Doing Political Science: Reflections on a Research Program

I’m going to take this invitation to talk about my congressional research and talk more about the development of that research over time and to talk less about my current research that would be normal in this setting. That is, more about the bottom than the top of the research iceberg. In the broadest sense, as my title indicates, political science is what political scientists do. So my talk might be entitled: “Careening through life as a political scientist.” I want to try and outline what I’ve been up to over the years as a way of helping myself and you understand where I am now. I am, of course, taking advantage of my seniority--but that’s a hallowed congressional strategy. When I’ve finished, the story may seem like a case of arrested development, but I’ll leave that

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to you. All I can say is: that's the risk you take when you invite
an old guy to come talk. (Theodore Green story.) You are listening.

As with Huff,
the focus of my research has always been elite political activity
in the U.S. And the central motivation has always been to help
political science produce empirical generalizations about elite
political activity. The research began with a study of the
President's cabinet, and then moved to the Congress, where it has
remained ever since—as I say, arrested development. The
substantive focus of the congressional studies began with member
activity in committees and then moved to member activity in
constituencies. These studies began with House members, moved to
senators and have recently moved back again to House members. In
terms of method, the research moved from dominantly library
research to mixed library and field research to dominantly field

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research. And, as field research, the emphasis mutated from one shot interviews to extended periods of hanging around in political settings. Whatever the focus of the research, it has been overwhelmingly qualitative, case study style research. Its several changes in substantive focus have been partly a matter of logic, partly a matter of personal experience and partly a matter of the prevailing interests of the larger research community of which I have been a part. And the presence of the larger community is crucial in this sense: that every one of these research projects began with a question that grew out of and resonated with the ongoing corpus of political science research. With that in mind, I want to talk first about changes in subject matter over time.

1. My Ph.D. dissertation was a study of the President’s cabinet. It is one of the very few times that I began to study a
subject and actually stayed with that subject to the end of the research! There is a lot of external discipline when you do a Ph.D. Picking a topic for Ph.D. can be pretty haphazard.

Cabinet interest grew out of a footnote.

2. (Jesse Jones' story) Cabinet study led to question: Why do some executive bureaus have more success with Congress than other executive bureaus? Lots of documentary research--16 years of hearings, floor debates, led to Court of first resort in Congress--House Appropriations Committee--read about it, became interested in it--decided to go to Washington to talk to them--became fascinated with the committee as an institution making decisions and maintaining itself. (Subcommittees story first interview!) Wrote book about Appropriations with House Committee as centerpiece. Changed

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my research question entirely. How does committee work? How
does committee fit into the larger appropriations process?

3. Out of that study—centered on one committee—emerged,
logically, I think, the question of whether or not this one
committee was unique. And that question led to a comparative
study of several committees. Sustained by Boys of Congress at
this stage of research. Prodded by state politics people:
"Why don't you do comparative politics?" "You are the last of
the last of the area specialists." And it resonated, too,
with a time of committee dominance in congressional politics.

4. The more I studied committee member activity inside Congress
and in Washington, the more I realized how little I knew about
the activities of these same people outside the institution

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and outside Washington. I knew, intellectually, that political ideas, political change and political careers were generated out in the country, and that constituency influence on congressional politics was tremendously important. All our roll call studies told us that. Still, the operationalization of “the constituency” seemed quite unsatisfactory to me. 

Interest in perceptions came from experience in 1960 (Ostertag story).

5. The research question I took with me into the field was: How does a House members’ perception, of his or her constituency, influence his or her roll call votes. It was Washington behavior I was trying to explain; and I intended to do a roll call study. Well, by the time I had spent a few days in each of my first four House districts, I lost interest once again,
in my original research question. I became interested, instead, in what House members were doing in their constituencies—in what I was watching them do. So I began to ask the question: How does their perception, of their constituency, influence what they do when they are in their constituencies? I dropped the roll call question that had brought me beyond the beltway. And I proceeded to study the activity of some House members in their districts. That research resonated with the growing emphasis on the individual, independent, self-starting, entrepreneurial, non-party produced politicians written about by Fiorina, Fowler, Jacobson, Loomis and others.

