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BIG WARS, LITTLE WARS, AND THEORY CONSTRUCTION

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I argue that there is no a priori ground for claiming that a general theory of all wars is preferable to separate theories of big wars and little wars, or vice-versa. The analytical distinction between "big" war and "little" war is excessively vague and devoid of empirical content, and it begs the more important question of what typologies of wars (if any) are most useful for the purposes of theory construction. Moreover, the relative utility of a single or separate theories depends on the specific question one wishes to answer, on the theory one constructs for that purpose, and on the tradeoffs one is willing to make among different criteria of theory evaluation. The tradeoffs between the parsimony and analytic power of a theory and its descriptive accuracy and predictive power are particularly important. These tradeoffs cannot be made in the abstract, for they require an evaluation of the degree of empirical support of each theory as well as its analytic power.

Two of the most significant developments in the study of international conflict in the last decade are the construction of an expected-utility theory of war by Bueno de Mesquita (1981) and the formulation of theories of hegemonic war by several different analysts (Modelski and Thompson, 1989; Kugler and Organski, 1989; Gilpin, 1981; Midlarsky, 1988; Doran, 1989; Wallerstein, 1984; Levy, 1985). The implication of expected-utility theories of war is that a general theory applicable to all wars is both desirable and possible, while the implication of hegemonic theories is that there exists a distinctive set of wars which are qualitatively different from others and which therefore require a separate theory to explain their causes and particularly their consequences. In this context, it is not surprising that there is increasing interest in the question of whether we need separate theories for "big" wars and "little" wars.

My own position is that this question cannot be answered in the abstract. It all depends on what it is that one wants to explain, on the nature of the theory constructed for that purpose, on an exactly how one defines "big" war and "little" war, and on the tradeoffs one is willing to make among different criteria of theory evaluation. I will develop each of these arguments in the following discussion.

I begin with two simple but obvious points. First of all, the utility of the analytic distinction between big wars and little wars, or of any typology for that matter, is a function of the question that one wishes to answer and the theoretical explanation that one proposes. It also depends on the clarity of the distinction between big wars and little wars, on the importance of the hypotheses that one can derive using the typology as a point of departure, and on the empirical validity of those hypotheses. Secondly, the big war/little war typology itself is not particularly useful because of its inherent ambiguity and lack of theoretical content. The distinction implies that one type of war ranks higher on some measure than the other type, but the basis of comparison itself remains unspecified. Does the big/little typology refer to some descriptive measure of the characteristics of the war (duration, magnitude, or severity, for example), or does it refer to the consequences of the war (and if the latter, what kind of consequences—military, political, social, economic, etc.)? This question takes us back to theory, for how one defines the concept, both nominally and operationally, depends on the theoretical question one is attempting answer.¹

The argument that neither the meaning nor the utility of the big war/little war distinction can be evaluated apart from the question to be answered and the theoretical framework adopted leads to a related point: our question has been misspecified, in that it begs the more general and more important question of what typologies of wars (if any) are most useful for the purposes of theory construction relating to the issue of war and peace. Other analytic categories might very well be more useful. In fact, one rarely sees the big war/little war typology used explicitly in the literature, though some alternative classification systems can basically be interpreted as refining the big war/little war distinction by giving it more specific theoretical content. Thus many have followed Clausewitz (1968) in distinguishing between total war and limited war, and attempts to define this dichotomy more precisely (Brodie, 1959: ch. 9; Smoke, 1977: ch. 1) constitute various ways of conceptualizing the big war/little war typology. Vasquez (1986) introduces another dimension by adding the distinction between dyadic and complex (multilateral) wars. Other classification systems make a fundamental departure from the big/little war typology. Vasquez (1986), for example, differentiates between wars of rivalry and wars of opportunity, depending on whether the participants are approximately equal or quite unequal in capabilities.² Wars have also been classified on the basis of motives of the belligerent actors of the causes of the war, as suggested by the concepts of "balance of power war," "defensive war," "preventive war," "scapegoat war," or "inadvertent war."³

