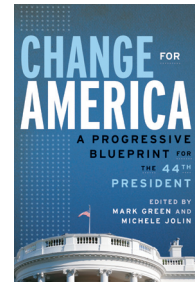




# Government Transition Overview

## Best Practices for Transitioning to a New Government

By Christine Varney



This chapter is part of an online effort by the Center for American Progress Action Fund and New Democracy Project to offer expert advice to the new administration as part of its *Change for America* book project.

### Summary

The presidential transition process proceeds in three distinct phases, all of which should boast sequential goals and structures to ensure a seamless shift from the campaign trail to the post-election transition to entry into the White House on inauguration day. Pre-convention planning for the transition should be restricted to a small (and anonymous) group with close but clearly separate ties to the presidential campaign. This group should create a framework for the eventual transition team to consider broad policy issues and appointment possibilities. The pre-election planning team for the transition needs to implement that framework, remaining in the shadows as they draw up more detailed policy briefs and appointment lists, and ensure the campaign manager and presidential candidate are thoroughly comfortable with the work. After the election, the transition team needs to act on those policy and appointment decisions quickly and decisively, providing the campaign staff with assurances that they will all have a role to play in the new administration while ensuring that the president-elect's top policy priorities are ready to be acted upon on day one.

### Introduction

The measure of success of a presidential transition is viewed through the historical prism of the success of the newly inaugurated president's first years in the White House. Did the president accomplish what he campaigned on? How well did the White House staff function? Did each cabinet position reflect the president's agenda? Was the president able to get a federal budget presented to and passed by Congress that reflected his priorities? And, the ultimate test that can be put to a president at any time, but particularly challenging when starting up, is: If there was a national security issue, was he able to respond fully and effectively?

Many nonpartisan academics and scholars have observed, analyzed, researched, and written about the “modern transitions.” These reviews start with the Carter administration in 1976-77 and look at each transition through George W. Bush in 2000-2001. In addition, there is a cottage industry of “transition experts.” Some are individuals with a particular expertise that is always in demand—national security, legal, and press. Others come from the political realm and understand the realpolitik of changing administrations, particularly as the reins of government are handed over wholesale from one party to another, as was the case in 1976-77 (Gerald Ford to Jimmy Carter), 1980-81 (Carter to Ronald Reagan), 1992-93 (George H.W. Bush to Bill Clinton) and 2000-2001 (Clinton to George W. Bush).

Transitions within one party, as happened in 1987-88 (Reagan to George H.W. Bush) present a unique set of issues, but most agree these issues are not nearly as difficult and fraught with the potential pitfalls as are the transitions between parties. Regardless of the partisan dimensions of the transition, the study of the last five transitions leads to remarkably consistent conclusions.

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## In the beginning: the pre-convention period

No one wakes up the Wednesday after the election and says, as did a wide-eyed Robert Redford in *The Candidate*, “What do we do now?” In the past five transitions, all of the successful candidates have had varying degrees of narrow, quiet, preliminary work done prior to the parties’ nominating conventions. In this “pre-convention conversation,” three or four individuals who are close to the nominee and the campaign’s senior staff outline what will need to be done in the period between the convention and the election. There is widespread agreement this is a necessary and useful undertaking.

But this pre-convention conversation must be discrete, limited in scope, and closely held by the campaign manager or another surrogate of the nominee. The sole purpose of the “pre-convention conversation” is to present to the nominee, around the convention, the plan for the work to be undertaken in the next two phases: the pre-election planning work, and the actual post-election transition. Scholars and participants agree that in the modern era there is too much work to be done between election day and inauguration day to wait until the day after the election to begin the transition work. Indeed, transitions that are viewed as less successful had many common characteristics, the first being that the post-election transition ignored the pre-election planning work that had been done and essentially started all over again the day after the election (more on this later).

As one participant described this pre-convention process: “It is three or four people, ‘grown-ups’ who have day jobs, coming together a few times a week for the few months prior to the convention to sketch out to the nominee what can and should be done while the Fall campaign is underway. These people are not on the campaign payroll, and should not be involved in the campaign in any ongoing way. The goal of this group is to come up with a

structure for the transition work, and how that work should be done between Labor Day and election day in order to ensure that there is no time lost after election day. This group must have the blessing of the candidate and the confidence of the campaign manager.”