During the study of House member home styles, a logical follow-up question, and one I was often asked was this: “Are senator home
styles different from House member home styles and why--or why not?" (Hayes story--1976) So I took that question with me, in 1978, to travel with some incumbent senators and some "wannabe" senators in their home territory. I concluded that while there did seem to be some differences--in their reliance on media, in the emphasis on fund-raising and on constituency complexity, for example, there was not enough of a difference to stimulate and sustain a full scale comparison--not anyway within the categories I had suggested for the study of House member constituency activity. Within those categories--allocation, presentation, explanation--senators behaved pretty much like House members. On the other hand, these travels rekindled an interest in the general question that had propelled me into the constituencies in the first place--that is, the impact of a member's constituency activity on his or her Washington activity. Why? I think it was because

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Senators and Senate candidates talk a lot more and more broadly about national policy making—and their participation in it—than House members do, and, therefore, as an observational matter, their Washington activity bulked large in my travels with them. Besides which there was an obvious institutional feature of the Senate that might, I thought, make an extended period of research on their Washington activity more feasible—and that was the six year term.

With that in mind, I spent a year studying in Washington the Senate activity of some senators—and thinking of that activity not in terms of roll calls as I once had, but thinking of it more broadly and more open-endedly as the activity of governing. The connections between their home and their Washington activities I thought of as connections between campaigning and governing. And so, true to form, I once again launched a research project that was totally different from the one with which I had originally begun.

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the research.

My Senate research subsequently went through two phases—the first centered on the governing part of the connection, the second on the campaigning part of the connection. The first phase produced several studies of individual senators; the second phase produced a single study of "Senators on the Campaign Trail." And I'll get to those in a moment.

This thumbnail sketch of changes in research focus highlights the degree to which personal experience in doing the research has altered the motivating research question. I'm sure there is nothing novel about a researcher changing focus in the process of doing the research. But the regularity with which I change as I go along, I think may be extreme. And the point is that this

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experience may be endemic to the kind of research I do. That kind of research is characterized in the most fundamental way by an openness to a very wide range of experience. You start with a broad research question, but you relinquish a great deal of your control over it in the pursuit of it. You place yourself in a situation where your broad research question comes into immediate competition with other possible research questions. You have come to observe and inquire into one form of political activity, but you find all kinds of unexpected activity going on all around you. When you immerse yourself in the real world of politics, it is especially easy to be propelled onto a new course.

Which brings me to some brief comments about research method—about what I have called informally “soaking and poking,” and more formally, “participant observation.” And since I’m still doing

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things that way, it probably qualifies as another case of arrested development.

As we know, research methods vary widely among political scientists. If you think of us as arrayed along a single dimension of “farthest from” and “closest to” the real world of politics, our mathematical modelers would be at one extreme and I would be at the other. Coming from Rochester, I can speak with some confidence about this! I share with my colleagues the desire to generalize about political activity. But in most cases, our daily research lives could not be more different. Their lives are spent moving between the blackboard and the computer. My life as a researcher is spent close by the real political world. And some of it is spent immersed in that world.

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And that simple fact about working conditions is responsible for certain problems associated with the research results. One of the problems, to which I am especially sensitive, is that of becoming overly influenced by the political world, to the point of becoming an actor in that world or, at least, becoming indistinguishable from a journalist. That might happen if all the researcher did was to plop into the real world and sit there waiting to be shaped by the surroundings. And that way of doing things is something that must be guarded against. The way political scientists do it—as I have tried to indicate—is to go into the field with a research question that is a political science question and when and if you alter that question, you produce another political science question in its place.

