

THE LEGACY OF JOHNSON'S WAR ON POVERTY

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THROUGH NEW LEGISLATION¹ intended to alleviate poverty, the 1960s proved to be a time of bureaucratic discovery and administrative experimentation. This decade witnessed the first man on the moon and the war in Vietnam. From innovations to destruction, Americans learned to rely heavily on the federal government. The War on Poverty, initiated by John Fitzgerald Kennedy and continued by Lyndon Baines Johnson, is a prime example of this new dependency. Not only did the War on Poverty create a new class of reliance on government handouts, it also resulted in a misallocation of resources. The programs' long-term consequences overshadowed any short-term successes.

The assault on unemployment began with the Kennedy administration. In his 1960 campaign, Kennedy focused on a new way of thinking. This New Frontier, as he called it, attempted to help renew Americans' faith in their country. Initially, Kennedy intended to strike poverty in underdeveloped countries, but he soon realized that conditions were just as bad in the United States. Although poverty existed all over the world, citizens of developed countries either did not know about the decrepit conditions in which people lived or they ignored that those conditions did exist in the United States. To maintain American strength and pride as a leading nation of the world, Americans refused to acknowledge the poverty

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¹ See Revenue Act of 1964 (PL 88-272) and the Economic Opportunity Act (PL 88-452, 78 Stat. 508, 42 U.S.C. § 2701).

that existed. Not until Kennedy received letters from members of communities pleading for relief from destitution did he realize that poverty was indeed damaging to the country's image. This prompted Kennedy and his administration to look further into the problem, and they concluded that poverty permeated many areas of the United States. The Kennedy administration discussed legislation as a possible means to amend the problem.²

Kennedy theorized that families passed on poverty from generation to generation. The goal, therefore, was to target the youth and provide them with the tools needed to escape the world of poverty. He considered job training and public works programs to get Americans back on their feet and to be more self-sufficient. With these programs, he hoped to ease the tensions caused by poverty and encourage people to live better, healthier lives.³

After Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, his vice president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, ascended to the presidency. Desiring to stay on the same track as Kennedy, Johnson continued Kennedy's plan to fight poverty. In his State of the Union Address, Johnson declared a so-called "war on poverty" and unemployment. In the search for the culprit of poverty, Johnson quickly realized that poverty was a complex mixture of elements. The poverty cycle revealed, as it does today, its roots in culture, life choices, family life, environment, motivation, ambition, race, class, and geographic setting.⁴ The fight to end this cycle included a tax cut to help prevent a recession and provide security for the employed as well as opportunities for the unemployed. In addition to the tax cut, Johnson proposed better transportation, health care, social security, foreign aid programs, and projects to build homes, schools, hospitals, and libraries.⁵

After Congress passed the civil rights legislation⁶ in the early 1960s, minorities found life more meaningful since they could now be more active in society. Johnson felt that it was necessary to provide them with the additional

¹ Carl M. Brauer, "Johnson, Kennedy, and the War on Poverty," *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 1 (1982): 101–104.

² *Ibid.*, 106, 109.

³ John A. Andrew, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1998), 56–94.

⁴ "State of the Union Address," in *Proceedings and Debates*, ed. House of Representatives (Congressional Record, 1963).

⁵ See Civil Rights Act of 1964 (PL 88-352, 78 Stat. 241).

tools needed to make better lives for themselves. But it was not just minorities that suffered from poverty. In 1964, one out of every five families suffered under poverty; white families made up 78 percent of that figure. These families lived their daily lives wondering about the source of their next meal. They also questioned from where they would get the money to pay the rent or to take care of their children if they got sick. Johnson sought to ease these worries for poor families, regardless of their ethnicity.⁷

Johnson tried to alleviate tensions through the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity and the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Under the command of Robert Sargent Shriver, the office developed programs that were implemented by an advisory council. The office demanded that the programs undergo assessments at least twice a year. These assessments evaluated the programs in relation to its goals, as well as the competence of its management and the efficiency of its projects.⁸ The bill included entitlements for youth, adult, and community action programs.⁹

