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Opinion | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Extended Forecast: Bloodshed

Nicholas Kristof APRIL 13, 2008

Here's a forecast for a particularly bizarre consequence of climate change: more executions of witches.

As we pump out greenhouse gases, most of the discussion focuses on direct consequences like rising seas or aggravated hurricanes. But the indirect social and political impact in poor countries may be even more far-reaching, including upheavals and civil wars — and even more witches hacked to death with machetes.

In rural Tanzania, murders of elderly women accused of witchcraft are a very common form of homicide. And when Tanzania suffers unusual rainfall — either drought or flooding — witch-killings double, according to research by Edward Miguel, an economist at the University of California, Berkeley.

“In bad years, the killings explode,” Professor Miguel said. He believes that if climate change causes more drought years in Tanzania, the result will be more elderly women executed there and in other poor countries that still commonly attack supposed witches.

There is evidence that European witch-burnings in past centuries may also have resulted from climate variations and the resulting crop failures, economic distress and search for scapegoats. Emily Oster, a University of Chicago economist, tracked witchcraft trials and weather in Western Europe between 1520 and 1770 and found a

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In particular, Europe's "little ice age" led to a sharp cooling in the late 1500s, and that corresponds to a renewal in witchcraft trials after a long lull. And there's also micro-evidence: in one area, a brutally cold May in 1626 led outraged peasants to call for punishment of witches thought responsible. Some scholars have also argued that the Salem witch trials occurred after a particularly cold winter and economically difficult period.

The point is that climate change will have consequences that will be difficult to foresee but will go far beyond weather or economics. There is abundant evidence that economic stress and crop failures — as climate scientists anticipate in poor countries — can lead to violence and upheavals.

In the United States, for example, some historians have found correlations between recessions or declines in farm values and increased lynchings of blacks.

Paul Collier, an Oxford University expert on global poverty, found that economic stagnation in poor countries leads to a rising risk of civil war. Professor Collier warns that climate change is likely to reduce rainfall in southern Africa enough that corn will no longer be a viable crop there. Since corn is a major form of sustenance in that region, the result may be catastrophic food shortages — and civil conflict.

The area that may be hardest hit of all — aside from islands that disappear beneath the waves — is the fragile Sahel region south of the Sahara Desert in West Africa. The Sahel is already impoverished and torn by religious and ethnic tensions, and reduced rainfall could push the region into warfare.

"The poorest people on Earth are in the Sahel, barely eking out an existence, and climate change pushes them over the edge," Professor Miguel said. "It's totally unfair."

His research suggests that a drought one year increases by 50 percent the risk that an African country will slip into civil war the next year.

Ethnic conflict in Darfur was exacerbated by drought and competition for water, and some experts see it as the first war caused by climate change. That's too

simplistic, for the crucial factor was simply the ruthlessness of the Sudanese government, but climate change may well have been a contributing factor.

In a forthcoming book, “Economic Gangsters,” Mr. Miguel calls for a new system of emergency aid for countries suffering unusual drought or similar economic shocks. Such temporary aid would aim to reduce the risk of warfare that, once it has begun, is enormously costly to stop and often damages neighboring countries as well.

The greenhouse gases that imperil Africa’s future are spewing from the United States, China and Europe. The people in Bangladesh and Africa emit almost no carbon, yet they are the ones who will bear the greatest risks of climate change. Some experts believe that the damage that the West does to poor countries from carbon emissions exceeds the benefit from aid programs.

All this makes the United States’ reluctance to confront climate change in a serious way — like a carbon tax to replace the payroll tax, coupled with global leadership on the issue — as unjust as it is unfortunate.

So let’s remember that the stakes with climate change are broader than hotter summers or damaged beach houses. The most dire consequences of our denial and delay may include civil war — and even witch-killings — among the poorest peoples on earth.

I invite you to comment on this column on my blog, www.nytimes.com/ontheground, and join me on Facebook at www.facebook.com/kristof.

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The New York Times

U.S.

In Small Town, 'Grease' Ignites a Culture War

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO FEB. 11, 2006

FULTON, Mo. - When Wendy DeVore, the drama teacher at Fulton High here, staged the musical "Grease," about high school students in the 1950's, she carefully changed the script to avoid causing offense in this small town.

