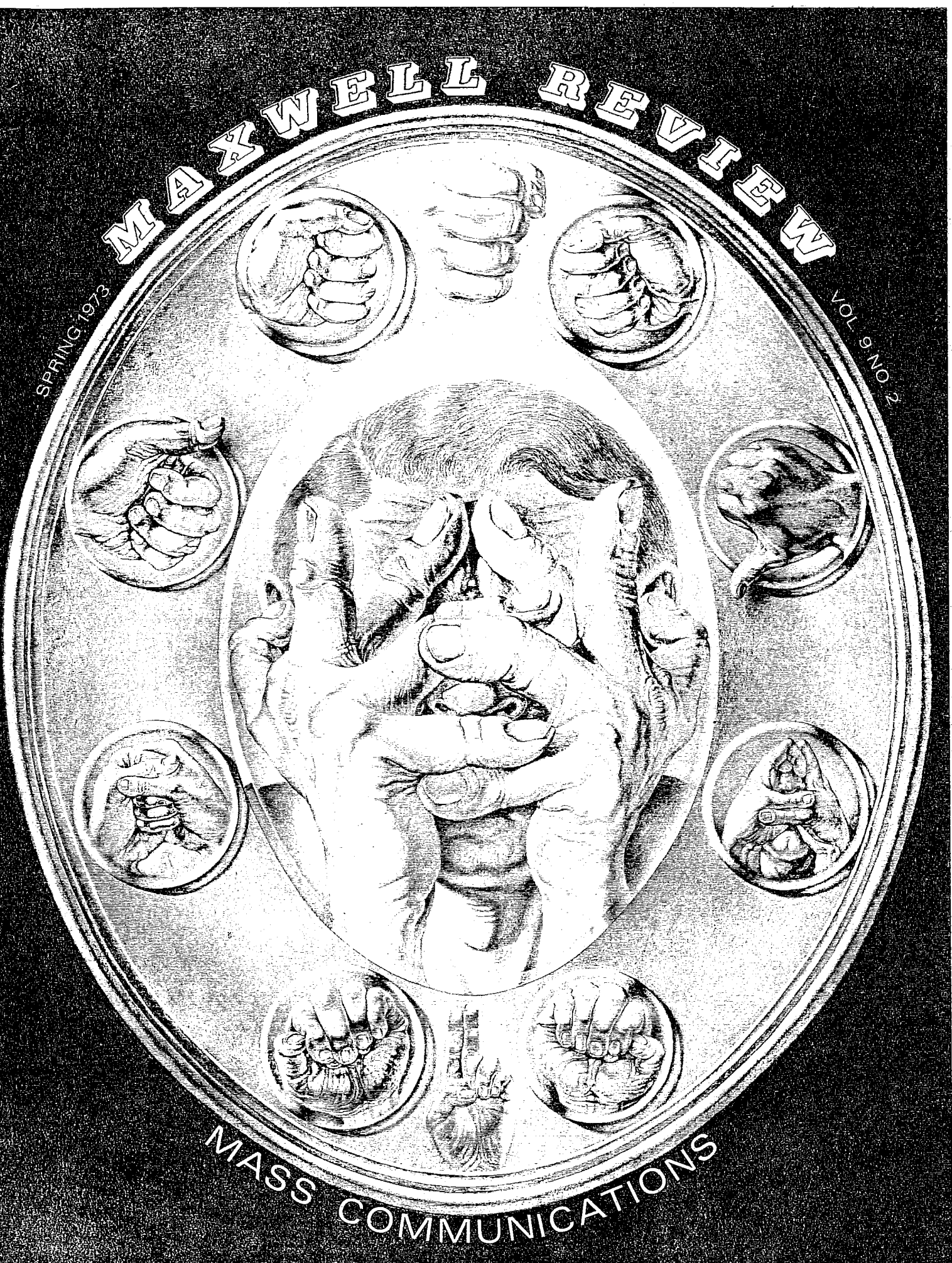
MAXWELL REVIEW

SPRING 1973

VOL 9 NO 2



MASS COMMUNICATIONS

MAXWELL REVIEW
A Journal of Scholarship and Opinion
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A Publication of
The Maxwell Graduate Student Association
The Maxwell Graduate School
Citizenship and Public Affairs
Syracuse University
Syracuse, New York
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The Maxwell Review is a publication of the Maxwell Graduate Students Association with financial assistance from Syracuse University. All materials to be considered for publication should be submitted to the Editors, Maxwell Review, 502 Maxwell Hall, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York 13210. Subscription rates by mail: $4 per year. Back issues, when available: $2 per copy. Single copies by mail: $2. Student rate on-campus per single copy: $1. Student subscriptions: $1.50. Overseas subscription by surface mail: $5.

