From Wars of Choice to the Mistakes of Wars: Presidential Decision Making and the Limits of Democratic Accountability

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After the Rubicon: Congress, Presidents, and the Politics of Waging War. By Douglas L. Kriner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 336p. $97.00 cloth, $30.00 paper.

Democracy's Blameless Leaders: From Dresden to Abu Ghraib, How Leaders Evade Accountability for Abuse, Atrocity, and Killing. By Neil James Mitchell. New York: New York University Press, 2012. 280p. $39.00.

Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions. By Elizabeth N. Saunders. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. 302p. $35.00.

U.S. Presidents and Foreign Policy Mistakes. By Stephen G. Walker and Akan Malici. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. 360p. $100.00 cloth, $29.95 paper.

One does not have to look far to see that much of what has been written over the past 10 years reveals a decade filled with US foreign policy missteps, miscues, and failures. Popular books such as Thomas Ricks's *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (2006), Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side* (2008), George Packer's *Assassins' Gate* (2005), and Bob Woodward's series on "Bush's wars" captured our attention and gave us a first cut on the history of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the "global war on terror." These riveting accounts provided rich, descriptive insights and exposed the wide range of ideological and bureaucratic feuding, the breakdown—and often deliberate circumventing—of institutional procedures and organizational practices, and the ad hoc and often chaotic process of policy selection. Embedded throughout these narratives is a broader theme that depicts the past decade as an extraordinary period of American foreign policy excess and a dramatic departure from the past.

Yet much of what has happened in the past decade—the foreign policy mistakes, the protracted commitment of blood and treasure for limited results, and the apparent breakdown of democratic accountability mechanisms—has a long history. Today, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down and with more than a decade having past since the 9/11 attacks, a new wave of scholarship is emerging that seeks to make sense of American foreign policy of the past decade and to situate it in broader theoretical, historical, and comparative perspective. The books under review here focus on this recent era of foreign policy challenges, but they each go beyond the immediate questions about why the United States intervened in Iraq, why it got locked into ambitious and expensive nation-building strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan, and why torture became a focal point of the Bush administration's global war on terror. Instead, they tackle these questions in the context of a broader set of trends—the ubiquity and persistence of foreign policy mistakes, the lingering challenges of rational decision making, and the limits of democratic institutions such as Congress and of the broader rule of law to ensure appropriate standards of democratic accountability. While some of the particulars of the current era may be extraordinary, these books, collectively, present a compelling story that the past decade tends to reflect more continuity than change in American foreign policy.

There are many ways to analyze American foreign policy decision making—especially when it comes to the use of force and means of coercion. Of the books under review, two bring the role of presidential beliefs and perceptions to the forefront of analysis. In *U.S. Presidents and Foreign Policy Mistakes,* Stephen G. Walker and Akan Malici seek to understand foreign policy mistakes over time and how foreign policy decisions are influenced by the ever-present uncertainty in global politics. They look at the ways in which leaders and their advisors often misperceive the basic configurations of power in their relations with others and

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how these misperceptions lead to mistakes in judgment, analysis, and policy. In *Leaders at War,* Elizabeth N. Saunders analyzes the role of the causal belief systems held by specific presidents regarding the source and magnitude of danger in the world. These causal beliefs influence a president's priorities for staffing the national security apparatus, developing defense policy, and preparing for war. The combination of these beliefs and domestic policy investments then influence decisions on when and where to intervene and on the selection of strategies that shapes those military interventions.

The other two books under review examine institutional factors: What is the role of Congress in checking or supporting executive decisions on war, and how well do democratic institutions perform their promised accountability procedures? In *After the Rubicon,* Douglas L. Kriner examines the role of Congress and, like Saunders, is interested not only in how decisions for war and intervention are made but also in how those wars and interventions are conducted. Kriner suggests that Congress often plays a more extensive and nuanced role than commonly assumed and that the balance of power among political parties is often a critical variable indicating how well Congress can influence the course of military strategy during wartime. And, in a highly critical study, Neil James Mitchell's *Democracy's Blameless Leaders* examines the limits of democratic institutional accountability and how democratic leaders often manage the political and institutional fallout from abuse and the killing of civilians in wartime.

