

THE RACIAL ATROCITY OF THE CIVIL WAR: THE MASSACRE AT FORT PILLOW

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Atrocities were second nature in the U.S. Civil War. Newspapers on both the Union and Confederate sides wrote about the savagery of the war and the barbarity of the fighting. But none of the atrocities of the Civil War can quite compare with the massacre at Fort Pillow, which would become the “atrocious” of the Civil War¹. On April 12th, 1864, Fort Pillow held Union forces; the 13th Tennessee Cavalry (white), the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery Regiment, the 2nd U.S. Colored Light Artillery Regiment and an unknown number of African American civilians². When the battle of Fort Pillow began in the early morning hours of that fateful day in April along the banks of the Mississippi River in Tennessee, what unfolded by the day’s end became “the most famous atrocity of the nation’s bloodiest war.”³

General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the commanding officer of the Confederate troops, attacked Fort Pillow on the three year anniversary of the attack on Fort Sumter.⁴ While General Forrest had the deceiving attribute of appearing ‘gentle’, deep inside was a vicious personality with the will and the way to carry out violence.⁵ In General Forrest’s eyes, it was better to inflict a devastating defeat on the enemy rather than negotiate with reason. In other words, it was better to wipe out the enemy and obtain their total destruction.⁶ With this mindset, General Forrest was not scared of inflicting death. He could kill without feeling. Since he could kill without guilt, it comes as no surprise that General Forrest killed some of his own soldiers who displayed cowardly behavior. “In Forrest’s mind, the killing of one of his own soldiers now and then as an example of what a coward might expect, was a proper means to the end.”⁷ Forrest’s conviction that the enemy had to be decimated in order

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Henry, Robert. *First with the Most: Forrest*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1944. p. 248.

2 *Freedom’s Journey: African- American voices of the Civil War. Fort Pillow: Testimony of Jacob Thompson and Ransome Anderson (1864)*. Ed. Donald Yacovone. Chicago: Laurence Hill Books, 2004. p. 144.

3 Cimprich, John. *Fort Pillow, a Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. p. vi.

4 *Freedom’s Journey*, p. 144.

5 Fuchs, Richard. *An Unerring Fire: The Massacre at Fort Pillow*. Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1994. p. 31.

6 *Ibid*, p. 31-32.

to declare victory and the ability to kill without caring would be key factors that would allow the events at Fort Pillow to occur.

With the idea that the enemy had to be slaughtered, victory was the only acceptable option in the eyes of General Forrest. Defeat was unacceptable and humiliating. But General Forrest met defeat at Fort Paducah in late March, 1864. During the battle of Fort Paducah, Union and Confederate soldiers were engaged in fighting for about one hour when "General Forrest sent a flag of truce to Colonel Hicks (the commander of the fort) with a demand for the surrender of the garrison."⁸ General Forrest encouraged the surrender of the Union soldiers by promising to treat all captives as prisoners of war. If, however, the General was forced to storm the fort, the captives "could expect no quarter."⁹ While General Forrest had no intention of storming the fort, he had used the same bluff that had resulted in the surrender of Colonel Hawkins and his forces at Union City.¹⁰ But, without Forrest's permission, Colonel Thompson, one of Forrest's officers, led an assault on the fort. Assuming that General Forrest had given the order for the assault, many captains and their men, including Captain Tyler followed Thompson's lead and charged. The results were devastating.¹¹ According to Captain Tyler:

...we dashed forward in a wild rush in the direction of the fort. The enemy opened upon us with a most terrific volley. Colonel Thompson was slain and a number of the troops killed or wounded by this discharge. The rest of us sought safety in a rapid retreat...¹²

The Confederate soldiers had met defeat. General Forrest's forces suffered twenty-five killed and wounded.¹³ Having met defeat, General Forrest laid his dark eyes on Fort Pillow with a thirst for revenge and the urge to inflict casualties on Union forces.¹⁴ The stage had been set for the massacre at Fort Pillow.

