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Fighting Words

Written by **Colin Berry**
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Filed in **Voice: Journal of Design** and **Illustration in State of the art**.



[Comments \(6\)](#) A graphic designer's daily concerns are relatively simple: create a visual identity for chosen concept, company, or product; make it convincing and, if possible, elegant; deliver it on a deadline that ranges from weeks to several months. But what if your work was meant to protect men and women in your nation's armed forces, and delivering it meant the difference—literally—between life and death? What if your client was your enemy? And what if your deadline was a few short hours, not weeks?

The U.S. Army's 4th Psychological Operations Group, or PSYOP, based in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, has this very task. The only active-duty psychological operations unit in the U. S. armed forces, the 4th PSYOPs' job is to influence the enemy to surrender by demoralizing its soldiers and/or populace by using radio or television broadcasts, loudspeaker announcements and, often, standardized printed leaflets dropped in huge bundles from planes.

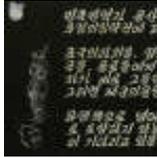
This November in San Francisco, Intersection for the Arts, a non-profit art gallery, exhibited a 50-year retrospective of PSYOP materials. Entitled *Paper Bullets*, the show demonstrated the widespread employment but limited content of such propaganda. Using words to dishearten the enemy is nearly as old as war itself: in the 13th Century, kites with messages were flown into a Chinese prison to incite a riot, and British soldiers at the Battle of Bunker Hill were given fliers offering them land and freedom if they surrendered. What linked this show—besides their gnarled translations and generally wretched design—was the leaflets' broad range of appeals to the most basic instincts of their intended targets.

One example, a blood-red flyer dropped on North Korean civilians in 1953, showed a fleet of bombers emptying their payloads. "WARNING!" it read, detailing on its verso what

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would happen to those who stayed in its path. Another, made by the North Vietnamese and targeted for African-American soldiers, argued: “Black men should not fight for racist USA.” A German leaflet from WWII caricatured Roosevelt using the slogan “Rich man’s war—poor man’s fight,” while Japanese flyers from the same era suggested American G.I.’s look to their unfaithful wives. More recently, an American leaflet dropped on Baghdad read: “We wish only to liberate the people of Iraq of Saddam’s tyranny.”

The point of all PSYOP, of course, is to convince the wavering (enemy) soldier or fearful civilian that the leaflets’ creator has the upper hand and that things will be better if he surrenders or just goes home—unless, of course, his ‘home’ is being targeted for bombing. According to the U.S. Army’s 1979 *Psychological Operations Field Manual No. 33-1*, leaflets may be persuasive, factual, or directive; they are typically standardized for rapid dissemination and consistency; and their recommended layout is on six-by-three-inch, 16- or 20-pound paper.

The Army prescribes their design precisely. Typography should be “large enough to be perfectly legible and familiar...8 points or larger...Roman”; color must “sharply contrast with the predominant color of the terrain” and must be “appropriate to the culture of the audience so as to signify the idea the propagandist wishes to convey.” Photographs, cartoons, and drawings are “valuable assets,” and “headlines, subheadings, and text should be arranged so as to present an attractive and symmetrical appearance”— army *lingua franca* for “make it look good.”

The trouble is, they don’t. As design documents, PSYOPs range from amateurish to just plain awful—somewhere between a Chick religious tract and a ball-point drawing made on the back of a Pee-Chee folder. They are riddled with mistranslations: during Desert Storm, Iraqis printed leaflets picturing the Statue of Liberty with tears running down her cheeks and the words “LIBERTY STADIUM IS CRYING.” PSYOPs rely on the cheapest materials and the quickest, most base appeal to war-weary citizens or soldiers, tapping their desires for food, safety, cigarettes, sex, money, or seeing their families again; as well as fears of infidelity, injury, or dying. American PSYOPs are no better: recent Iraqi War leaflets featured clumsy cut-and-paste graphics and pitiable caricatures of Saddam Hussein.