The scope of this pre-convention group’s work is narrow. Ideally, this group can identify and recommend a scope of work and process that will be used by a small team in the 60 to 70 days between the convention and the election. One approach, deemed successful by many observers, entailed laying out at a high level what the pre-convention group considered the 100 most important positions to fill after the election, given the candidate’s priorities, alongside a process for identifying potential appointees (without their knowledge) and then vetting them in what is termed a “public record vet.” In addition, this group should lay out a proposed structure for organizing the policy work and integrating the campaign’s issue work into this process, beginning in the post-convention period and carrying over to the post-election transition, with suggestions as to who could be tapped to carry out the post-convention work.

Given the times we live in, the pre-convention group should include a focus on national security. It should recommend how the nominee may approach national security issues both during the election and the transition. The nominee, for example, may wish to consider convening a small group whose sole focus will be on matters of national security, including homeland security, throughout the election and transition. Such a structure could provide a more coherent and seamless way to exchange information between administrations, and minimize the potential vulnerabilities that exist during the transition.

Pre-convention planning should and must be completely private. Any public mention of the undertaking could be politically harmful to the putative nominee. Ideally, there should be no more than five or six individuals aware of or involved in the undertaking: the putative nominee, the campaign manager, and the three or four people doing the work. One participant in a pre-convention effort stated that not even the secretaries or assistants of those involved knew the nature of the project.

This small group should craft a pre-convention framework for the presumptive nominee to consider. The goal is to present to the nominee a limited set of actions to be taken, with options and recommendations so that the nominee can easily make decisions regarding the scope and staffing for work to be undertaken between the convention and election day. This framework should include options on whether the work should be done on a voluntary basis or be supported by a “Transition Foundation.”

That decision may well rest on whether the campaign is receiving federal funds, as transition work can be legally done inside the campaign if the campaign is not receiving federal funds. If the pre-convention planning group and the presumptive nominee decide to establish a Transition Foundation, then it becomes a question of when to do so. During the election, campaigns are loathe to divert any financial resources, even if legally permissible,

to pay for staff engaged in work that will be directed primarily to the transition. Although the post-convention/pre-election planning may be done by volunteers—or possibly under the auspices of a think tank—there are expenses that will be incurred. The planning group must then consider what rules the foundation will operate under. Will corporate money be accepted? Will there be contribution limits in addition to those proscribed by law?

Whatever approach is taken by the pre-convention planning group, the campaign manager must be completely aware of all the group's efforts, completely comfortable with them, and fully supportive of the scope and the individuals involved. There should be regular communication between the campaign manager and this group.

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### In the middle: from the convention to the election

With the nomination now or about to be securely in hand, the nominee needs to make some basic decisions regarding the possible upcoming transition effort. Due to the vast amount of work needed to launch a successful government, much of the underlying work for a successful transition is begun immediately after the party convention. This pre-election effort, however, cannot detract or divert from what must be the sole focus of the nominee and campaign staff: winning the general election.

This pre-election planning effort is essential, but it is equally essential that the senior management of the campaign be comfortable with the undertaking and supportive of it without being directly involved. Most observers agree this comfort level can be achieved only if there is the highest level of trust and communication between those running the campaign and those working on the pre-election planning. To the extent those involved in the pre-election planning stay out of the press, have the confidence of the nominee, and focus solely on what needs to be in place for the transition to be operational the day after the election, they will be successful.

The pre-election planning group should have a set of clear, concrete goals and priorities with specific individuals responsible for achieving those goals. Again, those goals need to be established by the nominee (based on the recommendations of the pre-convention planning group), and might include: an appointment process for cabinet and sub-cabinet positions, a personnel process for the Executive Office of the President and government-wide positions, a policy process for issue-area blueprints and priorities, and a defined transition structure.

