Interview with Brian Lamb
Subject: The Detroit Riot of 1967
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Transcribed by Maeve Hooper and Brett Prim

Interviewee: Brian Lamb
Interviewer: Doug Perry

Dr. Perry Prelude: This interview is dealing with the Detroit Riot of 1967, and from what I understand Brian Lamb was a lieutenant with Cyrus Vance who was the special envoy of President Johnson and pretty much immediately arrived there on the 24th of July, 1967.

Dr. Perry (Later): I want to be respectful to your timeline. I'm kind of gabby. I'm an English teacher. What was specifically your role? As far as I understand you were assistant to Cyrus Vance at the time.

Brian Lamb: No, I was a lieutenant, junior grade, in the Navy. I was assigned full-time to the Office of Public Affairs in the Defense Department [Pentagon], or more precisely the Asst. Secretary of Defense of Public Affairs, who, at the time (I'm not sure this is correct) but it might have been Dan Henkin. No, it couldn't have been Dan Henkin; it would have been . . . I don't remember. There were three or four of them when I was there. He may have been the deputy because Dan Henkin ended up being in Detroit, and I don't think that's what his title was at the time. But I was asked, and I remember, vaguely remember, that Dan Henkin who was a civilian, working for Bob McNamara, the Secretary, was the Asst. Secretary or Deputy Asst. Secretary [of Defense]. He asked me. . . he said, "Get a tape recorder and a ticket to Detroit," (This is after the riots had occurred.) "and fly out to Detroit, check in to the Sheraton Cadillac Hotel, and go over to the police station, to the police chief's office, and stay there. Your primary job is to man the phone in the office and record all the press conferences held by George Romney, and feed them back to the White House, where they'll be transcribed. Then Lyndon Johnson can see what George Romney is saying." That was my primary role.

DP: A little political?

BL: Well, very political. I mean, at the time, you know, I wasn't all that savvy about all the ins and outs. I knew this was not an ordinary thing to do, but I was working in the military, I took orders. I grabbed my tape recorder, flew to Detroit, [donned] civilian clothes, and showed up at the police department and did my thing for a week.

DP: And did you have a lot of contact with Ray Girardin or Hubert Locke; Hubert was the Assistant to the Chief of Police Girardin.

BL: Neither one, neither one. My contract was in this office, and it was in the Chief of Police's actual office. If I remember, it wasn't very big, and it wasn't very fancy, and I remember it having linoleum tile on the floor. In this one room was Cyrus Vance, who was the Deputy Secretary of Defense. Roger Wilkins, who was either an Assistant Attorney General at the time for Civil Rights or a top Civil Rights advisor in the Department of Justice. I'm not exactly sure what his title was. Warren Christopher, who was the Deputy Attorney General; Dan Henkin, who

had come out of the Asst. Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Office; John Doar who at the time was in the Justice Department; and another top civil rights aid, (he could have been Assistant Attorney General or just an aid to the Attorney General; I don't remember for sure) and myself. Those were all the people that were in the room, and we all operated in this one room the entire week.

DP: You guys didn't get out? You weren't any part of the little tour that Vance took around the city?

BL: I took a tour around the city on my own with the Detroit police. That wasn't with Vance when he went out.

DP: What did you see when you went out? Do you recall what day it was? Vance got there at 1:20 pm, from my reading of Locke's book [on the riot, *Violence in the Model City*], on the 24th, which was the second day of the riot.

BL: I don't remember when I went out there. I vaguely remember coming in on a Sunday, but just vaguely.

DP: Yes, Sunday is the day it started. It started early in the morning.

BL: Then it probably wasn't Sunday when I went there. It probably would have been about Tuesday. They sent me out after this. **It got to be very political when Romney started having his news conferences because Johnson thought he was going to run against him in '68. So he was worried about what he [Romney] would do.**

DP: So when you went out on that tour with the police, what did you see in terms of the landscape of Detroit? What kind of activities, would you say, were related to rioting?

