

THE VIETNAM WAR: FROM THE BIG SCREEN TO THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

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Vietnam War films struggle, sometimes successfully and sometimes in vain, to inform audiences of the traumatic, life-altering experience that was the Vietnam War. Fictional Vietnam War films like *Go Tell the Spartans*, *84 Charlie MoPic*, *Platoon*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*, touch on a variety of issues stemming from the conflict in Vietnam and have shaped public opinion of the war in the process. The war's confusion and chaos, the issues of race, class, and gender, and the meaning of morality are just a few of the themes presented in these films. Some handle these issues better than others, which is why it necessary to supplement these fiction films with the actual words and experiences from the people who lived them. Vietnam memoirs offer insight into a war that is hard enough to understand from a textbook and even more difficult to portray accurately on the big screen. More and more, citizens gain their knowledge of the war from Hollywood movies, but these films often miss the mark on why it began, or why it went on for so long (Patriots, XV). Fiction films that focus on war aim to evoke emotion, rather than portraying the whole truth; and while these films are great stepping-stones for understanding the gravity of this war, they are also precisely why the first-hand accounts of witnesses are so important. They are the ones who saw what happened, survived, and were brave enough to tell the tale. Taken together, Vietnam War films, and the memoirs of survivors, are the public's greatest key to unlocking the reality of one of the most turbulent and terrifying times in American history.

*"Are you sure we're not in a looney bin?
Sometimes I think we're in a god damn looney bin!"*

- Major Asa Barker,
as played by Burt Lancaster,
in *Go Tell the Spartans*

The Vietnam War is probably the most complicated war of the modern era, defined by confusion, chaos, and death. Its real beginnings, however, are largely ignored by Hollywood films, perhaps because its roots go as far back as the end of WWII. Under the Truman administration, policies like the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine were designed to stop the spread of communism and protect United States credibility as the premier leader of the free world (Addington, 34). The Geneva Agreements, which partitioned off North and South Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel in June of 1954, put pressure on the United States to help build the free South Vietnam. A massive influx of Catholics to South Vietnam helped the US propagandize the rise to power of Ngo Dinh Diem, chosen by the government to rebuild South Vietnam against communist regime leader, Ho Chi Minh (Appy, 45). Under Eisenhower, the South East Asian Treaty Organization, formed in September 1954, was supposed to unite the countries of the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and Pakistan, in protecting weaker nations that might fall to communism without proper protection (Addington, 47).

In many ways, however, these solutions to Eisenhower's Domino Theory were futile. Tensions in Vietnam continued to escalate when the French fell at Dienbienphu in May 1954, compounded by the popularity of North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh and the failings of Ngo Dinh Diem as leader of South

Vietnam (Appy, 45-47). For nearly twenty years the American public was almost completely unaware of any conflict in Vietnam, and for five different presidential administrations, the course of the Vietnam War could have been changed, “but all of them acted as if they were trapped by the history they inherited” (Appy, 35). It wasn’t until 1965, when the 23,000 troops in Vietnam rose to almost 200,000, that the American public at large began to take notice of the war (Appy, 3).

In many ways, Ted Post’s *Go Tell the Spartans* is an early examination of this war that no one really knew about. In multiple scenes the reason for being in Vietnam is unclear. The men simply acknowledge they have a job to do and were going to do it, no questions asked. As the movie progresses and battles between the US and the unseen enemy of Southeast Asia intensify, it is clear there is unexpected rawness to this war. Intelligence about the enemy’s location and the US army’s strategy is difficult to understand. More importantly, when the information is obtained, Major Asa Barker (Burt Lancaster) is unsure of what to do with it (*Go Tell the Spartans*). It is not far off from the reality of the Vietnam War at its beginning. As Bernard Trainor, a former commander of covert operations in South Vietnam described, the early part of the war was supposed to be about winning the hearts and minds of the people. However, that became an increasingly difficult task when conflicting orders from General Westmoreland were for search and destroy missions (Appy, 7).

