

Mandela, Nelson (b. 1918)

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Nelson Mandela has become the icon of South Africa's successful transition to a political democracy. A leading figure in the African National Congress (ANC), imprisoned for a quarter of a century on Robben Island, and the first president of a democratic South Africa beginning in 1994, Mandela has become the symbol and its lodestar of the struggle against apartheid.

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born in 1918 in the small village of Mvezo in Thembuland to the local chief, Gadla Henry Mphakanyiswa, and his third wife, Nonqaphi Nosekeni Nkedama. The kingdom had been annexed by the British within living memory, 40 years earlier, after a century of struggle to defend the land against British settlers. The child was named Rolihlala – “pulling the branch of a tree,” a metaphor for disturbing the established order. The name was significant; Gadla lost his position and the government stipend that went with it when he refused to account to the local British magistrate for his ruling in a dispute in Mvezo over cattle. He was pointedly demonstrating that his accountability lay not with the colonial administration but elsewhere – according to an African maxim, “a chief is a chief by the people.”

The family was obliged to leave Mvezo. They moved to the district of Qunu, the home of Rolihlahla's mother. The boy took on herding duties at a young age: cattle were central to the economy of the homestead, and children were active contributors. During the long hours in the *veld*, the boys whiled away their time with stick-fighting. In these contests of strength, endurance, dexterity, and tactical sense, Mandela recalled, years later, that he absorbed values vital to the resolution of the struggles that lay ahead. “I learned that to humiliate another person is to make him suffer an unnecessarily cruel fate. Even as a boy, I defeated my opponents without dishonoring them.”

Nosekeni, his mother, was a Christian, and she and her husband agreed that their children should attend the local Methodist school, a wattle-and-daub hut. It was there that the child was given a new name, and a colonial identity. The boy's teacher, Miss Mdingane, selected



After 50 years of struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and nearly 20 years in prison for struggling to end racial oppression, Nelson Mandela was elected President of South Africa in 1994, a year after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Here he is pictured with F.W. de Klerk saluting the crowds in Pretoria on his inauguration day. Photo © Juda Ngwenya / Reuters

for him an upright English name, and so the child came to be known as Nelson, after the great British naval hero.

Within a few years, Gadla died of tuberculosis. He had been a valued counselor to the regent Jogintaba of the Thembu, and after his death the regent adopted his mentor's youngest son, Rolihlahla. The child had to leave his mother and his extended family and live at the “Great Place” – the royal court. This also left a profound imprint: looking back, while acknowledging its gender exclusiveness, Mandela remembered the regent's council meetings as a place where “everyone was heard: chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer . . . democracy in its purest form.” He was struck by the councilors' “freedom to criticize the regent” – “wise men who retained the knowledge of tribal history and custom” – and by the regent's duty to listen carefully, not speaking until the end, summing up what had been said, and suggesting a consensus for all the diverse opinions. The regent became for Mandela an exemplar – a man of insight,

2 *Mandela, Nelson (b. 1918)*

dignity, integrity, and compassion, committed to genuine consensus, yet ultimately not afraid to lead.

Mandela was sent to a Methodist missionary school, Clarkebury, as befitted a child of distinguished lineage, together with the son of the regent, Justice. It was here he first encountered whites, and was introduced to Christianity and western education. In later years, he was to put the accouterments of the ruling class to good use in the service of his people. Like so many other young men, Mandela had to master literature and math, and tussle with an alien moral code imposed by missionary teachers. In the process, he was learning to negotiate the relationship between tradition and modernity. To please his benefactor, he worked conscientiously and made good progress at school, graduating to an even more prestigious school, Healdtown. Here too, while appreciating the skills that he learned and the widening of his world beyond Thembuland, he was later to believe that his education had “often required subservience” and a negation of his own traditions.

Like Oliver Tambo – the ANC leader who would become his close friend and comrade – Mandela studied at the black Fort Hare University. His social and intellectual horizons rapidly expanded. He met young black people from many parts of South and Southern Africa, and began to develop an awareness of black society beyond the traditional and ethnic horizons of his youth. He began to rethink the regent’s plan for him to become a counselor to King Sabata, at the time still a child. Elected as a student leader, he clashed openly with authority. In his final year, he decided along with his peers to boycott university procedures in protest against the poor food meted out in the residences. The authorities gave him an ultimatum to abide by the rules or leave.

