

PRACTITIONER CASE STUDY

CONFIRMING DR. LISA COOK TO THE FED: THE COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE

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Practitioner Perspectives

Confirming Dr. Lisa Cook to the Fed: The Communications Challenge

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Information	Abstract
Received: January 29, 2023 Accepted: June 3, 2023 Published online: June 9, 2023	On May 10, 2022, Dr. Lisa Cook was confirmed by a 51-50 vote in the U.S. Senate as the first Black woman to join the Federal Reserve Board of Governors. A coalition of groups supporting her nomination worked to counter attacks from Republican senators with a track record of targeting nominees of color and to contain the impact of right-wing critics on social media. A comprehensive communications strategy built around emphasizing her experience and expertise included tactics to prevent racialized attacks on Dr. Cook from becoming mainstream. Identifying a clear opposing figure, depriving social media trolls of amplification, and turning the phenomenon of white privilege to her advantage all played a role in the public interest communications strategy that aided Dr. Cook's successful confirmation.
Keywords Advocacy Political appointments Race Gender Case study	

Introduction

Based on her qualifications alone—both education and experience—Dr. Lisa Cook merited a quick and easy confirmation as a nominee of President Joseph Biden to the Federal Reserve Board of Governors. A professor at Michigan State University who, in addition to her academic research, had been a White House staffer and overseer within the Federal Reserve's system of regional banks already, Dr. Cook could hardly have possessed better credentials for the governing body of the nation's central bank.

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From a public-interest perspective, Cook represented an important step forward for the Fed. Thanks to her own research, she was in the position to advance the Fed's incipient effort to understand the role of race in the U.S. economy. In time, she might provide a push to policy ideas that would help the Fed to craft policies to address the racial inequities that pervade the U.S. economy.

But as the first Black woman selected to join the Fed board, Dr. Cook had every reason to expect a challenging confirmation process at the hands of Republican senators who, with a track record of throwing sharp, disingenuous jabs at nominees of color (Linskey, 2021), would participate in the Senate debate over her confirmation. Seldom does a person of color, particularly a woman, escape such a process in the current political environment without having to brave this kind of treatment.

The U.S. Senate did eventually approve on May 10, 2022—by the narrowest possible margin of 51-50—the nomination of Dr. Cook. She now sits on the board of the Fed as it grapples with inflation, a possible recession, and stresses in the financial system.

While nothing can take the place of the right nominee, that outcome reflected, in part, a strategy designed by a coalition of nonpartisan groups who all shared an interest in policies designed to make the economy, and the financial system in particular, more just and stable. They laid in a strategy to set the right public tone both before and after Dr. Cook's nomination to the Fed on January 14, 2022. The groups saw the challenge coming, prepared for it, anticipated what the opponents would do, and worked strategically to push positive messages while deflecting or ignoring a disinformation campaign on social media.

What follows is an assessment of the communications strategy and tactics employed to support Dr. Cook's confirmation—and ultimately achieve economic and financial policies built around equity and stability. This case study will focus on the communications aspects of Dr. Cook's nomination that bear on the challenges when the person in question is a Black woman, focusing on nonstandard media and public relations tactics that might be adapted in other public interest efforts.

Adopting a clear strategy and sticking to it proved successful, as did the fortitude to avoid certain standard but resource-intensive tactics and to instead brainstorm new ideas. Countering disinformation with reframing and refusing to dwell on opponents' falsehoods and lies may have been the most useful tactic. Direct rebuttals of baseless or racist attacks ran the risk of being resource-intensive without necessarily achieving the goal, unless in the service of rebutting a figure who embodied the opposition narrative about Dr. Cook in the Senate. Also, choosing the right validators—in this case, prominent and experienced white men who lent the privilege and prestige they enjoyed—proved useful.¹

Overall, the communications strategy revolved around the fact that there was far more to the first Black woman nominee to the Fed than what she represented symbolically, namely her

¹ Dr. Cook was nominated to complete a term on the Board of Governors that expires on January 31, 2024. President Biden then re-nominated her to a full 14-year term on May 12, 2023.

experience and expertise. The organizations advocated for Dr. Cook in ways that had nothing to do with skin color.