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The Editors would like to give special thanks to Professor Julio San Jose, whose drawing appears on the cover, Susan Sensemann (B.A., 1971) and Roger Leyonmark (Visual Arts), whose drawings appear in this issue, and to Sharon L. Coyne who typed the entire issue.

The Maxwell Review is indexed in the Public Affairs Information Service (PAIS) Bulletin. Microfilms and Xerographic reproductions of the Review are available from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

ISSN 0025-6110

MAXWELL REVIEW

Volume IX | Spring, 1973 | Number 2

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GOVERNMENT PR: PERSPECTIVES ON THE PENTAGON

by

Mordecai Lee*

The Game of (No) Chance

Apart from Monopoly, War, and Chinese checkers, the name of the game on Capitol Hill is Up the Propaganda Machine. The rules are simple: criticize a government program by accusing the sponsoring agency of running an expensive public relations operation. Any player can play, provided he (or she) has access to a mimeograph machine or a newsman's ear. (Thanks to the trap of "objective journalism," the press can be an invaluable partner in the game because it assumes that whatever an "important person"--like a Congressman--says must be newsworthy.) Since the politician gets no extra points for accuracy or fairness, the winner of the game is the pol who makes the most outrageous statements in the most eye-catching or ear-shattering rhetoric, for it is this player who is awarded the most publicity. The irony of the game, of course, is that publicity is craved (and perhaps needed) in order to criticize publicity.

This Congressional game is hardly new. In 1910 Congressman Mondell of Wyoming, an opponent of the Forest Service's attempt to protect Western forests from commercial exploitation, attacked the Service's bureau for its "scandalously extravagant use" of public funds for propaganda purposes (Rosapepe, 1971:13). Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr., focussed his challenge to the New Deal on the publicity offices of FDR's newly-created agencies (McCamy, 1939). Instead of attacking Truman's Fair Deal head on, the Republican 80th Congress created a Subcommittee on Publicity and Propaganda to "study" the public information offices in the executive branch (Willard, 1959:60). Congressman Charles Teague, a conservative Republican, suggested that a good place to start cutting LBJ's Great Society programs would be in the publicity offices of the agencies created to make the society great.

The beauty of this no-chance game is that it can be played in reverse. Then the aim of the game is to expand the public information activities of a favored government agency. Thus, we have Congressman Bingham, a critic of Pentagon PR, as an advocate of an expanded public information program for the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Similarly, Congressman Jamie Whitten, chairman of the subcommittee which handles appropriations for agriculture, consumer protection, and environmental affairs, added $1,000,000 to the Department of Agriculture's information office in FY-73 so that it could better "explain the importance of a healthy agriculture to the nonfarming public" (Brenner, 1972).

PR in the Bureaucratic State

All elements of this game are displayed in Senator J. William Fulbright's book, The Pentagon Propaganda Machine (1970). In this long press release Fulbright makes outrageous statements, laced with anecdotal overkill, to prove his point. On one level, Fulbright's tract represents the case of an elected official complaining about a program he dislikes and fears. On another level, it reflects the traditional legislative opposition to public information offices housed in administrative agencies. In this sense, Fulbright's complaints, cloaked in the rhetoric of freedom from propaganda, can be understood as symbols of Congress' inability to adjust to a new reality, the Bureaucratic State.

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Back in the olden days, when the President was merely a General Manager of government, half the Federal government was housed across the alley from the White House in the Old Executive Office Building. In the absence of large administrative agencies, communication between the government and the public was conducted through elected officials. Thus, the Congressman could take credit for any Federal project in his home area and, as far as his constituents were concerned, the Congressman was Government.

The nature of these established roles and relationships changed drastically by the beginning of this century. The Congressional monopoly over communications with the public was broken by the expansion in size and function of government bureaucracies. Although it is rarely recognized, communicating with the public (e.g., informing citizens of available services) is an integral part of the administrative process. Increasingly, news about government originated inside the executive branch. The emergence of public information offices with the bureaucracies themselves meant that Congressmen were no longer able to take sole credit for Federally funded activities back home. It is within this context that the continued Congressional hostility to the Federal government's PR activities[1] appears both understandable and rational. And it is within this historic tradition that Fulbright's book can properly be placed.

Fulbright's View: Good vs. Evil

Fulbright's book, whether considered public information or propaganda itself, must be judged harshly. His specific thesis--that propaganda is bad but public information is good--is so buried within the text that it is barely noticeable (pp. 11, 20, 150). But once given his thesis, a reader could at least expect Fulbright to delineate boundaries between good (public information) and evil (propaganda). Without some guidelines, we are left to the common-sense notion that one man's propaganda is another's public information.

