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Office of the Vice President  
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## Interview of the Vice President by ABC News

Al-Asad Air Base

Al-Asad, Iraq

4:19 P.M. (Local)

Q So this is your first trip to Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It is.

Q What surprised you today? What do you know about Iraq today that you didn't know yesterday?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think like most people who have looked at it, I've been tremendously impressed with what happened in the election just this past. And I really think that's maybe a seminal event in the history of Iraq, that it's such an important part of the process of building a democracy, a viable Iraq, an Iraq that can stand on its own that the thing that strikes you when you come out is just the mood and the demeanor of the people you talk with. Talabani and Jaafari, for example, I've met with both of them before, but they both I think were visibly relieved at how big the turn-out was, that, in fact, the process is working. There is strong support even in the Sunni areas for participation in the political process.

Q But you know we've had elections before in this country, now twice before this year. There was that moment of hope after the January elections, the amazing sights that that brought out. And those hopes have been dashed again and again, what makes you think that this time it's going to be different?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I disagree with the notion that the hopes have been dashed. I don't think that's true.

Q Well, the violence had continued.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, the violence has continued, but I think the key in terms of looking at the elections is that they've made every single milestone that's been set, every single one. In the time we turned over sovereignty in June of '04 to the first elections in January, then writing a constitution, getting the constitution ratified, and now national elections under that new constitution. They've had three elections this year; each one has gotten better and stronger and more effective. I do think it's serving to undermine the legitimacy of the insurgency. I think it will make it increasingly difficult for the

insurgents to be effective. We see it, for example, in the volume of tips that we get from the Iraqi people, intelligence information about where to find weapons caches, or who is responsible for some of the terrorist attacks. There's been a quantum leap over the course of the last year in terms of the number of intelligence reports coming in. The economy is doing better. The services -- the Iraqi security services are clearly much, much better now. There's a big change there over the last 18 months.

I met today with some of the members and the leader of the Ninth Mechanized Iraqi Division. These are men who signed on to support the new government, and the benefit of having that election now is we're going to have a government -- a legitimate government in Iraq that nobody can claim lacks legitimacy. It's an Iraqi government elected by Iraqis under a constitution written by Iraqis. And so I think all of that is measurable progress. And while the level of violence has continued, I do believe that when we look back on this period of time, 2005 will have been the turning point when, in fact, we made sufficient progress both on the political front and the security front so that we'll see that as the watershed year.

Q You talk about undermining the legitimacy of the resistance, before the war you said Americans would be greeted as liberators here. And yet your own trip here today was undertaken in such secrecy that not even the Prime Minister of this country knew you were coming, and your movements around are in incredible secrecy and security, do you ever think about how and why you got it wrong?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't think I got it wrong. I think the vast majority of the Iraqi people are grateful for what the United States did. I think they believe overwhelmingly that they're better off today than they were when Saddam Hussein ruled. I think the vast majority of them think of us as liberators. And I think your own polls show that, Terry. If you look at the poll that was done just recently by ABC, it shows a great deal of optimism and hope on the part of the Iraqi people, that their lives are better and going to get better in the future. So I really believe that the notion that somehow the Iraqi people opposed what we did when we came in and toppled Saddam Hussein, or the majority of them are against it is just dead wrong. It's not true. I think the majority of them supported it.

Q Well, if I may, that poll shows that half of Iraqis say the invasion should not have happened. That's what our polls showed.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: But it shows that the majority of them want us to stay and finish the job, and get the job done. And I've had the experiences this week -- we met with 11 Iraqi voters in the Oval Office after they voted. These were Iraqis who voted in the United States because they're out of the country temporarily. It was a remarkably moving moment. And anecdotal evidence of how deeply they feel about the U.S. presence and about what we did for them, many of them say, look, a lot of us can't say it publicly, fearful still of saying anything to identify themselves with Americans because they're still worried about the terrorists that are out there, or the remnants of the old regime that might come after them. There's still politicians running for office who've been assassinated. It's still a hostile environment made hostile by a relatively small part of the population. But they're overwhelming sentiment was one of expressing gratitude to the President of the United States for what he had done to liberate Iraq, and the fact that they are all now able to vote in a free election. One of them, as a matter of fact, a young woman from Fallujah who had served as an interpreter for the Marine Corps in Fallujah, who is back in the U.S. now, is enlisting in the Marine Corps so she can come back and serve in the United States