The focus in this case study will be resolutely on the outside game, and the influence public interest organizations could bring to bear in the public debate around Dr. Cook's nomination. This article is not an explanation of communications work in the White House or the Senate. The public interest groups who led this coalition are nonpartisan issue advocates who pressure Democrats and Republicans alike. The groups necessarily stayed in contact with key Senate offices and Biden administration officials but they executed their own independent strategy. The organizations looked out for Dr. Cook and all that she promised to do to shift the economy in an equitable direction—not the political fortunes of the White House.

The public interest coalition

The public interest community created a large coalition organized chiefly, but not entirely, around the staffs of Americans for Financial Reform, Public Citizen, and the Action Center on Race and the Economy (ACRE).

Eventually, 97 groups, including labor unions, consumer advocates, environmental activists, and grassroots organizations would endorse Dr. Cook's nomination, and each played some role in winning over the Senate (Americans for Financial Reform, 2022). Also, Dr. Cook began the fight with her own set of high-level relationships at racial justice groups that spoke out strongly in support of her (Clunie et al., 2022).

Like other public interest coalitions, a measure of cheerful chaos and last-minute scrambling provided the theme music for the daily toil, but in the main, regular convenings and check-ins left the campaign feeling, to all those involved, relatively organized amid a broad dispersion of responsibility. It was truly a group effort.

Among the participating organizations, the moral imperative of ensuring that powerful governing bodies in the U.S. government included diverse viewpoints, and that a Black woman at the Fed was long overdue, required little emphasis.² But other factors heightened the importance of Dr. Cook's nomination.

First, Senator Elizabeth Warren has of late been the most prominent lawmaker to embrace the slogan—grounded in fact—that “personnel is policy” (Warmbrodt, 2021, para. 3), and the sentiment holds true; good outcomes depend on good appointees at agencies with immense influence. Second, a mere board member today often becomes a more senior policymaker in future administrations; the current chair, Jerome Powell, was previously a board member, as was the vice-chair, Lael Brainard. Finally, the Fed itself is on a long-delayed journey regarding the role of race in the U.S. economy. Over the past decade, it has deepened research into the causes

² Dr. Cook and Dr. Philip Jefferson, nominated alongside her, were only the fourth and fifth Black individuals ever to join the board. The Federal Reserve System, composed of the board and the regional banks, shows a “staggering homogeneity” (Conti-Brown & Nygaard, 2021, para. 1).

of Black unemployment, held conferences on the racialized impacts of policy choices, and founded institutions devoted to understanding the role of race in economics (Boesler et al., 2021). Dr. Cook, both in her person and her own research, would surely be an immense asset to the Fed's work.

But first, the Senate had to confirm her.

The nature of racist attacks

A study published by the progressive advocacy group Accountable.US (Accountable.US, 2022) after Dr. Cook's confirmation validated what people working with the coalition knew intuitively—and what they prepared for—before the Senate process got underway: Republicans would mount more vicious and numerous attacks on Democratic nominees of color than when considering similar nominations of white people.

The study traced the radicalization of Republican attitudes toward Democratic nominees, most notably the decision of the Republican leader, Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, not to even consider President Barack Obama's nomination of Merrick Garland to the U.S. Supreme Court in 2016. Then after Biden took office in 2021, Republican senators exhibited a pattern recognizable to any objective observer. According to Accountable.US (2022), "One of the more disturbing trends that has emerged during this new era of Republican obstructionism is that many of the most dishonest and caustic attacks on Democratic nominees have been reserved for women and people of color" (para. 11).

In this instance, as in many others, political realities do not let anyone ignore the role of race—in nominations or anything else—so simply disregarding it was unrealistic. However, it is essential to note that responding to racialized attacks did not always mean highlighting race or gender. The coalition devised a strategy and set of tactics aimed at Dr. Cook's successful confirmation. The public interest lay in achieving that goal, not making a point.

The makeup of the Senate meant that the strategy for getting to 51 votes on Dr. Cook's confirmation resembled other efforts in which Republicans were more likely than not to lock arms in opposition. All Democrats, starting with the Senate Banking Committee, which would have to report out the nomination, would have to support her. Democrats who had carved out reputations for throwing in their lots with Republicans, notably Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, could be trouble. Additionally, Vice President Kamala Harris was required to cast the decisive 51st vote, as the Senate was evenly split until early 2023.