Go Tell the Spartans’ most important symbol is its location. Set on the site of a battle between the French and the Viet Minh where the French were ruthlessly defeated ten years before US arrival. Many of the “advisors” present begin to wonder if Americans are destined to succumb to the same fate. At the end of the film, Cpl. Courcay, a once energetic volunteer, is now a jaded soldier and the only survivor of his platoon. He must “go tell the Spartans,” or in this case, the Americans, of the horrific defeat inflicted upon US troops by the Viet Cong. This film showcased how in one year, 1964, the conventional tactics the US used to win wars would no longer help them achieve a swift victory over an enemy that, as John F. Kennedy once wisely proclaimed, is “nowhere and everywhere at the same time” (Appy, 45).

84 Charlie MoPic, Patrick Sheane Duncan’s film that focuses on a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, is another example of the confusion and chaos embedded in the Vietnam War. Aesthetically the film allows the viewer to feel as though they are in the jungle with the LRRP team on this recon mission. Shot like an unedited documentary, the viewer gets an up-close glimpse of the personal lives of the soldiers who are “just doing a job” (*84 Charlie MoPic*). As Richard Bernstein wrote in his review of the film in the *New York Times*, “Its concern is not to decide whether the war was just or unjust, but rather to memorialize the harshness of warfare and the particular circumstances of Vietnam.”

Leroy Quintana, a real-life member of a LRRP team, debated over its advantages and disadvantages. “You lived in constant nervousness,” he said. His memories of life in the jungle are portrayed in Duncan’s film, especially one scene in particular when the men are forced to hide as a file of Viet Cong pass by. Since LRRPs were not supposed to initiate firefights, it was crucial to remain quiet to avoid being seen. “My teeth were chattering,” described Quintana as he remembered hiding from the VC (Appy, 538-39). In the film, a member of the LRRP team slams his arm down on bamboo shoots while trying to hide, forcing him to quietly stomach the agonizing pain while the VC moved along the trail.

At the heart of the films that examine life before the war was publicly unpopular, is that most soldiers did not care about the details of why they were there. There was no need for legitimacy of the war, and as one character in *84CMP*, Hillbilly, put it, “you do the best job you can do whether you like it or

not” (84 Charlie MoPic, 1989). Eventually the lack of interest in justifying the war would all change with events like the Tet Offensive, the My Lai Massacre, and the growing antiwar movement at home.

Many of the films previously mentioned deal with the confusion of battle by portraying them as sporadic firefights deep in the jungle in the dead of night. One movie, however, *Hamburger Hill* betrays that notion and offers a different kind of war confusion. In this film the character’s personal identities are more obscure and the real character becomes the battle itself. It was the cinematic story of the soldiers of B Company, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, during a brutal ten-day fight (May 11-20, 1969) for control over a hill in the Ashau valley of Vietnam. It was rare to find major battles, similar to ones fought in WWI and II during the Vietnam War, but the story of Hamburger Hill reminded audiences that they still existed.

The confusion of this battle lay in its unclear objectives. What were they fighting for? Was it worth it? Why did it matter? Ultimately the viewer is left to believe there was no reason beyond the fact that someone higher up told them to do it. On May 15, an air strike was called in, but the difficult task of trying to distinguish the enemy among the many other soldiers led to US helicopters firing on its own people. This disturbing scene didn’t just occur in Hollywood movies. At one point Lieutenant Frank McGreevy actually called his artillery liaison officer and gave him a clear message, “I don’t want any more ARA out here if they can’t shoot the enemy instead of us. I’m tired of taking more casualties from friendlies than from the enemy. The next goddamn sonofabitch who comes out here and shoots us up, we’re gonna shoot his fuckin ass down. And that’s final.” The issue of friendly fire in the war accounted for many casualties and added leverage to the antiwar movement growing at home since 1965 (Flanagan, 4).

*“Don’t be so eager to get yourself killed,
there’s plenty of war here for all of us”*

–OD, as played by
Richard Brooks,
in 84 Charlie MoPic

Imagine a group of young soldiers, some are fresh from training and some are experienced veterans. They are walking quietly through a dense jungle, being careful of their every step, measuring their every breath, shifting their eyes from one side to another while fear races through their minds. This goes on for what feels like hours as suspense builds in a quiet and seemingly calm jungle. Suddenly, a shot is fired from atop of the trees. A Vietnamese sniper has spotted the platoon. Soon, many of the men are shot down, some fatally wounded, but it is near impossible to find the culprit. A firefight breaks out and the once quiet patrol of the jungle is cut short by abrupt chaos and confusion as the search to find the enemy drags on into the night.

