

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE WAR IN IRAQ

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I. American Exceptionalism – Opportunity and Risks

In 1984, Caspar Weinberger, then U.S. Secretary of Defence, gave a famous speech on the use of military force. The issue under consideration was whether military force should be used only in the narrow context of real military threats to the U.S. and its allies or in the wider context of coercive diplomacy as well. This debate was – so to speak – a preview of what was to follow in the ensuing decades. Indeed, the very nature of contemporary conflicts has made it necessary to look beyond the traditional contexts of interstate war and focus much more on new conflicts “other than war”, i.e. “wars” in the context of privatized violence and/or failing and failed states. Fighting terrorism, halting genocide, restoring political order, assisting in nation building, if not comprehensive democratization has become the new political order of the day. In the wake of these developments, military force will inevitably become much more entangled with other forms of diplomatic and foreign policy methods of crisis management, i.e. diplomacy backed by threat and sanctions, diplomacy backed by force, force backed by diplomacy and diplomacy backed by reconstruction, nation building and possibly democratization.

Looking at George W. Bush’s Iraq war it is all too evident that this war was on the surface only, about a classical interstate conflict. Upon digging deeper it becomes evident that there was a huge effort underway to redesign not only Iraq, but the entire Arab world. And this effort was deemed necessary in order to redress a failing state and region respectively. Regime change in Iraq seemed the only way out and at the same time was considered a hopeful undertaking because of the anticipated spill-over effects for the whole region. G.W. Bush stated in a September 23, 2003 speech to the

United Nations General assembly the following: “Iraq as a democracy will have great power to inspire the Middle East”¹.

Looking at the specifics of the American foreign and security policy, it would lead one to think that the United States is best prepared for such an undertaking. The reason for this is that there is an inherent “idealistic” streak in its foreign policy design that determines and shapes the formulation of desired outcomes in political and military conflicts. This is grounded on the “exceptionalist” pattern of American self-perception which arises from America’s unique history, its unparalleled development as a free and democratic society, its exemplary institutions that serve as a beacon to the rest of the world, and last but not least its self-imposed moral obligation to allow other less fortunate peoples to participate in those blessings. This idealistic streak has had a deep and lasting impact on all of America’s foreign policy projects and wars alike, and is a far cry from the traditional European-style foreign and security policy revolving around perceptions of a perpetual political struggle for power and influence and perpetual military aspirations toward victory and domination.

Looking concretely at what this has meant, particularly in terms of Americas war efforts over the course of modern history it becomes evident that whatever the military involvement, these involvements never lacked – apart from their “realist” political motives – an “idealist” superstructure: be it the abolition of slavery (Civil War), the ultimate termination of colonialism (Spanish-American War), worldwide democratization (World War I.), Europe’s liberation from fascist totalitarianism (World War II.), the creation of a “New World Order” (First Iraq War), or the elimination of the “axis of evil” (partly addressed in the Second Iraq War).

This exceptionalist pattern of self-understanding and the resulting “idealistic” colouring of foreign and security policy has been theoretically framed by the so called “Wilsonian” school of thought (named after its author and most prominent theoretician)² which favours the securing of peace, and ensuring it as a natural state of international affairs and sees that it is supported

¹ See **Bush, George W.** 2003. w.w.w.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/09/20030923-4.html.

² Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States from 1913–21, was a fervent supporter of idealistic plans to create a global peace. He failed in his attempt at creating the “League of Nations” after World War I – the precursor of the United Nations. Today, much of his political idealism seems to be more characteristics of a European than American approach to the issues of peace and war. This essay will trace America’s departure from Wilsonian principles.

by worldwide democracy, enforced by international law, reinforced through political cooperation and enhanced with economic openness.

There is no point in focusing on the potentially dangerous hypocrisy of this kind of elevated idealist posturing and the all too obvious malicious insinuation that this idealism is, de facto, nothing more than a cover-up strategy in order to disguise publicly unjustifiable “realist” political objectives. Such conspiracy theories will lead nowhere. Much more relevant is the recognition that “exceptionalism” and “idealist” political projects are a double-edged sword.