Dr. Cook's nomination came alongside two others to the Fed board, Philip Jefferson for another board spot and Sarah Bloom Raskin as the vice chair for supervision. At the same time, Biden renominated Powell to a second term as chair, and proposed to elevate Brainard from board member to vice chair (The White House, 2022).³ In short, efforts on behalf of Dr. Cook were embedded in a larger fight.

³ About a year later, Brainard would leave the Fed to become director of the National Economic Council.

Campaign tactics

Work began by hashing out a basic document that outlined Dr. Cook's experience and expertise, emphasizing those elements that could become talking points, op-eds, or reporter memos. From those written products flowed the blocking and tackling of communications work: sending materials to reporters, steering them toward people who would speak helpfully about the nominee, and organizing output in various media that reflected key messages about her experience and expertise. These activities continued throughout the process, from nomination to confirmation.

The coalition extemporized specific tactics, acknowledging that race would play a role in the inevitable attacks on Dr. Cook, though the response would be to double down on her credentials. Again, the choice fell on the tactics most likely to work, not necessarily ones that emphasized race. Organizations did not prioritize seeing themselves quoted in the media. We were much more likely to feed information, data, and talking points to people—former government officials, academics, associates of Dr. Cook—who were credible validators.

Hugging Powell

A central tactic involved associating Dr. Cook as closely as possible with Powell, the Fed chair. Appointed by Trump, Powell had assiduously courted Democratic lawmakers before his renomination by Biden and seemed a sure bet for confirmation. Many public interest organizations involved had not supported Powell's renomination, so this tactic—dubbed 'hug Powell' by a tart-tongued Senate staffer—was not without reservations. However, this approach aligned with a parliamentary strategy of moving all the nominations through the process simultaneously so that lawmakers who wanted Powell to stay in the chair (he would later be re-confirmed by an 80-19 vote) would have to block him too if they wanted to bar the way for Dr. Cook.

The primary focus of the Federal Reserve is monetary policy, built around a dual mandate of stabilizing prices and maximizing employment. During her confirmation hearing, Dr. Cook expressed agreement with the Fed's current policy direction of raising interest rates. The trickier part, from a communications perspective, was framing her academic work, which was more expansive than monetary policy, in a manner consistent with how the Fed operates. Given the common perception that Fed's responsibilities are limited to monetary policy—i.e., lower or raise interest rates—harmonizing this portrait of her expertise with the Fed's overall role was important.

Dr. Cook's academic research

Apart from being a central bank, the Fed is also a massive research institution that produces countless studies, both in Washington at the Federal Reserve Board, and at the 12 regional

reserve banks. It seeks, quite reasonably, to understand the economy it is charged with steering, and understand where received wisdom might not be accurate or useful.

As noted, in the years before Dr. Cook's nomination, the Fed had already set itself on the path of understanding more about how race factors into macroeconomic performance. One standout piece of research Dr. Cook published was a paper about how violence against Black people in the United States reduced innovation in economic activity, a subject that Nobel laureate Milton Friedman—an icon among free-market Republicans—encouraged her to explore (Garcia & Smith, 2020).

Viewed in this light, advocates could portray Dr. Cook's nomination as not only a natural progression of the Fed's ongoing efforts, but also a valuable expansion of its capabilities. In addition to her prior experience with the Fed and the executive branch, Dr. Cook's appointment brought fresh perspectives, informed by her highly original research, to an institution that had already begun to question its own long-held assumptions. Briefing materials for media and Senate staff as well as outside validators constantly highlighted this point, which came to light in statements to the media like this one in *Bloomberg News*:

“Lisa Cook is not going to come to the Fed with rigid views about how the economy works,” says Andrew Levin, a Dartmouth College economist and former adviser to Janet Yellen, the former Fed chair and current Treasury secretary. “Throughout her career, Cook has been active in identifying the limitations of standard macroeconomic models.” (Torres & Flatley, 2022, para. 16)

Midwestern roots

Effort went into emphasizing Dr. Cook's roots in the Midwest. One form of anti-elitist criticism of the Fed truly crosses partisan lines. Multiple Fed governors have backgrounds on Wall Street or are simply very wealthy (Gandel, 2017). And conservatives have been known to complain that the Fed is out of touch, in some vague cultural sense, with everyday citizens, and that the federal government often ignores the heartland. It was common ground on which to build public interest messages.