## Marine Corps as a Marine in Iraq.

Q Let me piggyback to something else you said before the war, or actually not before the war, just last May you said that the insurgency was in its last throes -- while a plane goes over -- since you said the insurgency was in its last throes, hundreds of American G.I.s have been killed. Thousands of Iraqis have been killed, and the lethality of the insurgency hasn't seemed to diminish at all. What did you mean by saying it was in its last throes?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: In fact, the number of attacks has declined. You can look at the level of attacks, for example, during the election period in January, the election period in October, the election period in December, and you'll see that there has been a decline in the number of incidents, attacks. The basic point, and one I've made already that I believe that the elections were the turning point. And we had that election in January -- first free election in Iraq in decades -- and that we will be able to look back from the perspective of time, and see that 2005 was the turning point, was the watershed year, and that establishment of a legitimate government in Iraq, which is what that whole political process is about, means the end of the insurgency, ultimately. It may take time, may hang on for a while. But if you go back, there was a message we intercepted a couple of years ago from Zarqawi where he was, in effect, communicating with bin Laden and his associates in al Qaeda, as I recall the story. But the specifics of it were that he was fearful that once a democracy was established in Iraq, he would have to look for another venue to operate in. He'd have to move on to some other locale. That's my point, that, in fact, the political process did proceed successfully, and that they have made every single milestone represents ultimately the end of the insurgency because there will be legitimate democratic government in Iraq. And I don't think the insurgents will be able to stand up to it.

Q There's still a great debate in our country about how we got into this war. Many Americans -- most according to some polls believe that you and the President misled the country into this war by deliberately exaggerating the threat from Saddam Hussein and deliberately suppressing the doubt and uncertainty that we now know existed in the intelligence community about these weapons of mass destruction programs. You said in 2002, "There is no doubt." But there was. Did you know it?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Terry, go back and look at -- or the studies that have been -- look at the analysis that was done by the Robb-Silberman Commission, or by the Senate Intelligence Committee. Everybody believed in advance that he did, in fact, have weapons of mass destruction. It turned out the intelligence was wrong, but all of the studies show that at no time was there ever pressure brought to bear on the intelligence community, that we, in fact, reported what we received. The statements I made tracked almost perfectly with what was coming out of the intelligence community during that period of time. The Director of the CIA when asked by the President of the United States in the Oval Office, "how good is the intelligence on WMDs," said, "It's a slam-dunk case."

That was the view of the intelligence community. There might have been people someplace down in the bowels of the organization who didn't agree with it, but that was never communicated to us.

Q You never heard any doubt about these weapons?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, everybody was very solid -- "slam-dunk case" was the way it was

presented.

But beyond that, to some extent that's a big of a side issue because what we did was exactly the right thing to do. The President said the other day if he had the decision to make over again knowing what we know now would we have done it, and the answer is absolutely. Because remember what the circumstances were, you had Saddam Hussein who was a man who'd perpetrated two wars, started two wars, who'd produced and used weapons of mass destruction, a man who was, in fact, providing safe haven for terror, making \$25,000 payments to the families of suicide bombers, provided sanctuary for Abu Nidal, or Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a man who did have a relationship with terrorist organizations, and who had, in fact, produced WMD in the past, who'd used them. This was an evil man. In fact in the aftermath of 9/11, after we lost 3,000 Americans that morning, and we were faced with the prospect that terrorists would try to acquire these deadlier capabilities to use against us that we could no longer sit back and tolerate or accept the situation of the United States -- just play defense, where we didn't go on offense in attempts to deal both with the terrorists themselves as well as the state sponsors of terror. And Saddam qualified by every standard. We did exactly the right thing. The world is far safer with Saddam out of business. And Iraq will be a democracy, or a government that has -- capable of defending its own interests, taking care of itself. We'll help fundamentally transform this part of the world because of what we've accomplished here, what the troops are doing here, and what the Iraqis themselves are doing.

