

# Wilsonianism: The Legacy That Won't Die

by Paul Gottfried

*Elizabethtown College*

In *American Power*, a survey of American foreign policy and its chief architects since 1914, John Taft observes that the shadow cast by Woodrow Wilson, our twenty-eighth president, has affected our long-term view of international relations. Taft demonstrates his point by citing the appeal to Wilsonian ideals made by politicians and thinkers as ideologically varied as William Bullitt, Chester Bowles, Henry Wallace, Herbert Hoover, John Foster Dulles, Walter Lippmann, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and (even intermittently) George F. Kennan. One of Richard M. Nixon's first acts upon becoming president was to move a portrait of Wilson into his private office. A self-described political realist, Nixon may nonetheless have felt it expedient to associate himself publicly with the early twentieth-century personification of American internationalism. Although not all American public figures have interpreted the Wilsonian legacy in the same way, yet a general admiration persists for Wilson's "idealism" in approaching international relations. All of the men Taft mentions followed Wilson in believing that America should aspire to reform world politics, and they viewed the wars into which the United States was drawn as opportunities to promote this end.<sup>1</sup>

As late as 1957 Herbert Hoover wrote a book in defense of the president he served during the First World War. Hoover's *Ordeal of Woodrow Wilson* stands out as one of the few examples of saccharine prose in the work of a usually sober civil engineer. It also doggedly defends Wilson's participation in the Great War while ignoring the wartime violence committed against German-Americans, directly or indirectly, by his government.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, Hoover, a German-American, long opposed America's entry into the Second World War—like Walter Lippmann, another German-American, who also remained a self-described Wilsonian.

Yet it is also clear that the most conspicuous legatees of the Wilsonian heritage have not been either Republican isolationists of the late thirties or German-

Americans trying to move into the WASP establishment. They have been primarily those who admire Wilson's major political accomplishments, a permanent administrative government staffed by civil servants and an activist foreign policy aiming at the global imposition of democratic government. Robert Nisbet is correct in *The Present Age* to see in Wilson's textbook on comparative government, *The State*, a blueprint for his later presidential reforms: taxing wealth; federal control of banking practices; limiting the work hours of railroad employees; and bestowing on a growing body of civil servants both tenure and higher guaranteed wages. These acts, according to Nisbet, were not part of a hand-to-mouth policy, but stages in the fleshing out of a new conception of a positive national government.<sup>3</sup> In a youthful essay in *The Political Science Quarterly* (June 1887), Wilson affirmed that "the democratic state has yet to be equipped for carrying these enormous burdens of administration which the leaders of this industrial and trading age are so fast accumulating."<sup>4</sup> In his presidential speeches of 1912 published in *The New Freedom*, Wilson also warned that "the program of a government of freedom must be positive, not negative merely." Business must be subject to the "watchful interference of the government" lest it collude against the public interest.<sup>5</sup>

As the quintessence of Murray Rothbard's "welfare-warfare state," Wilson's regime exploited military challenges (partly created by its own adventurousness) to expand government planning. Wartime boards and commissions regulated everything from food prices, wages, and transportation to expressed or implied political opinions. They also produced a mobilized but browbeaten population. A Department of Information controlled and filtered the distribution of news; and local committees were organized, under federal supervision, to report on the expression of pro-German or anti-American sentiment.<sup>6</sup>

The seamy sides of Wilson's wartime administration have been left out of the accounts of his presidency that appear in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *World Book*, and *Encyclopedia Americana*. But, as Nisbet rightly observes, the efforts at thought control followed from a well-defined view of the state. It is one that Wilson had articulated and which the early *New Republic* and its founder Herbert Croly, a future admirer of Mussolini's corporatist state, thought that the war was putting into practice.<sup>7</sup> A rationally planned political order under state administrators would reshape and, to some extent, replace an independent civil society. The War Industries Board, formed in 1917, provided an unprecedented opportunity for economists and statisticians to change the face of America through the restriction of competition, price setting, and other moves toward a collectivized war economy. The right regulation of production and consumption and the mobilization of the entire population for national goals were hailed as wartime achievements by leading economists and philosophers. John Dewey, the revered teacher of Sidney Hook, hoped that America's entry into the war would spell the "beginning of the end

