

Afghanistan: Obama's War

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The esteemed historian and novelist on how there is only one path for the United States in Afghanistan: withdrawal.

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Afghanistan now is at a critical stage. And now I'm very glad to say that the *London Review of Books*, whose thirtieth anniversary we are commemorating, has over the years published myself and others on this subject, taking essentially a critical stance to this war because, as many of you will recall, it became fashionable all over the world, not just in the United States, to think of Iraq and Afghanistan as two very different wars. Which of course, on one level, they are. But I mean different moral values were placed on these wars by good-thinking people. The Iraq war was a bad war, which should never have happened; that is the view of large numbers of people in the United States today, and always was the view of an overwhelming majority of Europeans.

The Afghan war, on the other hand, was meant to be the good war. This was a war where people who attacked the United States on September 11th were based. And therefore they had to be sorted out; the government which gave them refuge had to be toppled and this could only be done militarily. I will just say as a small footnote here that the official 9/11 inquiry said that the Afghan government never formally refused to hand over these people; they just demanded to see the evidence, and said if the evidence was convincing of their involvement they would hand them over. I just say that because the commission of enquiry made a point of noting that.

Now, some of us argued at the time, myself included—of course, no one supported this crazed attack on the United States—what the motive of actually sending in an army to conquer Afghanistan was. If, as the former President said, the main aim was to sort out al Qaeda, sort out Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Omar, “dead or alive” in his unforgettable words—and, you know, if they were dead, that was that, if they were alive they would presumably be brought to the United States to stand trial for having ordered this attack... And I remember saying in an argument with one of the former president's leading supporters at the Washington Post, Charles Krauthamer—in a debate that took place on Canadian television—that if this was the case, then it was a failure. Because this was a small terrorist organization which wasn't going to hang around in Afghanistan for the United States Army to come capture it, but would flee and look for refuge in other parts of the world, most likely in the border badlands of Pakistan, but presumably elsewhere. So that would fail, and it did fail, because if you announce you're invading a country to capture A, B, and C, A, B, and C don't stay there. They move on.

So the country was captured without a struggle, in reality. Worth remembering that. There was no real struggle by any segment of Afghan society to resist the U.S./NATO occupation. Why? Because the key player in this war was Pakistan, which had armed the Taliban, which had sent the Taliban to take power and end a period of civil war. And there were large numbers of Pakistani soldiers, Pakistani Air Force, Pakistani military, Pakistani intelligence people, people in Afghanistan who

essentially told the Taliban leaders, “Now is not the time to fight. Shave your beards and come back to Pakistan, or go. But do not resist, because you will all be killed.” From their point of view, it was very sane advice. And, more astonishingly, the Taliban leadership, which was divided, actually accepted that advice. So Kabul fell without a struggle. And for the first two years the resistance to the United States and its NATO allies was limited, episodic, and localized. What made it national? What made it national was the decision by the United States to impose a regime on Afghanistan. One of its CIA assets, Hamid Karzai, was propelled into power. More on him later since he has become a controversial figure as of late, supposedly fighting with the United States. But let’s just go through the chronology.

They imposed this regime and gave it a U.S. bodyguard. I think DynCorp supplied the bodyguard because Karzai said at that point that he didn’t trust any Afghans to protect him, give him personal protection. And of course, that was astute, because they probably would have bumped him off. He then established together with his brother a government of cronies and a very tiny, narrow circle of supporters, largely within Kabul and a tiny part of Kabul, and their aim in Afghanistan was that the only way forward was to enrich ourselves. And in a country with the most appalling levels of poverty in the entire world, these people used the money that was being sent to them for reconstruction, money that was being sent to them both via NGOs and via states, after the Bonn conference, spent this money and they did enrich themselves. It’s no secret. All of the intelligence reports coming into the United States from the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency spell this out very clearly, the bits that have been leaked. And I assume the bits that haven’t been leaked are even more severe in their judgments, because when a country is at war, it needs good intelligence. And, to be fair, they had been getting good intelligence, that this regime they implanted in Afghanistan is a total disaster story.

