

Wars Are Not Prolonged For the Good of Soldiers

By [David Swanson](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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[War Is A Lie](#). 2 December 2010

An excerpt from David Swanson's new book [War Is A Lie](#).

We learn a lot about the real motives for wars when whistleblowers leak the minutes of secret meetings, or when congressional committees publish the records of hearings decades later. War planners write books. They make movies. They face investigations. Eventually the beans tend to get spilled. But I have never ever, not even once, heard of a private meeting in which top war makers discussed the need to keep a war going in order to benefit the soldiers fighting in it.

The reason this is remarkable is that you almost never hear a war planner speak in public about the reasons for keeping a war going without claiming that it must be done for the troops, to support the troops, in order not to let the troops down, or so that those troops already dead will not have died in vain. Of course, if they died in an illegal, immoral, destructive action, or simply a hopeless war that must be lost sooner or later, it's unclear how piling on more corpses will honor their memories. But this is not about logic.

The idea is that the men and women risking their lives, supposedly on our behalf, should always have our support — even if we view what they're doing as mass murder. Peace activists, in contrast to war planners, say the very same thing about this in private that they say in public: we want to support those troops by not giving them illegal orders, not coercing them to commit atrocities, not sending them away from their families to risk their lives and bodies and mental well-being.

War makers' private discussions about whether and why to keep a war going deal with all the motives discussed in chapter six of [War Is A Lie](#). They only touch on the topic of troops when considering how many of them there are or how long their contracts can be extended before they start killing their commanders. In public, it's a very different story, one often told with smartly uniformed troops positioned as a backdrop. The wars are all about the troops and in fact must be extended for the benefit of the troops. Anything else would offend and disappoint the troops who have devoted themselves to the war.

Our wars employ more contractors and mercenaries now than troops. When mercenaries are killed and their bodies publicly displayed, the U.S. military will gladly destroy a city in retaliation, as in Fallujah, Iraq. But war propagandists never mention the contractors or the mercenaries. It's always the troops, the ones doing the killing, and the ones drawn from the general population of just plain folks, even though the troops are being paid, just like the mercenaries only less.

WHY ALL THE TROOP TALK?

The purpose of making a war be about the people (or some of the people) fighting it is to maneuver the public into believing that the only way to oppose the war would be to sign on as an enemy of the young men and women fighting in it on our nation's side. Of course, this makes no sense at all. The war has some purpose or purposes other than indulging (or, more accurately, abusing) the troops. When people oppose a war, they do not do so by taking the position of the opposite side. They oppose the war in its entirety. But illogic never slowed down a war maker.

"There will be some nervous Nellies," said Lyndon Johnson on May 17, 1966, "and some who will become frustrated and bothered and break ranks under the strain. And some will turn on their leaders and on their country and on our fighting men." Try to follow the logic: Troops are brave. Troops are the war. Therefore the war is brave. Therefore anyone opposing the war is cowardly and weak, a nervous Nelly. Anyone opposing a war is a bad troop who has turned against his or her Commander in Chief, country, and the other troops — the good troops.

Never mind if the war is destroying the country, bankrupting the economy, endangering us all, and eating out the nation's soul. The war is the country, the whole country has a wartime leader, and the whole country must obey rather than think. After all, this is a war to spread democracy.

On August 31, 2010, President Obama said in an Oval Office speech: "This afternoon, I spoke to former President George W. Bush. It's well known that he and I disagreed about the war [on Iraq] from its outset. Yet no one can doubt President Bush's support for our troops, or his love of country and commitment to our security." What can this mean? Never mind that Obama voted repeatedly to fund the war as a senator and insisted on keeping it going as president. Never mind that, in this same speech, he embraced a whole series of lies that had launched and prolonged the war, and then pivoted to use those same lies to support an escalated war in Afghanistan.

Let's suppose that Obama really did "disagree about the war" with Bush. He must have thought the war was bad for our country and our security and the troops. If he'd thought the war was good for those things, he'd have had to agree with Bush. So, at best, Obama is saying that despite his love (never respect or concern; with troops it's always love) for the troops and so forth, Bush did them and the rest of us wrong unintentionally. The war was the biggest accidental blunder of the century. But no big deal. These things happen.