of business” and the triumph of “industrial democracy” and of “democratic integrated control.”<sup>8</sup> In the fall of 1918 the *New Republic*’s editors boasted that the progressives had “revolutionized our society,” by totally altering the state’s relationship to the American people.<sup>9</sup> Wilson viewed such a revolutionary order as the endpoint of a historical process that he had discussed in *The State*. The national state as conceived by him had to encroach on established property rights and social relationships in order to be true to its democratic mission, doing for the people what they otherwise could not do for themselves. The essence of freedom, and virtue, Wilson proclaimed in 1912, was “public service.”<sup>10</sup> From the spring of 1917 on, the Wilsonian state expanded its administrative role to thinking as well as acting for American citizens.

Since the Bolshevik Revolution it has been claimed that the critical political choice of the twentieth century is between Lenin and Wilson. The statement may be correct, but those who have made it have usually carried political baggage. For example, in *Wilson vs. Lenin: Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918*, the Marxist historian Arno Mayer has spoken of the contrast between the two leaders of 1917, while associating Wilson with a distinctly counterrevolutionary project.<sup>11</sup> Wilson, according to Mayer, intervened in the Russian Civil War as a defender of capitalism against Bolshevism. (Actually, Wilson sent American troops to keep an eye on Japanese expeditionary forces while searching for allies of imperial Germany.) Wilson is also seen to have invoked democratic internationalism as a tool in his struggle against Marxist revolutionaries in Hungary, Germany, and Austria. Cold-War liberal Irving Kristol, in the first issue of *The National Interest*, also refers to the world-historical confrontation between the followers of Wilson and Lenin.<sup>12</sup> Again one may be justified in looking for vested interests among those who offer this choice. In a syndicated column, Ben Wattenberg, another Cold-War liberal, exhorts Americans to go “back to our prime mission, making the world safe for democracy.”<sup>13</sup> There may be nostalgia activating New Deal-Humphrey Democrats when they appeal to the social democratic interventionism of yesteryear, before the McGovernites turned the welfare state from international crusades to programs of social therapy at home.

Morton Kondracke’s recent essay in *The New Republic* “The Democracy Gang,” serves up the same Wilsonian phrases in defense of a “pro-democracy foreign policy.”<sup>14</sup> Kristol, Wattenberg, and Kondracke all entrust their Wilsonian enterprise to the National Endowment for Democracy, an institution that is federally subsidized and whose major beneficiary has been the A.F.L.–C.I.O. Seizing on Wilsonian rhetoric and goals to justify the public financing of labor union activities in both Latin America and Asia is not an attempt to combine unlike things. Wilson tilted the federal government toward organized labor and intervened in Mexico in the hope of exporting democracy. He also benefited from good relations with certain segments of the emerging trade union movement. In the First

World War he received the support of Samuel Gompers and of their leaders of the A.F.L. in setting wages and imposing collective bargaining. Gompers also cooperated with a grateful government, and particularly with the War Labor Board, in isolating recalcitrant opponents of America's crusade for democracy.<sup>15</sup>

Another contributing factor to Cold-War liberal infatuation with Wilson is the combination in his career of Anglophilia and Teutonophobia. As an exponent of English parliamentary government, Wilson was associated at Princeton University with the Imperial school, which stressed the cultural and political ties between England and America. What he most respected about England, however, rather than its monarchical and aristocratic traditions, was its growth into a modern democracy. His model English leader was the liberal prime minister William Gladstone, who came to embrace the principles of popular government.<sup>16</sup> Unlike such traditionalist Anglophiles as T. S. Eliot and Russell Kirk, Wilson applauded the English for progressive reasons that Cold-War liberals can also accept.

