

Reinforcement in Diplomacy: More Effective than Coercion

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Editor's Notes

To paraphrase a relevant expression, *since we have sown the wind* (in the invasive international events that started in March 2003) *and so will reap the whirlwind*, we should know something about why, as well as something about what we can still do about it. This article can help us. It is an excerpt (pp. 276–287, the second half of Chapter 19; reprinted with permission) from the last chapter of Murray Sidman's book *Coercion and Its Fallout* (published in 2001 by Authors Cooperative of Boston, MA).

Recalling that *reinforcers* are stimulus events which strengthen behaviors that they follow, some behaviorologists refer to reinforcers *that are presented* as “added” reinforcers, and to reinforcers *that are withdrawn* as “subtracted” reinforcers, rather than use the more traditional terms “positive” and “negative” reinforcers. They find that this reduces the confusion that stems from the more general meaning of “positive” and “negative” as “good” and “bad.” However, since the author originally used the terms “positive” and “negative” reinforcers in his book, which first appeared in 1989, before this terminology change, his usage is unchanged in this excerpt. (For a more detailed discussion of the use of “added” and “subtracted” in place of “positive” and “negative,” see Ledoux, 2002.)—Ed.

Positive Reinforcement in Diplomacy

We on the sidelines know little about what actually goes on during diplomatic negotiations. Military and economic resources—potential reinforcers—are enlisted in the service of foreign policy through mysterious routes. The secrecy makes the diplomatic process hard to analyze. But there is no mystery about the results. By maintaining that war is a viable alternative to peace, standard diplomacy has spawned a system of intimidation, belligerence, and murderous aggression that functions to satisfy economic greed and lust for power.

Doves and Hawks

Because power, resources, and prestige are potent reinforcers, nations will probably always have to keep mili-

tary forces to forestall those who would take everything for themselves. “Hawks” advocate an increasingly aggressive posture, backed up by an irresistible military establishment. They argue that readiness to attack is self-protective and insist that only superior force can protect a nation against attack. “Doves,” who advocate international friendship, argue that threatened aggression generates counteraggression and insist that only disarmament will guarantee peace. The doves accuse the hawks of causing rather than preventing wars, and the hawks accuse the doves of unrealism, of just asking for self-destruction.

Certainly, no country can close its eyes to the possibility of attack by another and yet, the notion of superior force has itself become unrealistic; several nations now have enough nuclear explosives to destroy everyone. Is it really impractical to attempt to influence other nations noncoercively? The dove-and-hawk analogy has a curious twist. To be either kind of bird is equally natural and both have value, but doves appears to be survivors while hawks have become an endangered species.

Positive reinforcement, although it does not generate the enmity and counteraggression that comes in the wake of coercion, is nevertheless a contingency. It does not mean giving everything away for nothing. To be effective, positive reinforcers must be contingent on conduct and on the circumstances in which the conduct takes place. Although not coercive unless misuse transforms it into negative reinforcement, positive reinforcement is still behavioral control.

As we have seen, noncontingent giving is a form of control also, and can be destructive, generating behavior that is in nobody's best interest. Giving unconditionally is not the opposite of coercion. If parents give children everything they want regardless of how they act, the children will learn nothing useful to them, to their parents, or to society in general. One nation giving another everything it wants regardless of what it does will not get the recipient to function productively or peacefully in the world society. Noncontingent giving does not signify generosity. It produces its own destructive side effects.

On the other side, the avoidance paradox ([discussed in] Chapter 9) will prevent any coercive peace-keeping policy from succeeding completely; nobody can continue avoiding forever without receiving an occasional shock. Nuclear deterrence suffers a special disadvantage. When the inevitable shock comes, it will put an end to all human conduct. For that reason, a workable policy of mutual deterrence would require the restriction of armaments to less destructive weapons. Even with a peace that we maintain through mutual deterrence, nuclear disarmament would be necessary. An occasional armed conflict that does not wipe everyone out might then serve as the necessary reminder that keeps us avoiding more wars for a while.

Although we can probably never completely eliminate coercion from diplomatic policy, we cannot depend on it as the key peacekeeping mechanism. At most, we should keep it only for emergencies. As with families, a strong background of positive reinforcement can prevent an occasional use of force from producing devastating side effects. But again and again we have seen predominantly coercive control sooner or later producing the very counterviolence it was intended to prevent.

