For the first time in Mexico, a peaceful transfer of power is about to occur from one political party to another. On July 2, voters ended 71 years of uninterrupted rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Unsurprisingly, confirming the Actonian dictum that power corrupts, Mexico’s police forces have become legendary for their corruption. President-elect Vicente Fox Quesada (profiled in “The Next Mexican Revolution,” fall 1996) has vowed to tackle the issue head-on, beginning with a reorganization of the federal police, when he takes office December 1.

But as the following study of a typical police force on the outskirts of Mexico City demonstrates, corruption in Mexico is by now thoroughly institutionalized and operates at the local and state as well as federal levels. The authors, sociologist Nelson Arteaga Botello of the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico, and sociology student Adrián López Rivera came up with an ingenious way to document the mechanisms of corruption. Adrián López Rivera enrolled in a police academy and after graduation joined a municipal police force. To his colleagues, he seemed to be just another recruit. But behind the disguise he was carrying out his vocation as a social scientist, documenting every interaction and conversation in copious notes.

In collaboration with his professor, he wrote up his experiences for the Mexico City monthly magazine Nexos, which published them in two installments in April and August 1998. The following translation, excerpted to unify the installments, offers a graphic portrait of a situation in which corruption is the norm and honest performance of one’s nominal duty is treated as deviant behavior. The problem lies not with a few rogue cops but with the entire political culture. This study suggests that despite the best intentions of President-elect Fox reform will not occur overnight.

—Andrew Reding
The reasons a person decides to become a police officer, at least in the cases we analyzed, are the following: to accumulate capital to start a business; to recover a loss (home, savings, land); to make easy money; and, in only a very few cases, a genuine interest in law enforcement.

The life of those who aspire to become police officers is unquestionably difficult. Most have had a personal history involving law breaking, violence, bitterness and resentment, and drug consumption, and few have gone beyond a primary or secondary education.

A large number of applicants are immigrants from other Mexican states who are in search of a better life or have legal problems that lead them to leave their place of origin. In the city, they find work in the informal or semi-informal sectors. A few of them have a skill—carpentry, metalworking, radio and television repair, chauffeuring—which affords them an opportunity to find employment. Others with ties to narcotics or stolen-goods distribution rings see police work as a chance to expand their distribution and sales networks. There are also persons who have been police officers most of their lives, and have gone from one police force to another, after being discharged for violent behavior, corruption, or links to drug trafficking and consumption.

In what follows, we describe a few representative life histories. It should be noted that when these men were asked why they chose to join the police force, the typical response, given in the company of peers and usually under the influence of marijuana, was “for money,” to which they would add a brief life history, in which certain facts stood out.

**My Own Bus**

Alejandro sees police work as a way to build up savings to establish his own business. He’s originally from a rural part of the state of Mexico, is 23 years old, has been married three years, and has a child. He graduated from secondary school and worked as a bus driver before applying to become a policeman. He was persuaded to apply by four friends. He wants to be a policeman “for three years, because that way, between pay and bribes, I’ll be able to purchase my own bus.” Alejandro is among the few applicants whose past is not scarred by violence.

Miguel’s case is different. He joined the police to make money and to “recover what destiny and the police” took away from him. His first daughter was born when he was 18. After working in a slaughterhouse, Miguel joined the fire department. But within a year, he was detained for possession of drugs. In the prosecutor’s offices, they asked for his voter identification card and other personal information.

The last name and address coincided with the person they were looking for; all that was missing was to find out whether he was “El Mosco.” That was his brother’s nickname. He did not give his brother up, and instead said he was the person they were looking for. He was incarcerated in the Reclusorio Norte, charged with possession of drugs, robbing residences, and a holdup at a clothing factory. His brother visited him from month to month, for the sole purpose of persuading him that it was best to keep on assuming his false identity.
Miguel comments:

My brother and his gang would come and tell me they were working on getting the money an official requested to obtain my freedom, but the months kept on passing. As an inmate, I had acquired a reputation for being violent. Ten months passed, and I finally got out after my mother sold her house to obtain the money to free me. My job as a fireman awaited me, thanks to the chief, but I didn’t return to it because only as a policeman could I recover the lost money and my mother’s home. That’s what I was told by my cousin Roberto, who is a patrolman.