This scenario occurs in both real-life documentaries, *The Anderson Platoon* and *A Face of War*. In nearly every fictional film mentioned in the introduction a similar scene appears. Vietnam War films constantly try to portray the abrupt senselessness of the war. In the book *Bloods*, a collection of black veteran’s memories, First Lieutenant Joe Biggers, describes such a similar ambush when a group of NVA snipers slipped between his squad and rest of his company. “Someone told me the snipers had just got Joe. He was my platoon sergeant,” recalled Biggers, “That did it. I passed the word to call in napalm...we kept shooting until everything was empty. Then we picked up the guns they dropped and fired them” (Terry, 115-116).

In many ways there was a complete disconnect between what was really happening on the ground in Vietnam and what Washington D.C. policy makers were telling the public. Lyndon Baines Johnson's "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution" from August 7, 1964 ensured him the support of congress "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression" and in the beginning such action garnered the support of the public (Addington, 78). Although, as early as 1965, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara began having doubts about US involvement in Vietnam. Though he supported the war publicly, he watched with concern as fighting intensified and General Westmoreland repeatedly called for more troops (Addington, 94-96). Yet much of the politics surrounding the Vietnam War goes unmentioned in films about the conflict. In some of the films, political messages can be interpreted, but hardly any take a firm stance on whether they were anti or pro-war. *Hamburger Hill*, for instance, can be construed as a very anti-war film in the sense the men fought to take over the hill for essentially nothing. On the other hand, it showcases the resilience of men in war to put up with whatever comes their way for the sake of their country. Most films let the viewer draw their own conclusions about the validity of the war, just as the characters themselves are forced to come to their own conclusions through the unraveling of each plot.

A powerful scene at the end of *Full Metal Jacket* features the soldiers, led by Private Joker, singing the theme for Mickey Mouse. The Mickey Mouse image was often used as a reference in many Vietnam War films to convey the conflict's silliness, and utter ridiculousness. For the soldiers singing, they were belting out a chorus that made no sense, in a war that made no sense. It was a perfectly ironic moment for them to address their feelings toward the war in Vietnam.

*It don't mean nothing, man.
Not a thing."*

- Motown, as played by
Michael Boatman,
in *Hamburger Hill*

There is a pivotal scene in *84 Charlie MoPic*, when MoPic asked Hillbilly what he thought about being white and having a black patrol leader. Hillbilly becomes angry and says, "That's a real world question, we don't ask questions like that here." It is an important statement, recognizing that societal rules of the time did not necessarily apply in a place like Vietnam. Vietnam was a world and a culture all its own. However, this may only be half-true. In many circumstances race, class, and gender were the last topics on anyone's mind. Other times, they were the key deciding factors on who led, who followed, and what role each person was meant to play in the war.

In *Hamburger Hill* there are many clichés and stereotypes promoted, especially along the lines of race. The characters Doc and Motown in particular claim to see and know things white men in the war just can't or refuse to see. For instance, that blacks and whites are mostly separate, and must each find their own ways of coping with life in the war. Only through the intense battle do the many characters from all walks of life find a way to come together in the pursuit of survival. It is their determination to reach the top of the hill that forces them to put all political and social concerns aside. Issues such as race and class, which were coming to a head back home in America, were sometimes pointless to discuss in the war. Such things "don't mean nothin" when you found yourself deep in the jungles of Vietnam, fighting for your life (*Hamburger Hill*).

