

# Presidential Rhetoric and the Cold War:

## Redefinition of American Exceptionalism

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The words people use are not neutral artefacts; they shape ideas and behaviour ...  
The historian finds it rewarding to explore the imagery a particular period has used,  
consciously or unconsciously, to interpret its experience. - W. Leuchtenburg<sup>1</sup>

Asserting the primacy of 'ideological identification' over 'state affiliation', the Cold War is readily attributed with the decline of the nation as a unifying concept, its belligerents dismissed as superpower-oriented spheres which defy description as nation-states in the pre-1945 sense.<sup>2</sup> In empirical terms, there is no metric with which to measure the accuracy of this assumption. But from an appraisal of Presidential 'space race' rhetoric, this article contends that United States (US) internationalism – couched in the language of altruism – retained inherently nationalist qualities. It seeks firstly to explore the process by which the President's office was progressively located as a site for unity and national definition. The administration of President Kennedy, responsible for some of the period's most spectacular and identifiably American foreign policy projects, exemplifies this consolidation of symbolic influence. Using Presidential rhetoric to access national mood it is possible, secondly, to trace the way in which US foreign policy initiatives were manifestly infused with a primordial national character, deliberately reminiscent of America's pioneer tradition, while also symptomatic of an aggressive, renewed sense of exceptionalism. From this assessment, the internationalism of successive US Presidents cannot be seen as a mere political digression, permitted by prosperity and contentment at home; it was, rather, an ongoing act of national self-definition.

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1 As quoted in S. McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy: Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 4.

2 Hobsbawm's inadequate, half-page treatment of the issue is telling in this regard, 'national issues intervening only to underline or disturb the main theme': E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 183.

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Despite its narrowness, the field of Presidential rhetoric is an incredibly valuable and underutilised indicator of 'national character'. Its growth within the scholarly community can partly be accounted for by a transformation in the nature of the Presidency itself, from an office exercising strictly constitutional power, considerable but clearly circumscribed, to one of rhetorical excess.

<sup>3</sup> E.T. Lim provides a word-count content analysis of Presidential rhetoric for a variety of different word 'types': the frequency of 'words concerned with forms ... of formal power, e.g. "constitution", "enact"' has fallen steadily since the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Born of the 'modern doctrine of activist leadership,'<sup>5</sup> this transformation marked a conscious attempt by the administrations of Wilson onwards to increase the popular appeal of the office, and place the President firmly *and visibly* at the apex of the national political infrastructure:<sup>6</sup> invariably, 'a president who wishes to lead the nation rather than only the executive branch must be a loquacious president ... Speeches are the core of the modern Presidency.'<sup>7</sup> The subsequent reliance on exhortation and aphorism – both populist appeals exploiting *pathos* and, importantly, *ethos* – placed a premium on rhetorical idealism over rhetorical pragmatism, allowing the historian-rhetorician to more readily identify 'basic driving forces and motivating ideas, myths and ideals' behind a given administration.<sup>8</sup> To consolidate a few of the more ambitious arguments, Presidential rhetoric essentially 'defines political [and social] reality,' which in creating a 'climate of belief' becomes a 'mood shaper ... a vehicle for the explication of values.'<sup>9</sup> It is thus conceivable that national character, in this context, was more organic than timeless, subject to strategic emphasis and manipulation by the Executive.

Eisenhower's 1960 'President's Commission on National Goals' provides a vivid case study of the extent to which this preoccupation with intangible ideals drove Cold War Presidencies. At the same time, it illuminates the role of the President as a unilateral interpreter of national values. Indeed, in the broader sense of rhetoric-as-public-diplomacy, there is surely no more emphatic an example:<sup>10</sup> the possessive title alone symbolically ties the President to a grandiose quest for national purpose. Significantly, the Commission was something of a landmark in redefining America's national 'mission' as a function of Soviet supremacy. Jeffries argues that post-1945 confidence in an 'American Century' persisted through the Korean War, only to be cataclysmically dispelled after the 1957 launch of Sputnik and the Commission's findings, 'with all it implied about American

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3 T. O. Windt, 'Presidential Rhetoric: Definition of a Field of Study,' *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (Winter 1986), 102.

4 E.T. Lim, 'Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric: An Analysis of Rhetoric from George Washington to Bill Clinton,' *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3, (June 2002), 351.

