view I have been influenced by the work of Jacques Ellul, especially *The Technological Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1964); *Propaganda, The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1971); *The Technological System* (New York: Continuum, 1980). Other influences have included Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964); Joe McGinnis, *The Selling of the President, 1968* (New York: Trident Press, 1969); Melvin H. Bloom, *Public Relations and Presidential Campaigns: A Crisis in Democracy* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973); Larry J. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981); Sidney Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign*, Revised edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).
  14. *New York Times*, November 4, 1983, p. A16.
  15. *New York Post*, October 24, 1983, p. 1.
  16. *New York Post*, October 25, 1983, p. 1.
  17. *New York Times*, March 9, 1984, p. A12.
  18. William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade* (Warner Books, 1982), p. 39.
  19. For a sharp difference of opinion about the role of television in American politics see the Spring, 1983 issue of *Television Quarterly* in which Thomas Patterson, in "It's Not the Commercials, It's the Money," provides a majority view of participants in the Aspen Institute conference on television commercials in election campaigns that money, not television, is the major problem afflicting our political campaigns. An opposing view is offered by another participant, former New York Mayor John V. Lindsay who argues in "TV Political Ads Make Running for Office a Big Money Game" that money is needed "[m]ainly to buy television . . . [since] all available evidence proves that broadcast advertising is the most potent tool yet devised for political communication."
  20. Steven R. Weisman, "Can the Magic Prevail?" *New York Times Magazine* (April 29, 1984), p. 39.
  21. *Ibid.*

22. For an explication of the differences between these two terms, see Terence P. Moran, "Propaganda as Pseudocommunication," *Et cetera*, Volume 36, No. 2 (Summer, 1979), pp. 181-197.
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