He left, and returned home. The regent was outraged and decided that the young men needed to grow up, arranging marriages for both Justice and Nelson. But the two men had absorbed the western idea of having control over one’s individual fate. They helped themselves to one of the regent’s cows, sold it, and with the proceeds made their way to Johannesburg – the city of gold and destination.

Johannesburg in the 1940s was a symbol of modernity, menacing traffic, and high-rise parallel buildings. It was an urban life that

challenged the manhood and dignity of young blacks, whether educated or laborers. Retracing the footsteps of the two newcomers to the city, a hidden history emerges – the third-class train ride and the segregated railway station; the mine compound, each room housing scores of black laborers in cement barracks while white miners enjoyed family homes; downtown black Johannesburg and the bustling Diagonal Street of many colors, scents, and sounds; the mines and their compounds, where he and Justice first found work; crowded black townships with their dirt roads, modest homes, and backyard shacks. There was no escaping the association of technological advancement with white culture yet the landscape announced a white-dominated and bigoted society, racially unequal in economic and social conditions. The message was clear: black men and women were in town simply to serve the needs of the white population. Whether laborer, teacher, court interpreter, or nurse, the wages of black people scarcely varied – they were one-tenth or less of what most white workers and employees earned.

Into this world Mandela had thrown his lot, for Justice was persuaded to return home and face his destiny. He eventually found a tiny room in Alexandra Township, some 10 kilometers from the city center. With very little money, he would walk there and back. He had met an impressive estate agent, Walter Sisulu, a man without much formal education but far ahead of the university-educated tiny elite in both life experience and maturity. It was Sisulu who introduced Mandela to a widening circle of remarkable people managing to rise above the system of racial oppression, and thinking about social change and how best to achieve it for black communities. One of these was Oliver Tambo, a mathematics and physics master at the prestigious St. Peter’s College in Johannesburg, also expelled from Fort Hare on a point of principle during his year of training for a teachers’ diploma. Mandela also met the president of the ANC, the renowned Dr. Xuma (who had also attended Clarkebury).

With Sisulu, Tambo, and others, Mandela began to seriously discuss how the ANC – a respected movement founded in 1912 to unite and advance all African ethnic groups – could again take up the leadership of the struggle. The three friends – along with the brilliant and fiery articulated clerk and fellow Fort Hare graduate

A. P. Mda and Anton Lembede – started the Youth League as a “ginger group” to stimulate the almost moribund ANC. The group attended the ANC Congress in 1944 and formed the ANC’s Youth League. Its guiding ideology was then resolute Africanism, rejecting “exotic revolutionary doctrines” like Marxism (a European import whose basic notion of class struggle did not, they agreed, address race struggles and was therefore irrelevant). They were, however, interested in learning from the strategies and tactics of other organizations, including strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience, and developed a Programme of Action that advocated a shift away from the ANC’s stress on petitions to the authorities to mass-based protest campaigns and actions.

The racially exclusive elections of 1948 heralded the victory by a slim majority of the National Party on a platform of apartheid. Building on the policies of the earlier colonial era, the apartheid regime launched a barrage of discriminatory new legislation tightening up segregation and enforcing the racial order. The internal passport system, or pass laws controlling the movement of black labor, was tightened; black workers were officially excluded from skilled jobs, oscillating migrant labor was encouraged (with families left in the rural areas); and in the city too, other daily hardships of blacks increased dramatically.

Encouraged and assisted by Sisulu, Mandela (studying at the white University of the Witwatersrand) found work as a legal clerk for a sympathetic lawyer, Lazar Sidelsky. Later he was articulated, and eventually qualified as an attorney. His intention was to use his legal training as a weapon to defend his people. He set up a law firm and was joined by Tambo, who had in the meantime also qualified as an attorney. From the start, their chambers were crowded with men and women in deep trouble, desperately seeking help from black lawyers who, it seemed, were better able to understand their predicament – facing evictions as a result of racial zoning, arrest under the pass laws (later extended to African women), endless petty discrimination, school segregation, and arrest for any number of regulations while they were going about their daily business. Convicted offenders faced the prospect of being sent to work under harsh conditions on white-owned farms. Soon, the partners had to engage clerks to assist them, and their courtroom battles

often included instances of blatant racism by the magistrates against the attorneys themselves.