5 Windt, 'Presidential Rhetoric,' 103.

6 D. Henry et al., 'Report of the National Task Force on the Theory and Practice of the Rhetorical Presidency,' in *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, ed. J. A. Aune and M. J. Medhurst, (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 341. R. L. Teten, 'Evolution of the Modern Rhetorical Presidency: Presidential Presentation and the Development of the State of the Union Address,' *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2, (June 2003), 334.

7 C. Gelderman, as quoted in Teten, 'Evolution of the Modern Rhetorical Presidency,' 334.

8 *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *ethos* in rhetoric as 'the characteristic spirit of a culture, era, or community as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations.' McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy*, 4.

9 D. Zarefsky, 'Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition,' *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 3, (September 2004), 607, 611. McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy*, 3.

10 *Ibid.*, 1-22.

technology, education, military capability and prestige.<sup>11</sup> Walter Lipmann of *Newsweek* perhaps best encapsulates the sudden, public epiphany of national complacency when he wrote:

The public mood of the country is defensive ... We talk about ourselves these days as if we were a completed society, one which has achieved its purposes and has no further great business to transact ... The question is whether this country can recover what for the time being it does not have – a sense of high destiny.<sup>12</sup>

This species of trans-political call-to-arms – echoed *ad nauseam* by the pro-Presidential press – spoke directly, rather than circumspectly, to American nationhood.<sup>13</sup> By reappropriating the powerful imagery of a ‘manifest destiny’, it practically obligated Eisenhower’s successor to ‘insist on its restoration.’<sup>14</sup> Moreover, by identifying foreign policy as the bastion of US prestige, the Commission explicitly conflated ‘national purpose’ with an erstwhile separate ‘international mission.’<sup>15</sup> Whereas the Korean War had been a United Nations endeavour, future military action would not be ceded to an external intergovernmental organisation, but would be a solely American-led initiative. It fell to candidate Kennedy to translate this ‘common conviction’ into meaningful action.

The inherent risk in analysing Cold War rhetoric to explain policy, however, is that ‘the rhetorician makes claims unencumbered by evidence.’<sup>16</sup> When exploring the centrality of the President to the direction and outlook of the nation, it is instructive to look at the implementation of President Kennedy’s policies regarding a race to the Moon. This is one of the few instances in which the personal and rhetorical intervention of a President can be unambiguously traced to the implementation of an ambitious policy. It was, after all, a linchpin of the Kennedy election campaign and agenda, standing in marked contrast to the apathy of the Eisenhower Administration, which, despite Sputnik, reiterated its disinclination to engage in ‘an outer space basketball game.’<sup>17</sup> By contrast, the Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy Inaugural Addresses show that military intervention in South-East Asia was more a legacy of the previous administration than an innovation of the incumbent, and is thus an unreliable indicator of any single President’s

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11 J. W. Jeffries, ‘The Quest for “National Purpose” of 1960,’ *American Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4, (Autumn 1978), 452. A.J. Matusow, ‘John F. Kennedy and the Intellectuals,’ *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), Vol. 7, No. 4, (Autumn 1983), 146.

12 W. Lipmann, ‘The Confrontation,’ *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 September 1959, as quoted by Jeffries, ‘The Quest for “National Purpose”’, 454.

13 *Ibid.*, 457, 461. *The New York Times* was particularly preoccupied with ‘prestige.’ See too H.J. Gans description of US mass media values: R. E. Ostman and W. A. Babcock, ‘Three Major US Newspapers’ Content and President Kennedy’s Press Conference Statements Regarding Space Exploration and Technology,’ *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1, (Winter 1983), 112, 114.

14 Matusow, ‘John F. Kennedy and the Intellectuals,’ 147.

15 Note the unequivocal tone of *Life* magazine when summarising the foreign policy recommendations of the Commission. See: W. Miller, ‘Provocative Goals: President’s Panel Charts US Path for a “World in Revolution”’, *Life*, 12 December 1960, 110.

16 Zarefsky, ‘Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition,’ 610.

17 According to Ostman and Babcock, ‘Three Major US Newspapers’ Content,’ 115, space appears in twenty-eight of Kennedy’s sixty-five press conferences. Chief Assistant Sherman Adams, as quoted in Ostman and Babcock, ‘Three Major US Newspapers’ Content,’ 111. W. D. Kay, ‘John F. Kennedy and the Two Faces of the US Space Program, 1961-1963,’ *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (Summer 1998), 573.

influence and policy innovation.<sup>18</sup> Considering the Republican-controlled Congress to which Kennedy would have to appeal, space becomes an apt testing ground for Windt's theory of President-as-persuader, just as it would become a testing ground for the focus and unity of the nation.

