

Born American: Reflections of an Immigrant Patriot

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On October 23, 2006—the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Hungarian Revolution—an article by the Hungarian émigré Peter Nadas appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*. Mr. Nadas was a young participant in the revolution, so his article said many interesting and insightful things, but perhaps the most revealing is this:

To this day I can recite the chronology of those 13 days. Even today I cannot quite contain my *romantic frenzy* felt over the sensation that everybody is with us, the whole world is with us. You couldn't be everywhere at the same time, but all the news, the stories and the legends of glory reached you. Upon hearing them you experienced them vicariously, relying on your reserves of empathy and you embellished them, hence the greater number of variations. *The Revolution recognizes a first person plural which, instead of excluding the first person singular, accommodates and even absorbs the latter with all of its characteristics.* [Emphasis added.]

As I said, it is a very revealing quote—one with which I happen to disagree. When I say that I disagree, let me be clear: It may very well be that Mr. Nadas and his cohorts shared these feelings during the revo-

lution. I certainly do not dispute his memories or his feelings about them.

What I do question is his understanding and explanation of the pull and appeal of the revolution. It may have been what moved Mr. Nadas, but if that is so, it is too bad. It is the wrong way to approach a revolution—or, at least, it is a highly imperfect way. I understand the pith and eloquence of his explanation. I understand and sympathize with part of its meaning. But the part about the first person plural absorbing—that is to say, “swallowing up”—the first person singular is a dangerous temptation in all revolutions, and it is one, I am happy to say, you Americans have been fortunate and wise enough, by and large, to resist.

It was, I think, precisely this sentiment—so poetically described by Mr. Nadas—that helped doom the Hungarian Revolution to failure. Ironically, some 33 years later, this same tendency toward absorbing the first person singular would be one of the things cited as a justification for the destruction of the Communists whom the revolutionaries of '56, in their fervor, had meant to expel. The irony is that the revolutionaries of Mr. Nadas's memory had so much of an elemental nature in common with their enemies.

Or perhaps it is not ironic, just sadly predictable, in a land without the blessings and habits of liberty. The individual can never really—and should never

really—simply be *absorbed* into the political. No legitimate political cause would ask such a thing of a man. It is a kind of madness and barbarism. But this lesson, though sometimes deeply felt in the heart, is difficult to internalize in the mind and externalize in action, particularly in the face of the kind of “romantic frenzy” described by Mr. Nadas.

In America, each generation has to be educated in our principles of right, the natural rights that stem from those principles, and about our constitutional soul, which gives these rights their functional order. As Madison put it, “liberty and learning always have to be attached.” In this unique country—this *novus ordo seclorum*—citizens have to be made because it is not enough that they be born.

Unfortunately, it took me a very long time to come to that realization. Born, as I was, in post-war Hungary, becoming American was not just an obstacle of birth; for I came to America in late 1956, just as the revolution failed. I was only 10 years old, so my education about America came mainly in America.

But it did not come to me in any organized or systematic way. Much of it—too much of it—came to me by way of happy accidents. Though I fumbled about looking for it on my own—in your public schools and in your state universities—it was not until I reached graduate school that I really began the study of American liberty. Only there did I have the opportunity and the guidance to introduce myself to men like Jefferson, Madison, and Washington on their own terms. That is, I was able to read them without being distracted by Marxist or Freudian interpretations. But even then, I was lucky. I happened to have a few good professors, and they happened to have the good sense to let these men speak for themselves.

These “old time men,” as Lincoln called our founders, persuaded me that we Americans—that is to say, ordinary human beings—are capable of something quite extraordinary: self government. But their wisdom and my experience with tyranny also persuaded me that self-government is a fragile commodity. The project of self-government is not well served by “romantic fren-

zy” and absorbing the “I” into the “we.” It is much too serious a business for that kind of mindless sentiment and drive. In Madison’s words, “The people must arm themselves of the power which knowledge gives.” So I set my mind to learning from these “old time men.”

Now I am honored to be one of those professors who lets these men speak for themselves and to work at a place that Benjamin Rush might have called a “republican seminary”—the John M. Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs at Ashland University. Here, I teach mainly native Americans—that is, the sons and daughters of you who were born in this great country.

