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Does Culture Matter?

The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture

And when people are entering upon a war they do things the wrong way around. Action comes first, and it is only when they have already suffered that they begin to think.

– Thucydides, <u>The Peloponnesian War</u>[1]

Cultural knowledge and warfare are inextricably bound. Cultural knowledge as a means to improve military prowess has been sought after since Herodotus concerned himself with the opponents' conduct during the Persian Wars (490 - 479 B.C.). T.E. Lawrence embarked on a similar quest for adversary knowledge after the 1916 Arab rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, immersing himself deeply in local culture: "Geography, tribal structure, religion, social customs, language, appetites, standards were at my finger-ends. The enemy I knew almost like my own side. I risked myself among them many times, to *learn.*"[2] Since then, countless soldiers have memorized Sun Tzu's dictum: if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.

Although "know thy enemy" is one of the first principles of warfare, our military operations and our national security decision-making have consistently suffered due to lack of knowledge of foreign cultures and societies. As Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara noted, "I had never visited Indochina, nor did I understand or appreciate its history, language, culture, or values…. When it came to Vietnam, we found ourselves setting policy for a region that was terra incognita."[3] Our ethnocentrism, biased assumptions and mirror-imaging have had negative outcomes during the North Vietnamese offensives (1968 and 1975), the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989), India's nuclear tests (1998), the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990), and the Shi'ite transformation of Iran (1979), to name just a few recent examples.

Although cultural knowledge has not traditionally been a priority within the US Department of Defense, the ongoing insurgency in Iraq has served as a wake-up call to the military that adversary culture matters. Soldiers and Marines on the ground understand this better than anyone. As a returning commander from the 3rd Infantry Division observed: "I had perfect situational awareness. What I lacked was cultural awareness. I knew where every enemy tank was dug in on the outskirts of Tallil. Only problem was, my soldiers had to fight fanatics charging on foot or in pickups and firing AK-47s and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. Great technical intelligence. Wrong enemy."[4] As this commander's

observation indicates, understanding ones' enemy requires more than a satellite photo of an arms dump. Rather, it requires an understanding of their interests, habits, intentions, beliefs, social organizations, political symbols – in other words, their culture.[5]

This paper argues that new adversaries and new operational environments necessitate a sharper focus on cultural knowledge of the adversary. A lack of adversary cultural knowledge can have grave, undesirable consequences. Conversely, understanding adversary culture can make a positive difference strategically, operationally, and tactically. Although success in future operations will depend on cultural knowledge, the Department of Defense currently lacks the right programs, systems, models, personnel, and organizations to deal with either the existing threat or the changing environment. A federal initiative is urgently needed to incorporate cultural and social knowledge of adversaries into training, education, planning, intelligence and operations. Across the board, the national security structure in the US needs to be infused with anthropology, a discipline *invented* to support warfighting in the tribal zone.

Changing Adversaries and Operational Environments

In order to meet the future defense needs of the U.S., cultural knowledge of the adversary should be considered a national security priority. An immediate transformation in the US military conceptual paradigm is necessary for two reasons: first, the nature of the adversary has changed since the end of the Cold War; and second, the current operational environment has altered fundamentally within the past twenty years as a result of globalization, failed states, and the proliferation of both complex and light weapons.

Although the U.S. armed and trained for fifty years to defeat a Cold War adversary, Soviet tanks are never going to roll through the Fulda Gap. The adversary that the US faces today – and is likely to face for many years to come – is non-Western, transnational in scope, non-hierarchical in structure, clandestine in approach, and operating outside of the context of the nation-state. Neither Al Queda nor the insurgents in Iraq are fighting a Clausewitzian war, where armed conflict is a rational extension of politics by other means. These adversaries neither think nor act in the manner of nation-states. Rather, their form of warfare, their organizational structure, and their motivations are determined by the society and the culture from which they come. For example, attacks on coalition troops in the Sunni triangle follow predictable patterns of tribal