At dawn, on April 12th, 1864, the first of Forrest's soldiers under the command of Brigade General Chalmers arrived at Fort Pillow and the battle had begun. At about nine o'clock, the Confederate forces made a general assault on the fort. The assault was pushed back and the Confederates suffered heavy losses. But it was

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸ Wyeth, John Allen. That Devil Forrest: Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959, p. 304.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 301-303.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 305.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

¹⁴ *Freedom's Journey*, p. 144.

not over. The Confederates set up their sharpshooters and took aim at the fort. This resulted in heavy losses for the Union forces, including the head commander of the fort, Major Booth, who was shot and killed instantly when a sharpshooter bullet penetrated his heart.¹⁵

At ten o'clock, General Forrest arrived at Fort Pillow. He took charge of the operation from that point on. He ordered some of his men to get into positions on the south side of the fort and from there, move into a ravine on the south and east sides of the fort. The ravine would provide protection for the Confederate soldiers from Union forces and would also put the Confederates at an advantage for an attack on the fort.¹⁶ At eleven o'clock, the Confederates made a second assault on the fort, but again were pushed back with heavy casualties.¹⁷

At 3:30 pm, all firing from Fort Pillow stopped when General Forrest sent a white truce flag to the fort. He gave the fort a note addressed to Major Booth. Unbeknownst to Forrest, Booth had been killed earlier that day and command of the fort had fallen to Major Bradford.¹⁸ General Forrest demanded the surrender of the fort with the promise that all captives would be treated as prisoners of war. But Forrest also warned, "Should my demand be refused, I cannot be responsible for the fate of your command."¹⁹ Major Bradford, under the guise of Major Booth, asked for one hour to consider the surrender. General Forrest gave him twenty minutes. Again, under the guise of Major Booth, Major Bradford wrote back "I will not surrender."²⁰ The battle of Fort Pillow was over, but the massacre at Fort Pillow was about to begin.

After receiving word of Major Bradford's refusal of his offer to surrender, Forrest gave the order to prepare an attack on the fort. Remembering the defeat at Fort Paducah, a creed of hate flowed through the veins of Confederate fighters under the command of General Nathan Bedford Forrest; a deadly force was created and ready to explode. "According to Andrew Jackson Grantham of the 5th Mississippi,

15 Ibid, p. 52.

16 Castel, Albert. Black Flag over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War. *The Fort Pillow Massacre: An Examination of the Evidence*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. p. 91.

17 Fuchs, p. 52-53.

18 Ibid, p. 56.

19 Ibid, p. 56.

20 Ibid, p. 57.

when Bradford's reply was relayed along Forrest's line, it mutated from 'I will not surrender' to 'Go to hell, and turn your dogs loose.'"²¹ Union blood was to be split, and it was the Confederate soldiers' job to commence in this 'bloody work.'²² "The garrison had resolved to die- *not to surrender*."²³ The purpose now was to storm and take the fort at all costs, even if meant heavy loss of life on the Union side.²⁴

A bugler sounded the charge that began the fight for the capture of Fort Pillow. Firing re-commenced between the defenders of the fort and the sharpshooters outside. It was difficult for defenders of the fort to fire their rifles without exposing themselves to the sharpshooters. As the Confederate soldiers made their way into the fort, the Union soldiers held their ground. But soon, the Union forces were compelled to pull back because of the enemy's superior firepower. They retreated down a steep hill and hid behind logs and trees to protect themselves. As the Union forces continued to pull back, they soon found themselves trapped; surrounded by Confederates.²⁵ Within five minutes of the charge, the Confederates had the fort in their control. Major Bradford, upon learning this, gave the command, "Boys, save your lives."²⁶

At this point, some of the Union soldiers began to run. Many ran into the river where they were shot and subsequently drowned. As a result, "the river was dyed with the blood of the slaughtered for 200 yards."²⁷ Some of the defenders, realizing they were now fighting a losing battle, "...threw down their arms and held up their handkerchiefs and some their hands in token of surrender."²⁸ What happened next would be so atrocious, barbaric and controversial that many of the Union survivors would go before Congress and testify to make the battle at Fort Pillow an official massacre on record.