What I do with these American natives is to remind them of the axioms of a free society. I start with a simple thing about their country and themselves. I tell them that they are among the fortunate of the earth, among the blessed of all times and places. I tell them not only that their country is the most powerful and the most prosperous nation on earth, but also that it is the freest and the most just. Then I tell them how and why this is so. I teach the principles from which these blessings of liberty flow. I invite them to consider whether they can have any greater honor than to pass this great inheritance of freedom undiminished to their children and their grandchildren. Then we talk for a few years about how they might accomplish this.

But the irony of my situation is not lost on me. How did this Hungarian immigrant become a teacher of American things to native-born Americans?

REVOLUTION AND ESCAPE

I came to this country on Christmas Eve, 1956—one day after my tenth birthday. The revolution had begun exactly two months prior to our arrival. The Soviets moved in and crushed the Hungarian revolutionaries on November 4. My father told my mother that he had had enough. He had wanted to leave the country for years, but because of all the ties to kith and kin, he was persuaded to resist the temptation.

But the coming of the revolution had stirred up new hope in my father—who had suffered first under Nazi and then under Communist oppression. He had wit-

nessed the brutalization and near starvation of his own father in a Communist gulag for the high crime of having had a small American flag in his possession. The doom of this revolution was too much to bear. He told my mother it was time to get serious about leaving.

Hesitant at first, for all the usual and expected reasons, she knew in her heart that he was right. But she needed support in this decision, and perhaps because she could not discuss it with the elder members of our family for fear of putting them in danger, she told my father that she would go only if the children agreed. So my mother approached me and told me that my father was thinking of leaving the country. She asked if I would be willing to go with him. My mother claims—though I don't remember saying this—that I responded to her question by saying, "With my father I am willing to go to hell."

Like the statement from Mr. Nadas above, there is something that appeals to one's emotions in that response. I am tempted, still, to like it. But upon reflection, one sees in my response an imperfection very similar to the imperfection of Mr. Nadas's formulation. But I was young. I had not quite developed a sense of right and of wrong that went much beyond familial piety. Perhaps I was ready to be swept up by a "romantic frenzy," and I might have been, had it not been for the natural courage and good sense of my father. For my father informed me that our destination was not "hell"—we were already there—but someplace rather its opposite: America.

I do remember asking him this next question because his answer, in reflecting something greater than familial piety, turned out to be one of those pithy and moving moments that stays in your mind, not only because it is a good memory, but also because it shapes you and moves you through life in a certain direction as opposed to another one. I asked him, "Why are we going to America?" Dad answered, "Because, son, we were born Americans, but in the wrong place."

Born Americans but in the wrong place? When my father said these words, they settled our minds and calmed our hearts. I don't claim that we understood

the full import of his words—indeed, I've spent the better part of the last 50 years working to more fully understand them. But the good sense of his pronouncement had a jolting effect, and if we didn't grasp all the implications and permutations of this very American concept, we certainly knew that it wasn't completely insane. We sensed that he was on to something.

Of course, we knew something about America in that vague way that Europeans then did—and probably still do. Although today there is much more distraction with the attention given to mass media and popular culture, in those days it was not uncommon for schoolchildren of my age to have read, as I recently had done, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. Everybody read those books, and they probably still do read them in many places around the world—except, of course, in American high schools and colleges.

My father was on to something deeper than these vague and imprecise notions we all had about America. Everyone understood America to be a free and a good place where one might prosper unmolested. But in saying that we were "born Americans but in the wrong place," Dad, in his way, was saying that he understood America to be both a place and an idea at the same time. It was a place that would embrace us if we could prove that we shared in the idea.

We meant to prove it. We could not so express it at the time, but we meant to show that we were, in Lincoln's words, "blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh" of all true Americans because "the father of all moral principle" in us was the same as that of those "old time men" who brought forth this fine nation dedicated to the proposition that "all men are created equal." We had never heard these ideas so expressed, but that did not matter. We knew that our dignity as human beings demanded that our government respect us accordingly. We knew that a government that failed to do this was no government at all, but tyranny.

And so, we left Hungary.

