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| **Primary Sources: Reactions in Writing** http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2blueline.gifThe murder of [Emmett Till](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/peopleevents/p_till.html) and the subsequent [trial](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/peopleevents/e_trial.html) of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milan spurred many people to put pen to paper. Some thought that the FBI should get involved in the case. Others directed letters of criticism or praise towards the District Attorney.Track the correspondence, including letters between the Justice Department and the FBI, in these excerpts. [Original spelling and grammar have been retained.]http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...get the FBI on the case..."**August 30, 1955To: Mr. Gloster B. Current, Director, Branches NAACP, New York, New YorkFrom: Medgar W. Evers, Field Secretary, MississippiOn Sunday, August 28 at 2 A.M., a fourteen year old Negro boy, Emmett Till of Chicago, was forced from his home at Money, Leflore County, Mississippi, by three white men and a white woman who alleged that Till had made remarks that were displeasing to a white grocery owner's wife. One man has been apprehended by the Sheriff of Leflore County, the other man is being sought. If it is possible to get the FBI on the case, maybe we can get some results.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...lynch hysteria..."**TelegramSeptember 1, 1955To: Bert Crownell, Attorney General's OfficeFrom: Bernard Lucas, President, Warehouse Distribution, Union Local 208, Chicago. IllinoisWe are convinced that the brutal and savage lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi is part of the lynch hysteria being whipped up in the South to impede the desegregation of the public school system as decreed by the Supreme Court. Therefore we demand that you take the necessary steps to prosecute those responsible for this lynching and to also prosecute those who are whipping up the lynch hysteria.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...no investigation should be conducted..."**September 6, 1955To: Herbert G. Brownwell , Attorney GeneralFrom: J. Edgar Hoover, Director, FBII want to bring to your attention certain facts concerning the alleged kidnapping and death in Mississippi of the victim, a fifteen-year-old Negro from Chicago, Illinois. It is noted that considerable "pressure" is being generated by some newspapers and organizations in an effort to have the Federal Government take some action in this matter. On the morning of August 28, 1955, the victim was taken from the home of his uncle near Money, Mississippi, by the subjects. The victim's body was found in the Tallahatchie River on August 31, 1955, and Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam have been arrested by the Sheriff's Office at Greenwood, Mississippi, on warrants charging them with kidnapping. These individuals are being held without bond and the Sheriff also holds a warrant for Mrs. Bryant on the same charge. These two individuals were arrested by the Sheriff's Office before the recovery of the victim's body.The victim with two other Negro juveniles allegedly visited the Bryant store at Money, Mississippi, on August 27, 1955, at which time the victim reportedly made "ugly remarks" to Mrs. Bryant. The action against the victim was allegedly taken because of this incident.On August 31, 1955, after the receipt of information that the victim's body had been recovered, the above facts were furnished to Mr. A. B. Caldwell, Chief, Civil Rights Section, Criminal Division, by a representative of this Bureau and Mr. Caldwell stated that the facts did not indicate a violation of the Civil Rights Statute and no investigation should be conducted. The opinion expressed by Mr. Caldwell was confirmed by my memorandum to Mr. Olney of September 1, 1955.The facts in this case indicate a state offense of kidnapping and murder but there is no indication to date of a violation of the Federal Kidnapping Statute or the Federal Civil Rights Statute inasmuch as the action was taken against a private citizen by a group of citizens. There has been no allegation made that the victim has been subjected to the deprivation of any right or privilege which is secured and protected by the Constitution and the laws of the United States which would come within the provisions of Section 241, Title 18, United States Code. It should be noted that recently in Washington, D.C., a group of white boys from the State of Mississippi were beaten and knifed by Negro youths and this Bureau did not conduct an investigation into that matter upon the instructions of the Criminal Division.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...a hollow mockery..."