Rodrigo is originally from Veracruz. He’s 22, single, and left school in the first semester of training as an electrical technician. He killed a person in his hometown:

I went to his house and with five machete slashes I killed him, and for no more than fucking around. Because one day, drunk and half smothered with mezcal [a Mexican alcoholic beverage distilled from agave] in the town bar, my brother came looking for me to help me get home because I was in bad shape. But there was still a lot of mezcal in the bottle, and since we kept on drinking, my brother kept coming back, awaiting the moment I would stop drinking with Carmelo, who now rests in peace. Carmelo was looking at my brother, when he made the comment that cost him his life: “Hey Rodrigo, your brother seems like a fag, the way he moves, and when I look at him he smiles; they say in town that he likes to go out at night in your sister’s clothes in search of a husband.”

Rodrigo left his hometown and moved in with his sister. He worked in the Gillette factory for a year, and his wages enabled him to rent a room. Then he was laid off and applied for a position with the Municipal Police, after being encouraged to do so by a neighborhood friend: “As a policeman, no one will come looking for me for killing Carmelo.”

There are those who make police work a way of life, passing from one department to another, as in the case of Alberto. He’s 29, separated from his wife, with one child. He’s been a policeman since he was 18. In 1988, he became a police officer in a municipality of the state of Mexico; a year later he joined the Preventive Police of the Federal District.

Because his beat included part of the capital’s central plaza, his relationships with street vendors, prostitutes, and homosexuals were part of his daily routine. On one occasion, while on patrol in the center of Mexico City, he ran into two prostitutes taking drugs. He made them get into the patrol car, and negotiated: he would let them go free if they would have sex with him and his patrol partner. The two couples shared a hotel room. “Moments later, there were knocks on the door, and my commander entered the room with other policemen.”

Alberto was arrested, and discharged a few days later. A few months later he was charged with rape, and moved elsewhere, joining a state police force. He remained with the state police for three years until being discharged for alcoholism and drug addiction. He then decided to accompany his brother to the United States, but he didn’t make it at first. He stayed in Tijuana for a while, working as a bouncer at a bar. After six months he made it across the U.S. border and worked as a kitchen aide in a restaurant. But alcohol, drugs, and venereal disease interfered with his work record, and two years later he went back to Mexico with the objective of returning to
police work.

Javier was a member of the motorcycle transit police of the Federal District. He says the best location for extortion is the intersection of Reforma and Insurgentes Avenues, because many wealthy adolescents pass through there at night, drunk and speeding. But better yet than detaining them for those reasons is to wait until they’re involved in an accident or hit someone, and then have to place a telephone call. “In no time their relatives arrive with loads of cash.”

According to Javier, his dismissal was provoked by ambition. One day, in the early hours of the morning, he waited for “the juniors” to emerge from the discotheques. He and his partner had already gathered a considerable sum of money, rings, a gold medallion, and a woman’s overcoat, “one of those heavy, soft ones.” All of a sudden they heard a big noise coming from a neighboring street, which they immediately investigated. A person had run his car into a pole. He was still alive, but that didn’t matter. They stole his wallet containing 800 pesos, rings, gold chains, a watch, and a suitcase with clothing. But when they opened the trunk and found a small bag full of dollars, the man began to react:

My partner...began hitting the individual, who was already bleeding to death, with his pistol. My partner, who was going crazy, ended up disfiguring his face. We had thought he was unconscious, or at least unable to recognize us. We left him that way to slowly bleed to death. Then the neighbors reported the accident and they picked up the dead man. All was well until the relatives started asking for the belongings of the deceased, and one of them discovered that the taco vendor two blocks away was wearing the dead man’s ring. That’s when the investigation began, and it was discovered that those were our favorite tacos.

After Javier was fired, he started looking for work, but as soon as he told anyone he had been a policeman, they turned him away. That’s when he decided to join the police of a nearby municipality.

Learning How to Mine Gold

Like any other social organization with a defined structure, the police creates an order, a hierarchy, and above all values that make possible the reproduction of certain attitudes and behaviors. Though the academy trains cadets not only to carry out their job but to extort as well, the street is the true school of police life. It is there that the cadet puts into practice what he has learned and modifies it to suit reality.