The Office of Economic Opportunity took its initial step by focusing on social welfare. Social welfare recruited, and encouraged others to recruit, people for the Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Service, which constituted as a manpower program. Workers targeted high school students by distributing information and providing career exposure and educational opportunities. Once part of the program, people had the chance to improve their financial situations as well as increase their opportunities of making stronger connections with people in their communities.¹⁰

The Job Corps intended to reach young men and women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one. Education served as the foundation of the Job Corps. It appointed teachers to provide young people with material they had never seen before. Until then, they had only been exposed to the horrors of poverty. Job training taught Americans skills required for trades from basic office work to fixing a car. It also constituted as a way for people to learn the most efficient way to get a job and to keep a job. The highly

⁷ Andrew, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society*, 61.

⁸ National Advisory Council, "Ninth Report," ed. National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity (Washington, D.C.1977).

⁹ Andrew, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society*, 64–65.

¹⁰ "Overview Study of the Dynamics of Worker Job Mobility: National Study of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Workers, Work, and Organizational Contexts," ed. Education The Department of Health, and Welfare (SRS)72-05401 (Washington, D.C.1971), 123.

qualified training facilities had many years of instruction experience to tutor these people.¹¹

In addition to job training, women participants of the Job Corps received supplementary instruction. They acquired skills needed to perform daily household tasks. This included cooking, cleaning, childcare, and making clothing. These new abilities would prepare women to take care of their families and prevent their children from slipping into the state of poverty experienced by their elders. Together, Job Corps administrators hoped to lift men and women from oppression and open new doors to new futures for them.¹²

The Economic Opportunity Act did not solely aim to help individuals. To be fully productive, people needed to work together. The Neighborhood Youth Corps, another youth program, leaned toward this idea of community action. The adolescents who joined this team earned an hourly wage, which ultimately contributed to their family's income. They developed habits of time management as they worked and went to school. This project hit a double standard because it sought to reduce dropout rates, furthering the education of the youth, as well as provided them with jobs to improve their communities. Not only was it successful in terms of employment, it also succeeded in boosting the confidence of these young people and encouraged them to continue on the right path by fostering their education.¹³

Similar to the Neighborhood Youth Corps, work-study programs allowed students to stay in school and earn money. Work-study was mainly geared toward college students. The participating institutions guided pupils and presented them with jobs at the college or university or in neighboring communities. Students that would otherwise be forced to dropout of school because they did not have the means to pay tuition could now remain focused on their studies and pursue their future goals.¹⁴ This program met the Office of Economic Opportunities' pursuit to attack the root of poverty by educating the youth.

The Economic Opportunity Act also tried to reach adults by providing them with education. Men and women had the opportunity to take literacy classes. Anti-poverty funds financed free literacy classes in some

¹¹ Committee on Education and Labor, *Examination of the War on Poverty Program*, 1, 1965, 1–15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 33–62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 94–103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104–109.

states, such as North Carolina. With the chance to educate themselves, adults became an example for their children and increased their chances of finding and obtaining jobs.¹⁵ By engaging in these positive life choices, they proved to their children that poverty did not have to be a way of life and that they, too, could make positive life choices to design for themselves a brighter future.

The federal government also aided farmers and small businesses with loans. The loans assisted those who were too young to participate in youth programs or too old for job training. Farmers continued to supply others with meat and vegetables, and businesses advanced their technology and improved their products, implying a stimulation of the economy.¹⁶ Loans helped to dig already existing businesses out of the hole and get them back on their feet.