Although the utility of any typology cannot be evaluated apart from the theory in which it is embedded, I would argue that a more useful typology of wars for many purposes is one based on the nature of the participating actors. The distinction between states and various forms of non-state actors results in the familiar distinction between civil wars, imperial or colonial wars, and interstate wars. That this typology is widely perceived to be useful is suggested by the fact that the causes of civil, imperial, and interstate wars are usually analyzed separately in literature on international relations and war. Interstate wars can be subdivided further if we adopt the common distinction between great powers and small states.⁴ This leads to the classification of interstate wars into major-major, major-minor, and minor-minor wars, depending on whether great powers are involved on both sides of the conflict, on one side, or on neither side. There are numerous studies suggesting that these wars (and the disputes leading up to them) are different in significant respects (Small and Singer, 1982; Gochman and Maoz, 1984; Moul, 1987).

A distinct type of great power war, defined by the committed participation of nearly all

the great powers in the system, is what I have called a "general war" (Levy, 1985) and which is comparable to the hegemonic, global, world, and systemic wars defined by others.⁵ Because these general wars involve the intensive participation of nearly all the great powers, and because some great powers always perform better militarily than others, these wars nearly always result in significant changes in the distribution of power in the system. This is the phenomenon which is identified by most theories of hegemonic war as the key condition for fundamental change in the global political or economic systems, and which in turn constitutes the theoretical justification for a separate analysis of hegemonic war. Though different theoretical orientations lead to slightly different criteria and different lists of hegemonic wars, this small subset of wars is usually the basis for the implicit conception of the big war/little war dichotomy that is used by most analysts.

The causal link between hegemonic war and system transformation is an empirical as well as theoretical question, however, and it has not been convincingly demonstrated that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the two, or that a hegemonic war is either a necessary or sufficient condition for fundamental change in the international system. It is not possible to conduct a thorough analysis of this question in the space allotted here, for that would require careful attention to the difficult problem of how to define both hegemonic war and system transformation, but a brief discussion would be useful.

Let us consider, first of all, the question of whether hegemonic war is a necessary condition for system transformation. It is conceivable that a series of smaller wars might have the same effect. Consider the series of wars beginning with the French invasion of Italy in 1494 and ending with the Treaty of Cateau-Cambresis in 1559. Although Modelski and Thompson (1989) and Toynbee (1954) each define the Italian Wars as a period of global or general warfare, they terminate the conflict in 1516 and 1525, respectively. But this was only the first phase of the conflict, and consisted of a series of four Franco-Spanish wars for control over Italy that were not particularly decisive. The fundamental political conflicts of Europe were not resolved until the completion of four additional decades of great power warfare. There were five major wars between France and the Spanish and Eastern branches of the united Habsburg dynasty under Charles V, and a sixth between Philip II of Spain and Henry II of France. Several of these wars involved the intervention of the Ottoman Empire on the side of the French, and by England first on one side and then on the other in its role as a balancer. There were in addition two separate wars involving the Ottoman Empire in land campaigns in the East (against Ferdinand) and in a naval conflict in the Mediterranean, and two additional wars between England and France.⁶ The wars culminated in the emergence of Spain as the leading power in the European state system for a century, and created an historically rare set of conditions under which a long-based hegemony over the European continent might have been possible.⁷ This constituted a fundamental transformation of the system, but was accomplished by a series of wars that is not included in any conceptualization of general or global war. This case strongly suggests that a single hegemonic war is not a necessary condition for system transformation, and that an investigation of the question of system transformation cannot be restricted to the set of hegemonic wars commonly identified in the literature.⁸

This argument is reinforced by the case of the emergence of Prussia as both the leading power within Germany and the leading land power in the European system in the relatively short 1864-1871 period. Though perhaps not quite as consequential as some earlier system transformations, it still had profound consequences for the European distribution of power and the future development of the European and global systems, including the

system of diplomatic alignments for the next four decades and the processes culminating in the outbreak of the First World War. It was accomplished not through a general war, but instead through a series of three distinct wars (Schleswig-Holstein, Austro-Prussian, and Franco-Prussian), none of which was individually threatening enough to provoke the intervention of other great powers.⁹