His struggle on the side of England against imperial Germany's "warlords" continues to appeal to a generation that views the world as it was—or as they imagine it was—in 1940. As a reunified Germany becomes a possibility, American journalist Jim Hoagland of *The Washington Post* has joined numerous establishment intellectuals in finding continuities in German history.<sup>17</sup> Hoagland assumes that the Third Reich's totalitarian horrors were implicit in Bismarck's pseudo-constitutional Second Empire and even more dramatically foreshadowed in Kaiser Wilhelm's premeditated war for world domination.

It may be spitting into the wind to point out how tenuous these continuities are. *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1963), the book by the historian Fritz Fischer that claims to demonstrate such connections in spirit and war aims between the Germanies of 1914 and 1939, is full of unwarranted conjectures that have been refuted *ad nauseam*.<sup>18</sup> Throughout his book Fischer confuses two entirely dissimilar positions: the annexationist programs for Central Europe put forth by the German chancellor and German parliamentary leaders after the First World War had already broken out or while Germans were earlier preparing for a two-front war that they thought was inevitable; and Hitler's plan, revealed already in *Mein Kampf*, for a revolutionary reconstruction of the Eurasian landmass to provide *Lebensraum* for the Aryan race. In the first case we are dealing with an attempt to prevent another encirclement of Germany, which, it was hoped, could be avoided by taking away strategically useful territory from Germany's present enemies or from its probable future ones.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the government of imperial Germany, however, the Nazis sought to give flesh to a plan of human as well as territorial reconstruction. Hitler's state expanded as a function of its revolutionary mission, not because of any fatalistic or diplomatically inept leadership. The difference in treatment of the Eastern European Jewish population under German occupation in the two wars, being given food and army-related positions

in one case and being exterminated in the other, should give the lie to any efforts to equate civilized and uncivilized regimes.

Moreover, if George F. Kennan's *The Fateful Alliance* is correct, the Germans by 1894 faced a hostile encirclement by France and Russia that developed independently of German diplomatic ineptitude. It is known that imperial Germany alienated England when it embarked on a naval program in the late 1890s, one that seemed to threaten England's maritime supremacy. But this program, according to Kennan, did not result in Germany's encirclement on the continent, which occurred for other reasons. Tsar Alexander III considered war with the Germans as inevitable and allowed his country to be pushed by the French into confrontation with France's longtime enemy, Germany-Prussia.<sup>20</sup>

Contemporary Teutonophobia continues to feed Wilson's popularity. In the March 1987 issue of *Commentary*, the classical historian Donald Kagan, treading on alien scholarly ground, insists on the isomorphic nature of the three major struggles of the twentieth century, between democracy on the one side, and Kaiser Wilhelm, Hitler, and Stalin, all on the other.<sup>21</sup> Kagan leaves no doubt that he finds moral equivalence between the governments of Hitler and the Kaiser, and he strongly scolds interwar historian Sidney Fay for denying what Wilson understood: the incommensurability between democratic and nondemocratic societies. Like Walter Berns, Kagan asserts that democratic governments are neither aggressive nor inclined to fight wars with each other. It may be helpful to explain the reason: Such modern states have turned wars into "crusades for democracy" while designating those they fight, even constitutional monarchies in 1917, as antidemocratic foes. Teutonophobia, ironically, has not kept its captives from taking their bad habits from the Germans, including a fondness for economic collectivism and a tendency to identify nationhood with bureaucratically controlled national life. Red Prussianism may have started with Marx and Engels, but has also numbered among its representatives John Dewey and Woodrow Wilson. These and other outspoken critics of the Germans have fallen effortlessly into worship of the "STATE" whenever they wish to deplore the predominance of unenlightened interest in civil society.<sup>22</sup> What they typically glorify is not the true Hegelian state, as a protector of classes and communities, but a vulgar imitation characteristic of the Hegelian Left, the welfare state as a chosen instrument of social leveling combined with hymns to public-spirited administration.