BL: I saw none, because by the time I got there — I vaguely remember; I say vaguely only because I've never gone back to check the numbers — there were already 200 people in the jail from the riots. I remember that 43 people were killed, and I'm not sure when they were killed or what day they were killed, but when they had 200 people in this one cell in the basement of [the building] where the Police Chief was [stationed]. And again, I'm just recalling. It may have been in another building for all I know, but all I remember is it was a horrible looking cell full of people who were unruly and loud and had been drinking. It was not a very pleasant thing to see. When I went out on the city — I had to come from the hotel all the time over [to the station] — there were tanks on the street corner. I didn't see any rioting; I saw some fires, as I remember. I remember sitting in the back seat of a police car, and there were police on either side of me with a rifle out the window. That's all I remember. My job was basically to stay in that room, record the news conference, go back to the hotel, and I remember coming back to Washington. Whatever day Vance left, I left with him, and I was the only person on the plane with him and his wife.

DP: In terms of being in that room, and doing your job of getting that information on what Romney was saying, in addition to that, what did you hear about what was going on outside that room, in terms of the city of Detroit?

BL: Don't remember.

DP: Oh, ok.

BL: Don't remember. I do remember that Cyrus Vance, first of all, was an extraordinarily serious person. They all were serious. Roger Wilkins and John Doar had senses of humor, but Cy Vance didn't have one, and, of course, he was in charge. And Warren Christopher was very serious. They were all nice people. They all treated me nicely. I mean, I answered the phone when the phone would ring, swept the place out when they weren't around. I don't remember any unusual moments, but it the whole thing was rather tense. Frankly, more than anything else, I remember the politics of it. The fact of the matter is, everybody was concerned that George Romney was going to get the upper hand and vice versa. Romney was working very hard to. I remember sitting in his conference room waiting for Gov. Romney, and I watched him. I remember one thing I could always see. He was walking down the hall, and he took his coat off and rolled up his sleeves before he walked into the news conference. A bunch of people saw this. They said, "Oh, this is a phony deal because he could have walked in with his coat on." And the first thing he said when he came in the room for the first time was, "I played nine holes of golf this morning at six o'clock." And everyone in the room thought this was very strange.

DP: Was he serious?

BL: He was.

DP: My God! Wow.

BL: And that was, you know, in his mind, was exercise. That's all it was. He was probably out there by himself. I think he said he pulled the cart around, and he probably played nine holes in fifteen minutes. That's the way he was, he was very fast moving. Everybody looked at each other saying, "That was very strange that this man would tell us he was on a golf course this morning."

DP: Given the event [of the riot]?

BL: Yeah.

DP: In terms of the event, did you hear any discussion about what it should be called: a race-riot, a civil disturbance, etc?

BL: No.

DP: As far as your role as collecting the press releases, and funneling that information back to President Johnson, what do you recall of that in terms of any important bits of information?

BL: All I would do is tape the news conference, and literally take the phone, put my clips on it, (at that time they didn't have any fancy devices), and fed the news conference back to the White House situation room where they transcribed it and got it up to Johnson as fast as they could.

DP: On a cute little audiotape? [gesturing to the hand-held tape recorder used in this interview]

BL: No actually, it was a lot bigger.

DP: Well, yeah, but it was an audiotape?

BL: Audio tape, yeah.

DP: Yeah. Was there any discussion as far as the people you were around about including black leadership within the town to help quell the riot?

BL: Don't remember. I really don't remember a single conversation. I don't remember any of the substance of it. It's just a vague memory of mine**. It's always had an impact on me because I'd never been in the middle of a riot or been in an American town [where rioting occurred]. I don't remember for sure, but I vaguely remember thinking it was the 82nd Airborne that was there. One of these Airborne's planes flew in, and it had tanks on the ground. It was not a pleasant experience. It was an eerie place to be. There was no one at the Metropolitan Detroit Airport when I flew in there, because people weren't coming to Detroit that day because of all this. There was an air crisis, but I don't remember any conversation; I actually don't remember anything that Romney said or Cavanaugh or any of these people.**

DP: When you flew in, did you fly in during daylight hours or did you see fire?

BL: I don't think I did. I think I flew in at night. I remember coming to the hotel and walking into the Cadillac Hilton and seeing fatigues on all the military people as I was checking in, which again was weird. I was a military man, but I was in civilian clothes, and no one knew I was a military man. But they were all dressed in their greens.

DP: You said it was tense. Was it tense because of the event or the relations between the people that you were around?

