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Exploring the “American Obsession” Down Under: Teaching Civil Rights History in Australia

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Race may be, as Studs Terkel claimed, the “American obsession,” but it is an obsession that many foreigners clearly share.^[1] In recent years, scholars based outside the United States have published much of the best scholarship on civil rights and race relations, and the subject plays a central role in the teaching of U.S. history abroad, particularly in Great Britain.^[2] Much of this topic’s appeal for both undergraduates and teachers may reflect how it exposes the gap between America’s profession of democratic ideals and their realization. The subject also has particular relevance for Australia, a country confronting its own long history of white domination of its indigenous people, although some students are more comfortable critiquing America’s record rather than examining their own society. Nevertheless, the interest in learning about civil rights history remains, and the concept of race provides a defining theme that can be used to focus broad courses on American history. When teaching American history from afar, breadth of coverage is particularly important, as students are unlikely to have the background knowledge that allows U.S. universities to run more specialized courses.

The teacher of American history in Australia has a number of advantages, and the discipline has been a core part of the humanities curriculum for most of the post–World War II period. Like many students around the globe, those in Australia are interested in learning about the most powerful country on earth, but Australians have a particularly close bond with the citizens of the nation that has acted as the guarantor of their security since World War II. Despite the geographic distance between the two countries, they share much in common, including a similar territorial size and a history of settlement by migrants. Today, they are open and culturally tolerant societies, and are characterized by informality—features that many visitors, particularly from Europe, find refreshing. In addition, although both the American dream and the Australian dream are nebulous concepts, they ultimately articulate a similar vision of upward mobility and property ownership. In both countries, moreover, white settlers have been more able to achieve this mobility than nonwhites, although in recent years Asian migrants to both countries have achieved success.^[3]

The cultural influence of the United States on Australia is hard to exaggerate. American content dominates commercial television networks, and the popularity of Hollywood movies dwarfs that of the small domestic film industry. Australians generally regard Americans favorably because of the close relationship that the two allies forged during the Pacific campaign of World War II. Since then, a secure bond has endured. Most European countries balked at joining America’s military ventures in Vietnam and Iraq, but the Australian government participated as keenly as its American counterpart. As was the case in the United States, the Vietnam War caused acute divisions in Australian society; many young people resisted conscription and supported the antiwar movement. Still, the fundamental bond between the two countries was largely unaffected, and many disaffected Americans relocated to Australia and New Zealand during those years. While American travellers often complain that Europeans treat them with disdain or even hostility, in Australia they are likely to be welcomed with genuine affection.^[4]

Given these advantages, it is not surprising that American history courses across Australia enroll very well. Although the Australian and New Zealand community of Americanists is relatively small, the discipline has a well-established professional organization (the Australian and New Zealand American Studies Association) and a peer-reviewed journal (the Australasian Journal of American Studies) that has been published for almost thirty years. While Australia-based scholars still confront a fourteen-hour flight just to reach the American West Coast, the development of the Internet has facilitated access to vital research material and has kept scholars abreast of contemporary politics. In addition, the willingness of the Australian Research Council (arc) to generously fund research in American history has allowed internationally recognized historians to be based

“down under.” Using arc money, scholars such as Shane White, Rhys Isaac, Graham White, Ian Tyrrell, and John Salmond have produced pathbreaking work in American history—much of it focused on exploring the long black struggle against racial subjugation. In 1983 Isaac became the first Australian to win the Pulitzer Prize for history for *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790*.^[5]

My own courses draw on a long tradition of American history at La Trobe University, which was built in Melbourne’s northern suburbs in the late 1960s. Appointed shortly after the university’s founding, Salmond, Isaac, and William Breen together ensured that American history was one of the first subjects taught at the new campus.^[6] Salmond immediately offered a course on the civil rights movement; at that time the movement was very recent history. At an institution that had acquired a reputation for student radicalism, the course had considerable appeal. The subject also resonated with students from migrant backgrounds, especially because many had relatives across the Pacific Ocean. A masterly storyteller, Salmond used his personal experiences to great effect. As a graduate student at Duke University in the early 1960s, he had taken part in several civil rights demonstrations and had heard Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” oration at the 1963 March on Washington. Such personal experiences are a powerful tool for the Australian classroom; even today it is rare for La Trobe undergraduates—most of whom work long hours to fund their educations—to have visited the United States. My own experience of living in the southern states for extended periods has proved surprisingly valuable in an Australian context, where students have an extensive knowledge of American culture from films and books but remain hungry for details of everyday life. They are especially anxious to question whether media representations of the United States are accurate.^[7]