The nomination of Dr. Cook won support from the president of Michigan State University, where Dr. Cook previously taught (Ward, 2022). *Detroit Free Press* covered her nomination in detail as a running political story from nomination to hearing to confirmation and published a column decrying her treatment at the hands of Republicans (Spangler, 2022a, 2022b; Tompor, 2022a). Now a Fed governor, Dr. Cook merits coverage that clearly evinces a measure of local pride of ownership in her achievements (Tompson, 2022b).

Parrying right-wing attacks

Opponents of Dr. Cook's nomination, including elected Republicans, former officials, conservative academics, and right-wing journalists, launched vitriolic attacks that were not preventable. These attacks started from the premise that Dr. Cook's selection was "a purely race-based" choice, in the words of a former Trump administration official (Terkel, 2022, para. 6). And they unfolded the baseless charges from there: she's not qualified, her research was irrelevant to the Fed's work, or her experience was overrated.⁴

These attacks unfolded almost entirely within a media ecosystem of blogs and a few right-wing publications, where social media was the primary channel for circulating these opinions. Twitter, in its pre-Elon Musk incarnation, was the primary platform the critics of Dr. Cook used, presumably since there are enough mainstream voices on the platform that critics hoped to vault their message out of the right-wing echo chambers.

No troll-feeding

Coalition tactics revolved around arresting that process. The first decision was ironclad: do not feed the trolls. There was no upside to doing so. Social media, technologically speaking, raises the profile of controversies, so the less said, the better (e.g., Albright, 2019). The groups would never change the critics' minds. This decision was not controversial, but it did weigh on some people in our coalition; one person of color told me it was hard to watch the attacks and do nothing, a feeling that it behooved white colleagues to take to heart.

But the groups stood by it. In one case, a friend of Dr. Cook's, who works at a major think tank, had to be persuaded to retract a news release outlining and rebutting the attacks against the nominee. The friend of Dr. Cook's eventually appreciated the dangers: that if she called out a key instigator and rebutted him in a news release—with hyperlinks, no less—she would provide all the data points needed for a reporter to take this spat into the mainstream media. If right-wing attacks didn't get wider traction, there was absolutely no reason to rebut instigators by name.

The counter-campaign: White Dudes Step Up

The coalition adopted a counter-campaign strategy, dubbed "White Dudes Step Up," to respond to the right-wing trolls, without acknowledging them. One lesson of racial equity in the workplace, something many organizations in the coalition had examined in detail, is the concept of lending the advantages of privilege to those not born with it. So, public interest groups operationalized this idea for an era of social media, in the context of a nomination battle to prevent the trolls from leaping into the mainstream. The weekend after the Senate confirmation

⁴ Dr. Cook has a PhD in economics and has published extensively. The Trump-appointed chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Jerome Powell, has neither a PhD in economics, nor a record of professional publication.

battle got underway, prominent white men were asked to speak out on Dr. Cook's qualifications. Many of these men responded enthusiastically, and appreciated what we were doing. The men who spoke out via Twitter included Austan Goolsbee (see Figure 1), Glenn Hubbard, and Joseph Stiglitz.⁵

Figure 1

Tweet by Austan Goolsbee



I support all President Biden's Fed nominees. They need to be confirmed right away.

And [@drlisadcook](#), with her experience on international issues from her time at the CEA and grappling with the euro crisis, will be an important addition to the board. She is a great addition.

4:13 PM · Jan 24, 2022

Note: Among other notable names, Austan Goolsbee, the former head of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, now president of the Chicago Federal Reserve Bank, tweeted in support of Dr. Lisa Cook as part of the White Dudes Step Up counter-campaign strategy (Goolsbee, 2022).

Their messages did not repeat the charges of the trolls by referencing the critics or any other defamatory content. They simply stressed Dr. Cook's qualifications and called for quick Senate approval. On Monday morning, the collected tweets were sent, in the form of a memo, to reporters covering the nomination.