Most veterans of transitions believe they succeed only to the extent the pre-election planning is actually used. Tomes have been written about the demise of pre-election planning efforts the day after the election, when the campaign staff turns to governing and completely disregards the work already done. History consistently teaches that if the pre-election planning is viewed by the campaign staff as outsiders' efforts, then the campaign staff

will persuade the president-elect to disregard the effort. After all, the campaign staff just delivered the presidency to the successful candidate, who may in turn believe he owes the victory, in some part, to those who have dedicated the last year of their life to this success. The president-elect may feel the need to heed the demands of the campaign staff to ignore the work of “outsiders,” and let the campaign staff organize the new government.

Some observers conclude that the only way to avoid the outcome described above is for the pre-election planning to be done within the confines of the campaign itself. The pre-election planning effort can be successfully carried out to the extent that it is tightly controlled by the campaign manager (or the nominee’s designee), is not discussed in the press, stays within its mandate, and does not evolve into a power center competing with the campaign.

Historically, campaigns have set up separate foundations to receive transition funding. If a campaign has chosen not to receive public funds, however, then this comingling problem would not exist, though there could still be other advantages to forming a separate organization, such as separate accountability, clear lines of authority and communication, and distinct legal, ethical, and accounting rules.

Regardless of whether a separate transition foundation or other kind of organization is formed for pre-election planning, a president-elect may only use private funds to cover transition planning activities prior to the day following the general election. No federal election funds can be steered toward pre-election transition planning. In addition, under the Presidential Transition Act, there is a \$5,000 cap on private donations from any person or entity for purposes of transition activities as a condition for receiving public funding. Information regarding all private donations must be disclosed, including the date, source, amount, and use of each contribution. Public funding for transitions becomes available only once there is an “apparent successful candidate,” generally the day after the general election. Public funding may go toward office space and furnishings, compensation of staff, and other administrative expenses.

Past transitions lead to the conclusion that the individual leading the pre-election planning is key to its success. That individual cannot be an “outsider” or anyone the campaign manager does not support. As will inevitably occur, the press will ask who is thinking about what the nominee will do if he wins. Such a question should be answered by the campaign manager, indicating that a particular individual is giving it some thought. The individual leading the pre-election planning work should, in turn, downplay the effort and simply state the campaign is doing some preliminary ground work so they will be in a position to hit the ground running. No other names of individuals working on the pre-election planning should be released, and no further press conversations should occur.

Several approaches have been used in organizing this pre-election planning work. For the most part, the work can be divided into three principal categories: the policy issues, the appointment process, and the structure of the post-election transition.

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## The policy issues work

The campaign will have developed several detailed policy positions in a variety of areas. During the pre-election planning, issue teams are often formed. Generally, the individuals working on issue teams are not campaign staff but rather individuals who have been involved in advising the campaign and nominee on their particular field of expertise. The pre-election planning team should identify the nominee's high-priority issue areas, and then begin the process of converting campaign position papers into strategic and tactical plans that can be implemented after the election and after the inauguration.

Generally, pre-election planning has been organized into five broad issue areas. The first is national security and international affairs, including a separate area for critical issues, such as Iraq and Afghanistan in this election year. The second is economic policy, including a separate budget area. The third is energy and the environment. The fourth is labor and human resources, including a separate area for health care. And five is government reform, including a separate area for the Department of Justice and the federal judiciary.

The work done by these issues teams changes the least, aside from the shift in scope, between the pre-election and post-election periods. This work is largely focused on the development of more detailed plans regarding the execution of the policy goals outlined by the candidate in the campaign. This pre-election planning needs to take care not to overly bureaucratize the policy work. The scope of this work is drawn by the nominee's priorities—what needs to be done to accomplish the nominee's vision. The department-by-department review of policies and procedures comes later, and provides a post-election outlet for all those wishing to help. The pre-election planning work is more focused, and may recommend the structure for an expanded post-election undertaking.

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## The appointment process

Virtually all modern presidential transitions have benefited from doing an enormous amount of work on high-level appointments prior to the general election. In successful pre-election planning work, the appointments process has resulted in the nominee having 100 or so names that have had a full public record vetting prior to election day, which gives the nominee an enormous head start as he begins to put the government together after the election.

Again, one of the best practices that all observers agree on for this phase of the pre-election appointments process is that it must be done in complete confidence. Indeed, even those being identified as potential appointees and being vetted should not be contacted. There must not be any discussion of the names and process outside the team and the candidate or the candidate's designee in the campaign.