For many years, Salmond focused his civil rights course on the major protests of the 1950s and 1960s, but I have since expanded the subject to cover a much broader time frame. This reflects a recent shift in historical writing as scholars have increasingly traced the movement’s roots back in time. In two courses, *Civil War to Civil Rights* and *U.S. Civil Rights*, my students cover what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has termed “the long civil rights movement” and explore deeply how African Americans mounted important challenges to racial inequality well before the 1950s—efforts that deserve to be ranked alongside the more familiar mass protests of the Montgomery to Selma years. My teaching highlights the idea that black protest before 1955 was, as Adam Fairclough has observed, “more than a mere prelude to the drama proper: it was the first act of a two-act play.” Although he has retired from his university position, Salmond has collaborated with me on a forthcoming book that explores the ongoing civil rights struggle after 1965, and as more literature on the contemporary period becomes available I intend to offer a new course that explores recent developments and shows students why race in America still matters. With the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency, perhaps a third act in the movement’s history—one defined by increasing black political participation—has come to its logical conclusion.^[8]

Based on my class discussions, many students are drawn to civil rights history because it exposes the underside of American life. Familiar with claims that the United States is the most democratic country on earth, they are fascinated to learn that many American citizens were denied the most basic rights until comparatively recently and that a great deal of inequality remains to this day. In a country dominated culturally and politically by the United States, perhaps these courses allow students to vent an innate, subdued anti-Americanism that is certainly present in Australian culture. To some extent, students’ reactions validate the fears of many American policy makers during the 1940s and 1950s who worried that domestic racial discrimination would undermine their position of international moral leadership during the Cold War.^[9]

While many students are critical of the length of time it took politicians to take decisive action on the civil rights issue, others use the American example to highlight Australia’s own history of white domination. In class discussions, many undergraduates observe that Australians can hardly criticize Americans in this regard. To give one example, it was only a referendum in 1967 that allowed indigenous Australians to be included in the federal census and gave the Australian Commonwealth the right to legislate on Australian Aborigines. In the United States, however, black Americans’ equal citizenship rights were—at least on paper—protected by the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868. In addition, the American civil rights movement did much to inspire Aboriginal Australians to demand equality; at the time of the 1967 referendum, Aboriginal people still faced some restrictions on their ability to vote, move freely, and control their own children. The U.S. movement had

a particular influence on young Australians: in 1965, an interracial student group conducted their own “freedom ride” through rural New South Wales, doing much to highlight the everyday discrimination faced by Aboriginal people.[\[10\]](#) Although I often point out that indigenous Australians should be more accurately compared to Native Americans (who did not receive full citizenship rights until 1924), there are some valid comparisons. The recent effort to memorialize key aspects of the civil rights struggle and to atone for past wrongs has strong parallels in Australia, where Kevin Rudd, the Australian prime minister, formally apologized to indigenous Australians in February 2008. My courses also encourage students to raise broader questions about race and to explore the arguments that whites used to justify the subjugation of nonwhites, many of which have considerable resonance in an Australian context.[\[11\]](#)

To allow students to gain an insight into white people’s thinking, I use primary documents from whites and blacks, contrasting the two viewpoints to stimulate discussion. In looking at the Little Rock, Arkansas, school crisis, for example, class members read the account by the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (naacp) leader Daisy Bates alongside the Southern Manifesto, the statement of defiance signed by most southern U.S. congressmen in 1956. Despite my efforts, I find it difficult to get students to take white views seriously and to explore their nuance and complexity, as recent works by Jason Sokol, Matthew Lassiter, Joseph Crespino, and others have urged us to do. Instead, most identify strongly with the protesters’ point of view and dismiss as a ruse the arguments used by whites. These reactions show how compelling the stereotype of the southern racist is—an especially powerful image when viewed from a distance.[\[12\]](#)

Australian students are particularly skeptical of whites’ appeals to states’ rights, largely because Australian states do not have the same degree of autonomy as their American counterparts. For example, American states have more extensive taxation powers than those in Australia. In addition, Australians do not think of states as independent or semi-independent entities in the same way that Americans do, and there is an ongoing popular debate about whether separate state governments are necessary in a country of 21 million people. There is no comparable discourse in the United States.[\[13\]](#)

