

JFK Tape 104/A40¹
August 15, 1963, 11:00 a.m. – Oval Office
President Kennedy and Henry Cabot Lodge Jr.

[00:04.144]²

Lodge: ...they're all going to be assassinated: her daughter [Madame Nhu], son-in-law—Nhu, and the president—Diem. And she said, “[unclear], they're all going to be assassinated. I don't think there's any question about it.” The only hope they have is to get out. And she said, “I hope you,” Lodge, “will advise them to get out.”

Kennedy: She doesn't think it can be saved—is that it?

Lodge: No. It cannot be saved. And she said, “if you've advised them to go out and they refuse to take your advice let me know and I will come out and try to talk with my daughter. Now this daughter, Madame Nhu, has always been violent and impossible and—not cra—not stupid, but—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —but crazy.

Kennedy: [Unclear]?

¹ *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963* describes the meeting as follows: “Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge met with President Kennedy on August 15, 1963, from 11 to 11:35 a.m. at the White House. (Kennedy Library, President's Log Book) No record of their discussion has been found. Lodge subsequently recalled that when he met with President Kennedy on this occasion, he found the President ‘very much concerned by what was going on in Vietnam. He referred particularly to the famous Associated Press picture of the Buddhist monk, Quang Duc, burning himself alive. I suppose that no news picture in recent history had generated as much emotion around the world as that one had. President Kennedy referred to that picture, to the overall importance of Vietnam, and to what was going on in Saigon—to the fact that apparently the Diem government was entering a terminal phase. He also mentioned the extremely bad relations that the Embassy had with the press. He said, “I suppose that these are the worst press relations to be found in the world today, and I wish you, personally, would take charge of press relations.”’ (See <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v03/d254>) The *FRUS* volume in question was published in 1991. Public knowledge of the Kennedy taping system existed since at least 1982, when Kennedy's personal secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, disclosed existence of the system in a *Newsweek* interview. The recordings were deeded to the Kennedy Library in 1976. The recording of this meeting was released to the public in 2009.

² The following transcript was prepared by Luke A. Nichter. According to emails and conversations between the author and archivists at the Kennedy Library during December 2016, the conversation has never been published or transcribed. The recording begins while the conversation is in progress. An unknown portion was not recorded. Lodge begins with a summary of his conversation with Than Thi Nam Tran – wife of the Vietnamese Ambassador to the U.S. and mother of Madame Nhu. Lodge had dinner with South Vietnam's Ambassador to the United States Tran Van Chuong and his wife at 8:00 p.m. on August 14, 1963, at the Vietnamese Embassy. Lodge knew Madame Tran Van Chuong from her time as South Vietnam's observer at the United Nations, which coincided with Lodge's role as U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN during the Eisenhower administration.

Lodge: Right. And violent, and willful—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —and angry. When she was here in Washington a couple of years ago she took an overdose of sleeping pills and they had to pump out her stomach. She's just been a terrible trial to both of them, always. She says that she talks like this and a lot of them talk like this—because Diem and Nhu, this is what they really think, and they like to hear her talking like this—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —which is quite revealing.

Kennedy: Is she a Buddhist—this woman [Than Thi Nam Tran]?

Lodge: Oh, yes. She's a Buddhist, and she's a very devout one. And Madame Nhu was born a Buddhist and then—

Kennedy: Became Catholic.

Lodge: —a convert. I don't know how good of a Catholic she is anyway.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: For the record.

Kennedy: She's political. She'd put a lot of the church [unclear]. [laughs]

Lodge: [laughs] That's right. That's right. And this is highest upper level, so I thought you'd want to know that.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: As a matter of fact, that happened to me last night. Now I've got to do a press conference when I arrive in Saigon, and I want to just submit to you some of the answers—you see, she's already taken a crack at me—Madame Nhu.

Kennedy: I heard that. Yeah.

Lodge: And I thought if I was asked about that I'd just say no comment.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: My view is she is a private citizen. She holds no political—no office. If I meet her, well, she's just a private citizen that I meet. And then if I get a question on U.S.—what is the U.S. policy—has there been a change in the policy? I thought I would say the policy of the United States is to help the Republic of Vietnam to win and maintain their independence from the—from communist territories.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: Whatever helps that we are for, whatever is against that we are against.

Kennedy: Yeah. Good.

Lodge: Put it that way—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —and not leave the impression that there has been a change.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: And another question I think they'll give me is do you think we can win with Diem, which will be about the roughest question I can get.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: You always try to think of the rough ones—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: I know you have experience with that. My position will be we will win with the Republic of Vietnam—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —along with everybody in it. That's about—

Kennedy: Right.

