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Politicians use the military as a political prop in an attempt to transfer the military's prestige and public trust to themselves, their party, or their efforts. These actions threaten American civil-military relations by affecting perceptions of military nonpartisanship and risk drawing the American military from objective civilian control toward subjective civilian control. Mitigating recommendations include additional military senior leader counsel to political leaders and legislative action to control the military's use as a political prop in political advertising.

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**MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

**TITLE:** Silent Threat: The Danger of the Military as a Political Prop

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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## Executive Summary

**Title:** Silent Threat: The Danger of the Military as A Political Prop

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**Thesis:** Politicians use the military as a political prop in an attempt to transfer the military's prestige and public trust to their efforts; this threatens American civil-military relations by affecting perceptions of military nonpartisanship.

**Discussion:** Politicians use a variety of tools for communicating their virtues to the populace. One of these tools is the use of props, items or people whose presence in visual communications is meant to transfer their perceived attributes to the politician. The American military is particularly apt for such use due to its perceived patriotism, honor, and trustworthiness. The lattermost trait is quantifiable through public opinion polls that, over the past several decades, place the military as the most, or amongst the most, trusted American institution while Congress and the Presidency score significantly lower. This aptness is countered by the traditional expectation and need of a nonpartisan and apolitical American military.

**Conclusion:** The military's use as a political prop endangers both the nation's trust in the military and the objective control mechanisms that have built that trust. Military senior leaders should clearly and consistently push back on such use and political leaders should pursue legislative prohibitions on the use of military personnel or imagery for political means.

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## *Preface*

As the initial drafts of this paper were being written the United States Capitol was forcibly breached by Americans motivated by hyper-partisan resentment and distrust. During the incident law enforcement opened fire on a rioter climbing through a busted-out window of the Capitol, killing her. That woman was an Air Force veteran, a fact that news media consistently noted in stories covering her death. Put another way: An American, associated in the public eye with the armed forces, was killed in an attempt to affect Constitutionally-defined democratic processes because she did not agree with the outcome and felt emboldened to action. The exact effects are still unknown, but the incident comes after years of erosion to political and civic norms, and highlights the continued danger to civil-military relations when the military is associated with partisanship. It is my hope that this paper contributes to an increasing awareness of the necessity of a nonpartisan and non-politicized military amongst civilian and military leaders by studying one inactive manner in which those norms continue to be eroded.

I would like to thank my mentor on this project, Dr. Wineman, for his guidance and successful tailoring of the topic, which has kept it (relatively) reasonable in scope. My family, who endured many hours of closed doors in the writing of this document, also deserves all the praise and subsequent time together I can give. Finally, I'd like to thank a group of people who shaped me prior to the beginning of this effort. In two years as a legislative liaison I had an inside look at the relationship, checks, and balances between the executive and legislative branches. The most heartening things I saw in that time were Americans who put aside politics and partisanship for the sole good of American defense. To those senior leaders, members of Congress and their staffs, and especially the professional staff members of the Armed Services Committees: thank you for all of the oft-unheralded things you do for all of us.

## INTRODUCTION

During a 2019 press conference announcing a new service chief, that nation's senior-most military officer interrupted their civilian head of defense to ask that he and his fellow military officers step offstage whilst questions of a political nature were asked and answered.<sup>1</sup> Fourteen months later another senior military officer was conspicuously identifiable while accompanying his head of state to an overtly political photo opportunity that required the physical expulsion of a large group protesting racial and political inequities.<sup>2</sup> Both events and the military leaders' actions were highly publicized and examined after the fact. The former, involving Australian Defence Minister Pyne and Defence Chief, Lieutenant General Campbell, has been held up as an ideal instance of adherence to military apoliticalness while the latter, involving then-President Trump and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Milley, resulted in severe criticism resulting in both apologies and missives on the necessity of the American military remaining apolitical and nonpartisan.<sup>3</sup>

The disparity in reactions stems from the differences in the senior military leaders' responses to the recognition that they were becoming entangled in overtly political events that could have a negative effect on civil-military relations despite their inactive participation. In neither case did those in uniform make any political statement, endorsement, critique, nor take any inherently military action. In both cases the military members were simply present and visible, set to be identifiable but inactive participants while political persons carried out inherently political actions. These military officers found themselves becoming unwitting political props, visual representations of their militaries and of their services' characteristics. While political props abound in political events and visual communications, the use of the American military as a political prop is insidious as it is intended to create an indelible link

between the military and individual politicians or parties. Such linkages undermine the duty of the military to serve the nation according to the guidance of the Constitution and federal law while aligned to neither politician or party.

Political props perform an inherently inactive role in their use as a prop – in neither of the aforementioned examples did the military members do or say anything overtly political – making the practice’s impacts on the prop less obvious than if the prop had conducted its own overt political action or endorsement. Those negative impacts stem from why political props are used, reasons illuminated through understanding of propaganda and advertising theories. Of possible political props, the United States military has multiple attributes that make it particularly attractive for that use. That attractiveness, paradoxically, exists in part due to the civil-military relations norms and policies that are meant to maintain a military that exists outside of the political arena. The abandonment of those norms creates a threat of transforming the military into a political actor, the very perception of which would begin to erode the attributes that make it so attractive for politicians’ use of it as a political prop, with the most-dire consequence being the potential for military action against legitimate democratic processes. Such a situation and its related consequences would be eliminated by Congress passing legislating restricting the use of the military as a political prop and through proactive leadership from military senior leaders.