The legislation also included the Head Start Program. It aimed to raise the standard of education for poor preschool children to the same level of schools in prosperous areas. Teachers not only gave children educational materials, but also performed medical examinations on them to be more aware of the needs of the students. The results of these tests revealed the devastating impact of poverty. Over half of the students were anemic and had no previous dental care. One-third of the students had hearing problems, and one-quarter of the students had vision problems or was nearly blind. In addition to these distressing statistics, even more children were underfed and suffered from emotional and psychological problems. The early childhood intervention program designed by Head Start improved students' intelligent quotient scores as well as their health by developing their self-confidence and their ability to interact with others. It also focused on reconnecting students with their parents and involving parents in their children's academic activities. Head Start's mission included all of these ideas as well as the attempt to save children from the fate they would inevitably face if not given the chance to expand their horizons. The lasting effectiveness of the program, though, is questionable and controversial among its adversaries.¹⁷

Other community action programs, such as Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA, relieved migrant workers. Faced with long working hours, poor sanitation, and low pay, migrants endured harsh living and health conditions. Adequate housing, education, and day cares improved the

¹⁵ "Consumer Income," ed. United States Department of Congress, P-60 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1965), 1-2.

¹⁶ *Examination of the War on Poverty Program*, 110-12.

¹⁷ Andrew, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society*, 76-78.

standard of living for these people. Knowing their children were safe and healthy recovered the performance of the workers. At the end of the day, they returned to shelters with acceptable facilities and could alleviate the pressure of providing a clean home for their family.¹⁸ The program also provided work for the volunteers, many of whom personally witnessed poverty and wanted to change that lifestyle for them and their neighbors.

Johnson, moreover, incorporated the New Deal programs Medicare and Medicaid into his fight against poverty. Covering people over the age of sixty-five, Medicare provided a hospital insurance plan as well as a federally subsidized insurance for doctors' bills. Medicaid, however, targeted low-income individuals, regardless of age. It also used federal funds to provide medical care for families with dependent children and other disabilities. Medicare and Medicaid strove to make medical care equal for all Americans. Because Medicaid was administered by the state, affordable medical care was not consistent throughout the United States and eligibility requirements varied from state to state, a common criticism of the program. It did, though, reduce the financial burden some faced before they were granted this opportunity. The monetary assistance for the poor, however, created deficits in the economy. Apprehension began to stir amongst those being helped. The government had a history of exploiting the poor, and the poor had been let down before. Thus, Americans began to fear that the programs were becoming too expensive and that they would have to pay for them later.¹⁹

Much debate surrounds the purpose and effectiveness of the War on Poverty. The United States Department of Commerce reported in January of 1961 that the average family income increased by 6 percent from 1958 to 1959. In August 1962, the department reported a 2 percent increase in family income since 1960. In a population survey during that same year, a recorded 37 percent of families received incomes of \$7,000 or more. Moreover, 21 percent received below \$3,000, while 20 percent earned between \$3,000 and \$5,000, and 22 percent earned between \$5,000 and \$7,000.²⁰ In 1963, income reached record levels with an increase of 5 percent from 1962.²¹ Income also increased 5 percent from 1963 to 1964, and there was a 7 percent increase in

¹⁸ *Examination of the War on Poverty Program*, 113–22.

¹⁹ Andrew, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society*, 100, 102–103, 114.

²⁰ “Current Population Reports Consumer Income,” ed. United States Department of Commerce, P-60 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1962), 1–4.

²¹ “Current Population Reports,” ed. United States Department of Commerce, P. 60 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1964), 1.

1966.²² More importantly, poverty decreased from 22 percent in 1959 to 15 percent in 1966.²³

Clearly, confusion about the purpose of the War on Poverty was unavoidable. Opponents saw these statistics and questioned whether or not it was necessary to fight poverty if incomes were increasing and poverty was decreasing with the flow of the natural market. Furthermore, poverty increased by 5.1 percent in 1971 and by 10.7 percent from 1974 to 1975.²⁴ Opponents contend that Johnson's programs were not successful because poverty increased during this time, while it decreased before Johnson imposed any of his programs. Supporters of the legislation argue that there are many factors to consider while looking at poverty. Age, number of children, occupation, race, head of family, and education all contribute to the measurement of poverty.

