

Edmund A. Gullion Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 07/17/1964

Administrative Information

Creator: Edmund A. Gullion

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Biographical Note

Gullion was a United States Diplomat in Saigon from 1949 to 1952; the Deputy Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Administration from 1960 to 1961; and the United States Ambassador to the Republic of the Congo from 1961 to 1964. In this interview Gullion discusses his first impressions of and early relationship with Congressman John F. Kennedy [JFK]; JFK's 1951 visit to Indochina and its affect on his stance on foreign policy; the State Department's issues with JFK throughout his career; and JFK as a Senator, among other issues.

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Edmund A. Gullion – JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

With

EDMUND A. GULLION

July 17, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Samuel E. Belk, III

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BELK: Ambassador Gullion, how and when did you first meet President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

GULLION: Well, I was working in the State Department at the time as a special assistant to Dean Acheson [Dean G. Acheson], and I remember that Mr. Acheson told me that there was a young congressman who was interested in making a speech on foreign affairs, and he wanted to check some of his facts with someone from the department, and he asked me to go see Representative Kennedy. Curiously enough, I was very naïve. The name Representative Kennedy meant nothing to me even when I had heard that he was from Boston. I made no connection between Representative Kennedy and Joseph Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], the Southwest Pacific hero and all the rest of it, not even after I had talked to Mr. Kennedy. I did go to see him, and my first impression was, of course, I think, the same that many people must have had, his extreme youth and an air of physical frailty. I think he was a man who, until he was 45, always looked younger than he was, and he, of course, was suffering some of the effects of his campaigns in the Pacific. He did want to make a speech. I do not recall the details of it at this time. I think it would be worthwhile, and for my own satisfaction I intend to look it up. His speech, ranging pretty widely over the sphere of the United States' foreign policy, concerned an interest. It struck me that he did not want a narrowly focused address on some particular aspect of his own experience. He wanted to take a look at the United States in

world affairs as we emerged from the war. And that was the circumstances in which we met. I could go on about this speech. I do remember that it was not in the atmosphere of the time; one might have expected it to take either the Soviet Union, our gallant ally, who had stood off the enemy on the east front, or it might have been one that echoed deep concern about communism. Actually, it was a very realistic and an advanced kind of perspective that he had, and it was his own. My own contributions to it were factual, and I volunteered some opinions and some sentences, but I was somewhat surprised and, I suppose, my own very youthful egoisms somewhat checked when I saw the finished product and realized how much of this was Kennedy and how little of it was mine. It was quite an interesting product.

BELK: Were there any other impressions than those you just stated about youth and whatnot that you had of him during the early period of your acquaintance with him?

GULLION: Yes, and in retrospect I think I came to identify these qualities. The first, kind of an audacious plan and a rather diffident approach. I don't know whether his other friends would have found that characteristic of him at this time. I thought it was quite interesting that this freshman congressman was going to take on this kind of an address, and he went about it taking opinions that he thought were useful, and he did it in a rather diffident way, but at the same time he knew what he was doing and where he was going. And that was certainly one impression. As I have said, and I think it may come out as we carry on our conversation, up until the later years of our acquaintanceship, he always seemed to me to be younger than he was and frailer than he was. And I saw him from that period, from 1946 or so on until 1963, intermittently, over like gaps of two years or so. I think that that did permit me to register the extent of growth that had occurred in him, his personality, his philosophy and the impact that he made in personal relationships over that time. Had I seen him daily or had been that kind of an intimate of the President's, I don't think I would have been able to observe that. But seeing him as I did after intervals of some periods of time, the thing that struck me every time was the way this man had grown.

BELK: What was the nature of the relationship between you and the late President during the period, during these early years?

GULLION: Oh, at that time we had no further professional relationship. I saw him occasionally socially, and we had this slight cooperation, collaboration together. He would telephone me from time to time about something to do with foreign relations. I can't, at that time, remember particularly just what those topics were. And I would see him socially for a drink or so. It was not until later, until we met in Indochina, that we had some more significant contact.

BELK: You were close personal friends then?

