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**America the Brutal:
How Did We Get to such a State of Madness?**
By Caleb Rosado*

“I’m the big man. I got the gun. Why does she have this attitude?” This was the explanation a 16-year-old youth gave for killing at point-blank range a mother of three. While her 10-year-old daughter watched in shocked horror, two teenagers ages 15 and 16, ordered Christine Schweiger to her knees, outside of Popeye’s Famous Fried Chicken & Biscuits in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and demanded her money. When she told them she didn’t have any, one of the youth blew away most of her head with a blast from a 12-gauge sawed-off shotgun, giving the above reason for doing so.¹

Many years ago, the renowned communist leader Mao Tse Tung said that “power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” If there ever was a time when this slogan was true, it is today in America. For many people, especially young, male, urban African Americans and Latinos, their only source of power and self-esteem comes from the barrel of a gun. But the type of power Mao referred to was “political” power. The kind of violence society is currently plagued with is “driven more by greed,” suggests Jesse Jackson. Today’s youth, he reminds us, are “not shooting for food and clothes. They’re shooting for territory, conquest, gold, diamonds, cars.”² In other words, the violence we are currently witnessing is *power with an attitude*, as reflected in the reasoning of the 16-year-old who killed Christine Schweiger. It is power that blames the victim for not cooperating with the evil intentions of the victimizer. Thus, it justifies itself by suggesting that people deserve what they got, with a cold, amoral, consciousness, unremorseful attitude reflective of the behavior of the adulteress in Proverbs 30:20, who “eats, and wipes her mouth, and says, ‘I have done no wrong.’”³

Where have we as human beings gone wrong? Why is human life in certain sectors of society regarded as having such little value that on the slightest whim—even without provocation—one human being will blow away another person *with no remorse whatsoever*? Whether the incident is the Rodney King and Reginald Denny beatings, or the bludgeoning to death of a 2-year-old child in Liverpool by a couple of children not much older, or the “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or tribal massacres in Rwanda, or the Polly Klaas kidnapping-murder, or the Menendez brothers slaying their parents the result is the same—violence without guilt, power with an attitude. It is an attitude that says, “You don’t deserve to live.”

How did we get to such a state of madness? This is the question this article explores, in seeking to get a grasp of some handles on an explanation that may give us some sense of what is happening in our world society. The problem is not one-dimensional, whether that dimension be sociological, economical, political, psychological, theological or spiritual; it is a combination of all these factors.

One of the first things we need to understand is that violence does not occur in a social vacuum. Different societies have different attitudes and values towards violence. Depending upon what people value, the outcomes in terms of social behavior will be

different. And it is these aspects of social life that channel, shape, encourage, or discourage violent and nonviolent behavior. When it comes to gun violence, however, it is a “uniquely American problem,” placing the USA in a league of its own.⁴ In 1990, handguns killed only 22 people in Great Britain, 68 in Canada, 87 in Japan. In the USA: 10,567.⁵ Why? The quick answer is that, “they don’t have guns and we do.” But it goes much deeper than that. Let me suggest several reasons across various disciplines, each one of which by itself would not be a sufficient explanation. Collectively, however, they provided a formidable argument for why we are in the present amoral morass of violence. Because gun violence is almost exclusively an American phenomenon, this article will focus on the American experience.

The Social Meaning of Violence:

In American society, violence is:

1. *A cultural-historical value.* The potential for violence was made a possibility from the very foundations of our nation, when the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, in its Bill of Rights, made it clear in 1789 that: “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” Owning and displaying guns, therefore, became a fundamental right of individuals from the very start of American society. Later on in the expansion of the nation, at the expense of the native population, guns became the means by which the ill-devised Manifest Destiny of land appropriation was achieved. Two guns especially played a key role. The first was the Colt Revolver, patented in 1836 by Samuel Colt, and euphemistically labeled the “Peacemaker,” but more known as “the gun that won the West.” The second one was The Gatling Gun, the most successful mechanically operated machine gun patented in 1862 by Richard Gatling. Because the gun was capable of firing 350 rounds a minute through its rotating multiple barrels, it was believed to be the gun to end all wars, due to its formidability. It did the opposite, it only escalated violence. Both weapons were part of the “frontier mentality” in American history. This mindset, combined with the ideology of rugged individualism, gave rise to the image of the American cowboy as an independent, “I-go-where-I-want-to-go, do-what-I-want-to-do” type of fellow so popularized by Hollywood in Westerns, that not-so-coincidentally have made a comeback in the ‘90s. Today’s heavily armed “urban cowboys,” roaming the streets at night in their multi-horse-powered vehicles, are a re-emergence in the late 20th century of their old counterparts, the “outlaws” of late 19th century, who terrorized towns like Tombstone, Deadwood, Dodge City and Abilene. Night has become the new frontier in American society. It is a “time frontier” replacing the old land frontier. Many of the characteristics of the old land frontier—sparse population, isolated settlements, individualism, boredom, greater acceptance of deviance, nearly everyone carries a gun, lawlessness and violence—are all visible in the time frontier of night.⁶

2. *An integral part of the social fabric of the entertainment industry.* James M. Henslin poignantly observes: “It may seem bizarre to members of other cultures, but murder is a major form of entertainment in American society. Night after night we watch shootings, strangulations, stabbings, slashing, beatings, bombings, and various other forms of mutilation and mayhem flashing across our television screens—all in living color.”⁷ Rap music,⁸ music videos, video games,⁹ and movies, especially the slasher movies that are specifically targeted at a teenage audience, are all part of the booming

multi-billion dollar entertainment industry that has become a modern day Pied Piper, luring away our children and robbing them of their childhood through fear and violence from which many are never returning.¹⁰ Sadly, entertainment is the number one product the United States exports to the rest of the world. Which raises the question, will the violence that so dominates American culture and society soon dominate other countries and cultures, as they drink from the “broken cisterns” of select American values?

3. *A by-product of disconnectedness.* Long ago Emile Durkheim, the renowned 19th century sociologist, in his classic study, *Suicide*, suggested that violence is more a product of people’s disconnections from others and from the moral community of which they are a part, in large measure due to the upheaval in people’s lives brought on by rapid social change. He found that there was more suicide—violence against one’s self—for example, in Protestant countries than in Catholic countries, largely because, he theorized, Protestant societies, focused on the individual, left people to fend for themselves in times of crisis. Catholic countries on the other hand, were more communal and the group was valued, providing people with a support system in times of stress.¹¹

There is much truth in Durkheim’s theory. People that are disconnected, that lack social bonds or personal attachments, or whose attachments are to groups [read “gangs”] that are disconnected from, or feel no responsibility to, the larger society, are more likely to commit acts of violence. The high rate of divorce and child abuse that is plaguing families today is resulting in a high number of children with little to no family ties. Their only family is the surrogate family of gang life. In other words, because of adverse conditions, often beyond their control, many people today find themselves *alone* — economically, emotionally, socially and spiritually disconnected. Thus, when one examines what armed African American, Asian and Latino youth gangs, serial killers, disgruntled postal employees on a shooting spree, racist skin heads, and child killers all have in common, it is this: *they all experience in varying degrees a sense of disconnectedness from the larger society.*

Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, clarify this explanation with this insightful statement:

The real basis of the moral order is human relationships. Most of us conform to laws and social norms most of the time because to do otherwise would risk our relationships with others. When we are alone, even the most respectable of us act in ways we would not were anyone present. People who have no relationships with family or close friends, or whose relationships are with persons far away, are essentially alone all the time. They do not risk their attachments if they are detected in deviant behavior, because they have none to lose. Even in highly settled, stable communities some people are deficient in attachments, and it is they who are apt to engage in deviant behavior.¹²