Could it have been different? Difficult, given the Afghan personnel involved. But I remember writing, very rapidly after the occupation, that even though I didn’t agree with it—and if it went the way most occupations go, it was going to be a disaster—if by some miracle, the occupying forces in Afghanistan succeeded within the first year of rebuilding the wrecked social infrastructure of the country, had a massive New Deal-type program to build hospitals, to build schools, to provide employment, and to use their military to do this and actually defend this social infrastructure, who knows? I just posed the question mark. But it was too much to expect that to happen. Because we live, or lived certainly at that time, in neoliberal times, in which the intervention of the state is never used for these purposes, because everything in the motherland was being privatized—as we know, I won’t go into that—and likewise in most of Europe. So what they couldn’t do in Europe and the United States, they certainly wouldn’t do in Afghanistan. Some U.S. citizens would have asked, “If you do this for them, why can’t you do it for us at home?”

“That is why General Eikenberry, the U.S. Ambassador in Afghanistan, warned very seriously against against “the surge” of 30,000 extra troops.”

So the entire socio-economic structure, backed by NATO armies, was a structure that made a tiny group of people very rich. And this in front of the eyes of the poor, who were swelling the slums outside Kabul, which grew by half a million within the first two years of the occupation. Meanwhile,

huge villas were being constructed, and Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, became within the first three to four years the richest man in Kabul. How? By drug smuggling. By arms smuggling. By creaming off money which was coming. He was the family's banker, given full authority by his brother to do this, and he did. Today he is known as that. Now the money that they have used was partially to enrich themselves. But partially it was to try and buy a tiny social base inside Afghanistan itself. And they have had a bit of luck. They have succeeded in buying a few tribal leaders. They certainly have a larger social base now in Afghanistan than they did in 2001 when Karzai was implanted. In Kabul, it's not huge. It's in fact very tiny. But it is larger than he had before. And that is what gives Karzai the sort of strength—I suppose is the word, though there is another word for it as well—to defy the people who put him in power.

It happens, and it has happened in U.S. imperial history before. I mean, those of you who recall the Vietnam War will remember in the last years of that war, tormented years, it became commonplace to read about Ngo Dinh Diem getting too big for his boots, about General Tran (Quang Khoi) getting too big for his boots, the people put in place by the United States actually challenging them on how to conduct the war and being systematically bumped off. That was the traditional way of dealing with puppets that challenged the imperial rulers who put them in place. But the difference between South Vietnam and Afghanistan, of course, is that in South Vietnam the United States could always find someone else to replace them. Ultimately, of course, it didn't work and the whole system collapsed. In Afghanistan, there were no other candidates. No other candidates who had come from the southern part of Afghanistan where the majority lives, a real majority—up to 50 percent if not more now, the Pashtuns of Afghanistan live there—Karzai is a Pashtun. And to replace him with a leader from the northern tribal alliances, Abdullah Abdullah or some other joker, was not going to work.

And that's the reason that Peter Galbraith got kicked out of Kabul, not because he was engaged in corrupting the Kurds in relation to oil, but because he'd screwed up by antagonizing Karzai without having any alternative. And that is why General Eikenberry, the U.S. Ambassador in Afghanistan, warned very seriously against two things. He warned against "the surge" of 30,000 extra troops. And he warned very sharply against removing Karzai in private. Or so we are told. Because he said, "There is nothing else here, removing him is like handing the place over to the Taliban." Karzai himself more or less defended that position and actually said, "If you try and get rid of me"—he actually said this to the United States—"if you try and get rid of me, you know, I am going to join the Taliban." Which wouldn't be much of a political leap as people would imagine because he was once part of the Taliban. He once worked with them before he was called down to do other work. So he does know them. And the fact is that there are contacts, all of the time, between these different groups in the Pashtun part of Afghanistan. And that would have been a total disaster for NATO and the United States, and Eikenberry was convinced that the extra surge was going to be a disaster. And in the short time he has been proved right.