Lodge: —what I wanted to submit to you. And then when I see him [Diem], I want to face with him—when I have a chance to talk with him—this may be over several meetings. I can't do it all at once—would be “I want you to be successful. We want you to win—help you every way that I can. We understand that you don't want to be a puppet of the United States.” Dean Rusk would like to hear me say that we don't want to be a puppet of Vietnam—

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: —which, we don't want to be a tail of Mrs. Nhu's kite.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: Because many Americans think that she is the head of Vietnam.

Kennedy: Right.

Lodge: I had a fellow stop me in Beverly the other day, and—right on the street—and he said “who is this Madame Nhu, the head of Vietnam?” He'd seen her picture on the cover of *Time*, you know, and—and then I thought I would try to get the point across to him that he thinks he has us hooked, but nobody can hook the United States of America. Because nobody can hook U.S. public opinion and nobody can hook the U.S. Congress.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: And while the president's will is good, the president's power is not unlimited.

Kennedy: That's right.

Lodge: And I'm not sure if he realizes that. So those are things I wanted to get across.

Kennedy: Because he thinks that the press out there is really—you read Roger Hilsman's memorandum?

Lodge: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Kennedy: Well, you know how they can get in those places. They are—they feel they're doing the job because they're trying to get rid of—they're carrying out a political action to get rid of Diem because they would argue it is the only way they can win. I will say that two years ago they said they were going to collapse in six months, so their record of prophecy is not that good. And, in addition, you know, they're a lot of fellows who haven't had that much experience. A lot of them have been out there a year or so—have been, you know, they're not the first line [unclear]. About one day after I got that word about their being roughed up out there, we have the story about the American press being roughed up by the police in Rome! Well, that wasn't anything. I was there, and they weren't roughed up. So, I mean, you know how the reporters are—

Lodge: I know. I was one of them.

Kennedy: —you know, and—they don't—so that we do have a problem with them. I mean, that fellow—*New York Times* fellow [David Halberstam], I guess he's a bright fellow, just wrote a story about we're losing the war and having [unclear] days.

There's a real clique—you're going to have a difficult time maintaining a satisfactory relationship with them, because they are this—

Lodge: Mr. President, I plan—

Kennedy: —a lot of them [unclear].

Lodge: —there are three key ones: AP, UPI, and *New York Times*. They're the only three there every day—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —from the United States. And they're frightened. They've been frightened by the Vietnamese police.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: They're really afraid physically. They're mostly sick—got dysentery—they think they've been lied to, and they have been condescended to, socially, by some of our embassy people—I'm not really sure. The very first day I'm going to invite one of them to lunch, along with my wife and me, and I'm going to ask him to be quiet. Next day I'm going to ask the second one. The third day I'm going to ask the third one. We'll get it right like that, at a time that I'm too fresh for them to expect to get anything out of me—

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: —and try to at least get them into a human frame of mind.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: Of course, they must know that I am not going to be a terribly good news source, but at least I'm not going to lie to them. And anything—they can always come in and see me. And anything that they're entitled to get, I'll move heaven and earth to be sure that they get it.

Kennedy: The time may come, though, we've gotta just have to try to do something about Diem, and I think that's going to be an awfully critical period.

Lodge: Oh, yes!

Kennedy: I don't know how well prepared you are for that out there, or who we would sort of support, or who we would—and—I think that's going to be the key—your key problem this year. This woman's right. You don't see other situations that go on without disintegrating [unclear] information. It may be that they ought to go, but

it's just a question of how quickly that's done, and if you get the right fellow who—

Lodge: She said that she is the first—to me last night—that the type of [unclear] we had in Iraq, in 1958.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: Remember when we killed Nuri al-Said, and all that? Well, I've got to—and by the way, I want to thank you for the wonderful help and support I've had here in the government—this office...

[38 seconds classified]

Kennedy: ...because we don't want to make with them—it's a great temptation to leave the press to do what we did with Chiang. You know, by the—Chiang Kaishek was so pasted by American reporters, and American public opinion was formed, that it was hopeless—well, maybe it was hopeless. But looking back on it, I think probably we would think that we probably could have, as bad as it was, it would have been much better off if we had done something about it. I assume the situation would be hopeless, but I—and I am also conscious of the fact that the American press, and our government, wherever they are on this, including here, and I just want to be sure that there is somebody who would be better than this fellow [Diem]. After all, he has sustained himself against the French, and essentially against us, but that's not so much, but against the French, and then against the Vietcong, and did it for ten years. That's a pretty good record. So I don't like to see us just to decide that [unclear] would be better just because we're getting heat from the press. I don't know enough about it, but I do remember that all our people always seem to get pasted—

Lodge: That's right.