Because Obama's speech was about war, he spent a big chunk of it, as is required, praising the troops: "[O]ur troops fought block by block to help Iraq seize the chance for a better future. They shifted tactics to protect the Iraqi people," etc. True humanitarians. And it will no doubt be for their benefit that the War on Afghanistan and other wars drag on in the future, if we don't put an end to the madness of militarism.

YOU'RE FOR THE WAR OR AGAINST THE TROOPS

The media watch group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) noticed in March, 2003, as the War on Iraq began, that media outlets were doing something peculiar to the English language. The Associated Press and other outlets were using "pro-war" and "pro-troops" interchangeably. We were being offered the choices of being pro-troop or anti-war, with the latter apparently necessitating that we also be anti-troop:

“For example, the day after bombing of Baghdad began, the AP ran a story (3/20/03) under the headline Anti-War, Pro-Troops Rallies Take to Streets as War Rages. Another story (3/22/03), about pro- and anti-war activities, was labeled Weekend Brings More Demonstrations — Opposing War, Supporting Troops. The clear implication is that those who call for an end to the invasion of Iraq are opposed to U.S. troops, as in the story Protesters Rally Against War; Others Support Troops (3/24/03).”

This media practice does not outright call one side of a debate “anti- troop,” but neither does it call one side “pro-war,” despite that side’s clear purpose of promoting war. Just as those defending the right to abortion don’t want to be called pro-abortion, war supporters don’t want to be called pro-war. War is an unavoidable necessity, they think, and a means toward achieving peace; our role in it is to cheer for the troops. But war proponents are not defending their nation’s right to wage war if needed, which would be a better analogy with abortion rights. They’re cheering for a specific war, and that specific war is always a fraudulent and criminal enterprise. Those two facts should disqualify war proponents from hiding behind the label “pro-troops” and using it to slander war opponents, although if they’d like to start using the label “anti-peace” I wouldn’t protest.

One of the most inconvenient pieces of information for campaigns to prolong war to “support the troops” is anything telling us what the troops currently engaged in the war actually think of it. What if we were to “support the troops” by doing what the troops wanted? That’s a very dangerous idea to start floating around. Troops are not supposed to have thoughts. They’re supposed to obey orders. So supporting what they’re doing actually means supporting what the president or the generals have ordered them to do. Taking too much interest in what the troops themselves actually think could be very risky for the future stability of this rhetorical house of cards.

A U.S. pollster, as noted in chapter five of [War Is A Lie](#), was able to poll U.S. troops in Iraq in 2006, and found that 72 percent of those polled wanted the war to be ended in 2006. For those in the Army, 70 percent wanted that 2006 ending date, but in the Marines only 58 percent did. In the reserves and National Guard, however, the numbers were 89 and 82 percent respectively.¹⁹⁷ Since wars are fought to “support the troops” shouldn’t the war have ended?

And shouldn’t the troops, revealed in the poll to be badly misinformed, have been told the available facts about what the war was and was not for? Of course not. Their role was to obey orders, and if lying to them helped get them to obey orders, then that was best for all of us. We never said we trusted or respected them, only that we loved them. Perhaps it would be more accurate for people to say that they love the fact that it is the troops out there willing to stupidly kill and die for someone else’s greed or power mania, and not the rest of us. Better you than me. Love ya! Ciao!

The funny thing about our love for the troops is how little the troops get out of it. They don’t get their wishes regarding military policy. They don’t even get armor that would protect them in war as long as there are war-profiteering CEOs that need the money more desperately. And they don’t even sign meaningful contracts with the government that have terms the troops can enforce. When a troop’s time in war is done, if the military wants him or her to stay longer, it “stop losses” them and sends them right back into a war, regardless of the terms in the contract. And — this will come as a surprise to anyone who watches congressional debates over war funding — whenever our representatives vote another hundred billion dollars to “fund the troops,” the troops don’t get the money.

Usually the money is about a million dollars per troop. If the government actually offered the troops their share of that supportive funding and gave them the option of contributing their shares to the war effort and staying in the fight, if they so chose, do you think the armed forces might experience a wee little reduction in numbers?