Political scientists will behave this way—as journalists will
not--because we are members of a scholarly community from which we take a huge amount and to which we continually try to give something back in return. A list of the political scientists who shaped my various research questions, for example, would be 10 feet long. The Cabinet study was much influenced by pluralism, the appropriations study by political sociology, the comparative study by rational choice ideas, the home style study by empirical work on constituencies, elections, voting, and the Senate study by work on representation, etc. We go into the field swimming in political science research and we take our ideas and leads from that corpus of research. All the time we are soaking and poking, we keep asking ourselves, what is it that we're seeing that might be of interest to our colleagues--as political scientists? So, while it may look like participant observation is a passive research method, it is anything but.

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As political science goes, it is labor-intensive work—inelegant, unglamorous, blue collar, data grubbing work. It is time consuming, physically tiring, and psychologically nerve-racking. It requires a high tolerance for ambiguity—since you have to feel your way through a maze of personal relationships that differ from event to event, and from place to place. It requires persistence, patience, adaptability, a fairly modest ego and a non-judgmental posture. You ride around in a lot of back seats, stand around at a lot of functions, sit in the back rows of a lot of meeting halls, eat a lot of junk food and absorb a variety of indignities and a lot of teasing at the expense of your profession.

In this research, the object is to see the world the way politicians see it by watching them from over their shoulders, by listening and talking to each one when he or she is at work in a

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natural political habitat. I try to stay out of the way and, as a scholar, to maintain a certain distance from the people I'm with—“up close, but not too personal.” I have sometimes described my only real professional talent as the willingness and the ability to listen. Among political scientists, therefore, I see myself as a professional listener who from time-to-time leaves academia and immerses himself in the work-a-day political world, and who then reports back as carefully and helpfully as he can to those fellow political scientists who have not as they say, “been there” or “done that.” And are not likely ever to do so.

The research reports that emerge from participant observation are essentially exploratory in nature. The openness to personal experience in shaping questions and the method of participant lead to exploratory rather than to verifying work. They lead to the
formulation of hypotheses rather than to the testing of hypotheses. Research reports from the politicians' world can, at their best, give other political scientists a feel for the real world of politics and a politicians-eye-view of the world, and in the process, produce ideas that can help others to organize their thoughts and discipline their work. I am told that, on occasion, my reports have had such salutary results. The conceptualization of a legislator's several goals in the comparative committees study or the conceptualization of the nested constituencies in the home style study, for example. I hope so.

I spoke earlier about the two stage evolution of my research on senators. I want to elaborate on the conceptual development of those studies as a way of bringing this travelogue up to date--and then talk about my current research.

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Participant observation, by its very nature, has to be conducted over time. The researcher always jumps into the flow of events and has to go with that uncontrollable flow. For that reason, ideas that incorporate some sense of time and of sequence command special attention. In trying to connect the home activity and the Washington activity of senators one such idea is the six-year sequence of campaigning to governing to campaigning again. And that is the one I initially glommed onto in producing several case studies of senatorial activity--studies which began and ended with an election campaign across the six-year cycle and which concentrated on Washington governing activity in-between. At the macro level, therefore, there was the overall guidance of the campaigning-governing-campaigning sequence. And there were other sequential notions, too, which guided research in the interstices—for example, interpreting election results, adjusting to the norms

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and processes of the institution and explaining governing activity while campaigning back home.

At the same time, the micro-level story, too, was guided by the idea of another time consuming process--that of individual development. This idea gets conveyed in the very title of the studies: the making of a senator for Dan Quayle; the learning of a senator in the case of Arlen Specter; the emergence of a senator in the case of Pete Domenici; and the failure of a senator in the case of Mark Andrews. All of these studies are about individual political development--about making, learning, growing and failing over time.