When people find themselves disconnected from the societal rewards of wealth, power and prestige, due to layoffs, lack of job opportunity, or being locked out of the system for economic or political reasons, a sense of frustration develops, which may erupt in violent behavior. In other instances, when blockage occurs, frustration may take on alternate means by which to gain access to social rewards. Thus, since no one is going to get rich working for McDonalds at \$4.25/hour, why not sell crack for \$500/day? The drug economy thus becomes an “employment agency” for many people locked out of

the system.¹³ When people find themselves locked out of the structures and rewards of the larger society, they tend to construct their own group, even if this group is regarded as deviant by society. Why? Because in an age of hi-tech, people need hi-touch—the need for human attachments, those social bonds of affection. When one feels rejected, one in turn can reject the rejecter, and everything they stand for. The result is the development of a *subculture*, with its own value system and code of conduct, “the code of the streets.”¹⁴ This is what sociologist Elijah Anderson, from the University of Pennsylvania, calls the “oppositional culture” of the streets. “It is a culture with its own code of behavior, based on gangsta bravado and gangsta respect, and it is a powerful force in the inner city. It subverts the values of hope, work, love and civility, and it condones and romanticizes violence.”¹⁵ Many of today’s urban youth, especially nighttimers, live in an entirely different world from the rest of the population, the daytimers. These two worlds do not even interact nor relate to each other.¹⁶

Because of the cultural values that males should be the breadwinners and the primary family supporters, males locked out of the system through joblessness and racism tend to experience the most social and psychological strain. This strain is manifested in a state of powerlessness and a sense of inferiority. But since these are two traits that in gang life are perceived as weaknesses, one has to “front” (do impression management), in order to convey the opposite. The result is an overriding concern with respect. When coupled with the psycho-cultural need to express macho images of male bravado, the slightest demonstration of disrespect can result in an instant display of violence.¹⁷ This is because the fragile images of self are barely hanging from a thin thread of self worth. This is one reason why males are the ones most involved in crime.

James Henslin tells us that “the most dangerous time of the week is Saturday night.”¹⁸ Again this has much to do with disconnectedness and the fact that there is a less investment of one’s time and involvement in activities on weekends, giving credence to the old proverb: “An idle mind is a devil’s workshop.” Henslin says, “During weekends, when murders are more frequent, people feel less constrained by schedules and responsibilities, and they are likely to get out in public and, not insignificantly, do more drinking than usual. This increases the likelihood of quarrels, with the peak coming on the traditional ‘Saturday night out.’”¹⁹ It is not coincidental that cheap handguns are called “Saturday night specials.”

4. *A legacy of self-hatred.* The United States of America, because of its unique history as a nation of nations, is largely comprised of racially and ethnically diverse people, who don’t always accept each other on an equal basis. America has had a long and violent history of rejecting the “stranger,” especially the “other” who by virtue of color or culture is seen as different from the white majority.

Throughout our history there have been two ways of determining who is an American, one for the ethnic or “cultural” minorities, the other way for the “racial” minorities. For the former—the Irish, the Germans, the Italians, the Jews, etc.—all they had to do to assimilate and be accepted was to change their ethnic identification and discard their culture, and the socially invisible world of the majority was opened to, because they were “white.” For the second group, identified on the basis of “racial” stigma, the issue was more complex, it was biological, and as a result the shedding of culture made no difference in their acceptance. They were never seen, nor have been seen as “genuine” Americans, only as hyphenated Americans: Native-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc. The implication is that

they are not quite yet Americans, nor can they ever be because of phenotypical differences.²⁰

Such social rejection of persons of color, especially of African Americans because of their darker hue, has resulted in a legacy of self-hatred. This legacy has given rise to a socio-psychological sense of being without value, worth, power and hope. The result is a meaningless life, a life with no sense of worthwhile purpose. It should therefore come as no surprise, especially to white people, when this state of social trauma spills out in rage and violence in the streets. Nathan McCall in his autobiography, *Makes Me Want to Holler: A Young Black Man In America* (Random 1993), reminds us that the consequence of teaching people to hate themselves is violence to themselves. This violence is best expressed in the killing of another person like unto themselves as a form of killing oneself, because my “brother” is an extension of myself. The result is black brothers killing each other. McCall says, “If my life does not matter, your life does not matter either, since neither one of us has a future.” Jesus gave us the principle as to how this happens, when He said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If all I feel is hatred for myself, than all I feel for you, as an extension of myself, is also hatred!