**Western Union TelegramSeptember 6, 1955To: J. Edgar Hoover, Director, FBIFrom: Lester Banks, Los Angeles, CaliforniaThe world will regard America's sense of justice as a hollow mockery if the white men who brutally lynched young Emmett Till in Mississippi are not punished. I do not mean Mississippi justice. There is as much justice in Mississippi as in Communist Russia. This case legally falls under your jurisdiction and should be prosecuted in a federal court as Emmett Till's civil rights were violated.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...got just what he deserved..."**PostcardPostmarked September 8, 1955, Chicago, IllinoisTo: Dist. Attorney Gerald Chatham, Hernando, Mississippi, ProsecutorFrom: AnonymousI see where you are going to invite Mrs. Roy Bryant down there for the trial. Do you plan on rolling out the red carpet and putting her up at some classy hotel in one of the most expensive suites. That nigger of hers was trying to show the Southerners how "tough" their kind from Chicago could be and got just what he deserved. If he was so good why was his mother so careful to caution him before he left as to what he did or said. Check on his reputation up here before too many of the sob sisters and brothers try to make him a little angel. It's good to know that the Southerners still try to protect their women. The niggers up here have nothing else but rape and crime in their minds. They've raped little girls from 2, 7, 17 and women to 65. Don't let yourself be soft-soaped. Just a Southerner in Chicago.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...the little nigger asked for it..."**September 11, 1955To: Mr. Gerald Chatham, Hernando, Miss.From: J. S. Connelly, Morehouse Gin Company, Morehouse, MissouriDear Mr. Chatham:We have a case that needs careful handling. Certain features, sticking out like a sore thumb, demand consideration if justice is to be done.(a) The little nigger asked for it and got precisely what was coming to him.(b) Any apology or consilation offered to the negress that had such a son, or to the NAACP which condones the impudence is unwise. Appeasement serves only to encourage the opposition and make it bolder. They would come to think the little nigger was right.(c) Mrs. Bryant's husband and his kinsmen are her natural protectors from insult and injury. Those men deserve honor, not blame, for doing their duty. Even if they actually killed the little darkey, which has not yet been shown, a verdict of Justifiable Homicide would be in order.(d) To mete out punishment to such men would be a major blunder. It would be to weaken or destroy the defense of every woman against insult (or worse) at the hands of the up-surging negroes, who have become much bolder in the commission of crime since the infamous decision of the supreme court. (Mississippi's great Senator, James O. Eastland, has shown conclusively that the decision was based on considerations of "psychology, sociology and anthropology," as set out in books by crackpots, more than half of whose number are Communists or fellow-travelers. He shows further that it was NOT based upon CONSTITUTIONAL grounds.)Let us not be so upright as to 'lean over backwards.'P.S. Just where do I come in? I am from much farther south than the letterhead indicates. I was born and reared near Helena, Arkansas.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...kill them rats..."**PostcardPostmarked September 25, 1955, Cleveland OhioTo: Attorney Gerald Chatham, Criminal Court, Sumner, MississippiKill them rats or die yourselves. Kill them! Or we are blowing up your hole Goddam town -- every stinking ass.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...a gross miscarriage of justice..."**September 27, 1955To: Circuit Judge Curtis Swango, Sumner, MississippiFrom: Mrs. Clara Sawyer, Ashton, MarylandDear Judge Swango:I consider the acquittal of the two murderers of the negro boy, Emmett Till, a gross miscarriage of justice.This only confirms the well-known fact that it's impossible for a negro to receive justice in the most backward and ignorant state of the Union -- Mississippi.If the tables had been turned and a white boy kidnapped and brutally murdered under similar circumstances, there would probably have been wholesale beatings and lynchings of the negro populace but inasmuch as the crime was only perpetrated by the "superior race" they can literally "get away with murder."Mississippians ought to learn a lesson from Nazi Germany and its delusions of being a "Master race." The fate of Hitler and Germany was not a very happy one.Incidentally, I am 100% white.CC: The Governor of MississippiThe Prosecutor, Sumner, MississippiP.S. -- No reply expected -- merely justice for ALL people, regardless of race, color or creed.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...we are out to get the two killers of that boy..."