At this point, it appears individual soldiers tried to surrender, but many of these soldiers would not live much longer beyond raising their hands in the air in an attempt to surrender. Instead:

21 Ward, Andrew. River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War, New York: Penguin Group, 2005. p. 192.

22 Ibid, p. 192.

23 Wyeth, p. 327.

24 Ibid, p. 327.

25 Cimprich, p. 80.

26 Ward, p. 198.

27 Wills, Brian. A Battle from the Start. New York: Harper Collins, 1992. p. 185.

28 Cimprich, p. 80.

The rebels commenced an indiscriminate slaughter, sparing neither age nor sex, white or black, soldier or civilian. The officers and men seemed to vie with each other in the devilish work; men, women, and even children, wherever found, were deliberately shot down, beaten, and hacked with sabers; some of the children not more than ten years old were forced to stand up and face their murderers while being shot; the sick and the wounded were butchered without mercy, the rebels even entering the hospital building and dragging them out to be shot, or killing them as they lay there unable to offer the least resistance. All over the hillside the work of murder was going on...²⁹

When soldiers threw down their arms, they asked for quarter and to be treated as prisoners of war. This did not happen. Many soldiers, regardless of skin color, were shot while begging for their lives to be spared. Their cries went unnoticed; they were shot and left for dead. Women and children met the same fate.³⁰

“The Confederates came after them shouting, ‘No quarter! No quarter!’ and ‘Kill the damned niggers; shoot them down!’ All who attempted to escape were hunted down and shot. Many who raised their hands in surrender also were shot down, especially the black soldiers. Pleas for mercy were answered with curses and bullets.”³¹

At first glance, this massacre appears to be an indiscriminate killing of both African Americans and whites; men, women and children. About half of the Union forces at Fort Pillow on April 12th, 1864, were killed. However, an examination of the statistics of the massacre states otherwise. Between 277 and 297 soldiers were slaughtered along with an unknown number of African American civilians. Sixty-four percent of all African American troops present at the time of the massacre were killed.³² The pure racial hatred held by the Confederate soldiers is highlighted by this fact, and is complemented by the testimony before the Congressional Committee on the Conduct of War.

29 Reports of the Committee on the Conduct of the War: Fort Pillow Massacre. Returned Prisoners. United States Congress: Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War; May 6, 1864. p. 4.

30 Fuchs, p. 62.

31 Castel, p. 93.

32 Freedom's Journey, p. 145.

During the massacre, an unknown number of atrocities, most of them racial hatred in nature, occurred. Jacob Thompson, an African American cook at Fort Pillow, testified about the racial atrocities. He told the Congressional Committee about black sergeants who were nailed alive to logs and then the logs were set ablaze.³³ This was clearly an act of racial hatred because the Confederate soldiers who carried out this act had to restrain their victims as they were nailed alive to the logs. As the black sergeants were being nailed, there is no doubt that they released unbearable screams of pain. Being burned alive is also an agonizing experience. To be unmoved by the pain and suffering of another human being simply because of skin color highlights the racism present at the massacre of Fort Pillow.

It may seem legitimate to assume that these vicious atrocities carried out by Confederate soldiers may have been done in the craziness and madness of the war. However, Ransome Anderson's statement under oath highlights that General Forrest and his men knew what they were doing and intentionally carried out what can only be considered premeditated murder. One important yet disturbing aspect of Anderson's testimony was the Confederate soldiers' treatment of wounded Union soldiers. Anderson stated that Confederate soldiers told the wounded to go into a house where they would receive treatment from a doctor. Instead, the wounded were barricaded inside the house with no escape and the house was set ablaze.³⁴ This tactic can be considered premeditated murder as it, without a doubt, took time to carry the wounded soldiers (many of whom could not walk) into the house, and then took even more time to barricade the house up so the wounded could not escape. After all this extra work, only then was the house set ablaze which emphasizes the Confederate soldiers' intention to massacre and finish off the wounded Union soldiers.