warfare: avenging the blood of a relative (*al-tha'r*); demonstrating manly courage in battle (*al-muruwwah*); and upholding manly honor (*al-sharaf*).[6] Similarly, Al Queda and its affiliated groups are replicating the Prophet Mohammed's 7th century process of political consolidation through *jihad*, including opportunistic use of territories lacking political rulers as a base, formation of a corps of believers as a precursor to mass recruiting, and an evolution in targeting from specific, local targets (e.g., pagan caravans) to distant powerful adversaries (e.g., the Byzantine Empire). To confront and defeat an enemy so deeply moored in history and theology, the U.S. armed forces must adopt an ethnographer's view of the world – that it is not nation-states but cultures that provide the underlying structures of political life.

Not only our adversaries have changed. The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review predicted that smaller-scale contingencies (SSCs) – military operations of smaller scale and intensity than major theater or regional wars, such as humanitarian, peacekeeping, peace enforcement, non-combatant evacuation operations and combating terrorism – will characterize the future operational environment.[7] The use of the military for humanitarian disaster relief, peacekeeping, and counterterrorism operations, means that the military will be increasingly forward deployed in hostile, non-Western operational environments "disconnected from the global economy."[8] According to Andy Hoehn, the former

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, "The unprecedented destructive power of terrorists – and the recognition that you will have to deal with them before they deal with you – means that we will have to be out acting in the world in places that are very unfamiliar to us. We will have to make them familiar."[9]

Understanding culture matters operationally and strategically

"Culture" has become something of a buzz word recently in the DOD, but does it really matter? The examples below demonstrate the following three points: misunderstanding culture at a strategic level can produce policies which exacerbate an insurgency; lack of cultural knowledge at an operational level can lead to the development of negative public opinion; and a lack of cultural knowledge at a tactical level endangers both civilians and troops. There is no doubt that the lack of adversary cultural knowledge can have grave, undesirable consequences strategically, operationally, and tactically.

At a strategic level, certain policy makers within the Bush Administration apparently misunderstood the tribal nature of Iraqi culture and society. They assumed that the civilian apparatus of Iraqi government would remain intact after the regime was decapitated (either by an aerial strike, an internal coup, or a

military defeat). In fact, when the U.S. cut off the hydra's Baathist head, power reverted to its most basic, stable form – the tribe. As a young tribal leader observed "We follow the central government… But of course if communications are cut between us and the center, all authority will revert to our sheik."[10] Tribes are the basic, organizing social fact of life in Iraq and the Baath Party itself was the purview of one tribe, the Bu Nasir. Once the Sunni Baathists lost their prestigious jobs, were humiliated in the conflict, and frozen out through de-Baathification, the tribal network became the backbone of the insurgency.[11] The tribal insurgency is a direct result of our misunderstanding of Iraqi culture.

At an operational level, both the CPA and the US military misunderstood the system of information transmission in Iraqi society, and consequently lost significant opportunities to influence public opinion. One Marine recently returned from Iraq noted, "We had a lack of understanding about how information flows. We were focused on broadcast media, and metrics. But this had no impact because Iraqis spread information through rumor. Instead of tapping into their networks, we should have visited their coffee shops." Unfortunately, the US emphasis on force protection prevented soldiers from visiting coffee shops and buying small items on the economy. Consequently, soldiers and marines were unable to establish one-to-one relationships with Iraqis, which are key to both intelligence collection and winning "hearts and

minds." A second and related issue is our unfortunate squelching of Iraqi

freedom of speech. Many members of the CPA and CJTF 7 felt that anti-

Coalition and anti-American rhetoric was a threat to security and sought to stop

its spread. Unfortunately, closing Muqtada al Sadr's *Al Hawza* newspaper

contributed to the idea among Iraqis that Americans do not really support

freedom of speech, despite their claims to the contrary, and reinforced their view

of us as hypocrites.

Failure to understand adversary culture can endanger both troops and

civilians at a tactical level. Although it may not seem like a priority when bullets

are flying, cultural ignorance can kill. Earlier this year, the Office of Naval

Research conducted a number of focus groups with Marines returning from Iraq.