The sole exception to the no-troll-feeding rule was made for Republican senators who echoed the sentiment that arose on the right-wing, notably for Senator Pat Toomey, the then-ranking Republican on the Senate Banking Committee. Toomey kicked off his opposition to Dr. Cook—he would fight her to the end—by promising to examine whether she had the qualifications to serve at the Fed, a statement that clearly insinuated the answer was negative. The coalition punched back immediately.

Main Republican opponent

Americans for Financial Reform and Public Citizen had hired a public relations firm, Battle Born Collective, that had good relationships with reporters covering Congress. Their principal Adam

⁵ Austan Goolsbee, formerly chair of the Council of Economic Advisers in the Obama White House, is now the president of the Chicago Federal Reserve Bank. Glenn Hubbard was the chair under George W. Bush. Joseph Stiglitz, a Columbia University professor, is a Nobel laureate in economics.

Jentleson, now chief of staff to Senator John Fetterman (D-PA), was a prominent commentator on the Senate. Jentleson composed the memo with the unsubtle title, “Toomey has a credibility problem on Federal Reserve nominees,”⁶ and sent it to journalists. The memo pointed out that Toomey supported the nomination of two (white) Trump picks, Stephen Moore and Judy Shelton, both cartoonishly unqualified for the Fed. Having been TV personalities who appealed to a president who preferred right-wing political entertainment to intellectual engagement, the Moore/Shelton choices had been outlandish enough that even reporters joked about them. In short, that pre-existing frame indicted Toomey’s credibility.

After assailing Dr. Cook’s qualifications, Toomey would later make a broader critique aligned with current Republican opposition to ‘woke capitalism,’ a reactionary trend incorporating racially charged grievance politics into a pseudointellectual critique of how modern corporations might operate around rules touching on environmental, racial, or social issues (e.g., Doescher, 2021). Consistent with that critique, Toomey vocally opposed Dr. Cook because she would bring a racial sensibility to the Fed, though the Fed had been making such inclusionary efforts for nearly a decade prior.

Senate dynamics

The confirmation battle unfolded unexpectedly in one respect. Bloom Raskin, the nominee as vice chair for supervision, turned out to be a greater public flashpoint than Dr. Cook after unsubstantiated Republican allegations of ethical lapses (Eisen, 2022). At one point, they boycotted committee business, depriving it of a quorum and Democrats of their ability to even use their majority. Manchin, a friend of the fossil fuels industry (e.g., Friedman, 2023), torpedoed Bloom Raskin’s nomination in the end. So, Dr. Cook’s name appeared far less in the debate than anticipated when Biden announced the nominations.

Politically, the package of nominations affected the dynamics of the debate in several ways that worked to Dr. Cook’s benefit. Having stopped Bloom Raskin’s nomination, Republicans probably felt less inclined to invest energy in stopping another nominee. And Manchin, having burnished his credentials as an independent-minded lawmaker by deep-sixing Bloom Raskin, probably saw no political upside to defying the White House on another Fed nominee. Dr. Cook’s presence in this package of nominees also probably drew a lot of coded racist criticism that might otherwise have been directed at Jefferson, who is also Black.

⁶ The memo “Toomey has a credibility problem on Federal Reserve nominees,” dated January 22, 2022, is available upon request from the author, courtesy of Battle Born Collective.

Toomey invested much time and energy in rounding up all the Republicans to oppose Jefferson for the Senate floor vote on May 10, 2022. The media environment was suffused with irksome but not game-changing ‘Republicans say’ stories that parroted half-truths and lies. *The Associated Press* published:

Senate Republicans argued that she is unqualified for the position, saying she doesn't have sufficient experience with interest rate policy. They also said her testimony before the Senate Banking Committee suggested she wasn't sufficiently committed to fighting inflation, which is running at four-decade highs. (Rugaber, 2022, para. 3)⁷

However, by the time Toomey made these arguments, enough Democratic senators had become both inured to the Republican talking points and aware of Toomey’s penchant for selectively targeting nominees that their votes were secure. With Vice President Harris presiding over the Senate to cast the 51st vote, Dr. Cook was confirmed on May 10, 2022.