In their first days of active duty, new police officers learn behaviors and attitudes that allow them both to extort and survive, because the danger of losing one’s life is always a possibility. The novices become integrated into the life of the zone to which they are assigned, where experienced police officers teach them how to go about doing things. In this sense, the process of integration has two distinct phases. First, there is the development of an esprit de corps between the upper ranks and the novices. Once this is accomplished, the rookies are prepared to handle themselves in a manner that makes possible the systematic reproduction of corruption.
In one case, a zone commander welcomed new officers in an office, in a corner of which stood an altar with images of saints and the Virgin of Guadalupe, while a sign on the wall proclaimed, *Discretion Is the Virtue of Every Good Police Officer:*

We need young people in the zone, enthusiastic folk with a calling for a police career; capable men strong enough to handle long and difficult days. In 1977, when I joined the force, almost all the men were older, but, in spite of that, they had spirit, they knew police tactics, they exercised control over the zone. Nothing and no one escaped from them; they were like hunting dogs, police officers who perished in the line of duty, who could not be surprised or frightened by anything.

The commander spoke to the novices about his own life as a policeman, perhaps to help them identify with him. He said he was 48 years old and married, with six children. He had no more than a fifth-grade education. In 1977, he joined the municipal police, and three years later was named zone commander, thanks to a friend who was a municipal official. But that very year the municipal government changed hands, and the incoming government took note of rumors about protection money the commander was said to be collecting from businesses, stores, and stallholders in the town marketplace that were within his jurisdiction. He was removed, but after a restructuring of the upper ranks—with the advent of another administration—once again became zone commander.

Once each of the cadets had concluded a brief biography—concealing of course the real reasons for joining the police force, and any dark secrets—the commander used his radio to issue an order to the zone’s patrol cars to come to his office, while giving notice:

Today, because it’s your first day in the zone, you will make the rounds of the neighborhoods; you will see the boundaries of the zone, together with its most problematic points. It’s important that you keep in mind that we are dealing with one of the most troubled zones in the *municipio* [equivalent to a county in the United States]. The zone has serious problems with alcoholism, drug addiction, homosexuality, and prostitution; with more localized problems of youth gangs, street vendors, and organized crime.

Here, young men, there are no *entres* [payments up the chain of command, to share the take in bribes]. You have no obligation whatsoever to your commander, nor to the shift officers. Yours truly does not tolerate extortion, let alone any kind of corruption. However, the zone can be characterized as a gold mine, and all it’s missing is some good miners. You will answer to the head of the first shift, who will explain to you his arrangement. Finally, I welcome you and wish you good luck, hoping you will fit in with the rest of the group, a group that functions as a family.

When the patrol cars arrived, the commander directed each novice to pair off with an experienced police officer. Though the commander had made clear that there were no entres, the reference to the zone being a gold mine and that all that was lacking were good miners, combined with the fact that the shift commander was in charge, led the new police officers to understand that it was precisely to him that the entre was to be given. Their suspicions became confirmed during the first tour of the zone. On the street, the novices learn from the veterans, and what they learn depends on the teacher; and in fact a novice can have several guides who show him the peculiar ins and outs of police life. In what follows we present the case of a newly
enrolled police officer who had the chance to be a student of three prominent officers with lengthy careers in public service.

**The Lessons Begin**

Jorge gave Eduardo his first lesson on how to be a good police officer: the orders of superiors must be obeyed without the slightest hesitation or doubt. “Don’t question the commanders, shift officers, officials or even senior officers, because authority is always right. If one of them gives you any indication or suggestion, just obey him, even if it seems contrary to what you think or want. Authority is always right.”

The second lesson was given out: you must let veteran police officers teach you that extortion is an art that must be learned from them and must be carried out with caution. “Another thing: it’s better to work with an experienced fellow from the zone, a senior police officer, who is familiar with the zone and the methods of extortion. A recent graduate often wants to rob or extort without understanding the consequences. Money must come in little by little, without forcing anything, without affording any opportunity to get caught. Do you know that there are cases in which, after just two months of service in the zone, police officers are discharged for trying to become overnight millionaires?”