Haywood T. Kirkland remembers vividly being told during his training to call the Vietnamese “gooks” and “dinks.” There was a new kind of racism taking hold. The soldier to your left and right, regardless of color, was your fellow soldier. The enemy, on the other hand, was less than human and must be destroyed (Terry, 90). In fact GIs were under pressure to produce high body counts on missions. For most, it became a rule of thumb that “if it’s dead and it’s Vietnamese, it’s VC.” This created an environment where it was easier to kill the enemy without hesitation or concern for the loss of life. Though racism existed within the military, most veterans recall a great deal of unity, especially in the midst of combat. As the war progressed into the late 1960s and 70s, however, men became divided on all sorts of issues. Race was certainly one, but there was also tension between officers and enlisted men, between combat and rear-area soldiers, between ‘juicers’ who chose to drink and ‘heads’ who preferred to smoke marijuana (Appy, 355-356). Hollywood films tend to promote an image of complete unity, especially when it comes to race, but even when such unity existed it did not come easily or under simple circumstances. Often movies completely ignore what is probably the definitive source of tension among men in the war: class.

“Despite its racial and ethnic diversity, the U.S. military in Vietnam was hardly representative of the larger society in terms of class” (Appy, 45). It was common practice for privileged men to be able to put off going to war via student deferments, even after they were supposed to have stopped in 1965. Over 80 percent of the two and a half million enlisted men who served in Vietnam were from working-class and poor families. *The Deer Hunter* follows the lives of three men (Michael, Nick, and Steven) from a working class town in Western Pennsylvania. They were perfectly content with their lives before they were drafted into the Vietnam War, but all are changed in different ways after surviving as POWs. While the movie has a blatant disregard for the chronology of the war, as well as its accuracy, Cimino’s explained that his film was not meant to be literally accurate, but was supposed to evoke the impact of war on the members of small industrial town where everyone knew everyone (Canby, 1). Michael was desperate to feel the same way he did about life before the war, Nick who was consumed by Vietnam, forgets his home, and ultimately dies in a game of Russian roulette, and Steven, almost a quadriplegic, was terrified to return home in his condition, knowing his life would never be the same. The chilling end scene features the close friends drinking around a table in honor of Nick. The once little war 10,000 miles away now saturated their lives. Confused over their feelings, hating the war, loving their country, missing their friend, and trying to move on they sing “God Bless America,” an ironic salute to a country that turned their lives upside down.

Those are the consequences of war more affluent members of society were able to avoid. James Lafferty opened one of the first free draft counseling law firms in Detroit, Michigan in 1965, trying to level the playing field for poor men wanting to avoid the war, but ultimately conceding it was much easier to do so with more money. “Class bias was also blatant in the case of medical exemptions,” he recalled, explaining that even though the poor had some of the worst health problems, doctors examining them were under pressure to process as many people as they could so they were pushed through. Richer men were able to obtain personal doctor’s notes excusing them from war because of suddenly pre-existing conditions like asthma or allergies. Lafferty believed that no draft board failed to meet its quotas, meaning for every man he helped avoid war, one more was just called up to take his place (Appy, 164-166).

Race and class, though not always the most prominent, still maintain more of a presence in Hollywood-made films about the war than gender (many choosing to exclude women’s roles in the war

completely). In some of the films, when women were portrayed, they're often treated as a side note, or a minor subplot to the real story. Usually, like in *Full Metal Jacket* or *Platoon* they were whores. Female Vietnamese characters were seen getting paid to be exploited sexually or they were raped. Women were something men could fight over, something to keep them going, something worth living for, but they are rarely seen. Mostly they are talked about in a derogatory manner, or revealed to an audience as a man writes a letter home. However, *Full Metal Jacket's* last scene features a Vietnamese woman as the sniper. Although she is defeated at the end, she did succeed in killing many Americans, and it offers a little acknowledgement to the contributions Vietnamese women made for their country during the war.

Tran Thi Gung represents a microcosm of what women were capable of in war. Fighting against the French in the 1950s and then again during the Vietnam War, she once spent seven days trapped in a tunnel. She killed many GIs and was a skillful sniper who was involved in countless firefights. "I never felt guilty about the killing I did" she explained, justifying her actions by asking "Wouldn't you shoot me if you saw me holding a weapon and pointing it at you?" (Appy, 18-19).

American women played an important role outside sexual favors in the war as well. Helen Tennant Hegelheimer remembered her work as a flight attendant for World Airways, one of the airliners responsible for ferrying US troops in and out of the war zone. She acted in many ways as a man's wife, sister, or girlfriend. She saw what they were like before they entered the war and how different they returned. She offered them comfort when they needed it, helped them write letters home, wished them good luck, and saw them off. "I can't imagine doing anything more important than to nudge a troop into war. If he wasn't lucky, I was nudging him to his death with the best "it will be okay" smile I could conjure up," she explained (Appy, 108).