Q I'm going to shift gears. The President has now acknowledged authorizing and reauthorizing more than 30 times a program to spy on Americans without any warrant from any court. This is a huge --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think that's a slight distortion of what the President said. What the President said is that we will use all of our power and authority -- the decision we made after 9/11 -- to do everything we can to defend the country. That's our obligation. We take an oath of office to do that.

Q That's not in dispute.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: And that when we have a situation where we have communications between someone inside the United States and an acknowledged al Qaeda or terror source outside the United States that that's something we need to know. And he has authorized us to look at that. And it is, in fact, consistent with the Constitution. It has been reviewed. It's reviewed every 45 days by the President himself, by the Attorney General of the United States, by the President's counsel, by the Director of the CIA. It has been briefed to the Congress over a dozen times, and, in fact, it is a program that is by every effort we've been able to make consistent with the statutes and with the law -- the kind of capability if we'd had before 9/11, might have led us to be able to prevent 9/11. We had two 9/11 terrorists in San Diego prior to the attack in contact with al Qaeda sources outside the United States. We didn't know it. The 9/11 Commission talks about it, if we'd had this capability, then we might well have been able to --

Q Mr. Vice President, this is a program that surveils people inside the United States --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Who are in touch with --

Q -- the Constitution --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Who are in touch with al Qaeda terrorists outside the United States?

Q Don't you have to have a court give permission for that in any other circumstances that eavesdrop on communication in America --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Terry, these are communications that involve acknowledged or known terrorists, dirty numbers, if you will. And in fact, it is consistent with the President's constitutional authority as Commander-in-Chief. It's consistent with the resolution that was passed by the Congress after 9/11. And it has been reviewed repeatedly by the Justice Department every single time, it has been renewed to make certain that it is, in fact, managed in a manner that's fully consistent with the Constitution and with our --

Q But that's all the executive branch. The Constitution calls for a court, a co-equal branch of government as a check on the power of the executive to give a say-so before an American or someone in America is surveiled or searched or spied upon?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: This has been done, Terry, in a manner that's completely consistent with our obligations and requirements, I can assure. That's one of the reasons we hold it -- we watch it so carefully. That's why it has to go the President every 30 to 45 days to make absolutely certain we are in compliance with all of those safeguards with respect to individual liberty, and that it is managed in a very conservative fashion. And it signed up to by the Attorney General of the United States, and reviewed by the Office of Legal Counsel in the Justice Department.

We spend a lot of time making certain that this is, in fact, safeguarded. And as I say, we've briefed Congress on it -- just a few members, the leadership, on over a dozen occasions.

Q To take you up on that, Senator Graham, of Florida, ex-Senator Graham who was on the Intelligence Committee at the time this program began suggested to us that when you briefed him, you misled him. You didn't tell him the full scope of the program. That's his feeling now that he sees it exposed.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, that's not true.

Q He knew?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: He knew. I sat in my office with General Hayden, who was then head of NSA, who is now the deputy director of the National Intelligence Directorate. And he was briefed as long as he was chairman of the committee, or ranking member on the committee.

Q The President has said we do not torture. And Senate McCain proposed a measure in part to vindicate those values that would ban the cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of any person in U. S. custody anywhere in the world. Why did you fight so hard against that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, we ultimately reached a compromise between the President and Senator McCain. And it was arrived at just last week. The position I took was one that was a position the administration had taken when we signaled to the Congress that we were prepared to veto a bill that went farther than we thought it should in terms of trying to restrict the prerogatives of the President.