Now consider the question of whether a hegemonic war is a sufficient condition for fundamental system change. Our earlier discussion of the political indecisiveness (for the European states system as a whole) of the Italian Wars from 1494 to 1516 suggests that if we follow Modelski/Thompson or Toynbee and treat this case as a global or general war, then we must conclude that a global or general war is not a sufficient condition for fundamental system change. This argument can be extended to other cases as well. The War of Dutch Independence/Spanish Armada (1585-1609) is often treated as a general or global war (Toynbee, 1954; Modelski and Thompson, 1989; Doran, 1989; Levy, 1985). It certainly contributed to the erosion of Spanish power and the emergence of the Dutch as an independent state and its rise as a commercial and naval power. The processes culminating in the end of Spanish dominance on land and the rise of several competing centers of military power on the continent were not really completed, however, until the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648/59, though the emergence of Dutch naval, financial, and commercial supremacy may have come a few decades earlier (Israel, 1982; Parker, 1984).

This brief discussion suggests that there may be some reason to believe that hegemonic war is neither a necessary or sufficient condition for system transformation, and that an examination of systemic change would have to leave open the possibility that fundamental transformations of the international system could be effected by a series of smaller wars—or even by non-violent diplomatic, political, economic, or technological changes—rather than by a hegemonic war. This is a particularly important question for scholars, policymakers, and citizens in the nuclear age.¹⁰ Although change through war has probably been the more common historical pattern, the point is that the selection of cases must be determined by the specific theoretical question under investigation, rather than by an absolute dichotomy of big wars and small wars. It is also imperative to reduce a minimum any element of tautology in the definitions of hegemonic war and system change, so that the relationship between these variables can be investigated empirically.

Much of the discussion up to this point has been framed in terms of investigations of the causes or consequences of certain types of war. One might also want to investigate the role of certain variables in the processes leading to war. Whether one restricts the analysis to general wars or perhaps to great power wars, or incorporates all wars into the analysis, cannot be determined a priori, but instead depends on the particular variables under consideration and the theoretical framework in which they are embedded. If one wants to investigate the impact of international anarchy on the behavior of states, then there may be some reasons to restrict the analysis the great powers, for even in a nominally anarchic system smaller states must contend with the existence of external actors whose power and informal authority is qualitatively different than their own.¹¹ The same is true for the analysis of the impact of systemic-level power distributions or alliance configurations on the behavior of states.¹² For most non-systemic variables, it may be less useful to distinguish between great powers and small powers. Although there may be a few theories which suggest that variables such as misperceptions, bureaucratic politics, or other decisionmaking and domestic political variables have different effects on the behavior of great powers and small states

with regard to issues of peace and war, these theories are in the minority.¹³ More important, none has yet to receive such a high degree of confirmation as to permit the restriction of research on these variables to only one type of war at this stage of theoretical progress.

There may be some questions, however, that require a more exclusive focus on big wars. On normative grounds we may wish to give particular attention to the causes of "big" wars that result in enormous losses of life, in the hope that a better understanding of the causes of these wars will increase the possibility of preventing them.¹⁴ This is a perfectly legitimate question, and would call for the definition of big war in terms of severity or some other fatality-based measure.¹⁵ The empirical domain could not be limited to any of the standard sets of hegemonic wars, however, for those include criteria other than casualties (for example, the criterion that they be interstate wars and that they have important systemic consequences). As a result, conventional lists of hegemonic wars do not include some wars of enormous human destructiveness, such as the Taiping Rebellion (1860-1864), the Chinese Civil War (1946-50), the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), some of the Ottoman Wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the Iran-Iraq War, among others.¹⁶

Perhaps an even more important difference between big wars (defined as general wars) and smaller wars follows from the very definition of the former; they include basically all of the great powers. Whereas smaller wars may escalate vertically to involve more intense fighting, by definition they do not expand horizontally to include most of the great powers.¹⁷ Few if any general wars have begun with the simultaneous entry of all of the great powers,¹⁸ though some of these wars have begun with the expectation of a significant risk that the war one was anticipating could easily expand into a general war involving most of the great powers. The Seven Years' War in Europe, the War of the League of Augsburg, the French Revolutionary War, and World War I might be good examples here.¹⁹ This suggests that nearly all general wars involve the expansion of smaller wars. Some have begun as great power or major-major wars, such as the Dutch War of Louis XIV, the War of the League of Augsburg, and the War of the Austrian Succession. Others have begun as a civil or revolutionary war within a great power, as illustrated by the War of Dutch Independence/Spanish Armada, Thirty Years' War, and the French Revolutionary War. Other general wars have expanded from major-minor wars (World War II, and, depending on one's framework, the Seven Years' War in Europe and World War I), or from a minor-minor war (Peloponnesian War and the Seven Years' War in North America).²⁰