On the one hand a self-critical and carefully thought-out “idealism” of the Wilsonian type may promote a theoretical understanding of the interrelated nature of conflicts, particularly modern ones – encompassing everything from religion to economics to technology to social affairs to law. As far as imperatives for political action are concerned, Wilsonianism would require an appropriate mix of available tools (military/civilian) and expedient procedures (coercive/ supportive) in the different stages of conflict resolution – decidedly aimed at creating the political conditions necessary for sustainable peace and order. This ultimate goal – peace – may be considered merely a “regulative idea”, but it emphatically conveys the notion that successful policies are more than the outcome of a military mission.

This kind of idealism, in its “humble” variant, is predicated on two assumptions:

First, the superior nature of freedom and democracy – its perpetual truth, so to speak – does not by any means justify any kind of moralistic and self-idealizing grandeur on the part of those who are in some way “exceptional” and endowed with these values.

Second, the universal validity and “self-evidence” of freedom and democracy must not obscure a keen awareness of the often difficult and complex road map to these objectives. Both pitfalls have to be taken seriously.

1. The pitfall of self-idealizing grandeur

Any kind of idealist grandeur may, in many ways, hamper reflections on the appropriate use of assets (both military and civilian) at the state’s disposal. Self-idealizing grandeur may easily tempt political actors to disregard the moral constraints that have been imposed, and thus affect the way objectives are pursued and thereby cloud the realization of the moral unacceptability of certain available means. This ever looming discrepancy becomes all the more dangerous as more destructive assets become available.

In this respect the American mindset offers only a pragmatic solution. As American self-perception revolves around the central category of “success

versus failure”, Americans are prepared to abandon unsuccessful adventures however strong the moral foundations were. Ethical and psychological issues, however, cut deeper.

2. The pitfall of “self-evidence”

The “idealist” approach has – as previously mentioned – fails to take into consideration the paradox between the universal self-evidence of values and their complete lack of realization around the globe. Cultural, religious, economic and social roadblocks that cannot easily be removed may stubbornly stand in the way of an envisioned “paradise”. But American common sense is deeply convinced that the universal validity of freedom and democracy often demands no more than the more or less forcible removal of obstructive societal and political hindrances that stand in the way of a straight forward development towards self-evident truths. After all, the dream of democracy and freedom is in everybody’s heart, irrespective of colour, religion, race, social status and political leanings. So, often little attention is paid to transitional issues, and thus possibly desirable developments are curtailed. But the truth is: the dream of freedom in every heart must be laid bare and then nurtured in order to become realized.

The proposition that must be substantiated in the following two paragraphs, is as follows: just as an uncritical American idealism in conjunction with a politically and morally unreflective use of military force facilitated the Iraq war, the concomitant absence of awareness of the necessary prerequisites for free and democratic societies also became the “thorn in the flesh” of the Iraqi operation itself.

II. Bush’s Neoconservative Variant of Exceptionalism: the Gateway to the Iraq War

After the unexpectedly undramatic demise of the Soviet Union, the United States found itself in the position of being the only remaining superpower on the globe equipped with a military power worth nearly half the rest of the world’s military expenditures. Not even Rome could boast of looming so large a presence above the others. Political analysts rightly came to talk of an emerging “American Empire” in the 21st century bearing out the pattern of an “exceptionalist” self-perception: unparalleled strength and influence combined with an unequalled set of liberal democratic values. But 9/11 set the stage for this exceptionalism degenerating into an apocalyptic self-image

with a black and white view of international relations and a concomitant ostentatious demonstration of military superiority and unfettered national freedom of action. Bush's famous (or infamous?) 2002 National Security Strategy³ bears testimony to this new framework of thinking. This new framework lies like a layer of dispersed arguments over very traditional Wilsonian language. The National Security Strategy suffers a slight contradiction in terms. Wilsonian language is expressed in sentences such as:

“We build a world of justice, or we will live in a world of coercion”⁴,

“We must... work to make the world a better place for all its citizens”⁵,

“We have our best chance... to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of preparing for war”⁶,

“We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world”⁷,

“Including all of the world's poor in an expanding circle of development – and opportunity – is a moral imperative and one of the top priorities of U.S. international policy”⁸.

“In exercising our leadership we will respect the values, judgement, and interest of our friends and partners”⁹.