The historian John Lukacs perceives another aspect of the Lenin-Wilson polarity, when he identifies one of the antagonists with internationalism and the other with nationalism. Lukacs goes on to note that Wilson's cause has proved to be the stronger, more devastating one in the present century, representing an overriding quest for *Gemeinschaft*.<sup>23</sup> I believe that Lukacs is on to something, providing one recognizes that Wilsonianism is a double-edged sword, with both nationalist-imperialist and global democratic sides. Global democratic worshippers of Wilson

are often embarrassed that he imposed racial segregation on the federal civil service and made uninhibitedly anti-Semitic remarks. He was also deeply respected by the fiercely integralist Polish nationalist and father of the Polish National Democrats, Roman Dmowski. Though Wilson expressed reservations about the intensity of Dmowski's anti-Semitism (but not about his hatred of Germans), the nationalist leader praised Wilson as a liberator of oppressed Slavic people.

The nationalist ideal that Wilson fostered was democratic in a certain sense but not liberal—despite his belief in international free trade (under Anglo-American supervision).<sup>24</sup> The two sides of Wilson's legacy, globalist and nationalist, correspond to the duality inherent in his own thinking. Universal egalitarianism and national homogeneity are both ideals that have come to the fore in postliberal democratic movements. The Wilsonian project of restructuring civil society through an activist national state can lead into either of two plans that may be derived from Wilsonian ideals: supranational social engineering or the mobilization of certain nations said to represent the forces of good against other nations held to be thoroughly evil.

From 1917 on, Wilson pursued both plans at the same time. When America entered the First World War on April 10, 1917, Wilson made it clear that America was fighting Germany's leaders, not its people. One may put aside how Wilson brought his country into that war, particularly the machinations of his fervently Anglophile Secretary of State, Robert Lansing. It was Lansing who persuaded the English and French to submit harsh peace proposals in response to Wilson's attempts in December 1916 to mediate between the two sides. Lansing deliberately drove the Germans to desperation when they were looking for peace at the end of 1916. Because of Lansing's intervention, the Germans found no reasonable terms forthcoming from their enemies and tried to break the British blockade of their country by resuming unrestricted submarine warfare.<sup>25</sup> The British blockade had brought starvation to the Germans but had also made them willing to negotiate a peace. Without the chance for an honorable peace, the German government decided on a desperate measure, torpedoing vessels headed for British ports in order to force the British into moving their ships closer to home and into lifting the blockade. The vulnerability of the outnumbered German submarines, however, required them to attack without surfacing, and therein lay problems for the German side. This policy resulted in the destruction of American vessels that allowed Wilson to rally the Congress around a declaration of war against Germany.

Once America had entered the war, Wilson spoke frequently about his country's "high, disinterested purpose." Americans were fighting neither for gain nor for victory. They were prosecuting a "people's war" that would give birth to a new form of politics.<sup>26</sup> On June 5, 1914, Wilson had already pointed the way toward this future when he explained that "the new things in the world are divorced from force. They are the moral compulsions of the human conscience."<sup>27</sup> On May

26, 1917, moreover, he returned to his earlier vision that “the brotherhood of mankind must no longer be a fair but empty phrase.” This time, however, Wilson added that it must be given “a structure of force and reality.” To peace overtures from the Germans calling for a return to the status quo ante bellum, he responded in the same speech by linking “this iniquitous war” to the status quo from which it had come.<sup>28</sup>

Wilson suggests in *The Fourteen Points* and in other statements of his peace goals that the war was not over annexations but over “the standards of international political conduct.” But, as Harold Nicolson shows in *Peacemaking 1919*, when push came to shove, Wilson repeatedly rationalized the deviations from the new standard of international conduct. At the peace negotiations at Versailles, in January 1919, he offered only feeble protests when millions of Germans and Austrians were handed over to the victorious states and to their clients. Nicolson attributes Wilson’s acceptance of this betrayal of a peace without annexation to his ignorance of European territorial rivalries. He also notes Wilson’s expressed hope that a League of Nations would eventually rectify the provisional injustices caused by the Treaty.<sup>29</sup>