The surge

I talk about "the surge" because this is something new. This was President Obama's policy to differentiate himself from the Bush/Cheney Administration. The Iraq war was bad and we were going to pull out. That's what we were told. But the pullout is not going to happen, in my opinion. They are going to be in Iraq now in these huge crusader-style fortresses for eternity, as they promise us, unless the Iraqis drive us out. The British did it in the forties and fifties and were finally driven out. So whether that happens, we'll see. But that's another story. There's been no withdrawal from Iraq either, except a withdrawal from these towns to these big bases. But that was what was promised—withdrawal from Iraq but escalation in Afghanistan and religious language was used,

citing the Cold War rhetoric of Reinhold Niebuhr, of fighting evil, “good versus evil,” that’s how it started. That’s what we are in Afghanistan for, to “fight evil” and of course we can’t leave. That is why we have to send more troops, to stabilize the situation so we can leave. If you want a particularly contorted defense of this position written, I hate to say this, but really written for idiots who know nothing about Afghanistan, I would recommend the article of the British Foreign Secretary David Miliband in the New York Review of Books. It is truly appalling, without understanding what’s going on in the country, bland, one cliché dripping onto the pages after another, but at least saying one thing which is of interest: that we can’t stay there.

“The U.S. Marines went back in and with knives took the bullets out of everyone there, especially the women and children, so no one would know American bullets had been used to kill them.”

Even General Eikenberry has said we can’t stay here forever because the big difference between the situation now and when the U.S. landed is that the occupation itself has made the country angry. You read between the lines or in the lines even, of what the people who go to Afghanistan from the United States say, intelligence, non-intelligence, intelligent journalists, unintelligent journalists, they all come back with one story that no one challenges: the bulk of the people don’t want us there; we have antagonized them. And that is why Eikenberry opposed the surge, because he said if you send in more troops, you kill more civilians, and if you kill more civilians, you antagonize whole new swathes of Pashtuns who join the insurgents and the resistance. It is A, B, C. It has happened in every resistance since time immemorial. And that is what has been happening.

You see, since the surge began, the big publicity machines going into operation—another victory, yes, we’ve captured this, we are now going to attack Kandahar... In fact, disaster stories. Total and complete disaster stories. And you read side-by-side with these big propaganda stories smaller, quite shocking stories, of which many more happen, if you read the vernacular press in Pakistan (because that reports them). But occasionally they find a way into the mainstream press in the United States and Britain and other parts of Europe.

Let’s just see one story. The U.S. Special Black Ops Squad targets a house because they think insurgents are in the house. They don’t explain why they think that, but they say they’re pretty sure. They attack the house and kill everyone in it. In that house is a family, a large joined family. Everyone is killed. Women, children, a pregnant woman—this happened in February—are killed. Realizing what they’ve done... but the story is already going out: “We had a targeted attack on an insurgent house and it was successful.” Then, a *London Times* journalist who’s there, embedded with the troops, finds out what really happens. That it was a completely innocent family that was killed, that they went back in, the marines on these special operations, and with knives took the bullets out of everyone there, especially the women and children, so that no one would know American bullets had been used to kill them and to cover up the whole story. Now this is a tiny cover up. But there have been big cover ups since.

A week after this event happened, a passenger bus on its way to Kandahar was bombed and hit by helicopter gunships. Why? Because the troops on the ground had said that the bus was traveling in a funny way, and may have insurgents in it. So they fired at the bus and killed a few dozen people,

wounded several dozen others, and even Karzai once again had to say, "This is atrocious, how the hell can we do anything if this is going on?" This is the concrete result of the surge, essentially. And Petraeus who ordered it and convinced Obama to go ahead with it against the advice of Eikenberry and others within the U.S. Army, must be made accountable. I mean, he should be summoned by a Senate Foreign Relations Committee and questioned. You know, "we've had the surge now. This is what you guys are doing. How is this going to help anyone? The Afghans who you claim you go in to help or even the United States, whatever their point of view, how is this sort of behavior going to help anyone?"

So the situation now in my opinion is totally out of control and they know it. Which is why Karzai talks of joining the Taliban. Which is why the official line of the West as you can read even in the mealy-mouthed article produced by the British Secretary in the *New York Review of Books*, and the statements of Biden and others, is that they've now discovered that there's a good Taliban and a bad Taliban. Like there was a good war (Afghanistan) and a bad war (Iraq), now there's a good Taliban and a bad Taliban. Who are the good Taliban? The good Taliban are essentially those people directly controlled by Pakistani military intelligence, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an old, old veteran guerrilla jihadi who fought with the United States and Pakistan against the Russians in the '80s. But this guy has been on the Pakistani military intelligence's payroll for a long, long time. He claims to have in Afghanistan a group of people who are prepared to collaborate and join Karzai's government, provided that the United States behaves themselves, stops killing civilians, even they say that!