Daniel Tyler, an African American private, testified about being buried alive. Tyler was shot after he surrendered. Surviving his bullet wounds, Tyler contended that it would be in the best interest of his survival not to move or speak. If the Confederates thought he was dead, he would not be shot at again. At sundown, Tyler's body was tossed in a shallow grave and he was buried alive. Before Tyler was shot and buried, he suffered brutally at the hands of the Confederates. Tyler had his eye stabbed by a carbine before being shot.³⁵ Being stabbed in the eye is a painful and no doubt a gory and bloody ordeal. For a human being not to be moved with compassion at the sight of a horribly wounded man simply because of the color of his

³³ Ibid, p. 145.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 147-148.

³⁵ Reports, p. 18-19.

skin emphasizes the intense racial hatred of the Confederates soldiers involved in the massacre.

Thomas Adison, another African American private, stated under oath that he was wounded before he tried to surrender. Upon being wounded, Adison retreated down the hill. After surrendering, Adison was shot in the face, which broke his jaw bone. Knowing that he was badly wounded, the Confederate soldier who shot Adison searched his pockets and stole his money. Eventually, Adison was helped to a house and was laid outside the house with a number of other African Americans who were wounded. They were told they would be treated by a doctor in the morning. Luckily, Adison was warned that the Confederate soldiers planned to kill the survivors in the morning. Adison escaped, but the wounded African Americans who remained stationary outside the house were killed the next morning. After Adison's escape, he heard that wounded African American children were murdered execution style. While he did not witness this, he heard Confederate officers order the children to stand to be shot and then after the gunfire; he heard small bodies hit the ground.³⁶ Like Tyler, Adison suffered brutally at the hands of the Confederates. Enduring a broken jaw was certainly an agonizing experience. Also, having to hear the murder of children was also a traumatizing experience. For these Confederate soldiers to be able to look into the eyes of children, and execute them like it was second nature reflects the heartless and unfeeling ideology of Forrest's soldiers.

Private Eli Carlton, an African American, was wounded early in the battle before the fort surrendered. Upon being wounded, his comrades helped him to the hospital. Not long after his arrival, Confederate soldiers barged into the hospital and shot all the African Americans, including Carlton who lay on a hospital bed.³⁷ After the shooting, the Confederate soldiers began roughly interrogating the white Union soldiers. They were asked, "Do you fight with these God damned niggers?"³⁸ If any soldier answered 'yes', they were promptly shot. Carlton witnessed one instance in which a wounded white soldier said yes and had his brains blown out. Another soldier was bayoneted in the stomach until the bayonet broke off.³⁹ To go on a shooting spree of wounded African American soldiers is a violation of the laws on the conduct of war. In addition, the murder of white Union soldiers simply for fighting alongside African American soldiers underscores the racial hatred present at the massacre.

36 Ibid, p. 20.

37 Ibid, p. 28- 29.

38 Ibid, p. 29.

39 Ibid, p. 29.

Another African American private, George Shaw, swore under oath that he was shot after surrendering. The Confederate soldier that shot him shouted, "Damn you, you are fighting against your master."⁴⁰ This statement reflects the belief among Confederate soldiers that an African American soldier in a military uniform was guilty of slave insurrection. As a result, Shaw was shot in the mouth and the bullet exited out the back of his head. His body was then thrown into the river.

In the river, Shaw witnessed the murder three young African American boys, all of whom were under the age sixteen; all three of them were shot in the forehead.⁴¹ Shaw had managed to hide himself by taking cover under some brush in the river. These three young boys were not so fortunate. Unable to swim, all three boys were struggling to keep their heads above the water. That's when they were shot.⁴² To see children struggling to stay alive, only to watch them be killed was certainly distressing for Private Shaw. The fact that the Confederate soldiers who killed these children did not feel guilty or show remorse highlights their racial hatred present.

Shaw heard another Confederate soldier state, "...it isn't our law to take any niggers prisoners; kill every one of them."⁴³ Due to the fact that there was no law requiring Confederate soldiers to take African American prisoners of war, many Confederates used the absence of a law as justification for the slaughter of African Americans at Fort Pillow. With the non-allowance of African American prisoners, Confederate soldiers were given the opportunity for their murderous rampage.