These factors were, and remain, essential to consider in the determination of poverty. The percentage of nonwhite individuals who made under \$1,000 exceeded the percentage of white individuals by 6 percent. It was an unfortunate fact that nonwhite Americans earned less than white Americans. Women of all races earned less than men. In 1964, white men who earned less than \$4,000 a year was 7.7 percent, while white females reached an astonishing 22.8 percent. Twenty-nine percent of nonwhite women made less than \$4,000. Industrial workers, compared to farmers, also established a similar trend. Only 3.3 percent of non-farmers earned less than \$1,000 a year. Eleven percent of farmers made below \$1,000. White individuals who received at least four years of high school education earned more than nonwhites with the same amount of education. It is evident that it was necessary to look at these aspects. Families headed by a male were likely to be better off than one headed by a female. The color of the individual and their occupation proved to be a colossal determination of income and in classifying poverty.²⁵ All of these pieces were needed to complete the puzzle; it was unfair to assess the success or failure of Johnson's programs without these considerations.

²² "Consumer Income," "Consumer Report," ed. United States Department of Commerce, P60 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1965), 1.

²³ "The Extent of Poverty in the United States 1959-1966," ed. United States Department of Commerce, P60 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1968), 1-2.

²⁴ "Money Income and Poverty Status of Families and Persons in the United States: 1975 and 1974 Revisions," ed. United States Department of Commerce, P60 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1976), 1.

²⁵ "Current Population Reports," 2.

A common view among opponents of the War on Poverty is that the rhetoric the administration used greatly impacted Americans' interpretations. Johnson implied that poverty was a lifestyle, not just a lack of money, so people fell into the mentality that poverty was a way of life. Johnson's choice of words when declaring a "war on poverty" also damaged the mindset of Americans. Although the terms were helpful in obtaining the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act, they contained seeds of their own destruction. Opponents suggest that the phrase raised expectations of the poor, without having the necessary means to fulfill those expectations. For instance, job training did not guarantee employment. The program was costly and created violence between workers. They also claim that results were exaggerated. A large gap existed between the intentions and the actual execution of the programs and the legislature. Results of some programs were embellished and only parts of the truth were announced publicly. As an example, the administration exclaimed that 80 percent of students were in college because of the education programs provided to them. They did not mention, however, that 50 percent of those students were failing. Consequently, the media presented the public with only the information that was appealing to the public eye. This convinced communities that manpower programs were working, and their expectations continued to rise. In the latter years of the fight on poverty, the media reported more failures than successes, elevating hostility as opposed to easing the fear and anxiety that continued to linger. Government regulation was seen as the enemy and interfered with the natural course of events.²⁶

Some economists argue that the War on Poverty violated the natural, free market and followed the concept of the broken window fallacy. Take, for example, someone who threw a brick into a window of a bakery. At first glance, it seemed as though this action might benefit some businesses: the glass business will have another window to make, and in return the window business can use that profit for another business, and so on. The fallacy comes when considering the loss of business for other enterprises because the baker had to buy a new window. That money could have been used to buy more flour for the bread he bakes; therefore flour companies lost profit.²⁷ The same could be said for the social welfare programs enforced by the Office of Economic Opportunity. The creation of jobs in the community

²⁶ David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1986), 22, 67, 78, 91.

²⁷ Henry Hazlitt, *Economics in One Lesson* (New York: Pokcet Books, Inc., 1948), 11–12.

took away work from other workers, ultimately limiting competition and enhancing the possibility of inflation.

Others assert that the War on Poverty created a dependence on the national government. Kennedy and Johnson agreed that financial aid was not a solid solution to the problem of poverty because it did not grasp the root of the problem and Americans would learn to rely on the government to fix all of their problems. They felt that creating opportunities was a better solution and would help people become more self-sufficient. In reality, creating these jobs and opportunities limited self-sufficiency because people did not try to get themselves out of poverty from the very beginning, thus generating a reliance on government to solve all problems. This also relates to the broken window fallacy in that creating jobs does not follow the laws of supply and demand. In other words, there is a difference between jobs, and government created jobs. A real job results in a positive contribution to the aggregate well being of the country, whereas government created jobs do not. The unemployed may not be the most qualified for the job that the government makes for them, so productivity is still not at its full potential.²⁸ Moreover, the government had to borrow or create money to provide for these new jobs, which ultimately taxed Americans more and caused inflation; both consequences were detrimental to the poor and increased riots and crime among them.²⁹