GULLION: Yes. I'd say we were close personal friends. Let me say here that our relationship was not as close, we were not intimate from school days, and the fact that I was out of the country so much didn't permit us to see a great deal of each other. I think it was more that we were engaged in, later in some things that brought us together in agreement and on the minority side of certain questions. And I think that this is what was really close about our relationship. It would not be accurate to say that the President was constantly looking over every Foreign Service publication to see what became of Gullion or that he had that kind of interest in me. He certainly did after Indochina have a good deal of interest in the Foreign Service and I think was influenced somewhat in his outlook on larger or later questions by the experience in Indochina.

BELK: Ambassador Gullion, as time passed, President Kennedy did maintain a continuing interest in your career, didn't he?

GULLION: Yes, that is true. He did not, for example, reach out and pick me to be Ambassador to Indochina or intervene in the Foreign Service promotion process, but he was interested and would always express an interest in what I was doing. Let me say here, it's a little ahead of our story, but he did not name me, as far as I know, as Ambassador to the Congo. That came about in a normal Foreign Service operation. However, since he and I had stood for a particular point of view on the Congo and Indochina, he was certainly much interested in it, and when the matter was broached to him, he validated it, so to speak. Also, as I say, there is this factor to be considered. Since he was a critic of Administration and State Department policy on Indochina and a very outspoken and categoric critic and since he knew that I shared his views, he felt that he could embarrass me or hurt me in the Foreign Service bureaucracy if he became identified with me, and he showed a delicacy or restraint about trying to consult me. He knew that could embarrass me with my superiors. And indeed, before he acquired the national stature and reputation that he did, it could have been quite damaging and, in fact, one or two times it was a bit sticky.

BELK: Well, quite a number of your conferences during this period were off the record, weren't they?

GULLION: That's true. That is true. He came to Indochina in '51 or '50, I believe it was, accompanied by Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] and by Pat Kennedy [Patricia Kennedy Lawford], Mrs. Lawford, and he remembered our earlier contact. And he had heard something about Indochina. Just to summarize, to recall to you very briefly what the great problem was, the French together with the Emperor Bao Dai were trying to promote an economic and military solution of the problem against the Vietminh, a nationalist movement which had been captured even at that date by the communists with military and political solutions which fell short of the goal, in my opinion, at that time. They did not hold out to the Vietnamese the prospect of a real independence, a

date at which they might expect to acquire independence was not stated, and on the military plane the goals were

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not realistic and the means were not adequate. The French could not and would not throw into that matter, into Southeast Asia, what would have been needed even at that time to win a military solution. I apologize for going into that background, but it's rather necessary to understand that relationship.

BELK: It's very helpful.

GULLION: The President had heard about this situation, and somewhere along the line before coming to Saigon, he had apparently consulted people who knew the personalities in the Saigon picture. And he knew what I stood for, and he knew what others in the embassy stood for. I might say that we were in this respect, although not personally, a rather unhappily divided embassy. The opinions of different advisors and different departments of the government were sorely divided on what the prospects were in Indochina and what ought to be done about them, and upon the reports, the nature and content of the reports issued be made to Washington. It was a situation that was surcharged with a great deal of intense feeling and controversy among Americans as well as, of course, among the French themselves, and, of course, different factions among the Vietnamese. It was an intense, hot, bitter situation. This is when he came to Indochina. He consulted me, he indicated that he wanted to talk to me and that he wanted to talk to different members of the embassy. He'd like to talk to them separately. He also attended the Embassy briefings, and he made a trip up into the North. Now, mind you, as I say he was then still Representative Kennedy. He still had this youthful appearance, he still was in the shadow of his father as his record of achievement was before him. And this intrusion, interesting and intense and objective as it was, of a very young man into this tense situation didn't sit very easily with some of the senior people out there. He challenged the prevailing views at the briefings and in travel. He, at that time had contact with General de Lattre [Jean de Lattre], a rather flamboyant, prestigious, idealistic, extraordinary man who commanded the French effort. Senator Kennedy, President Kennedy admired him as a man as anyone was bound to do, but he didn't refrain from questioning the bases of de Lattre's own plans. It's rather interesting that after the Kennedy party had moved on, General de Lattre wrote a letter, which is a confidential letter, at that time it was, saying in French, . He was far from overestimating the importance and weight of Congressman Kennedy, but he wanted to point out that this was rocking the boat and, to put it in shorthand, I think that this experience there and the method of President Kennedy's operation, I believe, cast quite a shadow into the future. I think that it gave him a certain feeling about how foreign policy, Foreign Service reports should be assessed, some feeling about having direct contact with men behind the reports, certainly in the broader considerations a way of looking at relationships between evolving countries and the former colonial powers and the place of the United States in between the two. And I fancy, in fact I know, that some of his subsequent attitudes can be traced to that time. But getting back to the personal story a bit there, I came