Additionally, there should not be specific jobs and names recommended, but rather groups of names for a cluster of jobs. The appointment process for the highest level of government changes little after the election—aside from the president-elect and his advisors starting to think about individuals for specific jobs, initiating contact with those individuals, beginning background checks, and putting an appointment decision making process in place.

The most common approach to the appointment work is putting together a team that will do public record vetting of the 100 or so individuals who are most likely to be asked to take the highest level positions in the new administration. Generally, participants and observers agree this work is best organized by issue area. Case in point: An appointments team, working closely with the corresponding policy team, will identify 20 or so individuals whom the nominee may wish to consider for the top 12 to 15 economic policy posts.

In the economic area, these posts may include the secretary of the treasury, the deputy secretary of the treasury, the undersecretary of the treasury, the chair of the Council of Economic Advisors, the chair of the National Economic Council, the secretary of labor, the secretary of commerce, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, the chair of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the director of the Office of Thrift Supervision, the chair of the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the chair of the Commodities Future Trading Corporation.

It should be explicitly clear to the senior campaign staff and the pre-election planning team that no names will be put forth by the pre-election planning team for any White House jobs. The scope of appointments work is only to identify and do public record vetting of the 100 or so people that would be considered by the president-elect for any number of potential appointments.

This pre-election appointments work is quite different and distinct from the post-election “personnel transition process” described further below.

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## The transition structure

The pre-election planning team should put together a proposed structure for the transition but not recommend individuals for specific transition jobs. Every president-elect has had some unique twist to the organization of their transitions, but all had the benefit of being able to review a proposal, slightly tweak it, and then implement the structure. The pre-election planning team will probably have begun weighing both the issues and appointments, and those undertakings may be carried over, in an expanded version, to the actual transition. Ideally, pre-election planning should propose an organization for the transition that supports the following areas of focus.

## Communications

How will the president-elect present himself during the transition? Some presidents-elect have had almost constant press exposure and some virtually none. How does the president-elect wish to signal priorities? Alternatively, the president-elect may wish to convene a particular “working group” (economy or Iraq, for example) with some degree of press coverage. The pre-election planning team should prepare a transition communications strategy.

## Congressional

One area that many scholars observe has not been historically planned for in a transition is Congress. The president-elect needs to understand that his first acts—usually appointing the highest levels of government—require Senate approval, and immediately thereafter the budget process begins. Moreover, to capitalize on any potential “honeymoon,” the president-elect will need not only an overall strategic plan but a specific legislative plan. Indeed, the legislative appetite in a particular area may inform the strategic plan. The pre-election planning should provide the president-elect with a proposed plan for congressional outreach during the transition.

## Legal and ethics

There are a number of rules, regulations, and laws that support and govern presidential transitions. The pre-election planning team needs to fully understand the legal framework for conducting the transition. If there is or will be a transition foundation, then what are the legal requirements? And does the president-elect wish to impose additional requirements? Will the foundation, for example, only take non-corporate money, limit maximum contributions, and disclose donors? Most transitions have also imposed their own ethics pledge on all those who have worked on the transition. Such a pledge covers not only confidentiality but may also include limits or an outright prohibition on post-transition lobbying. If such a pledge is recommended, then it should be drafted by the pre-election team for the president-elect’s review.

## Executive Office of the President and White House staff

Every president-elect inevitably thinks about how he wants his government to work, be it a strong centralized White House staff, a strong council-type government, or a strong cabinet government. At a minimum, the pre-election planning team should develop two or three organizational models, given the nominee’s preferences and priorities, for immediate review when the transition begins. As the White House staff often draws heavily from campaign staff, there should be no specific names gathered by the pre-election planning

team for the White House jobs. Rather, draft job descriptions can be generated to help the president-elect understand the skill sets needed in each major job.

## Personnel

After the election, the transition team will be flooded with resumes and job applicants. One of the most valuable services the pre-election planning team can provide is a turnkey operation for processing resumes, and then matching applicants with positions. The Government Services Administration will contact whomever the candidate directs them to in about October—both candidates are extended this courtesy—to brief the team on the resources that will be made available to them for the transition. To the extent possible, the president-elect should be ready on day one with a process for receiving applications, and then matching those applications to opportunities. Such a process will greatly relieve anxiety and expedite filling the 4,000 political jobs that need to have people in place for the new administration to govern effectively.