She softened the language, substituting slang for profanity in places. Instead of smoking "weed," the teenagers duck out for a cigarette. She rated the production PG-13, advising parents it was not suitable for small children.

But a month after the performances in November, three letters arrived on the desk of Mark Enderle, Fulton's superintendent of schools. Although the letters did not say so, the three writers were members of a small group linked by e-mail, all members of the same congregation, Callaway Christian Church.

Each criticized the show, complaining that scenes of drinking, smoking and a couple kissing went too far, and glorified conduct that the community tries to discourage. One letter, from someone who had not seen the show but only heard about it, criticized "immoral behavior veiled behind the excuse of acting out a play."

Dr. Enderle watched a video of the play, ultimately agreeing that "Grease" was unsuitable for the high school, despite his having approved it beforehand, without looking at the script. Hoping to avoid similar complaints in the future, he decided to ban the scheduled spring play, "The Crucible" by Arthur Miller.

"That was me in my worst Joe McCarthy moment, to some," Dr. Enderle said.

He called "The Crucible" "a fine play," but said he dropped it to keep the school from being "mired in controversy" all spring.

To many, the term "culture war" evokes national battles over new frontiers in taste and decency, over violence in video games, or profanity in music or on television. But such battles are also fought in small corners of the country like Fulton, a conservative town of about 10,000, where it can take only a few objections about library books or high school plays to shift quietly the cultural borderlines of an entire community.

The complaints here, which were never debated in a public forum, have spread a sense of uncertainty about the shifting terrain as parents, teachers and students have struggled to understand what happened. Among teenagers who were once thrilled to have worked on the production, "Grease" became "the play they'd rather not talk about," said Teri Arms, their principal, who had also approved the play before it was presented.

"Grease" and "The Crucible" are hardly unfamiliar; they are standard fare on the high school drama circuit, the second-most-frequently-performed musical and drama on school stages, according to the Educational Theater Association, a nonprofit group. The most performed now are "Seussical" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

But challenges to longstanding literary or artistic works are not unusual, said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, deputy director of the American Library Association's office of intellectual freedom. Complaints generally are growing; in 2004, the last year for which figures are available, 547 books came under fire, an increase of nearly 20 percent over 2003, when 458 books were challenged.

"That a literary work is a classic does not protect it from being challenged, or even removed from a particular community," Ms. Caldwell-Stone said. Fulton, about 90 miles west of St. Louis, is best known as the home of Westminster College, where Winston Churchill gave his Iron Curtain speech in 1946. Presidents since Harry S. Truman have spoken in Fulton, lending the town a more cosmopolitan image.

Joseph Potter, an assistant professor of performing arts at William Woods University here, has staged dozens of shows for the community, including "Grease," and said he had never received a complaint. But politically and socially, Mr. Potter said, the town's core is conservative.

The three complaints about "Grease" reached Dr. Enderle within the same week.

Mark Miller, a 26-year-old graduate student, said he was moved to complain after getting an e-mail message about the show from Terra Guittar, a member of his church. Her description of the pajama party scene offended him, he wrote, adding that one character should have worn a more modest nightgown. Mr. Miller did not see the play.

"It makes sense that you're not going to offend anyone by being on the conservative side, especially when you're dealing with students, who don't have the same power as a principal or a theater director," he said.

A tape of the dress rehearsal showed that while most of the girls in the scene wore pajamas or a granny gown, Rizzo, the play's bad girl, wore just a pajama top. After the other girls fell asleep, Rizzo slipped her jeans on to sneak out for a date.

Ms. Guittar was so outraged by the drinking and kissing onstage that she walked out on the performance. She said she was not trying to inhibit artistic creativity. "It was strictly a moral issue," she said. "They're under 18. They're not in Hollywood."

But other parents were happy with the play. Mimi Curtis, whose son John played the lead, said the principal and drama teacher went out of their way to respect parents' wishes, changing the script in response to her own objections to profanity.

Ms. Curtis, who ran a concession stand during the play, saw all four performances.

"I didn't view it as raunchy," she said, adding that children who watch television are "hearing worse."