back from Indochina in October '52 to be on the policy planning staff, and shortly thereafter the President, then Senator, renewed contacts

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with me. He had, incidentally, told me in Indochina that he.... I asked him what he was going to do, what his plans were, and he said, "Oh, I expect to go back and run for governor or for Senator." It seems like a very unremarkable statement of a legitimate ambition looked at this time, but I ask you to look at it if you were out in Indochina and there was this extremely young man before you and he makes a statement of this sort and it certainly makes you think, well, has he really got it in him. I thought he had great things in him. I would not have, certainly no one could, I think, prophesied the presidency, and then we came back, and as I say, I've said earlier, this business of seeing him at intervals gave me quite a gauge on him. Just in that short time, you know, from the time I'd seen him as a kid in Dean Acheson's office when I was in Dean Acheson's office and then seeing him in Indochina and then coming back after two years again and seeing him in the Senate and.... In each of those two years he had grown a decade, I would have said, in comprehension and also in the kind of weight and impression that he made upon you. I've monologued here a bit. Perhaps you want to pick up the trail of what you were saying or I could just go along chronologically, however you....

BELK: Cut it for just a minute, would you?

[INTERRUPTION]

BELK: Ambassador Gullion, I was very interested in what you said about the Indochina experience influencing the President's subsequent attitude, say, on foreign policy, on the Foreign Service and the State Department and on people and places.

GULLION: Yes. As I say, he.... Something about his method of operation was formed, I think, in Indochina, that not only illustrated his method, but, I think, that he learned something from that experience. On foreign policy, I think that a great many of the issues that were to preoccupy him have to do with the dilemma of the United States as the architect of the Atlantic Alliance and the principle defender of freedom, and the United States as a former colonial country and one which has always manifested a particular sympathy with the aspirations of new countries of emerging peoples. I think that he came into contact with this in its early and very acute form in Indochina a long time before this became one of the very dominant crises, dilemma, if you will, of our foreign policy. Remember at that time just after the war, although India and the British possessions were going free, a great cascade of colonial authority had not occurred. And although President Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] had challenged, for example, at least in a somewhat offhand way, at least the French thought, the durability, continuity of French power in Southeast Asia, still I think that we did not really foresee that there would be this general sweeping away of colonial authority, nor did we challenge, really, the way in which

our allies were doing things. This, in the Far East was particularly true when we came later on to be involved in Korea, and of course I knew the President during this time, too. It looked as if we were bearing one burden in Korea, and that our European Allies would be bearing something

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of the same burden in Southeast Asia. Without going into that analogy very deeply, it was an extremely false and treacherous one. Our role in Southeast Asia, and Korea, is nothing like that of the French at that time in Southeast Asia. I think the French learned a tremendous amount from their Indochina experience, which they put to great profit in their administration, especially under de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle], their later operations in Africa.