Why are these documents so brutally ugly? Partly, it’s due to the fact that they’re hastily assembled in strategically-threatened mobile print shops erected at the front lines—and sometimes behind them. PSYOP experts are trained in espionage and disguise, gathering knowledge of customs within a culture in order to exploit it later with propaganda. But under fire, they have to design, print, crate, and distribute hundreds of thousands—sometimes

millions—of documents, as quickly as battle plans change.

The leaflets' design is no reflection on their effectiveness. PSYOPs are credited with saving thousands of lives, and the graphic artist may take some comfort in knowing that effective design plays a small but integral part in non-combative war-making. As Paper Bullets demonstrated, leaflets are an effective tactic in every global conflict, their designs and distribution created in the highest-pressure circumstances, their graphic sophistication trumped by their need to win over hearts and minds—and to do so quickly. They are truly fighting words, an essential example of the pen being mightier than the sword.

Fig. 1

Leaflet produced by United States 1st Radio Broadcasting & Leaflet Group, 839th Army Unit, APO 500, 1953. Intended target audience were North Korean Peoples' Army soldiers.

Front (translation from Korean): I died needlessly for the Communist boss, Kim Il Sung. Will that be your fate too?
Back (translation from Korean): The traitorous communist bosses have tricked you into a war of aggression. They have brought destruction to your country, suffering to your family and death to your comrades. Will they also bring needless death to you? Yes! – Unless you escape to the rear or to the protection of the UN.

Fig. 2

Leaflet produced by United States 1st Radio Broadcasting & Leaflet Group, 839th Army Unit, APO 500, 1953. Intended target audience were North Korean civilians.

Front (translation from Korean): WARNING!
Back (translation from Korean): Stay Away! Save your life! To destroy communism these military targets must be destroyed. Industrial Plant. Military Supply Dump. Military Vehicle. Troop Billet. Save your Life! Stay Away!

Fig. 3

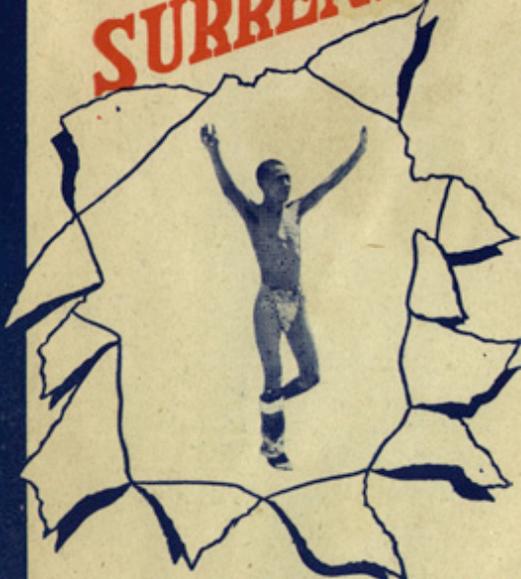
Image of leaflets being distributed from the rear of US Air Force plane over Vietnam, ca. 1966.
Courtesy US Air Force

Fig. 4

Front and back cover of leaflet produced by United States military. Intended target audience were United States Army soldiers. Intent was to instruct soldiers in the field on the philosophy and physical instructions on how to distribute and disseminate leaflets in the field.