All of this is summarized in the political credo: “The U.S. National Security Strategy will be based in a distinctly American internationalism”¹⁰.

But on the other hand there is the worrying apocalyptic language originating from the traumatic experience of 9/11 and its ramifications. The National Security Strategy is full of this language:

³ **The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (= NSS)** , September 2002. See: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>.

⁴ NSS, p. 9.

⁵ NSS, p. 21.

⁶ NSS, p. 25.

⁷ NSS, preface.

⁸ NSS, p. 21.

⁹ NSS, p. 31.

¹⁰ NSS, p. 1.

“War has been waged against us by stealth and deceit and murder”,¹¹

“Shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering to our shores”,¹²

“We are menaced by catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few”,¹³

There are small groups with “catastrophic power to strike great nations”,¹⁴

There is “the emergence of a small number of rogue states (which) callously violate international law”,¹⁵

There is “premeditated politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents”.¹⁶

In the framework of traumatic experiences the collective self-image changes dramatically – it takes on an ominously apocalyptic colouring. Now the political order of the day is the battle against these evil forces – their elimination and extermination. This leads to a mentally narrowing narcissism of self-righteousness and a compensatory grandeur in terms of the imminent struggles afoot. So we learn

that the United States is entitled “to speak the language of right and wrong”¹⁷

that it is justified in labelling failing or failed states as “rogue states”¹⁸

that the United States inner core of a “peaceful nation”¹⁹ is not altered by its “fierce” military response, *and*

that it is endowed with the quasi superhuman task to “rid the world of evil”.²⁰

This gigantic endeavour requires operative procedures and means that no longer follow traditional, negotiated and morally constrained political patterns of action.

¹¹ NSS, p. 5.

¹² NSS, preface.

¹³ NSS, p. 1.

¹⁴ NSS, p. 13.

¹⁵ NSS, p. 13–14.

¹⁶ NSS, p. 5.

¹⁷ NSS, p. 3.

¹⁸ NSS, p. 13.

¹⁹ NSS, p. 5.

²⁰ NSS, p. 5.

Extraordinary challenges can only be answered by extraordinary actions beyond the usual set of rules and regulations, restrictions and restraints. And here the departure from Wilsonian principles takes on an ominous clarity. Wilsonian internationalism is replaced by imperial attitudes. The United States is entitled to unfettered freedom of action specified in the concepts of

- Unilateralism, i.e. “acting alone”²¹ without any authorisation – be it the U.N. or other regional alliances.
- “Preemptive”²² action (while warning others “not to use preemption as a pretext for aggression”)²³.
- “Coalitions of the willing”²⁴ – thus undermining the fabric of institutional arrangement within the international community.
- Non-acceptance of the International Criminal Court (ICC).²⁵

This is the new American exceptionalism: an imperialism that is naturally in line with the true interests of all humankind. None of the other neo-liberal theorists has put it better, and in such plain language as Robert Kagan when he spoke of the United States as a “benign” empire or as a “behemoth with a conscience”. This deformation of American idealist exceptionalism was the strategic framework which determined America’s jump into the Iraq war. Iraq hadn’t challenged the U.S. strategically, but morally. It fulfilled all of the available criteria of a rogue state:

- supposedly harboring weapons of mass destruction,
- providing a safe haven for terrorists,
- having a devastating record of human rights abuses, and finally,
- apparently being an exemplary state to prove the possible spill-over effects of democratization under American leadership.

III. A Free and Democratic Iraq? The Contradiction Between Political Culture and Electoral Democracy

While the presumed moral deficits of Iraq proved partly questionable – after all, weapons of mass destruction were not found, and the presence of Al Quaida terrorists was to a greater extent due to Americas military

²¹ NSS, p. 6.

²² NSS, p. 15.

²³ NSS, p. 15.

²⁴ NSS, preface.