Hungry Generals

Military establishments preempt and use up a huge portion of the world's wealth, transforming it mainly into consumable supplies and weapons. Military organizations produce no food or shelter except for themselves, manufacture no goods for civilian use, provide health care only for their own, set up schools almost solely for education in the methods and technology of warfare, and establish research laboratories to discover new ways and to refine old ways of destroying potential adversaries. Only a minuscule portion of the military budget goes for the production of generally useful goods, technology, knowledge, or education. Most of the resources it appropriates go to waste. In wartime, human lives go down the drain. In peacetime, all weapons eventually burn, explode, or rot.

The world could reduce this wastage enormously by reducing the size of its military establishments. Wealthy and powerful nations might find it possible to scale down their forces safely by substituting positive reinforcement for the coercion that currently passes as diplomacy. International coercion, ipso facto, requires a military backup; retaliation is inevitable. We support coercive diplomacy by building up military forces, producing a still greater wastage of human and material resources. That cycle could be broken by replacing coercion with positive reinforcement as an instrument for maintaining civilized interactions among nations. Eliminating the need to sustain increasingly voracious military organizations would make a significantly larger pool of basic necessities and other resources available for all. To be sure, the mere availability of resources does not mean that they will be distributed fairly or in a spirit of international cooperation but it would at least open up a possibility. Contingent sharing would then lessen nations' need to resort to aggression and counteraggression.

Good Neighbors

Because the stakes are so high, preliminary experimentation is desirable, although diplomacy that is based on empirical data has hardly been a tradition anywhere. Might it make sense for the State Department to establish a research arm that included, among others, behavior analysts [the main name for natural scientists of behavior

before the independent-discipline movement of behaviorology] and experts in scientific methodology? These "foreign-service scientists" could initiate experimental studies, some perhaps asking whether our accumulating knowledge about behavior might be applied in the service of international peace.

The objectives of diplomacy are behavioral. Their aim is to influence the conduct of those who govern other nations. Instead of attempting to destroy an unfriendly government by supporting internal violence and terrorism—and in the process, turning old friends into enemies—might we shape cooperation and friendship? Shaping is a tried and true behavioral procedure. It involves finding some conduct that we consider desirable and making that conduct more likely by providing positive reinforcers. The first reinforceable conduct may be relatively unimportant but it will produce new forms of conduct, closer to what we eventually want. We can therefore gradually reinforce behavior that is more and more important to us. And by providing reinforcers—sometimes changes in our own behavior—that satisfy the needs of the other nation, the process becomes reciprocal; both nations gradually change the nature of their interactions with each other.

In international relationships, that means getting together to find areas of agreement. Disagreements are easy to identify, but we often overlook an unfriendly nation's needs that we could satisfy without endangering ourselves, and we fail to consider the likelihood that the other nation would be willing to go along with at least some small requirements of our own. A certain amount of mutual backscratching is always possible. In any negotiating session, the basic goal is to get the members of the other team to press certain levers; this can be accomplished by means of shaping programs that make positive reinforcements contingent on gradually closer approximations to the desired behavior. The shaping of behavior by means of positive reinforcement ought to be an integral curriculum element in the training of those entering the diplomatic service.

Contingent support, although certainly a technique of control, need not include the coercive elements of punishment and negative reinforcement [to be effective]. Positive reinforcement does not involve threats; support simply comes after desired conduct has occurred and at no other time. Undesirable conduct is not [and should not be] punished either by giving "shocks" or by taking away reinforcers that have already been earned. Control, yes, but not coercive control.

Starting with small and perhaps even unimportant areas of agreement, reinforcement strengthens desirable conduct and in the process makes new behavior appear for the first time. For example, providing medical supplies in return for minimal commercial airport privileges

would bring citizens and government officials of each country into constructive contact, would endow former enemies with the characteristics of positive reinforcers, and would establish bases for trust. Having made small progress, we might then see what other areas of cooperation could be found. Perhaps we could ask for the release of some political prisoners and on our part provide educational opportunities for civilian and military personnel.