THIS IS THE RESULT

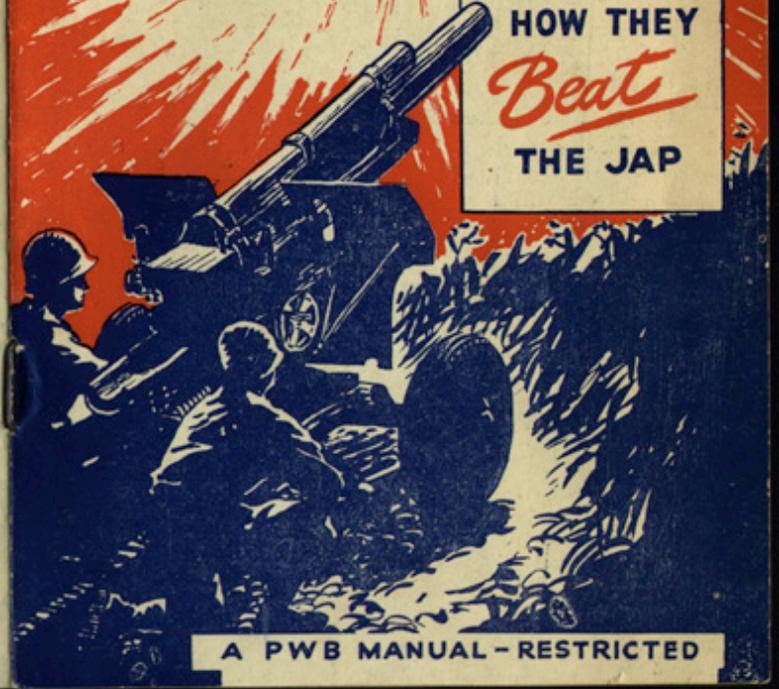
**I
SURRENDER**



BY ORDER G.G. U.S. FORCES

Paper Bullets

HOW THEY
Beat
THE JAP



A PWB MANUAL - RESTRICTED

Article

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POTUS *Typographicus*: Appealing to the Baseline and George W's Typographic Legacy

Written by **Steven Heller**

Published on May 30, 2006.

Filed in **Voice: Journal of Design** in **State of the art**.



[Comments \(14\)](#) Karl Rove may be a brilliant strategist, but he knows absolutely nothing about good typography. He'd better get his ascenders in gear if his White House minions plan to continue placing banners and digital backdrops above, behind, and below the President while he's making those key speeches. So far these ersatz billboards—with slogans like “A Brighter Future for America,” “Plan for Victory,” and “Protecting America’s Borders” underscoring W’s major themes and talking points—have been typographic monstrosities on an aesthetic par with those hideous subway advertisements hawking Dr. Zizmor, New York’s most publicized board-certified dermatologist.

Whatever one thinks about this administration’s domestic and foreign policies, the White House’s garish type selections are so thoughtless they trivialize rather than enhance the rhetoric of our POTUS (no, not a synonym for doofus—or that substance he used to smoke—but rather the Secret Service’s acronym for President of the United States). While his handlers would never allow the leader of the free world to go out in public wearing a rayon leisure suit and white bucks, they nonetheless use clownish shareware typefaces with hokey beveled edges and cheesy drop shadows to represent his ideas.

Bush’s typographic transgressions—or POTUS *typographicus*—began on May 1, 2003, when the President announced America’s victory over Saddam Hussein from the deck of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* as the carrier steamed toward San Diego harbor. His triumphant entrance, emerging from a jet-fighter cockpit, was precisely choreographed to stoke the patriotic flame for a war well fought and presumably won. Yet to ensure that the public really understood and appreciated this historic message,

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

someone felt the need to create the now famous “Mission Accomplished” banner. Its presence—akin to those premium-space LED screens at sports stadiums—was so imposing that one would have had to be dead not to notice it. Appearing as a Photoshop rendition, typeset in a bastardized, souped-up version of the otherwise elegant Bodoni and printed to give the illusion that it was floating atop an American flag, the sign spanned the length of the carrier’s bridge and served the same purpose for the politically challenged as closed-captioning does for the hearing impaired.



All the components—from a flight-gear-clad POTUS to the commanding “Mission Accomplished” slogan—created an essential mnemonic that Rove hoped would catapult W into American history as the first commander in chief to actually win a war since that one with Germany and Japan in 1945. Nonetheless, events in Iraq did not go as planned (or as touted), and a few months later reporters began questioning the origins of the banner: was it the navy’s idea or a White House spin operation? *The New York Times* referred to it as “the banner that will not go away.” By November 2003, when the Iraqi insurgency was gaining momentum, the White House reluctantly admitted it had created the banner, but as the *Times* further stated, “No one seems to want to take credit for coming up with the idea.”

