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INTRODUCTION

Adam Fox flipped over the carpet and opened the trapdoor that led to the basement of the Vac Shack Vacuums shop, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The thirty-seven-year-old had been living underneath the shop with his two dogs after his girlfriend had kicked him out. The owner of the store, a friend, had offered him the space until he could get back on his feet.

The room was a jumble of filing cabinets, dog crates, and vacuum parts. Fox was a frustrated man—and not just because he was practically homeless. This wasn't the first time he had been down on his luck. After graduating from high school, he'd struggled to find a path, working as a contractor for Vac Shack and barely able to pay his bills. He was angry at the Democratic leaders who had let this happen; he often tweeted about Barack Obama and Nancy Pelosi to let off steam. He'd recently found some camaraderie when he'd joined a local militia, but then he'd been kicked out for his anti-government rants and altercations with other members.

Now COVID-19 was spreading. It had hit Detroit and Grand Rapids so hard that on March 23, 2020, Michigan's governor, Gretchen Whitmer, had called for a state lock-

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down. Her stay-at-home orders extended even to rural areas with few cases. In late April—after yet another round of restrictions—Fox had donned a baseball cap and tactical vest to join hundreds of protesters, many of them armed, to march on the capitol in Lansing. He'd listened outside as Mike Detmer, a Republican congressional candidate, railed against the restrictions as un-American. "We are in a war for the hearts, the soul, the traditions, and the freedom of our state and country," Detmer had declared. "It is up to us to end the shutdown." Afterward, when protesters forced themselves into the capitol to occupy the House floor, Fox had joined them.

But none of this had really changed things, and as more weeks went by, Fox grew restless. That June, he livestreamed a video on Facebook, complaining about recent gym closures and calling Whitmer a "tyrant bitch" who loved power. "I don't know, boys. We gotta do something," he said into the camera. Soon afterward, he reached out over Facebook to Joseph Morrison, the leader of a local militia, the Wolverine Watchmen. Morrison allegedly agreed to help Fox recruit, train, and arm a new paramilitary group. Soon Fox was gathering other men to his cause. One who joined was a retired rifleman in the Marine Corps who had won the Humanitarian Service Medal, the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, and the Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal. Another had previously started basic training with the Michigan National Guard but had not completed it. One was affiliated with the Three Percenters militia group; another supported QAnon; another followed the social media accounts of the Proud Boys.

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There were fourteen of them. Many of the men, like Fox, had attended anti-lockdown rallies. They began meet-

ing in the basement of Vac Shack, where Fox would confiscate cellphones so no one could record the conversations. They also met on Morrison's one-acre rural property for tactical and firearms training. Every Sunday afternoon they would fire hundreds of rounds and practice building explosives.

They considered storming the state capitol—they could take lawmakers hostage, then execute them over the course of a few days. They also considered locking the doors of the capitol and setting the building on fire with everyone inside. Eventually, because the capitol was so well protected, they settled on a different plan: kidnap Whitmer at her vacation home in northern Michigan sometime before the November 2020 election. They would take her to a hidden place in Wisconsin, put her on trial for treason, and kill her.

That August and September, the men spied on Whitmer's home, looking for a nearby bridge to detonate as a way to distract law enforcement agents when they launched their plan. But the FBI was on to them. After discovering the group's activity on social media in early 2020, agents had infiltrated the group online and recruited informants who agreed to wear a wire or gather information. By September, despite Fox's precautions, the FBI had gathered more than thirteen thousand pages of encrypted text messages, as well as photographs, videos, and more than one hundred hours of audio evidence of the kidnapping plot. On the night of October 7, 2020, the feds closed in with a sting: When a handful of the plotters met for what they thought was a weapons buy, they were arrested instead. The FBI raided the Vac Shack basement and executed search warrants in more than a dozen locations. The fourteen men, including Fox, were slapped with terrorism, conspiracy, and weapons charges.