In return for friendship and cooperation, we could do more than just remove coercive pressures. We could send farm machinery, help erect factories and train people to own and operate them, provide medical supplies and physicians to initiate public health programs, and establish schools that would help guarantee the country's self-reliance. Eventually, whatever help unfriendly governments might be receiving from each other, we could easily exceed it, and in the process obtain our own diplomatic objectives also. Each nation would give and each would receive; the leaders, the negotiators, and the general populace of both would thereby maintain their self-respect.

The reinforcement contingencies would not include the use of force. Even an anti-American military buildup would not bring destruction raining on their heads. Nor would the form or style of government have to be involved in the contingencies. Friendly actions would bring positive reinforcers, unfriendly actions would not. Instead of the aftermath of mistrust and hostility that the usual coercive practices would have produced, friendship and peace could prevail in the area. Although coercion might help topple an unfriendly government, it would leave equally serious problems in its wake. Positive reinforcement for cooperation might prove just as effective internationally as in the individual family, bringing with it a lessening of the tensions that coercive control only worsens.

Nobody can guarantee that things would work out this way. We possess a wealth of data from the laboratory and from applications of technology to other deep-rooted problems of human conduct. Could this knowledge really provide guides for effective action in the complex arena of international relations? In what looks from the outside like a morass of individual greed for power and wealth, would the desirable effects of positive reinforcement survive the alligators? Could we ensure that reinforcers sent to another country would reach the general population whose conduct we want to influence? Would reinforcers ever be delivered to the neediest in countries where the wealthy have concluded that their own survival depends on keeping most of the population poor and uneducated?

These and other foreseeable problems could be met in various ways, with none perhaps providing a complete solution. Still, positive reinforcement could show some of its desired effects. The same could be true of unforeseen

problems. *We will not know until we try.* Existing data suggest that the attempt would be worthwhile. The disastrous effects of the current control techniques in international diplomacy make the attempt necessary.

Even when coercive policies succeed in overthrowing hostile governments, we find ourselves allied with corruption and viciousness. Again and again, seemingly successful coercive pressures have left the United States supporting governments that maintain themselves through violence, suppression, destruction, and treachery. We therefore remain faced with many of the same problems we were attempting to eliminate—unfriendly governments and populations not only in one country but throughout a region. While our agents of coercion crow over the forceful elimination of a potentially dangerous military base, our opponents gain enormous credibility. Isolated from and mistrusted by our neighbors, we find our position of leadership ever more difficult to sustain. Coercive diplomacy turns us into an eventual loser. Positive reinforcement might not work, but it could do no worse.

Clearly, these suggestions involve oversimplifications. But science always oversimplifies at first. It then gradually adds the complexities that bring controlled experiments into contact with the uncontrolled conditions of the everyday world. Positive reinforcement is a powerful determinant of behavior. Applied on a large scale, its effects are likely to show up broadly even though other variables counteract its action in some localities. It would be worth looking into other opportunities to experiment with positive reinforcement as a replacement for coercion in international relations.

Citizens of the World

The collaborative production and sharing of scientific theory, data, technology, and other products of intellectual labor have established a world community of scholars. In general, the important reinforcers that maintain scholarly excellence are positive. The notion that scientific creativity can be motivated by punishment is so contrary to experience that it is laughable. Scientists find their work reinforcing when it proves useful to other scientists or adds to the general welfare. The well-publicized and prestigious prizes for scientific accomplishment are largely based on the criterion, "How useful have other scientists found the work?" International journals disseminate the results of experimental and theoretical inquiry regardless of the country where the work was done. Scientists and other scholars travel extensively to all parts of the world both to teach and to learn. As a result of these positive interactions, most scientists find the thought of engaging even in a "limited" war against their scientific peers abhorrent.

In the arts, too, reinforcement is positive, contingent on the beauty and originality of the artist's creations—

paintings, music, sculptures, novels, dramas, essays, or performances. Although some artists (and some scientists, too) may lead hard lives, the principal reinforcement for artistic productivity lies not in the negative reinforcement of escape from starvation in the traditional garret but in the effect the work produces on an audience. Like the audience for science, the audience for the arts is international. Artists, too, travel extensively to all parts of the world, teaching, learning, and entertaining. The international artistic community, like the scientific, finds the very thought of war hateful.