There are more specific reasons for the popularity of civil rights history in Australia. The excellent pbs television series *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years* is used with written texts, and students respond quite favorably. The teacher covering the topic of civil rights is spoiled in having access to a resource that can vividly illustrate many of the key themes and events. This is especially important when teaching overseas because students lack familiarity with the places and protests that American undergraduates are more likely to know. As one La Trobe student wrote on the feedback form, “visual stuff in lectures were great. One thing to tell someone a story, another to actually see it.” Given that many of those interviewed by pbs have recently died, the series has become especially valuable in preserving the recollections of key movement participants and their opponents.[\[14\]](#)

Despite the group’s decline in recent years, the Ku Klux Klan also fascinates many students, as does the broader role of violence in establishing and maintaining segregation. In *From Civil War to Civil Rights*, for example, many students choose to write an essay on the Klan’s role in thwarting Reconstruction, while others select lynching as their topic. Like many foreigners, Australians are interested in understanding why the United States is a more violent society than their own and why it has much higher levels of gun ownership and capital crime. In tutorials, students frequently ask if the Klan still exists and how widely supported it is, and I often refer them to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s informative Web site, which closely monitors the Klan and other hate groups. There are, of course, some Klan chapters in Australia, as many students learn for the first time.[\[15\]](#) With the election of President Obama, interest in these groups has been renewed, and many students want to discuss the possibility of an attack on Obama. Perhaps this curiosity stems from the fact that the security presence around top Australian politicians is restrained by American standards. At a recent local launch of a colleague’s book, I was surprised to see that there was no visible security around former Australian prime minister Malcolm Fraser; this was quite a contrast to the situation in the United States, where even retired politicians are much better protected. In Australia, such a level of protection is not necessary.[\[16\]](#)

A number of peculiar issues emerge from teaching American civil rights history in Australia. In a country where voting has been compulsory in all federal elections since 1924, students express astonishment both at the low level of voter participation in the United States and at policy makers’ ability to disenfranchise large

sections of the black population. Coming from a culture where citizens' responsibility to vote is heavily stressed and where voting is mandatory for even local government elections, students are amazed to learn that most African Americans in the Deep South secured open access to the ballot only after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Some react by insisting that the United States, like Australia, should have adopted a centralized system where all adults are automatically required to register and to vote, thus preventing local officials from using the registration process to keep blacks from participating. Many are also critical of the low level of voter participation in the contemporary United States, although others point out that under the Australian system many citizens give little thought to how they should vote or can provide a legitimate reason for not casting a ballot. Commenting on the persistent popularity of compulsory voting in Australia, the historian John Hirst has observed that "the Australian people want to be compelled to vote. . . . The existence of government is taken for granted and people can be forced to be citizens."[\[17\]](#)

The civil rights movement was based in the black churches, yet many Australian students struggle to appreciate the strength of religion in the United States. Australia is basically a secular society, and the proportion of citizens who go to church or profess a belief in God is very low. In 2001 the National Church Life Survey found that less than 10 percent of Australians attended church regularly—and even that figure is declining.[\[18\]](#) This is in marked contrast to the United States (especially its southern states), where regular church attendance is the norm. As the historian James T. Patterson has observed, the modern day United States is "the most religious nation in the Western world." In the late 1970s, 50 percent of Americans told pollsters that they prayed every day, and 80 percent declared that they believed in an afterlife; in 2000 around 44 percent of Americans attended church on a weekly basis.[\[19\]](#) As a result, the United States is home to a huge number of Christian conservatives, whereas in Australia the cultural and political influence of evangelicals is much more limited. Australian students find it difficult to identify with a country whose official motto is "In God We Trust," and many view professions of divine backing—which both sides claimed in the civil rights struggle—as arrogant and off-putting. In Australia, only sport plays such a defining cultural role, and in Melbourne residents are expected to follow an Australian football team in much the same way that southerners often take religious affiliation for granted.[\[20\]](#)

As they learn of the civil rights struggle, Australians also remark on the constant literary references to the U.S. Constitution and constitutional rights. In the United States, African Americans and their white supporters battled for almost a century to secure effective enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments, and there was an ongoing debate about the exact meaning of those constitutional rights. Australians rarely refer to their federal constitution of 1900 in public discourse. Unlike the American Constitution, the Australian Constitution fails to include a bill of rights, largely because most delegates to the 1898 constitutional convention believed that subjects' rights and freedoms were sufficiently guaranteed by the federal parliamentary system and the independent judiciary that the Australian Constitution would create. Reflecting these differences, Australian audiences sometimes comment on the strident rhetoric of individual rights in the United States. Students also find American patriotism more demonstrative, and many are surprised that even civil rights protesters frequently carried American flags at marches. Again, displays of bellicose patriotism in Australia are generally restricted to sporting events.[\[21\]](#)

