

The Downing of Iran Air 655 Covering the Persian Gulf Tragedy

How did the American media cover the USS Vincennes downing of Iran Air Flight 655 over the Persian Gulf? We analyzed 189 stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news, the *Washington Post*, and the *Washington Times* from July 3, the day of the shooting, through July 19.

The results:

- *Vincennes Defended- Ninety-three percent of all sources defended the actions of the Vincennes' captain and crew. (p.3)
- *USA Faulted- When blame for the shooting was assessed, 74% of all sources targeted the United States and 26% blamed Iran (p.3). On the question of American intentions, coverage was balanced: 51% called the shooting premeditated and 49% termed it accidental. (p.4)
- *Unnamed Sources- Ninety-four percent of all stories cited unnamed sources. The greatest number came from the Defense Department, U. S. military, and Iranian government. (p.2)
- *Human Error Ignored- Only one source (on ABC) identified human error as a factor in the shooting. (p.3)
- *Times vs. Post- The two Washington papers differed sharply in their perspectives on American responsibility for the shooting. The *Post*'s sources were more critical of American actions and intentions. (p.3)

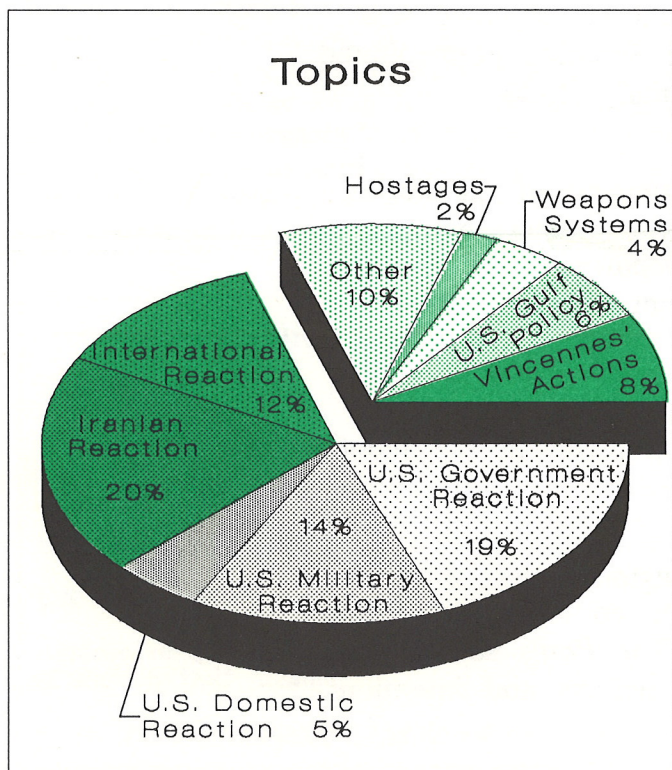
First Reports

The USS Vincennes' shooting of an Iranian airbus on July 3 provoked a deluge of news reports aimed at establishing the causes, assessing blame, and sorting out the political and military implications. Coverage was heaviest during the next week, diminished gradually the following week, and then shifted its focus to developments in the Iran-Iraq War. From July 3 through July 19 we logged 189 stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news and in the *Washington Post* and *Washington Times*. The latter paper was selected for its influence in conservative circles; among its readers is President Reagan.

The networks aired 101 stories on the Persian Gulf tragedy during these seventeen days. Television coverage was about equally heavy on ABC (42 stories, 77 minutes) and CBS (35 stories, 74 minutes), but lighter on NBC (24 stories, 50 minutes). The *Post* ran 61 stories, and the *Times* (which appears only on weekdays) printed 27. Over one quarter of all news reports (51) were front-page or network lead stories.

What's the Story?