Recalling the *malaise* of late-1950s America, the public had by this time shown themselves in want of an administration built upon an idealistic platform. During the first of the 1960 campaign debates, Nixon's over-conciliatory agreement with the 'freedom' policies enunciated by Kennedy, and his attempts to rearticulate the debate onto more mundane, pragmatic matters like gross national product and cost-of-living no doubt, sat in an unfavourable light, viewed as comparatively unprincipled and unconcerned with Soviet progress.<sup>19</sup> Kennedy's opening remarks are particularly noteworthy, containing three references to the Soviet Union, whereas Nixon's contained none. The 'national purpose' mandate resonated heavily in the new administration's internal rhetoric too: in Vice-President Johnson's space program memorandum, variations on the phrase 'world leadership' appear ten times in the six-page document, and in eight of the memo's nine conclusions.<sup>20</sup> Suggestively, the very first conclusion notes that:

... largely due to their concentrated efforts, the Soviets are ahead of the United States in *world prestige* attained through impressive technological accomplishments in space ... [which] are being *increasingly identified as a major indicator of world leadership*.<sup>21</sup>

Significantly, practical military benefits are touted briefly as an afterthought, at the end of the document.<sup>22</sup> At one level, this language is precisely as insecure as it appears. During Kennedy's personal tenure, the United States had to endure an embarrassing defeat in unimpressive Cuba, whilst Kennedy himself had fared poorly against Khrushchev at the Vienna Convention.<sup>23</sup> Lim's word-count analysis of Presidential rhetoric suggests that the frequency of 'words about power increasing' was highest during his administration.<sup>24</sup> But more than a sense of insecurity, the wholehearted adoption of language of principled idealism over language of practical utility reflects awareness of the need for national leadership to proactively compensate for the loss of a sense of infallibility.

In public, thus, 'space' was to be offered as a new national purpose, answering the dissatisfaction of the Sputnik-*cum*-Commission era and providing a transcendent, almost spiritual alternative to muddier quasi-military quests, à la Bay of Pigs. Less than a month after Johnson's influential memo, for instance, the President stood before a joint session of Congress to deliver an unscheduled State of the Union address on 'Urgent National Needs', culminating with a discussion of the space race.

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18 The 'Quagmire Theory' of inevitable Vietnamese escalation through successive administrations.

19 'Transcript: The First Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate, September 26, 1960,' 26 September 1960, *The Museum of Broadcast Communications*, <<http://www.museum.tv/debateweb/html/greatdebate/92660transcript.htm>>, accessed 7 May 2011.

20 L. B. Johnson, 'Memorandum for the President: Evaluation of Space Program,' 28 April 1961, NASA Historical Reference Collection, <<http://history.nasa.gov/Apollomon/apollo2.pdf>>, accessed 27 April 2011.

21 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Kay, 'John F. Kennedy and the Two Faces of the US Space Program, 1961-1963,' 577.

24 Lim, 'Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric,' 355.

The State of the Union institution itself is of great rhetorical significance, commencing as it does with ‘a public meditation on underlying values ... the symbolic process by which people identify as a nation.’<sup>25</sup> No doubt aware of the shortcomings of argument by pragmatic military necessity, Kennedy explicitly eschewed it in favour of a more positive ‘freedom doctrine.’ In principle, the US would act to promote economic development, encourage cultural dialogue via radio and television, and militarily stabilise countries at risk of programmatic subversion by any power: ‘a contest of will and purpose [as much as of] force.’<sup>26</sup> When the space race was raised in conclusion, as if at the peak of a crescendo, it too was conflated with a battle between ‘freedom and tyranny’: not only would it act as a beacon for *other* ‘men ... attempting to make a determination of which road they should take,’ but as a ‘great new *American enterprise* ... the key to *our* future on the earth.’ Indeed, national unity lay at the very heart of Kennedy’s rhetorical appeal, for ‘if we are to only go half way, in my judgement it would be better not to go at all’ (though the tone of his oral delivery betrays a confidence that this would not be the case) – a prime example of the State of the Union Address as ‘defining exemplary attitudes for citizens.’<sup>27</sup>