Although most students have a good knowledge of the contemporary United States, some of the events that we cover generate considerable confusion. A few examples will suffice: in *From Civil War to Civil Rights*, the fact that a Republican president abolished slavery while the Democratic party consistently defended both slavery and segregation causes significant bewilderment, given that the Democrats became the party that eventually sponsored equal rights legislation. In modern politics, the American designation "liberal" has the opposite meaning in Australia, where the Liberal party occupies roughly the same ideological ground as the British Conservative party. A Republican in Australia is often a left-wing moniker for those who advocate constitutional change (although this issue does cross party lines). All of the Australian political parties, unlike a significant section of the American electorate, accept big government, and students consequently find it hard to understand the potency of antigovernment sentiment in the United States. Even after my warnings to avoid the use of the dated term "colored" in their writing, many students still legitimately question why the NAACP still uses the term—although this question can facilitate a discussion of the organization's staying power and

long-term contribution to the civil rights struggle.

Even though students immerse themselves in American publications, cultural differences nevertheless come through in their writing. There are some variations in terminology: racial beatings become “bashings” and Ida B. Wells-Barnett and W. E. B. Du Bois become “black journos.” There are many moments of humor. In some cases, such as the student whose rushed exam answer repeatedly mentioned that the sheriff of Selma, Alabama, was Jim Crow (rather than Jim Clark), the wit is unintentional; but in other cases it is more calculated. On one feedback form, for example, a student responded to the question “How could this unit be improved?” by writing “A lecture by Martin Luther King Jr. himself.” Even on faded black and white films, King’s speaking ability continues to impress today’s media-savvy students.^[22] Despite cultural differences, many students quickly acquire a sophisticated understanding of the civil rights struggle and a close familiarity with key issues.

By studying U.S. civil rights history, many of my students are pushed to reassess their preconceptions. Prior to enrolling in *From Civil War to Civil Rights*, most tend to identify the black freedom struggle with King and the well-known protests of the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, the emphasis on the “long civil rights movement” is especially crucial in Australia, where important pioneers such as Wells-Barnett, Du Bois, and A. Philip Randolph are almost unknown. In contrast, these figures have a much higher profile in the United States, where college students are more likely to have studied American history in high school. Exploring the contribution of early leaders allows Australian students to appreciate the long duration of the black freedom struggle and helps them understand how King and other post-1945 activists built on the vital work of their predecessors. It is a lesson with particular resonance in Australia, where indigenous people have also had to fight long and hard for basic rights. Even today, they are much more likely than their white counterparts to live in poverty, and they do not have equal access to quality health care—both complex problems that also confront African Americans. In both countries, the struggle for racial justice is a continuing one.^[23]

^[1]Timothy J. Minchin is an associate professor and deputy head of the School of Historical and European Studies at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. I thank the countless students at La Trobe University whose classroom insights I have drawn on here. I would also like to thank my colleagues John Salmond and John Hirst for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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Studs Terkel, *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession* (New York, 1992), esp. 3–5.

^[2]Before moving to Australia in 2004, I received my Ph.D. at Cambridge University in 1995 and taught American history at Cambridge University (1995–1998) and St. Andrews University (1998–2004). My comments about the strength of civil rights history in Britain are based on my personal experiences there. For examples of civil rights scholarship published by British scholars, see Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Athens, Ga., 1987); Stephen G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940–1980* (Athens, Ga., 2001); Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, 1998); and Brian Ward and Tony Badger, eds., *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* (Basingstoke, 1996).

^[3]Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York, 2003), 7–10; *The Great Aussie Dream*, dir. Ben Ulm (Film Australia, Australian Film Commission, the National Film and Sound Archive, and Nine Network Australia, 1999); Wendy McCarthy, *A Fair Go: Portraits of the Australian Dream* (Edgecliff, 1999); Godfrey Hodgson, *More Equal Than Others: America from Nixon to the New Century* (Princeton, 2004), 119.

^[4]Norman Harper, *A Great and Powerful Friend: A Study of Australian American Relations between 1900 and 1975* (St. Lucia, 1987), ix–x, 312–37; Stuart MacIntyre, *A Concise History of Australia* (Cambridge, Eng., 2004), 230–31.