## SECTION I: POLITICAL PROPS – ADVERTISING & TRANSFERENCE

It is apropos that propaganda, the art of spreading “ideas, facts, or allegations...to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause,” begins with the etymologically-unrelated word prop, an object “used in creating or enhancing a desired effect,” as the former is often enhanced or dependent upon the latter.<sup>4</sup> Propaganda developed from Latin roots with an initial meaning of “to further” biologically, though there was a turn toward its current informational meaning in the

sixteenth century when Pope Gregory XIII created a group of cardinals charged with spreading Catholic doctrine and named it *da propaganda fide*.<sup>5</sup> The term gradually lost its religious connotation in favor of generally negative links to political or governmental persuasive messaging during the late-nineteenth century, a link that became indelible during the propaganda barrages of World War I.<sup>6</sup> During the Great War, belligerent states “conducted organized and extensive campaigns of oratory and literature to convince the righteousness and importance of their causes” with a penchant of “contain(ing) exaggeration and falsehood” that, combined with the negative international reaction of the human costs of the war for which the propaganda campaigns supported, cemented the negative connotation of the term that survives to today.<sup>7</sup> Visual war propaganda of the First and Second World Wars often made use of generic patriotic items, or props, such as the United States’ “I Want You” Army recruiting poster featuring the fictional Uncle Sam.<sup>8</sup> Like propaganda, prop in this usage also has Latin roots, though it is to *proprietatem* (property), the subsequent term “theater property,” and finally the shortened term prop as used to describe an item used in visual art.<sup>9</sup> Props in theater and in propaganda are normally silent inanimate objects, meant to sell the realism of a scene or, like the skull in Hamlet’s soliloquy, to represent concepts, themes, or notions grander than the prop itself. Theater props visually create and reinforce themes and messages conveyed through word and action. The skull of Yorick in Hamlet is used not to only to sell the realism of a graveyard scene, but also to focus and increase attention on Hamlet’s pensiveness and his existential worry about the inevitability of death.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the image of a stern and directly-pointing Uncle Sam, resplendent in red, white, and blue, has a dual purpose: representing both a literal call to duty from one’s nation while subtextually challenging the constitution of the individual. This ability for a prop to represent more than itself makes the use of props attractive in all forms of

propaganda, advertising, and messaging, to include the medium that falls within all three: political messaging.

In political messaging, a political prop can be defined as a thing, person, or group used in the messaging to imply that it shares values with, supports, or endorses a politician or their political stance. Political messaging, especially prepared visual media and the backdrops of political rallies, are heavily curated and frequently make use of props according to this definition, though what is used as a prop and how it is used is dependent upon the medium. Politicians and political candidates hold speeches, campaign events, or rallies and the audio, video, and photography from these can be subsequently spread through audio, photographic, and video media. Any props used must be suitably large, prominent, and identifiable enough that they are assured to be present and noticeable in visual media subsequently used by the individual's team or by other, uncontrolled media elements. This ensures that the resultant photographs and video, which has a larger reach than the immediate audience of an event, includes the prop, influencing the message without direct input into use of the photograph or footage. Examples of live-event prop use include then-President George W. Bush announcing the end of major combat operations in Iraq from the deck of an aircraft carrier, then-President Barack Obama introducing an updated foreign policy with additional funding requirements in front of United States Military cadets, and then-President Trump notably featuring Air Force One directly behind him in campaign rallies and accepting the Republican Party's nomination for his reelection directly in front of the White House after considering doing it at Gettysburg National Military Park.<sup>11</sup> The events further highlight the diversity of items that can be used as props; ranging from military hardware to people to objects that are indelibly linked with the Presidency. These events all received significant news media and public attention, with images and videos of all being easy to

find eighteen years after the first event. Though the opportunity for such unpaid coverage is desirable, it comes with the risk of inability to control the use or reception of the images or videos, a risk less-present in the highly-controlled realm of campaign advertising.

Campaign advertising has become big business in America, with \$8.5 billion spent on political advertisements in the 2019-2020 election cycle, representing 60 percent of the total amount spent for all national election activities.<sup>12</sup> Of the \$8.5 billion, 76 percent (\$6.37 billion) was spent on over nine million television advertisements and 20 percent (\$1.65 billion) was spent on digital advertising to include \$1.07 billion on Facebook alone.<sup>13</sup> These large sums were spent because of the reach of television and internet advertising and because campaign teams can tailor their advertisements for specific effects on specific audiences. This is done by very carefully crafting the messages conveyed in audio or text and imagery such that it represents the qualities the candidate is hoping to imprint upon the audience. The use of props within campaign advertisements enhances these effects, making them nearly ubiquitous. For example, a major 2020 reelection campaign video advertisement for then-President Donald Trump made use of pioneer and cowboy imagery, images of supporters of a variety of ethnicities, World War II and modern military footage, footage of conspicuous veterans at a campaign rally, a bald eagle, and near-continuous visuals of the American flag.<sup>14</sup> Comparatively, a major 2020 election campaign video advertisement for President Joseph Biden used footage of then-Vice President Biden identifiable due to the use of Executive Branch leadership aircraft such as Air Force Two, a working Jeep factory, images of young President Biden in working class settings juxtaposed against images of then-President Trump in lavish settings, images of iconic civil rights leaders and events, the Statue of Liberty, and similarly near-continuous visuals of the American flag.<sup>15</sup> All of these political props were carefully chosen to convey to the politicians their perceived

desirable attributes of patriotism, stalwartness, traditional America, hard work, and honor without the need to overtly state as much. This non-overt effect is realized through a propaganda and advertising tool first defined during the rise of fascism.

The rise of 1930s nationalism led to waves of conflicting propaganda that only increased as the Second World War began. In an effort to educate Americans to the danger of propaganda a group of academics formed the Institute for Propaganda Analysis and published a guidebook, *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, in an effort to describe in plain words the seven devices or “tricks” propagandists, use to curry favor for their message.<sup>16</sup> These seven devices have gone on to be used in both political and non-political advertising, with “transfer” being highly applicable to recent involvements of military and politics. *The Fine Art of Propaganda* defines transfer as the carrying of “the authority, sanction, and prestige of something respected and revered over to something else in order to make the latter acceptable.”<sup>17</sup> Transfer is inherently about symbols, their emotional link, and their position within the zeitgeist.<sup>18</sup> Patriotic images are plentiful in examples of transfer, especially amongst politicians who are inherently vying to represent the nation. For transfer to work the imagery that is used must be instantly recognizable, another aspect for which patriotic imagery is particularly well suited for, and must have the desired perception within the target audience. The aforementioned campaign ads’ use of cowboys, individuals in clothing that identified them as veterans, national symbols such as the bald eagle and Statue of Liberty, and American flag imagery all served as readily-noticeable and easily-contextualized transfer objects representing what each candidate determined to be desirable qualities for a President with little chance for negative connotations amongst the bulk of American voters. Conversely, imagery representing highly-divisive topics for which the candidate’s party supports but the middle or opposite end of the political spectrum opposes (e.g.,

an open or closed abortion clinic, guns or a gun shop, immigrant detention centers, etc.) tend to be avoided as the reaction to their presence is harder to determine for a larger portion of the population. Beyond an intended transference of attributes to the politician, readily-noticeable political props such as military imagery are also used to affect the viewers' perception of a message's overall content and credibility.