But at that time what the President was doing was in a way challenging the establishment. I don't like to use that word right now, but his stance on Indochina certainly went against the prevailing opinion. I don't think that the President really ever saw himself as a flaming radical, who was out to tear down walls in this sense. I believe he was, his method of political operation at least, was pragmatist. He had certainly long and real liberal goals, but I would never have thought that he would feel at home cast in the role as a destroyer of the existing order or even preconceptions. Yet his challenge here to what was thought and believed in Indochina was quite important. Now when he came back he prepared an address in the Senate which was one of his most important. It states a number of things. I haven't had occasion to look at this in some years, but I believe you'd find that he challenged the feasibility of the French military-political situation, the reality of the independence that was then accorded, the extent to which Indochina or Vietnam could achieve political solidarity in its own house, given the limitations that were still on it from the colonial regime.

Now he, as was quite natural, consulted me about the talk that he was going to make about my views because I'd come back from Indochina somewhat later than he had. I remember going up to his house in Georgetown for lunch, and then we talked for a little bit, and I told him, not in preparation of any speech at all, but I mentioned to him the way I saw things since we last talked in Indochina. And he asked if I would say that same thing, while he went off to play touch football, if I'd say the same thing into a tape recorder, which I did, but which was not a speech in any sense of the word, in fact it was not aimed at any speech. I said he consulted me about a speech; he didn't tell me he was going to make a speech. He was asking about my views on Indochina and he prepared those.... He apparently used this material, and he did use some material of published character, I mean speeches that the Council on Foreign Relations and other remarks about that time which were available to him as they were to anyone else.

He delivered his speech and it was, of course, not too popular in the State Department, and I said that the President manifested always some feeling that he might hurt me in the State Department. I think this was an early instance of it. I was more or less accused, if that is the word, of having prepared the Senator's speech, and this was considered as normally in the State Department and understandably as more or less a disloyal operation in preparing an opposition Senator making an assault on the Administration policy. This is a distortion of what our contact was, but it wouldn't minimize the reality of it, and some of the

representations that were made to me with respect to this. President Kennedy thought it was quite wise to lay off, and I think he was right. I just want to emphasize in this recording that,

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of course, again these views were entirely his own. Even at that time he had the habit and the ability and the range of consultation available to him. He saw great numbers of people, and he saw a good number of people on Indochina. He was already beginning to be one of those who took a great interest, he and Senator Mansfield [Michael J. Mansfield], Mr. Justice Douglas [William O. Douglas], and he was.... He joined in study societies that were interested in Vietnam, and he made talks to them, and I went along to hear some of them, so he was not all in the way, nothing like a conduit for one fella's opinions. Anyone who knows the President knows how ridiculous that is.

But, I think it's rather indicative that some of my colleagues, certainly not all, didn't pick the President as a comer. For example, if this speech had been made by a very senior man in the Senate, say Senator George [Walter F. George], the reactions in the executive branch might have been quite different. There would have been a good deal more hesitation and consideration before condemning it. As it was, the Administration, I was told at different times, said, "Oh, well, of course the Senator up there, he's not a real heavyweight, he's not a member of the club, the Senate Club, he just represents the Kennedy family," and the standards used were relayed up to Administration spokesmen, or rather Administration spokesman. Let me say this was the period when Senator George was a great friend in foreign policy of the Secretary's and Senator George made a speech, as I remember, rebutting Senator Kennedy, and the people dealing with Indochina in the State Department at that time thought that Senator George's remarks were an adequate rebuttal, which, of course, history indicates that they were not.

I think that this experience was of considerable interest to the President. I believe that his approach then to countries and problems like Algiers was bound to reflect what he felt about Indochina. I think at the same time, however, he was always a man who deeply understood the primary, central importance of the American alliances, the North Atlantic Pact, the Pacific Pacts, and going way ahead of our story, coming back down to the period of the Congo, for example, the President was involved in trying to work out a solution. He was always accessible to the points of view of the British, of the Belgians, of course primarily involved, and he was very aware, as he showed in talks with me and in his conduct of Congo policy. Of the fact that the continuing crises in the Congo were not only very crucial for that center of Africa, cockpit of Africa, but also were putting a great strain on the alliance. Solutions and policies in the Congo not only had an impact in Africa, but had Belgians in our cells crosswise, and the British, of course, had a great deal of dubiety and misgiving about it, and, of course, the French were out and out opponents of the UN/U.S. Congo policy. I bring that in as I think that the President had occasion to evoke his experiences in Indochina when he thought about the Congo, but, of course, he was the President of the prime country in the alliance. He was not a man, as I said earlier, who was a do-gooder. This would be the wrong thing to call Kennedy in the sense that people think of a do-gooder as being somebody who automatically has a kind of a knee-jerk reaction in favor of little dark peoples who were just independent, and colonialists all bad, and the new fellows all