Sometimes race, class, and gender defined every experience a person involved in Vietnam would have. At other times, all three simply meant nothing. Although they existed and were visible, there was often no meaning behind them. When the going got tough a soldier was only supposed to care about two things: staying alive and winning the war.

*"I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy; we fought ourselves.
The enemy was in us. The war is over for me now,
but it will always be there, the rest of my days."*

– Chris Taylor, as played
by Charlie Sheen,
in *Platoon*

Simply put, war changes people. Not just war, but it is the preparation one needs before entering war, the time they spend fighting, and their time at home after the war, that changes people. Recall the beginning of the Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* when the audience is introduced to a dozen or so long-haired teenage boys whose heads are being shaved before entering basic training. From the minute a new recruit arrived, be it from volunteering or the draft, the Marine Corps knew how to turn young, incompetent men into fierce instruments of war. This is most exemplified by Private Joker and Private Pyle, two extreme examples of military training. They are abused, verbally and physically, by Gunnery Sergeant Hartman for weeks until they were considered ready for war.

Philip Caputo, in his memoir "A Rumor of War," remembers being a young, impressionable teenage boy interested in joining the Marine Corps both as an act of rebellion and also as a way to gain personal independence. The picture *Full Metal Jacket* paints of life at Parris Island, South Carolina in 1967 is not far off from what Caputo endured at Quantico in the mid 1960s as well. He had a romantic idea of war, thinking its end would be in a few months and he'd return home a welcomed hero, revered by the average citizens he fought for. He believed in John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, and that he was doing what he could for his country (Caputo, 40-58).

However, Caputo also remembered mob mentality. It is featured in both *Full Metal Jacket* and his memoir, as men were forced to shout ridiculous things while running or training (Caputo, 12). It didn't matter how inane the words were, when the group was shouting together another force outside themselves took over. "We had become self-confident and proud, some to the point of arrogance. We had acquired the military virtues of courage, loyalty, and *esprit de corps*, though at the price of a diminished capacity for compassion" he said (Caputo, 21). This diminished compassion serves as a breaking point for Private Pyle, who commits suicide under the enormous weight of the looming war in his future. Private Joker becomes the embodiment of peace and war in corporeal form. He wears his helmet which features the words "born to kill" alongside a peace sign. It is not until the very end of the film when he must put aside his moral principles and kill for the sake of staying alive.

Those who seek out Vietnam movies to gain their knowledge of the war would see a recurring theme when it comes to morality. It is often the story of the naive recruit, a clean-cut, follow-the-training soldier, who when juxtaposed with the tired, experienced, seen-it-all and done-things-you-wouldn't-believe veteran, seems entirely out of place and unwelcome. Eventually he will come face to face with the aspects of war that change him from the inside out. When the average life expectancy of a second lieutenant in the field is three weeks, there is a crucial need to stay alert and learn fast. LT is forced to kill a Vietnamese soldier when it goes against his protocol (*84CMP*), Christ Taylor must pick a side in his platoon (*Platoon*), Joker stops reporting and picks up a gun (*Full Metal Jacket*), the list could go on and on.

Similarly in Caputo's memoir, his desk job documenting casualties gave him a perspective of the war he doesn't expect. He sees the carelessness and unpreparedness of the war's leaders and understands this war will not give him the post WWII glory he is seeking. Instead he begins to see the fine line Vietnam soldiers walk between being alert and being paranoid, between making rational decisions and acting on impulse, between trying to find camaraderie and staying alive (Caputo, 228-232).