JUST SEND MORE OF THEM

The fact is that the last thing war makers care about — albeit the first thing they talk about — is the troops. There's not a politician alive in the United States who hasn't uttered the phrase "support the troops." Some push the idea to the point of requiring the slaughter of more troops, and the use of troops in the slaughter of more non-Americans. When the parents and loved-ones of those troops already dead denounce the war that has harmed them and call for its termination, war supporters accuse them of failing to honor the memory of their dead. If those already dead died for a good cause, then it ought to be more persuasive to simply mention that good cause. Yet, when Cindy Sheehan asked George W. Bush what good cause her son had died for, neither Bush nor anyone else was ever able to provide an answer. Instead, all we heard was the need for more to die because some already had.

Even more frequently we're told that a war must be continued simply because there are troops currently fighting in it. This sounds sadistic at first. We know that war damages many of its participants horribly. Does it really make sense to continue a war because there are soldiers in the war? Shouldn't there be some other reason? And yet that's what happens. Wars are continued when Congress funds them. And even many professed "opponents" of wars in Congress fund them to "support the troops," thus prolonging what they claim to oppose.

In 1968, the Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, George Mahon (D., Texas) said voting to fund the War on Vietnam was no measure of whether or not one supported the War on Vietnam. Such a vote, he said, ". . . does not involve a test as to one's basic views with respect to the war in Vietnam. The question here is that they are there, regardless of our views otherwise." Now, the "they are there, regardless" argument, which seems to never grow stale is an odd one, to say the least, since if the war were not funded the troops would have to be brought home, and then they would not be there.

To get out of this logical cul-de-sac, war supporters invent scenarios in which Congress stops funding wars, but the wars continue, only this time without ammunition or other supplies. Or, in another variation, by defunding a war Congress denies the Pentagon the funding to withdraw the troops, and they are simply left behind in whatever little country they've been terrorizing. Nothing resembling these scenarios has happened in the real world. The cost of shipping troops and equipment home or to the nearest imperial outpost is negligible to the Pentagon, which routinely "misplaces" greater sums of cash. But, purely to get around this nonsense, anti-war congress members including Barbara Lee (D., Calif.), during the Wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, began introducing bills to defund the war and to provide new funds purely for the withdrawal. War supporters nonetheless denounced such proposals as...guess what?...failures to support the troops.

The Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee from 2007 through 2010 was David Obey (D., Wisc.). When the mother of a soldier being sent to Iraq for the third time and being denied needed medical care asked him to stop funding the war in 2007 with a

“supplemental” spending bill, Congressman Obey screamed at her, saying among other things: “We’re trying to use the supplemental to end the war, but you can’t end the war by going against the supplemental. It’s time these idiot liberals understand that. There’s a big difference between funding the troops and ending the war. I’m not gonna deny body armor. I’m not gonna deny funding for veterans’ hospitals, defense hospitals, so you can help people with medical problems, that’s what you’re gonna do if you’re going against the bill.”

Congress had funded the War on Iraq for years without providing troops with adequate body armor. But funding for body armor was now in a bill to prolong the war. And funding for veterans’ care, which could have been provided in a separate bill, was packaged into this one. Why? Precisely so that people like Obey could more easily claim that the war funding was for the benefit of the troops. Of course it’s still a transparent reversal of the facts to say that you can’t end the war by ceasing to fund it. And if the troops came home, they wouldn’t need body armor.

But Obey had completely internalized the crazy propaganda of war promotion. He seemed to actually believe that the only way to end a war was to pass a bill to fund it but to include in the bill some minor and rhetorical anti-war gestures.

On July 27, 2010, having failed for another three and a half years to end the wars by funding them, Obey brought to the House floor a bill to fund an escalation of the War on Afghanistan, specifically to send 30,000 more troops plus corresponding contractors into that hell. Obey announced that his conscience was telling him to vote No on the bill because it was a bill that would just help recruit people who want to attack Americans. On the other hand, Obey said, it was his duty as committee chair (apparently a higher duty than the one to his conscience) to bring the bill to the floor. Even though it would encourage attacks on Americans? Isn’t that treason? Obey proceeded to speak against the bill he was bringing to the floor. Knowing it would safely pass, he voted against it. One could imagine, with a few more years of awakening, David Obey reaching the point of actually trying to stop funding a war he “opposes,” except that Obey had already announced his plan to retire at the end of 2010. He ended his career in Congress on that high note of hypocrisy because war propaganda, most of it about troops, has persuaded legislators that they can be “critics” and “opponents” of a war while funding it.