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good. I think that would be just kind of a sappy, wet kind of thing that his own character and sophistication rejected. I've heard him characterize some people as this sort of honkers and do-gooders and people who in his mind really obscured the issues and delayed the liberal democratic achievements that he thought could be brought to these areas.

BELK: Mr. Ambassador, go back just a moment to the Vietnam period. Now, after this was over what were your relationships with the President after you returned from Vietnam and during the remaining Senate years?

GULLION: Well, again we used to see each other socially. And he would occasionally call me about things, say Latin American policy, about which I know nothing, or about Algiers, which I remember my feeling was, which I expressed to him, was that let's not look for too facile parallels between the situation in Algiers or the situation in French Africa and that in Southeast Asia. I remember complimenting him on his role with respect to the St. Lawrence Seaway, which seemed to me a rather courageous stance for a Massachusetts Senator, issues of the time I would talk to him about. I remember, as I say, I think that systematic consultation or a close identification of me with...

SIDE TWO OF TAPE (some conversation lost)

...was something that he wanted to avoid in my own interest, and our contacts focused on Indochina. Of course his illness occurred along about here some time, long period when he was hospitalized with his back trouble, and I was traveling out of the country considerable periods during this time also. He at this time met Jacqueline Bouvier [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis]. I think it was about this period. I don't remember details of the courtship and the rest of it. I unfortunately could not go up to the wedding, which I often regretted. I would love to have seen that and was sorry that I couldn't go. But I really don't have enough to go on, but I used to think at the time that this was a really very poetic, genuine love union. And again there is a kind of diffidence or good form reaction of the President's. I think that people expected him to gush about this, and also who knew that he was a man who certainly appreciated tremendously, as everybody knows, the charms of women, and people expected him to gush about things and be very demonstrative in this way, especially in public, probably didn't realize the intensity and depth of his feelings. I think that this and his illness and his growing exposure to great causes which he always wanted to investigate closely, I think all of these things added to his growth.

BELK: Ambassador Gullion, during this period, other than the interests that you've already mentioned that President Kennedy had, were there any additional ones that you observed during this period that perhaps you haven't mentioned?

GULLION: Well, yes, but of course when he became President I suppose it was with some surprise that many people saw the President and Mrs. Kennedy become the arbiters of good taste in the country and do so much to restore the arts to their

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place and make the President a literary critic. I say surprise because the President was an educated man, and he was a reading man. And his illnesses certainly reinforced the reading habit, as well as his desire to relate what he saw to what he read. But my impression of him during this time, and I want to say again I was not a continuous, intimate household friend of the Kennedys, but he struck me as an extremely well-educated man of sensibility and man of taste. And, of course, he just carried this along with him to the White House. And I suppose why it was a surprise that you have a man of taste in the White House is because that hasn't been predominately the characteristic of men in the White House, and one came along that was and that was a surprise. But I used to reflect upon the President's contribution in this field to just the natural preferences and bents that he had as a civilized person, which I was conscious of during this period.

BELK: Ambassador Gullion, what more can you say about how he was regarded in the State Department during the Senate and the presidential years, and also the Senate?