Hollywood movies also introduce audiences to individuals who, under the pressure of war, go too far. In *Platoon*, the actual platoon itself becomes a character as it is divided into two factions. One, led by the ill-tempered Robert Barnes, who ultimately believes it is sometimes necessary to compromise your morals in order to support the war effort. The other, led by Elias Grodin, still believes that even in war there is a difference between right and wrong. In one of its most dramatic scenes Barnes becomes convinced some villagers are secretly Viet Cong and shoots a mother for failing to cooperate with his platoon. The act is considered murder and the platoon divides over whether or not Barne's action was right. In subsequent scenes Barnes murders Grodin, Bunny beats a handicapped Vietnamese boy to death, and Chris Taylor finally sees the atrocities of the war that have been hidden from the public for so long. His decision to murder Barnes and find a way out of Vietnam is symbolic of the pressure soldiers were under.

Tim O'Brien, a renowned author of Vietnam War stories, has said this is what his stories are really about. "I don't write about maneuvers and bombing and how guns work...these things bore me," he said, "...I'm trying to speak to everyone about the heart under pressure, the incredible spiritual pressure of seeking the right thing to do under difficult circumstances" (Appy, p.543). In some way, all of the Vietnam War films analyzed explore this idea. Perhaps no fiction film focuses on the issue of morality more than Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Of course the story of the formerly praised and glorified war-hero-turned-renegade-with "unsound methods," Walter Kurtz, is really an overblown exaggeration of this pressure O'Brien has alluded to.

Kurtz explains to Willard (the captain sent on a mission to murder Kurtz) about the day he "went insane" and asked whether or not Willard would have behaved the same way. After vaccinating Vietnamese children from polio, a tactic to win hearts and minds, the VC chopped the vaccinated arms off of the children. Kurtz decided his "unsound methods" were the only way Americans were going to be able to win the war. This movie presents a savage, barbaric image of Vietnam and surrounding countries, as well as the story of how one American can gather devout followers to be just as ruthless toward the enemy. Kurtz proposes that if moral men were able to use their primordial instincts to kill without judgment (as he believes the Vietnamese are doing), then the war would go to the Americans. In this one scene, *Apocalypse Now* gets to the heart of morality better than any other fictional Vietnam film. Though it is hardly an accurate portrayal of events in the War it is a symbol of the extreme decisions soldiers had to make and how some, after making them, found it impossible to enter back into regular society at the war's end.

"War is hell"

War is hell, but it is also so much more. If a person relies solely on films for their understanding of the Vietnam War they are doomed to miss the whole truth, as told from the men and women who lived through the period. Fictional war films manipulate audiences the same way the press, as described by war correspondent H.D.S. Greenway felt *Time* magazine was manipulating the public about the war until the late 1960s (Appy, 259-261). There are themes Hollywood movies, no matter how big their budget, large their cast or long their production schedule, can never cover completely in a two and a half or three hour movie.

It can be argued that many of the films, like *Platoon* or *Hamburger Hill*, are war-glory movies often missing the realities of the politics and disappointment felt at home (Felker, 1). Tom Grace's experiences at Kent State on May 4, 1970 (Appy, 385-89) never make it into these movies, the American public learning the truth about the war through their televisions at home are looked over (Appy, 268). Nixon's Cambodian Incursion and growing public disapproval are unseen. The purpose of these movies is to evoke those basic human emotions about men in war and leave discovering the rest of the details up to the individual who watches them. Vietnam War films molded public opinion of the war into a simple box by using elaborate cinematic tricks. Music said what screenwriters could not, explosions were meant to scare, gruesome images were meant to shock, and characters were tested. The product became little nutshells of the war: it was confusing, it left tens of thousands of dead, it became increasingly unpopular, and it was hell. Memoirs, offer the meat and bones to these ideas. Soldiers like Reginald Edwards find films like *Apocalypse Now* to be attention grabbing, but not accurate in any way (Terry, 13). Thai Dao, a Vietnamese immigrant found Hollywood depictions of the war in movies like *Hamburger Hill* and *Platoon*, incomplete when it came to describing and portraying the enemy that defeated the United States (Appy, 541). Only when this information is sought out are those truths revealed. Movies create a picture memoirs cannot, and memoirs tell a story films often try to tell, but fail to capture completely. Both films

and memoirs are unquestionably needed to truly learn about one of the most complicated wars in history, a quagmire that spanned decades and affected millions of lives, from soldiers deep in the jungle to whole towns at home in America, from the Vietnamese people and their way of life, to the very top of the United States federal government.

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