All advertisements seek to gain an audience's attention and hold it for long enough to communicate a believable and convincing message in order to motivate the audience to make the desired decision. In visual advertising, the imagery plays the leading role in both capturing an audience's attention and in bolstering the message. First, pictorial or image elements are the most effective part of an advertisement at gaining the initial attention of an audience, with more-noticeable elements being more effective.<sup>19</sup> Once attention to the advertisement or message is gained, that attention must be transferred to the message or text itself, for which visual branding, or representative imagery that serves as "visual brand-identity cues...such as the brand name, trademark, and logo," has been shown to be the most effective advertisement element.<sup>20</sup> If successful, the transference allows consideration of the textual or verbal elements of the advertisement, completing the desired chain of events up to the audience's decision making. Political props serve as the pictorial or image elements that gain attention and can also serve as the branding element, of the prop and not the politician, that drives attention transference to the main message. For example, in President Biden's "Keep Up" campaign video clips of him in a working Jeep factory accompany a voiceover proclaiming him to be "on the side of working families."<sup>21</sup> This combination uses imagery elements (e.g., the factory, workers, and Jeeps) to gain or maintain attention and the instantly recognizable branding of Jeeps (e.g., the fascia of Jeep Wranglers on the assembly line) to drive a link to, and bolster, the voiceover that proclaims

the benefit of a Biden presidency to the working class. The choice of using a Jeep factory as the political prop is additionally beneficial as Jeep has a carefully curated brand image that focuses on ruggedness, freedom, authenticity, and Americanness, all attributes desirable to a candidate for President.<sup>22</sup> The culminating effect of the advertisement or message is not only to affect the decisions of the audience, but also offers the opportunity to influence that audience's perception of the candidate.

Audiences inherently judge the credibility of an advertisement or message as well as the credibility of the source of the advertisement or message. These judgments in turn affect the audience's perception of what is being advertised and affect the audience's decisions to support what is being advertised. Specifically, a viewer's judgments of an advertisement's credibility and their perceptions of the advertisement's quality create an attitude toward the advertisement that, when combined with the viewer's perceptions of the brand being advertised, directly affects the attitude toward the brand and intent to purchase the brand or item being advertised (see Figure 1 in Appendix 1 for a visual representation of this process).<sup>23</sup> While these precepts were postulated regarding print media, its efficacy has been born out toward video and online advertising, with credibility in online advertisements being shown to drive further searches by the audience for product information leading to increased intention of purchasing what is being advertised.<sup>24</sup> When this system is applied to political messaging, political props serve to affect the perceptions of credibility of the message (i.e., the advertisement's credibility) as well as perceptions of the politician or policy (i.e., the brand perception). Combined, these are meant to affect the audience's attitude toward the politician or policy (i.e., brand attitude) and support thereof (i.e., purchase intent). For example, in then-President Trump's "Stronger" campaign advertisement, patriotic imagery of cowboys and imagery of a cheering campaign rally crowd are

accompanied by a voiceover extoling the economic and foreign policy successes of then-President Trump's first term in an attempt to add credibility to the message of four economically-successful years while transferring connotations of toughness to the candidate's brand in an effort to influence voters.<sup>25</sup> For a political prop, this chain of linkages from attention gaining, credibility affecting, and transference of characteristics is dependent first and foremost upon the public perceptions of the political prop. In a deeply split America, this makes the choosing of political props dangerous, though one easily-identifiable prop enjoys support across the political spectrum, making it an easy, if damaging, choice.

## SECTION II: APPRECIATION OF THE MILITARY AS A POLITICAL PROP

For a political prop to be effective, it must first be instantly recognizable by an audience; an attribute in which the American military excels. Military members in uniform stand out in an obvious way, such as occurred during then-President Trump's walk to Lafayette Square when General Milley was conspicuous in a primarily-green camouflage military uniform while all other participants wore dark business attire.<sup>26</sup> The wearing of uniforms not only makes military members stand out, but also makes them immediately identifiable as members of the military. Similarly, military equipment used as a backdrop, such as the F/A-18 Hornet aircraft and aircraft carrier tower behind then-President George W. Bush during his May 1, 2003 "Mission Accomplished speech," can also be readily linked with the United States military.<sup>27</sup> Imagery of a military member, of a group of service members, or of distinctly-military equipment represents more than the individuals or equipment, it represents the entirety of the military and its perceived characteristics, characteristics that are important to the military's attractiveness as a prop.

When viewed through the lens of advertising, the military also has an easily recognizable brand and enviable brand image. Surveys conducted since the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, terrorist

attacks show that Americans perceive the military to embody honor, integrity, patriotism, and sacrifice for the greater good.<sup>28</sup> Such is the power of these perceptions that polls have indicated that roughly nine-tenths of Americans feel pride in service members, more than two-thirds have personally thanked a military member for their service, and more than half have directly helped someone in the military or their family.<sup>29</sup> These perceptions are aided by the very-robust public affairs and recruiting efforts of the military, with over \$1.4 billion in the Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act dedicated to advertising and recruiting efforts that are inherently positive and reinforce favorable perceptions amongst the public.<sup>30</sup> This single-year spending amount is particularly notable for being only slightly behind the \$1.5 billion total spent for advertising in the entirety of the 2016 Presidential election and that it represented wholly positive exposure with no “attack ads” to counter the messaging.<sup>31</sup> This level of public support, public attention, and specific public perceptions are enviable to politicians, though amongst these perceptions there is one highly-quantified attribute that is notably desirable.