Perhaps the best place to start is to examine the concept of foreign policy mistakes. What are they? How do we know them when we see them? And, how often do they occur? Walker and Malici have produced a rich study that reviews a wide range of US foreign policy mistakes over the past century. They begin by conceptualizing mistakes as policies that deviate from the interests of the policymaker and his or her constituents, that are seen as "counterproductive in [their] own time, not merely in hindsight," and that are chosen over feasible and available alternatives (pp. 13–14). They then develop a typology of mistakes as falling into two broad categories: mistakes of *omission* in which the government acts too little or too late, and mistakes of *commission* in which governments overreact by either doing too much or acting too soon. Both of these types of mistakes happen at the *diagnostic* level, that is, when decision-making teams are trying to understand and assess the meaning of particular events, and at the *prescriptive* level when trying to assemble the right policy response.

The authors' analysis centers on developing a game-theoretical and historical framework for assessing when and how these types of mistakes happen. The core argument is that foreign policy mistakes are essentially errors in the understanding and exercise of power. Given the inevitability of uncertainty in international politics, mistakes happen because leaders fail to accurately calculate the magnitude, utility, and limits of their power vis-à-vis others and because they fail to understand basic relations of power, that is, "who is able to destroy, control, utilize, help whom" (p. 25). Starting with this core conceptualization, they analyze a wide range of US foreign policy mistakes, ranging from *deterrence failures* with Japan prior to Pearl Harbor in 1941 and Iraq prior to the 1991 Persian Gulf War; *false alarm failures* that include the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and President Lyndon Johnson's escalation in Vietnam in 1965; *reassurance failures* that include missed opportunities to reunify Germany in the 1950s and to end the Cold War earlier in 1986 and 1987; and *false hope failures* that include Harry Truman's failed policy to unify Korea by military force in 1950 and Jimmy Carter's failed policy to reach an arms-control agreement with the Soviet Union in 1977.

Through use of Stephen J. Bram's "Theory of Moves" that extends the logics of simple game theory, they model each case to identify the underlying power dynamics and strategic actions. In each case, the authors argue, specific strategic dynamics were revealed throughout the crisis escalation and decision-making periods in a way that revealed a set of policy choices that would have mitigated mistakes. It was the failure of presidents and their advisors to understand these revealed strategies and their failure to anticipate the longer-term interaction effects that ultimately contributed to the mistakes.

In *Leaders at War,* Saunders presents an empirically rich and highly readable discussion of presidential decisions to intervene and how they shape the nature of those interventions. While her analysis is not specifically focused on an analysis of foreign policy mistakes per se, her central purpose is to explore how Presidents Johnson and George W. Bush became entrenched in quagmires in Vietnam and Iraq, respectively, and how other presidents were able to avoid such pitfalls there and elsewhere. In doing so, she presents a model in which presidents make strategic decisions on intervention based on a set of core causal beliefs that are formed well before they reach the Oval Office. These beliefs shape their views on when and where to intervene, as well as on the development of domestic institutions—budgets and resources—that will ultimately be used in those interventions.

Saunders argues that some presidents see threats as emanating from the *internal characteristics* of other states. These presidents see the domestic political order and institutions of target states as the primary cause of threats to international peace and security. As a result, these leaders are likely to pursue "transformative interventions," by investing in a broad range of counterinsurgency and nation-building capabilities and by using force for regime change in other countries. Such interventions will inevitably lead to more ambitious forms of nation building and democracy building in order to transform domestic political order. Other presidents are more *externally* focused. They see

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threats as emanating from a target state's external position and are more likely to use force to balance or neutralize the opponent, but not to pay much attention to changing the internal attributes of the target state.