²⁵ NSS, p. 31.

involvement, rather than due to Al Quaida's original preferences. So, democratization was what remained as the overarching objective of America's military commitment. It was not without good reason that the military campaign was dubbed "Iraqi freedom" – as opposed to the rather prosaic labelling of the first Iraq war as "Desert Storm". But why did these rather lofty aspirations fail to come to fruition in Iraq? The answer is quite simple: The American political establishment underestimated the relevance of all the ingredients of Iraqi political culture that neither stimulated nor nurtured Iraq's development towards liberty and democracy. It was convinced that when an institutional framework of authoritarian dictatorship is crushed and a democratic institutional structure of democracy (the establishment of a multi-party system, a parliament, popular elections, and an accountable government) is put in place, a country can be considered safe for democracy. But that did not prove true. An institutional democratic framework is the expression of a prevailing democratic culture, but it cannot be created. So, democratic institutions have only a modest chance of surviving in a non-democratic political culture. And the prevailing political culture in Iraq is non-democratic. Three major impediments to the desired process of democratization can be named:

1. A modern secular state is not feasible.
2. The emergence of a modern civil society revolving around egalitarianism (instead of tribal paternalism), values of meritocracy (instead of tribal nepotism and clientelism), individualism and personal responsibility (instead of conventional role ascriptions – particularly in gender related issues), and intellectual questioning (instead of authoritarian guidance) are not a likely development in the years to come.
3. The supportive power of a booming economy is absent to a deplorable extent.

Re (1): Statehood

It must be noted that Iraq is predominantly a Muslim country, and the Muslim faith is – in contrast to Christian faith – rather resistant to a kind of secularism that stipulates that religious commitment be restricted and relegated to the private sphere and to the individual conscience. This creates a subjective principled value-orientation that may prove its worth and vigour even in the context of pragmatic everyday politics. The essence of Islam is the attainment of a much closer connection between religion and politics than Christianity could ever provide. So it cannot come as a surprise that few Muslim countries qualify as democracies. (Turkey, for instance, – but this is due to the

cultural and political ramifications of Atatürk's forcibly imposed secularism.) The often vocally supported notion of a sharia – based constitution, not to mention the Salafist idea of a revival of the sultanate, bears testimony to the lasting resistance against any kind of secular political rule. So, even democratically elected governments, such as those that we can now observe in Iraq and other post Arab spring countries, are not institutional representations of a secular political culture. Currently, the opposite is true: they are for the most part the vanguard of staunch Islamist revival projects – fighting for their special vision of what a truly Muslim society is all about.

But the political situation in Iraq is still more complicated because there is not a homogenous Muslim population pushing through its religious-political agenda. Iraq is characterized by a deep-running Shia-Sunni divide, if not chasm, with Shiites representing 65 per cent and Sunnis representing 20 per cent of the population, and Christians and other minorities representing the rest. The warring religious visions of the future political design of Iraq are tearing the country apart. On top of this complex and polarizing situation is the divide between moderate and radical forces on all sides.

One may object that this is the normal ideological pluralism experienced in all modern democratic countries. But this is missing the point. The different parties and factions fighting for religious hegemony in Iraq don't fight within the framework of pluralism – they outright fight pluralism. So, none of the Parties committed to Iraq's political future is able to compromise.

- Be it a kind of “Islamic theocracy (as realized in Iran ceding ultimate political authority to religious Shiite leadership – Muqtada es-Sadre and the Islamic Supreme Council can be counted on to cling to that vision);
- Be it a moderate national, but Shia-dominated regime like that favoured by prime minister al-Maliki (independence from Iranian influence is taken for granted);
- Be it the Sunni vision of an extremist Wahhabist government using Saudi Arabia as a role model;
- Be it a more moderate government modelled on the (so to speak: “liberal”) Hanbalite School of Sharia law;
- Be it the minority vision of a more secular breed of political activists originating from the disbanded Baathist party organisations and from the Iraqi exile organisations previously well-connected to the United States;
- Each of their visions claims to be the only true one.