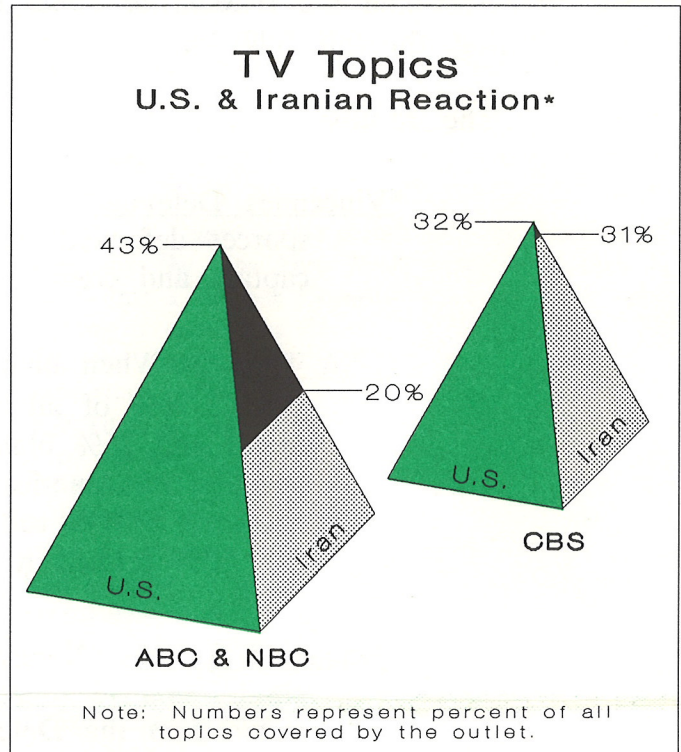
The big news wasn't just what happened in the Persian Gulf. It was the worldwide uproar that followed. News about the USS Vincennes' actions and circumstances surrounding the shooting made up only 8 percent



of all topics discussed. The accompanying debate over U.S. Persian Gulf policy, weapons systems effectiveness, and the American hostages' fate together added only 12 percent.

By contrast, 70% of all story topics concerned reactions to the shooting, from the U.S. (38%), Iran (20%), and other nations, along with the U.N. (12%). These topics varied from Iran's threats of retaliation and the American debate over compensation to the emergency U.N. Security Council meeting and the varied Soviet, middle eastern, and European responses.

For the most part, the different outlets covered the story the same way. There were no systematic differences between print and broadcast coverage, or



between the two Washington newspapers. Among the networks, however, CBS provided the most international focus. CBS gave roughly equal coverage to American and Iranian reactions (32% to 31%), while the other networks gave the USA twice as much coverage as Iran (43% to 20%). Domestically, CBS focused less on the American military than other networks did (13% vs. 23% of all coverage).

Voices Without Faces

When the media cover official inquiries, unnamed sources are as ubiquitous as official "no com-

ments". During inquiries designed to affix blame in the wake of tragedy or disaster, unnamed sources become the primary generator of news connecting the event itself with the eventual official verdict.

Thus, in the aftermath of the Vincennes shooting, 94 percent of all television and newspaper stories cited at least one unnamed source. Just 11 out of 189 stories credited only sources who were fully identified. Overall, we counted 440 unnamed governmental or "official" sources.

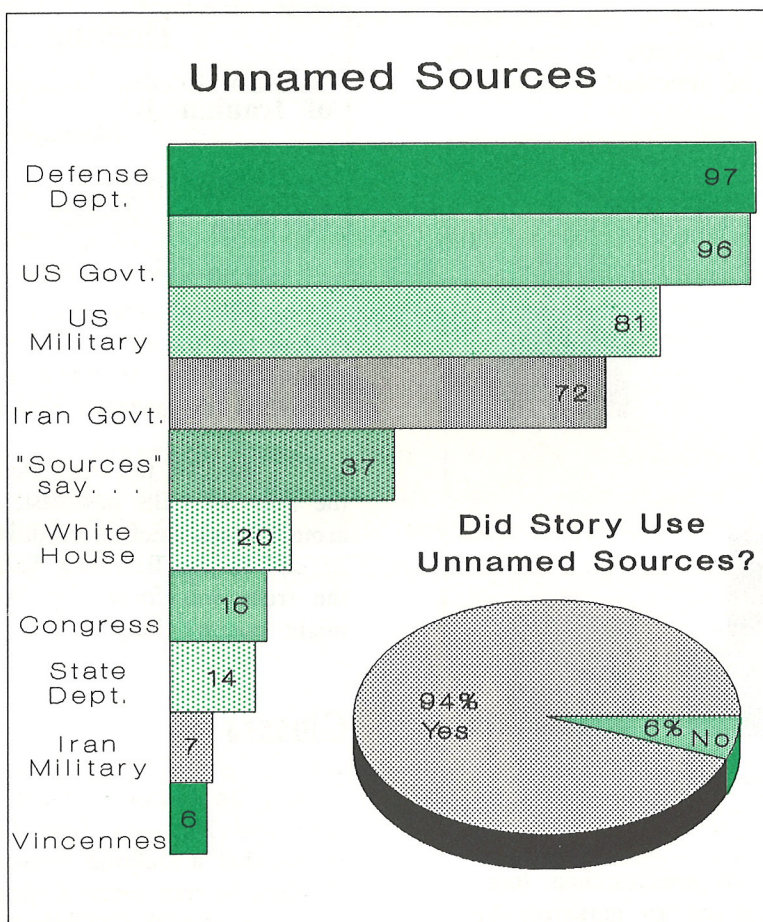
Most stories located the source within a specific government department or agency. Defense Department sources (where the inquiry was being conducted) led the list with 97 appearances. Next came sources identified by some other military affiliation (e.g. "military sources, "F-14 pilots"), with 81 citations. Iranian officials accounted for nearly as many (72).

