

Human Resources and Public Administration

J. Edward Kellough, *University of Georgia*

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply honored to be the 2019 recipient of the APSA's John Gaus Award and Lectureship, given annually for a lifetime of exemplary scholarship in the joint tradition of political science and public administration. Receiving a lifetime achievement award is an experience for which I am profoundly grateful; but it is also quite humbling, especially when I think of others who have received this honor in the past. It is particularly satisfying to me to receive this award from the APSA. I received my doctoral training years ago in political science with concentrations in American politics, public administration, and public policy. I have viewed public administration as an academic subfield of political science, and my work has focused on public administration throughout my career. I want to thank the association and award committee members Sharon Mastracci of the University of Utah, who served as chair; Jerrell D. Coggburn of North Carolina State University; and Charles W. Gossett of California State University, Sacramento. I also want to acknowledge the University of Georgia for providing an intellectually stimulating home for my academic career. Thanks go to Dean Matt Auer of the School of Public and International Affairs at UGA and to Brad Wright, the head of the UGA Department of Public Administration and Policy. Thanks also to my wife, Vicki, for her companionship and support over the years and to my many friends and colleagues throughout this profession.¹

In my talk today, I will emphasize points that you, as scholars in political science and public administration, will understand as important, even if you do not fully agree with my perspective. It is likely that others, including some politicians, leaders in private organizations, or people from the news media, may not consider my arguments significant. Nevertheless, I will contend that the administrative branch of government and public administration generally,

under appropriate and effective political oversight, is crucial to the well being of the nation. The people in the administrative branch of government—public employees—are vital to the effectiveness of government. The way we select, assign, develop, support, and reward these people is therefore of great consequence. This makes systems of public personnel administration or human resources management vitally important. I will contend that initiatives aimed at reforming public personnel systems in recent decades have been poorly conceived and implemented as means of enhancing the effectiveness of those systems. The value of these reforms has been impeded by inadequate treatment of employees; they have drawn on dysfunctional, simplistic, and outmoded theories of people in public service. Rather than continuing to pursue these approaches to change, we must design reforms based on more enlightened theories of people in organizations, and we must incorporate into educational programs for public service coverage of the history, theory, and

design of effective public human resource management systems.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PEOPLE TO MAKING GOVERNMENT WORK

The argument that the administrative branch of government is vital to our national welfare is perhaps not a surprising assertion coming from a student of public administration such as myself. Thankfully, however, there are many others who agree. A recent popular book by Michael Lewis entitled *The Fifth Risk*, for example, makes clear the importance of people in government by detailing how knowledgeable and dedicated employees within the US Department of Energy worked diligently to protect us from the kinds of disasters that could result from the mishandling of nuclear materials—even when the department's political leadership, by contrast, expressed little knowledge of, or interest in, understanding the agency's mission. Lewis also documents the crucial roles played by capable public servants in divisions within the Departments of Commerce and Agriculture (Lewis 2018).²



J. Edward Kellough, professor of public administration and policy at the University of Georgia, delivers the 2019 John Gaus Award Lecture at the annual meeting in Washington, DC.

Accordingly, I wish to stress the central importance of people (i.e., public employees) to public administration. It is government employees who carry out the functions of the state. They make decisions about how programs are implemented and how services are delivered. In making these decisions, they are given great latitude and exercise substantial discretion. Public employees are, as a result, at the core of the administrative state. Given this context, it is helpful to recall the words of organizational theorist Benjamin Schneider who argued years ago, “the people make the place.” According to Schneider, the kinds of people found within a work organization “define the way [the] place looks, feels, and behaves” (Schneider 1987). In other words, work organizations are to a considerable extent a function of the people found within them, and those people, and their attitudes and abilities, are largely the product of existing human resources management systems and procedures.

Those of us who have spent the bulk of our careers engaged in the study of political science and public administration know this reality well. The importance of people in government leads us to examine questions such as: what is the extent and impact of bureaucratic discretion? How do we ensure that power exercised by bureaucrats is carried out responsibly? What are the bases for public employee motivation—or stated another way, what are the motivational bases for public service? What are the drivers of employee turnover? What is the impact of employee diversity? How can we enhance diversity? What are the forces motivating civil service reform and what are the effects of those reforms? All of these questions, and more, underscore the value of human resources and the civil service in public sector work.