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The owner of Vac Shack, meanwhile, grappled with his disbelief. "I knew he was in a militia," he told reporters, "but there's a lot of people in a militia that don't plan to kidnap the governor. I mean, give me a break."

In the wake of the arrests, news reports focused on the true aims of the would-be kidnappers. Even though Michigan leaders, both Democrat and Republican, condemned the plot, President Donald Trump criticized Whitmer, tweeting that she had "done a terrible job" as governor. Fox himself, however, left no doubt about the group's motives. The trial and execution of Whitmer, he'd explained in FBI recordings, were designed to inspire others to carry out similar attacks. The time had come for a revolution, and he and his men would provoke a societal collapse. "I just wanna make the world glow, dude," he told an informant. "That's what it's gonna take for us to take it back."

WHEN I FIRST read about the plot to kidnap Whitmer in the fall of 2020, I was alarmed but not altogether surprised. It fit into a pattern I had been writing and thinking about for decades. There have been hundreds of civil wars over the past seventy-five years, and many of them started in an eerily similar way. As a scholar and an expert on civil wars, I have interviewed members of Hamas in the West Bank, ex–Sinn Féin members in Northern Ireland, and former members of FARC in Colombia. I have stood on top of the Golan Heights and stared into Syria during the height of the Syria civil war. I have driven across Zimbabwe as the military was planning its coup against Robert Mugabe. I have been followed and interrogated by members of Myanmar's junta. I've been at the wrong end of an Israeli soldier's machine gun.

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I first started studying civil wars in 1990, and at the time, there was very little data to work with. You could read a lot of books by scholars on civil wars in Spain, Greece, Nigeria, and even America in the nineteenth century, but there were almost no studies that looked at common elements that repeated themselves across countries and over time. Everyone thought their civil war was unique, and so no one saw the risk factors that emerged again and again no matter where war broke out.

But within a few years, our knowledge had expanded. The Cold War was over, and all over the globe, civil wars were erupting. Scholars around the world began collecting data—lots of data—on various aspects of these conflicts. The biggest data collection project is now housed at Uppsala University, in Sweden. It was built in collaboration with the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, Norway (PRIO), and has been funded over the years by the Swedish Research Council, the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Norwegian government, and the World Bank. Carefully trained researchers work together with a network of experts on different countries to collect the data. Today, anyone can access dozens of high-quality datasets (the results are triple-checked) related to how civil wars start, how long they last, how many people die, and why they fight. Scholars have used this data to uncover patterns and risk factors that help us predict where and when civil wars are likely to break out. What can we expect to see in the future, given the patterns we have seen in the past? It's a whole new world of understanding.

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In 2010, an article published in the *American Journal of Political Science* caught my attention. Written by a team of

academics, it featured the work of researchers who belonged to something called the Political Instability Task Force (PITF), a group of academics and data analysts who were asked to convene at the behest of the U.S. government in 1994. These experts at the PITF had taken civil war data from around the world and built a model that could predict where instability was most likely to occur.

The idea that researchers could predict civil conflict was revolutionary. And so in 2017, when I was asked to join the PITF myself, I did not hesitate. For almost five years, I attended meetings and conferences with other scholars and analysts, in which we studied political volatility around the world—the potential collapse of Syria, the future of African dictators—and came up with ways to further refine the predictive possibilities of the data at our fingertips. Our goal was to try to anticipate violence and instability in other countries, so that the United States was better prepared to respond.

But as I did this work, I realized something unnerving: The warning signs of instability that we have identified in other places are the same signs that, over the past decade, I've begun to see on our own soil. This is why I witnessed the events in Lansing—as well as the assault on the U.S. Capitol in January 2021—with such trepidation. I've seen how civil wars start, and I know the signs that people miss. And I can see those signs emerging here at a surprisingly fast rate.