Why is this? The answer is threefold:

- There is no cultural model available which would show how to reconcile and compromise a commitment to Islam and democratic procedures, i.e. how to stick to one's own religious convictions, and yet simultaneously accommodate others' religious preferences and political leanings. If political designs are conceived (and they are, indeed) to be the direct outflow of God's absolute truth and unquestionable will, then compromise would be tantamount to apostasy and lead to its inevitable consequence: going to hell. This catastrophic equation can only be resolved by a sort of religious enlightenment which would help to differentiate between God's divine and absolute truth and its typically human and humble equivalent in the fashion of seeking (not: disposing of) truth. But enlightenment is currently far from reality.
- The reality is that under the guise of executing God's absolute truth and unquestionable will, a morally unrestrained struggle for power paralyzes pragmatic down-to-earth politics. The ongoing activities of militias and suicide commandos in Iraq are testimony to this struggle to secure one's own sphere of influence at the expense of people's welfare. This struggle is not about how to safeguard and develop public goods like education, health, prosperity and infrastructure. The struggle is about who is legitimately at the levers of power that shape such policies. A fatal ingredient of Muslim faith is that martyrdom can easily be exploited in this context and is held in high regard among the faithful. This is the complete opposite of a "live and let live"-attitude of a relaxed society.
- All these circumstances chip away at the fundamental prerequisite of statehood: the existence of a collective feeling of togetherness that enables political trust. In this respect the current situation is in no way different from previous Iraqi history. Iraq could never be considered to be a consolidated nation state – one that was founded on a culture of national unity. Established in its confines as the arbitrary product of colonial rule at the end of World War I., Iraq went through a history of successive authoritarian regimes from monarchy to military dictatorship to Hussein's secular Baathist totalitarianism which was consolidated through the political exploitation of mutual distrust. America's "Iraqi Freedom" campaign broke down the totalitarian structures, but in no way did it alter the distrust that has accompanied Iraq's history from the outset.

Re (2): Civil Society

Political distrust on a national level has vice-versa reinforced traditional structures and loyalties on a tribal level. Only these guarantee survival in an otherwise murderous environment. Thus, more than 75 per cent of Iraqis stick closely to the tribal make up of their society with tribal leaders and patriarchal values having the decisive impact on their lives and fortunes.

Firstly, egalitarianism is at odds with the tribal leaders' comprehensively paternalistic status. Particularly explosive is their innate right to settle conflicts by virtue of personal authority (perhaps: wisdom) and unquestioned archaic conventions (for instance, the custom of paying blood-money which is still widespread in Iraq). This does not accord with a modern procedural method of administering justice in an egalitarian way – irrespective of religion, ethnicity, race, gender and other distinctions.

Secondly, it should be noted that the superior role of tribal leaders does not come without obligations. Tribal leaders are obliged to reciprocate in the currency of nepotism and clientelism. That again is against the principle of a levelled playing field in the context of meritocratic structures. But in tightly bound tribal structures nepotism is considered to be (moral!) business as usual. After all, allegiance and loyalty have to be rewarded. So, in an effort to transform a tribal society into a modern nation state it is necessary to convey the insight that nepotism and patronage contradict the egalitarian principle of a modern nation state where paternalism is supplanted by meritocracy and nepotism by performance oriented social status.

Thirdly, the issue of liberty is even more complicated. Its ostentatious societal manifestation is individualism, i.e. having a choice – between competing parties, conflicting ideologies and different lifestyles. This individual choice comes with personal responsibility which supersedes the networks of clientelism. In this respect the theory is that individualistic attitudes will nurture higher levels of creative aspirations, an entrepreneurial spirit and last but not least satisfactory self-fulfilment. Furthermore, of especial concern is the question of gender-related individualism. Liberty in tune with individual empowerment and personal obligations is a cross-gender concept. It applies naturally to women as well. There is no legitimacy for forced marriages any longer and likewise no room for the prevalence of marriages between first and second cousins, either. But it is precisely this paternalistic culture that is still very much alive in Iraq and hampers its development towards a full-fledged modern society.

Fourthly, the rise of the modern nation state has – interestingly enough – coincided with the development of the concept of intellectual questioning, i.e. doubting the validity of time honoured traditions and rigid conventions. The historical result was a culture of reflection – a culture in which the assertion of moral obligations is ideally predicated on the deliverance of “good reasons”. It can be taken for granted that a culture which embraces reflection cannot simultaneously embrace patterns of non-reflection. This is especially integral for the modern concept of a state. “Good reasons” ideally constitute political legitimacy. The omnipresent and all pervasive interests that permeate modern societies can in the end be curbed only by this kind of legitimacy-“check”. Playing the devil’s advocate one could argue that traditional societies utilize many more instruments to curb (sometimes pernicious) passions and interests than modern societies do. So, there is perhaps a compelling argument to leave just this ingredient of intellectual questioning out of the political equation. It’s not the most pressing issue in Iraq and other Muslim (Arab) countries.