But what Nicolson does not take into account is the Manichaeian fashion in which Wilson, once having resolved upon war, came to view the other side. Though Wilson initially spoke of making war on the “masters of Germany” but not its people, the distinction in his own mind became rapidly blurred. The war became a confrontation between the American people and its allies standing for “democracy,” “liberty,” and “human rights,” and their thoroughly “iniquitous” opponents. “There are American principles, American policies,” Wilson announced in January 1918. “We stand for no others. They are the principles of mankind and must prevail”<sup>30</sup> In June 1917, the German and Austrian peoples were still seen merely as subjects of “the military masters of Germany,” though Wilson stressed the difficulty created by the mass indoctrination that had led to such dangerous servitude. On January 13, 1919, Wilson wrote to a congressman from Kentucky explaining the principle by which the American relief organization was distributing food to starving Europeans. The food was being sent in a war against Bolshevism, but not to Austrians or Germans (who were still subject to the British blockade). It was going to “our real friends in Poland” and to “the people of the liberated countries of the Austro-Hungarian Empires.”<sup>31</sup> The only people Wilson felt morally obligated to feed were those who had fought on *his* side in the war. By 1919 no longer governments but peoples were to blame for the “iniquitous” outrages that had forced his nation to take up arms in a holy cause. Food became a weapon with which to pursue ideological ends, as can be seen by the way in which Wilson’s director of European relief at the end of the War, Herbert Hoover, distributed food in Central and Eastern Europe. Hoover’s correspondence with Wilson makes clear that food distribution was viewed by



both of them as a means of bringing to power regimes that they liked. In Poland, for example, food diplomacy meant forcing on a reluctant populace Wilson's own choice of premier Jan Paderewski (who lasted less than six months), at the expense of the popular national liberator, Joseph Pilsudski.<sup>32</sup>

Such concern with ensuring doctrinally acceptable government coalesced in Wilson's mind with the increasingly sinister image of the enemy that he had formed by the end of the war. As late as September 4, 1919, in a speech primarily devoted to the League of Nations, Wilson dwelled on the iniquitousness of the German people. It was appropriate, he noted, that Articles 227 through 231 of the Treaty of Versailles stressed German war guilt, an emphasis introduced to justify unspecified reparations: "The Treaty seeks to punish one of the greatest wrongs ever done in history, the wrong which Germany sought to do to the world and civilization."<sup>33</sup> The Treaty, then, was intended as a form of "punishment" for a nation, not simply for its wartime leadership. After all, Wilson had compelled the Germans in November 1918 to replace their monarchy with a government he approved of. Even so, it was the German nation rather than its leaders that he thereafter took satisfaction in punishing.

Wilson indeed had the tendency to turn political decisions into grave moral judgments. His systematic segregation of blacks in the federal government went beyond the attempt to accommodate diehard segregationists in the Democratic Party. Wilson undertook at his own initiative to segregate and even demote blacks in post office jobs across the country, "for their benefit," that is, for their separate racial development.<sup>34</sup> His own politics never lost its universal, redemptive character, whether he was engineering black racial consciousness or fighting with good nations against bad ones in a democratic crusade to change the world. As Americans it behooves us to reassess the Wilsonian democratic legacy. More than an ephemeral aspect of our national past, it may be the fate that we have never escaped.

## NOTES

1. John Taft, *American Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).
2. Herbert Hoover, *The Ordeal of Woodrow Wilson* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1957), especially the introductory chapter.
3. Robert Nisbet, *The Present Age* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 29-33. On the revolutionary implications of Wilson's refounding of America, see Paul Eidelberg, *A Discourse on Statesmanship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 292-94, 314-17.
4. Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *The Political Science Quarterly* 11 (June 1889): 197.
5. Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom* (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1914), 284.
6. See Murray N. Rothbard, "World War I as Fulfillment: Power and the Intellectuals," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies* 9.1 (Winter 1989): 81-125; and Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 123-158.
7. On Croly's odyssey as a state planner, see David W. Levy, *Herbert Croly of the New Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
8. Cited in Rothbard, 97.