For me, a covering idea that pulls together the macro level and micro level sequences into a single sequential notion is--the idea

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of the career—or more accurately, perhaps, the idea of career segments, since I could claim only to be describing one slice of each person's political career. By the time I had finished these four case studies, therefore, my research on U.S. senators had mutated, in the broadest sense, into the study of senatorial careers. And that focus rested on the work, again, of a growing interest in careers among political scientists—for example, Matthews, Schlesinger, Fowler and McClure, Jacobson and Kernell, and Hibbing. My emphasis in the four senator studies was on the career of each senator inside the Senate, that is, on their institutional careers. These career segments could not have been written had I not spent a year living in Washington following up close and in detail, their legislative activities.

As we tell our students, however, there are two parts to a
senator's job--legislating and representing. And I have taken the view that the up close and in detail study of representational activity can best be done in the constituency. Put differently, senators have constituency careers as well as institutional careers. And the study of constituency careers calls for more of an emphasis on the campaigning part of the six-year cycle than on the governing part. Since I had, in pursuing the original idea of a Senate home style study, traveled around in the constituencies of a number of senators whose activity I had not been able to follow inside the Senate, I decided to do some studies that focused on the campaigning and representing kinds of senatorial activities--as they could be observed in the constituency. As you might expect, a lot of my data was no different from what I had collected from the original Home Style study. But subsequent experience had carried me beyond the categories of allocation, presentation and
explanation I had used to organize that material. The importance of sequence and of longitudinal analysis had increased in my thinking. My interest in the six-year electoral cycle, and in careers and in career stages, which had been peripheral earlier, had become dominant. And while representation had always been a broad concern, the emphasis on sequence, cycle and career segments had made it clearer just what it was I wanted to say about representation in general.

The second phase of Senate studies treated, in case study form, three senator-centered questions about representation: why do I want to be a representative, a question which involved ambition and motivations; how do I get to be a representative, a question which involved the building of constituency connections via a campaign, and how do I manage to stay a representative, a question
that involved the long-term maintenance of constituency connections by some combination of personal and policy activities. All of these are career-related notions: about seeking, achieving and keeping the constituency relationships that underpin a constituency career, which, in turn, underpin a legislative career.

A central idea emerging from what I call the second phase of Senate career research is this: that the senator-constituency relationship can usefully be conceptualized as a long running negotiation between senator and constituents in which constituent support is being negotiated on one side, and senator responsiveness is being negotiated on the other. Through negotiation, the performance of the senator is gradually, incrementally and over time, brought into some kind of equilibrium with the expectations of his or her constituency—or it is not. Only some such idea as continuous
negotiation, it seems to me, can capture the incremental tentative, changing, uncertain and essentially experimental nature of the representative/constituency relationship—a I have observed.

Once the representational relationship is recognized as a negotiated relationship, it becomes easier to think of representation in part at least as an over-time activity—as a process. Cross-sectional correlations between constituency preferences and roll call votes are certainly crucial to our understanding of representation. But so, I would argue, are the over time negotiations, the continuous connecting and reconnecting activity that takes place in the constituency between members and constituents.

Anyway, that was where I was when I undertook my current research

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project—a project that is for now, my answer to the favorite question at political science conventions? “What are you working on now?” My answer is that I’m working on the problem of how the sorts of negotiated relationships among representatives and their constituents might have changed over time—specifically over the quarter century since I first went out into the country to look at House members home style. It is a question where I have a bit of comparative advantage.

Specifically, this question of representational change has sent me back to the House of Representatives—specifically to a district in Georgia which I first visited in the 1970's, whose boundaries have remained relatively unchanged, and which I decided to revisit in the 1990's. I am working on an exploratory case study of changing patterns of representation in that district—which reaches south.
and west of Atlanta's southern boundary. It sits in the region of the country where we know the greatest political change has taken place in the last quarter century--the South. As such, it both reflects and puts a human face on that large scale political change--in this case a change from solidly Democratic with Representative Jack Flynt in the 1970's, to solidly Republican with Representative Mac Collins in the 1990's. It is another study in which time and sequence are basic to the analysis.

Jack Flynt starred as Congressman A in Home Style. For the record, he defeated Newt Gingrich twice before retiring. Gingrich then represented the district until he changed districts in 1992; and he was succeeded by Mac Collins.