It must be noted that nearly all of the Confederates present at the battle of Fort Pillow were unmoved by the human suffering during the massacre. Sergeant Clark, of the Confederate Army, was one of the few soldiers who tried to stop the massacre; however, his calls for a halt to the slaughter fell upon deaf ears. While he did not testify before Congress, Clark described the scene as, "Their fort turned out to be a great slaughter pen. Blood, human blood stood about in pools and brains could have been gathered up in any quantity."⁴⁴ The massacre at Fort Pillow was a bloodbath, according to Sergeant Clark and the massacre went farther than it should have. But Sergeant Clark's yells to stop the massacre were ignored as he was shouting alone. Most of the Confederate soldiers at Fort Pillow screamed for Union blood to be spilt. The Confederates therefore followed the orders of those who screamed the loudest.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 25.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 25-26.

⁴² Ibid, p. 25.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 26.

⁴⁴ Cimprich, p. 81.

Although a Confederate, Sergeant Clark, as he watched the massacre unfold, felt sorry for the Union African Americans and the fate they met that day. "The poor deluded negroes would run up to our men, fall upon their knees and with uplifted hands scream for mercy but they were ordered to their feet and then shot down."⁴⁵ These African American men literally begged for their lives and simply because of the color of their skin, their lives ended with a bullet. This repeated atrocious act against African American soldiers emphasizes the racial hatred present at the massacre of Fort Pillow.

On April 13th, 1864, the massacre was over. But the survivors would meet a similar fate as their comrades at Andersonville. The few Union survivors of Fort Pillow that were able to walk were marched to Andersonville prison (called Camp Sumter) over the course of 7 days, 77 percent of the survivors would die there.⁴⁶ Andersonville had become their death camp just as Fort Pillow had been to those that passed on before them.

After the removal of the walking survivors, and the severely wounded were placed on Union ships sent to medical camps; only then were Union soldiers who were not present at the massacre of Fort Pillow allowed to survey the scene. What they found were remnants of a massacre. According to Captain Ferguson, "He saw bodies of men that had been 'bayoneted, beaten, and shot to death, showing how cold-blooded and persistent was the slaughter of our unfortunate troops'."⁴⁷

The Confederates found many disturbing reasons to justify the massacre. When the Union Army began accepting the enlistment of African American soldiers, the Confederates and many white people of the south saw this as slave insurrection against their masters. As a result, a law was passed in all slave states that made slave insurrection punishable by death. Under Confederate Law, the murder of African Americans in a military uniform was acceptable.⁴⁸ Other Confederates would claim that because there was no formal surrender of the fort, the massacre was justifiable. Individual forms of surrender in this respect were thus considered unacceptable.⁴⁹ By justifying the killing of all African American soldiers in uniform and refusing to accept individual surrenders explains the cold-blooded murders that took place at Fort Pillow. It is evident here that the Confederate soldiers involved in the post-surrender massacre at Fort Pillow had little to no intention of taking prisoners. They killed off most of the survivors in cold blood.

45 Ibid, p. 81.

46 Ward, p. 288.

47 Ibid, p. 267-268.

48 Fuchs, p. 129.

49 Cimprich, p. 81.

On April 13th, 1864, newspapers spread the story of the massacre at Fort Pillow. In the *St. Louis Missouri Democrat*, it was argued that Confederate soldiers present at the massacre sought mostly to slaughter African Americans (soldier and civilian) more than anything.⁵⁰ Knowing that the Confederate soldiers at Fort Pillow were racists filled with hate, many African American Union soldiers realized that they could not expect to surrender to Confederate forces without meeting certain death. As a result of Forrest's refusal to grant quarter to all who tried to surrender, particularly the African American population, the *St. Louis Missouri Democrat* gave this warning: "Especially let every colored soldier when going into battle remember that with him it is victory or death, and when called upon to surrender, let him 'Remember Fort Pillow'"⁵¹ 'Remember Fort Pillow' became the battle cry for African American Union soldiers following the massacre.⁵²

When Lizzie Booth (the wife of Major Booth who was killed early in the battle at Fort Pillow) attended a military ceremony, she gave a blood-stained flag to Lieutenant Colonel Jackson. The flag was from Fort Pillow. It had been saved by a corporal who wrapped his bleeding leg in it in order to prevent the Confederates from taking possession of the Union flag. "Colonel Jackson accepted the flag, called the troops to kneel down, and led them in swearing to avenge the victims of the Fort Pillow massacre."⁵³ Fort Pillow would never be forgotten by the Union Army for the remainder of the U.S. Civil War.