Saunders develops the argument by means of a well-documented set of case studies examining the presidential decisions of Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Johnson. In these cases, she demonstrates the factors that led Eisenhower and Johnson to view threats as externally oriented and Kennedy to see threats abroad as internal to the target country's institutions and political order. This model helps her explain why Eisenhower was reluctant to intervene in support of the French at Dienbienphu and provided only a limited intervention in Lebanon in 1958 to back up his Eisenhower Doctrine; why Kennedy invested heavily in the Alliance for Progress and transformative policies with respect to the Dominican Republic; and how Johnson's external orientation compelled him to develop a robust, conventional air campaign and more conventional posture in Vietnam while only reluctantly supporting an underresourced counterinsurgency strategy there.

Both analyses offer a wide range of historical cases of policy failures and give us insights into the complexity of decision making. They reveal that foreign policy mistakes are common and probably an enduring feature of American foreign policy. The real strength of the Walker and Malici analysis is in the typology of mistakes along two different dimensions: failures of analysis and of prescription and the mistakes of omission and commission—sometimes the United States does too much too soon, and sometimes it does too little too late. The exercise of laying out this typology and illustrating each type of mistake with a series of prototypical cases is helpful and constructive to the literature on decision making and on American foreign policy. For Saunders, the real strength lies in how well her model ties together longer-term policy investments and the decisions for intervention with the decisions on the strategy for those interventions.

The challenge in building an analysis of foreign policy mistakes on the concepts of uncertainty and power, however, is that both concepts are analytically elusive and contested. In presenting their case studies, Walker and Malici suggest that there was a correct reading of each case that principal decision makers missed. This argument has a certain intuitive, deductive logic, and several of their prototypical cases seem to be on the mark: Pearl Harbor and the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990 are fairly clear-cut cases of deterrence failures. But left unexplored is an assessment of the conditions that would have been needed to make deterrence work. What kinds of power projection and policy instruments would have been needed to deter Japan—a country that ultimately engaged in a seemingly irrational battle with the United States—or Iraq under Saddam Hussein—who misread Iranian power in the 1980s and who would later fundamentally misread American intentions (including President Bush's ultimatum) a decade later in the run-up to the 2003 American invasion? Even in hindsight, it is not clear what would have been necessary to ensure that both the United States and its target state accurately understood, processed, and responded rationally to the set of diplomatic cues and markers to effectively alter their subsequent actions and avoid the corresponding mistakes. In other words, how confident can we be that an alternative course would have generated a preferred outcome? One way to get leverage on this question would be to develop a broader comparative perspective and examine cases of American foreign policy successes to see whether or not there are significant patterns of influence to explain variation.

Similarly, the Vietnam War and the Iraq War in 2003 both appear to be fairly strong cases of overreaction to threats—a position shared by Walker and Malici and by Saunders. For Walker and Malici, the mistakes in Vietnam were both diagnostic and prescriptive. The Johnson administration exaggerated the threat of the North's power and the subsequent threat of communist takeover of the South, and then responded counterproductively given the diplomatic signals conveyed by the North at the time. Every time the North presented the United States with an opportunity for a settlement, Washington reacted as though it were a threat. Walker and Malici conclude that Johnson's escalation in 1965 closed a set of openings from the North to reach a negotiated settlement. The challenge for analysis here, however, is that this conclusion presumes that the North's intensions were real and fixed and would not have changed in response to a new strategic environment created during or by an agreement. Perhaps, but without more careful analysis, it is hard to be sure. Given Ho Chi Minh's nationalism, the threat of a Moscow-inspired communist takeover might have been overstated, but the North's basic negotiating position rested on the eventual unification of Vietnam, and it is unlikely that it would have conceded or released its pressure on the South until that objective was reached. Of course, how this historical trajectory would have unfolded is an unknown and much is left for scholars to speculate. But this is part of the problem. In the end, Walker and Malici dismiss the level of uncertainty that existed for decision makers at the time, and that exists for historians and other scholars now, about the dynamics of strategic interactions in Vietnam. This is not to suggest that their analysis is wrong, but because they imply rather than demonstrate these counterfactuals, the analysis is occasionally not as compelling or persuasive as it could be.

