

Comparing the Foreign Policy Doctrines of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush

Written by Marcella Berkeley Gill

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At the end of the Cold War the world was seen as unipolar with the United States standing as the only superpower.[1] This can be attributed to the fact that it possesses the largest economy in the world along with impressive military strength[2] and extensive diplomatic capital. With its new status officials, have been looking for rationales for U.S. interventionism which saw the emergence of “preserving international stability” and democracy promotion. These objectives have led to the U.S. intervening into local and regional conflicts throughout the world in which it had no interests, assuming the role of either a social worker or a global policeman.[3] In its search for a grand strategy the U.S. has experimented with isolationism and internationalism, unilateralism and multilateralism which have had implications for the rest of the world. These strategies were exhibited in the first two post-Cold War presidencies of Bill Clinton (1993-2001) and George W. Bush (2001-2008). The Bill Clinton Administration sought engagement the rest of the World While the George W. Bush Administration sought confrontation. This essay will defend this claim by comparing and contrasting the foreign policies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and their humanitarian interventionism exercises. The first section of the essay will discuss the foreign policy doctrine of Bill Clinton along with a subsection on Clinton’s engagement with the world. The second section focuses on Clinton and the War in Kosovo. The third section elucidates the George W. Bush foreign policy doctrine. The fourth section discusses the George W. Bush and the Iraq War. The fifth section compares the Clinton doctrine and the Bush doctrine so as to highlight areas of continuity and diversion. Additionally, it examines both of their approaches taken in each case and the consequence of their actions. Kosovo and Iraq was chosen because both of them were interventions of choice against tyrannical leader that did not pose an immediate threat to the United States.

Clinton’s Foreign Policy

In his inaugural address, Clinton declared,

“Our hopes, our hearts, our hands, are with those on every continent who are building democracy and freedom. Their cause is America’s cause.... when our vital interests are challenged, or the will and conscience of the international community is defied, we will act with peaceful diplomacy whenever possible, with force when necessary.”[4]

This was in keeping principles of his predecessors of Wilsonian liberalism and the continuation of America of as world policeman. This gave the impression that Clinton was ready to adopt a vigorous doctrine of U.S. interventionism. However, his detractors argued that he was not in the least interested in foreign affairs, he only had the zeal for domestic matters in the at the start of his presidency. [5] This caused his presidency to be plagued with endemic vacillation[6] and Band-Aid foreign policy with Clinton “improvising policy at each flashpoint...using in action as action”[7] to protect Americas interests.

Clinton’s grand strategy democratic enlargement as purported by Lake in his speech to the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) encapsulated the expansion of democracy and market economy which could boast the U.S. economy and make America more secure.

According to Lake:

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“The expansion of market-based economics abroad helps expand our exports and create American jobs, while it also improves living conditions and fuels demands for political liberalization abroad. The addition of new democracies makes us more secure, because democracies tend not to wage war on each other or sponsor terrorism. They are more trustworthy in diplomacy and do a better job of respecting the human rights of their people.”[8]

The Clinton administration acknowledged that globalisation was the key to helping to build the American economy in a new era where the world is moving at a faster pace, “computers, faxes, fibre-optic cables, and satellites all speed the flow of information. The measurement of wealth, and increasingly wealth itself, consists in bytes of data that move at the speed of light.”[9] Clinton was aware of the implications of the globalisation when in 1995 he issued an economic bailout to Mexico without the approval of Congress because he knew that it would cost many Americans their jobs.[10]

Conversely, some commentators felt that the enlargement strategy looked good on paper but it did not address pressing foreign policy problems such as those presented by Bosnia, Iraq, North Korea, Rwanda and Somalia. As postulated by Hass the promotion of democracy should be side-lined for the other chief interests “stemming the proliferation of nuclear weapons safeguarding Western access to oil, defusing regional crises and containing potential aggressors.”[11]