In the meantime, the ANC had adopted the Youth League’s Programme of Action in 1949. The ANC embarked on a Defiance Campaign in 1952, in collaboration with members of the Indian Congress such as Maulvi Cachalia, Nana Sita, and Dr. G. M. Naicker. The campaign was a turning point in many ways. For the first time, the ANC worked in a multiracial alliance, and Mandela and Tambo were impressed with the non-racial, personal commitment displayed by communists. These Youth League leaders were now finding themselves in more responsible, national positions and exposed to a wider world. Sisulu had been elected national secretary of the ANC, Tambo was the Youth League vice-president, while Mandela replaced the banned J. B. Marks as provincial president of the ANC in the old Transvaal and was also national president of the Youth League.

Mandela became “volunteer-in-chief” in the Defiance Campaign, traveling across the country urging people to defy “Six Unjust Laws”: separate and unequal public amenities, pass laws, disenfranchisement, and the Bantu Authorities Act that divided the country into tribal enclaves and left 87 percent of the land under white control. “Defiers” joined up and, moving in groups, embarked on acts of civil disobedience: they sat on whites-only park benches and entered stations or post offices through the whites-only entrances; white defiers walked into black townships; thousands were arrested, clogging up the prisons.

The apartheid government reacted with increasing repression. Following a riot, 20 African and Indian leaders, including Mandela, were arrested and convicted under the Suppression of Communism Act, and sentenced to nine months’ hard labor. This was followed by a barrage of banning orders – the “banned” were forbidden to attend “social gatherings” (defined as more than two people), make speeches, or be members of a political party. “I was made by the law a criminal,” commented Mandela, “not because of what I had done, but because of what I stood for, because of what I thought, because of my conscience.” His banning order forced him to withdraw overtly from the ANC, but he continued behind the scenes to participate in the planning of the campaigns that followed. The regime meanwhile intensified its program of implementing its apartheid design. In 1953 a Bantu

4 *Mandela, Nelson (b. 1918)*

Education Bill was introduced and eventually passed. Its purpose was to provide separate and inferior schools and curricula in the townships for black children, forbidding the churches or independent organizations to participate in black education.

What emerged was the Freedom Charter, a document which was to define the identity of the ANC. In his trial in 1962, Mandela called it “the most important political document published by the ANC. . . . It declares that South Africa belongs to all who live in it and that only a democratic state based on the will of the people can secure to all their birthright.” The Freedom Charter was formally adopted after it was presented to the Congress of the People in 1955 in Kliptown, Soweto. The ANC now led a multiclass and multiracial alliance consisting of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the South African Indian Congress, the Colored People’s Congress, and the small white Congress of Democrats – the “Congress Alliance.”

In December 1956, Mandela, like Tambo, Sisulu, and communist leader Joe Slovo, was one of 156 men and women arrested and charged with high treason. He remained one of the accused after charges were withdrawn against 97 of the accused one year later. The treason trial dragged on until 1961, when all were acquitted. By then, momentous events had occurred. Sixty-seven people were shot outside the Sharpeville police station during a peaceful protest organized by a new breakaway movement opposed to the Freedom Charter – the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). Led by Robert Sobukwe, the PAC was hostile to communists, whites, and Indians and took its stand on the Africanism of the early Youth League. The massacre – followed by a second at Langa – resulted in the banning of the ANC and PAC, and the declaration of a state of emergency. Thousands of opponents were locked up without trial for five months, including Mandela. When they were released, most were banned or banished to remote rural areas, or served with house arrests.