BL: They all got along fine. There was a tension because of the riot; there was a tension because of the politics of it. So, you know, the Johnson White House crowd — and these are all political appointees — were all very concerned that Romney not get the upper hand. Cy Vance wasn't a very political man. He really was a bureaucrat more than anything, in spite of the fact that he had the bureaucratic mentality; afraid to do anything that [might upset President Johnson]. I remember once answering the phone, and Lyndon Johnson was on the phone for Vance. He was calling Cy Vance. And when I said to Mr. Vance, "The President is here," he couldn't have gotten the phone out of my hands faster. He did not want the President to come on the line without him being there. He was not relaxed about what he did. He never was relaxed. He took nothing casually. He was a very a serious human being.

DP: And you feel that's more an offshoot of the man's own temperament as opposed to what we hear about to "trust nothing that Lyndon Johnson could perpetrate on people"?

BL: I think he was afraid of Lyndon Johnson. I mean just given the nature of the beast I don't think, as a kid watching him, I remember thinking, "That's the way most people are with presidents anyway." There was nothing casual about him. Very direct; he didn't make small talk.

DP: There was an order not to shoot any looters. Did you hear anything about that, or any speculation about that order had not been given, if the riot would have been quelled?

BL: I don't remember ever hearing anything about that. I remember just at the time that [topic] being discussed, but I can't put a focus on any discussion.

DP: Ok. Of the people there that you were around, was anybody going to rise to the top as far as having qualities of leadership? Did anyone stand out as a leader?

BL: I think after that experience I would have said Warren Christopher handled himself very well. I have been an admirer of Roger Wilkins. I remember John Doar, [who] went on to be Watergate counsel for the House of Representatives during the Nixon years, as having a nice sense of humor. I remember I really liked both John Doar and Roger Wilkins. They treated me very down to earth; they didn't put on any airs. They were not relaxed about the situation, but they weren't overly uptight, and they handled themselves well. I'm not surprised at all that all of the people in that room went on to leadership. That doesn't surprise me. They were confident**. I remember feeling at the time that this has gotten very political. I didn't like it. I wasn't feeling good about the politics in the middle of all this, of people getting killed. It didn't seem the time to play politics, but people on both sides were. No question about it.**

DP: And you were there just carrying out orders.

BL: I didn't have any substantive role at all. I was just a fly on the wall, by and large.

DP: If we could just back up a couple weeks in July. There was the Newark Riot. Had Vance gone to Newark?

BL: Don't remember.

DP: Ok, I guess you weren't there.

BL: This was one of those strange experiences that was never anticipated. It had never been done before that I know of in our office, and we all found it a little unusual. I wouldn't get another opportunity. It never happened again. I remember saying at the time that I was going to be living through a little history there, but also knew that it was unusual to send a military person out to record the Governor's words in the news conference. But it made sense because Romney had been rumored for some time to want to run for president. He was a very popular Republican at the time. He was middle of the road to left, left is not the word, but a Liberal Republican.

DP: He and Rockefeller too.

BL: Right. In retrospect though, Romney never had a chance, but at the time . . . Nixon didn't announce until '68.

DP: Do you have any impressions of Jerry Cavanaugh?

BL: He was heavy. Not enormous, but he was a heavy-set man. I mean, he was 50 pounds overweight. He was pleasant enough. That's all I remember.

DP: He died of a heart attack, I think, three or four years later.

BL: Yeah. I don't remember anything other than I can see him.

DP: In terms of the 60's: 1965 the Watts riot, '67 the Newark riots and Detroit riots, I mean those are the three big ones; there were other riots in American society. As a citizen what did you see as the precipitating cause of those three major riots?

BL: Vietnam.

DP: Vietnam? Why?

BL: The country was in turmoil over Vietnam. It was very active. The war began to be very active in '66-'67. There were a lot of antiwar demonstrations, and a lot of blacks were fighting in Vietnam. Thought they were getting the raw end of the stick. I vaguely remember 35% of the soldiers in Vietnam were black, and there was an active effort on the part of Martin Luther King, Jr. The blacks were basically saying that this was a hot summer, that they were fed up with it [the war], and the country was in great turmoil. It was in far greater turmoil than it is today, all over. You had significantly larger military, you had 550,000 troops in Vietnam. During that period from '63 to about '73, you had about nine million people that served in the military, two and a half million that served in Vietnam at one point or another. Because of the draft, you were not getting a lot of white boys in the military. They were getting married and having children, or going to law school. So you had a disproportionate amount of blacks fighting in Vietnam. And it just all came to a head. It was years and years in the making.