The plot in 2020 by a group of white nationalist, antigovernment militias in Michigan is one of those signs. Civil war in the twenty-first century is distinctly different from civil wars of the past. Gone are the large battlefields, the armies, and the conventional tactics. Today, civil wars are

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waged primarily by different ethnic and religious groups, by guerrilla soldiers and militias, who often target civilians. The unrest in Michigan, if you look closely, features these very elements. The state is deeply divided along racial and geographic lines: Two of its major cities, Detroit and Flint, are predominantly African American, while its rural areas are 95 percent white. Economic decline in the state has created deep personal discontent, especially among its rural residents, which has led to anger, resentment, and radicalization. Michigan also has a strong anti-government culture and one of the highest numbers of militias of any state, creating ready-made units for violence. It is no surprise that one of the first attempts to instigate a civil war happened here.

That a kidnapping attempt by a group of far-right extremists is a sign of impending civil war may strike you as preposterous. But modern civil wars start with vigilantes just like these—armed militants who take violence directly to the people. Militias are now a defining feature of conflicts around the world. In Syria, anti-government rebels were a hodgepodge of insurgents and freed prisoners, fighting alongside the violent extremist group ISIS. Even Syria's largest early rebel faction—the Free Syrian Army—was a mix of hundreds of small loose-knit groups, rather than a centrally led organization. Ukraine's current civil war is being fought by bandits, warlords, private military companies, foreign mercenaries, and regular insurgents. The same is true in Afghanistan and Yemen. The era of a single, regimented, and hierarchical fighting force in official military uniform using conventional weapons is over.

Today's rebel groups rely on guerrilla warfare and organized terror: a sniper firing from a rooftop; a homemade bomb delivered in a package, detonated in a truck, or con-

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cealed on the side of a road. Groups are more likely to try to assassinate opposition leaders, journalists, or police recruits than government soldiers. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, masterminded the use of suicide bombings to kill anyone cooperating with the Shia-controlled government during Iraq's civil war. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, perfected the use of massive car bombs to attack the same government. Hamas's main tactic against Israel has been to target average Israeli citizens going about their daily business.

Most Americans cannot imagine another civil war in their country. They assume our democracy is too resilient, too robust to devolve into conflict. Or they assume that our country is too wealthy and advanced to turn on itself. Or they assume that any rebellion would quickly be stamped out by our powerful government, giving the rebels no chance. They see the Whitmer kidnapping plot, or even the storming of the U.S. Capitol, as isolated incidents: the frustrated acts of a small group of violent extremists. But this is because they don't know how civil wars start.

TO UNDERSTAND HOW close modern America is to erupting into conflict, we must acquaint ourselves with the conditions that give rise to, and define, modern civil war. That is the purpose of this book. Civil wars ignite and escalate in ways that are predictable; they follow a script. The same patterns emerge whether you look at Bosnia, Ukraine, Iraq, Syria, Northern Ireland, or Israel. The pages that follow will explore these patterns: We'll examine where civil wars tend to start, who tends to start them, and what tend to be the triggers.

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We'll also look at how to *stop* them. An eruption of conflict requires a set of variables to build on one another, like winds in a gathering storm. As I've become increasingly alarmed by the potential of a second civil war in America, I've grown personally invested in what we, as citizens, can learn from experts about defusing these gales and squalls. These incidents have offered us a lesson: We have trusted, for too long perhaps, that peace will always prevail. That our institutions are unshakable, that our nation is exceptional. We've learned that we cannot take our democracy for granted, that we must understand our power as citizens.

Some of the risks have felt immediate, such as the January 6 assault on the Capitol by far-right extremists who hoped to stop Joe Biden's presidency, or the politicization of face masks in the middle of a global pandemic. But there are deeper forces at play, and we must also be willing to acknowledge them. In the past decade, our country has undergone a seismic change in economic and cultural power. Our demographics have shifted. Inequality has grown. Our institutions have been weakened, manipulated to serve the interests of some over others. America's citizens are increasingly held captive by demagogues, on their screens or in their government. We are seeing similar developments in democracies all over the world.