The ANC was now an underground organization. Tambo was sent into exile to become the ANC’s international diplomat, while Mandela took up the baton internally. It was he who initiated a call for an “All-in African Conference.” The aim was to unite the oppressed and find a way forward. In March 1961, an audience of 1,400 people gathered in a small township in

Pietermaritzburg, Natal. Giving the security police the slip, Mandela made a surprise appearance. After his speech to the assembly, he proposed a resolution to call for a national convention of all adult men and women, irrespective of race, color, or creed. A National Action Council was formed, and Mandela was elected its secretary.

In this capacity, Mandela called for a three-day stayaway at the end of May, to coincide with the white Republic Day celebrations. He had developed masterful public relations – he would telephone editors of the white newspapers to make public announcements from call boxes. Jittery, the government responded by mobilizing citizen forces and commando units in a huge military operation. Police patrolled the township streets and helicopters hovered above. Black workers were warned that if they stayed away from work they would be fired and forced out of the towns. The white newspapers, the Liberal Party, and the PAC opposed the stayaway.

The general strike was by no means a failure: in Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth (the most politicized cities of South Africa) the majority of workers responded to the call; however, the ANC and the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) leadership came to a consensus that any further strikes would inevitably lead to massive clampdowns and violence. A decision was taken to opt for armed struggle. The proposal was nothing new, and had been discussed in 1958 as a possible option when peaceful tactics were exhausted.

At its inception, the newly formed *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (the “Spear of the Nation,” or MK) abjured the taking of life and opted for symbolic targets – the sabotage of sites and equipment accompanied by a call for economic sanctions. In short, MK was conceived as a weapon of “armed propaganda.” It was multiracial in composition, and its leaders included senior ANC and SACP figures. On December 16, 1961, Mandela, as supreme commander of MK, publicly announced its formation. “One of the lessons I learned from the failed Western Areas anti-removal campaign was that it is the oppressor who defines the nature of the struggle; in the end, we would have no alternative but to resort to armed struggle.”

Mandela was fast becoming an international figure. The BBC was excited to be able to report a telephone conversation with the elusive “Black Pimpernel.” In 1961, Mandela gave his first

television interview to ITN – it was to be his last for 30 years. Early in 1962, Mandela left South Africa illegally. His purpose was to raise support for MK amongst the newly independent African states, and explain to the external wing of the ANC the decision to take up arms. With Tambo, he toured African countries and received some military training. Shortly after his return, on his way home after reporting to Chief Luthuli, president of the ANC and 1961 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Mandela was apprehended and put on trial. He was charged with incitement and leaving the country illegally.

On the first day of the trial, he stunned the court and the audience by exchanging his customary three-piece suits for a traditional leopard-skin *kaross*. “I was a black African walking into a white man’s court. I was literally carrying on my back the history, culture and heritage of my people. That day, I felt myself to be the embodiment of African nationalism.” In court, his wife Winnie Madikizela Mandela and friend Albertina Sisulu also arrived wearing traditional dress. It was a clear statement of the nationalist nature of the accused’s revolutionary intent. At the start of the trial, Mandela, conducting his own defense, began by challenging the right of a white magistrate and prosecutor to judge the right of a black man to resist racial oppression and exploitation. At the end of the trial, found guilty of the charges, Mandela gave what was supposed to be a plea in mitigation but amounted to a political testament. In particular, he recalled, with the pain and nostalgia of a world that had been cruelly smashed, the functioning homestead economics, the importance of humanism (*ubuntu*) in social relations, the perceived collective values and the participatory democracy of precolonial South African societies. He was given the heaviest sentence yet for a political offense – five years’ hard labor without parole.

Less than two years later, the remaining underground leadership of MK was uncovered in a hideout on a small farm outside Johannesburg. The 1963 arrests netted most of the MK high command, and Mandela was among those charged with 222 acts of sabotage and conspiracy to facilitate a violent revolution. The charge carried with it a death sentence and reverberated worldwide. Mandela’s statement, when it came, was directed as much to South Africans and the international community as to the court. In the context of a world deeply embroiled in the

Cold War, Mandela explained why the ANC, a national organization, had so readily worked in alliance with communists. At the end of his four-hour testimony, he put down his papers and faced the judge. He spoke from memory:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