Q How so when it comes to cruel and inhuman -- what's the President's prerogative on the cruel treatment of prisoners?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: There's a definition that's based on prior Supreme Court decisions and prior arguments. And it has to do with the Fourth, 13th and -- three specific amendments to the Constitution. And the rule is whether or not it shocks the conscience. If it's something that shocks the conscience, the court has decreed that crosses over the line.

Now, you can get into a debate about what shocks the conscience and what is cruel and inhuman. And to some extent, I suppose that's in the eye of the beholder. But I believe and we think it's important to remember that we are in a war against a group of individuals, a terrorist organization, that did, in fact, slaughter 3,000 innocent Americans on 9/11, that it's important for us to be able to have effective interrogation of these people when we capture them. And the debate is over the extent to which we're going to have legislation that restricts or limits that capability.

Now, I say we've reached a compromise. The President signed on with the McCain amendment. We never had any problems with the McCain amendment. We had problems with trying to extend it as far as he did, but ultimately, as I say, a compromise was arrived at. And I support the compromise.

Q Should American interrogators be staging mock executions, water boarding prisoners?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to get into specifics. You're getting into questions about sources and methods, and I don't talk about that, Terry.

Q You -- as Vice President of the United States, you can't tell the American people whether --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't talk about --

Q -- or not we would interrogate --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I can talk about -- I can say that we, in fact, are consistent with the commitments of the United States that we don't engage in torture, and we don't.

Q Are you troubled at all that more than 100 people in U.S. custody have died, 26 of them now being investigated as criminal homicides, people beaten to death, suffocated to death, died of hypothermia in U.S. custody?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I won't accept your numbers, Terry. But I guess, one of the things I'm concerned about is that as we get farther and farther away from 9/11, and there have been no further attacks against the United States, there seems to be less and less concern about doing what's necessary in order to defend the country. I think, for example, the Patriot Act this week -- the Patriot Act is a vital piece of legislation. It was, in fact, passed in the aftermath of 9/11. It extended to our ability to operate with respect to the counterterrorist effort, gave us authorities that are already used in other areas, against drug traffickers and so forth. It broke down that wall between law enforcement and intelligence that had prohibited cooperation in the past. It's been a very --

Q We're going to have to take a break --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: -- airplane --

Q It's a little airplane --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Forward air controller.

And what I'm concerned about, Terry, is that as we get farther and farther from 9/11, we've got -- we seem to have people less and less committed to doing everything that's necessary to defend the country. I think about the Patriot Act. It has been a vital piece of legislation that was passed in the aftermath of 9/11, gave us the authority to break down the wall between intelligence and law enforcement that was there previously that gave us the authority to use against terrorists some of the same tools that are already authorized and used against drug traffickers, for example. The Patriot Act up for renewal was filibustered in the Senate this week by the Democrats and blocked from passage. As a result parts of that are going to expire on December 31st. Somehow I think a lot of people have lost their sense of urgency out there. That's hard for me to do, or for the President to do. We get up every morning, the first thing we do is an intelligence brief where we look at the threats to the United States. We do that six days a week. We're well aware that there are still terrorists out there who mean to do evil, that they're trying their best to get their hands on deadlier weapons, biological agents or nuclear weapons to use against. And we need to maintain the capability of this government to be able to defend the nation. And that means we have to take extraordinary measures. But we do it in a manner that's consistent with the Constitution and consistent with our statutes. And when we needed statutory authority, as we did for the Patriot Act, we went and got it. Now Congress and the Democrats are trying to filibuster it.

Q Does the United States maintain secret prisons around the world?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to talk about intelligence matters.

Q Secret prisons?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to talk about intelligence matters.

Q Does the International Red Cross have access to everyone in U.S. custody, as we are obliged?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Terry, with all due respect, I won't discuss intelligence matters. I shouldn't.

Q I'd like to put this personally if I can. You're a grandfather, I'm a father, when we look at those girls, and we think that the country we're about to pass on to them is a country where the Vice President can't say whether or not we have secret prisons around the world, whether water boarding and mock executions is consistent with our values, and a country where the government is surveilling Americans without the warrant of a court, is that the country you want to pass on to them?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I want to pass on to them a country that is free, that is not plagued by terrorist attacks, doesn't see a repeat of the terrible events of 9/11 when we lost 3,000 of our people that morning to a handful of terrorists who have no justification at all for what they do.