The bad Taliban are the ones who say, we are prepared to be part of a national government—not that we don't want to take power ourselves—we are happy to be part of a national government, but once all foreign troops have gone. And that is the view which more and more Afghans are now putting forward. And the people the United States could depend on, the Northern Alliance people in the north, basically take their orders from Moscow. I mean, let's be totally blunt about it. So a lot will depend on what the Russians tell them. And at the moment if you read the Russian press, there are of course many veterans of the Russian war in Afghanistan who are feeling a sense of Schadenfreude. They're saying, "Well it happened to us, now it's happening to you, you have to get out." That is what the Russian press is reporting. The latest upheaval in Kyrgyzstan—the first statement of the new president, Rosa (named, by the way, after Rosa Luxemburg in the old days) actually said, "One of the first things we're going to do is to ask the Americans to close down the base." After a conversation with Putin, she said, "Well, we will negotiate the American presence." But clearly there's pressure building up.

"In other words, if the draft constitution had gone through, women in Afghanistan would have had the right to vote before they did in the United States and Britain and most parts of the West."

The other ally which gave the U.S. the green light to occupy both Iraq and Afghanistan are the Iranian clerics. I mean, it's no secret now. It's come out, close advisers to President Bush who were in the White House negotiating with the Iranians and actually negotiated this tricky business of getting the Iranians to agree to a U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan—they have come out

publicly and said that the Iranian decision not to oppose us was crucial. They said it on the Charlie Rose show not so long ago, I think two or three weeks ago, and they're absolutely right. Because without that Iranian backing it would have been very difficult for the U.S. to pull off Iraq and Afghanistan. But they are now in the business of antagonizing the Iranians saying, "We're going to impose sanctions," and this is all largely under Israeli pressure. So the U.S. finds itself more isolated today in Afghanistan than it was in 2001, when virtually the whole world supported it.

What is the way out?

Now, what is the way out? The only way out is the way the Russians took and the British before them. And by the way, the British were driven out of Afghanistan in the nineteenth century. They fought two wars, and they were driven out; they were defeated at a time when weapons were very straightforward and simple. Of course, the British had the Maxim gun, or something closely resembling it, which later became the Maxim gun. They had quite advanced technology for the time. But they were defeated essentially, you know, by tribal guerrillas who had nothing but very old-fashioned rifles which often took just one gunshot, and they fired it normally for killing animals. And the British, realizing they had lost, left the country. And they claimed they left it alone. But they never did because they were then occupying and ruling over India. It was British India at the time. And when, for the first time, you had in Afghanistan an attempt by native Afghans to create a popular democratic constitution in 1918, 1919—inspired partially by the Kemalists in Turkey, and partially by the Bolsheviks—the new king, Amanullah, said, "We will have a democratic constitution and permit elections," and his wife Soraya, said, "And we will give women the right to vote." This was in the Afghan draft constitution. In other words, if that had gone through, women in Afghanistan would have had the right to vote before they did in the United States and Britain and most parts of the West. But this plan was defeated by a British plot which conspired with very deeply conservative and reactionary tribes and toppled this regime and put a semi-puppet regime in its place which was always unstable.

So it's all been tried before. The Russians likewise invaded Afghanistan in 1979 after two unanimous politburo decisions not to do it. Zbigniew Brzezinski boasts that they drew them into a bear trap. Was false information put on the desk of the politburo saying that Hafizullah Amin, the president of Afghanistan, was a CIA agent? Probably. In any case, they changed their minds; they went in and were stuck in an unwinnable bloody war for ten years, until finally, Gorbachev came and decided, "We have to withdraw unilaterally," and General Boris Gromov crossed the River Oxus, the Amu Darya, marched out. Quite a courageous thing to do given the enormous casualties they had had. Now, the big difference between then and now—but this shouldn't really give too much hope to those in favor of an indefinite war—is that the Afghan mujahideen, the jihadis, Osama bin Laden, groups from Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia fighting the Jihad, funded by Pakistani military intelligence, were backed by the entire West, including the Israelis for the first time. There were Mossad people giving very concrete advice inside Pakistan to the jihadis fighting the Russians. And so there was no shortage of weapons, munitions, propaganda, money. All the jihadi groups were built up at the time by the Pakistani intelligence to defeat the Russians.