The marines were quick to acknowledge their misunderstanding of Iraqi culture,

particularly pertaining to physical culture and local symbols, and to point out the

consequences of inadequate training. Most alarming to Marines were the Iraqi's

use of vehement hand gestures, their tendency to move in one's peripheral

vision, and their tolerance for physical closeness. One Marine noted, "We had to

train ourselves that this was not threatening. But we had our fingers on the

trigger all the time because they were yelling." A lack of familiarity with local

cultural symbols also created problems for Marines. For example, in the Western

European tradition, a white flag means surrender. Many Marines (rather

logically) assumed a black flag was the opposite of surrender – "a big sign that said, shoot here!" as one Marine officer pointed out. As a result, many Shia who traditionally fly black flags from their houses as a religious symbol were identified as the enemy and shot at unnecessarily. A lack of cultural awareness created a number of problems at roadblocks. One Marine explained the American gesture for stop (arm straight, palm out) meant welcome in Iraq, while the American gesture for go actually meant stop to Iraqis (arm straight, palm down). As can be easily imagined, this misunderstanding resulted in deadly consequences at roadblocks.

On the other hand, understanding adversary culture can make a positive difference strategically, operationally and tactically. The examples below illuminate three key points: using pre-existing indigenous systems creates legitimacy for the actions of the occupying power; indigenous social organization (including tribal and kinship relationships) determines the structure of the insurgency; and avoiding the imposition of foreign norms will generate cooperation among the local population.

Recognizing and utilizing pre-existing social structures is the key to political stabilization in Iraq. While US policy makers often seemed perplexed by the existence of a sub-rosa tribal structure in Iraq, the British understood the indigenous system and were able to use it to their advantage.   Brigadier Andrew

Kennett, commander of the British battle group based in Basra, identified a core lesson learned during their history of empire: the importance of adjusting to local cultures, and of not imposing alien solutions.[12] In Iraq, the most important bit of local culture is the tribe and the associated patronage system. The majority of Iraq's population are members of one of the 150 major tribes, the largest of which contains more than one million people, the smallest a few thousand.[13] Tribes are invariably patronage systems, in which powerful sheiks at the top dispense riches and rewards to sub-sheiks, who in turn distribute resources to tribal community. Sheiks always need money in order to generate loyalty from sub-sheiks. Thus, in Iraq there is an old saying: you cannot buy a tribe, but you can certainly hire one.[14] In Amara, the British did just this. They appointing tribal leaders to local councils, and gave the local councils large sums to distribute, a way to reinforce the sheiks political standing. As one British Lt. Colonel noted, "We deal with what exists. In the five months we've been here, we're not going to change the culture of Iraq. We have to work with what there is."[15]

The structure of any insurgency will reflect the indigenous social organization of the geographical region in which you find the insurgency. Thus, charting the Iraqi tribal and kinship system allowed the 4th Infantry Division to capture Saddam Hussein. Although most U.S. forces were preoccupied with locating the fifty-five high value targets on the Bush administration's list, Maj.

Gen. Raymond T. Odierno understood that relationships of blood and tribe were the key to finding Saddam Hussein.[16] Two total novices - Lieutenant Angela Santana and Corporal Harold Engstrom – of the 104th Military Intelligence Battalion were assigned the task of building a chart that would help the 4th Infantry Division figure out who was hiding Saddam. According to LT Santana, a former executive secretary in Ohio, their first thought was "Is he joking? This is impossible. We can't even pronounce these names." Despite the challenges, they created a huge wall-chart called "Mongo Link" depicting key figures, their relationships to one another, social status, and last-known locations. Eventually, patterns emerged showing the extensive tribal and family ties to the six main tribes of the Sunni triangle: the Husseins, al-Douris, Hadouthis, Masliyats, Hassans and Harimyths, which in turn led directly to Saddam Hussein.[17]