Here are two large international groups, artists and scientists, for whom peaceful interactions based on mutual positive reinforcement has become a way of life. Positive reinforcement has been establishing positive relationships among scientists, among other scholars, among artists, and between these producers of knowledge and beauty and their students and audiences all over the world. This worldwide goodwill and cooperation have come about not because of but in spite of standard diplomacy. Indeed, diplomats and their political supporters often regard scientists and artists with suspicion because of their friendly interactions with citizens of potentially hostile nations.

The Peace Corps has never been evaluated for its success in establishing and maintaining international goodwill toward the United States. Many informal testimonials suggest that it has been enormously effective in counteracting the divisions that official coercive diplomacy creates. Nevertheless, this country's support for the Peace Corps grows shakier all the time.

Another positive mechanism for encouraging international cooperation, the Fulbright Scholar Program—maintained by the United States Congress outside the usual diplomatic channels (and, for that reason, subject to steady destructive pressures from State Department officials)—is a small experiment that has been going on for years, but we have not stopped to analyze it and learn from it. Fulbright Fellowships, granted as positive reinforcers for accomplishment, have significantly increased international goodwill in return for a relatively small financial investment.

Why not enlarge the scope of these experiments, extending the positive reinforcement model that has worked for international technology, scholarship, and art to all areas of human activity? When problems and conflicts of interest do arise, individuals with a history of reciprocal positive reinforcement are more likely to insist that their governments work out constructive and not destructive solutions. When those at the negotiating table have no positive bonds, they just make demands. When their citizens have already established cooperative and friendly interactions, it is more natural to propose solutions. Governments will find it difficult to threaten or to

make war if their citizens, even their soldiers, have become friends.

To foster this aim of creating bonds among individuals, could we not establish international institutes, devoted to research, teaching, and the application of knowledge and technology in areas characterized by important, unresolved practical problems? These could include agriculture, nutrition, disease prevention, business management, architecture, law enforcement, computer technology, education, and many others. We could locate these institutes in many nations, excluding none. Each would invite experts and laymen to international workshops and conferences. All who attended would be able to ask their own questions, learn what others are thinking or have discovered, present their own thoughts and discoveries, and evaluate the relative merits of various solutions to a given problem. In the process, they would have a chance to see the “enemy” for themselves, interacting during both work and relaxation. Such positive interchanges would make it difficult for participating individuals to remain or to become enemies.

Positive interactions among people of different nations could also be fostered by a program of citizen exchanges. With national and international support, young people could travel to other countries, living with families long enough to become really acquainted with another culture and to form lasting friendships. Hospitality is a term that covers many positive reinforcers. It means being treated with respect and consideration as a valued and interesting visitor, being “shown around the town,” sharing food and shelter, taking part in family intimacies, learning a new language, and becoming comfortable with culturally specific skills, practices, and customs that seemed strange or even frightening at first. It means acquiring an extensive history of positive exchanges that would be difficult for any circumstances to reverse. If enough citizens could be given such a history, the customary coercive diplomacy would lose popular support.

Such exchanges would clearly not solve all the world's problems. The suggestion is intended not as a cure—all but as a first step that might then make other constructive steps possible. On a large scale, the exchanges would be expensive, but if they eventually permitted a significant reduction in the cost of maintaining military establishments, the substitution of one expense for the other would be easily justifiable.

The general principle is for governments to relieve and prevent international tension by using positive reinforcement to develop and strengthen positive relationships among individual citizens of different countries and cultures, rather than using negative reinforcement to set other governments scrambling to escape and avoid threats. The technique is just the opposite of “summitry,” in which heads of state, having hurled their threats and

counter threats, meet to evaluate each other's suggestions for escaping from the tensions they have created. Instead, they would meet—preferably with behaviorally trained mediators present—to determine how each nation might best achieve its needs. The push for peace would come from below, with the general population setting the ground rules for the conduct of international affairs. In the long run, programs that provide positive reinforcement for the constructive actions of individual citizens would more than pay for themselves. And the improvement in the quality of life, unencumbered by the fear of partial or total destruction, would be incalculable.

Terrorism

Could positive reinforcement help bring terrorism, too, to an end? Perhaps, but not quickly. Terrorist activities are just one side effect of coercive pressures that have been in place for a long time (see Chapter 9). And, of course, terrorism itself is a coercive technique so it, too, generates countermeasures. Once set into motion, repeating cycles of coercion and countercoercion are hard to interrupt. Each side fears that any relaxation of its defenses (the usual euphemism for offenses) will leave it at the mercy of a merciless enemy.