THE NEED FOR GOOD MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES

In short, public service is a human activity. Much of the work that public servants do, whether it is public education, delivery of the mail, provision of fire or police protection, public transportation, the maintenance of parks and recreation facilities, or the provision of social services, defies effective mechanization. Public service cannot function without human agency. This observation carries at least two significant implications that I want to explore. The first (that I have alluded to) is, to risk stating the

obvious, it is imperative that we manage public employees well.

Of course, good human resources management can be an elusive concept, but fundamentally, it is about managing human beings effectively. This implies, among other things, that employee interests should be acknowledged and advanced when possible as organizational interests are pursued. In other words, individual goals should be integrated with those of the organization. Employees in the public workforce have an interest, for example, in performing meaningful and challenging work. They have an interest also, like employees anywhere, in being recognized and treated fairly. Research shows that when employees believe they are treated fairly, organizations are more productive. Years ago, Hal Rainey noted that numerous organizational behavior researchers (e.g., Shepard, Lewicki, and Minton 1992 and Lawler, Mohrman, and Ledford 1995) found that “well developed procedures for justice in organizations contribute to productive management” (Rainey 1997, 245). Rainey also reminds us that various scholars have found that employees who perceive greater levels of procedural justice in their organizations exhibit increased levels of trust in management and higher levels of job satisfaction (Rainey 1997, 249; see also, Alexander and Ruderman 1987; Greenberg 1996), and additional research has shown that higher levels of job satisfaction are associated with positive employee behaviors including lower absenteeism and decreased turnover (Rainey 1997, 251). Nevertheless, contemporary approaches to public management reform seem to eschew these values. It is fascinating and perplexing that some recommendations for administrative change are on their face punitive and negative. They have much in common with Douglas McGregor’s “Theory X” and show apparently little regard for what McGregor described 60 years ago as the “human side of enterprise” (McGregor 1960). They are based on assumptions inadequate for achieving all that public employees are capable of delivering, and the failure of these reforms is a political problem as much as it is a managerial problem.

I do not wish to say that there is never a need for reform or that all proposals are ill considered. We should be looking constantly for ways to improve the practice of public administration. Problems do arise that require adjustments to public personnel management systems. But

reform efforts should emphasize contemporary management and HR thought/theory stressing intrinsic motivations, especially for the professionalized employees of the sort that government has. Instead, however, we more typically have reforms that emphasize control, prohibitions, and extrinsic incentives. As a consequence, merit systems of public employment are under attack.

THE MERIT SYSTEM

Since the latter part of the nineteenth century, the concept of merit in public employment has provided the dominant model for structuring civil service in the United States. Merit systems, of course, are structures in which employees get their jobs based on demonstrated competence rather than political connections. Once hired, they are protected from political or other forms of abuse, and they are expected to behave in a politically neutral manner. Merit systems are, in effect, designed to ensure politically neutral competence within the civil service. They are intended to remove partisanship, favoritism, and patronage from the bulk of the public service. They rest on three core principles: (1) selection on the basis of open and competitive examinations of qualifications, (2) political neutrality, and (3) relative security of tenure. These principles are enforced through the promulgation of rules designed specifically to limit the discretion of managers, supervisors, and leaders of public agencies. The establishment and enforcement of such rules necessarily requires the presence of a politically neutral central authority. Central personnel agencies establish civil service regulations and review agency practices to enforce compliance. The unambiguous purpose is to restrict the actions of political executives and line managers, but this is precisely the feature of merit systems that civil service reformers and politicians seek to undermine.

In essence, common approaches to public sector reform are assaulting core concepts associated with merit systems, and politicians are often leading the charge. This happens because, as noted, rules and restrictions found within merit systems place limitations on managerial discretion, and the additional layers of personnel system red tape result in delays and inefficiencies in employee recruitment, selection, management, and retention. Political leaders who seek reform are interested in finding ways of correcting what they see as the excesses of traditional centralized personnel systems.

They want to “let managers manage” and simultaneously enhance political control of the bureaucracy (Nigro and Kellough 2000).