Post-conflict reconstruction is most effective when the reconstructed institutions reflect local interests and do not impose external concepts of social organization. For example, Iraqis tend to think of the central government as the enemy. The long-standing disconnect between the center and the periphery meant that Baghdad did not communicate down and city councils could not communicate up. Unfortunately, the CPA misunderstood the relationship between Baghdad and the rest of the country and imposed a US model based of central government control. Yet, many Marine Corps units intuitively had the

right approach and began political development at the local level. In one case, a

young Marine captain in Iraq was assigned the task of building a judicial system

from the ground up. He refurbished the courthouse, appointed judges and

found a copy of the 1950 Iraqi constitution on the internet. His efforts were

applauded by local Iraqis -- because he used their system and their law, they

perceived the court as legitimate. Unfortunately, he was instructed by the CPA in

Baghdad to stop employing Baathists. It appears that we are often our own

worst enemy.

The US national security system is currently inadequate for this task

Countering insurgency and combating terrorism in the current

operational environment depends on accurate and timely cultural and social

knowledge of the adversary. As Andy Marshall, Director of the Office of Net

Assessment has noted, success in future operations will require an

"anthropology-level knowledge of a wide range of cultures." Currently however,

the Department of Defense lacks the right programs, systems, models, personnel,

and organizations to deal with either the existing threat or the changing

environment.

Existing socio-cultural analysis shops (such as the Strategic Studies Detachment of 4th Psychological Operations Group or the Behavioral Influences Analysis Division of National Air and Space Intelligence Center) are under-funded, marginalized, and too dispersed. Because of a lack of resources, their information base is often out of date. Task Force 121, for example, was using 19th century British anthropology to prepare themselves for Afghanistan. Because there is no central resource for cultural knowledge and analysis, those in both the military and policy communities who need the information most are left to their own devices. According to a Special Forces colonel assigned to the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, "we literally don't know where to go for information on what makes other societies 'tick.' So we use Google to make policy."

Although the U.S. Army Intelligence Center at Fort Huachuca, the 82nnd Airborne Division, the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Naval Postgraduate School, and the JFK Special Warfare School are now all offering some form of pre-deployment cultural training to US forces, these programs are generally rushed, overly simplified, or just not available to all soldiers and marines who would like to participate. Much of so-called cultural awareness training focuses on "dos and don'ts", language basics, and tends to be geared towards Baghdad. As one US Army colonel noted, "In Western Iraq, it's like it

was six centuries ago with the Bedouin in their goat hair tents. It's useless to get cultural briefings on Baghdad." To make up for the lack of formal training, US troops are forced to rely on extensive personal reading. One marine described this as "the University of Barnes and Nobel." The consequence of a lack of training (or inadequate training) is misunderstanding that can complicate operations. For example, Marines in OIF II who were instructed that Muslims were highly pious and prayed five times a day lost respect for Iraqis when they discovered that there was a brewery in Baghdad and many Iraqi men have mistresses. In actuality, of course, for six decades Iraq had been a secular society, with relatively few pious Muslims.

Although all services now have a Foreign Area Officer (FAO) program, the military still lacks advisors who can provide local knowledge to commanders on the ground. The FAO program is intended to develop officers with a combination of regional expertise, political-military awareness, and language qualification who can act as a cross-cultural linkage between and among foreign and US political and military organizations. Because they are never subjected to deep cultural immersion totally outside the military structure, most FAOs do not develop real cultural and social expertise. Furthermore, most FAOs do not work as cultural advisors to commanders on the ground, but serve as military attaches, security assistance officers, or instructors. The result is that commanders who

are looking for cultural advisors have to fend for themselves. One Marine Corp

general explained that when his unit deployed to Afghanistan, they had no local

experts. They were lucky since the cook on the ship just happened to be born in

Afghanistan. According to the general, that Pastoo speaking cook became the

"most valuable player" of the entire mission.