Kennedy: —Thailand, Chiang, got it in South Korea—everybody we're for always is a son of a bitch.

Lodge: That's right.

Kennedy: So I think that you have to make an independent judgment of it.

Lodge: You've got the good about Diem. He's very courageous.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: Physically courageous. He's got a lot of stamina. And he has never said "you do this for me or I'll go over to the communists."

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: He's never ever done that. Now there aren't too many men like that in the Far East—maybe there are some others. And if so, then it's my job to try to find them. There aren't too many men that are like that. And that's what Harriman thinks. Rusk has got to the point where he says anybody other than Diem.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: Well, I think the vice president is worse than Diem, from what I understand.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: Tho—He's worse. There are some men—there's a labor leader that George [Cabot Lodge] knows—my son George knows—[unclear], who's the head of the rice growers union, who is—everybody says is a top fellow, superior—that kind of a fellow. But you can be a top fellow and still not be—

Kennedy: [Unclear] to do—

Lodge: —but politically—what it takes, you know.

Kennedy: He has, I say, going to that, I just, you know, everybody always—everybody gets attacked—you remember all that stuff about Greece at the end of the war? You know, when the communists really almost took over Greece, you know?

Lodge: Yeah.

Kennedy: And all that was written in the American press was the fascist nature of the Greek government. So I don't think there's any doubt that the press are instinctively—a lot of them are liberal, and some very—and they harry against any authoritarian regime they [unclear]. Then there's the—so I don't know—I've never—I assume that probably this fellow's [Diem's] in an impossible situation to save, but I just want to be sure we're not getting our policy made for us by a couple of smart, young reporters.

Lodge: Of course, their viewpoint at the time—they're looking at a story—they're looking at something sensational. And they're not—they don't realize that an authoritarian government is what the people have always had in most parts of the world.

Kennedy: That they have to have, it's just that there really isn't anybody else to run it—just this bitch [Madame Nhu], of course. She's made it—she's made it—well, as I say, I think we have to leave it almost completely in your hands and your judgment. I don't know whether we'd be better off—whether the alternative would be better.

Maybe it will be. If so, then we have to move in that direction. But I think I'd take a good look at it before I come to that conclusion.

Lodge: Yeah. Because if—

Kennedy: Nolting's always felt that Diem was better than anybody—

Lodge: Yeah.

Kennedy: —than we can get. Now everybody says Diem was—says that Nolting was soft and Diem was [unclear]. That maybe, however, been the right policy—

Lodge: It very well may have.

Kennedy: —two years ago, everybody was saying we're all through out there in six months. And you know, then we're—[unclear] coming out that we'd have to put American troops in there, but Nolting said no, he thought it would be alright. So I just figure that we don't want to get carried away until you've had a good chance to look at it.

Lodge: Well—

Kennedy: OK?

Lodge: —that's very helpful. That's very helpful. I'll certainly give it my very best. I—

Kennedy: How does your wife like going out there? It's genuinely the most interesting assignment that there is.

Lodge: Oh, it's the most interesting assignment in the government, I think.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: Well, she's all for it. When you—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —very kindly offered it to me, I went and asked her, and she said yes, we've got to do it.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: She's coming out with me on Saturday.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: And she's looking forward to it very much. And I think there's a lot she can do.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: We have a big American community there. And some of them, I think, are a little bit scared—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —afraid of diseases and being shot at. So I think there's a lot she can do to pull the American community together, which I'm planning to do.

Kennedy: When will you get there?

Lodge: Well, I'm taking about a week, because I'm going to—

Kennedy: Go to Hawaii?

Lodge: I'm going to Hawaii and get briefed by Admiral Felt. And then they want me to—the foreign minister of Japan wanted me to call on Tokyo, so I'm going to do that, and then Dean Rusk wanted me to get the briefing by the consulate general in Hong Kong on the situation in communist China—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —so I won't get there for a little over a week.

Kennedy: Right.

Lodge: And I've allowed to do that because there's a sleep adjustment—it's a twelve-hour difference in time—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —and the day I arrive is the—the first day in a thing like this is a very big day—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —and all the people that are trying to embarrass you are out in full force. I don't want—I want to feel fairly good.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: You know the sleep business—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —I want to feel fresh when I get there so that when they talk about me I can throw a few back! [laughs]

Kennedy: No, that sounds fine.