Dr. Enderle said he did not base his decision to cancel "The Crucible," which was first reported by The Fulton Sun, a daily, just on the three complaints and the

video. He also asked 10 people he knew whether the play crossed a line. All but one, he recalled, said yes.

"To me, it's entirely a preventative maintenance issue," Dr. Enderle explained. "I can't do anything about what's already happened, but do I want to spend the spring saying, 'Yeah, we crossed the line again'?"

Nevertheless, the superintendent said he was "not 100 percent comfortable" with having canceled "The Crucible."

The absence of public debate meant that students heard of the cancellation as a *fait accompli* from their principal, Ms. Arms, and Ms. DeVore, the drama teacher. Others learned "The Crucible" was off limits through an internal school district newsletter. In it, Dr. Enderle said he dropped the play after seeing this summary on the Web: "17th century Salem woman accuses an ex-lover's wife of witchery in an adaptation of the Arthur Miller play."

Mr. Miller wrote "The Crucible" in the 1950's, in response to the witch hunt of his own day, when Congress held hearings to purge Hollywood of suspected Communists, pressuring witnesses to expose others to prove their innocence. The affair is not acted out in the play, which focuses on how hysteria and fear devoured Salem, despite the lack of evidence.

Dr. Enderle said Fulton High's students had largely accepted his decision and moved on. They are now rehearsing "A Midsummer Night's Dream" as their spring drama.

But in interviews here, students, who had already begun practicing for auditions of "The Crucible," expressed frustration and resignation, along with an overriding sense that there was no use fighting City Hall.

"It's over," said Emily Swenson, 15, after auditioning for "A Midsummer Night's Dream." "We can't do anything about it. We just have to obey."

Both the students and Ms. DeVore seemed unsure of why "The Crucible," which students study in 11th grade, was unacceptable.

Jarryd Lapp, a junior who was a light technician on "Grease," said he was disappointed that "The Crucible" was canceled. But he had a theory. "The show itself is graphic," he said. "People get hung; there's death in it. It's not appropriate."

Ms. DeVore believes it was canceled because it portrays the Salem witch trials, "a time in history that makes Christians look bad."

"In a Bible Belt community," she added, "it makes people nervous."

The teacher and her students are now ruling out future productions they once considered for their entertainment value alone, like "Little Shop of Horrors," a musical that features a cannibalistic plant, which they had discussed doing next fall.

Torii Davis, a junior, said that in her psychology class earlier that day, most students predicted that "Little Shop of Horrors" would never pass the test.

"Audrey works in a flower shop," Ms. Davis said. "She has a boyfriend who beats her. That could be controversial."

Ms. DeVore went down a list of the most commonly performed musicals and dramas on high school stages, and ticked off the potentially offensive aspects. "'Bye Bye Birdie' has smoking and drinking. 'Oklahoma,' there's a scene where she's almost raped. 'Diary of Anne Frank,' would you take a 6-year-old?" the drama teacher asked.

"How am I supposed to know what's appropriate when I don't have any written guidelines, and it seems that what was appropriate yesterday isn't appropriate today?" Ms. DeVore asked. The teacher said she had been warned that because of the controversy, the school board might not renew her contract for next year.

For the moment, Dr. Enderle acknowledged, the controversy has shrunk the boundaries of what is acceptable for the community. He added that "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was "not a totally vanilla play."

But asked if the high school might put on another Shakespeare classic about young people in love, "Romeo and Juliet," he hesitated.

"Given the historical context of the play," the superintendent said, "it would be difficult to say that's something we would not perform."

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October 15, 1998

Op-Ed: Salem Revisited

By ARTHUR MILLER

A number of commentators have seen a resemblance between the extravaganza around President Clinton and the witchcraft hysteria in Salem 300 years ago. There are some similarities and some important differences.

The tone of iron vituperation and the gut-shuddering hatred are reminiscent of the fury of the Salem ministers roaring down on the Devil as though they would grind their heels into his face. Though there were never any witches while there certainly is a Bill Clinton, the underlying emotions are not all that different -- the evident wish is to end the Evil One's very existence.