9. See Charles Hirschfield, "Nationalist Progressivism and World War I," *Mid-America* 45 (July 1963): 149.
10. *The New Freedom*, particularly the dedicatory page calling for the "Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People" waiting to do "Public Service."
11. Arno J. Mayer, *Wilson vs. Lenin: Political Origins of the New Diplomacy: 1917-1918* (New York: Meridian, 1964).
12. Irving Kristol, *The National Interest* 1 (Fall 1985): 6-15.
13. Ben Wattenberg, "Back to Our Prime Mission," syndicated in *The Washington Times*, 9 March 1989, F3.
14. Morton Kondracke, "The Democracy Gang," *New Republic*, 6 November 1989, 30.
15. On Gompers, organized labor, and Wilson's war government, see Ronald Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1969), 58-71; and Murray N. Rothbard, "War Collectivism in World War I," in *A New History of Leviathan: Essays on the Rise of the American Corporate State* (New York: Dutton, 1972), 66-110.
16. See John Garraty, *Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 5-7, 21; and William Diamond, *Economic Thought of Woodrow Wilson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1943), 50-53.
17. For samples of the anxious murmurs about the German threat and the threat of German character that have accompanied talk of German reunification, see Jim Hoagland "Reunification Qualms," *The Washington Post*, 26 December 1989, A-23; and by the same author, *ibid.*, 11 November 1989, A23. For a critique of these attitudes, see Franz M. Oppenheimer, "Treacherous Signposts for the Alliance," *The WORLD & I* 3.8 (August 1989): 131-36.
18. See the English edition of Fischer's work *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), and the unqualified praise in the introduction by Hajo Holborn.
19. A compendium of all the critical insights about the gaps and deficiencies of the Fischer thesis can be found in my own "History or Hysteria," *The American Spectator* (January 1975): 16-18.
20. George Kennan, *The Fateful Alliance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), especially 116-35.
21. Donald Kagan, "World War I, World War II, World War III," *Commentary* 83 (March 1987): 212-40.
22. On Dewey's adaptations of Hegelianism, see Richard Bernstein, *John Dewey* (New York: Washington Square Press 1966), 11-16. Wilson's evolutionary view of the historical process, culminating in a "democratic administrative" regime, is cribbed from the work of both Hegel and the German jurist Rudolf Gneist and outlined in his first book, *The State* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1889). For a view of Hegel as an old-fashioned constitutionalist rather than democratic statist, see Paul Gottfried *The Search for Historical Meaning* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 3-19.
23. See John Lukacs, *Outgrowing Democracy* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1984), 223.
24. *Ibid.*, 224-25. Lukacs brilliantly depicts the contradictions in Wilson's character and thinking, especially between his "preternaturally old" Victorian and Anglophile mindset and his claims to being a progressive internationalist.
25. Surprisingly, these facts are revealed in, among other places, A. S. Link's generally laudatory essays in *The Higher Realism of Woodrow Wilson* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), 40-45. On the effects of the British blockade, see C. Paul Vincent, *The Politics of Hunger: The Allied Blockade of Germany 1915-1919* (Columbia: Ohio University Press, 1985).
26. *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd (New York and London: Harper and Brother, 1927), vol. 1, 51.
27. Quoted in Harold Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1965), 38.
28. *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 1:50.
29. *Peacemaking 1919*, 36-37, 202-05.
30. *Ibid.*, 38.
31. *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 1:389.
32. See Murray N. Rothbard, "Hoover's 1919 Food Diplomacy in Retrospect" in L. Gelfand, ed. *Herbert Hoover: The Great War and Its Aftermath, 1914-1923* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979), 89-110; and Hoover, *The Ordeal of Woodrow Wilson*, 120-29, 151-57.

33. *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 1:590. At least some of this Teutonophobia may have resulted from the conversation between the impressionable Wilson and his advisor, Edward House. Though Wilson broke with House over the Treaty of Versailles, which House found to his liking, House's support of Allied war aims may have influenced Wilson, even after the rupture in their friendship. See Lawrence I. Gelfand, *The Inquiry* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1963).
34. Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson*, vol. III, *The New Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 244–54.

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