Lodge: I'm—I'd like to see this PL 480 aid that's distributed through voluntary charitable organizations distributed through Buddhists—some Buddhist organizations. They run orphanages and refugee camps and all that sort of—

Kennedy: Do we give them any now?

Lodge: No.

Kennedy: Just American—

Lodge: American Catholics, Mennonites, and [unclear]. And I think it would give me a—give us some leverage. If we can do it, it'll make us popular with the Buddhists. If the government objects that it's an interference in internal affairs, I can ask Diem to ask the Buddhists to name somebody and make him do something for us, so that we won't give it to him.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: But I'm going to get some leverage with this man [Diem]. I think he thinks he's got us on the hook too much. So I wanted to tell you about that. And then I'd like to see a map, which I've never seen—has never been made—black and white map, no colors—showing the area of the Vietcong domination two years ago and the areas today—a sort of map, the kind I used to get made when I was at the UN. It could be printed in any ordinary newspaper, and you can see the progress.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: I think that would be helpful here and helpful there, too. I think the public relations haven't been as good as the results justify.

Kennedy: I noticed the way that fellow [Halberstam] in the *Times* wrote it this morning about—he talked about the last year, not the last two months, but the war in the Delta has been going bad for the last year. Did you read the story this morning?

Lodge: Yes.

Kennedy: I don't—that was a more ominous report than the ones we've been getting from Harkins. Harkins, he's done an outstanding job, but this story seemed to paint a pretty black picture in the Delta.

Lodge: Well, if—if this Buddhist thing keeps on, it's bound to get in the army eventually.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: And that's too bad. That's too bad. Oh, Harkins is a very superior officer, and I'm glad that they plan to keep him on after his term expires in January, I think. It would be—I would be very unhappy if he would leave then.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: He is very, very good. Well, I think those are the—I'm planning more cultural contacts. They have a great respect for the culture and learning in that country, and I'm going to try to get some books to the university and get—try to develop that side of things a little bit. But those are about the principle—

Kennedy: What about the food thing? Is there any problem about arranging that? Can we do that alright?

Lodge: I've been in touch with AID, and they've told me how to do it. I've made the PL memorandum to Hilsman. Harriman thought I didn't even need to bother Rusk with it.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: And Hilsman seemed to think he could handle it alright.

Kennedy: Right. Right.

Lodge: That gives us something to do.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah. I was asking Forrestal—see, I asked to get a report of the whole Buddhist thing, how much of it is political, and how much religious, and how much is subversive. How do you judge it?

Lodge: I think it's only partly religious. Buddhism isn't a religion that makes great demands. It isn't a religion that has a lot of discipline—a little bit like Episcopalians. [laughs]

Kennedy: Yeah. [laughs]

Lodge: You know, people—they want to have a funeral, and they want to have a wedding, and the man will go sometimes with his wife to keep her happy, and be respectful. [laughs]

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: Well, then why do they feel they can go and try to chop their hands off in front of the altar? I think they have a sense of injustice, which is always possible with many of these people. I think they have a feeling that they're discriminated against. I don't think there's been persecution. I don't think they've persecuted the Buddhists. I think it's just a natural thing to give the posts to the best educated people, who were the people educated in France—

Kennedy: That's right.

Lodge: —who naturally happen to be Christians!

Kennedy: That's right. I—

Lodge: I think it's come along that way. And then there was complete stupidity in Hue—on the 8th of May. But that can happen anywhere.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: And, then there was a comedy of errors, because they flew the Vatican flag, and then Diem said pull down the Vatican flag and put up the Vietnam flag. And then they thought of it—a month later they put up the Buddhist flag, and then, police remembering that Diem had ordered the Vatican flag pulled down told them to pull down the Buddhist flag and then got stupid and shot into the crowd and, as a matter of fact, killed two Catholics in the crowd. I think the religious angle is very slight. Very slight.

Kennedy: It's unfortunate that it's a Catholic-Buddhist fight—

Lodge: And so, of course, the press has mentioned that all the time.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: Because the fact that these people are Catholics is killing [unclear].

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: The heart of the matter is that they've established a police state, and that they're interfering with the liberties of people. And that you have resentments born of that.

Kennedy: Right. Yeah, right.