YOU CAN CHECK OUT ANYTIME YOU LIKE, BUT YOU CAN NEVER LEAVE

You might imagine from the efforts Congress goes to in avoiding and recklessly rushing through debates on whether to initially launch wars that such decisions are of minor importance, that a war can be easily ended at any point once it has begun. But the logic of continuing wars as long as there are soldiers involved in them means that wars can never be ended, at least not until the Commander in Chief sees fit.

This is not brand new, and goes back as many war lies do, at least as far as the first U.S. invasion of the Philippines. The editors of Harpers Weekly opposed that invasion.

“Echoing the president, however, they concluded that once the country was at war, everyone must pull together to support the troops.”

This truly bizarre idea has penetrated U.S. thinking so deeply, in fact, that even liberal commentators have fantasized that they’ve seen it enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Here’s Ralph Stavins, speaking of the War on Vietnam:

“Once the blood of a single American soldier had been spilled, the President would assume the role of Commander in Chief and would be obliged to discharge his constitutional duty to protect the troops in the field. This obligation made it unlikely that troops would be removed and far more likely that additional troops would be sent over.”

The trouble with this is not just that the clearest way to protect troops is to bring them home, but also that the president’s constitutional obligation to protect the troops in the field doesn’t exist in the Constitution.

“Supporting the troops” is often expanded from meaning that we need to keep troops in a war longer to meaning that we also need to communicate to them our appreciation for the war, even if we oppose it. This could mean anything from not prosecuting atrocities, pretending the atrocities are extreme exceptions, pretending the war has succeeded or met some of its goals or that it had different goals more easily met, or sending letters and gifts to troops and thanking them for their “service.”

“When the war begins, if the war begins,” said John Kerry (D., Mass.) just before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, “I support the troops and I support the United States of America winning as rapidly as possible. When the troops are in the field and fighting — if they’re in the field and fighting — remembering what it’s like to be those troops — I think they need a unified America that is prepared to win.”

Kerry’s fellow presidential candidate Howard Dean called Bush’s foreign policy “ghastly” and “appalling” and loudly, if inconsistently, opposed attacking Iraq, but he stressed that if Bush started a war, “Of course I’ll support the troops.”

I’m sure troops would like to believe everyone back home supports what they’re doing, but don’t they have other things to worry about during a war? And wouldn’t some of them like to know that some of us are checking up on whether they’ve been sent to risk their lives for a good reason or not? Wouldn’t they feel more secure in their mission, knowing that a check on recklessly turning them into cannon fodder was alive and active?

In August 2010, I compiled a list of about 100 congressional challengers, from every political party, who swore to me that they would not vote a dime for the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. One Independent Green Party candidate in Virginia refused to sign on, pointing out to me that if he did, his Republican opponent would accuse him of not supporting the troops. I pointed out to him that a majority of the voters in his district wanted the war ended and that he could accuse war supporters of subjecting troops to illegal orders and endangering their lives for no good reason, in fact for a bad reason. While this candidate still did not sign on, preferring to represent his opponent rather than the people of his district, he expressed surprise and approval for what I told him, which was apparently new to him.

That’s typical. Atypical are congress members like Alan Grayson (D., Fla.). In 2010 he was perhaps the most vocal opponent of the War on Afghanistan, urging the public to lobby his colleagues to vote against funding bills. This led to predictable attacks from his opponents in the coming election — as well as more corporate spending against him than any other candidate. On August 17, 2010, Grayson sent out this email:

“I’ve been introducing you to my opponents. On Friday, it was Dan Fanelli, the racist. Yesterday, it was Bruce O’Donoghue, the tax cheat. And today, it’s Kurt Kelly, the warmonger.

"In Congress, I am one of the most outspoken opponents of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Before I was elected, I spent years prosecuting war profiteers. So I know what I'm talking about.

"Unlike chickenhawk Kurt Kelly. On Fox News (where else?) Kelly said this about me: 'He put our soldiers, and our men and women in the military in harm's way, and maybe he wants them to die.'