In her analysis, Saunders argues that Johnson's tendencies toward externally oriented threats led him to see the threat in Vietnam as emanating from the broader international strategic implications of the Cold War. As a result,

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he allowed Kennedy's counterinsurgency policy investments to lapse, and he supported a large conventional, and counterproductive, bombing campaign. By the time Johnson was persuaded of the need to change course, he had not invested in the right US capabilities to respond to an insurgency and was subsequently hamstrung in his ability to pivot American policy and strategy. Implicit in this argument is the conclusion that had Johnson chosen an alternate course earlier, had he invested in the institutional structures to support the counterinsurgency campaign and nation-building strategy in the South, he might have been able to avoid the quagmire. Again, this seems problematic. It is hard to see how any strategy of major American involvement could have produced a different outcome. There is probably no clearer lesson from Vietnam than that there are real and material limits to American power and the utility of force.

Both of the analyses of Vietnam under review here have significant parallels to the authors' respective analyses of the Iraq War in 2003. According to Walker and Malici, the failure of omission (too little/too late) in the run-up to 9/11 triggered the mistake of commission (too much/too soon) in Iraq. After 9/11, the Bush administration quickly locked into a specific narrative about the nature of the threat: The United States would wage a war on terror and not tolerate states that sponsored terror. In doing so, it abandoned norms and legal judgments limiting and prohibiting domestic surveillance, torture, and detention and developed a new set of protocols and capabilities to fight the new global war on terror. In this new world, possible threats became probable threats, leading the administration to assume that absent compelling evidence to the contrary, Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction and supported terrorist organizations plotting against American interests. Walker and Malici add that this preinvasion, false-alarm mistake was compounded by a false set of optimistic assumptions about how the postinvasion would go. In the end, as with Vietnam, the Iraq War was a mistake of both diagnosis and prescription.

So why did President Bush find himself repeating many of the same mistakes of President Johnson? Here, Saunders's argument is intriguing and informative. She argues that Bush's initial external orientation led him to be highly averse to the concept of nation building prior to 9/11. Throughout his 2000 presidential campaign, he pledged that he would pull back from American commitments in the Balkans and elsewhere and refocus the US military toward a more traditional war-fighting posture. This position, which was similar to Johnson's views before August of 1964, led him to a series of staffing decisions, budgetary commitments, and defense-planning postures that shied away from building the capacities and planning for postwar reconstruction and stabilization. As a result, the Bush administration did not focus on, or even really consider, the requirements for postinvasion planning in either Iraq or Afghanistan until it was too late.

While this is an interesting argument, Saunders implies that had the Bush administration adhered to the advice of the State Department, conducted better postinvasion planning, and developed a comprehensive counterinsurgency and nation-building strategy, many of the problems after the fall of Saddam could have been mitigated. Again, perhaps, but the insurgency and sectarian violence were fueled both by a scarcity of security and by the power vacuum that followed the collapse of Saddam's regime. Even with better planning, it is not clear that the United States had the capacity or the wherewithal to effectively balance a robust occupation with an orderly and peaceful transition. There is plenty of scholarship on the history of military occupations to suggest that this balance, at best, is very difficult to achieve.

In both Vietnam and Iraq, the best we can say is that the existing policy clearly did not achieve the stated objectives. It is difficult, even in hindsight, to fully understand the range of available policy options that could have been effective. The challenge is to better understand these deeper questions: Under what conditions are various types of mistakes more likely to occur? Why do some presidents misperceive power relations in some instances and not in others? Under what conditions can we understand which policies will be effective or not?

Despite these analytical shortcomings, both books provide interesting and informative policy prescriptions. Since mistakes are common, Walker and Malici conclude that the best approach during crisis-escalation diplomacy is a strategy of "disjointed incrementalism" whereby decision makers make small and reversible moves when uncertainty is high. Small moves have the benefit of slowing crisis escalation and being reversible should new information emerge or if the target state responds with aggressive countermeasures. This strategy helps to manage or mitigate the range of recurring mistakes resulting from groupthink, cognitive and motivated biases, and the acute psychological pressures of crisis and complex decision making.

Saunders suggests that policymakers need to be more self-reflective about the core causal beliefs that motivate their decisions on intervention and war. Such self-reflection is a vital element of learning and policy adjustment that may be needed if the intervention does not go according to script. Without this self-reflection and without minimal levels of investment in the resources needed to shift policy, presidents too often get locked into a particular strategy.