Republicans disagree with the amount of money that was spent on these programs. They believed it created a false hope for those in need of assistance, and that it would cost much more money, time, and programs to attack every aspect of poverty. Additionally, community action agencies reduced the power of local governments.³⁰ Governors complained that there needed to be a higher authority, which suggests that they were more concerned about their political power than they were about the poor. As a result, more supervision was applied to community programs.³¹ Others counter that this increased supervision only harmed the economy more. This view of arrogant power is widely held among historians. The 1960s seemed to be all about this source of power and the aspiration to be on top and ahead of the world in terms of innovation and technology. Kennedy wanted the United States to put the first man on the moon, and he succeeded. Kennedy

²⁸ Lester O'Shea, *Tampering with the Machinery: Roots of Economic and Political Malaise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 41–42, 81.

²⁹ Gareth Davies, "War on Dependency: Liberal Individualism and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964," *The Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 2 (1992), 216–17.

³⁰ Andrew, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society*, 175.

³¹ Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History*, 113.

and Johnson wanted the United States to emerge as heroes from the Vietnam War, and they succeeded, according to some, and failed, according to others. Johnson wanted to continue this image of the United States, and tried to do so by enacting programs to pull people from poverty.³²

Murray Rothbard, a well-known economist of the School of Austrian Economics, suggested that food stamps, Medicare, and Medicaid were much more appealing than low wages, so it is not surprising that people chose help in those forms instead of being unemployed or receiving a low wage. Between 1955 and 1976, social welfare increased from \$2.2 million to \$11.2 million. Rothbard looked at the Mormon Church and Albanian Americans to demonstrate self-sufficiency without government aid. Mormons and Albanian Americans were taught to be independent and to make a living for themselves. To them, welfare was an insult, and pride was more important to them than wealth. These two groups of people were much more successful and much happier knowing that they made a living for themselves on their own; it gave them pride, independence, and confidence to continue that lifestyle. Unfortunately for other Americans, the idea of government intervention had been implanted in their ways of thinking. In their eyes, it was okay to fail because the government always bailed them out. Dependency was a way of life; they knew nothing different. The harsh consequence of this attitude was that people who were not used to working were less inclined to want to work, even if presented with the opportunity. The upper and middle classes tended to have a better attitude about life and therefore usually held higher paying jobs. The job of the government should have been to encourage responsibility rather than providing resources that were already scarce.³³

A 1965 hearing examined the progress of the War on Poverty. Though it had only been six months into the program, Congressmen had admitted that all was not well. The primary concern was that the poor were not involved in the programs designed specifically for them. There was too much administration on the part of local governments and others running the programs. Unless the poor were directly involved, Congressmen feared no significant progress would be made. In the south, for example, African

³² Andrew, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society*, 57.

³³ Murray N. Rothbard, *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1978), 149–52.

Americans did not have a voice in many of the programs, which completely contradicted the objective of this piece of legislation.³⁴

The representatives present at this hearing toured the United States to inspect the progress of the programs. In the west and midwest, it was found that the Job Corps and community action programs were quite successful in some districts, while others were unorganized. The lack of organization came from a competition between public agencies and the community. Once again, the need for power interfered with the objective of the programs. In Cleveland and Detroit, programs only focused on one part of the city. In order to be effective, programs needed to be spread across the state to cover all sections hit by poverty. Another drawback in these two states was the requirement of every employed person to pass a civil service examination. This was an astounding discovery for representatives because it was known that many people who were poor were illiterate, which made it impossible for them to pass an exam testing their literacy. A major delay in the implementation of programs in these areas was that local governments were left to fend for themselves and supply the essential resources for these programs, many of which were expensive and not readily at hand for local governments.³⁵