"Yes, Kurt. I do want them to die: of old age, at home in bed, surrounded by their loved ones, after enjoying many Thanksgiving turkeys between now and then. And you want them to die: in a scorching desert, 8000 miles from home, alone, screaming for help, with a leg blown off and their guts hanging out of their stomachs, bleeding to death."

Grayson has a point. Those who fail to "support the troops" can't very well be accused of putting the troops at risk, since "supporting the troops" consists precisely of leaving the troops at risk. But warmongers like to believe that opposing a war is the equivalent of siding with an enemy.

ONLY THE ENEMY OPPOSES A WAR

Imagine an atheist's position on a debate over whether God is a holy trinity or just a single being. If the atheist opposes the holy trinity position, he's quickly accused of backing the single being, and vice versa, by those who can't wrap their minds around the possibility of honestly not wanting to take one side or the other. To those for whom opposition to a war's existence is incomprehensible, failure to cheer for the red, white, and blue must equate with cheering for some other flag. And to those marketing the war to these people, waving an American flag is enough to nudge them to this conclusion.

In 1990, Chris Wallace of ABC News asked the former commander of the War on Vietnam William Westmoreland the following question: "It's become almost a truism by now that you didn't lose the Vietnam War so much in the jungles there as you did in the streets in the United States. How worried should the president and the Pentagon be now about this new peace movement?"

With that kind of question, who needs answers? The war has already been sold before you open your mouth.

When Congressmen Jim McDermott (D., Wa.) and David Bonior (D., Mich.) questioned the Iraq war lies in 2002, Washington Post columnist George Will wrote "Saddam Hussein finds American collaborators among senior congressional Democrats."

These war pitchers were equating criticizing a war with fighting a war — on the side of the enemy! Thus ending a war because we the people are against it is the same thing as losing a war to the enemy. Wars can neither be lost nor ended. They must simply be continued indefinitely for the good of the troops. And when the war makers want to escalate a war, they pitch that idea as a means toward ending the war, as we'll see in chapter nine of [War Is A Lie](#). But when it comes time to demand the funding and force Congressman Obey to reject his conscience, then the escalation is disguised as a mere continuation. It's easier to fund a war on behalf of the troops out there in harm's way if nobody knows that what you're funding is actually the shipping of another 30,000 troops to join the ones already deployed, in which case rejecting the funding couldn't conceivably strand any troops without bullets; it

would just mean not sending more troops to join them.

At the end of 2009 and beginning of 2010, we had a good democratic debate over whether to escalate the war in Afghanistan, a debate in the corporate media between the Commander in Chief and his generals. Congress and the public were largely left out. In 2009 President Obama had already launched a similar escalation with no debate at all. For this second round, once the President had caved in to the generals, one of whom he would later fire for a seemingly much more minor act of insubordination, the media ended the story, conducted no more polls, and considered the escalation done.

In fact, the President went ahead and started sending the troops. And congress members who had sworn they opposed the escalation began talking about the need to fund the “troops in the field.” By the time six months had gone by, it was possible to make the vote on the funding a big story without mentioning that it was for an escalation at all.

Just as escalations can be described as support-the-troop continuations, war continuations can be disguised as withdrawals. On May 1, 2003, and August 31, 2010, presidents Bush and Obama declared the War on Iraq, or the “combat mission,” over. In each case, the war went on. But the war became ever more purely about the troops as it shed any pretences of having some purpose other than prolonging its own existence.

SUPPORT THE VETERANS

As we saw in chapter five of [War Is A Lie](#), no matter how much government officials talk about the troops as their motivation for action, they fail to take action to care for veterans who’ve already been deployed. War veterans are abandoned rather than supported. They need to be treated with respect and to be respectfully told that we disagree with what they did, and they need to be provided healthcare and education. Until we can do that for every living veteran, what business do we have creating more of them?