In both cases there is a kind of sublime relief in the unearthing of the culprit's hidden crimes. The Salem church, which effectively controlled the village, had been so fractious that minister after minister had fled the pulpit or been dismissed. But with the discovery of Satan in town, the people understood in a flash what the source of their troubles had been, and a new era of social peace opened before them -- provided they could root out the diabolically corrupt. Suddenly paranoia ruled and all were suspect and no one was safe.

What is very different now is the public reaction. Rarely does just about every newspaper and television commentator agree so thoroughly. Be it The New York Times, The Washington Post, or the television and print tabloids whose normal business is reporting news of the gutter, media outlets all became highly moral in a single stroke, as though an electric charge had passed through iron filings, instantly pointing them all in the same direction. Not often does one sinner raise so many so quickly out of their moral slumber.

But what is strange and interesting is how the public, that great stallion that is so often led to water, this time dipped its head but refused to drink, perhaps scenting the stale smell of political manipulation.

It may also be that with so many American marriages ending in divorce, and most of those surely involving a mate in the wrong bed, an unspoken self-identification with this kind of marital misery has restrained people from losing all sympathy for their leader, disappointed as they might be in his behavior.

Despite the lashings of almost all the press and the mullahs of the religious right, the people seem largely to have withheld their righteous anger. This did not happen in Salem, where the members of the clergy, who were also the leaders of the community, were strangers to mercy and indeed to common sense, and helped drive the public into a lethal panic.

There is, I think, a parallel in the sexual element underlying each phenomenon. Witch hunts are always spooked by women's horrifying sexuality awakened by the superstud Devil. In Europe, where tens of thousands perished in the hunts, broadsides showed the Devil with two phalluses, one above the other. And of course mankind's original downfall came about when the Filthy One corrupted the mother of mankind.

In Salem, witch-hunting ministers had the solemn duty to examine women's bodies for signs of the "Devil's Marks" -- a suggestion of webbing, perhaps, between the toes, a mole behind an ear or between the legs, or a bite mark somewhere. I thought of this wonderfully holy exercise when Congress went pawing through Kenneth Starr's fiercely exact report on the President's intimate meetings with Monica Lewinsky. I guess nothing changes all that much.

In any case, those who think it trivial that Mr. Clinton lied about a mere affair are missing the point; it is precisely his imperious need of the female that has unnerved a lot of men, the mullahs especially, just as it has through the ages. This may also help to account for the support he still gets from women. He may be a bit kinky, but at least he's not the usual suit for whom the woman is a vase, decorative and unused.

Then there is the color element. Mr. Clinton, according to Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist, is our first black President, the first to come from the broken home, the alcoholic mother, the under-the-bridge shadows of our ranking systems. He is also the most relaxed and unaffected with black people, whose company and culture he clearly enjoys.

His closeness to blacks may, in fact, have contributed to the relative racial harmony we have been enjoying these past few years. But it may also be part of the reason for his estrangement from his peers, and it may have helped uncork the sewer of contempt upon his head, the Starr report.

The Devil in Salem was white, but two of the few black people in the village were his first suspected consorts, John Indian and Tituba. Both were slaves. Tituba was tortured into naming women she had seen with the Devil, thus starting the hunt on its way. The conflation of female sexuality and blackness in a white world is an old story, and here it had lethal results.

In Mr. Clinton's case, there comes an overflowing of rage reminiscent of that earlier explosion. If he lied under oath he of course broke the law, but it seems impossible that the Founding Fathers would have required Congress, as a part of his punishment,

to study what parts of a woman's body the President had touched. Except for this hatred of Mr. Clinton, which sometimes seems to mount to a hellish fear of him as unclean, a supernatural contaminator, it would surely have sufficed for Mr. Starr to report that he had had an affair and falsely denied it under oath.

The Salem paroxysm left the town ravaged, accursed and almost deserted, a place where no one would buy land or farm or build for 100 years. Salem's citizens had acted out the mythology of their dark subconscious and had eaten their own -- all in the name of God and good morals. It was a volcanic explosion of repressed steam that gave people license to speak openly in court of what formerly would have been shamefully caged in their hearts -- for example, the woman who testified that her neighbor flew in through her window one balmy night and lay upon her and had his way. Suddenly this was godly testimony, and the work of heaven was to kill the neighbor.