Those long-favored sources of background information, the White House, State Department, and Congress together mustered fewer citations than the Iranian government. Even the Vincennes chipped in six comments from unnamed crew members. Relatively few items (37) were attributed simply to "sources" (as in, "sources here say..."), but their functional equivalent, "government sources", were cited nearly three times as often - 96 citations in all.

Justifiable Homicide?

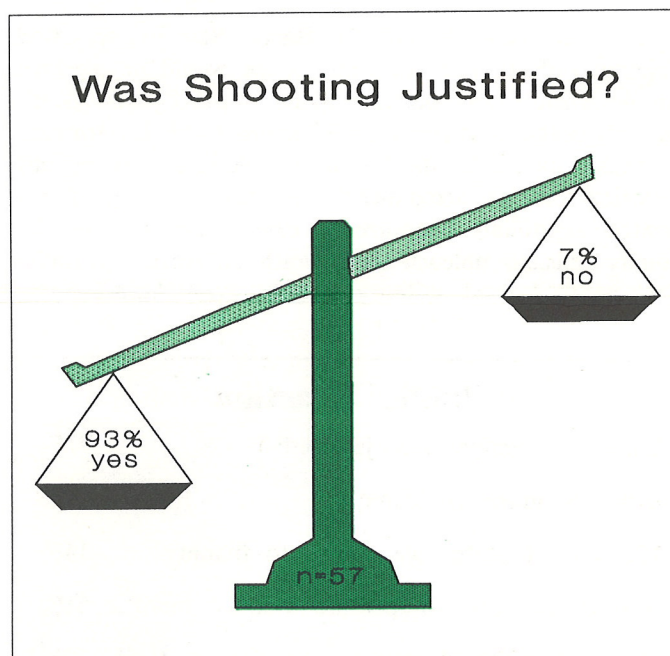
The most common feature of the coverage was a defense of the Vincennes crew. Ninety-three percent of all sources (52 of 56) presented the American ship's actions as justified. President Reagan, Vice-President Bush, and Admiral Crowe were quoted repeatedly to this effect.

Typical was Reagan's statement on the July 4 ABC news, "I think it was an understandable accident



to shoot and think that they were under attack from that plane." Other justifications indicated the ship's combat status, equipment malfunctions on either the ship or the plane, and even suggestions that the plane was on a suicide mission.

The role of human error was raised by only two sources, one of whom rejected it as an explanation. The only story that pointed to human error (later targeted as a major factor by naval investigators) was a July 6 ABC report by Bob Zelnick. He reported, in part, "Military sources say that without human error it would have been impossible for the Vincennes radar system to have confused signals from the airliner with those of a distant F-14."