In view of all these factors, one can now understand why it is that young African Americans, Latino and Asian males are the ones most involved in crime and violence. One can now also understand the reason why Asians, Latinos and African Americans turn on each other. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said in speaking of the power in all their hues: “If color made them different, misery and oppression made them the same.”²¹ Economically and politically blocked from societal rewards, and daily taught and experiencing self-hatred, self-rejection, and a lack of self-respect, they attack each other through a “horizontal violence.” This is the violence that results from a sense of powerlessness against an oppressive system and a traumatic inability to alter one’s situation. Thus, each scapegoats the other as a means of dealing with their frustrations. Cut off from the normal societal power supply, they have developed their own form and source of social power—violence, power with an attitude. If power is defined as “the capacity to act,” and if the only way powerless people are able to gain respect is through power which “grows out of the barrel of a gun,” then what one is left with is *power as coercion*—the capacity to act in a manner which forces the behavior of others even against their wishes.

This violence feeds the media, which in turn feeds our prejudices and stereotypes, which ultimately feed our fears and behaviors, even among us persons of color towards our own. Thus it came not as a surprise when Jesse Jackson himself, in a speech given in Chicago near the end of 1993, decrying black-on-black violence, admitted: “There is nothing more painful to me at this stage in my life than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start thinking about robbery—then look around and see somebody white and feel relieved.”²² American as a nation is now collecting on a 400-year debt of violent dehumanization against persons of color, especially African Americans.

There is one further disconnectedness prevalent in society, and perhaps the most crucial one—alienation from God. The further people are from God, the closer they are to violence and inhumanity. Lets discuss this last aspect of violence.

5. *Violence reflects a lack of the “fear of God” in human experience.* The human carnage in our cities and throughout the world raises a crucial question—where is God? This question goes deeper than whether or not God exists, for most people acknowledge that, even the violent person. The real question is this: Is violence the

natural result of the absence in human life of a sense of the holiness and awesomeness of God to whom one has to give account? The Bible calls this the “fear of God.” It does not mean fear in our normal understanding of the term, to be afraid, as when one is spooked. It means to “quake,” to “shudder,” to “tremble” in the presence of a Being so holy, so superior, so overpowering, so removed from evil, that in the presence of this Being, human boasting, human pride, human arrogance vanish as the person bows in humility, reverence and adoration. Rudolf Otto tells us that in relation to God human beings lack a sense of the “mysterium tremendum”—a sense of dread, a “hushed, trembling, and speechless humility” in recognition of that which is beyond human conception or understanding.²³ The prophet Isaiah experienced this sense of dread. “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty. . . And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips!”²⁴

For this reason Proverbs declares, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Any correct understanding of life and the human condition begins here, with a sense of the presence of God in human affairs. When the fear of God is missing from the human heart, evil, corruption and violence prevail. “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good” (Psalm 14:1).

If God is the source of life, than anything that *unjustly* takes life, separates us from God. But the question is: Is the *taking of life* that which separates us from God, or is our *separation from God* that which makes it easy to take life? For sure it is a reciprocal action, but the spark of that action lies in our separation from God. The psalmist in Psalm 36:1 says: “Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts.” Why? Immediately the answer comes: “There is *no fear of God* before their eyes.” Abraham went down to Egypt and feared for his life. When asked why, he declared, “I thought, ‘There is *no fear of God* at all in this place, and they will kill me,’” (Genesis. 20:11). Where God is not feared, life is cheap. When people are removed from God, human life is not valued.

What Can We Do?

Once the problem has been clearly defined, the solutions are easy to detect for they emerge from the definition of the problem. An assessment of all the above leads us to the following steps of action to alleviate the problem of violence. I say “alleviate” because as long as evil persists in the world, violence will always be a reality to contend with. While most of these solutions have already been proposed, implementation will not be easy, for there will always be opposition, especially from those who have a vested interest in maintaining things as they are.