**September 27, 1955To: Sir Jude or Dist Attorney To whom it may concernThis is the worst case we have ever seen and we going to have justice one way or another. We have seen Chinese tie your hands behind your back and shoot you but I have never seen two bastard like these two before in my life. You know human bein is a human bein no matter what color you are. We go to the Wars side by side in China or Germany wherever we are we call ourselfs American. You can come from any place in this world and your skin is white you are better than an American Negro. Know you know that that's why this country is full of communism from your State Dept to every Dept. Tis know this is a group of veteran from the 1st World War and mostly from the 2nd World War and from Korea. We are a group of about 4,000 and this letter is sent to the jury and the defense lawyers. This is a warning and we are not playing. Listen to this carefully. We are out to get the two killers of that boy. We are watching this case carefully. This group consist of Negros how you call us or colored that don't matter to us so if you want don't notify any body and I tell you again we are not kidding. This group is strong. We have boys from all groups and we have Porto Ricans, West Indes and East Indies, American Negroes all races. We have cars to go to the South and we are out to kill every Southern that is a criminal if they go free. We shall get them no matter where you put them. We have spys watching every move. And we are from all those States or City if you want to know New York, New Jersey -- Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia remember 4,000 mens some of them don't give a damn about dying but those two criminal bastards we are going to hang them our self. They can have all the fun they whan! This is the worst crime I have ever seen talking about Russia we have Russia in the South and we wish the first atomic bomb fall from Virginia to Florida and kill all of these criminal who don't deserve even to live. They are worser than savages. They are not human. If we could only get to them we would cut off their hand and feet and burn there eyes out. But they and all who stick whit them is going to get it so help us God if we have to start a revolution down South. We have backing but we are go going to stop this know and forever. You or whoever read this letter if you are white you better start praying because from know on for every colored man you kill we kill 10 so help us God. This is the first warning 2nd be on the death alert. we mean every word we say. We are watching every move.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...see that justice is done..."**[letterhead - undated]The Challenger[Streamliner](http://www.pbs.org/amex/streamliners)Please do see that justice is done -- from a bunch of fellows on this train.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...a credit to you and Mississippi..."**September 28, 1955From: Law Offices -- Cary Stovall, 201-204 Chambers -- Liddon Building -- Corinth, MississippiTo: Hon. Gerald Chatman, Hernando, MississippiDear Chatham:Congratulations on the outstanding job you did in the trial of the Till case, which was a credit to you and Mississippi.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...a job well done..."**PostcardPostmarked September 30, 1955To: Hon. Gerald Chatman, District Attorney, Hernando, MississippiFrom: Joseph A. Bolden, Bolden Dental Laboratory, Bristol, PennsylvaniaDear Sir:My hat off to you, for a job well done on the Till case.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...this mess is shaking the world..."**September 30, 1955To: Mr. Gerald Chatham, Sumner, MississippiFrom: Fleming R. Waller, Anchorage, AlaskaDear Mr. Chatham:According to TIME of this week you and Mr. Robert Smith "made an earnest and honest effort to build their case at what can be assumed to be great social cost to themselves."What should you care about rubbing elbows with degenerate people whose idea of reprisal for a childish prank is to torture, maim and then shoot a 14-year old kid?This mess is shaking the world and people of Mississippi like Sheriff Strider have no idea how far behind they have put Mississippi, their country and their people.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...the facts did not indicate a violations of any Federal statute..."