The accused were surprised and delighted to receive a sentence not of death, but rather life with no parole. The next morning, all (except Denis Goldberg, the only remaining white accused, who was incarcerated in Pretoria) were flown to Robben Island to begin their sentence. Desmond Tutu was to write that “People might think that twenty-seven years in goal was an utter waste, but I beg to differ. That time was actually crucial in the evolution of a moral giant.” Mandela would spend a further quarter of a century in prison. Fortunate not to be separated, the Rivonia leaders formed a group and began the long process of negotiating with their jailers the terms of life in prison. Their strategy combined an uncompromising insistence on dignity with a willingness to respect their jailers as human beings. Their consistent and focused resistance eventually paid off: some of the more brutal warders were phased out, and the prisoners won small victories that made life more bearable and dignified. Mandela later recalled that his anger lasted for 14 years, which coincided with the most vicious years on Robben Island. After that, he began to reflect and develop a more creative, problem-solving approach.

The leadership continued to build the ANC within South Africa as much as possible. They were also able to find ways of communicating (albeit unevenly) with the exile movement headed by Tambo. As the years went by, thousands more political prisoners joined them: they brought with them news of the escalating conflict and the increasing use of violence and torture to contain the liberation movements, and they were in turn exposed on the Island to the elder “statesmen” of the movement, men of increasingly legendary

6 *Mandela, Nelson (b. 1918)*

stature. After the Soweto uprising of 1976, militant young people began to arrive and challenged the quiet diplomacy of their parents' generation. As prisoners served their terms, they left with formal distance-learning qualifications, as well as in-house courses on political education. Many were released, only to take up the struggle again underground or in exile, where thousands of political refugees ended up in the ANC's camps.

The apartheid regime also recognized that Mandela was the indisputable ANC leader – in style, confidence, and shrewdness – and realized the political risk of his dying in prison. Following a brief stint in a hospital on the mainland, Mandela was not returned to Robben Island but sent to Pollsmoor Prison, outside Cape Town. It seemed clear to Mandela that this was a ploy to isolate him in the hopes of influencing him; however, a plan had slowly been developing in Mandela's mind: his years in prison gave him time to reflect on the fears and anxieties of the whites that helped underpin apartheid. In the mid-1980s, he decided to take upon himself the responsibility and the risk of opening communications with P. W. Botha, prime minister and president of South Africa. This would help open the negotiations that would eventually end apartheid.

Mandela overcame the suspicions of those militants who feared that in his long incarceration he had succumbed to "the enemy." Such qualms had to be seen in the context of escalation of resistance and violent reaction in the townships. However, Tambo – who managed to stay in contact with Mandela – ascertained Mandela's strategic thinking, and endorsed it as part of a multiple strategy that did not exclude armed propaganda, mass mobilization, international pressure, and other options. This allayed the fears of many ANC supporters. Finally, in February 1990, in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ANC, the PAC, and the SACP were unbanned.

A week later, Mandela was released. From his first speech as a free man, Mandela's message was clear: the new South Africa was to be democratic and inclusive of all races. This won over many doubters and he swiftly became an international icon, fêted internationally on his world tours. Yet the country continued to teeter on the edge of civil war. A "third force," aided by sections of the army and police, was apparently provoking violence, and Mandela accused then-president de Klerk of

failing to stop the massacres that were taking place in the townships. Negotiations took place, yet hovered on a knife-edge.

The crisis point came when the widely popular MK commander and secretary of the SACP, Chris Hani, was assassinated outside his home. It was Mandela's national appeal on television that prevented a bloody uprising, and a renewed determination to push for general elections. A year later, the Mandela-led ANC was able to pull off peaceful elections.

The ANC came to power with over a 60 percent majority. Only too aware of the tragic history of the lurch toward violence following independence in other African countries in the 1960s, the Mandela presidency was accompanied by careful reassurance to the white civil service that their jobs would be protected and that reconciliation would prevail. At the same time, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was appointed in an attempt to heal the traumas of the past. Amnesty was granted, provided that former perpetrators revealed the full truth. A surprising number of witnesses who bared their harrowing experiences to the world forgave their tormentors.