## Appointments

What is the process to be put in place to forward recommendations and selections to the president-elect? The transition team will have the 100 or so vetted names and priority positions on hand from the pre-election planning team, but how will the decision making be done? Some presidents-elect have asked advisors for consensus recommendations of two or three names per post. Others have sought “slates,” or candidates with the right mix of credentials and expertise. The transition team will have to coordinate the final vetting before the decision making has concluded. To the extent possible, most observers recommend that the cabinet secretary and deputy secretary be considered and decided simultaneously.

## National security

As the election nears, the candidates will receive periodic national security briefings. With these briefings in mind, special attention needs to be given to the process for keeping the president-elect and the staff he chooses continually updated during the transition. The pre-election plan should have a proposed process in place for quickly securing security clearances for those who need them, alongside a high-priority list of issues that may need urgent action, and a second list of the most important national security positions that the transition team should move quickly to fill.

The candidate and campaign manager should be prepared to name individuals who will run these transition areas on election day. The pre-election planning team should not propose staff for transition jobs, but should be prepared to work on the teams once the president-elect appoints the heads of the transition team.

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## The end of the campaign, the beginning of governing

A hard-fought election has now been won, and all eyes turn to governing. Inside the Beltway, the perennial parlor games of “who’s up,” “who’s down,” and, the favorite, “who’s out” begin in earnest. Several transitions have been destroyed by these games, leaving the president-elect poorly served, and the new administration off to a rocky start. So how should the winner move smoothly into a cohesive transition that can successfully launch a presidency?

First, the president-elect must focus on successfully engaging in the formal transition process. Transitions benefit from strong and continual leadership. We have seen, time and again, the inner circle of the most senior individuals tapped to be the “board” or “co-chairs” of a transition—only to be subsequently named to a high-level cabinet post. Out of necessity, when this occurs, the individual who was responsible for a key part of the transition must turn their focus to the new government department they are about to run. In such circumstances, it is without question the transition and, in turn, the new administration, that suffer enormously.

While special care should be given to thinking through the four most important posts in the transition team—head of appointments and personnel; White House organization and staff; domestic policy; and national security and foreign affairs—the individuals leading these efforts should not, in an ideal transition, be likely to be named to a cabinet post. Yet, given our recommendation for continuity, the individuals leading these efforts might hold other (noncabinet) senior positions in the administration.

The individual who leads the White House organization effort, for example, should be someone who the president-elect would consider for White House chief of staff or other senior White House counselor-type post. The person tapped to head the appointments and personnel transition process might be the individual named to the head of the White House Office of Personnel. And those heading up the domestic policy and national security transition teams may be individuals who remain outside of government, or perhaps take subcabinet or White House jobs in those fields.

The president-elect should also understand that while the transition process provides immediate job opportunities for many of his closest campaign aides, there are at least two other undertakings that will need to be staffed: the Inaugural Committee and the National Committee of the president-elect’s political party. Most of the campaign staff who go on to the transition staff will end up with administration jobs—not all in the White House, but

across the government. The transition team, however, cannot and should not absorb all the campaign staff. The Inaugural Committee, however, probably can.

One of the key undertakings early in the transition is to staff up appropriately, but also to move campaign staff who will not be on the transition team to the Inauguration Committee, which winds down at the end of January. At this point, hundreds of “Schedule C” and other deputy-assistant-type jobs will need to be filled. There will be a natural progression from campaign to inauguration to government for the majority of campaign staff. Having a well-established personnel office during the transition that can move seamlessly into the White House will ensure an effective government is up and functioning as soon as possible, and relieve the natural anxiety of the hundreds of people who worked hard to get the president-elect to the White House and hope to continue to serve.

Equal attention needs to be paid to developing the president-elect’s strategic plan, whether for the first 100 days or the first year. This planning includes the inaugural address; the first acts as president, such as executive orders; organizing and staffing the White House and Executive Office of the President; appointing the cabinet and other key positions in the government; and developing the blueprint for executing the overall policy agenda at issue- and department-based levels. Several best practices emerge from these requirements.