But this debacle has not prevented the White House from penning more slogans and designing additional signs set in garish types with clichéd graphic gimmickry derived from overused Photoshop filters. And what a bag of tricks they are. The most persistent is the use of Roman-like faux intaglio and engraved letterforms to give an air of authority and truth—although the effect is more Las Vegas casino. To celebrate the fourth anniversary of the “No Child Left Behind” act, someone got a little creative and added a drop shadow to a font that fakes the look of chalk or crayon lettering. This is only one evolutionary step away from introducing the Lariat font (novelty letterforms made from rope) whenever W is speaking from Crawford, Texas. Another intelligent design trope is the use of secondary colors to “complement” the classic red, white, and blue backdrops at many of his speeches. Sparkling gold and silver are now favored, as if a little bling might instill ideas pimped by POTUS with a certain regal street cred. He bad!

No president before Bush—not Kennedy, Reagan, or Clinton—relied on such huge typographic statements to get their messages across. I checked 100 or so photographs of past presidents’ major speeches and saw no such signs or banners for “The New Frontier,” or even “The Evil Empire.” Their respective oratory did the job just fine without any need for read-along subtitles. But the current administration, perhaps worried that Bush’s less than commanding oratorical style could have an adverse or

emetic effect, has committed to using visual/verbal aids—like cue cards aimed at the audience—to steer our gaze straight to the point. This isn't necessarily a bad thing in this age of diminished attention spans, but the strategy would be more effective if the White House communications department hired real typographers and graphic designers instead of computer geeks.

“Sparkling gold and silver are now favored, as if a little bling might instill ideas pimped by POTUS with a certain regal street cred.”

Whether they are geeks or bumbling DIYers, the evidence of typographic disregard—and malfeasance—continues unabated. During 2005 and into 2006 a string of new slogans appeared around podiums at speeches, bill signings, and town meetings—all annoyingly typeset in disproportionately large and small caps, some in bastardized versions of Optima, Copperplate, and other barely recognizable sans serif fonts. The reasoning makes sense: signs add content and context to photo ops. When W poses in close proximity to these illuminated slogans, it's as though he becomes a living political poster. In fact, during the White House's November 2005 blitz campaign, designed to goose sagging poll numbers on Iraq, type treatments for the demonstrative “Strategy for Victory” and the less effusive “Plan for Victory” were featured on newspaper front pages throughout the United States and abroad. Even when set so atrociously (and with all the subtlety of a PowerPoint presentation for a financial-services company), the slogans served as alternative headlines that spoke without ambiguity.

Rove is expert at conveying “on-point” messages to the Republican “base.” So whether or not a typeface has subtle nuances that tickle a typographer's fancy is irrelevant. Like socialist realism, POTUS *Typographicus* must be base as well as direct, clear, and downright all-American (no French or German typefaces are tolerated). Yet it is a mistake to disregard type's nuances; even a seemingly neutral face adds to—or diminishes—a message. For instance, when the President addressed the White House Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Leadership Conference in March 2005, the sign bearing the slogan “Compassion in Action” was set in an expressionless serif font so bland that it removed any hint of ingenuousness from the word *compassion*.

“When W poses in close proximity to these illuminated slogans, it's as though he becomes a living political poster.”

There is no historical reason why this White House should care about typography. Throughout the twentieth century the common charts and graphics used during

Congressional hearings have been routinely lackluster. (And have you noticed that the Presidential seal has not been redesigned since Truman was in office?) Although good design is not totally ignored by government, as evidenced by the old Presidential Design Awards program inaugurated by Richard Nixon, it has never been near a top priority; there has never been an U.S. undersecretary of design. (Incidentally, I'm available.) Still it is not unreasonable to expect that the most powerful nation on earth could afford more sophisticated typography.

Why must signs used at the celebration of important initiatives like "Preventing Human Trafficking" or "Stem Cell Therapeutic and Research Act of 2005" be routinely set without any respect for leading or word spacing—and then printed in gold? What's wrong with a little more attention to detail? Will it make government bigger? Will it eat into the tax cuts for the rich? Will it make the nation soft? Beveled edges and Photoshop drop shadows may be fine for candy bar and football logos, but they don't give our country the credibility it wants or, for that matter, deserves. In the final analysis, good typography is patriotic.

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About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA Designer As Author at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, Second Edition and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).