As Jorge was giving his lessons, Eduardo inspected every inch of the patrol car, inquiring about the purpose of this or that colored button. The automobile stopped in front of a small fruit stand, where the veteran officer asked to be given two of the largest and juiciest apples. As they got underway again, the novice, following Jorge’s advice, observed with great care each neighborhood they passed through. Come nightfall, the patrolman explained to the rookie that it wasn’t just a matter of working the streets, that there were also ways to have a good time in a zone bathed in prostitution. “Okay now, partner, if you want a woman to quench your fire, what you need to do is get out of the patrol car and pick out the woman you want. And if she doesn’t want to, force her into the patrol car and take her to the station. Try it out and you’ll see.”

The zone was full of prostitutes and homosexuals hurriedly crossing the street on their way to the bars. Mouths with red lipstick and short skirts incited passersby to discover what was hidden behind a curtain of smoke and red lights in each bar and cantina. With dawn, the shift ended, and the patrol car returned to headquarters.

On the next shift, the rookies were introduced to the rest of the zone’s police officers. There were shouts: “We welcome you.... Now my boots will take on a new shine.... You’re being baptized.”

Once the commander had called the roll, the formation dispersed and the “baptism” got under way. The rookies were doused with pails of cold water, then whipped with wet towels, and finally kicked around a bit. Everyone laughed as they watched the travails of the newly baptized rookies. As Gustavo puts it: “The baptism is the way we receive and welcome each of the new companions; you will have the same opportunity with the new arrivals, once they leave the academy.”
The First Shift

Following the initiation ritual, the commander returned to make assignments for the first shift, seeking to pair novices with experienced policemen. The parameters for determining who would be a patrolman or an escort (sidekick), or who would be assigned to a watchpost, were related to the ability to drive a patrol car—possession of a driver’s license—or in the ability to memorize and interpret radio codes.

Thus, for example, Alberto and Heriberto were made escorts because they did not know how to drive. Heriberto teamed up with his brother, who was in charge of a patrol car. Octavio, with his experience as a truck driver, was trusted with the steering wheel of a patrol car; he was accompanied by El Chango, a veteran of the zone. Because of their military experience, Pedro and Raúl were assigned to watch posts in the most difficult neighborhoods.

The shift began at nine in the morning. The police were assigned their destinations, the patrolmen checked their vehicles, turned on their radios, and gave the signal that informed the commander that they had begun their patrols. The patrol cars pulled out into the street. Last to leave were José and Eduardo, who walked to the market nearby.

José: “Have you had breakfast, partner?”
Eduardo: “No.”
José: “Well go for it, because otherwise the donkey doesn’t walk.”

Breakfast at a taco stand lasted more than an hour, after which the patrol got under way. José began giving the rookie his first tips on what a police officer does, which would become the third lesson—the importance of money to survival in the police force:

Look, partner, we are here to get all the money we can, and if you come at this with other ideas you won’t fit into the group, and will therefore be of no use as a police officer. You’re here because you want to get rich overnight. Don’t trust anyone here, neither your companions or citizens; don’t bend to anyone.

Here in the zone, as in all of the police force, don’t inform about what is done and what is heard. There are no names, nor attributes of companions and commanders. Never doubt anything that seems suspicious to you, because it is doubtless suspicious—go check it out, because it’s money.

You should always be alert to what is happening around you, don’t let anything or anyone surprise you. Search, sniff, observe, and discover. Everything in this job is money. After you get experience as a sidekick and then as a patrolman, you’ll realize that what I’m telling you is true. Everything inside the police force is handled with money. No favor from companions, commanders, or the upper ranks is by good will. Everything must be paid for.

The two policemen continued their rounds. Turning a corner, they surprised two people drinking beer on a bench. That’s when Eduardo got his fourth lesson—and his first practical one: a police officer’s proper form of extortion. They detained the youths and took them to the patrol car.
After a long drive, they pulled over on a quiet street.

José: “All right now, boys, would you like me to alleviate your problem of drinking in the public right of way, or would you like to spend 36 hours locked up?”

Detainee #1: “No, officer.”

José: “Well, what are you going to do?”

Detainee #2: “All we’ve got on us is ten pesos.”

José: “No way, what do you mean only ten pesos? What I want is money, but not ten pesos. I suggest you guide me to your home.... In all likelihood your relatives have a little more money.”