Walker and Malici should be applauded for their typology and for raising the bar on judging foreign policy mistakes. And Saunders provides an excellent analysis of the decisions on both interventions and particular military strategies. In the end, both sets of analyses provide good

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frameworks for identifying common types of mistakes or policy errors. And by focusing on the role of presidential decision making, these frameworks provide welcome emphasis both on the influence of presidential beliefs and on the role of complexity and uncertainty in decision making.

Democratic Checks and Balances and Institutions of Accountability

Despite the strong contributions of *U.S. Presidents and Foreign Policy Mistakes* and *Leaders at War,* however, a larger set of questions remains: Even if a president misperceives power relations or is influenced by a particular set of causal beliefs that influences particular policy trajectories, where are the systems of democratic checks and balances and the institutions of accountability to prevent these misperceptions and beliefs from leading US policy astray? Many of the democratic institutions in the Untied States were specifically designed to help minimize foreign policy disasters, especially when it comes to decisions on war. The U.S. Constitution designates the president as commander in chief but gives Congress the powers to provide for the common defense and to declare war. The intent of this clear separation of powers was to make the process of going to war difficult and to ensure a robust deliberative process before the United States sends its troops into combat. In short, this institutional structure was specifically designed to avoid the types of mistakes we have seen in Vietnam, Iraq, and elsewhere. This institutional structure also encourages the development of a relatively free and independent media and provides for regularly scheduled elections to ensure accountability and recalibration should American policy go awry. So the question is clear: Given the number of foreign policy mistakes and blunders over the years, why do these institutions sometimes fail? Under what conditions do the checks work, and under what conditions do they fail?

These questions are reviewed in the two other books under review here. In *After the Rubicon,* Douglas L. Kriner examines how Congress influences American military strategy both in the run-up to and the aftermath of a decision for intervention and war. Kriner builds on recent literature on interbranch political dynamics that has found partisanship to be often a significant variable in the decision by a president to use force. Presidents with strong partisan opposition in Congress use force less often than do those presidents whose parties are in the majority. The primary explanation is that presidents often anticipate congressional resistance when they do not have majorities and, hence, are less inclined to use force. Kriner expands this literature to examine how and under what conditions these dynamics play out in the selection of military strategy after American combat forces intervene abroad. In short, does Congress influence the scope and duration of military operations, and if so, how and under what circumstances?

Kriner provides a highly informative, rigorous, and nuanced analysis of congressional actions. He finds that partisan support provides the president with much greater flexibility in the waging of war, which often leads to longer and more intensive interventions. Presidents with large majorities are more likely to "use ground troops, employ sustained firepower, or commit American air and naval vessels to hostile areas than presidents with less partisan support in Congress" (p. 139).

Still, this is only part of the story. Kriner finds that there is actually a good deal more congressional influence on presidential behavior than meets the eye. A president facing an opposition party in Congress is influenced and constrained by formal and direct means—specific legislation that opposes a presidential policy or decision—and also by subtler, more informal tools, such as hearings and committee investigations, as well as even more indirect tools, such as nonbinding resolutions and public commentary that can influence public opinion. These work, according to the author, because presidents anticipate the likely political and public costs that are raised by these congressional actions. He finds that they often permeate the president's calculations on the costs and benefits of the military action and can influence the selection of strategy and the duration of the military engagement.

The strength of Kriner's analysis lies less in its empirical findings than in its interpretation of the empirical evidence in a broader theoretical context. For example, in his comparison with a wider range of other cases, Kriner demonstrates how the Bush administration's successful campaign to secure congressional authorization in October 2002 on the use of force in Iraq is similar to a number of other instances in which Congress failed to check the president. Furthermore, he adds to the analysis by showing how the robust Republican congressional support from 2004 to 2006 enabled Bush to settle on the failed military strategy in Iraq. It was not until the 2006 midterm elections, which led to Democratic control in both the House and the Senate, that President Bush was forced to alter his military strategy. Through legislation, hearings, and investigations, Congress became very active in overseeing the conduct of the war in relatively minute detail. This heightened congressional scrutiny compelled the Bush administration to develop concrete plans for a speedier transfer of power and responsibility for Iraqi security, as well as the outlines for an American withdrawal from the country.