Positive reinforcement, used ineptly, has helped foster terrorism. The payment of ransom, whether money, prisoner exchanges, transportation, armaments, or any other positive return, has ensured that the taking and killing of hostages will continue. Responding to anguished pleas from the families of hostages by paying ransom for the release of one group has guaranteed that others will later be taken. This is not a matter of personal opinion; it is the way positive reinforcement works. As long as we pay terrorists for what they do, they will be happy to keep on obliging us with more of the same.

Another source of strong positive reinforcement that helps perpetuate terrorism is the intense television, radio, newspaper, and magazine coverage of every terrorist act. Terrorists have discovered that throwing a small stone can make a worldwide splash, with ripples extending not only into every council of state but into every household. The relatively small effort involved in taking a few hostages can bring a group up from obscurity, however insignificant and powerless the group may be by any usual criterion. Representatives of the most powerful governments and the most influential churches allow themselves to be led blindfolded to rude negotiating tables where they discuss payment with hostile and contemptuous captors. The news media place the negotiators in the world's center stage. Only the superbowl and the international soccer finals get as much publicity.

One of our well-known newspaper columnists did a piece in which he argued that acts of terrorism have become largely unsuccessful in accomplishing broad politi-

cal or social aims. But he went on to point out, "Terrorism ... has been filling the news for most of our lives, and will doubtless go on demanding the attention of our children and grandchildren as well. What's new is how rarely it achieves its goals these days." In spite of his clear recognition of the broad media response to terrorist acts, this columnist, like almost everybody else, fails to recognize that the media response is itself the goal of terrorism. It does not matter what terrorists say their goals are or whether they achieve their stated goals. The fact remains that conduct is governed by its consequences, and the main consequence of terrorism is media attention.

Imagine the feeling of power and grandeur in the breasts of terrorists as they see themselves and hear their achievements discussed on channel after channel and page after page of the news media. What must it mean to people whom the world has treated with contemptuous disregard to discover that they have been able virtually to wipe out the international tourist industry for a time just by detonating a couple of bombs in airports? Are there simpler ways to make your existence felt than by kidnapping and killing a few defenseless individuals, or planting a time bomb, or machine-gunning a prominent politician or industrialist? Have the deeds of any hero ever gained more recognition?

Even that most recent variety of terrorism, the taking over of schools and the murdering of pupils by their classmates, has received such intensely detailed and continuing media coverage as to guarantee the recurrence of such behavior. Indeed, in one instance—a plot that was fortunately prevented after classmates warned the authorities—14 seventh-grade pupils, who brought weapons, bomb components, and disguises to school, actually admitted that by terrorizing their class, they hoped to get their pictures on television.

By negotiating and paying ransom and by providing unlimited publicity, government and news media have been supplying positive reinforcement that guarantees the continuance of terrorism. It is perhaps too late now for governments to use positive reinforcement as they should have used it originally to bring about acceptable alternative means of protest or to make protest unnecessary. Given the present polarization, governments may no longer have any choice except violent countercoercion to stop terrorism [which *is not* a real solution].

The reinforcement of terrorism by the news media has brought the resurgence of an old threat, censorship. That solution to the media problem is unthinkable. Free communication of news and opinion is one of the strongest protections a people can have against those who would achieve their aims by coercion. Nevertheless, the news media's continuing support of terrorism is making it difficult for concerned citizens to maintain their opposition to censorship. Those who would prefer, for other reasons,

to see our sources of information muzzled are already making noises in that direction, pointing in justification to terrorism's successful exploitation of the media.

Recognition both of its role in reinforcing acts of terrorism, and of its own danger, should therefore engender a certain amount of responsible self-restraint by the news media. The excuse that all the news must be reported is patently false; it has never been possible to report everything. Editors have always had to choose what to publish. The real problem is that the media have never developed criteria for deciding what to report and what to leave unsaid. Taking account of the behavioral consequences of their practices would help provide rational and objective bases for such decisions. For example, is informing the public about an act of terrorism—or about any act of violence—worth the cost of encouraging more such acts? What is important is for the media to put those criteria into place themselves.