Salem purified itself nearly to death, but in the end some good may have come of it. I am not historian enough to assert this as fact, but I have often wondered if the witch hunt may have helped spawn, 100 years later, the Bill of Rights, particularly the Fifth Amendment, which prohibits forcing a person to testify against himself -- something that would have stopped the witch hunt in its tracks. It may also have contributed to the wall of separation between church and state in America, for in Salem theocratic government had its last hurrah. Or so one may hope.

Arthur Miller is the author of "The Crucible" and many other plays.

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N.Y. / REGION

When Suspicion of Teachers Ran Unchecked

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL JUNE 15, 2009

Fifty-seven years later, Irving Adler still remembers the day he went from teacher to ex-teacher at Straubenmuller Textile High School on West 18th Street.

It was the height of the Red Scare, and the nation was gripped by hysteria over loyalty and subversion. New York City's temples of learning, bursting with postwar immigrants and the first crop of baby boomers, rang with denunciations by interrogators and spies.

Subpoenaed in 1952 to testify before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee investigating Communist influence in schools, Mr. Adler, the math department chairman and a member of the executive board of the embattled Teachers Union, refused to answer questions, citing his constitutional right.

The end came quickly, recalled Mr. Adler, 96, who later acknowledged membership in the Communist Party: "I was teaching a class when the principal sent up a letter he had just received from the superintendent announcing my suspension, as of the close of day."

Mr. Adler, who has written 56 books, was one of 378 New York City teachers ousted by dismissal, resignation or early retirement in the anti-Communist furor of the cold war, when invoking the Fifth Amendment became automatic grounds for termination. These painful stories may have been buried to history, if not for a coming documentary and a lawsuit seeking to reopen 150,000 documents on more

than 1,150 teachers who were investigated and on the informers who turned them in. Among the questions, all these years later, is whether their names can be published, and whether there is still a stigma in being named, or having named, a Communist.

The Board of Education's purges came to be widely condemned as the city's own witch hunt, repudiated decades later by subsequent administrations that reinstated dozens of dismissed teachers.

"None of those teachers were ever found negligent in the classroom," said Clarence Taylor, a professor of history at Baruch College who has written a study of the Teachers Union and the ideological strife that destroyed it. "They went after them for affiliation with the Communist Party."

Teacher interrogations also occurred in Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit and Buffalo, among other cities. In hearings of the security subcommittee, about 1,500 of the country's one million teachers were said to be "card-carrying Communists," with two-thirds of the accused residing in New York City.

The plaintiff in the lawsuit, Lisa Harbatkin, a freelance writer, applied in 2007 to see the files on her deceased parents, Sidney and Margaret Harbatkin, and other teachers summoned for questioning in the 1950s by the city's powerful assistant corporation counsel, Saul Moskoff, assigned to the Board of Education as chief prosecutor.

As next of kin, she got access to files showing that informants had named her parents as Communists, and that her father had surrendered his license rather than be interrogated while her mother escaped retribution. But files on other teachers and suspected informants were withheld.

Under privacy rules adopted last year by the Municipal Archives, researchers without permission from the subjects or their heirs can review files only upon agreeing to seek city approval before quoting material or publishing identifying personal information about the subjects (except for accounts from already-public sources like newspapers).

Ms. Harbatkin sued, gaining free representation from the Albany firm of Hiscock & Barclay. “The city’s offer imposes restrictions on her freedom of speech that are unconstitutional,” said her lead lawyer, Michael Grygiel. The legal brief calls it “more than a little ironic” that the city sought “to prohibit Ms. Harbatkin from ‘naming names’ in writing about this period of history.”

A lawyer for the city, Marilyn Richter, said that a 1980 court ruling allowed the archives to redact some names before releasing files. But the same ruling noted that the city had sealed the files only until 2000.

“The courts previously determined that the individuals named in these records have a right of privacy not to have their identity revealed,” said Ms. Richter. She said the offer to allow Ms. Harbatkin to review unredacted copies of the documents, “if she agrees not to reveal identifying information, actually provides her greater access to the records than the law requires.”