Americans’ trust and confidence in the nation’s public institutions has been tracked through public polls since World War II with clear trends for the military, Congress, and the Presidency. The most consistent of such polls are Gallup’s “Confidence in Institutions” polls that have been run since the mid-1970s. These polls ask Americans to rate their confidence of public institutions as “A Great Deal,” “Quite a lot,” “Some,” “Very little,” “None,” or “No opinion” with Gallup defining the combination of the first two options as a vote of “confidence in” the institution.<sup>32</sup> The simplicity and consistency of these polls allow for long-term comparisons of institutions against each other and over time. Among the military, Congress, and the Presidency, Congress has routinely maintained the worst confidence numbers of the three, with numbers dropping from 40% in 1975 to 13% in 2020 with a low of 7% in 2014.<sup>33</sup> The

Presidency started with a 52% confidence rating in 1975, a minimum of 25% in 2007, and 39% in 2020.<sup>34</sup> The military meanwhile has seen a net increase in confidence starting with a 58% rating in 1975 rising to 72% in 2020 with a high of 85% in February 1991.<sup>35</sup> These military confidence numbers routinely result in it being placed as the public institution with the most confidence of the American people, though in the 2020 poll “Small Business” took the top spot with a 75% rating.<sup>36</sup> This consistent disparity between elected officials’ ratings and the military’s ratings presents a tempting opportunity for politicians: the transference of the military’s most valuable asset as a political prop, trust. The use of the military as a political prop has further advantages, specifically with regard to further attributes that dovetail well with the needs of effective advertising.

The combination of the military’s qualities of instant recognition and its perceived strong and favorable attributes allow it to fit uncomfortably well into the concepts of advertising theory. By being notably different, military imagery in visual media grabs attention, providing a segue to the message of a political advertisement. Further, military imagery represents a form of brand, one that the American people have shown continued high confidence in. This high confidence is then meant to be linked both to the political advertisement and the targeted candidate in an effort to affect how the viewer’s attitude toward the advertisement and the perceptions of the politician to in turn affect the viewer’s attitude toward the politician to drive support. Beyond supporting the effectiveness of individual advertisements or messages, the association of the military with a politician drives the propaganda tool of transfer. By associating the military, and thus its perceived qualities and prestige, with a politician, it is hoped that those qualities and prestige will be carried over to the politician. In the previously-mentioned two-minute campaign advertisements for President Biden and then-President Trump, military imagery (i.e., military members in

uniform or military equipment) is featured five times<sup>37</sup> and three times<sup>38</sup> respectively. All but two of those eight instances are face-to-face interactions between the candidate and uniformed service members, furthering the message of connection between the candidates and the military. These attempts at linking the military and the candidates to cause transference are done purposefully and make sense both as an advertising tool and due to the future links between the military and those whom desire to be their Commander in Chief, though doing so is propagandizing a group that does not actively seek it.

Like all other political props, the military can be used in a variety of means by a variety of politicians, though guidance and norms ensure that the military does not actively seek such a role. Instead, military imagery is often used by a candidate without the military's request or permission. For example, both the campaigns of then-President Trump and President Biden ran advertisements that featured imagery of general officers in uniform without seeking those officers' permission beforehand, with President Biden's campaign team eventually removing the image from the advertisement after the retired general officer requested them to do so.<sup>39</sup> The advertisement for then-President Trump, though, highlights the most awkward way in which the military is used as a political prop: when it is done by a sitting Commander in Chief. The Commander in Chief has broad authority over military personnel and military events as part of their constitutional powers. The execution of these powers results in frequent interaction with the military including interaction with ceremonial staffs (e.g., Marine door guards at the White House), transportation teams (e.g., crews of Air Force One and Marine One), informal events such as speeches to troop formations at military bases, and regular meetings with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or other key senior leaders. Any of these interactions could result in photographs or videos that are used after the fact to make the military a prop in political

advertising; as with any subject in a photo or video there is little ability to control the end use of that media. Such use makes the military a wholly passive political prop, unable to affect its use in political messaging and, in turn, putting at risk the norms that have supported American civil-military relations since the nation's founding.

### SECTION III: CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

The United States began its life distrustful of having a standing arm of the sort it had just expelled. Yet, 181 years and two world wars after the Declaration of Independence the nation found itself locked in a nuclear-armed Cold War with 2.6 million active duty personnel, roughly equivalent to the 1776 population of the American colonies.<sup>40</sup> That major shift was enabled by adherence to the principals of civilian control of the military.<sup>41</sup> This unique balance resulted in significant development and study of the civil-military relations that could successfully maintain a military that was not seen as a threat to the nation's democratic foundation. Amongst those studies of how civilians and the military interact, Samuel Huntington's 1957 *The Soldier and the State* is, without a doubt, the most influential work. Written in the early Cold War as America came to grips with the existence of a large, standing, professional, and technology-dependent military complex, its tenets remain both a cornerstone and touchstone for current civil-military relations studies.

Divided into three parts, Huntington's first significant work mostly consists of historic examples to frame the overarching theoretical framework provided in the first part, with the second and third parts splitting American civil-military history before and after 1940 respectively. In covering the civil-military history of the United States from the country's inception to 1940, Huntington describes the building of a state control apparatus by those that initially distrusted a standing military while finding it increasingly necessary for one's existence.

These competing viewpoints built upon the framework of the Constitution, which still underpins civilian military control today. Huntington, however, attributes one key fault of the American system to the Constitutional construct: the splitting of military controls between the Legislative and Executive Branches, a split that necessitates the intertwining of the military into political checks and balances. Huntington's historical analysis focuses heavily on the era from the start of World War II to the time of his publication. This weighting is not due solely to recency bias, but also due to the seismic changes the nation saw as its Cold War military size and cost swelled well beyond that of any near-peacetime period before due to the perceived constant threat of the Soviet Union. Additionally, the nation was feeling through the effects of a military that was more technologically-demanding of its members and of the effects of the reorganizations from the National Security Act of 1947. These changes drove then-nascent changes to how the military, the nation, and the political leaders of the state interacted.