GULLION: Yes, well, my own angle of vision, range of vision, is limited. I think that the esteem for the President grew tremendously, and I've just cited some episodes from early in his career when Representative Kennedy and Senator Kennedy were not as well known, and the depth and continuity of his influence and intellectual curiosity were not as well known. But he as a President and earlier as a Senator, I think, certainly in my experience in the State Department, is one of the greatest figures in American foreign policy, and everyone must have commented in this symposium on his direct concern with problems that the State Department was dealing with. His habit of going right to the man who was dealing with some smaller facet of the problem, calling up a desk officer and saying this is the President, what about this or that, I think that this was done partly to put people on their toes for whatever vitalizing influence it would have. And that was a calculated trick of command, which is a good trick of command, but it was also a very spontaneous and real gesture, and a great morale builder, the fact that the President was closely concerned in these matters. You know, when he came in there was a great range, a great committee structure, the staff system of President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] with the National Security Council, the Operations Coordinating Board [OCB], and a great proliferation of committees under the OCB, and a committed way of doing things, a very well-articulated chain of command, delegation and that kind of business. Sometimes the original idea, the purpose, got lost in the chain of command. Well, I think that this was the feeling that he very definitely had. More than a feeling, I think it was part of his philosophy of the presidency, as well as his approach to command, that the economical way, economical in the sense of conserving energy, is to make manifest the things of the man at the top all the

way through the command structure. Instead of having things fed to you all the time by people who really don't know what it is you want to accomplish, let the man at the top articulate just what the purposes of the United States are and then the supporting pieces will fall into line, rather than having a lot of disconnected pieces of a policy put together by people without a sense of pattern expecting somewhere

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along the line some *dues ex machine* to find a pattern in it. I think this was part of his whole approach, the thing, I think, he will probably be remembered for. Many people in the State Department were conscious of the fact that this was his attitude. I think at the same time that there was another feeling that you can understand among professionals, and possibly the nearer to the top you got this may have been felt more, although I don't know what the Secretary and others thought about this. But the feeling that maybe the White House was taking things out of the hands of the State Department, that this direct close interest, interest manifested by the White House, high-powered White House advisors, wasn't this putting the State Department back into the kind of shade that it had during President Roosevelt's period, at different times when under the stress of war some of the professionals were pushed into the shadows? I don't think so because it was so manifest that there was an inquiring mind and one which was so focused on foreign policy and one which was determined to bring out the best contributions of the State Department. I think that on balance the favorable impression is the idea that rapport and support for the White House was stronger in the State Department than in the time that I've known it. As to how he was regarded in the Senate, I just don't know. I just have that little vignette from an earlier time when he presumed to criticize the earlier Administration's Indochina policy, and I was told by people in the State Department that that wasn't well-regarded in the Senate, but that that was water under the bridge. I wouldn't be competent to comment on President Kennedy's relations with the Senators over the years. That's not my field.

BELK: Mr. Ambassador, you alluded earlier to the President's illness. Did you notice any change in his philosophy or his personality or his world outlook following his illness?

GULLION: Yes. Of course, I was looking for it. One expects anyone who's come close to death or has been through a long period of inactivity during which the whole future seems in doubt, lying on one's back, a period of inventory. You expect this to make a great difference in a man, as President Roosevelt's illness did to him. And I certainly believe that it did in the President. That's not a thing that I ever questioned him about or talked to him about, but it does seem to me that this is one of the great influences in his life. I think, as I say, that it put him in the reading and writing mode more than he would have been and certainly made him a more reflective person. All of the things that a personal crisis of that kind can do for a man if he takes an affirmative view I think came out of that.

BELK: Ambassador Gullion, you also alluded earlier to the President's marriage.

Would you comment, as you see fit, on what marriage meant to the President?

GULLION: Well, I think, Mr. Belk, that I already have touched on that. I think that the President was a great father and husband, and I think that the marriage and the family.... I've said things that he'll be remembered for, I think that, of course, the representation of the family, remember how many years it had been since there had

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been a young family in the White House. The ability of so many young people around the country to identify with the President probably stems from his consciousness of this family unit. But I do rank this along with these other profound influences, like his illness. I mean his marriage and his family is one of the things that deepened and strengthened his character.

BELK: The person interviewed on this tape was Ambassador Edmund A. Gullion, former United States Ambassador to the Republic of the Congo, Leopoldville. The interviewer was Samuel E. Belk, National Security Council staff. The date is July 17, 1964, the place, the White House.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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