The two individuals accepted the proposal. Before arriving, the patrolman told Eduardo to cover up the patrol car number with his body, by leaning against the car door. Just as soon as the family members were informed of the problem, the father shouted to the mother to give the policeman 50 pesos. When the latter received the money, he bid the family a friendly goodbye, reminding them of the importance of keeping an eye on the children to keep them from breaking the law, above all when there are police officers who are doing everything possible to enforce it.

The policemen continued on their rounds, as the patrolman explained—in a fifth lesson—the importance of covering oneself as best as possible while engaging in extortion: “Be careful to hide the patrol car number. One must create as much confusion as possible in case people decide to complain. You can use your cap to cover your face. When the accuser is unsure of the patrol car number and of the police officer who engaged in extortion, then everything favors the police officer, and that’s when you screw ’em.”

With nightfall, the two policemen hung around a bit, awaiting the beginning of the rounds by convoy, that is, in the company of other patrol cars that, in single file, make the rounds of a section of the zone. The objective is to put on a show of force in the streets, to show people the police are watching over their neighborhood. Nevertheless—and here’s where the sixth lesson began—the convoys also serve to extort from groups of youths who drink alcoholic beverages in the streets and in front of their homes. José says:

On weekends, and even more so on warm nights, many people, especially young people, hang out with friends in front of their homes. They talk while drinking beer and listening to music. So there is much to do. First one detains one or two of these persons who are having a good time outside the door to their home. The others come to their friends’ aid by collecting money to release them. Second, as all of them run off, they forget the tape deck and everything else they were entertaining themselves with. That’s where the sidekick comes in. You must take all you can. Things that have value, obviously—don’t pick up pieces of shit. And immediately cover the patrol number to avoid any complaint.

This type of operation yields a lot. If you afterward add up the monetary value of the things you’ve picked up, you’ll see that in very little time you can acquire your own business. But that is something you need more than two police officers for. We must await the arrival of additional patrol cars, because this business occurs in low-income neighborhoods where they are real sons of bitches.
With about half a dozen of the zone’s patrol cars gathered together, the convoy got under way, consisting of some 16 police officers. Heavily armed, they entered the lowest income areas. The caravan was organized by a leader, with the following characteristics: 1) seniority; 2) knowledge of the territory and persons in each neighborhood; 3) precise knowledge of the organized social groups in the zone; 4) experience in dealing with the municipal administration.

The leader organized the work in the following manner: first, he decided how the patrol cars would station themselves; second, he decided who would use shotguns and who would use handguns; third, he indicated who would search those who were detained; fourth, who would bring them to the station for booking, and in case that should happen, who would accompany them; fifth, advised on what to steal, and what not to steal; sixth, indicated who to detain, how to detain them, and how to extort from them; seventh, collected and divided up the money and other articles obtained in the process.

The Most Eloquent Lesson
But without a doubt the seventh lesson Jorge gave him was the most eloquent for a novice. One day, Jorge accidentally fired his weapon while involved in a dispute between neighbors. The bullets struck a 19-year-old student and a 46-year-old worker. Jorge and his partner were arrested and turned over to a judge from the public ministry for investigation. Thanks to a bribe, the investigation was inconclusive. Nevertheless, from that point on they could not return to that zone and police force.

For 300 pesos, José’s patrol car was transferred to another patrolman. Eduardo was assigned to a police post in the zone, where he had to patrol three neighborhoods by foot. With his new assignment, Eduardo had to do the rounds of marketplaces and small shops, collecting along the way the offerings of the shopkeepers. He returned to his post at noon. But the nights were terrible. Beggars, prostitutes, and street children wandered about and made love under cardboard boxes in out-of-the-way spots. The nights became unbearable. Being relieved from the police post became his priority. Fortunately, another patrolman doing his rounds in a police car visited Eduardo and told him how he could get out of that post. In so doing, he reminded him of the lesson about the policeman’s purpose, which he had apparently forgotten: “You’re here for one simple reason, which is because you have not paid off the commander. José must have told you that, shift after shift, you must pay off the commander. If you don’t do that, you’re not a good policeman. Whether a policeman gets assigned to a post depends on the zone’s shift supervisor, and the posts get occupied by those who do not turn in the daily entre.”