Although further historical research on the patterns of escalation of war is necessary to confirm these tentative judgments, there is good reason to believe that the escalation of lesser wars has been a central element in the causal sequences leading to the most hegemonic wars. For this reason, a theory of general or hegemonic war must incorporate a theory of escalation,²¹ and in this sense theories of hegemonic wars differ from theories of smaller wars.²² The very fact that hegemonic wars involve escalatory processes, however, requires that a theory of hegemonic wars also incorporate a theory of the causes of small wars, for it is necessary to explain how the escalatory process is initiated.²³

Our earlier discussion of hegemonic war and system transformation, as well as the more recent discussion of the escalation or expansion of war, leave us in a somewhat ambivalent position regarding the utility of the big war/little war typology (with big war defined here in terms of hegemonic war). Although big wars differ in some important respects from

small wars, it is not always clear whether those differences are in kind or in degree. It is conceivable that the same variables are involved in the causes and escalation of both big wars and little wars, and even that the form of the relationships among these variables is the same, but that the magnitude of the effects is different in the two sets of cases. If the intervention of great powers has a much larger effect than that of weaker states, or if the impact of structural anarchy affects the great powers more than the small powers (or at least in different ways), perhaps that effect can be captured directly by the different values of the capability variable for the two classes of states. In Bueno de Mesquita's (1981) expected-utility theory of conflict, for example, the impact of the possible intervention of third states on the decision calculus of states considering the initiation of war is easily incorporated into a capability term in his equations, so that the impact of external great powers may be different from that of weaker states.

Although this particular model is based on the assumption of a linear relationship between capabilities and impact, there is nothing in principle to prevent the construction of an alternative non-linear model which could capture the disproportionately larger effects of the great powers. The drastically different effects of power relationships in the two cases might be due to the fact that the sets of actors involved are at different places on the same theoretical curve.²⁴

Of course, as one makes a theory more and more general, both in terms of theoretical relationships themselves and the operational indicators which link key concepts to the empirical world,²⁵ it can in principle be applied to an ever larger empirical domain of phenomena. But this expansion of the scope of the theory involves costs, and it brings us to the question of tradeoffs among different criteria by which theories are evaluated. In particular, there is a tradeoff between the parsimony and analytic power of a theory on the one hand, and its descriptive accuracy and predictive power on the other. The greater the variation in the phenomena to be explained by the theory, the more general the nominal concepts and empirical indicators necessary to capture those phenomena. The result is a theory which is broader in scope, more parsimonious, and greater in analytic power. But this theory may be less able to account for the contextual factors which affect key relationships, to specify all of the intervening causal linkages, and to provide the contingent generalizations necessary for prediction and policy guidance. It may also be more difficult to test empirically.²⁶

Although there exist no rigid criteria to evaluate the tradeoffs between the analytic power of a general theory and the descriptive accuracy and richness of a theory tailored to a more restricted set of empirical phenomena, there is little doubt that at some point such evaluations must necessarily be made by the theorist, whether implicitly or explicitly. These evaluations cannot be made in the abstract, however, for the degree of descriptive accuracy and predictive power is in part an empirical question which cannot be determined independently of the two theories being compared and their respective levels of empirical support. This means that we cannot say a priori whether a single theory of all wars is preferable to separate theories of big wars and little wars (however defined).²⁷

I have argued that there are no a priori grounds for asserting with confidence that a general theory of all wars is preferable to separate theories of big wars and small wars. The question itself is probably a misleading one, given the ambiguity of the distinction between big wars and little wars, the more fundamental question of which typology of wars (if any) is most useful for the purpose of theory construction, and the fact that the utility of any typology cannot be evaluated apart from the specific theoretical question that

one hopes to answer and the explanatory theory that one constructs for that purpose. In addition, we should recognize that general theories of war and more restricted theories of specific types of war each have their strengths and their weaknesses, and that it is difficult to find any theory of war, whether general or middle-range, that has gained widespread acceptance among scholars specializing in the study of peace and war. It is undoubtedly very useful to think through the issues involved in this debate regarding the utility of constructing separate theories of big wars and little wars. We must always be aware of the tradeoffs we are making between various criteria when we construct our theories. In the end, however, our understanding of war and peace will be determined more by our success in improving the theoretical coherence and in demonstrating the empirical support of good theories at any level of generality, than by attempts to come to a final resolution of more abstract epistemological debates such as the one raised here.