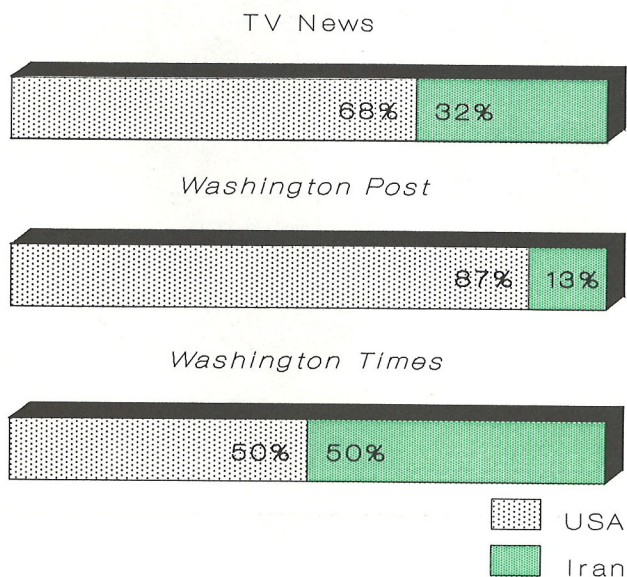
Who Was at Fault?

Sources were much more critical of America in allocating blame for the tragedy. Three out of four laid

responsibility on the U.S. rather than on Iran (74% to 26%). Iranian sources were cited frequently on this point. For example, on July 7 the *Post* quoted an Iran Air flight attendant at a memorial service for the airbus victims: "What happened to them was America's fault, we all agree on that."

There was wide variation among media outlets in assigning blame. The *Post's* coverage was most critical, with 87% (20 of 23 statements) targeting the USA. At the opposite end was the *Washington Times*, where eight sources were equally divided. Only the *Times* gave page one coverage to suggestions that Flight 655 was on a suicide mission. The networks fell in the middle; 68% of televised sources (13 of 19) held America rather than Iran responsible.

Whose Fault?

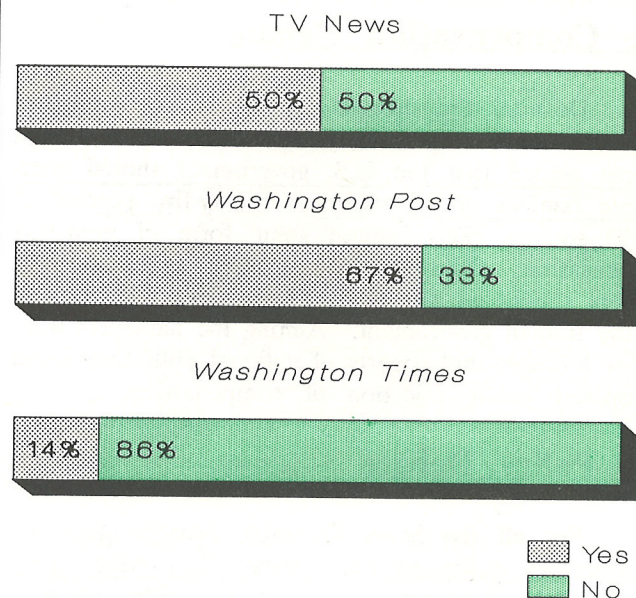


Premeditated Murder?

A narrower debate focused on America's intentions in shooting down the plane. Many Iranian and some Soviet sources claimed that the action was an intentional provocation. On CBS (7/4) the Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations charged, "This has not been a mistake. This was a premeditated attack. It was cold-blooded murder." The next day the *Post* quoted Radio Moscow as calling the tragedy, "deliberate mass murder in cold blood".

This allegation was heatedly denied by U.S. officials. Vice-President Bush received widespread coverage of his response at the United Nations: "The wild allegation by the Iranian side that the attack on

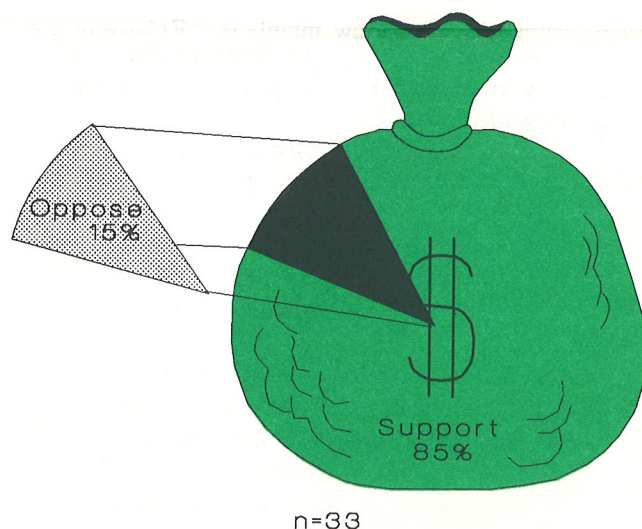
Was It Premeditated?



this airliner was premeditated is offensive and it is absurd."