However, it can be argued that was one of the central goals of U.S. foreign policy during the Clinton administration was non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. It was through engagement that China has joined the Chemical Weapons Convention (to which it is complying), the Biological Weapons Convention, and the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). According to Berger non-proliferation was the centrepiece of the Clinton administration’s engagement with Russia and its neighbours which resulted in the denuclearization of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan and the “elimination of hundreds of tons of nuclear materials; tighter controls to prevent smuggling; and an intensified, if still inadequate, effort to halt the transfer of weapons technologies to Iran.”[12]

Clinton Engages with the World

Clinton knew engagement was imperative if the U.S. was to retain its global status, instead of taking the isolationist approach. The National Security Strategy for a New Century in 1999 stressed that America will not be in the position to lead abroad if they do not contribute the military, diplomatic, intelligence and other resources that are needed by other nations. Clinton felt America “must be prepared and willing to use all appropriate instruments of national power to influence the actions of other states and non-state actors, to provide global leadership, and to remain a reliable security partner for the community of nations that share our interests.” [13]

Clinton engaged with various countries of the world on various fronts. He worked for a peaceful and undivided Europe where he revitalized and expanded the NATO from its old cold war model so that it can meet the demands of the new era which lead to the addition of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. The administration led NATO into the first engagement in Bosnia which resulted in the Dayton Peace Accord and further in Kosovo to end the ethnic cleansing and regional instability.

Moreover, the Clinton administration helped to improve the relationship between America and Russia. It negotiated the exit of Russian troops from the Baltics where they joined in the NATO mission in Balkans. Russia was also brought into the G-8 and APEC by the Clinton administration. Russian entrepreneurs were trained, given consulting services and loans which led to the privatisation of seventy percent of the Russian economy. Although some pundits argued that the Clinton administration has failed with Russia because it could not get it to join “the democratic community of nations”. [14]

Clinton’s China policy has been effective through a combination of engagement and deterrence even though it was off to a rocky start when he tried to coerce China into improving its Human Rights record by removing it most-favoured-nation status but soon realized that confrontation would threaten the U. S.-Chinese relationship. [15] Clinton fostered China’s entry into the WTO. The Clinton administration’s policy of engagement has helped to foster peace in the Northern Ireland and the Middle East. It was through the signing of the Good Friday Accords which helped to stop

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the long- Standing conflict over Northern Ireland and the Oslo Accord in 1993 which garnered some semblance of peace in Palestine and Israel. Clinton facilitated the signing of the Wye Peace Agreement in 1998 of the said nations.

Bill Clinton lacked experience in foreign affairs but whenever there were foreign policy crises, he rose to the challenge. Not all of his engagements were a success. In Somalia in 1993 eighteen American Soldiers were killed in a mission where the intention was to capture a local warlord. This had led to Clinton's unwillingness to engage U.S. troops abroad. The "quasi-invasion" of Haiti was a sloppy success although Clinton was initially reluctant to act. Clinton was able to get the junta to leave Haiti after his threat was backed by the Presence of military planes in the air, so that the duly elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide can be restored to power. "This prevented a blood bath and an exodus of Haitian refugees to Florida." [16] Nonetheless, Clinton was accused of taking foreign policy for social work. It was argued that the interventions in Bosnia, Somalia and Haiti did nothing to further American interest which seen as developments that could affect the lives of American citizens, according to Mandelbaum. He further argued that these countries are not a threat to America because "the absence of democracy in Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti was not going to lead to World War III." [17]

Conversely, Clinton was indeed cognisant of the threats to U.S. interests when he launched missile attacks on Baghdad when it was uncovered that Saddam Hussein ordered the assassination of former President Bush [18] and 1996 when Hussein sent troops in Northern Iraq to fight for a faction of Kurds. Also, Clinton wanted regime change in Iraq which was evident in the coups planned by the CIA to oust Saddam Hussein in 1995 and 1996. [19] Nevertheless, his critics charged that he only launched the missiles because he was being called a weak leader. [20]