And while we have been busy fighting battles over immigrant caravans and "cancel culture," violent extremist groups, especially on the radical right, have grown stronger. Since 2008, over 70 percent of extremist-related deaths in the United States have been at the hands of people connected to far-right or white-supremacist movements. Their growth may have felt imperceptible; extremists typically organize slowly and clandestinely. It took three years for Mex-

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ico's Zapatista to grow to twelve members, and over six years for a group of thirty Tamil teenagers to form the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka. Al-Qaeda leaders sheltered with tribes in the desert of Mali for years before they joined the rebellion there. But now, it seems, the evidence is everywhere. Americans are no longer surprised to see armed men at rallies and paramilitary groups converging at protests. It has become commonplace to see Confederate flags for sale in Pennsylvania convenience stores, or American flags with a thin blue line and insignias of all kinds. We are now beginning to understand that bumper stickers like the circle of stars around the Roman numeral III, the Valknot, and the Celtic Cross are not innocent. Instead, they are symbols of America's far-right militant groups, which are becoming increasingly visible, vocal, and dangerous.

America is a special country, but when you study the hundreds of civil wars that have broken out since the end of World War II, as I have, you come to understand that we are not immune to conflict. Here, too, there is anger and resentment and the desire to dominate rivals. Here, too, we fight for political power to protect a way of life. Here, too, we buy guns when we feel threatened. So in those moments when I would prefer to look away or take comfort in the voice that says, *No, that could never happen here,* I think of all that political science has taught me. I think about the facts before us.

And I think about the time I met Berina Kovac and we shared stories about political violence, and how it tends to sneak up on people. Berina had grown up in Sarajevo. As militias began to organize in the hills and suburbs, as former colleagues increasingly targeted her with ethnic slurs, she continued to go to work, attend weddings, take weekend

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holidays, and try to convince herself that everything would be fine. But late one evening in March 1992, she was at home with her son, just a few weeks old, when the power went out. "And then suddenly," Kovac told me, "you started to hear machine guns."

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HOW CIVIL WARS START

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CHAPTER 1

THE DANGER OF ANOCRACY

Noor was a high school sophomore in Baghdad when U.S. forces first attacked Iraq on March 19, 2003. At age thirteen, she had seen her country's leader, Saddam Hussein, condemn U.S. president George W. Bush on TV for threatening war and had heard her family talking around the dinner table about a possible American invasion. Noor was a typical teenager. She loved Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys and Christina Aguilera. She would watch Oprah and Dr. Phil in her free time, and one of her favorite films was *The Matrix*. She couldn't imagine U.S. soldiers in Baghdad—where life, though sometimes hard, had mainly been about hanging out with friends, walking to the park, and visiting her favorite animals at the zoo. To her, it just felt unreal.

But two weeks later, American soldiers arrived in her part of the city. The first sounds she heard were airplanes and then explosions late in the afternoon. She rushed up to the roof of their house, following her mother and sisters, not knowing what they would find. When she looked up at the sky, she saw armored vehicles floating under parachutes. "It was like a movie," she said. A few days later, American soldiers walked down the street in front of her house, and Noor

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ran to the front door to watch them. She saw her neighbors also standing in their doorways, smiles on their faces. The soldiers smiled back, eager to talk to anyone who was willing. "Everybody was so happy," Noor recalled. "There was suddenly freedom." Less than a week later, on April 9, her fellow Iraqis descended on Firdos Square in central Baghdad, where they threw a rope over the enormous statue of Saddam Hussein, and, with the help of American soldiers, tore it down. Noor thought to herself, *You know, we can have a new life. A better life.*