Our goal, in fact, should be to put the Veterans Administration out of operation by ceasing to manufacture veterans. Until that time, young men and women should be told that war is not a smart career move. Yellow ribbons and speeches won’t pay your bills or make your life fulfilling. As we saw in chapter five, war is not a good way to be heroic. Why not serve as a member of an emergency rescue crew, a fi refighter, a labor organizer, a nonviolent activist? There are many ways to be heroic and take risks without murdering families. Think of the Iraqi oil workers who blocked privatization and formed a labor union in the face of U.S. attacks in 2003. Picture them ripping off their shirts and saying, “Go ahead and shoot.” They were taking risks for their nation’s independence. Isn’t that heroic?

I understand the desire to support those making sacrifices supposedly for us, and those who already have made the “ultimate sacrifice,” but our alternatives are not cheering for more war or joining the enemy, creating more veterans or abusing the ones we have. There are other options. That we don’t think so is purely the result of our televisions spouting nonsense with great frequency for so long it begins to smell sensible. Comedian Bill Maher expressed his frustration this way:

“For the longest time, every Republican election has been based on some sentimental bullshit: the flag, or the flag pin, or the Pledge, or the, ‘It’s morning in America.’ Bill Clinton got a blowjob in the Oval Office. And the Dixie Chicks insulted President Bush on foreign soil. And when that happens, it hurts the feelings of our troops. And then Tinkerbell’s light goes

out and she dies. Yes, yes, the love of our troops, the ultimate in fake patriotism. Are you kidding? The troops, we pay them like shit, we fuck them and trick them on deployment, we nickel and dime them on medical care when they get home, not to mention the stupid wars that we send them to. Yeah, we love the troops the way Michael Vick loves dogs. You know how I would feel supported if I was a troop overseas? If the people back home were clamoring to get me out of these pointless errands. That's how I would feel supported. But, you know, don't hold your breath on that one fellas because, you know, when America invades a country, we love you long time. Seriously, we never leave, we leave like Irish relatives: not at all."

If we all purged ourselves, as Maher has, of the "support-the-troops" propaganda, we wouldn't have to say "Support the Troops, Bring Them Home." We could skip half of that and jump ahead to "Bring them home and prosecute the criminals who sent them." It should go without saying that we wish the troops well. That's one of the main reasons we don't want them pointlessly killing and dying! But we do not actually approve of what they are doing. Our praise is reserved for those soldiers who refuse illegal orders and nonviolently resist. And we approve of the work being done courageously and with great dedication by Americans in hundreds of professions other than war. We ought to say we support them once in a while. We all fail to do that, and fortunately we don't accuse each other of wanting all those people dead, the way we do if someone fails to say "I support the troops."

SUPPORT THE MASS MURDER

Blogger John Caruso collected a list of news items reporting things he especially did not support, things that get brushed aside as too inconvenient when we delude ourselves into believing that wars are fought on behalf of the soldiers fighting them. Here's part of the list:

From the New York Times : "We had a great day," Sergeant Schrumpf said. "We killed a lot of people." But more than once, Sergeant Schrumpf said, he faced a different choice: one Iraqi soldier standing among two or three civilians. He recalled one such incident, in which he and other men in his unit opened fire. He recalled watching one of the women standing near the Iraqi soldier go down. "I'm sorry," the sergeant said. "But the chick was in the way."

From Newsday: "Raghead, raghead, can't you see? This old war ain't — to me," sang Lance Cpl. Christopher Akins, 21, of Louisville, Ky., sweat running down his face in rivulets as he dug a fighting trench one recent afternoon under a blazing sun. Asked whom he considered a raghead, Akins said: "Anybody who actively opposes the United States of America's way...If a little kid actively opposes my way of life, I'd call him a raghead, too."

From the Las Vegas Review-Journal: The 20-year veteran of the Marine Corps said he found the soldier after dark inside a nearby home with the grenade launcher next to him. Covarrubias said he ordered the man to stop and turn around. "I went behind him and shot him in the back of the head," Covarrubias said. "Twice." Did he feel any remorse for executing a man who'd surrendered to him? No; in fact, he'd taken the man's ID card off of his dead body to keep as a souvenir.

From the Los Angeles Times: "I enjoy killing Iraqis," says Staff Sgt. William Deaton, 30, who killed a hostile fighter the night before. Deaton has lost a good friend in Iraq. "I just feel rage, hate when I'm out there. I feel like I carry it all the time. We talk about it. We all feel the same way."

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David Swanson is the author of “War Is A Lie”

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