The Kosovo War

In Kosovo ninety percent of the people were Albanian Muslims who were ruled by a Serb minority under the protection of Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade. Deadly violence had escalated in Kosovo in early 1999 between Albania Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Serbian authorities. Milosevic was carrying out an exercise in "ethnic cleansing" of Albanians from the province of Kosovo. There was the systematic expulsion of Albanians from Kosovo. Almost one million refugees were begging for entry into Albania and Macedonia. The refugees were touting stories of rape, executions and massacres by the Serbian army. [21] Conversely, some analysts contend that the expulsion of Albanians was a direct result of the NATO bombings. [22]

In 1998 Cohen wrote that the KLA was taunting the Serbian army into killing Albanians because they wanted their independence instead of the autonomy that the United States will only support. He was of the belief that if they provoke the Serbs to kill the West will take sides. Predictably the United States demanded that Milosevic withdraw his army from Kosovo but Milosevic ignored the warning. [23] So NATO embarked on an air attack on Kosovo which lasted for seventy-eight days (March 24 until June 9, 1999).

This happened in spite of Clinton's reluctance to engage his troops in a war abroad after the Rwanda and Bosnia fiascos where nearly a million persons perished at the hands of ethnic extremist while U.S. stood by doing nothing. [24] This level of inaction was the greatest criticism levelled at the Clinton administration by Third World leaders. [25] In his Statement to the nation in March 1999 Clinton articulated America could not sit idly by and watch a repeat scenario of the Rwanda and Bosnia because "inaction in the face of brutality simply invites more brutality." [26] Clinton further explained why it is imperative to act in Kosovo:

"We act to protect thousands of innocent people in Kosovo from a mounting military offensive. We act to prevent a wider war; to diffuse a powder keg at the heart of Europe that has exploded twice before in this century with catastrophic results. And we act to stand united with our allies for peace." [27]

Clinton further stated that this action was needed in order to foster a "secure undivided free" Europe. Yet Hass charged that Clinton is only willing to intervene "when the domestic political cost of standing aloof exceeds the cost of a carefully staged and limited operation" [28]

Clinton's critics maintained that military action in Kosovo was unconstitutional because the province of Kosovo was

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recognized as a part of sovereign Yugoslavia by the United States. As postulated by Campbell, President Clinton had no authority to declare war because “there was no attack on the United States, no summons from an ally under attack, or no emergency that prevented congressional deliberation.” [29] Campbell argued that the power to declare war resided with the Congress with was bestowed by Article I, Section 8. In February 1999 before the engagement in Kosovo Congressman Tom Campbell along with thirty-eight other members of Congress wrote Clinton a letter stating that he had no right to declare a war in Kosovo without the Congress’s approval.[30] Clinton ignored the letter and went to war anyway. It was hailed as the largest concentration of airpower in history with 1,100 airplanes flying 38,000 sorties. After seventy-eight days of NATO air strikes Milosevic withdrew his army from Kosovo. [31]

Multilateralism got a boost during the in the intervention of Kosovo. Clinton had recruited NATO forces in his humanitarian intervention exercise, its first major military in its 50-year history. Additionally, this was the first war fought by any formal alliance of democracies since the end of World War II. Although the United States was the leader of the committee of 19 nations it still had to get consensus on the activities of the group. In the words of Callahan, “Never has NATO multilateralism been put through a more demanding test.”[32]

Nevertheless, critics have stated that it was not multilateralism but unilateralism because it was headed by the United States and it did not have U.N. authorisation which violated Article 2(4) of the U.N. Charter which prohibits the “threat or use of force against” another state. Article 51 allows a nation to use force in “self-defense if an armed attack occurs against” it or an allied country. [33] However, Clinton was cognisant of the fact that he would not have garnered U.N. Security Council support because Russia would use its veto against the any intervention in Kosovo because of its historic ties to Serbia.[34] Further, the US military fighting as a part of NATO did indeed demonstrated multilateralism on the part of Clinton because the US did not embark on this mission alone.