As far as government policy on terrorism is concerned, the first thing to be done there, too, is to stop the reinforcement. End all negotiations, even “quiet diplomacy.” Stop enhancing the prestige and power of governments that make the support of international terrorism a matter of national policy. Using them as middlemen to win concessions from the very terrorist groups that exist only by virtue of their protection just perpetuates their practices. To use a technical term that is nonetheless apt, terroristic activity and its support need to be extinguished, not reinforced.

Given terrorism's history of success, however, a policy of extinction—the withdrawal of reinforcement—will require considerable time to take effect. A single large reinforcement is enough to keep an act going for a long time. Terrorism has yielded huge returns—many large reinforcers; we can expect it to continue for a long time even if it never succeeds again. Also, the beginning of extinction will bring a temporary escalation of terroristic activity. Having allowed things to reach this point, we may be left with no alternative than to reply to the escalation with violence of our own.

No one should suffer the illusion, however, that anything permanently constructive can be accomplished that way. Coercion has brought a large segment of the world to a state of economic deprivation, social humiliation, and political repression. The rest of the world will have to reverse its reliance on coercive diplomacy if it is ever to eliminate the threat of desperate countercoercion.✻

More Editor's Notes

DATELINES—2001 September 11 and 2003 March 19: A reality check shows that the *coercive status quo* in international relations continues with all the predicted negative

effects discussed in this article. And the events of these dates show us the kinds of events that (as a result of the *lack* of change in the coercive status quo in international relations) we all, locally and around the world, will be experiencing in ever escalating spirals that are heading for the horrific end of humanity. Obviously, this is not mere alarmism. No less obvious is the need for change, and we may still have time to change, away from the coercive status quo and at least toward practices like those already described. The outcomes of this change very likely are, and can only be, better than the outcomes being experienced from the coercive status quo! Such change, however, may require that *everyone* try to contribute to the change. How will *you* contribute?

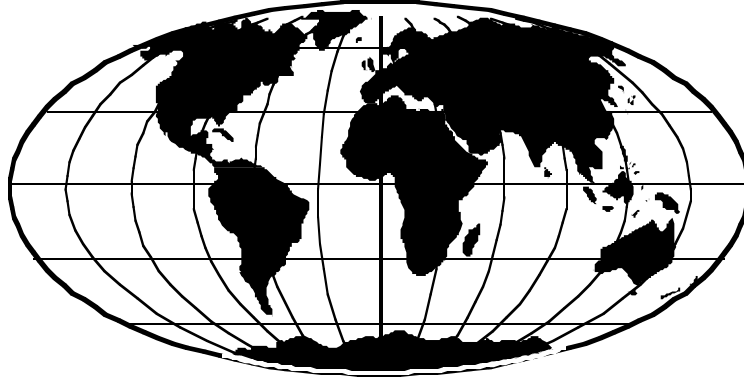
Again, this is an excerpt, the second half of Chapter 19, the last chapter in Dr. Sidman's book *Coercion and Its Fallout—Revised Edition* (Sidman, 2001). In the earlier chapters of his book, Dr. Sidman first summarizes what is known about coercion and its three most fundamental effects of escape, avoidance, and counter-coercion (or, of getting away, staying away, and getting even, using the less technical terms preferred by Dr. Glenn Latham in his book *The Power of Positive Parenting* [Latham, 1994]). Then he (a) describes alternatives to coercion that are more effective, and (b) applies this knowledge using a full range of human concerns (from child care and education, through business and industry, to government and diplomacy). To become more effective in reducing coercion around yourself, throughout society, and around the world, read the whole book. You can order copies through booksellers everywhere (ISBN 1-888830-01-8).

Also, the topic Dr. Sidman addresses in this excerpt, and the continuing circumstances to which it is relevant, often generate thoughtful responses on the part of readers. Please share your thoughts with others on more about making a better world by reducing coercion, and how our natural science of behavior can help achieve this. Send or email your comments or articles to the editor (using the addresses on the inside rear cover).—Ed.

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**THIS POINT IS NOT A MATTER OF CHOICE:
ALL PEOPLE MUST SHARE THIS WHOLE PLANET.
WE SHOULD DO SO PROACTIVELY (I.E., SCIENTIFICALLY)!**



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