Huntington's assessment of historic and then-current civil-military relations was necessary to bolster and justify his theoretical framework, which serves as his major contribution to the field. Within this framework are three prime tenets of civil-military relations. First, the military, or at least the officer corps, is a profession aside from society as a whole who is entrusted with the "management of violence" at the direction of the state.<sup>42</sup> Second, the military and society are bound by the oft-opposed functional imperatives (i.e., the necessity to win wars) and societal imperatives (i.e., the need to reflect the nature of society as a whole and to be shaped by social forces).<sup>43</sup> Third, civilian authorities control the military either through subjective or objective control.<sup>44</sup> In the concept of subjective control the military is a political pawn or player controlled by the dominant political element of the state for that element's advancement. Objective control conversely requires the separation of politics and the military, with military

professionals allowed autonomy in military affairs for efforts directed by a rightfully-selected civilian leadership. Of these two modes of control, Huntington advocates heavily for objective control as a means for long-term, steady, and ready military defenses for the nation, though recognizes that gaining and maintaining such a system requires adherence to his previously-mentioned tenets of military professionalism and balance between functional and societal imperatives. The former is the foremost priority as the society must trust their military to utilize the violence that rightful civilian authorities direct, a trust that is built in part by ensuring the military is “politically sterile and neutral.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, society must trust in the object professionalism of the military such that the military carries out its functional imperative only when directed by those that are selected to speak for the nation’s societal imperative. If it is believed that the American military will carry out its functional imperative’s perceived needs or its desires outside of the direction of civilian leadership then the military’s professionalism and the public trust that go with it will degrade, vacating objective control for subjective control. However, the American military has thus far successfully held to the necessary tenets of objective control, enabling the military to not only be trusted, but for it to be amongst the nation’s most trusted institutions despite a decrease in direct experience with the military amongst Americans.

Americans’ confidence in the military has followed a generally upward trend since the end of the Cold War while the military’s size, both in total numbers and as a percentage of the workforce, have followed a generally downward trend.<sup>46</sup> As the military has shrunk, so has its recruiting base. Only an estimated 29 percent of the youth population are eligible for recruitment while over 75 percent of those who do enter have a family member who served in the military.<sup>47</sup> These trends have increased a separation of the military from the society it serves, resulting in a

dichotomy of broad general support for the military set against ignorance of the military's actual functions and actions.<sup>48</sup> This trend reflects the growth of "thank you for your service culture" in which Americans thank service members reflexively while willfully lacking understanding of what those service members actually do or have gone through.<sup>49</sup> Benevolent but ignorant gratitude toward military members is indicative of an American public that is unwilling and unequipped to judge the use and actions of the military, placing the military in a criticism-free safe space where the singular act of being the military grants it unquestioned prestige and clout. With the lack of first-hand and second-hand experience with the military, society's link to the military is more reliant upon media, which tends to focus on exceptionally positive or negative military actions or events without covering the level of sustainment and cost inherent in recent wars.<sup>50</sup> These factors and effects open the opportunity for media exposure in the form of a political prop to endanger the apolitical and nonpartisan characteristics of the military that allow for objective control and public confidence. While the military is used in a passive sense as a political prop, the recognized dangers to objective control caused by it taking an active political role have led to laws and policies meant to prevent it.

Three federal documents provide restrictions on political actions or endorsements of members of the Department of Defense. The oldest is the 1939 Hatch Act (Public Law 76-252, now Title 5, United States Code Sections 7321–7326), that restricts partisan political activities and candidacy of civilian federal government employees.<sup>51</sup> Military members are beholden to Article 88 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (Title 10, United States Code, Section 888) prohibits commissioned officers from using "contemptuous words against the President, the Vice President, Congress" and certain other office holders while they are in office.<sup>52</sup> While the Uniformed Code of Military Justice applies to retired officers, there has been a reluctance to

charge retired officers under Article 88, with only one such charge occurring in the past century, with that 1918 case ending in an acquittal.<sup>53</sup>

Active duty, retired, and inactive military members are further restricted from partisan political activities by Department of Defense Directive 1344.10, “Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces.” Among other prohibitions, the directive restricts current service members from serving as officials in partisan organizations, speaking at a partisan rally or meeting, or to appear in uniform to support a partisan effort or otherwise to appear to be representing the American military in a partisan way.<sup>54</sup> The directive also provides restrictions for retired or inactive members’ use of imagery of themselves in uniform for political purposes that, while generally allowed, must be accompanied with a disclaimer meant to ensure that viewers do not infer endorsement of the Department of Defense or an individual service.<sup>55</sup> While these restrictions apply to service members and currently-employed government civilians, they do not apply to politicians who use imagery of military personnel in uniform for political advertisements without the consent of the personnel or the Department of Defense. In fact, there are no restrictions on the Executive Branch featuring military members or military imagery during non-campaign events, nor are there restrictions on former military members making the public political endorsements they were prohibited from making while in active service. The latter gap in restrictions facilitated the rise in the 1990s of the most blatant and obvious linking of military professionals with specific parties and politicians: the retired general officer endorsement.

General officers serve for decades beholden to Department of Defense Directive 1344.10, prohibiting them from making public endorsements of politicians or parties. This prohibition robs politicians from receiving the sort of direct member or en masse endorsements from the

military that would make the intended passive endorsement inherent in political prop use pointless. However, the directive does not prohibit officers that are no longer active from making endorsements, a fact that led to a groundswell of very-public, and very-sought-after endorsements from retired general officers starting in the 1990s. In the face of this rising number of retired general officers' endorsements of presidential candidates, James Golby, Kyle Dropp, and Peter Feaver sought to quantify the effect of those endorsements in "Military Campaigns: Veterans' Endorsements and Presidential Elections." Utilizing a survey of 2,517 registered voters the authors found that endorsements did not markedly persuade voters, but found indications that endorsements may be more impactful to the Democratic candidate, possibly due to those endorsements being against expectation of veterans' support of a Republican candidate.<sup>56</sup> As part of their study the authors also analyzed the effect of endorsements on respondents' views of the military as an institution. While limited by their survey's size and design, the authors did find that military endorsements could negatively, and not positively, affect perceptions of the military's attributes.<sup>57</sup> The fact that endorsements remained highly sought after by politicians despite public criticism via editorials and scholarly works speaks to the power of perceptions, both those of the politicians on the status of the military and on those of the nation on the status of the military. It is, in turn, the possible negative effects on those perceptions that drives the danger of the less-overt linkages driven by the use of the military as a political prop