In the eastern part of the country, particularly the cities of New York and Washington, opportunity was accompanied with enthusiasm of both the communities being helped and those helping the communities. New York struggled the most with getting programs started. There was a large amount of energy present in the city, but there was also a large amount of poverty stricken areas, given the size of the city. In Washington, the indigenous poor were heavily involved in the planning and operation of the programs. Many had already been trained and returned to their neighborhoods to train others. This was not the case in New York, though there was much hope. Discrimination among minorities was still prominent in New York City as well. Until this discrimination ceased and minorities participated in their own programs, argued a representative of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, employment would remain unfair. Critics did exist in 1965, but they were not dominant and there was a positive outlook for the future of the country.

³⁴ Committee on Education and Labor, *Examination of the War on Poverty Program*, 1, 1965, 112.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

Twenty years later, in a hearing before the Ninety-ninth Congress, Congressmen discussed the progress of the War on Poverty through that point in time. The topic of the hearing was whether the War on Poverty was victorious or futile. The consensus, as stated by Robert Greenstein, was that it had not completely eradicated poverty, nor was it a complete failure. The legislature claimed success in reducing the poverty of the elderly by nearly half of its previous total. As for the increase in poverty rates in the 1970s, Greenstein blamed the poor performance of the economy. Regardless, he, and others like him, maintains that if it were not for the poverty programs, poverty rates would be higher still. He continued to defend the legislation by referencing to programs other than cash assistance. The decline in infant mortality, the increase in life expectancy, and the improvement of nutrition were accomplishments that attest that there were measures of poverty other than income. Other Congressmen at the hearing, of course, refuted this, insisting that most of the programs were not helpful to the poor.³⁶

Supporters of the War on Poverty believe that the legislation was based on the founding principles of America and democracy; that every American should have an equal opportunity to make a life for themselves. They had their hearts in the right place because they yearned to help those who could not help themselves. They did not believe that the free market could provide the resources that were needed to end poverty.

Sargent Shriver gave a statement to the Eighty-ninth Congress before the Committee on Education and Labor. In his statement, he refuted the overall assumptions of the congressmen that the War on Poverty was not generating any success. He agreed that there were issues that needed to be addressed, but there were solutions to those issues. The only major problem Shriver recalled was the skepticism and responses that entertained the public. He believed in continuing the programs despite the uncertain reactions. The War on Poverty did not just target individual people; it targeted whole communities and the entire culture of poverty. Stereotypes existed and, based on those stereotypes, people who were poor were treated differently. This was seen in hospitals, where doctors focused their time on wealthier patients. It was seen with landlords who turned off the heat in an apartment whose renter could not pay on time. It was a pattern of abuse. The government was involved, he agreed, but it was intended for the people of the communities to play a larger role than the government. The War on Poverty was not just comprised of government programs; it was comprised of different religious, ethnic, racial, labor, and professional groups working together to attack all

³⁶ Joint Economic Committee, *War on Poverty—Victory or Defeat?*, 1, 1985, 89–92.

fronts of the war. This fight was not simply a way for the government to control Americans, he suggested, it was a means to reaffirm the confidence of Americans. Shriver reminded congressmen that the eradication of poverty was a process, and success would not be seen quickly.³⁷

Poverty is a devastating quandary entrenched in many societies. The realization of the consequences of poverty in the early 1960s concerned many people. Kennedy and Johnson dedicated themselves and their administrations to the eradication of poverty. Whether it was from the kindness of their hearts, or the desire to gain political favor, the two presidents used an extensive amount of time, money, and other resources on programs that only created dependence on government aid. Programs such as the Job Crops, Head Start, and community action agencies showed initial progress, but years after the declaration of the War on Poverty, income declined and poverty increased. The scope of poverty proved to be too large to handle. It caused frustration between representatives and those being assisted. Ultimately, Americans grew accustomed to government support and the future of the country would develop according to this mentality.

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³⁷ *Examination of the War on Poverty Program*, 112.

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