Bush’s Foreign Policy

President George W. Bush came into office as the second post-Cold War president. In his first inauguration address he touted the usual “Wilsonian” dynamic of democracy promotion stating the America must “lead the cause of freedom” and “confront weapons of mass destruction, so that a new century is spared new horrors” which was testimony to Bush’s belief of America’s primacy. Concomitantly, he assured the nation that,

“The enemies of liberty and our country should make no mistake: America remains engaged in the world by history and by choice, shaping a balance of power that favours freedom. We will defend our allies and our interests. We will show purpose without arrogance. We will meet aggression and bad faith with resolve and strength. And to all nations, we will speak for the values that gave our nation birth.”[35]

Unilateralism along with preventative and pre-emptive strategies were the defining characteristics of the Bush administration. After 9/11, according to Bush, the new policy “stressed pre-emption of attacks, instead of investigating evidence and prosecution.”[36] Bush believed that he did not owe anybody any explanation because he was the president of the United States.[37] It was clear even before 9/11 that the Bush administration would adapt the Republican principle of unilateralism with the renunciation of the ABM Treaty, the rejection of the Kyoto Protocol and persistent public criticism of the treaty initiatives undertaken by the Clinton Administration such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, international conventions on land mines, small arms trafficking, biological weapons and the treaty for the establishment of the International Criminal Court.[38] In the post-9/11 period, the Bush administration vehemently portrayed its intentions to free itself of multilateral constraints. The White House’s National Security Strategy of 2002 declared that the United States “will be prepared to act apart when our interests and unique responsibility require”[39]

The Bush administration’s strong belief in U.S. primacy was echoed in his West Point Commencement Address Bush stated that “America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge — thereby, making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.”[40] This showed that Bush intended to build up a military force that was not be countered by any other country. On the contrary, Van Ness charges that the Bush administration has limited understanding of the international relations theory of the “security dilemma” which dictates that “when one country builds up its military capability to enhance its

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defence, an adversary may see that build-up as an offensive threat and increase its own military capabilities, thereby igniting an arms race in which both countries become less secure.”[41]

The Bush administration was of the opinion that there are no universal rules or norms with which dictates the behaviour of all the nations of the world and that order is only sustained when the “dominant power behaves differently” to the other nations. This is why the Bush administration was not worried about the invasion of Iraq without the permission of the U.N Security Council.[42] In the words of Ikenberry, “America arrogates to itself the global role setting standards, determining threats, using force and, meting out justice.”[43]

The open-ended Global War on Terror was one fixation of Bush’s foreign policy where Bush sought to “rid the world evil”. According to Bush, War was to be waged on all perpetrators of terrorism who was seen as inherently evil which was a ‘conflict between good and evil.’[44] Apparently, in this war there was nothing to discuss or negotiate because that constituted appeasement. Conversely, commentators have seen it as the new cold war where “fanatical Muslims replaced Soviet Communists and, like the reds, these enemies could be anywhere, including in our midst (they may not even be Muslims, but kindred agents who likewise “hate” us and oppose our values).”[45]

Bush Confronts the World

President Bush’s tenure reeked of confrontational rhetoric which other countries of the world saw as arrogant and provocative. These confrontational vocalisations were heightened especially after the 9/11 attacks. In his speech Bush at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., on September 14, 2001 the President lamented that “the conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others. It will not end in a way, and at the hour, of our choosing.”[46] On September 20, 2001 in his address in a joint session of congress Bush demanded that the Taliban:

“Deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of Al Qaeda who hide in your land. Release all foreign nationals, including American citizens, you have unjustly imprisoned. Protect foreign journalists, diplomats and aid workers in your country. Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and hand over every terrorist, and every person in their support structure, to appropriate authorities. Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating. These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion”.[47]

He further warned that “every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” which meant that they will suffer a similar fate.[48]