1. *Limit the availability of firearms.* The passing of the Brady Bill and the ban on assault weapons is a good start. But more is needed. Guns have to be removed from the streets.

2. *We need a more responsible entertainment industry that will put human welfare above profit.* This, of course, is easier said than done. But if there is one thing that comes across crystal clear, it is this. The money changers in the temple of capitalism in America today are just as amoral, just as callous as the young gunmen that kill without a conscious in our streets. Both could care less about the quality of human life. The only difference is that the capitalist does it through socially acceptable means, and rarely receives a higher sanction than a slap on the wrist, such as recent efforts by congress to limit violence on TV and in video games. The kid on the street sees no difference. For sure the latter behavior results in death, while the former does not. But both attitudes are just as murderous for their insensitivity.

3. *Put the money in jobs and education, not in prisons.* Crime in many cases is often the only option open for people to gain respectability when no other doors are open. We need to open these other doors. One of the best doors for young people to go through is the door of *quality education*. Much of what passes for education in our urban centers does not even meet minimum standards. A lot of teachers have given up on their students. We need teachers that are willing to inconvenience themselves for their students. Otherwise, they will graduate from the schools of the street to the higher education of prisons. Comparing four-year costs for college and incarceration, the differences are staggering (see graphic). Four years of college in a public university costs on the average \$23,892. For a private university the cost is \$59,644. But four years in a federal prison cost \$80,288.²⁵ Simple math tells you which one is the wiser investment of funds. What is needed is not “three strikes and you’re out,” but as Jesse Jackson says, “Four balls and you’re in”—Headstart, education, vocational/ technical training, and jobs.

4. *Build strong attachments.* The family needs to be strengthened. Support networks need to be developed in communities. We are all members of “gangs.” Some gangs or groups are simply more socially acceptable than others. We need to move youth from deviant gangs to socially acceptable gangs. Here is where churches can play a key role, setting up alternative, surrogate families to replace gangs. The church needs to become “family” for many estranged persons, for the church in a special sense is the home of the connected.

Churches cannot take the position that God’s kingdom is not of this world and only focus on the spiritual. While Jesus spoke much against violence, the church cannot just posture from a stance of separation and aloofness, and spew out condemnations against violence. It is because of this myopic vision and mission, why many young offenders do not see the church as a viable option for change in their lives. Yet the

church may very well be the most important institution to mediate change in the ghettos and barrios of America. Why? Because, as Jim Wallis from *Sojourners* declares: “The cruel and endemic economic injustice, soul-killing materialism, life-destroying drug traffic, pervasive racism, unprecedented breakdown of family life and structure, and almost total collapse of moral values that have created this culture of violence are, at heart, *spiritual issues*.”²⁶ [For what churches can do, see the sidebar, “Ten Point Plan to Mobilize the Churches.”²⁷]

5. *Teach self-respect and self-love.* We must teach our children to reject rejection and not themselves, by giving them positive images of self rather than negative ones. Part of the problem has to do with “adulthood,” the abuse of the power imbalance which adults have over children and youth. Children and youth have no power over their lives. “Without power to protect themselves, children and youth are constantly restricted, disrespected, and abused by adults.” At home, at school, at church, at work, on the sports field or on the street, adults hold all the authority to decide their future. And they do so through grades, discipline, arrests, report cards, allowances, evaluations, lies, failed promises and neglect. The result is low self-esteem. “When we only help them develop higher self-esteem we lie to teens. We lead them to believe that they are the problem and that they are to blame,” resulting in “internalized oppression.” What they need is adults serving as *allies*, to help change the odds.²⁸ Adults need to model respect for children, and teach them to respect each other. This lesson especially needs to be taught to boys, to respect girls and not treat them as sexual objects. Images of women in the media have to change because such images are encouraging sexual abuse and a rising lack of self-respect among girls and women, resulting in self-hatred and a low sense of self-worth.