Many of the reforms proposed as part of the new public management/reinventing government movement beginning in the 1990s typified this experience. The reforms were, in part, based on ideas associated with the concept of “reengineering” that had previously been popular in the private sector (Peters and Waterman 1984; Champy and Hammer 1993; Obolensky 1994). The underlying premise was that organizational efficiency and effectiveness can be significantly improved by streamlining procedures, empowering managers to make more decisions at their levels in the organizational hierarchy, and focusing on results rather than process. I would argue, however, that process matters—especially in the management of public employees—and that process can be positively associated with results. The manifestations of civil service reform have appeared in a number of ways, but much attention was, and is, paid to the implementation of performance management programs (including pay-for-performance schemes), the decentralization of personnel authority, and the elimination or reduction of merit system protections for public employees. Let us consider these reforms in turn.

Pay for Performance

Pay for performance is an old idea, but a truly problematic procedure for performance management. The logic underlying the concept can seem compelling. It simply requires that we give larger pay increases to those employees who are the best performers (assuming, of course, that pay raises are available). Those who do not perform well will get smaller increases or no increases. The argument for this approach is that it will motivate marginal performers to improve their productivity while good performers gain satisfaction from the knowledge that their efforts are recognized and rewarded. The most commonly implemented form of pay for performance, known simply as merit pay, requires that individual employee performance (which is usually based on a supervisory rating) be used as the basis for adjustments to individual pay.

As is widely understood, the US federal government began an early experiment with merit pay following passage of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. The

program targeted mid-level federal managers (i.e., managers in General Schedule and equivalent grades 13–15). Studies of the impact of that effort found, unfortunately, that employees covered by the plan typically saw no credible link between pay and performance (Milkovich and Wigdor 1991; Pearce 1989; Perry 1988–89; Perry, Petrakis and Miller 1989; Siegel 1987; and US General Accounting Office 1984). Because the system was required to be budgetarily neutral in each agency (that is, overall budget allotments for federal salaries were not allowed to increase simply because of the program), any large increases for selected employees had to be offset by smaller or no increases for others. This aspect of the program, coupled with the fact that supervisors often struggle with performance appraisal and find it difficult to draw sharp distinctions between employees, meant that pay increases under the system were usually not significantly different from what had occurred earlier, and as a consequence, the motivational potential of the program was undermined (Perry 1986; Brewer, Selden, and Facer 2000). Studies of employee perceptions of the program found that many workers in the merit pay system believed that factors unrelated to performance were influencing ratings and subsequent pay decisions (Milkovich and Wigdor 1991). Certainly, this is not a formula for motivating workers. To its credit, the federal service backed away from merit pay in the 1990s, but other jurisdictions, including numerous state and local governments, continue to embrace it.

An example is the program implemented in the state of Georgia in the mid-1990s. This system was very carefully planned. It included a new performance appraisal process grounded on job-related performance standards along with written performance goals and new job descriptions (Kellough and Nigro 2002). Training in the new performance appraisal process was extensive. But despite all of this effort and the expenditure of millions of dollars, a survey of employees conducted a few years after the system was implemented showed that state workers had low levels of trust in the program and little confidence in its fairness. Employees and their supervisors both reported that it was not the best way to motivate state workers (Kellough and Nigro 2002). Over 75% of the employees surveyed in the year 2000 agreed with the statement “Office politics has more to do with performance ratings than actual performance.”

For supervisors alone, that is, the individuals conducting the appraisals, the proportion agreeing with that statement was 77%. Similarly, 85% of all employees believed that management had imposed quotas on the number of people who could be eligible for performance ratings above the middle level of “met expectations.” In this case, 84% of supervisors agreed (Kellough and Nigro 2002).

These results suggest that merit pay systems are not effective mechanisms for motivating public workers, yet politicians and other observers are reluctant to abandon them. They have symbolic value as strategies to hold “bureaucrats” accountable or make them earn their keep. Inevitably, however, pay is limited, and the subjective nature of the performance appraisal process, which provides the foundation for the system, leads to employee distrust. Supervisors know this problem. Typically, most workers are rated slightly above average to minimize dissent, and most employees receive pay increases similar to what they would have received without the reform. But resentment builds because employees are told they will receive higher pay if they perform well.