DP: Do you recall when King gave his Vietnam speech?

BL: No.

DP: I don't either. It was somewhere in that time period [of 1966-67]. How old were you at that time?

BL: Twenty-five.

DP: Wow. So was I.

BL: I was born in '41, and I would have turned 26 that October.

DP: Your image of Detroit prior to that — did you see it as some people called it, a model city in terms of the city trying to provide more opportunities for blacks in terms of jobs and better educational opportunities, a modern city in terms of how it was using federal funds it gained for education?

BL: My view of Detroit was: "I had never been there." I grew up in Indiana, and it [Detroit] made cars. That was the depth of my knowledge at the time, so it was a shock because it was a big city in America. And it was a shock to go in the middle of this for the first time ever and that's all the view I had.

DP: And did you, after that, hear anything in terms of possible conspiracy theories as far as what ignited the riot? If there were other factors than just, "Hey, a raid of the blind pig"? From my reading, it seems like there were possible outsiders who came in and did some of the tossing of Molotov cocktails. Who were they? Do you know? Did you know during the time of the riot or subsequently?

BL: Don't remember. I mean, I've told you everything that I can remember from it. The night of the press club dinner [make a notation] is one of the reasons I asked Roger Wilkins to speak was because of my memory of him that had started in that room. [And all through these years it had started in that room.]? He was always a gentleman to me. He was always an even-tempered person, and he never lost his perspective. His stature just grew with me over the years, just because — and I'm not endorsing what he thinks; I basically stay out of that [in my present role at C-Span]. He just struck me more than anything else as a very decent man. And I've always liked him.

DP: Was he the only African-American in that group?

BL: Yes, the only African-American anywhere in that area.

DP: And was that surprising that there was one African-American in that group?

BL: I don't remember having a thought about that when I was there. I just remember . . . I can still see the jail cell and that was a shock to see a room. I don't know if it's accurate to say there were 200 people in that cell, but it was a very full cell.

DP: That seemed to be the situation in many parts of the city where people were incarcerated, but it was people staying on buses for several days and not being able to relieve themselves [that caught the news]. So in the prison area that you saw, would say it was more like a sardine can?

BL: I don't remember it being like that. I just remember them relieving themselves right in the cells, so the smell was rather strong. Not good.

DP: I have another question kind of looking back on all of this: How would you assess race relations in America today in general?

BL: I don't know that I can answer that. We have a forum here [at C-Span] for people from all walks of life and I think for the first time in history over the last 25 years the black race in this

country has a true opportunity to have an equal say in what goes on through our forum. It's always been one of my positive feelings about what we've been able to do. It's not just the black race; it's anybody in our society has a chance to speak. And we don't ever sit here and say, "We're not going to let that side speak because we don't like their views." There's too much of that in the media. There's too much in our society. We're afraid to let people say what they really think, and they ought to be allowed to say it, and I think that's part of people's frustration.

So race relations in this country are significantly better than they were in 1967. Part of the reason for that, as it always will be, is money. There are more blacks today doing better than ever in the history of this country. In a town like this, for instance, there are substantial middle and upper-class black folks that live here and do very well, and they're very much a part of this society. They live like everybody else, and that's the answer to this in the long run. We'll never get along. We can't get a long. White people can't get along with the different groups whether if you're and evangelical born-again Christian versus somebody on the far left who doesn't believe in the church. There's as big a difference there between a white and black in certain areas. As a matter of fact they could be a lot closer together because of their views. I've come to believe it today to be a class thing more than a race thing. The black race is still smarting from 200 years of this in this country, or 400, and that's going to take forever to get rid of. But it's better. There are a lot of people in public life and in private life, not as much as any of us would like, but a lot better than it ever was. There are lots of places in the country that are very integrated. Although I've come to believe — and this is a personal comment — it has nothing to do with politics, that in the end people like to be with their own. So we will continue to be segregated for an awful lot of our social activities. It has nothing to do with whether you like or dislike somebody, it just happens. Iranians who are American go to their own people, and Chinese go to their own, and whites go to their own, Protestants go to their own. You just pick your class, you pick your group and you find your own. It's just the way it's going to be.