Comments

14 comments.

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Posted
Tue May 30, 2006
by Glen.

I initially read this article in Metropolis Magazine and it articulated a lot of things that had been mulling in the back on my mind.

I think the cringe-worthy typography stems from a couple of sources.

One is a general disregard for things that are "elitist." Anyone with a computer can add a drop-shadow to their Microsoft Office word art. The same people who do this on a regular basis to their family newsletter can feel a sense of validation from the highest office in the land about their artistic clout.

Second, and slightly related, is a general dumbing-down of typography and information design in the media (well, television media at least). One look at Fox News' Rococo-meets-WalMart-inspired main news screen will make this abundantly clear. Even CNN and MSNBC fall victim to this trend.

Perhaps it's a symptom of an overload of 24-hour information without a capable design structure to make sense of it, or that typography & design might not be priorities for these organizations who compete for ratings by using sensationalism. Either way, too many viewers simply accept what they are given and too few demand

change.

It will be very interesting to see if this kind of typography continues on to the next president's media team or if it meets a swift end.

Thank you for addressing this issue.

Posted
Wed May 31, 2006
by Leila Singleton.

As a typophile, I do object to such egregious type treatments...

...but if you prefer to look at the bright side (made luminous by an outer glow, of course), it COULD be theorized that the person setting this type is actually a brilliant designer who has decided that this atrocious design aesthetic is PERFECTLY suited to such trite, empty phrases as "A Brighter Future for America," "Mission Accomplished," and "Strategy for Victory." In this way, the type treatment becomes a commentary where form reflects content, assaulting the retina to underscore the phrases' lack of substance!

...that would be the hope, anyway. I fear it's more likely the work of an intern run amuck with Photoshop...or PowerPoint. Here's another slogan to set in fake small caps, stretched vertically with multiple glows and bevels applied:

HOW MANY TYPEFACES HAVE TO SUFFER?

Posted
Thu Jun 1, 2006
by Danny.

If you want to see something even worse, check out the "Fox & Friends" logo on Fox News. I believe that's the morning program. I actually have wondered if perhaps, since most designers are apparently liberals (or that's how aiga and all the pubs make it seem) if perhaps this isn't all the work of liberal designers purposely doing bad work for (what they perceive to be) republican/conservative clients. Who knows...

Posted
Mon Jun 5, 2006
by SK Arkins.

Thank you once again Mr. Heller for exposing the typographic and design oblivious.

I think that the current administration is using the same interns to design these items as the FBI did to create the new anti-piracy slide that I am forced to watch at the head of every DVD. I scream every time I see it.

You're our design Hero fighting against the callow use of typefaces and Photoshop filters by the Empire!

Posted
Tue Jun 6, 2006
by Josh Hardy.

In general, politics have never seemed fertile ground for good typography.

Posted
Wed Jun 7, 2006
by Harry S.

I agree -- the President's typography is terrible. But his campaign materials looked much better than Kerry's. Think back to Kerry's anemic serif font -- an after-thought, really -- and recall Bush's bold, rightward-leaning blocky sans-serif bumper stickers. Why was Kerry's so forgettable? Why didn't Bush hire the people who made his campaign designs to do his flight deck propaganda?

Posted
Wed Jun 7, 2006
by John Mindiola III.

Yeah, can we PLEASE stop using the faux small caps option? I want to vomit everytime I see those big, disgusting caps next to their stunted little brothers. I've spoken to exhaustion on the difference between a true small caps font and the faux small caps style, only to receive blank stares and horrifically ignorant comments like, "It's not a big deal, we do it all the time." Hello?! True small caps fonts are just as necessary as real italics and real bold faces. Besides, in most cases (like on television and computer screens), the use of small caps instead of all caps is unnecessary at best.

Do you desire a look of seriousness and professionalism? Perhaps try all caps all tracked out or left-flushing everything. PLEASE, I can't stress this enough: NO MORE FAUX SMALL CAPS! And if you don't know what I'm talking about, you're just as guilty as these sickening type assassins. My views on the W? Well, first fix the type, then we'll go from there.