All in all, the United States has not sufficiently taken into consideration these cultural prerequisites of an institutional (electoral) democracy. Democratic hardware is not compatible with non-democratic software. But in the attempt to implement democratic hardware, the United States has – for the sake of stability and order alone – embarked on the experiment of relying on the traditional culture. For instance, it has sought to secure support – at least on the local level – from just those forces that seek to counteract the democratic process as much as possible. But that is the dilemma. Politics must at least partly deal with those who are actually at the levers of power. It can’t actually deal with those who are only supposed to be there.

Re (3): Democracy and Economic Development

Democracy is not only based on a conducive political culture – it is to no lesser degree predicated on favourable economic circumstances. Under conditions of economic deprivation a democracy has no chance of thriving. Democracy is rightly considered to be a stimulus of good governance in every respect – including the socio-economic wellbeing of its citizens. Conventional wisdom has it that socio-economic wellbeing will help create a broad middle class, and middle classes will in turn, invariably constitute the backbone of popular claims to political participation and democratic progress. Statistics show that this process has a strong correlation with a minimum per capita income of close to \$ 10 000. Impoverished people are much more focused on individual economic survival than on the inaugura-

tion of a civil society. As for Iraq it must be noted that prior to Hussein's military adventures and the ensuing international sanctions that devastated it completely, the country actually possessed a relatively well off and educated middle class. Today Iraq's unemployment rate is at a staggering level – let alone the overwhelming debt load it is faced with due to the Iran/Iraq war, the invasion of Kuwait, and the Persian Gulf War. Given this initial situation the international community will have to help Iraq onto its feet – avoiding the obvious temptation to only exploit Iraq's economic resources without providing any tangible benefits for the Iraqi people themselves.

IV. Lessons Learned

What are the lessons learned from the Iraq war? They are threefold and concern America's status, the concept of western values and Iraq's (and other Muslim-Arab nations') reform agenda.

Firstly, the Iraq war can be considered the most outstanding epitome of the heyday of America's unrivalled and unprecedented superpower status and the heyday of neo liberal attempts to marry America's universalist political ideas to the unrestrained use of every means available – be they coercive or diplomatic to accomplish those ends. It unavoidably, however, ended in some kind of imperial overstretch. The unpardonable negligence of domestic problems – infrastructure, middle class protection and international competitiveness has damaged America's self-image as well as its foreign image. Obama's first National Security Strategy of 2010 therefore emphasised the need to rebuild the foundations of the American project – an endeavour of questionable success at the moment.

Secondly, addressing the Iraq war in a more comprehensive Western context, we find that there was not just a complete underestimation of the relevance of the political culture in the context of the democratic transformation processes. It was dramatically more than that – it was the groundbreaking insight that the process of modernisation can't be controlled from the outside, particularly as the West – the wellspring of all modern ideas – seems to be at the end of its tether as well. Its electoral democracy is more and more incapable of checking the devastating impact of big finance capital, vested interests, intransparent and hidden political agendas and concomitant corruption undermining its credibility. The benevolent supposition of an electoral democracy being a panacea for all kinds of political ills is gone. So, turning

away from specifically Western ideas in pursuit of good governance may no longer be off limits in non-Western contexts.

Thirdly, the fact of the matter is that all the necessary prerequisites of a Western-style democracy – a culture of political trust, societally egalitarian individualism, and intellectual questioning, plus an economy that enables people to live reasonably well – are currently absent in Iraq. Therefore the question arises whether the western emphasis on “freedom”–democracy is really getting things any further. Provided that justice (not liberty) is the prevailing and fundamental value orientation in Muslim (Arab) countries and its lack and absence the reference point of publicly voiced grievances and protests in these countries it should follow from that that transforming such a country should possibly not take its starting point from a liberty-based electoral democracy concept. In the light of a globally shared belief that only good governance is an end in itself political effort should focus on a model of good governance that is more compatible with securing a just society – the inherited legacy in all the Muslim Arab countries concerned. It will surely not be a liberal democracy as we know it.

Further Reading

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