It is true that other writers have attempted, and failed, to draw meaningful distinctions between the concepts of propaganda and public information. But Fulbright makes no proposals to aid the public information officer (PIO) or the public in what to expect from official government sources. It does not seem cricket to attack the Pentagon PIOs for grinding out propaganda without offering some concrete suggestions for defining what aspects of the PIO's role are properly considered public information tasks[2]--and therefore acceptable. This type of ex post facto criticism in which Fulbright and others engage is singularly unedifying. No wonder that many career PIOs become timid in their duties and resort to writing in a style which at best makes government publications unreadable.

The Fulbright volume has several other shortcomings. First, the central chapters, which are meant to build the case for the existence and potential of the Pentagon's propaganda machine, read more like laundry lists of the activities of military public information offices. Second, the data base from which he works is unreliable. When Fulbright first made inquiries which led to this book, the Pentagon itself did not know (or disguised, depending on your interpretation) how much money was being spent on PR--no matter how the term is defined--because of the budget structure; public information activities are included as (or, alternately, buried in) part of general administrative expenses and are not listed as specific line items in the DOD budget. The only clearly identifiable PR expenses are those originating at the central offices. Field activities are absorbed in the appropriate "command" budgets. Hence, the data that Fulbright present are far from reliable. Indeed, the guestimate is so soft that it was openly derided by the Pentagon officials who had compiled it at Fulbright's request. It should be noted that it was impossible to estimate how much it would cost to estimate just how much Pentagon PR costs!

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[1]This hostility is expressed in a 1913 law, still on the books, which outlaws the employment of "publicity experts" by the executive branch.

[2]A task force of the Government Information Organization, a group of Federal PIOs, is currently addressing this problem and trying to develop some guidelines. Although the "results are not yet in," their chances of success appear faint.

Had Fulbright emphasized this point--that, in fact, there are no reliable data on Pentagon PR spending--it would have strengthened his argument. After all, the Pentagon was the prophet of better living through PPBS' promise of rational decision-making. Thus, it seems rather amusing that the home of sophisticated policy analysis tools pleads ignorance or incompetence in this particular area. And, he could have asked, what kind of railroad are we running in this country that doesn't know how much the government spends on officially informing (or selling) its citizens of its activities?

However, whatever the deficiencies of Fulbright's book, it is both unfair and unwise to judge it solely on its internal merits or demerits, for The Pentagon Propaganda Machine was more than a book--it was a Capitol event. It was an event that spoke directly to what Stewart Alsop (1968) calls the "Center," that small group of people who live in Washington, read the same newspapers, talk mostly to each other, and also, run the government. And the book did have impact. First presented in a series of four speeches on the Senate floor in December, 1969, it provoked much publicity. A few weeks later Congressman Henry Reuss proposed a successful amendment in the House forbidding propaganda activity in the DOD. Senator Fulbright and Congressman Bingham proposed an annual ceiling of $20,000,000 on military public information; the proposal was rejected, but the House Appropriations Committee did impose strict limits on DOD expenditures for PR. Over a period of two years the House Committee cut the DOD PR budget from $44,000,000 to $28,000,000 (Farney, 1970). Several GAO studies concerning military public affairs programs were requested and subsequently made public. In addition, Congressman Bennet proposed a bill to forbid free junkets on military transport and dropped the bill only after receiving informal assurances from the DOD that abuses would be eliminated and procedures tightened. The Comptroller of the Defense Department initiated a new accounting system to monitor PR expenditures. The Bureau of the Budget made a last-minute decision to cut $10,000,000 from Federal agencies' PR budget in FY-71 (Bonafede, 1971). And finally in 1970, President Nixon, in a shrewdly-timed act, announced his own opposition to "self-serving public relations activities" and his intention to "sharply curtail" these expenditures (Nixon Memo: November 6, 1970). Not surprisingly, the furor seemed to quiet down after the President's directive to agency heads curtailing their PR activities.

This is not to suggest, however, that Fulbright's book singlehandedly led to a re-evaluation of government PR activities. Rather, it was one of the initial events which served to increase public scrutiny in this area. As a public issue, military PR received widespread attention about a year after the "Center" had already dealt with it; the CBS telecast on February 23, 1971, "The Selling of the Pentagon," provoked significant public reaction to the military's information efforts. The substantial impact on the general public of the controversial CBS documentary (or, more properly, essay in media advocacy) versus the less significant public impact made by Fulbright's book is noteworthy in itself, for both contained almost exactly the same material. The gamesmanship question that arises here is "Was CBS the Fulbright Propaganda Machine?" (Rogers & Clevanger, 1971).

Goulding's View: What Machine?