Our intelligence system is also not up to the task of providing the required

level of cultural intelligence. As Admiral Cebrowski, Director of the Office of

Force Transformation, recently noted "the value of military intelligence is

exceeded by that of social and cultural intelligence. We need the ability to look,

understand, and operate deeply into the fault lines of societies where,

increasingly, we find the frontiers of national security."[18] Rather than a

geopolitical perspective, threat analysis must be much more concrete and

specific. According to Lieutenant General James R. Clapper, Jr., the former

director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, "Of course we still provide in depth

orders of battle, targeting data, and traditional military capabilities analysis. But

we must also provide the commanders on the ground with detailed information

regarding local customs, ethnicity, biographic data, military geography and

infectious diseases." Producing intelligence on these factors can be very

challenging. As Clapper notes, "we provided detailed analysis on more than 40

clans and subclans operating in Somalia -- far more difficult than counting tanks

and planes."[19]

Back to the Future

A federal initiative is urgently needed to incorporate cultural and social

knowledge of adversaries into training, education, planning, intelligence and

operations. Across the board, the national security structure in the US needs to

be infused with anthropology. While this idea may seem novel or even

whimsical, anthropology was *invented* in order to provide support to the military

enterprise.

Frequently called "the handmaiden of colonialism," anthropological

knowledge contributed to the expansion and consolidation of British power

during the era of empire. In the United States, the Department of Defense and its

predecessors first recognized the importance of culture as a factor in warfare

during the Indian Wars (1865-1885), resulting in the formation of the Bureau of

American Ethnology under the leadership of Major John Wesley Powell.[20]

During World War II, anthropologists such as Gregory Bateson served the war

effort directly, first conducting intelligence operations in Burma for the OSS, and later advising on how to generate political instability in target countries through a process known as *schizmogenesis*. American anthropologists produced ethnographies on the Axis powers that facilitated behavioral prediction based on national character. While Ruth Benedict's (1946) study of Japanese national character, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword is the best known; other studies such as Ladislas Farago's German Psychological Warfare (1942) collect dust on library shelves. Their predictions were often highly accurate: following recommendations from anthropologists at the Office of War Information, President Roosevelt left the Japanese Emperor out of conditions of surrender.[21]

The legacy of WWII anthropology survives in the form of the Human Relation Area Files (HRAF) at Yale. Established by the Carnegie Foundation, the Office of Naval Research and the Rockefeller Foundation, this database was used to provide information on Japanese-occupied former German territories of Micronesia.[22] Although the database was maintained for decades after the war with funds from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the CIA,[23] even those US government agencies seeking "an anthropological-level of knowledge" have sadly forgotten its existence.

During the Vietnam era, the defense community recognized that familiarity with the indigenous, non-Western cultures was vital for

counterinsurgency operations. Dr. R.L. Sproul, director of the Defense

Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), testified before the

U.S. Congress in 1965 "that remote area warfare is controlled in a major way by

the environment in which the warfare occurs by the sociological and

anthropological characteristics of the people involved in the war, and by the

nature of the conflict itself." To win hearts and minds, counterinsurgency forces

must understand and employ local culture to their advantage as part of a larger,

political solution. As General Templer explained during the Malayan

Emergency: "the answer lies not with putting more boots into the jungle, but in

winning the hearts and minds of the Malayan people." Thus, the US defense

community determined it was necessary to recruit cultural and social experts.

Seymour J. Deitchman, Defense Department Special Assistant for

Counterinsurgency, explained to a congressional subcommittee in 1965: "The

Defense Department has …recognized that part of its research and development

efforts to support counterinsurgency operations must be oriented toward the

people… involved in this type of war; and the DOD has called on the types of

scientists -- anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists,

economists -- whose professional orientation to human behavior would enable

them to make useful contributions in this area."[24]

During the Vietnam era, the Special Warfare community understood that successful unconventional warfare depended on understanding indigenous, non-Western societies, and they used anthropologists to do accomplish this task. The Special Operations *Command's Special Operations in Peace and War* currently defines unconventional warfare as "military and paramilitary operations conducted by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, and directed by an external source."[25] To conduct operations "by, with and through," Special Forces units must have the support of the local population, which can often be decidedly difficult to achieve. While he was acting as an advisor to US troop in Vietnam in 1965, the British expert Sir Robert Thompson suggested that anthropologists be used to recruit aboriginal tribes as partisans. Indeed, anthropologists excelled at bridging the gap between the military and aboriginal tribes. US Special Forces in Vietnam, for example, were assisted by anthropologist Gerald Hickey in working with the Montagnards.[26]