One argument often heard for continuing the practice in government is that it is successful in the private sector, but the literature reveals that businesses have problems similar to those in the public sector (Kellough and Lu 1993; Bowman 2010). In fact, Seejeem Park and Francis Berry concluded in a recent study that pay for performance “became a management fad that offered a popular solution to an ongoing problem of employee rewards that diffused from the private to the public sector in spite of evidence that it was not highly successful in the private sector” (Park and Berry 2014, 778). Park and Berry argue that pay for performance is “an example of policy adoption based on myth rather than fact” (Park and Berry 2014, 763). Merit pay requires us to expect more from an imperfect and subjective employee performance appraisal system than that system is able to deliver (Kellough 2012; Mosbergen 2015).

The Decentralization of Authority

Turning to our second reform, I will argue that serious problems can arise also from the broad decentralization of authority for public sector human resources management—a popular idea that places authority and responsibility for personnel procedures

in the hands of line administrative agencies while simultaneously reducing or eliminating oversight functions performed by a central personnel management agency. The most troubling problem associated with this form of decentralization is that we cannot be certain that employees in distinct governmental units, each operating under its own license, will be treated similarly when they are in similar circumstances. This is a simple matter of equity. If agencies are given authority for the classification of positions, for example as many have, how can we be certain that jobs with similar responsibilities or duties are treated similarly, especially when there is no centralized oversight or review? In the rush to reform, this is a question that is not often raised.

Reducing Employee Protections

Finally, efforts to reduce or eliminate merit system protections are also troubling. These “reforms” seek to reduce employee probationary periods, diminish employee rights to appeal adverse actions, and move large segments of the public workforce to an “at-will” status. All of these and other measures implemented or proposed in recent years are vindictive and castigatory in orientation. It is as if proponents of these strategies believe that government can be made to work better only when we make it easier to fire people.

Let us consider more closely, for example, the expansion of at-will employment. Beginning in the 1990s, this reform was embraced across the country in a number of states, including my home state of Georgia (see Kim and Kellough 2014). It was sold as an effort to make public management more like management in the private sector, but it overlooks the political environment of public employment. Technically, employment at will means that both the employee and the employer enter into the employment relationship at will and either can end the relationship at will. In truth, however, at-will employment is a system in which the government employer removes from its employees a simple promise: the promise that employees will be terminated only for just cause. Think about that for a moment. Under this approach, the government is refusing to promise employees that they will be terminated for just cause only.

Those who advocate for at-will employment do so in part because in the US context, the promise that removal will be made for just cause gives rise to important legal rights. When government promises

employees that adverse action will be taken only for just cause, it is reasonable for those employees to believe they will have continued employment provided there is no just cause for their removal. That is, their performance is satisfactory and the work they are doing needs to be done. From a legal perspective, this reasonable expectation creates a property interest in the job for employees. In other words, like property, the job cannot be taken away without procedural due process. This is because provisions of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the US Constitution come into play. Specifically, the Constitution prohibits government from depriving an individual of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, and the US Supreme Court has determined that minimal due process in termination proceedings requires that employees be notified of pending adverse actions and have the opportunity to hear and respond to allegations against them prior to their termination (*Cleveland v. Loudermill* 1985). These requirements are designed to prevent the mistreatment of employees. The court noted that government may choose not to create a property interest for employees, but if it does establish that interest (as in traditional merit systems), due process requirements found in the Constitution and interpreted by the courts must be followed. Those procedures slow down the termination process, and that is what reformers seek to avoid by expanding at-will employment.

Bear in mind, however, that traditional systems with their due process requirements are institutional structures to ensure fairness. Recall also the discussion earlier of abundant evidence that employees who believe their organizations treat them fairly and justly are better employees. I would argue that one way to get employees to believe they are treated justly is to actually treat them that way. That is the purpose of due process requirements and other mechanisms to protect employees from mistreatment. Of course, the procedures require time to implement. Delays in taking action will occur when due process is followed, but it is not a dead-weight drag on an organization. The longer processes can be counterbalanced by higher employee production and positive orientations. New research that I am involved in with colleagues at the University of Georgia finds, for example, that federal employees who believe their organizations are protecting core merit

principles (including due process) also exhibit increased job satisfaction, higher levels of public service motivation, and reduced inclinations to leave the federal service (Brewer, Kellough, and Rainey, forthcoming).