The coverage split almost evenly on this question, with 24 sources (51%) alleging premeditation and 23 (49%) denying it. But this overall balance conceals sharp variations across outlets. Once again, the *Washington Post* published the most criticism, and the *Washington Times* printed the least. Two out of three sources at the *Post* (12 of 18) charged that the shooting was intentional, compared to only one of seven (14%) at the *Times*. The networks again fell between the two

Views on Compensation



outlets. Their 22 sources split 50-50 over calling shooting intentional or accidental.

The Compensation Debate

Despite the heated debate over American motivation and responsibility for the tragedy, most sources agreed that the U.S. government should compensate families of the victims. Eighty-five percent of the 33 sources cited favored some form of monetary compensation, although they usually specified that payment should go directly to the victim's relatives and not the Iranian government. Among the naysayers were former hostages and reports of national polls that found widespread public rejection of compensation.

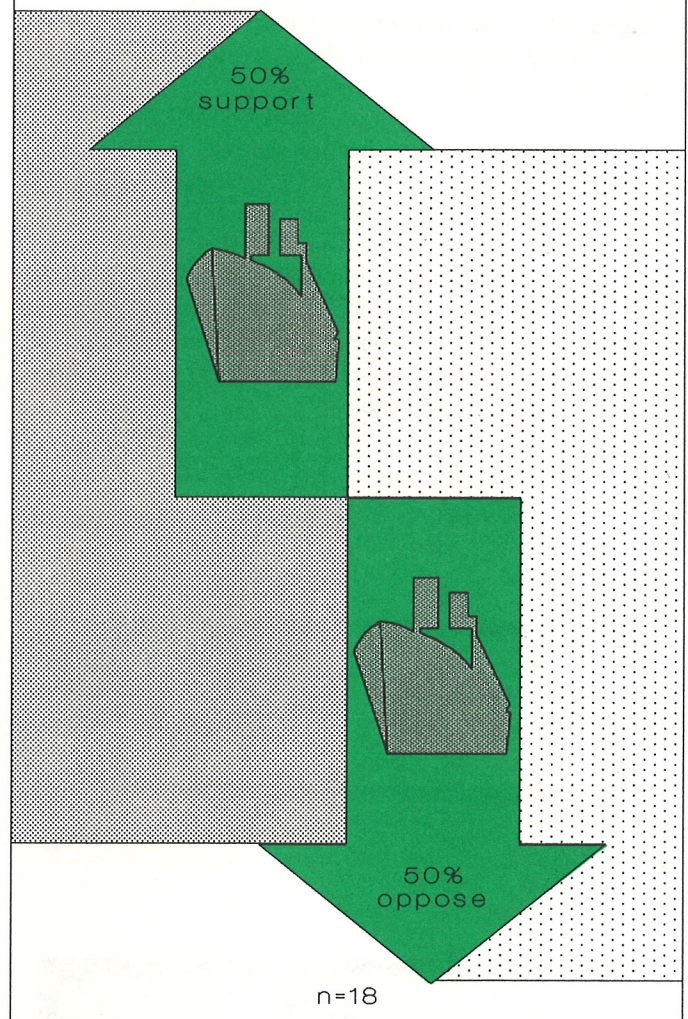
The Policy Debate

For all the heavy coverage, broader questions of American policy in the Persian Gulf were rarely raised. Only 18 sources were quoted as either supporting or criticizing our current policy there. They were evenly divided over its virtues and defects. Criticism was often hedged or stopped short of complete rejection. For example, ABC quoted Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, "I believe the administration should conduct a fresh assessment of this new mission... We cannot stand many more earthquakes such as we have had these last few days.

Tit for Tat?

In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, the airwaves were filled with dire threats or predictions of

Views on Persian Gulf Policy



Casting Stones

It is another result of our being in the Gulf . . . a combination of a guided missile and a misguided policy.

--Jesse Jackson
ABC, 7/3

So what was the big threat to his ship?

--F-14 pilot
Washington Post, 7/6

Maybe it was personal feelings of hostility (by) the commander of the warship that made him shoot down the airplane.