A New Teacher
Eduardo offered 100 pesos to the shift supervisor, and was reassigned to a patrol car as an escort. Eduardo’s new teacher, Mario, a four-year veteran of the zone, explained his work style: “I like money but don’t like to fuck people over.... I don’t like to spend a lot of time talking to people.... I don’t like to have to deal with soldiers.... I don’t like dealing with prostitutes and homosexuals.... I believe in the saying that if you want to become an old policeman, make like you’re an idiot.”
Mario went about gathering rents from stores, home-brew wine shops, and *pulque* vendors (*pulque* is a home-brewed alcoholic beverage made from fermented agave juice), concluding around noon. At 1:00 P.M., he went to sleep for his siesta. He woke up four hours later to make the rounds of the zone. They ran into two individuals fighting outside a cantina, but the patrolman paid no attention. On the zone’s principal avenue, they came across two soldiers drinking beer and arguing, but passed them by. In the secondary avenue, they got a report of two individuals holding up a beauty shop, but didn’t answer the call. At about 8:00 P.M., a woman approached, crying, her clothing soiled, complaining that her husband had beaten her. The police officer didn’t pay her any attention either. About 9:00 P.M., a taxi driver reported that he had been assaulted. The officer responded: “If they assaulted you, it was for being an idiot!” At 11:00 P.M., the patrolman went to sleep. At about 7:00 A.M., he got up to watch over the Liconsa dairy products stores; five minutes in each of them were enough to gather several bags of milk. At 9:00 A.M., he turned in the patrol car...and the *entre* to the commander. Then he left with his bags of milk in hand.

On the following shift, Mario again explained to Eduardo the first, and apparently basic, lesson for every policeman—collecting rents {*protection money*}:

You must have a really good idea what the rents are; José must have explained it really well to you. Rents are how the policeman collects from persons who sell beer, *pulque*, and wine without a permit. It’s how the policeman gets money for offering security to shops, wine stands, cantinas, bars, *pulque* stands, butcher shops, beauty shops, barber shops, etc. It’s an arrangement between the owner and the policeman. One doesn’t just work for the sake of working. You will assist those places that pay for service; those who don’t cooperate can go to hell.

Patrolmen collect the rents at the very beginning of the shift. The important thing is to earn them. At first, people distrust the police officer they do not know. It’s important for you to note carefully the people who cooperate, so that they come to recognize you, and that way you alone collect the rents.

But he gave another lesson—the eighth in less than three weeks—that explained the discretionary power a policeman acquires if the shops in the zone decide not to pay their rents:

Many people know what the rents are, others don’t. In that case you must explain that it’s the way the commander collects in order to let them sell within the zone. Obviously once store owners become accustomed to paying the rent and then stop offering the customary cooperation, they become liable to being disturbed, and in the case of cantinas that resist cooperating, they render themselves liable to having the police rape the prostitutes. As you will see, everything in this business is reciprocal. People give money so that the honest policeman carries out his duty in the best way possible. You’ll see that now.

The patrolman continued his rounds, stopping in every store and bar. As he did so, he again told the rookie to be careful not to ask too much in the way of rents, because otherwise it could set off a spiral of confrontation between policemen and the owners of certain businesses, especially those dedicated to prostitution. Just before 1:00 P.M., Mario took a break, taking a nap in the patrol car, while Eduardo monitored radio communications.

That’s how Mario works every day. He’s not interested in extortion, or anything that involves
direct contact with people, and that complicates his life. But Mario does understand that one has to provide the *entre*, and that it is obtained by collecting payoffs from each business in the zone. For that reason Eduardo decided to change partners, to be with a more experienced patrolman, with greater expectations, who would work with the intention of being a good miner.

**The Final Lesson**

Eduardo then gave his shift officer a 100-peso *entre* to be reassigned to a different patrol with a different kind of partner. The transfer occurred without any problem. The next teacher gave him more lessons. His reputation transcended the boundaries of the zone and even the police force. His alias was “El Simpson.”

El Simpson—Ricardo, to anyone who wasn’t a friend of his—is without a doubt an extreme case. For him, collecting rents is more than a competition with his fellow officers. It’s a struggle against time. He’s always impatient, especially when entering or leaving each store, cantina, or moonshine joint. Spending the least possible time is his objective.

It is from Ricardo that Eduardo learned the ninth and final lesson about being a police officer: by wearing a uniform, anyone can enjoy as much impunity as his imagination and avarice will allow.

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**Note**

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