Ms. Harbatkin said her aim was to write about cases she found compelling but not to expose every name in the files. “The fear increases directly proportional to how closed off everything is,” she said. The city, she said, had no right “to tell you what you can see.”

Files already released to Ms. Harbatkin recount a battle of wills in 1956 between her mother and Mr. Moskoff, the inquisitor who became the fearsome face of the crusade to ferret out subversion in the schools. In her interrogation, Margaret Harbatkin acknowledged joining a Communist Party cell under a pseudonym but said she later withdrew.

Then, directed by Mr. Moskoff “to identify those people who were members of this group,” she replied: “I don’t remember any. I’ve known teachers at so many different schools. As a substitute I went from — I don’t even remember all the different schools I worked at, Mr. Moskoff, and that’s the truth.”

The files contain reports by informants who have never been publicly identified. But one operative known as “Blondie” and “Operator 51” was later revealed as Mildred V. Blauvelt, a police detective who went undercover for the Board of Education in 1953 and was credited with exposing 50 Communist teachers. Later, in

a series of newspaper reminiscences, she said her hardest moments came when, posing as a Communist hard-liner, she had to argue disaffected fellow travelers out of quitting the party.

Other material was collected for a documentary, "Dreamers and Fighters: The NYC Teacher Purges," begun in 1995 by a social worker and artist, Sophie-Louise Ullman. She died in 2005, but the project, accompanied by a Web site, dreamersandfighters.com, has been continued by her cousin Lori Styler. The unfinished work is narrated by the actor Eli Wallach, whose brother, Samuel, was president of the Teachers Union from 1945 to 1948 and was fired from his teaching job for refusing to answer questions before the superintendent of schools, Dr. William Jansen. Samuel Wallach died at 91 in 2001.

"They called everybody a Communist then," growled Eli Wallach, 93, in a telephone interview, still bristling over the way his brother was treated.

The Teachers Union, which was expelled from the American Federation of Teachers in 1941 before disbanding in 1964 and being succeeded by the United Federation of Teachers, maintained that "no teacher should be disqualified for his opinions or beliefs or his political associations." State and city authorities countered that Communists were unfit to teach because they were bound to the dictates of the party.

When asked by Mr. Moskoff, "Are you now or have you ever been a Communist?" many teachers refused to answer. They were then charged with insubordination and subject to dismissal.

In his case, said Mr. Adler, the math teacher, it worked out happily. His Challenge of the state's Feinberg Law, which made it illegal for teachers to advocate the overthrow of the government by force, was rejected by the United States Supreme Court, but the court later reversed itself in another case and declared the law unconstitutional.

He went on to a successful career as a writer of math and science books, settling in North Bennington, Vt. But although he quit the Communist Party after the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, he said, the F.B.I. in 1965 listed him as "a potentially

dangerous individual who should be placed on the Security Index” — subject to detention in the event of a national emergency. Another teacher, Minnie Gutride, 40, killed herself with oven gas in 1948 after being called out of her classroom to be questioned about Communist activities.

Outside the written record, Ms. Harbatkin did discover unexpected moments of humanity. The Board of Education was often reluctant to oust a husband and wife when both were teachers, and her mother, who died in 2003, confided to her that after she told Mr. Moskoff she would never sleep again if she provided or verified the names of fellow teachers, he turned off his tape recorder “and told her to keep saying she didn’t remember the names.”

She was not charged and continued teaching into the 1970s.

Correction: June 18, 2009

An article on Tuesday about a lawsuit that is seeking access to New York City Board of Education files on teachers investigated during the anti-Communist purges of the 1950s misstated, in some editions, the outcome of a legal challenge to the state’s Feinberg Law, which made it illegal for teachers to advocate the overthrow of the government by force. The United States Supreme Court upheld the Feinberg Law in 1952; it did not declare it unconstitutional. (That came 15 years later, in a decision on another lawsuit.)

The article also referred imprecisely to the reason that Irving Adler, a fired teacher who challenged the Feinberg Law, broke with the Communist Party in 1956. He quit over the Soviet invasion of Hungary and Kremlin policies; he did not renounce Communism.

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