**September 30, 1955To: Thurgood Marshall, NAACP, New York, New YorkFrom: J. Edgar Hoover, Director, FBIMy attention has been called to a news report of a speech given by Dr. T. R. M. Howard before a meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People at Baltimore, Maryland, on September 25, 1955, in which he reportedly stated "that the FBI can never seem to work out who is responsible for killings of Negroes in the South." Dr. Howard was quoted as making reference to the "unsolved killings of the Rev. Walter W. Lee and Lamar Smith" and the death of Emmett Till and urging that the President, the Attorney General "and J. Edgar Hoover, himself" be called into the conference by national Negro leaders to find out "why Southern investigators of the FBI can't seem to solve a crime where a Negro is involved."I, of course, do not know Dr. Howard's connections with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but since he used your organization as a forum for his most unfair criticisms of the FBI, I am taking the liberty of writing you to set the record straight. I am sure that since you are familiar with the FBI's position in the investigation of civil rights cases you will want to do everything you can to see that the truth is fully understood by everybody.As you know, the FBI is the investigative arm of the United States Department of Justice. It is responsible, based on instructions issued by the Attorney General, for investigating allegations of violations of laws of the United States. If a complaint has been received indicating a violation of the civil rights statutes, the FBI conducts a preliminary inquiry. The results are then immediately furnished the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice. If the Department of Justice requests a full investigation, this is conducted and the results are furnished to it.In the case involving Reverend George Wesley Lee of Belmont, Mississippi, the FBI did conduct a preliminary investigation as allegations had been received that Lee had been killed because he refused to remove his name from a list of registered voters. Subsequently, at the request of the Department of Justice, the FBI conducted a full investigation. This has now been completed and the results furnished the Department of Justice.In the other two cases mentioned by Dr. Howard, the killings of Lamar Smith, of Brookhaven, Mississippi, and Emmett Till, available facts were presented to the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice which advised that no investigation was desired in either case as the facts did not indicate a violation of any Federal statute.The statements of Dr. Howard criticizing the FBI show a total disregard of the facts. Apparently he has overlooked the investigations which led to prosecutive action against members of the Klu Klux Klan. In October, 1951, for example, a group of Klansmen, organized by the Exalted Cyclops of the Fair Bluff (North Carolina) Klavern, Klu Klux Klan, abducted two victims, drove them across the state line into South Carolina where each was flogged. As a result of the FBI's prompt investigation, ten persons were convicted in United States District Court, Wilmington, North Carolina, in May, 1952, for violation of the Federal Kidnapping Statute.In another instance, Klu Klux Klansmen demonstrated and burned crosses in Dade County, Georgia. As a result of their activities, several white persons were intimidated and seven Negroes flogged. The FBI promptly instituted an investigation, and two law enforcement officers were convicted in the United States District Court at Rome, Georgia, in March, 1950, for violation of the Federal civil rights statute. It is interesting to note that in this case a resolution was directed to the Atlanta and Knoxville offices of the FBI by members of the Federal Grand Jury of the United States District Court commending the investigating Agents of the FBI who "by their great fidelity and singleness of purpose in developing the information in the Dade County, Georgia, conspiracy trials have gone far beyond the line of duty to aid, assist and protect the citizens of the United States and to further the cause of equity and justice in America." The United States Attorney, the Federal Judge and the Attorney General also commended the work of the FBI. Surely this is evidence of the thoroughness and impartiality of the FBI's investigations.I think you will agree that the FBI's fair and prompt investigations have done much to increase public respect for and consciousness of civil rights. In 1954, moreover, for the third straight year there were no lynchings in the United States. In fact, during the last ten years, compared with the previous decade, lynchings dropped from 65 to 16. Lynchings at any time are terrible examples of mob action. These figures indicate, however, a higher respect for law and the processes of democratic government. Since Dr. Howard's remarks were made at a meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, I felt compelled to call them to your attention in view of the widespread dissemination in the press. Moreover, since you are familiar with the record and have knowledge of the diligence with which the FBI applies itself to cases within its jurisdiction, I know that you would not want your organization to put itself in a position of supporting factual inaccuracies.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...a disgrace to our democracy..."