--Iranian pilot
Washington Times, 7/7

How could they know that plane was not loaded with explosives?

--Rep. Bob Dornan (R-Ca.)
Washington Times, 7/7

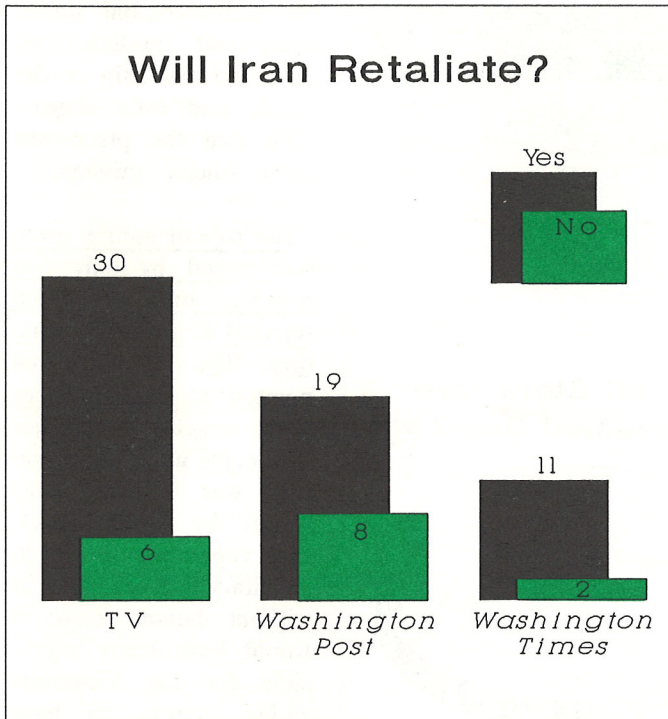
We may very well have given our Navy a mission impossible.

--Sen. John Warner (R-Va.)
ABC, 7/7

Three people in a control room made a mistake? No. The whole system doesn't work.

--Iranian Air Force General
Washington Post, 7/8

Iranian retaliation. On July 3 and 4 television news alone aired nineteen separate forecasts of escalation, along with only three denials of increased tension. By



the end of the first week, 60 sources had forecast increasing trouble, outstripping the 16 naysayers by a four to one margin.

On July 4, ABC's Barry Serafin repeated Teheran radio's claim that the attack would be avenged "in the same blood-spattered skies of the Persian Gulf". On July 6 the *Post* reported Khomeini's call for Iranians to "rush to all fronts for a full fledged war against America and its arrogance." A day later the *Times* printed Ayatollah Montazeri's exhortation to "revolutionary cells...to unleash their wrath on American financial, political, and military targets everywhere."

Public Reaction

Vincennes' action was justified	71%
Iran was more to blame	74%
The United States was more to blame	14%
U.S. should <u>not</u> compensate victims' families	61%
U.S. forces should stay in the Persian Gulf	82%
Approve of President Reagan's handling of Persian Gulf situation	65%

Source: July 6 ABC/*Washington Post* national poll.

Dueling Headlines

Human Errors Blamed in U.S. Downing of Iranian Jet

--*Washington Post*, 8/4, p. 1

Iran also Blamed in Navy Report on Downing of Airbus

--*Washington Times*, 8/4, p. 3

For all the sound and fury, it soon became evident that the other shoe wasn't going to drop. Despite dominating the coverage early on, the question of retaliation disappeared entirely after July 9.

Instead, the story closed with an ironic coda. On the July 18 CBS newscast, Dan Rather quoted Iran's armed forces chief as crediting the shooting for bringing an end to the Iran-Iraq war. According to Rafsanjani, the truce was forced by "America's declaration that it might commit huge crimes if Iran continued the war."

Closers

On August 3, one month after the shooting, ABC news and *The New York Times* reported in their lead stories that a Defense Department inquiry attributed the shooting to crew error arising from the stress of combat. The next day the *Washington Post* ran essentially the same story under a banner front page headline. Three days later, a *Post* editorial questioned whether human error was the only problem and expressed doubts about the report, the ship's technology, and U.S. naval policy in the Gulf. By contrast, *The Washington Times* relegated its August 4 story on the report to page 3. The lead sentence emphasized that the navy's report "does not absolve Iran for its part in the tragedy."

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