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NOTES

1. Thompson (1990) makes a similar argument in his article in this issue.
2. For other typologies of wars see Bernard (1944) and Wright (1965).
3. See Wright (1965, p. 638) on both balance of power and defensive wars, Levy (1987) on preventive war, Levy (1989) on scapegoat or diversionary war, and George (1991) on inadvertent war. A serious problem with the classification of wars on the basis of their motive or cause is that the categories are not mutually exclusive, since most wars are multicausal. Even if one could establish that one causal variable were more important than another, the fact that there are few if any variables that are either necessary or sufficient for war further complicates the problem of classification. See my discussion of this problem for the concept of preventive war, and my argument regarding the need to shift our analytical focus from the concept of preventive war as kind of war, to that of the preventive motivation as one of several independent variables contributing to the onset of war (Levy, 1987).
4. This distinction has been made by historians, international lawyers, and political scientists for centuries. The theoretical literature suggests that these two types of states are different in terms of their interests, behavior, international legal status, and image as perceived by other states (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1969; Levy, 1983: ch. 2).
5. "Committed participation," defined in terms of the size of armies in the field, casualties, or an economic indicator of the proportion of one's resources devoted to the war, excludes cases involving the limited participation of many great powers, such as the War of the Bavarian Succession or the internationalized Russian Civil War. This is a slight modification of my earlier definition of general war (Levy, 1985: 366-371), which focused only on the proportion of great powers involved in the war and the war's overall intensity.
6. This discussion of wars is based on a recent revision (Levy, *et al.*, 1989) of my 1983 war data. For background and historical interpretations of these wars see Mattingly (1964), Hill (1906: 2/163-488), and other sources listed in our Codebook.
7. Kennedy (1987: ch. 2) argues that this was the only time in the five-century history of the modern European state system when a hegemonic "gunpowder empire" was possible in Europe. Modelski and Thompson (1989), however, are more interested in the global system based on naval power than in the European states system.
8. If one were interested in investigating whether hegemonic wars were a sufficient condition for system transformation, then it would be entirely proper to restrict one's focus to this set of wars.
9. See the discussion of this case, and particularly the Austro-Prussian War, by Bueno de Mesquita (1990) in this issue. See also Friedjung (1966), Pflanze (1963), and Howard (1961).