**October 3, 1955To: Herbert G. Brownwell, Attorney General From: Arthur Chapin, Human Relations Director, New Jersey State Council, Congress of Industrial Organizations, Newark, New JerseyAlready the public press has indicated that many organizations and individuals have urged the US Department of Justice to investigate the murders which have been occurring with great frequency in Mississippi during the year 1955. Your department should determine whether these murders of the Negro victims are the result of a conspiracy against the right to exercise the franchise in this country. It has been disclosed that Mr. LaMar Smith of Caseyville, Mississippi, who was murdered had received several threats on his life if he did not slow down on his political activities. Mr. Smith, as you know, was shot and killed on the morning of August 13 not in his home, but of all places on the court house lawn of Lincoln County where large numbers of people normally congregated on Saturdays. Up to this writing there seems to have been no dispensation on this case.I am sure you are aware of what happened in Belzoni, Mississippi, where a Negro minister was shot and killed for the very same reasons as Mr. Smith. You are also aware of the White Citizens Councils that have been formed in Mississippi for the purposes of continuing white supremacy and creating fear and distrust in US Government by sending threatening letters through the mails containing phrases of this nature, "If you are tired of living vote and die."It seems to the New Jersey CIO that the action of acquitting the murderers of Emmett Till is a disgrace to our democracy and that there ought to be some area in which the federal government can exercise power where law and order in any state has completely broken down as it obviously has in the State of Mississippi. The 250,000 members of the CIO in this State cannot understand why the federal government has not acted in these cases. We would be desirous of knowing what the Justice Department is doing concerning justice in Mississippi.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...wipe out the evils of lynching and kidnapping..."**TelegramNovember 4, 1955To: Herbert G. Brownwell, Attorney General From: Charles A. Buckley, Member of CongressI urge that you have the Department of Justice immediately investigate the widespread violations of civil rights in Mississippi and other Southern states. The recent Emmett Louis Till case is a travesty of American justice. Action must be taken at once to enforce in the South those federal statutes passed by the Congress to wipe out the evils of lynching and kidnapping.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...these crimes are offenses against Mississippi laws only..."**November 14, 1955To: Charles A. Buckley, House of RepresentativesFrom: Warren Olney III, Assistant Attorney GeneralDear Mr. Congressman:This acknowledges your telegram of November 4, 1955, in which you refer to the recent killing of Emmett Louis Till in the State of Mississippi. You request that this Department investigate alleged widespread violations of civil rights in Mississippi and in other Southern states.Available information indicates that Till was killed after being kidnapped by two private individuals. Since the kidnapping involved no transportation across state lines, these crimes are offenses against Mississippi laws only and are not violative of any federal statute. This Department, therefore, has no jurisdiction or authority to take any action in connection with this matter.We are, however, conducting extensive investigations concerning alleged violations of the civil rights statutes. Should these investigations indicate that any person has been deprived of the rights protected by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, you may be assured that appropriate action will be undertaken.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...mass exodus of Negroes..."**November 18, 1955To: Warren Olney III, Assistant Attorney GeneralFrom: J. Edgar Hoover, Director, FBIRe: Mass exodus of Negroes from the State of Mississippi, as a result of the Till case and White Citizens Council activitiesReference is made to your memorandum of November 15, 1955, requesting certain inquiry in this matter.This will confirm a conversation between Mr. A. B. Caldwell, Chief, Civil Rights Section, Criminal Division and Bureau representatives on November 17, 1955, concerning this matter.Mr. Caldwell was advised that a check with Bureau of the Census reflected that the city of Le Flore, Mississippi, in 1950 had a population of only 27 persons and that the city of Tchula, Mississippi, had a population of 927. He was also advised that a check with the Greyhound Terminal in Washington reflected that there is no Greyhound Terminal in the city of LeFlore, Mississippi.It was pointed out to Mr. Caldwell that inquiry of bus terminals in Mississippi would in all probability result in the inquiry being known and that the records of the bus terminals would probably not be divided as to white and colored tickets sold in view of Interstate Commerce Commission's regulations. Mr. Caldwell then stated that it would not be necessary to contact the bus terminals and other travel agencies but the inquiry should be handled by the field offices covering the State of Mississippi contacting their established sources of information and confidential informants to ascertain whether or not there has been any appreciable number of Negroes leaving the state.In accordance with the instructions of Mr. Caldwell, our Memphis and New Orleans Offices are being instructed to handle this inquiry in the above manner and you will be advised of the results.