The achievement of the Mandela presidency, often through his personal charisma, was to mobilize many South Africans across class and color. His persuasion of big business to buy in to the new democracy through individual investments in schools, clinics, and other developmental and social projects, and his enthusiastic endorsement of the white-dominated Springbok rugby team during the 1995 World Cup, are but two examples. In 1996, South Africa's constitution was finally hammered out, a remarkably enlightened document that bore the influence of the Freedom Charter and was a testament to the consensus skills of Mandela and the ANC tradition.

With regard to the economy, the Mandela government began with a Reconstruction and Development Policy (RDP), largely crafted by the ANC's alliance partner, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and influenced by Keynesian ideas. Every government department was to cooperate with a special RDP Ministry to promote redress, economic transformation, and delivery of services. Indeed, the first term of the ANC government delivered 700,000 houses, clean water to millions, clinics, schools, and recreational facilities.

But with the growing grip of neoliberalism in

the post-Cold War world, and feeling the generational gap in his understanding of contemporary complexities, Mandela was persuaded by younger economists to stress international investment and liberalization: the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) policy was introduced, and Mandela championed it in the face of trade union opposition. However, GEAR's "trickle-down" approach and privatization policies arguably exacerbated unemployment and the pressures on working-class blacks. Some have also commented that the Mandela presidency failed to recognize and respond adequately to the growing threat of HIV and AIDS. Amongst blacks, too, there was an increasing feeling that whites had got off too lightly, although the rising crime rate, both in white middle-class suburbs and in the black townships, took their toll.

In 1997 Mandela announced his decision to retire after only one term of office as president of South Africa. This set a new example in the history of liberation leaders in Africa. In his farewell to the ANC Congress, he reaffirmed his commitment to democracy, and promised to speak out as a loyal and ordinary member of the ANC. He was replaced by Thabo Mbeki in 1999, who continued the GEAR policy, stressed "Black Economic Empowerment" to build a black middle class, and centralized state power. Mandela kept his promise and became an outspoken moral symbol. He continued to work for broad, rather than narrow, ownership of South Africa's negotiated revolution; through his Children's Fund he continued to sensitize society to the needs of children and also spoke up against the silence of key ANC figures regarding the scourge of HIV and AIDS. Internationally too, he was free to speak his mind, and was scathing of President Bush when the US invaded Iraq in 2003.

Mandela became an international icon and inspiration in his lifetime. To what extent did he and the ANC achieve a revolution? Mandela himself admitted, on his release, that liberation had come in a drastically circumscribed new world order: "We are living in a world in which the project of revolutionary transformation has become a much more difficult one." His project focused not so much on the socialist class struggle that challenged many revolutionaries of the

twentieth century, but on a lifelong commitment to nation-building. During his political journey, Mandela's concept of "the nation" had grown: it had traversed Thembuland, moved beyond the vision of the unity of Africans, beyond all the oppressed, beyond the multiracial democrats, to the vision of a nation of all South Africans in all their diversity. Syncretizing the values and cultures to which he was exposed, and drawing from them what was most relevant for his purpose, with the support of the ANC leadership and millions in the liberation movement, he was able to turn an aggressively racial regime into an open democracy. With the employment of his native *ubuntu*, he was able to minimize violence. Furthermore, freedom for South Africa also released the entire Southern African region from the grip of the apartheid regime.

Walter Sisulu, Mandela's close comrade and mentor, called the ANC's victory in South Africa's first democratic elections the "greatest" revolution of the twentieth century, because its democracy was inclusive and rehabilitative rather than punitive. Mandela's humanist response to racism, the scourge of the twentieth century, liberated racists as well as the oppressed. Mandela was indeed a nationalist and a revolutionary. Above all, in the five years of his presidency, he showed the world an *African* example of how a political revolution might be achieved. But it is an incomplete revolution. The equally vital task of economic and social transformation has been left to the twenty-first century and to future generations to tackle.

SEE ALSO: Anti-Apartheid Movement, South Africa; Communist Party of South Africa, 1921–1950; COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions); Hani, Chris (1942–1993); Slovo, Joe (1926–1995); South Africa, African Nationalism and the ANC; Tambo, Oliver (1917–1993)

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