Our escape was not without its drama. Such escapes were rarely simple matters—else they would not be

called “escapes.” But my father was an enterprising and a clever man. He plotted a way for us to go that would attract the least amount of suspicion, and he knew the countryside along the Austrian border. We could not tell anyone—least of all our remaining family—that we were leaving. Though this was certainly the best policy for their safety and ours, it caused us some anguish, for we knew not whether we would survive our attempt at escape, let alone whether we would ever see them again. We had to hope that we would survive and to assume that we would not see the rest of our family again.

We took almost nothing with us. My mother had a little satchel with some jewelry and mementos. My sister, who was then four, and I each carried a little doll. My father had some U.S. currency that took him a lifetime to squirrel away. It was about \$17 in single dollar bills. We boarded a train headed for a town on the Austrian border. No one spoke on the train, for we all knew that most of the people aboard were engaged in the same endeavor. My father shook his head as he saw a large number of these folks exit the train at a particular stop. He knew that they would not succeed if they took that route. He was right.

When we exited the train and began walking, it became clear after a while that although this was the road less traveled, it was still pretty seriously traveled. Before long, we had amassed a group of some 50 people as we picked up stragglers along the way. My father became a kind of *de facto* leader of this group, as he had grown up around here and played in these fields as a child. I remember picking up small children crying over the dead bodies of their parents, shot by Soviets. But we had to be very careful in doing this. It was a well-known Soviet trick to use a crying child as a trap.

It was nearly daylight when, after crossing a little bridge, we heard people speaking German. We had done it. We were in Austria. I remember being amazed, as a typical little boy, by watching the Austrian guards approach our group, saying something I couldn’t understand, and then seeing the members of our group unload an arsenal of every imaginable

kind of weapon. That was, to my young mind, one of the most fascinating things about our journey. I could not fathom the fear that had caused these men to come so prepared.

Some 200,000 Hungarians left Hungary in the aftermath of 1956. Nearly a quarter of these would also decide to come, if not immediately, then eventually, to the United States. Who knows how many more wished to come but could not find a sponsor?

The story of our amazing good luck in finding our sponsor involves a bit of serendipity that sounds almost contrived as a bit of bad fiction writing. As we recuperated from our journey in a camp outside of Nickelsdorf, Austria, representatives from different embassies would meet with the refugees and try to persuade us to come to their country, depending upon the refugee’s occupation, their needs, and so on.

Since “Schramm” is a German name, the man from the German embassy informed my father, we would be considered *Volksdeutschen* in Germany, and so we should consider moving there. He told my father all about the great generosity of their welfare system: We would have an apartment, a car, and a guaranteed monthly income. We had virtually nothing, mind you, but my father responded with, “No, thank you, I’m not a German.”

He waited for the man from the American embassy to speak with us. Of course, we had to speak to him through an interpreter, but we finally came to understand that getting to America was not as simple as stating a desire to come. There was a limit on how many people they could take, and there was a very large number of people vying for those spots. It would be very good, the man informed us, if we had a relative in the United States. That would help us get to America faster. Of course, we had none. “Well, even a friend might be helpful if he would sponsor you. Do you know anyone in America?”

My father started to say “no,” but my mother stopped him. She ran back to her satchel and pulled out a rumpled business card. She put it in front of my father. “Oh!” said my father—surprised not only by

the memory that it inspired but by my mother's keen foresight in both saving the card and bringing it with her on this journey.

The card, barely legible after all these years, said "Dr. Joseph Moser, DDS, Hermosa Beach, California." The man from the embassy is waiting patiently, but he does not understand. "What does this mean?" he asked my father. "I do know someone in America," my father explained. "I know this man." Then he explained the following story to the American ambassador.

In 1946, before I was born but while I was on the way, my father was newly married and post-war Europe was economically devastated. Hungary was no exception to this rule, but my father was an entrepreneurial character, and so he was able to fashion a rude sort of vehicle out of four wheels, an engine, and a flat bed—in other words, random parts cast off from military vehicles. He would use this vehicle to scavenge the countryside for things to sell or trade. This is one way we existed for a few years after the war.

Actual cars were almost never seen on the roads in those days, so when Dad came across a broken-down Volkswagen off to the side of one road—good will and neighborliness were only two reasons to stop; curiosity compelled it—it turned out that the man with the vehicle was an American G.I., now on leave and touring Europe. He had been born in Hungary and was taking advantage of an opportunity to see it again, but the car had broken down, and he could not fix it. Dad could, and so he did.