The conceptualization here is that every representative adopts a
strategy of representation and that this choice is shaped by the goals of the individual, by the constituency context and by the negotiating processes by which the representative works out a satisfactory representational relationship with his or her constituents. The argument in the Flynt-Collins study is that Flynt’s strategy was a dominantly person-intensive one and Collins’ strategy is a dominantly policy-intensive one. The change I wish to describe and explain, then, is the change from one representational strategy or pattern to the other.

There are really two stories of change to tell. The first is the story of change during the six years I traveled with Flynt and his inability to adapt to the challenges presented by that change. The second story is the quarter-century change from basic Flynt strategy to basic Collins strategy.

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Jack Flynt's goal gets revealed in the story of his career. He was a lawyer who got into politics early--as his grandfather and father before him--because he loved the sheer involvement with others that is a part of the political life. Politics was the only career he ever wanted or ever had; and he was never defeated during his climb up the political office ladder. His district was--with the exception of its 25% black residents--homogeneous. It was a rural, small town district of 16 counties dominated by agriculture and textiles. It was a one-party Democratic district--in which for a long time the Democratic primary was the only meaningful contest. So long as he kept the economic and political elites of his 16 counties--the county seat elites--happy, he was safe. And this he did, binding them to him through the constant cultivation of his personal relationships with them, one-on-one, one-at-a-time.
In my three visits, we walked the main streets of seven different county seats, as he shook hands, gossiped and schmoozed, in and out of every office and business establishment. We visited in numerous individual homes and country stores. Indeed, he insisted I stay in his home during my visits— all evidence of his preoccupation with personal relationships. He had an incredible gift for names, faces, places, families, events, history—for all the associations that link one person to another. Once, after a Rotary Club dinner, he proceeded to name everyone of the 40 people who had been there, table-by-table, describing each one by occupation and by level of political support. His representational strategy, then, was one of personal contact, personal service and personal accessibility. “In this district,” he said, “only a person-to-person campaign will work.” His negotiations were intensely personal—and for at least nine of his 11 elections, they seemed to fit the expectations of Dartmouth Talk (10/25/99)-29
What he did not do in any of his home activities I observed was talk about matters of public policy--issues. He had opinions, strong opinions. He was a segregationist on racial matters and equally conservative on all fiscal matters. His active, supportive constituents knew his views--especially on race--and those views were essential to his political success. They were a necessary underpinning of his representational strategy. And any representative of that district at that time would have had the same policy views. But Jack Flynt's stock in trade and his passion, was his network of personal relationships and he was not about to jeopardize those personal ties by plunging into potentially unsettling policy discussions. My central point here is not that he avoided policy discussions on race. He did. But my

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point is that he avoided all policy discussions--period.

In his speeches, he talked not about policy, but about the community to which they all belonged--that is, to which all whites belonged--and how perfectly he represented that community because he and they were so much alike. He wanted his constituents to think of him as a good representative because they saw him as "one of us." His talks were designed to create that common community feeling. All-in-all, I think of this as a person-intensive representational strategy. And that strategy got him elected 11 straight times--till he retired in 1978.

His strategy was sorely tested in his two campaigns against Gingrich--both of which he won narrowly. He was redistricted in 1972--to reflect Georgia's population growth--into a much less
rural, more suburban district close to Atlanta--strange territory for someone whose stock in trade was longstanding personal association with small town elites. The change virtually paralyzed him; he could not adjust; he was a fish out of water in the suburbs; luckily, his small town core strength carried him through to retirement in 1976--whereupon Gingrich--a consummate policy-centered politician--carried the district.