#### SECTION IV: HAZARDS AND COUNTERMEASURES

The greatest danger of the United States military being used as a political prop is that is done successfully, that the military does indeed become linked in the public eye to a politician, political party, or political stance. Such successful linkage would represent the breakdown of

Huntington's objective control to subjective control, dragging the military directly into the political realm and damaging American civil-military relations and norms. The first friction point of that breakdown occurs immediately upon senior military leaders recognizing that they are to be involved in an overtly political event, requiring them to balance the needs to support civilian leadership with the necessity of upholding apolitical norms. A breakdown of those apolitical norms would cause the erosion of the twin pillars Huntington showed uphold the military's societal expectations: the trust placed in the military by the American public and its elected officials. More dangerously, such an erosion of trust could mirror reality, with military members or the military as a whole becoming active political actors, seeking to influence, overturn, or create laws or policies beyond the military's constitutional constraints. These threats warrant changes, both legislative and cultural, to uphold norms and protect the military's traditional beneficial role as a protector, not a determiner, of the republic.

The examples of political events that opened this paper show the most-immediate danger of military involvement as a political prop. Both created crises of obedience as the Australian press conference went from politically benign to overtly political and the walk to Lafayette Square became apparent to be specifically and overtly political. In the former, Lieutenant General Campbell extricated those in uniform from the stage while in the latter General Milley took part in the politically-fraught publicity stunt, only to announce later that he should not have.<sup>58</sup> Both situations were awkward, though General Milley's was more so, as he was faced with balancing an apolitical imperative with a President's wishes while being uncertain of what exactly he was walking into. Had General Milley known the specifics of the event that he was about to take part in, and had he known how his blatantly obvious uniformed presence would affect the response to the event, his options were to accompany the President as requested or risk

the sudden end of his career by refusing to do so. This risk stems from the fact that what the President was seeking to have General Milley do was not illegal. Had General Milley given the President his best military advice that he should not make the walk to Lafayette Square and had the President ignored this advice and insisted that General Milley accompany him, the only choices would have been resignation or disobeying a lawful, though deeply problematic order. Beyond the immediate effect on General Milley, such a decision to resign or disobey could also gravely affect the relationship between the then-sitting President and the military as a whole, an entirely undesirable decision on its own. The desire to please or appease civilian leadership is a necessary aspect of a military that is subservient to those elected officials. However, when this desire is put upon by civilian political considerations, it risks upending the results of the long-standing apolitical norms and traditions that have assured objective control of the American military.

It is ironic that a shift toward subjective control would be first evidenced in a decrease in one of the attributes that make the military so attractive as a political prop: the trust and confidence that the military currently enjoys from society at large and the elected officials charged with commanding and overseeing the military. This decrease would first occur due to the perception of military backing of political politicians, political parties, or specific political policies. The effects of active duty military support for a politician are difficult to quantify due to the prohibitions on the public endorsement of politicians, though studies of retired general officers' endorsements of candidates have shown that those endorsements negatively, and not positively, affect perceptions of the military.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, in the wake of General Milley accompanying then-President Trump to Lafayette Square, Jim Golby and Peter Feaver previewed not-yet-published research that “suggests that linking the prestige of the military to controversial

policies carries with it unintended consequences, including the potential for reduced overall confidence in the military and increased doubts about the military's competence, truthfulness, and other dimensions of trustworthiness."<sup>60</sup> Namely, in a survey experiment designed around military support of a controversial border policy, the scholars found that the military's support had little effect on respondents' support of the policy, but that it did negatively affect respondents' confidence in the military. Such a response appears to be paralleled by two YouGov polls conducted a week before and after the Lafayette Square event. In polls taken from May 29 to May 30, 2020 (1,060 respondents) and June 9 to June 10, 2020 (1,570 respondents) Americans were asked if they had "A great deal", "Some", "A little", or "None" trust in the United States military.<sup>61</sup> Republican responses stating "A great deal" or "Some" confidence was essentially unchanged at 89% and 90% (+1%) while Democrat responses dropped from 73% to 66% (-7%) and Independent responses dropped from 70% to 67% (-3%).<sup>62</sup> A link of causality between the Lafayette Square event and these polling numbers is not possible due to the size and nature of the survey, though its results correlate both with the timing of the polls and the response presumed by scholarly works. This detrimental effect also occurs for the trust and confidence placed in the military by elected officials, with particular concern regarding incoming Presidents. Should a new President perceive the military to support the opponent party, or to have backed their prime election opponent, it is possible that they will distrust or ignore the senior military leaders that are meant to provide that President their best military advice. Such a gap has existed in recent history, with then-President Clinton's relationship with the military being fraught enough that a leading civil-military relations scholar labeled it a "crisis" while military senior leaders felt the need to lecture units on proper behavior in front of the President

prior to events with military audiences.<sup>63</sup> These threats to perceptions are problematic, though pale in comparison to the threat of the perceptions being evidenced by direct action.

The foremost risk of the military's continued use as a political prop is the possibility that the desired transfer mechanism works as intended. Transferring the qualities, attributes, and expectations of politicians to military members, whether in the eyes of the public or military members, invites overt political action from the military. Dissent and discontent with elected officials and their decisions has and will always occur within the military. However, with the growth of social media, the ability of military members to share their dissent and discontent has expanded in ways that have already caused concern about the state of civil-military relations.<sup>64</sup> The greater danger is that increasing linkage to politicians or political parties combined with the belief of being a political actor may influence service members to go beyond statements to actions. At their worst, such actions could include the physical support of a politician or party against democratic processes, representing the complete betrayal of Huntington's concept of public trust for managed violence. The possibility of hostile seditious acts by current or former military members of the type that would confirm the worst fears about standing armies of the founding fathers is, unfortunately, not hypothetical. Several former military members and at least one active duty military member have been identified to be part of the mob that attacked the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, in an unsuccessful attempt to disrupt Congress's certification of the 2020 presidential election.<sup>65</sup> Those few insurrectionists represent the ultimate danger, a military that sees itself as a political actor that perceives support from politicians and a public that share its position, and that acts to contravene actions that would run counter to its position. Such a threat appears to remain extraordinarily unlikely and the military's use as a political prop would

not summon it on its own, though there are actions that would minimize or eliminate the effects of the use of the military as a political prop.