One thing I will say about the Russians, opposed though I was to that invasion and occupation, simply for the reason that I said, "If this happens the Americans will come in and it will become a Cold War battlefield and the whole area will be a mess for thirty years." And it is more than that now. Afghanistan has now been at war, bloody, brutal war since 1979, longer than the Vietnam War, longer than the First World War, longer than the Second World War, and imagine what that does to the people... But I was saying that, opposed though I was, the Russians at least did one thing. They did build an education infrastructure, they did build hospitals, and for the time they were there, they

did attempt—and succeeded—to educate Afghan women, lots of people were trained as technicians, lots of people were taught sciences, lots of people were given free room, board and lodging, and education at higher institutions in Moscow. That they did.

Their successors in the invasion occupation business, the U.S. and NATO, have not done that. They claim they have but the statistics are a joke. And any serious person who goes to Afghanistan reports back on how much of a joke it is: statistics are cooked, statistics are manufactured, handed to them, and they believe them. But of course the real intelligence forces in that country know that this is far removed from the truth.

So, this is a war which is unwinnable, this is a war which is going to end, no one can win it. Neither the United States nor the insurgents. The insurgents do not have the power to inflict a Vietnamese-style defeat, and that defeat too which the Vietnamese inflicted in 1975—you know, we tend to sort of exaggerate the indigenous impact; it was very strong, but we mustn't forget the Vietnamese armies had state-of-the-art weaponry from the Soviet Union and from the early days from China. So they were incredibly well armed to take on the United States; even though their casualties were huge, they inflicted very heavy damage. And the second help the Vietnamese had, which is hardly a secret, is from the huge anti-war movement that erupted in the United States because you had a conscript army and every single family was affected by that war. These two factors are missing in the case of Afghanistan. So there's not going to be any quick victory for the insurgents. But they now have the support of large swathes of the population who were indifferent to them, because of their experience of the regime they had imposed on Afghanistan, and are now not so indifferent. And what has made them supportive of the insurgents and [enabled] large numbers of kids joining the insurgency is how the NATO armies have operated. Look, it's not just the killings, it's not just the massacre of innocents, which happens regularly; it is the whole tone and tenor of this occupation. That the way Western soldiers, Western journalists, Western administrators, Western NGOs live is in such sharp contrast with the ordinary people of the country, that it excites anger and makes people feel this is not the way we are ever going to get anything.

The argument being used today by Obama and his British camp followers is: "We can create a stable Afghan army. Look: we have an Afghan army of 100,000 people." Hang on a minute. You may have that on paper. How do you know how many of these 100,000 soldiers are on your side, how do you know that all the people you're training to be policemen are on your side? We know what the insurgency has instructed people to do. It's not a secret. They've said in the villages and in the towns, "If the Americans offer you military training, if they say, 'We'll teach you how to use weapons,' join it; we need people in there." Classic resistance tactics, utilized in virtually every resistance struggle over the last century. The Vietnamese did it, by the way. Lots of the opponents were asked to join the South Vietnamese army. Which is why sections of them collapsed in '74,'75. And the Afghans are doing it because it's an obvious thing to do, and in this case even more so—no one is backing you, no one is training you, a tiny chunk of your forces are getting irregular, informal help from the Pakistanis. But by and large you're dependent on the weapons you capture and the training you get. And we've had episodes lately of supposedly loyal Afghan policeman turning and killing British officers. We've had a famous case of an Afghan agent working for the Intelligence agencies for United States who went into a very heavily guarded secure facility and shot people dead. And that is not surprising given the anger that exists at the moment.

So what to do? What then is to be done? Out. Got to get out of Afghanistan and got to get out quick. And not get out by saying we're leaving the towns and we're going to build four huge military bases in Afghanistan, because it's not going to work. I think it might work in Iraq for a while as long as the Iranians let it work. It's not going to work in Afghanistan, because when the United States first announced they were going to build bases in Afghanistan for perpetuity, there were public street demonstrations in every big city: south, west, east, north. All the cities came out. No one wants

that—not even those allied. Whether Karzai wants that is an open question. If he wants to stay in Afghanistan, he won't accept that; if he wants to leave with the NATO troops, he will.