Life under Saddam had been challenging. Noor's father had been a government employee, yet like many other Iraqis, the family had little money. Saddam's failed war against Iran in the 1980s had left Iraq poor and in debt, and things had gotten only worse in 1990 after he invaded Kuwait and economic sanctions were imposed. Noor's family, like most Iraqi families, struggled with rampant inflation, a crumbling healthcare system, and shortages of food and medicine. They also lived in fear. Iraqis were forbidden to talk politics or to criticize their government. They came to believe that the walls had ears, and that Saddam's security services were constantly watching. Saddam had been brutal to his enemies and rivals during his twenty-four-year reign. Iraqis who criticized the president, his entourage, or his Baath Party could be put to death. Journalists were executed or forced into exile. Some dissidents were imprisoned; others simply disappeared. People heard stories of how prisoners were tortured—their eyes gouged out, their genitals electrocuted—then killed via hanging, decapitation, or by firing squad.

But now the Americans had come, and eight months after Iraqi citizens dragged Saddam's statue to the ground,

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U.S. soldiers found the fearsome dictator hiding in an eight-foot-deep hole near his hometown of Tikrit. He looked dirty and dazed. With Americans in charge, most Iraqis believed that their country would be reborn and that they would experience the freedom and opportunities available in Western countries. Families dreamed of experiencing true democracy. The military, and perhaps the judiciary, would be reformed. Corruption would end. Wealth, including oil profits, would be distributed more equally. Noor and her family were excited for independent newspapers and satellite TV. "We thought we would breathe freedom, we would become like Europe," said Najm al-Jabouri, a former general in Saddam's army. They were wrong.

When Saddam Hussein was captured, researchers who study democratization didn't celebrate. We knew that democratization, especially rapid democratization in a deeply divided country, could be highly destabilizing. In fact, the more radical and rapid the change, the more destabilizing it was likely to be. The United States and the United Kingdom thought they were delivering freedom to a welcoming population. Instead, they were about to deliver the perfect conditions for civil war.

Iraq was a country plagued by political rivalries, both ethnic and religious. The Kurds, a large ethnic minority in the north, had long fought Saddam for autonomy; they wanted to be left alone to rule themselves. The Shia, who made up more than 60 percent of Iraq's population, resented being ruled by Saddam Hussein, a Sunni, and his mostly Sunni Baath Party. Over decades, Saddam had been able to consolidate power for his minority group by stacking government positions with Sunnis, requiring everyone to join

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the Baath Party to qualify for jobs regardless of religion or sect, and by unleashing his murderous security forces on everyone else.

A mere two and a half months after the invasion, Iraqis coalesced into competing sectarian factions, dictated in part by two fateful decisions by the U.S. government. In an effort to bring rapid democracy to the country, Paul Bremer, the head of the United States' transitional government in Iraq, outlawed the Baath Party and ordered that all members of Saddam Hussein's government, almost all of whom were Sunni, be permanently removed from power. He then disbanded the Iraqi military, sending hundreds of thousands of Sunni soldiers home.

Suddenly, before a new government could be formed, tens of thousands of Baath bureaucrats were thrown out of power. More than 350,000 officers and soldiers in the Iraqi military no longer had an income. More than 85,000 regular Iraqis, including schoolteachers who had joined the Baath Party as a condition of their employment, lost their jobs. Noor, who is Sunni, remembers the feeling of shock around the country.

Those who had been locked out of power under Saddam, however, saw their opportunity. Political jostling broke out almost immediately among figures such as Nouri al-Maliki, a Shia dissident who had returned from exile, and Muqtada al-Sadr, a radical Shia cleric who wanted Iraq to become an Islamic regime. Though the Americans had hoped to broker a power-sharing agreement among Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, they soon acquiesced to the demands of Maliki, who wanted a government that, like the population, was majority Shia. For Noor, what resulted wasn't democracy. It was chaos followed by a power grab.