The apolitical nature of the military is not enshrined in law nor is there a legal prohibition on politicians politicizing the military, both are accepted as norms of American civil-military relations. However, societal norms only exist if society continues to follow them. American society and its norms continue to evolve, with one aspect of being society's increasing separation from the military that increasingly constrains public attention of the military to media, to include the millions of political advertisements in which the military can be used as a political prop. One method to eliminate the effect of political advertisements on perceptions of the military, and on civil-military relations at large, would be a change to Title 52, United States code to prohibit the use of military imagery (e.g., imagery of military members in uniform, imagery of military-unique equipment, etc.) in political advertisements such as campaign advertisements. This change would require Congressional legislative action similar to recent attempts to add transparency to advertisements and their funding (e.g., 2017's Honest Ads Act and Campaign Sunlight Act) and would fit easily into the already-significant legal requirements of Title 52 and the Federal Elections Commission's guidance in Code of Federal Regulations 11. With estimated campaign advertising spending for the 2020 election exceeding \$8 billion, such a prohibition would represent the elimination of a major avenue for the outside politicization of the military.<sup>66</sup> Such legislation should also incorporate the guidance of Department of Defense Directive 1344.10, requiring political candidates to add disclaimers to any imagery or text that extols their former military service. By eliminating the use of the military as a political prop in political advertisements, these prohibitions would eliminate the most-persistent and most-overt linking of the military to specific politicians or policies, but not ad hoc instances such as General

Milley's appearance at the Lafayette Square incident, which require norm-reinforcement by military leaders.

Senior military leaders are responsible for providing their best military advice to senior political leaders based upon their decades of experience, experience that the vast majority of politicians do not share. Traditionally, this experience and advice is expected to be martial in focus, leaving politics and its ramifications to civilian policy makers. This tradition should be broken when it comes to the use of the military for political aims. Senior military leaders should take the time to explain to political leaders the necessity of the military remaining apolitical. This includes clearly and directly explaining to political leaders the dangers of any use of the military as a political prop. Additionally, senior military leaders should continue to provide guidance on the importance of the military remaining apolitical and nonpartisan, to include in response to significant deviations from norms such as the Joint Chiefs of Staff did in the wake of the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol.<sup>67</sup> Finally, it is incumbent upon military senior leaders to remain staunchly apolitical themselves, ensuring an example is set for their services and for political leaders. Through these actions senior military leaders can be the exemplars of nonpartisanship to their services, for their political leaders, and their nation.

Protecting the military from use as a political prop for partisan reasons requires a tight-roper's balance between ineffectiveness and overreach. Legislative prohibitions of politicians interacting with military members or equipment, or the recording of visuals from such encounters, would directly conflict with constitutional requirements for oversight and command given to Congress and Presidents respectively. Such broad prohibitions would also affect far more than the use cases that are most dangerous for civil-military relations (i.e., political advertisements), resulting in the elimination of events, footage, and photographs that are neutral

or positive for civil-military relations, resulting in the need for carefully-tailored recommendations. The provided recommendations also avoid restrictions of speech or text in political advertising that would link a politician or political party with the military (e.g., a candidate claiming in a campaign advertisement that they fully support or “stand with” the military, a candidate stating that they have previously supported a specific military effort, etc.) as such restrictions would tread upon free speech rights as enumerated in the First Amendment to the Constitution. While the recommendations for senior military leaders to serve as examples and to advise political leaders on threats to civil-military relations appear easier to implement, they are fraught with risk to individual relationships. Military senior leaders have a vested interest in maintaining a productive relationship with both members of Congress and especially the President. Any action that would see a senior military leader appear to direct, influence, or temper politically-focused actions of the President creates an immediate crisis of obedience with potential long-term implications. Similarly, the perception of a military member counseling or teaching a Commander in Chief on what they should or should not do could be problematically perceived as a subordinate speaking down to or dictating to the President. These risks are worth bearing, though military senior leaders must tread carefully in these situations to avoid upsetting the very civil-military functions they are hoping to protect.

## CONCLUSION

The use of the United States military as a political prop jeopardizes everything that makes it so attractive for that use. The American military’s immediately-identifiable image conveys with it the prestige that it has earned it a place at the top of lists of most-trusted American institutions. Politicians use the military as a political prop to tie into these attributes, first to bolster their advertisements or events and then to drive the transference of the military’s prestige

to the politician. In doing this the military is a silent tool, as there are prohibitions, traditions, and norms against it endorsing politicians or political parties. Those restrictions are in place for the exact reason that the military should not be used as a political prop: the risks inherent in a politicized military. Should the military be linked in the public eye with a specific politician or party, the objective civilian control that has defined the American military since the concept's inception shall slip toward the subjective control Samuel Huntington warned against with dire consequences. The faith and trust in the military that undergirds its place in the nation's constitutional system will erode, both amongst the public and the politicians that are elected to represent them. More worryingly, the military and its members could embrace the mantle of being political actors, using the services' considerable manpower, resources, or even weaponry to enforce a political agenda that benefits the military at the cost of the processes, checks, and balances that have no constitutional role for the military. Such a threat demands counteraction.

The participation of veterans and military members at the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, storming of the United States Capitol foreshadows the dangers of a slip toward subjective civilian control and emphasizes the need for corrective actions. The norms of yesterday should be bolstered through legislative corrections to election law, prohibiting the use of military imagery in campaign advertisements, eliminating the use of the military as a political prop from divisive claims that attempt to sway the electorate. Military leaders must also continue to play a direct role in forestalling a slide to politicization. This should be done by providing education and feedback to political leaders about the necessity of maintaining the military's apolitical character, by exemplifying apolitical norms, and by providing clear guidance to the force in the face of maleficence or uncertainty. These actions would forestall the silent threat to societal norms caused by the use of the American military as a political prop.