Bush’s State of the Union Address in 2002 where he accused that the triumvirate of North Korea, Iran and Iraq being the “axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”[49] This caused some damage to the European status on the world stage and impeded the constructive engagement taking place between Europe and these nations simply because of their historic alliance with America[50] and an out pouring of criticism from all over the world. When Bush invaded Iraq in 2003 at a Press Conference in July when he was asked about the rising rates of attacks on U.S. soldiers and casualties. His response of “bring ‘em on”. [51] The jihadists was that as a challenge. This led to jihadists from across the Middle East descending on Iraq. One CIA intelligence official commented that “if Osama bin Laden believed in Christmas this is what he would want under his Christmas tree.”[52]

Bush’s Iraq Invasion

The invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration in 2003 was a brazen exercise of preemption and unilateralism. In his West Point Address Bush contends that the strategy of containment as used in the past is not practical for use in the present day where there are “unbalanced dictators” who can distribute weapons of mass destruction to terrorists. He further stated that the Americans cannot defend themselves and their allies by just sitting back and hoping for the best. Bush charged that America “need to take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge”. [53] The National Security Strategy of 2002 Bush echoed his doctrine of preemption along with his unilateralist stance stating the U.S. “will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and

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our country”.[54] Some pundits have argued that preemption defined as prevention ran the risk of the U.S. being viewed as a clear and present danger because preemption is seen as “taking military action against a state that was about to launch an attack; international law has permitted this in order to forestall clear and immediately present dangers, while prevention is defined as “starting a war against a state that might, in some future point, pose such risks.”[55]

However, one can argue that this had to be done by the U.S. because Bush did not the U.N. Security Council did not give permission to the America so it had to act alone. It can be argued here that Clinton did not even approach the UN before air attacks in Kosovo because of Russia while Bush when to the UN for permission to strike in Iraq. However, Bush only went to the U.N. Security Council because he wanted to legitimise its pre-emptive action against Iraq.[56] His attempt was not successful because Bush failed to establish a credible link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda and there was no solid evidence that Hussein really possessed WMDs. Additionally, there was some distrust among members from America’s rejection of multilateral treaties like the Kyoto Protocol and the treaty for the International Criminal Court. The other countries were uneasy about America’s policy of preemption, where it was free to attack on other countries at a time of its choosing. This violated the sacrosanct principle of sovereignty in the international system.[57]

So why did Bush invade Iraq? Bush offered a number of reasons why there had to be regime change in Iraq. He said the Iraq was a nation that sponsored terrorism and had links to al Qaeda. He possessed WMDs. In his January 2003 State of the Union Address Bush stated that Hussein had “materials sufficient to produce more than 38,000 litres of botulinum toxin — enough to subject millions of people to death ...500 tonnes of sarin, mustard and VX nerve agent” which could kill thousands.[58] In addition, Hussein was accused of brutally murdering his own citizens with poisonous gases.[59] All of these allegations saturated the American media to galvanise support for an Iraqi Invasion. However, when Secretary of State Colin Powell was sent to address the U.N., he stated that he knew the location of the WMDs in Iraq and that he even had pictures. But this was an exercise in futility because the U.N inspectors had before reported that there were no WMDs in Iraq. This whole WMD debacle has proven to be somewhat inconclusive because of there are sources that have claimed that they exist and sources who claimed the opposite.

Although the American did not get U.N authorisation it invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003. In his address to the nation on the invasion of Iraq dubbed “Operation Iraqi Freedom”. President Bush articulated that the Saddam Hussein’s regime “threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder. We will meet that threat now, with our Army, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard and Marines, so that we do not have to meet it later with armies of fire fighters and police and doctors on the streets of our cities.” The invasion lasted for forty-four days (19 March to 1 May, 2003). The military found forces found no WMDs. This was to be expected because Iraq was already denuclearized (between 1991 and 1992) by the International Atomic Energy Agency.[60] However, some pundits are of the belief that the Bush administration invaded Iraq to preserve access to the region’s petroleum which will ensure a reliable and cheap access to oil.[61]

This stimulated extensive debates over the legality of this act. This act violated section 3 and 4 of Article 2 of the U.N Charter which stipulates:

“All members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered [and shall] refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.”[62]

Offner contends that the Bush administration rejected “the Westphalian doctrine of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, U.N Charter prohibition on the use of force except or by Security Council mandate, and the Nuremberg trials judgement that preemptive war is a crime”[63]which makes America under Bush more a rogue nation than a world leader.