I can guarantee you that what we do as a government, as an administration is to support and uphold the Constitution of the United States, that we do, in fact, take extraordinary steps to make certain we maintain our constitutional obligations and responsibilities, which include both defending the country, as well as defending individual liberties and protecting the rights of all Americans. You have to --

Q But it's the America we grew up with.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: -- all of that. Well, somehow we go through these cycles -- after 9/11, we are berated for allegedly not connecting the dots. You guys weren't tough enough. You weren't aggressive enough. You didn't follow up on all the leads. And now, it has been four years, gee, maybe it was a one-off event. Maybe the terrorists out there just hit us accidentally. Maybe there's nothing for us to be concerned about. I know that's not true. And I think anybody who sits down and looks at it knows that we're engaged in a long struggle here that does, in fact, affect the lives of all Americans. And I want my kids to grow up in a strong, free independent America, where they are safe from the kinds of outrages that have been perpetrated not only in New York and Washington, but in Madrid, Casablanca, and Istanbul, and Bali, and Jakarta, all over the globe. And we're up against a very tough adversary. And under those circumstances we need to do everything we can to protect the American people. And that has got to be of prime concern for us, and it is.

Q Even if it's changing who we are?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It's not changing who we are. We've had times in the past where we've had to go before -- take steps to protect ourselves. The whole argument over military commissions, should the President be able to set up military commissions to try unlawful combatants, terrorists who've committed murder or other outrageous acts against the American people? The precedent for that is F. D.R. in World War II, who set up military commissions to try German spies who came into the United States to commit acts of terror. And they tried them -- perfectly tried. It was a legal proceeding, and they were executed. Now everybody acts as though a military commission established now is somehow a brand new development. No, it's not. It's a precedent based exactly on what was done in World War II by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. But we do everything we can, and I say successfully to protect and defend our basic fundamental Constitution, liberty. That's part of who we are. That's part of what we have to do.

Q Another subject: When did you first hear the name Valerie Plame?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm going to respectfully decline to talk about that. There's a trial pending. I have been constrained for the last two-and-a-half years not talking about that case because there was an investment under way. And now with a trial pending, I think it would be inappropriate for me to say anything about it at all, so I have not said anything about it, and won't.

Q Can you say, as Vice President, and answer did you direct anyone to disclose her identity or to lie about --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Terry, you can ask the question any way you want. Scooter Libby is a close friend of mine. He's one of the most able and talented people I know. He's entitled to the presumption of innocence. And from my perspective, it would be totally inappropriate for me to comment, period. That has been my posture now for two-and-a-half years and will continue to be.

Q I'm going to try once more because I'm not really asking about the criminal investigation --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: The answer will be the same, Terry.

Q I'm asking about the conduct of the Vice President, and people have a right to know that. Did you direct anyone to disclose her name or to cover up disclosing her name?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Terry, I have given you the answer. I will not say any more about it. There will be a time when I can discuss it, but not now.

Q Fair enough. You mentioned Scooter Libby is a close friend.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: He is.

Q And he was close with you for a long time, what do you make of how he's doing?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm sure it's very tough. But he's a good man. He's a patriot. As I say, he's entitled to the presumption of innocence. We'll leave it at that.

Q All right. Iran, the President of Iran has been making comments recently that have gotten attention. He's called for the -- Israel being wiped off the map, perhaps reconstructed somewhere in Europe. He's denied the Holocaust. What do you make of him? How dangerous is he?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Don't know the man, have never met him. I think his statements have been outrageous. I think he's probably done more to marshal world opinion against Iran than his predecessors have done for a long time. He strikes me as a very dangerous man, especially in light of the fact that the Iranians appear to be embarked upon a course of trying to develop nuclear weapons. I'm concerned about it.