Evaluating the public interest coalition’s contribution

It is important to acknowledge that while the coalition’s media and communications efforts may not have been the sole factor in Dr. Cook’s confirmation to the Fed, they did have one notable impact.

The coalition supporting Dr. Cook supported preventing the right-wing attacks from becoming part of the mainstream narrative, despite intensive efforts by Republican Senate staff—which the coalition learned about only after Dr. Cook’s confirmation—to push these attacks into the mainstream via the same reporters the coalition reached out to first. This success highlights the importance of strategic communications efforts in public interest communications campaigns.

Generalizing lessons

A few generalized lessons can be drawn from the experience of confirming Dr. Cook, as outlined below.

⁷ The point *The Associated Press* repeats about inflation is incorrect. In her confirmation hearing, Dr. Cook articulated the same position on inflation that the Fed itself, led by Powell, had already adopted. Indeed, on the Fed board she has voted with Powell on interest rate hikes designed to contain inflation.

Finding an opposing figure

Finding an opposing figure helped pin down the borderline racist treatment meted out to Dr. Cook. Senator Toomey's opposition to Dr. Cook on the grounds of experience and qualifications proved laughable, based on his prior record of supporting two white candidates for the Fed. Drawing these distinctions helped smoke out treatment of the nominee that was, on the surface, neutral—but had racial overtones.

Containing trolls

Containing trolls in public interest communications efforts is possible, but it requires discipline because social media allows disinformation to spread quickly and fringe ideas to penetrate the mainstream. Instead of engaging with trolls, the coalition supporting Dr. Cook focused on leading the conversation on its own terms by repeating positive messages and pushing its own narrative. It's a common tactic to reframe a conversation.

Choosing validators wisely

Choosing validators wisely is essential in any public interest communications effort, but how they work effectively is a constantly evolving tactic. In the past, the validators in our White Dudes Step Up strategy would have written op-eds or given interviews. In this effort, we bypassed those traditional outlets in favor of social media so that we could, on a quick timetable, put their views in front of reporters covering the nomination. The public interest coalition did not expend a lot of energy trying to flood social media with positive messages. Instead, efforts targeted media with the goal of preventing trolls from reaching the mainstream.

Using resources strategically

Using resources strategically is imperative to public interest communications. Opposition to most public interest priorities are funded by monied interests with significant budgets at their disposal. Developing tactics so that the coalition could prevent right-wing attacks from finding their way into the mainstream media was, at root, a question of resources. If those attacks had gone mainstream, pushing back would have been far more resource-intensive.

Conclusion

The coalition supporting Dr. Cook did not invest heavily in pitching Black-oriented media since our problem lay not with the (largely Black) readership of such media, but rather with white senators. The lack of coverage was disappointing, since Dr. Cook's compelling personal

biography presented her as a role model for future Black academics and economists, even if not directly related to her confirmation.

However, the idea that the Federal Reserve does not loom large as a relevant subject for Black media is a mindset that is misguided, or at least incomplete. Coretta Scott King, after her husband's murder in 1968, devoted her life to economic justice issues (Stein, 2016). She stood behind President Jimmy Carter in 1978 when he signed into law the statute governing the Fed; its mandate, a balance of fighting inflation and promoting full employment, was in part her accomplishment. The civil rights movement has always been a pillar of economic justice advocacy (Baker et al., 2017).

By contrast, the subsequent nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first Black woman on the Supreme Court, about six weeks after the Fed selections, received significant coverage in Black media and elsewhere. The through-line between the nomination of these two Black women—now *Governor Cook* and *Justice Jackson*—was not lost on commentators in hindsight (Haines, 2022). In a world where Black women are nominated to high positions, communicators working in the public interest must be prepared.

Contributor biography

Dougherty is the communications director at Americans for Financial Reform, a coalition of civil rights groups, labor unions, consumer advocates, small businesses, and community activists working to make the financial system more inclusive, just, and stable. Founded in 2009 to fight for the legislation after the global financial crisis that became the Dodd-Frank law of 2010, Americans for Financial Reform now works on a variety of issues related to the financial system. Before Americans for Financial Reform, Dougherty was a journalist for 20 years, writing for publications including *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, and *Bloomberg News*. He has reported from Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as from around the United States.

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