Kriner's analysis shows the strengths and weaknesses of Congress's role in American military actions across time and place: It is thorough, sharp, and persuasive. Yet in *Democracy's Blameless Leaders,* Neil James Mitchell challenges the notion that Congress is often or frequently effective in checking presidential behavior. Mitchell demonstrates that political leaders in democratic societies rarely sit back and respond to the checks of democratic institutions. Instead, they are active and strategic actors,

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constantly managing, manipulating, and obstructing efforts for greater accountability concerning their power and policies.

Mitchell concludes that democratic accountability mechanisms rarely work well in periods of security threats and war. His core argument is that when wars go bad, when civilian agencies or military forces from democratic states engage in abuses and atrocities, democratic leaders behave in opportune ways to shift and manipulate the oversight mechanisms and accountability institutions. This book is more an examination of the ways in which leaders manage blame than an examination of why these abuses happen. Its real strength is the historical breadth and cross-national scope, which allows the author to show that democratic leaders behave remarkably similar when confronted with their abuses and their management of blame. The cases include the British massacre in Amritsar in India in 1919, the Allied bombing of Dresden in 1944 and 1945, Bloody Sunday in Londonderry in 1972, the Israeli attack on the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut in 1982, and the American and British abuses at Abu Ghraib and Basra in Iraq—all episodes in which civilians were killed and abused by armed forces of democratic states.

Mitchell argues that in each case, there was widespread condemnation of the atrocities and abuse. Furthermore, he presents compelling evidence of the internal deliberations in each case, which reveals that the principal decision makers understood the gravity of the abuses. Nonetheless, in each case, leaders undertook similar strategies to evade responsibility. The author suggests that leaders rely on a gravitational theory of accountability—that is, shifting the blame to the lowest person or unit. For example, concerning the most recent case of American abuses in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he demonstrates that despite evidence of systematic abuses of detainees in multiple detention centers at Guantanamo, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan, the Bush administration (along with Congress and the military judicial system) shifted the blame to a few "rogue" soldiers, rather than find and accept senior-level direction and complicity in creating policies of abuse. He suggests that leaders frequently employ strategies to shift blame and spin abuses as events they "can't control," laying out the specific mechanisms of evasion: denial and delay, delegation, and diversion. In case after case, some combination of these strategies proved effective in defusing political pressure and deflecting blame.

One limitation of Mitchell's analysis is that it is principally focused on individual accountability rather than on institutional or broader political accountability. As we know, none of the principals in the Bush administration has been found legally or personally liable for practices of torture, extraordinary rendition, or other abuses in Iraq and Afghanistan, or at Guantanamo. But there are other and often more diffuse forms of accountability. President Bush's popularity and political capital sagged dramatically as a result of the policy failures and abuses in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Kriner points out, this contributed to the Democrats' victory in the 2006 midterm elections. Although Mitchell correctly found the absence of personal or legal accountability, the system of political accountability worked to some degree—albeit late and after the fact. Unfortunately, as he rightly concludes, this is unlikely to prove to be much of a deterrent to future leaders, who will almost certainly engage in more abuses during times of war and heightened security.

The four books together provide an interesting panorama of the challenges of American foreign policy decision making in an increasingly complex and dynamic world. The core democratic institutions that are intended to ensure transparency and provide accountability often fail to function. And partisanship often trumps institutional or constitutional checks. In the end, while some things are new in the current era of American foreign policy, serious mistakes are not likely to go away. Together, these books make clear the historical breadth and range of mistakes, the motivations behind various presidential decisions for war and the strategies for fighting those wars, the conditions under which Congress does (and does not) constrain and influence those decisions, and the ways presidents seek to manage blame and the political fallout when their policies fail. An understanding of these processes may not eliminate future mistakes, but it surely contributes to the possibility that future US political leaders will be both more careful and more accountable as they approach the possibility of war.

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