First, the president-elect and his top transition advisors must pull the campaign’s closest advisors and strategic thinkers together to develop the 100-day plan that will launch the new administration. They will draw upon work being done across the transition process, but they should not have line responsibility for a particular issue.

Second, the transition team must immediately start the FBI and Secret Service background checks for all senior campaign staff and senior advisors—even though it will not be clear what jobs the individuals will fill. These background checks take an enormous amount of time. To get a fast start, they need to be completed in a timely manner.

Third, the transition itself must boast a clear organizational structure. Everyone should know what their job is and how it relates to the ultimate decision making. Having a clear decision-making process, and a complementary process for announcing decisions, is crucial. To facilitate this process, the president-elect must name his senior White House Staff as soon as possible, as well as announce the roles and jobs of senior campaign staff and advisors who will not go into the White House.

Fourth, the transition team should put a small team together to coordinate with the outgoing White House. It’s very important to have a national security team in place that can take special care to ensure that the National Security Council transition is seamless. The Department of Homeland Security has put together a transition briefing book that should be considered by the team. Equally important: Have a budget team in place that

can coordinate with the Office of Management and Budget, and work with the transition's economic team to quickly develop the new budget.

Fifth, transition leaders should staff the department-by-department issue and policy reviews out of the transition team, but invite outsiders to participate. They should clearly state and publish what ethics obligations will be imposed on those working on the transition, including volunteers. A one-year ban on lobbying the executive branch, for example, may limit the number of volunteers. The transition is an excellent way to involve all those in Washington and around the country who want to help. Put teams together agency by agency to review each agency's mandate, and then ask them to make recommendations as to how to achieve the president-elect's agenda in the particular agency. These undertakings, which produce what is known as "transition briefing books," can be quite helpful to an incoming agency team.

Finally, it is critical that there is a well-defined communications plan for the transition and, to the extent possible, that the "message" of the transition is clear and consistent. This communications plan should include a detailed outreach strategy for elected officials, labor unions, interest groups, business groups, and other constituencies.

Above all, though, the most important and often overlooked aspect of the transition process, according to all who have participated in recent successful elections, is providing the president-elect with sufficient down time to recover from the campaign. A well-organized transition provides the most likely opportunity for the president-elect to rest, reflect, and ponder what comes next.

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## Postscript: Freedom of Information Act and transition papers

The presidential transition team is independent of the executive branch; therefore, transition documents are not generally subject to the disclosure requirements that the Freedom of Information Act imposes on government entities—even though the transition receives government funding. Other issues may arise, however, for governmental entities that share information with a transition team, as well as for members of the transition team that go on to serve in government.

Nonetheless, a combination of case law and public policy protect the candid discussions that take place in the months before inauguration day. The president will no doubt wish to keep his talented and loyal staff with him as he transitions into his role as chief executive officer of the United States. As these individuals populate the government, they are likely to bring with them papers generated prior to inauguration day. The fact that a transition team member brings documents into her office does not automatically convert those documents into "agency records" under FOIA guidelines. But if the transition

team member utilizes the documents in the course of official business, or allows staff to rely upon or integrate them into agency files, then this official runs the risk of making those documents subject to disclosure.

It may also be the case that the outgoing administration will wish to brief members of the transition team prior to the handover of power. This is especially true—and especially sensitive—when it comes to national security challenges. Although the courts have yet to rule squarely on the issue, it is likely that documents would protect legitimate information-sharing between an outgoing administration and their successors, and that such candor does not constitute a waiver of FOIA’s nondisclosure provisions, particularly in the important realm of national security. This has not been fully tested in court, however, and the protections for the formulation of policy are more robust once an administration has taken office.

The president will face many challenges prior to taking office. The disclosure of his transition team’s internal memoranda, which for many reasons he may not wish to share, will likely not be one of them—provided those documents are appropriately segregated from agency operations in the new administration. Additionally, it is most likely the case that sensitive deliberations between the transition team and the previous government will be considered confidential by the courts in the face of a possible FOIA challenge.

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