Naturally, the man wanted to give Dad some money. Dad refused the offer and said it had been his pleasure to help. Of course, in reality, the money would have been a huge help to him, but something made him refuse it. So the man instead handed him his business card and said to my father, "Well, you've been very kind with your time and effort, so here's my business card. If you ever need anything," he said with real meaning, "give me a call." Of course, that was Dr. Moser. Ten years later, Dad needed something.

The man from the embassy took the card and looked skeptically at my father. "Have you had any contact

with this man in the intervening years?" he asked. My father reported that there had been no contact between them. Still, he took the card and went away. Three or four days later, he returned with good news. Dr. Moser remembered the encounter with my father; he said he would be happy to sponsor us.

AMERICANS COME HOME

Thus it was that my family and I arrived in New York on Christmas Eve, 1956. We moved to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, on Christmas morning to be processed, and by January 5, 1957, which happened to be my father's birthday, we arrived in Hermosa Beach, California, to meet with Dr. Joseph Moser, DDS. Christmas and birthdays were all overshadowed by this tremendous gift: the chance to start our new life in freedom.

We started out in a small beach house the Mosers helped to secure for us. The shock of our new environs was jolting at first. In our typical Hungarian arrogance, we had scoffed at cornflakes in Camp Kilmer—Hungarians feed such things to pigs—and we assumed that this house we were now inhabiting was some kind of vacation beach shack. It was, in fact, a perfectly nice home, but my point is that in all the ordinary ways, we were entirely out of our element. We had much to learn about this country.

Dad, of course, went to work immediately. We had to make certain promises upon entering the country and had to prove that we would not become a burden on the American taxpayers. So Dad began moving and lifting heavy things for the *Hermosa Beach Daily Breeze* newspaper. My mother worked cleaning houses. Within a couple of years, they had saved enough money to go into business for themselves.

Of course, none of us spoke any English right away. In addition, my parents had no formal higher education or specific job training upon which they could draw in America. But Mom could certainly cook, and so, together, Mom and Dad looked around and said, "These Americans are nice enough people, but they can't cook. Why don't we cook for them?"

And so it was that Schramm's Hungarian Restaurant was born with \$1,500 of hard-earned savings and another \$1,500 loaned by some trusting American banker. It was a small place on Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles. I was about 12 and my sister was six when we opened it. I say "we" because, as is typical in such situations, we all worked there. My English and writing were the best among us, so I was assigned to type the menus as well as wash dishes, wait tables, and so on. We prospered, and in a few short years, we were able to move into a larger location in Studio City.

I mentioned that it was my responsibility to type the menus. We would change them every week or so, depending upon which foods and dishes were available. From the beginning, the first and most popular dish was stuffed cabbage. It was very good, very easy to make, and people loved it, so it was a regular item on the menu.

Something like three or four years after we opened the first restaurant, one of our regular customers approached me and said, "Peter, I've been meaning to tell you this for a while because I know you're typing the menus." "Vat eez eet?" I demanded, sensing that I was about to be corrected and, possibly, deeply embarrassed about something I had done. "Well, Peter, you've been spelling 'stuffed cabbage' wrong." "Vat do szyoo mean?" I asked in heavily accented English. "Peter, you've been typing 'stuffed garbage' all these years. I think it's time you knew it."

Of course, I was just as embarrassed as could be. My mother was mortified. But this is how we learned: in bits and pieces, by trial and error. There was no "bilingual" education in the schools, so it was up to me to learn English as I could. There was a very kind little red-headed boy named Jeffrey in my first American classroom, who would take me to the back of the room and read with me. He would point to the words, and I would read them. He would correct me. I would repeat it again until I got it right. Eventually, after nine months of this painful exercise, I began to understand.

Another boy in that first fifth grade class—and I swear it is true that his name was "Butch"—used to

beat me up every day. This was probably because I was wearing lederhosen until a kind woman from our neighborhood explained to my skeptical—and somewhat appalled—mother that it was more customary for American children to wear blue jeans and such to school. Butch beat me up every day until the last day of school that year, when I was finally able to pin him down and make him say "Uncle."