Not unexpectedly, the Pentagon's man atop the Pentagon propaganda machine has a view which differs markedly from Fulbright-CBS. Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Phil G. Goulding[3] offers his view of military information reality in Confirm or Deny: Informing the People on National Security (1970). His insider's view is so at variance with the Fulbright-CBS conception of reality that one can only wonder if they were both dealing with the same subject, let alone on whose side "truth" would fall.

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[3]Goulding worked as a Washington journalist until Arthur ("government has a right to lie") Sylvester, then DOD's Assistant for Public Affairs, named him Deputy Assistant Secretary. Upon Sylvester's retirement in January, 1967, McNamara promoted Goulding to Assistant Secretary. It is interesting to note that Goulding's Deputy Assistant Secretary, Daniel Henkin, was himself later promoted to the Assistant Secretary position by the incoming Nixon administration. This job history indicates that there is a smaller degree of political partisanship in top PR jobs than one might expect.

Goulding's book does an effective job of transmitting the aura of "crisis management" inside the bureaucracy. The truth-according-to-Goulding is this: the Pentagon never had time between coping with crises to mount any propaganda campaigns. Goulding says that making information available to the press occupied all his time. The Goulding version runs as follows: "Only exceptionally does the government as a whole try to see that information reaches the people, and almost never does it seek additionally to ensure that the people understand that information" (p. 84). The handling of the Viet Nam news coverage (a self-confessed Goulding failure) is offered as evidence. Goulding maintains that instead of a consistent, coherent, and integrated news policy, the Pentagon handled it on a day-to-day basis, causing, he feels, a distorted public impression of U. S. military activities there (Chapter 3).

Only once does Goulding sound remotely like Fulbright. In explaining the background work preceding McNamara's announcement of the Administration's decision to build a "thin" anti-Chinese ABM system, Goulding states that media opinion leaders (e.g., key columnists) were brought in for individual briefings with McNamara. In those sessions McNamara explained the rationale behind the new policy. This procedure, which is standard at the White House, is hardly an overwhelming propaganda operation. (It was ineffective as well: the recent FY-74 budget doesn't even include funds for the construction of one of the two ABM sites permitted in the Moscow arms limitation agreement.)

Implicitly, Goulding seems to be arguing that Congress and the press should be trying to reinforce the activities of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs instead of sniping at it. In Goulding's eyes the Office is a counterbalance to the public information offices of each of the armed services and, as such, prevents interservice rivalries from being fought out through publicity campaigns in the press. Of course, in the logic of Goulding's argument lies the basis of the fears of many Government PR opponents: that Big Government, speaking in one voice, can indeed be a devastating propaganda machine.

Still, the question remains: does or does not the Pentagon run a well-oiled propaganda machine? Goulding infers that it is difficult to mount any monolithic, planned propaganda campaign in this giant bureaucracy. The vast information machine can grind to a halt, Goulding illustrates (1970:116), simply because the Navy--even in emergencies--prefers not to use the all-service reporting channels which lead to the National Military Command Center but instead utilizes its own network, leading to the Chief of Naval Operations. On the other hand, Fulbright believes that the Pentagon's PR is "designed to shape public opinion and build an impression that militarism is good for you" (p. 11). What is the public to believe? Is Pentagon PR designed to sell militarism but is simply ineffective, to wit, the anti-Viet Nam war demonstrations, the opposition to a "thick" ABM system? Or, does it seek only to inform the citizens of current policies and programs? Taken together, the Goulding, Fulbright, and CBS reports offer conflicting definitions of the situation.

Public Policy Questions

While the philosophers may want to debate the truth claims of Goulding and Fulbright-CBS and the sociologists of knowledge uncover which groups in the population believed which version of "the truth," there is another set of questions for public policy analysts to ponder. Key questions here, concerning government's communication with its public, include the following: Would a consistent, coherent and integrated government news policy, as Goulding proposes, serve that ill-defined but still useful concept of "the public interest?" Or, does competing government information (or propaganda) enhance public access to information? Can workable guidelines for differentiating between public information and propaganda be developed at all or are the concepts inherently inseparable? Should government information officers act more like lawyers (that is, collect dissenting opinions and historical precedents for policy) and less like lawyers (that is, include the dissenting opinions as a matter of course in PR releases)?

Defining the proper role of government public relations in the democratic-bureaucratic state is really the core of the problem. Is it to report to voters on the government's activities? To inform citizens of news events so that alternative policies come before the public forum? To inform individuals of available services

and warn citizens about new legal obligations? To propagandize the populace to do what clearly is in their best interest (e.g., not smoking, wearing seat belts)? Until a generally accepted definition is formulated, we can expect more Fulbright-like broadsides and more Goulding-ish defenses.

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