Now the big question is, what should be the mode of withdrawal? Sometimes, people say, "But if we go, won't there be a bigger mess?" Well, probably there will for a short time. But then I think a withdrawal is something which has to be organized, after serious discussions—and serious discussions with the local neighboring countries. There is no way the Pakistani regime, whichever regime you have, can be excluded from being part of the process, because apart from anything else, millions of Pashtuns live on the Pakistani side of the border. It always used to be a notion of a nominal border which was never seriously policed until this recent occupation and during the Soviet occupation. Prior to that anyone could cross it, any Pashtun could cross the border. No one ever asked him or her or any kid for their passports. The same tribes live on each side. So obviously there are links.

And that is the other factor, which has to be taken into account—that this spillage from the Afghan war is now totally destabilizing Pakistan. The notion that Pakistan is a country which, simply because it has an elected government, is calm and peaceful—that's not true. It does what the West asks it to do. But that's a very different business from actually knowing how to run the country. Pakistan has its own Karzai-style figure, Asif Zardari, who's a thief, a crook, possibly a murderer, some people say he is a murderer, and who will be swept away soon by the democratic process if it is permitted, because all he's done since he's come to power is that he and his cronies have been making money. And if these are the allies which the U.S. backs in these countries regardless of how they're in power, it doesn't help them in any way.

But the Pakistani military obviously is a key player, and has to be part of the process of withdrawal, as have the Iranians, as have the Russians, the Chinese. These are the four critical players. The Chinese because they have investments there and their money is needed to rebuild the country; the Pakistanis, Iranians, and the Russians because they need to tell their supporters in this country, "We need a national coalition government in Afghanistan for ten years, we'll disarm you, no violence will be tolerated, we're going to rebuild the country." That is the only way forward. I know it seems utopian at the moment. But the other way is to send more and more troops which will lead to more and more Afghan deaths, more and more U.S. deaths, more and more NATO deaths. I mean, the Germans have now sent in more troops than most European countries, have started participating in clashes. One of the first clashes they had was they shot dead their own allies in the Afghan army, which created havoc in that country. And just so that we know, the last opinion poll in Germany showed more than 80 percent of the German population opposed increasing German troops in Afghanistan. In Britain, the figures are lower. I'm talking to you at a time of a general election campaign which is taking place here, which you could be forgiven for thinking it wasn't taking place, because there's no big enthusiasm for it, unlike the last campaign in the United States. But 77 percent of the British population is in favor of withdrawing the troops and has declared its opposition to the war. Opposition not reflected by any of the three major political parties contesting this election. In Spain, in Italy, in France, it's exactly the same. In Holland, a government has collapsed because the Labor Party there, to its credit, said they were not prepared to vote for continuing the Dutch presence in Afghanistan. And if the Dutch begin to do it—and some of you may know, they are probably the country, apart from Britain, which does whatever the U.S. wants—then you're in trouble.

So the European population is unhappy with this. They won't act, they won't move, because they think they feel disempowered, they think it isn't going to help. But a way out is absolutely necessary. And one of the ways to do it is, as I've suggested—because if the U.S. decides to stay on, and indefinitely kill and be killed—it's not going to help anyone, and if this war spreads into Pakistan in a big way and succeeds in splitting the Pakistani military which has so far managed to preserve its

command structure, it could be [catastrophic]. So although it's the continuity with previous policies and the escalation of the war in that region, one can't say that this is a surprise, because Obama promised that he was going to do it in the election campaign. But some of us said then it was a crazy thing to pledge and an even crazier thing to carry out. So in brief, the U.S. has to concentrate now not on surges, not on wishful thinking, but on beginning the process to pull itself out from Afghanistan. And when it does, all the Europeans, highly relieved, will follow suit.

Tariq Ali

P.S.

* Editors' note: The following talk was given on April 19 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the London Review of Books. From Guernica Mag, June 2010:

http://www.guernicamag.com/features/1809/ali_6_15_10/

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