I suppose today some well-meaning administrator might enroll Butch and my classmates in a sensitivity training class, but I think this baptism by fire, painful as it was, was more effective and did me and my classmates more good. After I won that final fight, my classmates all cheered and rewarded me with a baseball book that everyone, including Butch, proudly and generously signed.

Mishaps and memorable misadventures were my primary way of learning about America. One amusing example happened on the third or fourth day after we arrived in Hermosa Beach, when I stole a Bible. I still have it. I was walking down a street, and there was some kind of a garage sale in progress. I didn't know about such things in Hungary, so I assumed that the people were throwing the things away. I saw the Bible lying there, immediately recognized what it was, and—though I couldn't read it yet—I thought it a shame to see it thrown out, and so I took it.

So off I went with my new Bible, and later that evening there was a knock at the door. Mrs. Moser had to be summoned to interpret for us. This little boy and his parents were there to inform my parents that I had stolen the Bible. They were not worried about the Bible so much as indignant about my apparent ignorance of the commandment against stealing. When finally it was all explained, I was told to keep the Bible, and their son became my first American friend and soon taught me to swim in the Pacific Ocean.

In short, there was no systematic plan for our assimilation as Americans, but in these many small and innumerable ways, we did assimilate. As an immigrant to your country, I must say that I find the concern that some people have for these trivial kinds

of assimilation to be very odd. These small things that, upon our first meeting, make us uncomfortable in one another's presence for one reason or another have a way of working themselves out—or at least they used to—without much interference.

On the whole, Americans tend to be among the most kind and generous people on earth. For every Butch there are a thousand Jeffreys. But when it comes to the important and necessary kind of assimilation—that is, teaching immigrants about the history and greatness of your country—there the public schools, the universities, the government fall flat. There is very little concern, unfortunately, for that kind of lack of assimilation.

BECOMING AMERICAN

After fifth grade, I attended American schools and a four-year university. I was never required to read any kind of founding document in any of them. I probably read some kind of textbook account of American history, but nothing worthy of the subject. Though I was always an avid reader and had a general interest in history, nothing I learned about American history in school had any effect on me; there was no poetry in it, nothing to inspire appropriate awe or respect.

The closest thing I got by way of an education in high school was in an English class where a harsh spinster of a teacher insisted that we memorize 40 lines from Shakespeare. She was a serious person, and though we made fun of her behind her back, I actually liked her and wanted to please her. Unimaginatively, perhaps, I chose Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy. In order to master it, I would pace up and down in my bedroom reading aloud.

At first I only had a sense of the rhythm and the music of the language. I liked it, but I really had no idea what it meant. At some point, however, after repeatedly reading it aloud, it hit me. I realized that I finally understood what Shakespeare was saying, and, more than that, I realized that I finally had some real grasp of the English language. Until that moment, I was living in English but dreaming in Hungarian.

After that moment, I never had a dream in anything other than English.

This modest beginning of an education, though certainly very good for me, still left me without much curiosity about the nature of the regime to which I had emigrated. I still had no concept of the greatness of America or why, beyond what my Dad told me and the contrast with tyranny that I had witnessed, I should love it. I knew we were free here, but I had no idea about how rare, how difficult, and how remarkable that freedom was.

My experience at a California state university did not do much to enlighten me. I started to ask questions and to inquire about American history, but the professors would denigrate it as a study in hypocrisy. Lincoln, of course, was dismissed as a racist. I thought that was somehow odd. I didn't know much about American history, but I knew that Lincoln was certainly, in all the ordinary ways, known to be a very important person in American and, indeed, in world history. Everybody has always known this, including Leo Tolstoy, and here's my professor, at an American state university in California, dismissing all of this out of hand.

It was immediately after that class that I went down and changed my major from history to political science. I later had to change it back to history because another professor—this time in political science—told the class that anyone who believed in God should immediately leave his class. I and another woman were the only ones who did this, but we got up and left.

So I graduated with a degree in history but focused on European history in order to avoid studying this so-called American hypocrisy. I didn't want to study these Americans who talked big about rights and justice and duty and obligation and constitutional government but who were in fact hypocrites who established slavery and then couldn't end it.