Lodge: I think that's what it is. And that's a damn [unclear] serious. That is the bottom of the whole thing. They're completely—she says to me that—she's a very impressive person. They're completely cut off from everything. It's very hard to get in to the palace. The only people that get in are people that tell them what they

want to hear. They don't have the slightest idea what's going on in the country. And, if that's true, it's very serious. And the—[Ngo Dinh] Can, the brother who governs the central province, nobody ever sees him. He's locked up in his place. And the bishop is living in the 12th century, and—

Kennedy: Is that a brother, is he—?

Lodge: He's another brother.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: The bishop is a brother, the governor of central province is a brother, the principal advisor is a brother, and the ambassador to London and Paris is a brother.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: But, as you say, they are strong anti-communists!

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: And I'd hate to let go with my claws and let the whole [unclear]—

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: But if they all get assassinated then you're going to have to—

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: And then you'd really have to be on top of it all.

Kennedy: And what about Madame Nhu? Is she a lesbian, or what? She seems awfully masculine.

Lodge: Well, I think she probably is.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: And I think she also was a very promiscuous [unclear] of information, too.

Kennedy: Yeah. And she's had this terrific moral reaction, is that it?

Lodge: Yes. She's closed up all the dance halls for the American soldiers.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: Besides, it was—I think that was [unclear]. I'm going to try to give the USO—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —a little encouragement out there.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: Because if you can't go to the nightclub in town—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —you've got to do something. Yeah, she did all that. She has this act as a Puritan. That's what she's—

Kennedy: [Unclear]? [laughs]

Lodge: [laughs]

Kennedy: [Unclear] of him.

Lodge: [Unclear] [laughs]

Kennedy: That's a dangerous combination, isn't it? [laughs]

Lodge: [Unclear] [laughs]

Kennedy: [laughs]

Lodge: That's very well put. Let's see, I told you about everything that happened in my night. If I can ever get him—if they ever get back on a normal track, I'd like him to turn into a real political leader and—

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: —give the country a sense of national purpose. And when we reclaim this land from the communists, make it possible for the farmer to have a good living. Here is a country where 80 percent of the people are farmers, and yet the policy is adapted to the city dweller. And the farmer rarely gets the price that he ought to get for his rice and all those things. And as the military makes its gains, the farmer ought to be doing better because then he can talk to the military. You give him intelligence and then he'll be feeling good.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: They don't do anything like that because Saigon is all cut off from the farmer and for generations the tradition is that the capital tells the village what to do but

never anything from the village to the capital. I'd like to do what they did in the Philippines and have a suggestion system whereby anybody in any of these villages can send a message to Saigon and you have a competent man with a staff to process the messages and throw away all the nut ones and do something about the meritorious ones.

Kennedy: Yeah.

Lodge: In the Philippines with the Huk thing, that had a great effect on making [Ramon] Magsaysay popular and then making the army popular. And then have the army—

Kennedy: Anybody can send a message to him?

Lodge: Yes. Magsaysay arranged—anybody in the Philippines could send a message to him. Of course, he never saw them, but he had a very competent man with a very competent staff, who really followed through on the meritorious ones.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: And, it had a—according to General Lansdale, who you know—

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: —really, he's a valuable advisor—that created a great psychology. Then they arranged to take care of the farmers that got wounded—take care of them in army hospitals. And then farmers that had litigation about their land, they take the judge advocates out of the army and they litigate them for them. And it all makes the army popular.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: Those are all psychological things. I'd like to give him a little lesson on how to be a politician.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: You could do better than I could! [laughs]

Kennedy: [laughs]

Lodge: [laughs] But I could do better than they could, but some of the people would—

Kennedy: Yes, they can. What about [unclear]? He's a pretty good press man they all tell me.

Lodge: They tell me—[unclear] is the press man, and then the head of the U.S.I.A. is the former Time-Life man—John Mecklin.

Kennedy: Yeah, I hear—

Lodge: In fact, I'm told the U.S. government has put its first team out there, and that's very attractive.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: The present head of the economic commission is apparently very good. And—I think there are no eight balls at all. They're all very good.

Kennedy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lodge: And, of course, if somebody is a blabber mouth—somebody is not satisfactory, I have the authority to—

Kennedy: Yeah. Send them back.

Lodge: —send them back. So that's that. I'd like to have your photograph, Mr. President.

Kennedy: Yeah, good. Alright, when are you going to leave?

Lodge: I am leaving on Saturday. I am leaving here right now to go to New York. I have some appointments in New York, as well as the head of the Associated Press.

[22:06.510]

[Photographs taken]

[As conversation breaks up, remainder of conversation turns to politics and prospective 1964 Republican candidates while their voices become more and more distant.]



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