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...shock and dismay..."**November 21, 1955To: Herbert G. Brownwell, Attorney General From: Leonor (Mrs. John B.) Sullivan, Member of Congress, 3rd District MissouriI was abroad at the time of the trial in Mississippi for the murder of young Emmett Till. The case was very much on the minds of government officials and everyone else we talked to in the European countries we visited. Since returning to the United States I have found much mail in my office discussing this case and expressing shock and dismay at what it represents.I have been surprised to learn that the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice seems to have evidenced no interest at all in this case, or at least has indicated, as I understand it, that this was strictly a Mississippi matter in which the Federal Government had no responsibilities. This seems rather incredible.I should appreciate learning from you what the Department of Justice's position has been in the Emmett Till case, and why it has taken no action in what certainly seems to have been a dreadful miscarriage of justice and a brutal and shocking crime based on color.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...we...have no jurisdiction or authority..."**December 6, 1955To: Leonor Sullivan, House of RepresentativesFrom: Warren Olney III, Assistant Attorney GeneralThe Civil Rights Section of the Department carefully examined the facts regarding the kidnapping and killing of young Till. It reached the conclusion that since only private individuals were alleged to be responsible for these offenses, and since there was no transportation of Till across state lines, no violation of the federal civil rights statutes, the federal kidnapping statute or other federal law became involved. We, therefore, have no jurisdiction or authority in connection with these regrettable incidents.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...bring law and order into Mississippi..."**Western Union TelegramDecember 8, 1955To: Senator Irving M. IvesFrom: Sidney Unger, Kord Manufacturing Company, Bronx, New YorkLack of proper federal action when the Till boy was kidnapped and murdered has apparently been a sign to some people in Mississippi that kidnap and murder are permitted and condoned in their state. The rush of recent killings in Mississippi seems to attest to such an attitude. It would seem to me for some action to be taken to bring law and order into Mississippi. Uncontrolled civil violence in Mississippi not only threatens civil liberties in our country but also must have a seriously deleterious effect on our foreign relations. The attitude of non-white countries cannot but be affected by the repeated violence occurring in Mississippi. I strongly urge that you take action to end the un-American and uncivilized violence recurring in Mississippi and to bring the criminals to justice.http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/subimages/2_1_2grey.gif**"...this Department lacks the jurisdiction or authority..."**December 22, 1955To: Senator Irving M. IvesFrom: Warren Olney III, Assistant Attorney GeneralDear Senator:This acknowledges your letter of December 13, 1955, to Mr. John Lindsay, Executive Assistant to the Attorney General. Attached to your letter was a telegram from Mr. Sidney Unger of the Kord Manufacturing Company of Bronx, New York, urging federal action in connection with the recent alleged kidnapping and killing of Emmett Louis Till and other violent incidents occurring thereafter involving allegedly the killing of other unnamed individuals in the State of Mississippi.Available information indicates that young Till was kidnapped and killed by private individuals who did not at any time transport him across a state line. Therefore, these offenses being violative of Mississippi laws and not of any federal statute, this Department lacks the jurisdiction or authority to take any action. We are, however, conducting investigations in connection with other fatal Mississippi incidents to determine whether violations of federal statutes are involved. Should any of the investigations indicate such to be the case, appropriate measures will be undertaken. |

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