THE POLITICS OF REFORM

I am concerned about the kinds of reforms of the civil service and public sector human resources management that I have noted thus far not only because of the adverse effects they may have on government workers and their organizations, but also, as I have said, because they are motivated by or easily bent to political purposes. There is always a political interest in how the administrative state operates (Brewer and Kellough 2016; Riccucci and Thompson 2008). As you know, political patronage was essentially unchallenged as the basis for appointment to civil service positions for the first 94 years of the US government and remains the model for the highest-level positions. Patronage builds accountability to political authority, and of course, political leaders in elected positions want a public bureaucracy that is responsive to their policy preferences. Bureaucratic responsiveness to politicians’ agendas helps to ensure that policies and programs consistent with those agendas are implemented faithfully. Responsiveness to political leadership is enhanced as control of the bureaucracy is strengthened, and political executives often wish to extend that control as far down the hierarchy as possible. But traditional civil service merit systems, by design, limit political control of the bureaucracy. To the extent that politicians generally want greater political control over government employees, constraints on political influence imposed by traditional civil service rules need to be removed or reduced. As a result, there is a political interest in civil service reform. Examples include reforms intended to reduce oversight by non-partisan civil service commissions and those designed to reduce employee rights in the workplace (Carroll 1995). This political reach into the bureaucracy is illustrated well by Guy Peters and Jon Pierre (2004) in the title of their edited volume on the topic that reads: *Politicization of the Civil Service in Comparative Perspective: The Quest for Control*.

In an empirical investigation of this subject, Robert McGrath (2013) found that state-level Republican politicians in the US were predisposed to promote “radical”

civil service reform (characterized by high levels of decentralization of the personnel management system) when their political party held a majority of the seats in the state legislature. He found further that their probability of success in moving a reform forward depended on the size of their majority (McGrath 2013); that is, reforms were more likely to be enacted when the size of the majority was larger. When the majority was small or thin, members of the majority party were more cautious since they realized that a switch in majority control could mean that their opponents could overturn any reform passed or might even benefit from the reform if they became the majority. Importantly, McGrath (2013) found also that the propensity for reform was tempered by the strength of public employee unions and by the proportion of seats in the legislature held by Democrats. The time period covered by McGrath's study was from 1996 to 2005. The fact that reform was more probable when Republicans were in control is not surprising since the agenda fits well with a conservative political ideology, and conservatives may be interested in reining in public bureaucracies that are perceived as sympathetic to more liberal democratic objectives.

Unsurprisingly, while political and ideological motivations for civil service reform are important bases for action, reform packages are usually not sold to the public using those arguments. Instead, politicians complain of lethargic public organizations that need revitalizing and recalcitrant bureaucrats who need disciplining or removing, and they speak of the need to "modernize" the civil service. One might question, however, how the age of a system should necessarily be an indicator of its quality. Whether a civil service system is "modern" or reflects the most recent fads in organization design should not alone determine its value. A more appropriate test is whether the principles underlying the system are sound and whether it promotes effective and equitable performance of core personnel management functions such as hiring, promotion, compensation, and discipline.

The negative attitudes toward public employees I have described are reverberating throughout the current US administration. Consider for a moment the present situation of federal public employee unions. These organizations exist to promote the interests of public employees. But as unions go, federal employee unions are

among the weakest in operation. They do not negotiate over pay or benefits, indeed, the range of workplace issues or working conditions that are negotiable is defined narrowly while management prerogatives are protected. Is this a context begging for further suppression of union activity? The answer is yes, apparently, in the eyes of the current administration which has issued executive orders that (1) restrict the use of office space and the amount of time union officials can use for union business while on duty, (2) reduce further the range of issues subject to collective bargaining, and (3) limit the rights of federal workers to appeal adverse disciplinary actions. Are these the kinds of reforms needed to make the federal bureaucracy function more effectively? I don't think so, but they are strategies to punish organizations that are considered part of the "deep state."

These and other efforts—including the relocation of employees of two science units of the Department of Agriculture away from Washington, DC, a plan to abolish the US Office of Personnel Management, an effort to decertify specific public employee unions, and a proposed pay freeze for the coming fiscal year—do little to promote trust within the public workforce or a sense of fair treatment. Beyond the impact these actions have on the current workforce, one may ask what effect they will have on our ability to recruit the next generation of federal employees. Who among the best and brightest of the graduates of our academic programs will see their futures as federal bureaucrats under these conditions?