^[5]Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982). For other works on American history produced by Australian-based scholars, see Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering American*

History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech (Boston, 2005); John A. Salmond, "My Mind Set on Freedom": A History of the Civil Rights Movement (Chicago, 1997); Timothy J. Minchin, From Rights to Economics: The Ongoing Struggle for Black Equality in the U.S. South (Gainesville, 2007); and Clare Corbould, Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919–1939 (Cambridge, Mass., 2009). I have selected works here with a racial theme, but Australian scholars have published many others; John A. Salmond alone has produced thirteen books on various aspects of U.S. history. The work of Ian Tyrrell should also be noted, especially Ian Tyrrell, *Woman's World, Woman's Empire: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill, 1991).

[6] Along with Warren Ellem, these four staff members taught American history at La Trobe University for many years, but all have now retired. Along with Claudia Haake, who specializes in Native American history, I am now primarily responsible for teaching the subject. Haake's courses also engage racial issues.

[7] Peter Bastian, "anzasa Forty Years On," *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, 23 (July 2004), 3–4.

[8] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History*, 91 (March 2005), 1233–63; Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens, Ga., 1995), xii. Timothy J. Minchin and John A. Salmond, "Moving to the Land of Freedom: Federal Policy and Black and White Southerners in an Era of Change, 1965–2007" (Lexington, Ky., forthcoming).

[9] For example, see Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1964), 1015–18; and Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2000).

[10] For an informative study of the 1967 referendum, see Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The 1967 Referendum: Race, Power, and the Australian Constitution* (Canberra, 2007), esp. vi–viii, 54–64. For an engaging account of the Australian freedom ride from one of its participants, see Ann Curthoys, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers* (Crows Nest, 2002).

[11] For a series of excellent essays on reconciliation efforts in the United States, see Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds., *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens, Ga., 2006). For Kevin Rudd's apology, see *Saying Sorry: The Day the Nation Cried*, prod. Richard Frankland, Sky News (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, May 25, 2008). For text of the apology, see "The Apology," Feb. 12, 2008, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/events/apology/text.htm>.

[12] According to Joseph Crespino, the traditional emphasis on white resistance to black rights "reduces history to a morality tale. . . ignores ongoing struggles for racial justice, and . . . oversimplifies white reaction to the civil rights struggle." Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, 2007), 4. For other recent works that focus on whites, see Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, 2006); and Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945–1975* (New York, 2006).

[13] For some of the differences between the powers of the states in Australia and America, see Geoffrey Sawer, *The Australian Constitution* (Canberra, 1988), 103–6.

[14] Anonymous student feedback form, U.S. Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1968, semester 2, 2005 (copy in Timothy J. Minchin's possession). *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years*, prod. Harry Hampton (Backside Productions, 2006, digital video disc, 7 discs; pbs Video).

[15] See the Southern Poverty Law Center Web site, <http://www.splcenter.org>.

[16] The book that I refer to is Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, Eng., 2008). In June 2008, I also attended the launch of Ernest F. "Fritz" Hollings and Kirk Victor's *Making Government Work* (Columbia, S.C. 2008). Ernest Hollings retired from the U.S. Senate in 2005, but his visit to a university library attracted an obvious security presence.

[17] Voting in Australia is compulsory in all federal, state, and local elections, although compulsion at the state and municipal levels occurred later than at the federal level. In state elections, for example, Victoria adopted compulsory voting in 1926, followed by New South Wales and Tasmania in 1928, Western Australia in 1936, and South Australia in 1942. For a full discussion of compulsory voting in Australia, including its

history, see John Hirst, *Australia's Democracy: A Short History* (Crows Nest, 2002), 321–27 (statistics on p. 325, quotation on p. 327).

[18] “ncls Releases Latest Estimate of Church Attendance,” Feb. 28, 2004, ncls Research, <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=2106>. For verification of this figure, see also “Couch Life,” *Melbourne Age*, April 4, 2009, sec. A2, p. 48.

[19] James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (New York, 2005), 143–44, esp. 144.

[20] First appearing on U.S. coinage in 1864, “In God We Trust” was made the official national motto in 1956. For an overview of the history of the term, see “History of ‘In God We Trust,’” U.S. Department of the Treasury, <http://www.ustreas.gov/education/fact-sheets/currency/in-god-we-trust.shtml>.

[21] Sawyer, *Australian Constitution*, 138–40; George Williams, *A Bill of Rights for Australia* (Sydney, 2000), 7–14.

[22] Anonymous student feedback form.

[23] For an excellent history of indigenous Australians that brings their long struggle for equality up to date, see Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Domination, 1788–2001* (Crows Nest, 2002).

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