Audre Lorde, the African American poet, tells us. “It is a waste of time hating a mirror or its reflection instead of stopping the hand that makes glass with distortions.”²⁹ Black and Latino youth today are shattering social mirrors of self-hate and in the process are cutting and killing themselves. What they need is our help in “stopping the hand that makes glass with distortions.” One such effort in America today is *multiculturalism*, the respect for the contribution other cultures have made to our nation. Multiculturalism is redefining *who* is an American by challenging the taken-for-granted definition of American as “white.” It is telling the people of the United States of America that an “American” is any person that is a citizen of this country either by birth or naturalization, no matter their skin color, physical features, cultural expression or national origin. The result is group pride and empowerment, the ability to enable people to be self-critical of their own biases so as to strengthen themselves and others to achieve and deploy the maximum potential of this nation. At the heart of this empowerment lies what Whitney Houston sang to us in her 1986 hit song, “Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.”

Jesus made it clear that at the core of a healthy relationship with others lies a healthy relationship towards oneself. Why? Because at the heart of all forms of oppression lies one's concept of self, regardless of race, color, or gender. If one has never fully accepted the self, one can never fully accept the “other,” not even God. This is why Jesus declared, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). Jesus was seeking to communicate an important truth, that my attitude and behavior toward others is a reflection of how *I feel about myself!* “Of the various problems plaguing society, most can be reduced to the problem of identity—failure to accept oneself with a total

emotional maturity which allows one to be comfortable with self, and does not seek to take away from others their humanity or add to others that which will make them less than human. Thus, the degree to which any person fails to grant another person total human dignity and acceptance, equates the degree to which that person is enslaved and dominated, whether by someone else or by his or her own distorted self-image. The oppressor, then, needs liberation just as much as the oppressed.”³⁰

Ultimate self-love and self-respect, however, come when we as human beings recognize our value to God. For the value of a human soul is determined by the price God was willing to pay for its redemption. The truth of this principle should be the guiding force in our lives, giving us a positive image of self, and a healthy, respectful relationship with other human beings.

Actually most people have never experienced it. Martin Luther correctly observed that the “natural” person cannot fear God, for the natural does not comprehend the spiritual. The fear of God is only experienced through the “spiritual” dimension of life. Unfortunately this is the one dimension in people’s lives that is the least developed. This why people today, in ever increasing numbers, are in search of spirituality—that intangible reality and animating force which connects us to God, however defined, and to each other, resulting in a state of security and in a sense of worthwhile purpose. Churches need to recover a sense of spirituality in their ministry. Far too often they merely operate as business corporations. Churches need to become spiritual centers connected to social reality. People want and need a God that is real, not one enshrined in organized, meaningless ritual. We need to break out of the old religious paradigms and explore new ways of connecting urban life with divine life. This will not be easy, but the rewards will be great.

The other day, on my way home from San Francisco, I pulled off Highway 101 outside of Cloverdale, to pay tribute to the informal memorial set up by the side of the highway to the memory of Polly Klaas. It was a sobering sight, recalling the experience of her death at the hands of a heartless killer. Of all the kind words expressed in cards, paper scraps and on wood, one written on a board moved me to the core. It simply read: “For a brief moment an angel rested here.”

If Polly’s life had been respected, she would still be with us. God respects life. Humans need to learn that respect for all the Pollys of the world. In so doing we will restructure a society that is safe for differences and where human life is valued.

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⁷James M. Henslin, *Social Problems*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994), p. 170.

⁸See cover article, "when is rap 2 violent?" *Newsweek*, November 29, 1993.

⁹See cover article, "Attack of the Video Games" *Time*, September 27, 1993.

¹⁰See cover article, "Growing Up Scared: How Our Kids Are Robbed of Their Childhood" *Newsweek*, January 10, 1994.

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¹³Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

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¹⁵Tom Morganthau, "The New Frontier for Civil Rights," *Newsweek*, November 29, 1993, p. 65. See also Elijah Anderson, "The Code of the Streets," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1994.

¹⁶See reference in note 6 above.

¹⁷For excellent discussions of the relationship between respect and violence, see Nathan McCall, *Makes Me Want to Holler: A Young Black Man In America* (New York: Random, 1993); and Elijah Anderson, "The Code of the Streets," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1994.

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