So, where are the anthropologists now that the US government needs them? Although the discipline's roots are deeply entwined with the military, few anthropologists are interested in contributing to national security. Their hesitance and suspicion of military activity stems from a question of ethics: if professional anthropologists are morally obliged to protect those they study, does their cooperation with military and intelligence operations violate the prime

directive? The answer in their minds is, unfortunately, yes. This conclusion

among anthropologists was based on a number of defense projects that sought to

use anthropological tools in potentially harmful ways. In 1964, the U.S. Army

launched Project Camelot, a multinational social science research project, to

predict and influence politically significant aspects of social change that would

either stabilize or destabilize developing countries. The project was canceled in

July 1965, after international protests erupted in target countries. Critics called

Project Camelot an egregious case of "sociological snooping."[27]

    While anthropological knowledge is now necessary to national security,

the ethics of anthropologists must be taken into account. In addition to direct

discussion and debate of the issues associated with using ethnographic

information, policy makers and military personnel must be trained to apply

anthropological and social knowledge effectively, appropriately, and ethically.

Conclusion

    The changing nature of warfare requires a deeper understanding of

adversary culture. The more unconventional the adversary (and the further

away from Western cultural norms), the more we need to understand their

society and underlying cultural dynamics. To defeat non-Western opponents

who are transnational in scope, non-hierarchical in structure, clandestine in their

approach, and operate outside of the context of nation-states, we need to

improve our capacity to understand foreign cultures and societies.

The danger, of course, is that we assume that technical solutions are

sufficient or that we fail to delve deep enough into complexity of other cultures

and societies. As Robert Tilman pointed out in a seminal article in <u>Military</u>

<u>Review</u> in 1966, British counterinsurgency in Malaya succeeded because it took

account of tribal and ethnic distinctions, while similar US efforts in Vietnam were

bound to fail because they lacked anthropological finesse.

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3 Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect*, New York: Random House, Inc., 1995, p. 32.

4 Steve Israel and Robert Scales, "Iraq Proves It: Military Needs Better Intel," *New York Daily News*, January 7th, 2004. See also Robert Scales, "Culture Centric Warfare," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, October, 2004.

5 Culture is "those norms, values, institutions and modes of thinking in a given society that survive change and remain meaningful to successive generations." Adda Bozeman, *Strategic Intelligence and Statecraft*, New York: Brassey's, 1992, p. 57. There is an enormous literature on the place of cultural analysis in foreign policy. See Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism,* New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1979; Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996; Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style*, Lanham, MD: Hamilton, 1986.

6 Amatzia Baram, "Victory in Iraq, One Tribe at a Time," *New York Times*, October 28, 2003.

7 . Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)*, September 30, 2001.

8 Greg Jaffe, "Pentagon Prepares To Scatter Soldiers In Remote Corners," *Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2003, Pg. 1..

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11 Amatzia Baram, "Victory in Iraq, One Tribe at a Time," *New York Times* (Oct. 28, 2003). Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/28/opinion/28BARA.html.

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[17] Farnaz Fassihi, "Charting the Capture of Saddam," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2003.

[18] Statement of Arthur K. Cebrowski, Director of Force Transformation, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Treats and Capabilities, Armed Services Committee, United States House of Representatives, February 26, 2004.

[19] Lieutenant General James R. Clapper, Jr., "The Worldwide Threat to the United States and its Interests Abroad," Statement to the Senate Committee on Armed Services, January 17, 1995. Available at:
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[23] Clellan S. Ford, *Human Relations Area Files: 1949 – 1969, A Twenty Year Report*, New Haven, CT: HRAF Press, 1970, p. 13.

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