That Kennedy secured the substantial and requisite Apollo funding is itself a remarkable demonstration of the influence wielded by the Presidency, on the back of intangible goals and ambiguous results. By July 1963, for instance, Johnson was forced to concede that military benefits – the only physical return promised to Congress and the taxpayer – would be unquantifiable at best, and non-existent at worst.<sup>28</sup> Kennedy made the point of stressing that ‘no one can predict with certainty what the ultimate meaning will be of mastery of space,’ and what pragmatic language he does use (vague descriptions of ‘liquid and solid fuel boosters’ and condemnation of ‘wasteful interagency rivalry’) is only a token attempt at harnessing the credibility of ‘technocrat realism’.<sup>29</sup> Yet on this basis, the federal government would eventually commit an unprecedented 2.2% of its budget to the moon shot.<sup>30</sup> This can be explained to some extent by the post-1939 Presidential affinity for crisis rhetoric, which used a tone of impending catastrophe to encourage rapid, unified and unquestioning obedience.<sup>31</sup> The unusual circumstances of this unscheduled ‘Urgent’ address

25 K.K. Campbell and K. H. Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 140.

26 J.F. Kennedy, ‘Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs,’ 25 May 1961, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/JFK-Speeches/Special-Message-to-the-Congress-on-Urgent-National-Needs-May-25-1961.aspx>>, accessed 25 April 2011.

27 Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 141.

28 R. Dallek, *John F. Kennedy: An Unfinished Life 1917-1963*, (USA: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 653.

29 A point made too in the more famous Rice University speech, as ‘an act of faith and vision.’ See: J. F. Kennedy, ‘Address at Rice University on the Nation’s Space Program,’ 12 September 1962, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-040-001.aspx>>, accessed 24 April 2011. Lim has again provided a graph detailing the frequency of ‘words of causality, eg. “consequence”, “result”’, which shows Kennedy as having the lowest score of all Presidents. See: Lim, ‘Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric,’ 350. This itself may indicate a predisposition against language of pragmatism. Bostdorff and Goldzwig note that this balancing of lofty idealism with pragmatic language was a recurrent trend in Kennedy’s rhetoric, particularly as it relates to escalation in Vietnam. See: D. M. Bostdorff and S. R. Goldzwig, ‘Idealism and Pragmatism in American Foreign Policy Rhetoric: The Case of John F. Kennedy and Vietnam,’ *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3, (Summer 1994), 514.

30 D. D. Stine, ‘The Manhattan Project, the Apollo Program and Federal Energy Technology R&D Programs: A Comparative Analysis,’ 2008, Congressional Research Service, <<http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/110368.pdf>>, accessed 28 December 2011, 7.

31 D.M. Bostdorff *et al.*, ‘Report of the National Task Force on Presidential Rhetoric in Times of Crisis,’ in *The*

suggest as much, with Kennedy further castigating the nation for its unwillingness to ‘specify long-range goals on an urgent time schedule.’ Though he conspicuously leaves ‘judgement’ to Congress, this evocation of immediacy, and the taunting provocation of ‘half-way’ inadequacy, was effective in securing the desired result, the ambition of which is a credit to the power of the office.<sup>32</sup>

Of greater symbolic import were Kennedy’s populist appeals, like that at Rice University, which sought to locate this internationalism-*cum*-Americanism firmly in terms of elemental national values. In this sense, the Space Race was a definitive landmark in the development of the Cold War American identity, representing a break from the rhetoric of World War II moralities and anti-isolationism, harking back instead to the language of Foundation. The Inaugural Addresses of Truman and Eisenhower adopted what can best be described as ‘rhetoric of negativity’, stressing the reactionary nature of foreign policy – Truman’s mechanical communist-democracy catalogue is particularly telling.<sup>33</sup> This exceptionalism born of antagonism was itself a distinctive form of nationalism, but an impermanent one, which relied upon continued military conflict to justify the language of ‘slavery’.<sup>34</sup> Kennedy by contrast, ennobled the mission, and constituted an American sense of purpose *in its own right* which acted irrespective of earthly political struggles, for the benefit not of ‘allies’ or ‘the nation’, but of ‘man’, ‘mankind’, ‘freedom’ and ‘peace’.