DP: School teachers hang out with school teachers.

BL: Exactly. I am not an expert on this. I can just tell you it's better than it was in '67. It was really ugly.

DP: I see that change too, Brian. One thing I can't judge very well though is if you look at urban ghettos in the 1960s and you look at them today, and I've seen them today in L.A. and in Pittsburgh where I did graduate studies, I've seen them traveling through Philadelphia and Boston and New York, the Bronx, here in D.C. and Detroit. In Detroit, it's still incredibly stark when you compare it to a black area of Seattle or Tacoma. Black areas in Seattle and Tacoma look middle class in comparison to the most decayed areas of Detroit. If you compare and contrast urban ghettos today with those back in the '60s it's pretty much the same spot, maybe a little larger. Is that a sign of the lack of movement or is that a sign of further decay?

BL: I really have to be careful here, I'm not an expert. Detroit's the blackest city in America, 81% black. Compared to Washington D.C., which is 75% black. But what's happened about in Washington is that an awful lot of African-Americans have left the District of Columbia and have moved to Prince George's County and Montgomery County and into Virginia. There's a real migration where you have the integrated neighborhoods, especially in this area. It's changed here dramatically. I have a book show that I do on Sunday nights called Book Notes. I've devoted an awful lot of time to the issue of race. There probably isn't anywhere in the public

media in the United States where more black folk have told their story than on that one little show. I've done 55 books in those years with African-Americans and they've all had their say-so in an hour's time. Both sides have had their say. We've had conservative blacks, liberal blacks, women, men, all that. What is clear to me, after all these interviews and thinking a lot about this, is that slavery has cut deeply in the country. So deep that the scar is so big that I'm not sure where this goes. There has been an enormous amount of white people that have tried to pull us together and out of this. As a matter of fact, I'm always interested in how often today there's an all-black magazine and an all-black television network, the black caucus. It seems to me that after all these years the black folks in leadership often want to go the other way, and they don't want to be integrated into our system. They want their chance to be heard from their point of view. So it's a complicated subject, and I have no solution to the problem.

We try here in our little way to have a forum where everyone can talk in hopes that people will start to understand each other. I think if I were to say anything to my own race I'd say, "You better understand, if you haven't thought about it, how deep this is." And if I were speaking to a black person, I'd say, "You better understand there's an enormous amount of white people that are trying to make a difference and help the problem. They need to know you see that or we're never going to get anywhere in this country."

DP: As a teacher in an all-white school, I would really agree. As a teacher of American history, I have read a lot in terms of slavery, Civil War, civil rights, post Civil War, a whole lot in the Civil Rights movement. Now I'm looking more at Northern civil rights, and that's one of the ways I've gotten into the study of the Detroit Riot.

BL: I've concluded it's the toughest problem we have. I don't think there's any problem that comes close to it because it touches all the different areas that we're concerned about: education, jobs, the military. I'm always astounded and I go to historical places all the time; I'm astounded by how few blacks go to our historical sites. If it hasn't had something to do with Civil Rights, you won't find them in presidential libraries, you won't find them in a lot of museums. They aren't buying the history as it's portrayed by a lot of people in this country. I think it's worrisome. I have the same feeling I do about people who are immigrants to this country who don't want to know the history. They don't want to understand it. And there are a lot of people that don't, a tremendous amount of people that aren't the slightest bit interested. We've got to all be using the same Constitution and the same basis of history to understand how to make it better for the future. It's one of the weakest things I see [in our society], but I'm just one little guy here trying to do our thing. I don't understand it all. But in the end it comes back to money. It's always about money; it's always about having the wherewithal to live like your neighbor. If you don't have it, you do strange things.

DP: Feeling powerless?

BL: Yes. A guy goes out and sells cocaine and makes a tremendous amount of money to buy the fancy automobile. I mean, why would he waste his time going to college to have a real job and put on a tie every day and make significantly less money? It would take a lot of work, and I think some people are wary. White people are wary of being accused all the time of being racist, not that it makes them matter. And blacks are wary of whites not paying any attention to the problems they see that are, in their minds, caused by white people. I think it's better because the black folks are doing better economically. Overall, there are still huge weaknesses, but overall

there are a lot more [black people] doing a lot better and are a lot better educated than they were 30 years ago.