Comparing Clinton and Bush

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Both administrations had some commonalities such as the Wilsonian dynamic of democracy promotion; both had a war on terror, they both fought wars of choice in Kosovo in the case of Clinton and Iraq in the case of Bush. However, there were some very striking differences. Clinton was a strong believer in multilateralism while Bush believed in American hegemony and Unilateralism. Clinton's actions were mostly fuelled by public opinion whereas Bush did not care for public opinion. Clinton sought to promote stability while Bush sought to freedom at the expense of stability. Clinton rhetoric when speaking the world was convivial while Bush's was viewed as provocation.

Additionally, there were commonalities in the Clinton's War in Kosovo and Bush's War in Iraq. Both did not have U.N.S.C. authorisation. Both fought against tyrannical regimes that did not immediately threaten America and had quick victories. Both provoked strong opposition from Europe and the rest of the world. However, this is where the similarities stop. Clinton invested and engaged NATO in its first major military exercise which brought America and Europe closer together and gave the NATO a new sense of purpose. On the contrary, Bush ignored NATO which led to loss of U.N. support for the Iraq war and went to war in Iraq although much of the world opposed it. His actions ultimately strained the European-American relations; divided Europe had left the fate of the NATO and the U.N in doubt.[64] Clinton's War fostered stability of Kosovo in Europe. Although it came at a cost to the Serbs who were expelled after the Kosovo intervention. Bush's invasion of Iraq, on the other hand, instigated further destabilisation in the Middle East.[65] His invasion in Iraq has sparked, in recent months, debates about his responsibility for the formation of ISIL.[66]

Conclusion

There are some similarities in the administration of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. However, there are also some very staunch contrasting features in each administration's foreign policy. It is evident that the Bush Administration had endemic credibility issues in all of the areas studied. Having reviewed the information, it is affirmed that the Clinton administration sought to engage the people while the Bush administration sought an aggressive (Big Stick ideology) way of attaining its agenda. Clinton's approach was one of multilateralism and the promotion of stability through engagement. The European-US relations were peaceful. The people of the world felt at ease with Clinton in the White House. By contrast, with the Bush administration there was a marked difference in European-U.S relations, the U.N lost its moral and legal authority to settle disputes by peaceful means the world was crawling under the shadow of U.S imperialism. Bush's approach of unilateralism, pre-emption and the flaunting of U.S. primacy has indeed showed that his administration had a confrontational disposition while Clinton made effort to engage with all corners of the world as though they were almost equal, not flaunting U.S. primacy as in the case of Bush.

The question dictated an approach of comparing and contrasting in order to distinguish the degree of change that took place as a result on the change from the Clinton's presidency to Bush's presidency. This was done by examining both of their foreign policies of each, the way in which they related to the rest of the world and their intervention exercises. This has led to the following conclusions. There was some continuity between the Bill Clinton and Bush administration where the plight of democracy expansion was continued and the fight against terrorist was continued although there were vast deviations (which were afore mentioned). It is seen that pundits have written that unilateral actions taken by Bush violates sovereignty and threatened the national interest and relevance of other countries. In the prevention of the use of the used of weapons of mass destruction either by rogue states or international terrorists, the interests of all nations should be considered in this fight because all nations will feel the effects it these weapons a deployed, whether it be environmental, physical or environmental. Benjamin Franklin puts it best, "We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we will hang separately." [67]

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