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- <sup>50</sup> Schafer, “Generations of War: The Rise of the Warrior Caste & the All-Volunteer Force”, 9 – 11
- <sup>51</sup> Hatch Act, 5 U.S.C. §§ 7321–7326
- <sup>52</sup> Uniform Code of Military Justice, 10 U.S.C. § 888
- <sup>53</sup> John G. Kester, "Soldiers Who Insult the President: An Uneasy Look at Article 88 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice." *Harvard Law Review* 81, no. 8 (1968), 1726
- <sup>54</sup> US Department of Defense, “Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces,” Directive 1344.10, February 19, 2008, 3-5
- <sup>55</sup> US Department of Defense, Directive 1344.10, 5-7
- <sup>56</sup> James Golby, Kyle Dropp, and Peter Feaver, “Military Campaigns: Veterans’ Endorsements and Presidential Elections” (Washington D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2012), 12-13
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- <sup>58</sup> Helene Cooper, “Milley Apologizes for Role in Trump Photo Op: ‘I Should Not Have Been There’”, *The New York Times*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/11/us/politics/trump-milley-military-protests-lafayette-square.html>
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- <sup>64</sup> Heidi Urben, “Like, Comment, Retweet: The State of the Military’s Nonpartisan Ethic in the World of Social Media”, National Defense University Press, Washington D.C., May 2017, 1

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<sup>67</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff, Message to the Joint Force, January 12, 2021, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/JCS%20Message%20to%20the%20Joint%20Force%20JAN%2012%2021.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0vinxSMz8M263828EvlXRlqJ75RyHdjO5uw99CzjR-aJY-zIaWdWZRVio>

APPENDIX 1: ADVERTISING THEORY MODEL FLOWCHARTS

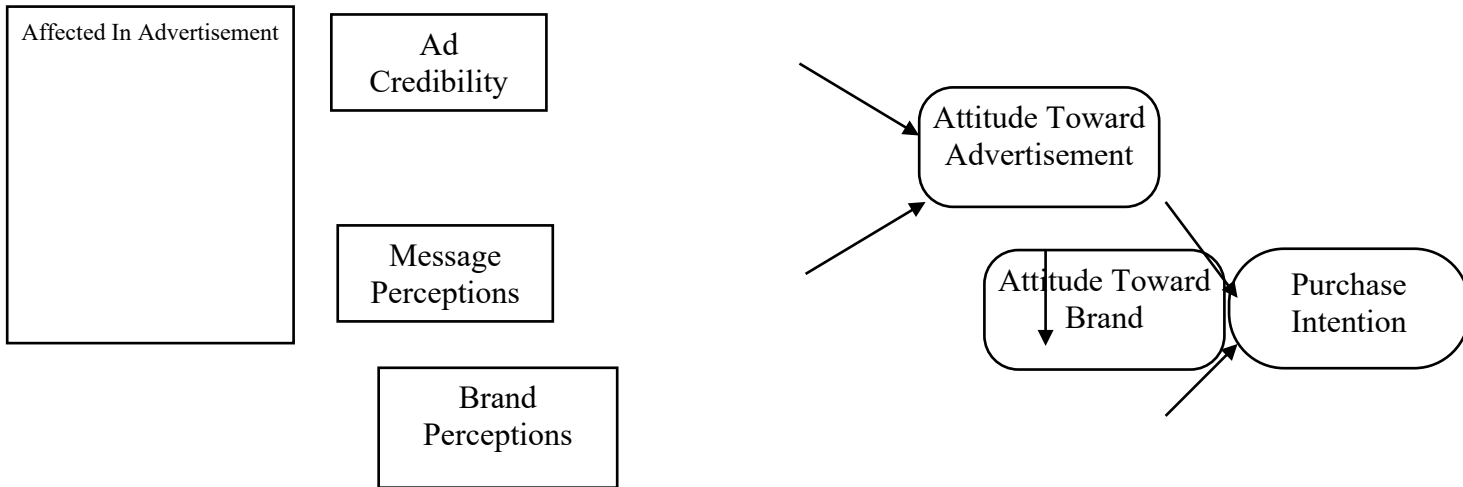


Figure 1: Foundational Advertising Process Model, adapted from Stewart, et. al., "Examining digital advertising using an affect transfer hypothesis."

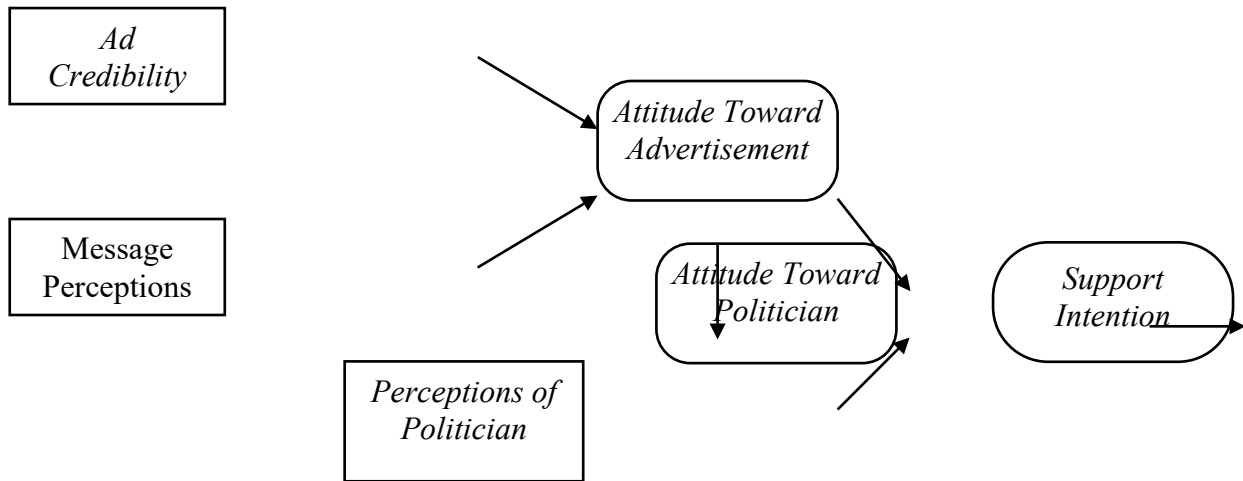


Figure 2: Desired effects of use of military imagery as a political prop in political advertisements as applied to the Foundational Advertising Process Model; desired affected elements in italics

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