Q How close do you think Iran is to developing a nuclear --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: You get various estimates. Actual estimates are clearly classified, but there's every reason to believe that they are seriously pursuing nuclear weapons. We're not the only ones who believe that. Obviously, the Europeans do, as well. The Israelis do. The European Community, the EU, the Brits, the French and the Germans have taken the lead in trying to negotiate a diplomatic solution. We support that effort, and we'll continue to do so. We think there's no need for Iran to develop nuclear weapons. They've been offered different options -- the possibility, for example, that the Russians would be responsible for providing the fuel, and we take back the spent fuel. But they don't need to have enrichment capability themselves. Other nations have nuclear power, generating capability and don't enrich their own uranium. They get it on the market. The Iranians ought to be able to do the same.

Q Do you think that when you, or the President of the American government now talks about Iran and North Korea and its weapons of mass destruction ambitions and programs, the world looks at this with a rightly skeptical eye, that our credibility has been damaged because of what happened here in this country, that there were no weapons of mass destruction?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, what there was in Iran -- Iraq, again, remember was a man who had produced and used weapons of mass destruction before. A universal view, part of all the intelligence agencies worldwide that he was at it again. And what we found with the Duelfer report when we get in, for example, that while they didn't have stockpiles, they still clearly had the capability to produce chemical and biological agents; that he was expected as soon as sanctions were lifted to go back into business producing. Again, that's the testimony of Duelfer before the Congress. So we're still with the WMD problem, if you will, in Iraq, even though there may not have been stockpiles. I think one of the things I'm concerned about is that the United States is more concerned than anybody else appears to be with this problem of proliferation. We sort of led the charge to try to deal with that.

We've found, for example, that other nations haven't been quite as eager, as enthusiastic as we are to try to cope with it. One of the most important things that came out of our operations in Iraq was that Moammar Ghaddafi in Libya saw what we did here and surrendered his nuclear weapons development efforts. All of his weapons designs, the centrifuges, his huge -- for the uranium enrichment process now are under the control of the United States, under lock and key --

Q He was on his way to doing that, though?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I don't believe so. I think what happened was when we invaded Iraq; he contacted Tony Blair and George Bush. He didn't call Kofi Annan. And five days after we dug Saddam out of his hole in Tikrit, then he went public and announced he was going to give it all up. I think he did it directly because he saw what the United States did in Iraq. Put that aside, the fact of the matter is, we have to find a way as an international community to limit the spread of nuclear weapons technology primarily because you don't want rogue states to acquire it, but also because of the very real danger that ultimately it may fall into the hands of a non-state actors, of terrorists. And you try to do that through diplomacy, through international agreements, perhaps through the United Nations. But we've got to find a way to do it because we do have the problem not only in North Korea, but also in Iran, and it could well develop elsewhere. And as an international community, we must come together and find

some way to make certain that doesn't happen.

Q This has been a tough period for the administration -- poll numbers, the hurricane and the response of the federal government that seems wanting, and a lot of Americans seems angry at the administration right now. Are you back on your feet? That was the last question, basically.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Are we in trouble?

Q Are you in trouble?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I've been sort of in and out of this business or in it more than out of it for going on 40 years, Terry, since 1968 when I first went to Washington. Every administration has ups and downs. But when you've been through that, you have a perspective on it, and there's a little less hand-wringing inside. The President is very steady through this period of time. There are always in this business good days and bad days. We deal with the toughest problems in the world. Those are the only kind that end up on the desk of the President in the Oval Office. I feel very, very good about where we are with respect to Iraq and Afghanistan. Tomorrow I'll be in Afghanistan, in Kabul for the swearing in of the newly elected democratically elected parliament in Afghanistan, first one they've had in 5,000 years. So it's a very special time to be part of this administration. And I think we get it right more often than not. And the American people will judge us, eventually history will judge us. But I am proud to serve, and I think we've got a great President, and we're doing good things.

Q Thank you, thank you, sir.

END 4:50 P.M. (Local)

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