So I studied tyranny. I studied Louis XIV and Stalin and Hitler. I figured it just made sense to take things in their pure form without the hypocrisy, and it was rather fun if one likes counting bodies and wars. So

that's what I did: I counted the bodies of the people that tyrants from Genghis Khan to Stalin killed. I talked about why they were killed, and then I counted more bodies. I was a typical history student, and all because of that one professor who misled me.

Fortunately, I was still interested in politics. It was the '60s, so I guess everyone was interested in politics. I walked precincts for Goldwater in '64 and started reading *National Review*. There was this organization called the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists, now the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, or ISI, that sponsored week-long summer institutes. This group was appealing to me because I certainly was not a Communist. I would go to these seminars, and I would meet 40 or 50 really bright students from around the country, and we would talk about things in a way that seemed more intelligent and more intellectually and morally enlivened than the conversations of most of my colleagues at the state college. And they went deeper and further than my conservative friends in the political world, looking back and beyond the immediate battles at hand.

As a result of these seminars, I came upon some very interesting people—Harry Jaffa, Martin Diamond, Bill Allen—all associated with Claremont Men's College, now Claremont McKenna College. I really had no idea of what I was doing at this point in my life. I only knew that I had stumbled upon something very interesting and that I wanted to know everything I could about it.

I had so many credits at the state school that I was more or less forced into graduation. I panicked because I thought this meant that I had to stop studying and learning. I had no idea about graduate school, so being forced into graduation nearly devastated me. Then Bill Allen suggested I enroll at Claremont Graduate School, and I did. I was already spending all my time over there, so it was a natural fit.

And so I began, in earnest, the study I continue with my own students today: the study of the nature and purpose of American constitutional government and the story of its creation and birth. Put another

way, as my Dad once put it, I study what it means to be born American.

TEACHING AMERICANS

I know this is a wonderful country for all kinds of reasons, not the least of which is that I now get paid to think and talk and write and teach about these deeply interesting things. The students I teach are usually native people: Americans who happen to have been born in the right place, probably the greatest country ever—meaning the biggest, the strongest, and the most significant country, but even more interestingly, the freest. This is the country that is the most self-consciously free, the one that really talks about itself in wonderful philosophical terms of justice, of rights, of individual liberty and dignity and equality, and limited self-government.

I teach my students that this is a unique thing. If you as an American, regardless of your political opinions, left or right, don't understand that uniqueness or are, perhaps, even offended or embarrassed by it, as some on both the left and—I regret to say—the right are, then I think you're making a very bad mistake, very much like the one I made in college when I gave up studying American history. Take it up again or discover it for the first time—but do it on its own terms.

This is a *novus ordo seclorum*—a new order for the ages, and because everyone has always understood that, it has also offended nearly everyone. When you stand up and you say that an ordinary John Smith—a farmer or a mechanic or a man his "betters" might have called a peasant dog—can govern himself with as much ease as a George III and with as much right, that offends the George IIIs and the would-be George IIIs of this world. It offends all the self-appointed aristocrats who think something flowing in their veins or beating about in their brains gives them the right to govern themselves and everybody else—without, of course, the consent of the governed.

This country isn't really just a regime. It's the still-burning spark of a new world. Our fathers then, and all of us now, have stood up in a manly way and said

to all the world that we can govern ourselves, and we are doing it, despite the chaos around us; despite the fury of elections, the horrors of war, and the grind of sometimes apparent stupidity.

The fact of the matter is that we've done it all and done it in an extraordinarily good way. We have to remind ourselves of what we are at our best. More important, we have to remind our children of that, because Hungarians and Germans may be born, but Americans are not. Nobody is really born an American. You have to be made into an American.

In a certain way, you're born by nature to be an American—in a kind of teleological way, if you like, as an end or purpose. But for this purpose to be fulfilled, human interference has to be involved. You have to teach a young person, this would-be American citizen, what are the things worth fighting for? What are things that might be worth dying for? And why? This is a country worth loving not only because it is your own country, but because it is good.

Lincoln might be right. America might be “the last best hope” for freedom on this earth. To neglect her is to allow the spark of this new order of the ages to be extinguished. And that, I submit, we have no right to do.

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