In any discussions of administrative reform, we would be well served to remember that, as Dwight Waldo told us over 70 years ago, administrative arrangements are never value neutral (Waldo 1948). Indeed, most reforms or other changes to administrative procedures are proposed precisely because they advocate or promote particular values. But these value trade-offs implicit in the process are usually downplayed—even by academicians. One may reasonably ask at this point: "What are we to do? How should we move forward? What values should we embrace?" I believe we should recommit to the traditional principles associated with civil service. We should seek a public service dedicated to ideas of equity and fair treatment in which employees, managers, and political leaders all see themselves as members of the same team working to promote the national interest through the application of

politically neutral competence to solve public problems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

I mentioned at the beginning of my talk that there are at least two implications flowing from the labor-intensive and highly professionalized nature of government work. One that I have been discussing is concern for public sector human resources management systems and efforts to reform those systems. The other is a simpler but no less important concern. Students in our graduate programs in public administration should be knowledgeable of civil service systems and human resources procedures. Standards for accreditation of those programs promulgated by the Network of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) touch only obliquely on this objective by defining student competency domains to include the "ability to lead and manage in public governance." I want to argue here that we should all go beyond that standard to include specific classes in public sector HR policy and management. Graduates of our MPA programs should know the history of the civil service. They should be familiar with the foundations of merit in public employment. They should know the meaning of neutral competence. They should understand employee recruitment, examination, and selection procedures and the legal requirements for equal employment opportunity and nondiscrimination. They should understand job analysis, classification, and compensation. They should be familiar with issues in employee performance appraisal, the operation of unions, and employee rights and responsibilities under the law and the US Constitution. Much of public management is focused within public sector human resources management. While many of our programs cover these issues, there are others awarding MPA degrees in which students are only superficially exposed to these matters. As a result, students may graduate with only a vague understanding of these central aspects of management in the public sector unless human resources policy and management are more forcefully emphasized.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I want to reiterate that the integrity of public administration systems is important, especially when it comes to the management of public employees and civil service procedures. Politicians, especially

ected executives, may seek to augment their authority or may pursue reforms for political, ideological, or symbolic reasons. Typically, administrative changes are made with little regard for the full range of their possible consequences. Often, they are oriented toward increasing political influence or managerial authority. But entrusting more discretion in public managers suggests that we must also have mechanisms to ensure that they use their discretion responsibly—including centralized oversight. Clearly under a system of reduced employee protections, there is also a significantly heightened need for supervisors and managers to act ethically. The problem is finding the right balance between the need for public managers to have the flexibility necessary to guide their organizations effectively and the simultaneous need to ensure fairness and equity in the treatment of job applicants and employees.

Given the central importance of employees to the work of government, and by extension, of the civil service systems erected to implement human resources management policy, we should approach administrative reform cautiously and conservatively. We should work also to ensure that the students we are educating are fully knowledgeable of the history, operation, and objectives of human resources management in public administration. ■

NOTES

1. I wish to acknowledge and thank colleagues who read earlier drafts of my lecture and offered valuable suggestions: Hal G. Rainey, Gene A. Brewer, and Jerome S. Legge, Jr. Any errors of insight that remain are, of course, exclusively my responsibility.
2. The title of Lewis' book comes from a discussion he had with a high-ranking former official at the US Department of Energy (John MacWilliams) whose responsibility was to assess risks the department confronted regarding the maintenance of the US nuclear arsenal, efforts to guard against nuclear threats, work to clean up nuclear waste sites, and strategies to protect America's access to adequate energy. Lewis asked him to name the top five risks that we should worry about. MacWilliams listed: (1) an accident with nuclear weapons, (2) a nuclear confrontation with North Korea, (3) Iran's potential acquisition of nuclear weapons, (4) an attack on the nation's electrical grid, and (5) a failure of project

management. The fifth risk involves day-to-day managerial decisions by public servants charged with program responsibility. The problem was not so much that the risk was high, but rather that managerial failures could have devastating consequences.

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