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Regular Iraqis, especially Sunnis, began to worry. If the more numerous Shia were in control of the government, what would prevent them from turning on the minority Sunnis? What incentives would they have to give them jobs, or share critical oil revenues? What would keep them from exacting revenge for Saddam's past crimes? Former Baathist party leaders, intelligence officials, and Iraqi army officers, along with Sunni tribal chiefs, soon realized that if they wanted to retain any power in the new democracy, they had to act fast. Nascent insurgent organizations began to form as early as the summer of 2003. They found easy recruits in Sunni cities and Iraq's Sunni-dominated countryside where citizens increasingly felt politically and economically aggrieved. As one Sunni citizen noted, "We were on top of the system. We had dreams. Now we are the losers. We lost our positions, our status, the security of our families, stability."

Sunni insurgents didn't go after American troops at first (the Americans were too well armed). Instead, the insurgents focused on easier targets: those individuals and groups who were helping the Americans. This included the Shia who enlisted in the new Iraqi security forces, Shia politicians, and international organizations, including the United Nations. The insurgents' goal was to reduce or eliminate support for the U.S. occupation and isolate the American military. It was only afterward that the insurgents began to target American troops, planting inexpensive but highly effective roadside bombs along important supply routes. By the time Saddam Hussein was captured in December 2003, guerrilla war had broken out.

The fighting escalated in April 2004 when Shia factions began to compete for power. The most notorious was a Shia militia led by Muqtada al-Sadr, who played on Shia

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nationalists' anger at U.S. occupation to gain support. He, too, targeted American allies and troops in order to convince the Americans to leave. By the time Iraq's first parliamentary elections were held, in January 2005, it was clear that Sunnis would play, at best, only a secondary role in government. Some hoped the Americans would step in to strengthen the constitution, or rein in Maliki. But the Americans had become worried about their long-term entanglement in Iraq and did little to intervene. As acts of violence toward coalition forces continued to escalate, so did fighting among Iraqis, who fractured into dozens of regional and religious militias to try to gain control of the country. Many had the support of the local population and received money and weapons from foreign rivals. "Saudi Arabia supported the Sunni militias, and Iran supported the Shia militias, and then you had Muqtada al-Sadr, who promoted himself," recalled Noor. "People everywhere started taking sides."

Soon it was too dangerous for Noor to leave the house or even to walk to the grocery store. Rival militias were fighting for territory, and snipers waited to pick off anyone in the street; roadside bombs and military checkpoints became a fact of life. At the zoo, where Noor had spent so many weekends with her friends, the animals were either starving to death or eaten by people increasingly desperate for food. Noor and her family didn't know what to do. First, they fled to a relative's safer neighborhood, and then in 2007, they left Baghdad altogether because they no longer felt safe anywhere in the city. They traveled by bus to Damascus, where they were content, at least for a time. They did not know that the blood and chaos of civil war would eventually fill the streets of Syria, too.

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It had taken American forces only a few months to remove Saddam Hussein from power and set Iraq on the path to a democracy. But almost as swiftly, the country descended into a civil war so brutal that it would last for more than a decade. Like the dictator's fallen statue, all of Noor's hopes—for a new voice, for new rights, for new dreams—had been smashed to pieces.

OVER THE PAST one hundred years, the world has experienced the greatest expansion of freedom and political rights in the history of mankind. In 1900, democracies barely existed. But by 1948, world leaders had embraced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was signed by almost all of the UN member states. It asserted that every person had the right to participate in his or her government, the right to freedom of speech, religion, and peaceful assembly, and that they had these rights no matter their sex, language, race, color, religion, birth status, or political views. Today, almost 60 percent of the world's countries are democratic.

Citizens of liberal democracies have more political and civil rights than those who live in non-democracies. They participate more in the political life of their nations, have greater protections from discrimination and repression, and receive a greater percentage of state resources. They are also happier, wealthier, better educated, and generally have a higher life expectancy than people who live in dictatorships. It's the reason refugees risk their lives to reach Europe, fleeing more repressive countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. And it's why President Bush, after invading Iraq, felt confident that the United States would establish "a

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