Posted
Wed Jun 7, 2006
by Mace.V.

Typography? What's the shape of land got to do with anything?
As you said towards the end of your article Steven, it's of little priority.

Posted
Fri Jun 9, 2006
by Matt.

Great piece and right on target. But as a "computer geek" myself, I take offense to Steven's suggestion that one of us was responsible for these typographic crimes against humanity ;) I prefer to think that it was some low-level assistant to a political operative with Powerpoint...

Posted
Mon Jun 12, 2006
by LJ.

As a former employee of a federal agency, I can tell you (unfortunately) that bevelled edges and drop shadows are just EXACTLY the kind of thing my internal federal clients really wanted and asked for. And those were the better clients, believe it or not. Other times, I was actually told to NOT make projects look good, lest people assume that a lot of time and/or money had been spent on them. At first, I tried to offer alternatives and suggestions. But they wanted what they wanted and didn't feel that we designers were professionals with any valuable expertise to offer. Rather, we were thought of more as very low-level technicians. In truth, design was considered optional at best. It was most certainly not regarded as a profession. I left.

Posted
Wed Jun 21, 2006
by Kristy Pennino.

I find that their typeface selection and manipulation follows suit with what you might find on a motivational poster typically observed within a military workplace environment.

Sure, it's enough to make you want to throw up, but I imagine it makes those who are accustomed to viewing bad type feel right at home and secure with their voting decision. The likelihood that the type in question was in fact set by a military employee in some public relations department seems high to me. In which case, you can't expect that their education in design and typography matches your standards.

You also can't expect they'll hire an award winning and industry respected firm to slap something up behind the president in the 30 minutes they had to do it. It would have taken them two weeks just to select the proper typeface.

Posted
Fri Jul 21, 2006
by Andrew Sturgess.

Aesthetic value in America has deflated swiftly since the Summer of Love in 1967 - A period when aesthetics and counter philosophy ruled a generally united culture of people (united, at least, in thinking and acting, but often in actual events; be-ins, happenings, et cetera).

This freedom of existence from the standards of conformism (though conformism always exists, on some levels, within a subculture itself) coupled with a serious shift of values to favor creativity and expression simply shocked the nation. Inevitably, the Freaks became enemies to America and its history. What that history exactly means, I may never understand.

Thanks to America's Best and Brightest (I suppose this also includes major media broadcast designers, but I am mainly referring to our armed forces, their supporters, and the best and brightest voters who gave the POTUS a second term) we may eschew all acts of creativity and aesthetic thinking. European nations who favor good design over imperial power have obviously missed the boat on what a Nation (with a capital

N) can and should be!

I'm afraid that patriotism doesn't exist anymore, because it carries with it a sense of unity, a strenght within a nation to continue its cause. Half the country would look at these hideous designs and not flinch - They've been given them because market research and fiscal numbers prove they are effective. The other half, well, we're busy writing comments about a somewhat facetiously written article in an almost NEVER facetious publication. it's THAT BAD.

Substanceless presidential drivel does not surprise me one bit. What does surprise me is the fact that so many people believe we're still one nation, and that poiitics are going to change and unite us in 5 or 10 years.

I will admit that one flyer received in the mail from Connecticut State Senate candidate Eileen Daily was fairly well designed - It was definitely done by a designer and not a political intern.

It's hard being an aesthetic renegade who also understands typographic nuiances. My best work is hard to digest for some -certainly radical to many- but I like to believe it has plenty of beauty within and has never been concerned about marketable value. A problem when your field is called "Commercial Art", i must conceit!

...But I'd rather live through this time knowing that I always championed creative, expressive, and artistically sensitive thinking to everyone in my world, and attempted to convince those not-so-visually inclined that beauty is a pretty damn important part of our existence.

Posted
Mon Aug 14, 2006
by Andy B.

Bad typography is the perfect partner to bad ideas. Wouldn't you rather that the best work of our profession not be used to seduce America into accepting deadly and senseless policy? -- Andy

Posted
Sat Aug 19, 2006
by TIMMYTOOTH.

GREAT, i LOVE IT

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