10. Some historical/structural theorists concede that peaceful change is possible in the future if functional alternatives to global war are found, but deny that systemic change has occurred without hegemonic war in the past (Gilpin, 1981: 205-10; Modelski and Thompson, 1989: 48-50). It is conceivable that recent changes in Eastern and Central Europe and in the Soviet Union (which to this point have involved some internal violence but no interstate war) will lead to a major structural change in the international system. These changes are unlikely to affect the underlying distribution of power in the system to the extent that hegemonic wars have done in the past, however, though admittedly the reunification of Germany will be quite significant.
11. This refers not only to the disparities in capabilities between the great powers and others, but also to the systems or regimes of informal governance set up by the hegemon or other leading states, as conceived by hegemonic theories of various forms (or even by balance of power theorists in their treatment of the "Concert of Europe").
12. The impact of dyadic power balances or alliances on states may not be so different for great and small powers.
13. In his important "pre-theories" article, Rosenau (1966) hypothesized that the impact of individual, role, governmental, societal, and systemic variables is a function of the size of a state (large/small) as well as its level of development and degree of political openness, but Rosenau's framework was not followed by enough empirical work to support his hypotheses with any degree of confidence (e.g., East, 1978). More recently, Vasquez (1986: 323) has asserted that social psychological variables are more important in wars of rivalry (between equals) than in wars of opportunity (between unequals), where rational choice processes are more likely to dominate. These are interesting hypotheses, but ones that require empirical tests which include both types of wars.
14. Note the implicit analytic assumption that the relevant empirical domain for analyzing the potentially big wars of the future is the big wars of the past.
15. An analysis of the causes of these costly wars would still have to incorporate small wars on the independent variable side of the equation, because many big wars result from the escalation of small wars, a point to which I will return.
16. For fatality data see Small and Singer (1982) and Levy (1983). Bueno de Mesquita (1990) makes a similar point in his article in this volume. In addition, note that because of their different analytic focus some theories of hegemonic wars leave out a few European great power wars that involve enormous losses of human life. Modelski and Thompson (1989) and Toynbee (1954), for example, exclude from their lists of global and general wars the Thirty Years' War, which was one of the biggest wars in history in terms of its lost of life and impact on society (Parker, 1984; 208-15).
17. I will use the concept of escalation to refer to both vertical escalation and horizontal expansion.
18. World War I comes close to simultaneous entry by all great powers, in that the Austrian and Serbian decisions for a local war cannot be separated, either chronologically or analytically, from German, Russian, and French decisions for a general European war. The set of preferences, constraints, and expectations that determined a local war also determined a continental war. If German leaders had perceived that British intervention was a distinct possibility, they would have restrained Austria, and an Austro-Serbian war would not have occurred in August 1914 (Levy, 1990/91).
19. See Levy *et al.* (1989) for sources. Note that these examples contradict Bueno de Mesquita's (1990) argument that great powers initiating small wars almost certainly did not expect that they would escalate to become unlimited conflicts.
20. This discussion of general wars is based on my 1985 list. Note that the classification of the escalatory patterns of these wars is not entirely consistent with Sabrosky's (1985) analysis of escalation during the more restricted 1820-1965 period. Sabrosky argues that none of the wars which began as major-major conflicts subsequently expanded (enlarged) to involve additional great powers, and that only once has a minor-minor war expanded to involve additional great powers. From the very small set of general wars examined here, we see that each of these escalatory patterns was more common in previous historical eras.
21. This theory of escalation could involve alliances (Siverson and King, 1979), more general spatial diffusion processes (Most and Starr, 1976), or other causal mechanisms.
22. Admittedly, some "little" wars also result from the escalation of even smaller wars, and one can argue that from the standpoint of theory construction it is preferable to have a single theory of escalation. One difference, however, is that the escalation of small wars to larger but still non-hegemonic wars does not involve the participation of most of the great powers with their broad systemic interests and much larger capabilities. This makes an enormous difference in the cost-benefit calculations of states, their likely behavior, and its likely impact.
23. This issue of the escalation of war is important in the context of the literature on hegemonic war. The structural theories of Modelski and Thompson (1989), Kugler and Organski (1989), Gilpin (1981), Goldstein (1988), Doran (1989), and others trace the origins of hegemonic war primarily to the deconcentration of power capabilities and the decline of the hegemonic leader. They do not examine the specific causal linkages through which the deconcentration of power leads to a major war (though Doran and Gilpin make some efforts in this direction), and they do not examine escalatory processes. Structural theories identify the under-

- lying conditions which are supposedly necessary for hegemonic war, but not the immediate conditions and processes which are sufficient for the initiation of war and its subsequent expansion. Both are essential for a fully-specified theory of the causes of war (Levy, 1991).
24. An extreme analogy might come from physics. Although Newton's theory differs from Einstein's, Newton's laws of motion can be derived from Einstein's theory of relativity when velocities are not too high.
 25. Theories of the empirical world include *both* internal principles and "bridge principles" (Hempel, 1966), both a logical structure and operational indicators linking theoretical concepts with the empirical phenomena we want to explain. Thus theories have more empirical content than do abstract formal models or conceptual frameworks.
 26. Note that the logical extension of the argument for a single theory of all wars would be a general theory of conflict which would incorporate everything from hegemonic wars among the leading states in the international system to conflicts within society or within the family. An even more general theory of conflict would include aggression in the animal world. Here the tradeoffs among different criteria for theory evaluation become particularly stark.
 27. The empirical dimension of the comparison is unnecessary if and only if the more general theory subsumes the more restricted theory and the same operational indicators are used in both.

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