This altogether more righteous form of exceptionalism (which saw the administration ostensibly pursue spaceflight cooperation with Khrushchev)<sup>35</sup> was not weaker for its repudiation of adversarial militancy, but rather more potent for its emphasis of more deeply seated American ideals. Space as an ‘opening vista’ speaks visually to the American pioneering heritage, for instance, with Kennedy recalling at Rice that ‘this country was conquered by those who moved forward, and so will space’:<sup>36</sup> the rejection of local, territorially bound, defensive military conquest as a heroic myth, in favour of an aesthetic, *total* conquest of the wilderness. The Moon itself acted as a symbolic focal point in this regard; a firm, measurable and thus tangible metric with which to test the nation, to ‘organise and measure the best of our energies and skills,’ beyond its very literal transcendental appeal lying in outer space.<sup>37</sup> So in the context of popular American history the space program became self-justifying, with the implicit invocation of ‘manifest destiny’, ‘set[ting] sail on this new sea’ and the New Frontier recalling values far more ancient and mobilising than the sense of ideological superiority acquired during World War II.<sup>38</sup> And importantly, space navigated the politically dangerous road between policies of interventionism and policies of non-interventionism: it neither engaged the nation militarily (Kennedy increasingly refrained from even mentioning

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*Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, ed. J. A. Aune and M. J. Medhurst, (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 355. This crisis register was also adopted, during Kennedy’s Cuban Missile Crisis Address.

32 Kennedy, ‘Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs.’

33 H.S. Truman, ‘Inaugural Address,’ 20 January 1949, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, <[http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/50yr\\_archive/inagural20jan1949.htm](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/50yr_archive/inagural20jan1949.htm)>, accessed 27 April 2011.

34 See McEvoy’s definition of exceptionalism, which emphasises the ‘corruption’ and ‘danger’ of the Other. See: McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy*, 27.

35 Kay, ‘John F. Kennedy and the Two Faces of the US Space Program, 1961-1963,’ 573-584.

36 Kennedy, ‘Address at Rice University on the Nation’s Space Program.’

37 J. W. Jordan, ‘Kennedy’s Romantic Moon and Its Rhetorical Legacy for Space Exploration,’ *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (Summer 2003), 215. Dallek, *John F. Kennedy*, 393. As much is recognised by the administration in Johnson, ‘Memorandum for the President: Evaluation of Space Program.’

38 Regarding the seafaring motif, see T.C. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, (New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1965), 528.

the adversary by name), nor ignored the ideological threat, and thus resonated across the political spectrum.<sup>39</sup>

There was an element of pro-capitalism to the Rice Address too, as a sort of counter-ideology to 'communist' space successes. Whereas Eisenhower had sought to downplay the war-economy liaison with his farewell warning against 'a military-industrial complex', Kennedy's dense one-paragraph description of the technology behind the space effort emphasised the superiority of the American financial system.<sup>40</sup> Simultaneously, he reappropriated the tools of nuclear holocaust – 'communist missiles', to quote his later Cuban Missile Crisis address – as awe inspiring monuments to this capitalist ingenuity ('air shattered by the testing of a Saturn booster rocket'). Kennedy was thus able to ever more closely marry 'the American way' to his lunar foreign policy, addressing the ideo-economic insecurity which had earlier underpinned his debate case against Nixon, and the Eisenhower Commission concerns.<sup>41</sup>

The Kennedy Administration, despite its brevity, thus had a disproportionate impact on the Cold War sense of national self. Though the disaster in Vietnam would undo much of the idealism espoused by Kennedy, rendering it less a national myth than a fortuitous distraction, to his contemporaries the rhetoric of the Space Race was a definitive break from the nation's ideological stagnation. Kennedy's singularly powerful role in this regard says much about the dynamics of modern American nationalism: manipulated, influenced and inspired by Presidential agency. By rhetorically locating the conflict outside the realm of military exploits, the President was able to reinvigorate an American sense of purpose, emphasising altruism rather than the usual complacent moral supremacy, and define the nation not by the insecure protection of physical territory, but by its ability to project a *positive*, cohesive, para-ideological 'Americanism' into the cosmos.

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39 See M. Roskin's discussion of Cold War, generational, interventionist-non-interventionist paradigm shifts: Roskin, 'From Pearl Harbour to Vietnam: Shifting Generational Paradigms and Foreign Policy,' *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. G.J. Ikenberry, (Boston: Wadsworth, 2001), 303-321.

40 D.D Eisenhower, 'Farewell Radio and Television Address to the American People,' 17 January 1961, The Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, <[http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/all\\_about\\_ike/Speeches/Farewell\\_Address.pdf](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/all_about_ike/Speeches/Farewell_Address.pdf)>, accessed 25 April 2011. See the passage beginning 'But if I were to say... that we shall send to the Moon...' in Kennedy, 'Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Program.'

41 Note the 'if they can do it, we can do it' tone in Kennedy's opening address. See: 'Transcript: The First Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate, September 26, 1960.'

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