DP: Does the government have an obligation to help them out in terms of urban ghettos or just trying to put together programs that will create jobs, sort of a New Deal in terms of helping revitalize a work force? Because it seems to me that there are just people rotting, whether it's through drugs or crime. Those people are human beings and they have talent just as you and I do. They can make a contribution to society that's important in their little slot in life.

BL: I'm going to duck that question because it's too close to politics and I don't like to get into it because of what we do here at C-Span.

DP: Right, I gotcha. I've seen enough C-Span to know what you're talking about.

BL: That's fair. The answer to that question, you put your finger right on the problem and if you give the answer to that question, you'll be on a side.

DP: Ok ok, I respect that.

BL: I'd just get myself in trouble. I don't like to get into this because it's such a hot issue. I've already said things that you could get into an argument on.

DP: I've done other interviews on the Riot of '67, not too many. I interviewed fellow Frank Rashid whose father ran a party store in Detroit, and whose father also had a grocery store in Detroit. Both were looted; one destroyed. I've interviewed two African-American women that are about our same age. One had kind of a conspiracy theory that there was a 16-wheeler that came up just the day before the riot, and unloaded a bunch of furniture from a store, and zipped it on over to Ohio and that was one of the places that burned down the next day. Another woman, who works at the Ruether Archives in Detroit, I ran into when doing research there. She was about 16 or 18 at the time of the Riot; she saw men dressed in gray hooded sweatshirts and sweatpants with ball caps on, runing around literally starting fires. That's something that she saw. When I interviewed her and others, I was trying to really understand the riot. When I discussed the Riot with Nathan Caplan on the phone, he said that what Sidney Fine wrote [his academic tome on the Riot, *Violence in the Model City*, was myth history. Fine's trying to really gear history towards some point rather than to look at all the evidence. I just have this funny feeling that there was something a little more going on in Detroit at the time of the Riot than what we read in the history books.

BL: There always is.

DP: [Laughs] Yeah I guess so.

BL: History is what you're able to find, and that's one of the great dangers of reading history because no one gets it all. If you talk to one person, you've already found they have a view of it. You can see my view, all these years later, is very spotty. My memory is very spotty. You have to be very careful. Even going back and reading the newspaper stories in those days — who knows what that person's attitude toward the riot was. What they thought they saw and all that

stuff. You're doing the right thing by piecing it all together. The one thing you know is, it doesn't matter whether somebody started it or not: it happened. And once it happened there's a lot of anger. People come out of nowhere and things happen, and people were killed and people were wounded and all that stuff. It happened. There was a lot of unrest in the society that happened in Newark and other places. I've never been a conspiracy theorist; I know things happen. Sometimes because they're planned. But we went through a period of years where there were serious deep-felt racial differences, and this was after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which changed everything. It's part of it too. A lot of people resisted it, a lot of white people resisted it. My own mother was from Arkansas, and wasn't the slightest bit interested in changing how we live, she didn't want to live together. I was always arguing with her about this, I wasn't a crusader I'd just say, "Mom, you can't look at people that way." She was a nice lady, and a decent person, but she grew up in a family full of that stuff.

DP: My [maternal] grandfather ran an Italian importing store and a deli and restaurant in Spokane, Washington. I remember working there. One day, a black man, kind of a hobo, was coming through the door and what he [my grandfather] said I wouldn't repeat, and it's something I've never said. It was an Italian immigrant looking at a black man whose presence near the store would hurt his business. I saw a very stereotypical viewpoint of the black man. You know, those are things we grow up hearing that don't jive.

BL: Our generation reacted to this thing differently than the generation before us, no question about it. The intermarriages going on today — huge numbers.

DP: I think that's another side, yeah.

BL: I mean, they've doubled in the last twenty years, which is a clear sign that things are happening. It's just going to take years. In your and my lifetimes this problem won't be solved, but it's going to be better.

DP: Faulkner says at the end of one of his novels that one of these days, we're all going to be "sprung from the loins of African Kings."

BL: I'd like to be around to see it. I'm afraid it's going to be a long time.

HERE IS THE FORMAL END OF THE BRIAN LAMB INTERVIEW; WE KEPT TALKING FOR SEVERAL MORE MINUTES

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