When curiosity led me back to the district in 1996, I found that three-quarters of its constituents lived within the boundaries of Flynt's 1976 district, and that 79% of the total 1992 vote and 81% of Collins' own vote came from the old Flynt district. So while the district was not "the same," it was close enough to explore for change. And the main change in that "same district," is that Mac Collins' personal goals, by sharp contrast with Flynt, center on

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his ideas about good public policy. His goals were shaped, too, during his pre-political career—as a businessman. Collins entered politics as a successful small businessman, the owner of a trucking business. And it was a business he entered right out of high school. He did not go to college. Almost the first words out of his mouth when we first met was “I’m not your typical Ivy League congressman. I came from the school of hard knocks. I’ve spent my life close to working people.” He came to Congress with the policy attitudes of a successful entrepreneur—with the feeling that “I did it without the government, you can too. Let’s get the government off our backs.” He was a Democrat by reasons of birth, but like so many other southerners, he became a Republican by reasons of policy.

During my first trip with him in 1996, he gave six speeches.

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Compared to Flynt, it was a total turnaround. Every speech was about the country's fiscal problems--the budget, social security and medicare. Driving around in the car, most of what I call "travel talk" was about tax and trade policy and about the trade policies of the Republican candidates for the Presidency--Pat Buchanan and Bob Dole. Most all of his policy preoccupations were stimulated by his background and by his position on the House Ways and Means Committee--a position which he had ardently sought because of his longstanding businessman's interest in tax policies.

For example

In 1998, my three day visit was consumed primarily with a variety of negotiations devoted to current policy problems--with EPA officials on county water problems, with regional officials on transportation, with the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce on air quality problems, with hospital officers on long-term health care and with
an organization policing child custody payments. I neither heard
nor saw anything like this with Jack Flynt. Collins is a policy-
oriented congressman. Any one-on-one negotiations he had with
individuals were dwarfed by his policy discussions. Collins
negotiations were about policy—they were building blocks of her
representation.

What about his constituency? Has it changed since the 1970's? In
one sense, no—it is still as conservative—socially and fiscally
as it ever was. And Collins' voting record is indistinguishable
from Flynt’s. Neither man, for example, has reflected the
interests of his black constituents—25% to 30% in Flynt’s day, 19%
to 23% today.

But in other ways, it is a vastly different district. It is now a
suburban district, younger, better educated, more mobile, more
business and reform-oriented. It is no longer dominated by

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agriculture and textiles and court house cliques, but rather as

Collins' put it, by "people who drive to Atlanta to work every
day." The one-party South has been transformed by demography and
the civil rights revolution. It has become much more Republican as
outsiders and cross-over white conservative Democrats--have swelled
the party's ranks. Furthermore, the constituency has doubled in
size, from 280,000 in Flynt's day, to 700,000 today. And the
proliferation of advocacy groups plus the communications revolution
has increased the flow of policy demands coming from the
constituency. Jack Flynt signed every letter personally; he never
got more than six letters against a vote. In 1997, Collins got
14,000 communications all told; one vote brought 190 individually
written letters of criticism. The ratio of personal touch to
technological touch has changed enormously.

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Taken together, these changes make it more difficult for a representative to adopt a Flynt-style person-intensive representational strategy and much easier to adopt a policy-intensive strategy—if the representative is so inclined. And Collins is—deliberately so. He was elected in 1992 and reelected three times since, in 1998 without opposition.

Does this mean that Mac Collins does not cultivate personal relationships? Of course not. Here, my point would be that each representative has a central, dominant strategy—one emphasizing personal, the other policy relationships. But for each one there is also a necessary supplemental strategy. For Flynt, that involved his policy positions; for Collins, it involves personal contact and service. All politicians must pay some attention to both. But the proportions differ. And it is the difference in the

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proportions I take to be a measure of representational change in that district--vague though it may be. I have no desire to generalize much beyond this case except to say that it might help students of southern politics to understand political change, by learning about change at the grassroots in one southern district.

And it might help all students to understand the district-level changes that lie behind the increased polarization of the two parties as policy makers inside the House in Washington.

So that's where I've been and that's where I am--still fixated on the U.S. Congress--as I say, arrested development.

Thanks for listening.

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