After the massacre at Fort Pillow on April 12th, 1864, African American Union soldiers no longer expected quarter and for the most part, refused to surrender for the remainder of the war. Every battle for African American soldiers became a matter of life and death. "For black troops, the character of the war had changed, taking on a level of savagery that few white troops knew."⁵⁴

In any period of history, whenever there has been a military disaster, there is a need for a scapegoat; someone to blame. The Congressional Committee on the Conduct of War blamed the Confederate soldiers who acted with savagery worse

50 Ibid, p. 90.

51 Ibid, p. 90.

52 Freedom's Journey, p. 144.

53 Cimprich, p. 104-105.

54 Freedom's Journey, p. 144.

than the atrocities committed by the Native Americans in early American history.⁵⁵ Some blamed the Union Army and President Lincoln. "Several radical Republican papers charged that both the Federal army's unequal treatment of black troops and Lincoln's lenient reconstruction policy encouraged the massacre by demonstrating a lack of respect for blacks."⁵⁶ While both of these accusations are legitimate, most, if not all of the blame belongs to General Nathan Bedford Forrest. General Forrest has the blood of all those killed at Fort Pillow on April 12th, 1864, on his hands.

There is no doubt, being head commander of all the Confederate soldiers present at the battle of Fort Pillow, General Nathan Bedford Forrest should be held accountable for the outcome of the massacre. When Sergeant Clark tried to stop the massacre, "he believed his effort failed because 'General Forrest ordered them (Union forces) shot down like dogs'"⁵⁷ The soldiers under Forrest's authority, thirsty for blood, slaughtered human beings like animals. Forrest's men carried out the massacre at Fort Pillow the same way their commander sought 'bloodlust' on the battlefield. They followed their commander's hate-filled creed; defeating their enemy to the point of annihilation.⁵⁸ General Forrest had the power and the authority to stop the massacre at any moment. He chose not to.⁵⁹ Forrest's men "...had killed blacks and white 'renegade Tennesseans.' In his eyes (Forrest) they probably got what they deserved."⁶⁰ With this attitude, General Forrest saw no need to stop the outright butchery that took place that terrible day in April, 1864.

All individual Union soldiers who tried to surrender should have been spared, but they weren't.⁶¹ General Forrest gave his men the ability to kill without feeling guilty and with a lack of compassion, and filled his men with his creed of hatred against African Americans in general and a particular hate for African Americans in a military uniform. "For a variety of reasons, Fort Pillow became a collective release of pent-up anger and hatred...And as the overall commander of the troops

⁵⁵ Reports, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Cimprich, p. 90.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 81.

⁵⁸ Wills, p. 196.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 196.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 196.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 196.

on the scene, some of whom carried out these acts, Nathan Bedford Forrest was responsible."⁶²

Nathan Bedford Forrest returned home from the war praised as a hero. After his death, a park and a statue were created in his honor. Forrest became a symbol of white supremacy, especially during the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. Forest is also credited with modernization of the Ku Klux Klan. It would not be until the late 1980's and early 1990's that the citizens of Tennessee would call for the renaming of Forrest Park and the removal of his statue.⁶³

There is no doubt that a massacre indeed occurred at Fort Pillow that was racially motivated. Undoubtedly, General Forrest had brought about the massacre by teaching his troops coldness and indifference towards killing and death, and filling the minds of his soldiers with his intense racist creed. The barbaric massacre and the ruthless killing displayed by the Confederate soldiers that fateful day in April, 1864, clearly makes the massacre at Fort Pillow the racial atrocity of the U.S. Civil War.

⁶² Ibid, p. 196.

⁶³ Ward, p. 381-382.

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