

THE **MEDIA** AND THE **RWANDA GENOCIDE**

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The Media's Failure: a Reflection on the Rwanda Genocide

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In their article 'Britannia waived the rules' in the January 2004 issue of *African Affairs*, Linda Melvern and Paul Williams argue that during the Rwanda genocide: 'Britain and other great powers signalled their intention to let the killers conduct their grisly business unimpeded' (Melvern and Williams 2004). They point out that while members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council may not have recognized that genocide was taking place, they were aware that hundreds of thousands of people were being killed when they decided to withdraw the UN peacekeepers. They accuse the British government of a 'deliberately misconceived version' of what was happening in Rwanda and a 'wilful neglect of its obligations under the genocide convention.'

With hindsight, it is obvious that the world's political leaders and opinion formers failed Rwanda in 1994. Bill Clinton, then United States president, and Madeleine Albright, his representative at the UN and later Secretary of State, have recognized this and expressed regret for their part in withdrawing the UN force from Rwanda as the genocide started. Their British equivalents, John Major, then prime minister, Douglas Hurd, foreign secretary, and Baroness Lynda Chalker, the minister for Africa, have been less forthright. At the time, no one resigned and nobody's career has been damaged by the failure in Rwanda. Indeed, the pivotal player at the UN at the time, Kofi Annan, undersecretary general for peacekeeping, who dealt with the dispatches from the UN force commander in Kigali, later became secretary general. Annan's deputy and successor at peacekeeping, Syed Iqbal Riza, was later to serve as Annan's *chef de cabinet*.

The aim of this commentary is not to pass judgement on these players, but to try to recall the thinking of the time and revisit the context in which decisions about Rwanda and Africa were made. Because the genocide in Rwanda itself has challenged assumptions and changed perspectives, it requires a mental repositioning that goes further than asking who knew what when. I begin with my own experience as a journalist covering Africa at the time, then go on to examine some of the early coverage of the genocide that appeared in Britain's press.

In 1994, I was Africa editor for the *Independent*. I had been in Kigali briefly in January that year on my way to Zaire, as Congo was then called. All the diplomats, politicians and aid workers I spoke to in Kigali talked about the fragile but functioning Arusha peace accords, the complex power-sharing agreement between the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the Habyarimana government and several small political parties. After two years of bitter fighting and heavy negotiations, an agreement had at last been reached and signed. The delicate and dangerous task of implementation was then reaching its final stages. Only one person in Kigali had warned me that there could be genocide: Philippe Gaillard of the International Committee of the Red Cross. He told me that militias were being armed by the government and that plans were being laid to promote mass killings of Tutsis throughout the country.

I thought long and hard about writing a story called 'Genocide looms in Rwanda.' It might have made the front page – the aspiration of every journalist – but I had only one source. Everyone else I spoke to talked up the Arusha peace process. I did not sense anything sinister on the streets of Kigali that might have made me skeptical. And, as the world-weary diplomats said, the worst that would happen if the accord did not work would be another round of fighting. I had not been in Kigali long enough to make a judgement or doubt my interlocutors, so to write a sensational story about impending genocide would have been dishonest and irresponsible. It might even prompt genocide. I put down my pen and went off to eastern Congo.

On 6 April, I was packing my bag for South Africa to cover the impending election when the *Independent's* foreign editor, Harvey Morris, called to tell me about the plane crash that had killed President Juvénal Habyarimana. After some discussion, we agreed that I should continue to South Africa but watch developments in Rwanda. I wrote a background article and caught the plane to Johannesburg. For the next three weeks the newspaper carried agency reports on Rwanda. As the South African polls closed, I flew to Kampala to try to find out what was happening in Rwanda.

Getting to the action was not easy. There were no flights to Kigali or anywhere else in the country. The route from Zaire in the west was impossible as President Mobutu Sese Seko did not allow journalists into the country except by special invitation. To try to get in from the south through Burundi might be impossible and dangerous, as that country too had been destabilized by the death of its president. The other viable routes were through Tanzania to southeastern Rwanda – a journey of at least three days, or across the Uganda border, which was officially closed. However, the World Food Programme (WFP) was running a cross-border feeding operation to eastern Rwanda, encouraged by the RPF, which controlled the border on the Rwandan side.

The WFP lent me a vehicle and a driver and we drove into Rwanda. Once inside, the RPF took over and kept us waiting near the border for a couple of days. Eventually, the RPF gave me a guide and bodyguard and, on 2 May, we drove down through Rwanda to the Kagera River on the Tanzanian border. I learned later that the best road from Uganda into the northeast was being

used for military supplies, something that neither the RPF nor the Ugandan government wanted outsiders to see. We, therefore, had to take ill-maintained dirt roads.

The country was almost completely deserted. Africa's roads, especially in a crowded country like Rwanda, are usually dotted with pickup trucks, walkers and cyclists. In two days of driving, we saw no more than a dozen people. The Kagera River carried scores of bloated dead bodies downstream. At the rate I saw them – one every four or five minutes – I estimated that hundreds of people were being killed every day further upstream. It was hard to get close enough to see the cause of death, but some seemed to have their hands tied.

From there we drove across to the refugee camps on the Tanzania side, leaving our RPF guide and guard in Rwanda. Here thousands of Hutus who had fled eastern Rwanda told us that RPF Tutsis were murdering Hutus and they had come across the border to escape. Some journalists bought this story at face value. Although we had seen few people on the way, I had seen no evidence of killing and little sign of destruction and I did not believe it. My instincts were confirmed when two people separately drew me aside and whispered that what I was being told was untrue. I found them convincing. They were clearly frightened but desperate to tell their story. They said that it was these refugees who had done the killing and they had fled to escape RPF revenge.

On the way back, I saw some of the massacre sites that have been extensively reported and recorded. Then we turned west to Kigali and joined the RPF front line in the hills overlooking the city from the northeast. From a distance it looked peaceful. It was impossible to know what was happening there.

It was also impossible to get the story out without leaving Rwanda. Telephones did not work and mobile phones did not reach that far in those days. To send reports back to the newspaper meant going all the way back to Uganda, another day's journey on roads where you had to drive permanently in second gear. Once out, it might be impossible to get back in again as the WFP vehicle had to go back to Kampala and no other vehicles were available.

I should also add that it was difficult for me to find words to describe what was happening. I had covered nearly 20 wars, but the usual clichés of death and destruction mocked Rwanda's horrors. I could find no new words to describe what I was seeing. Furthermore, all the usual human and journalistic instincts to tell an important story to the world shrivelled in the face of what I was seeing and hearing. I began my main report with the words: 'I do not want to tell you what I saw today....' Why should my aged parents be presented with this vision of hell at their breakfast table? How could I tell my wife what I had seen and smelled? And what of my children as they got ready for school? What if they caught a glimpse of it? Why should anyone at all need to be told these things? I have spoken to other journalists who were there at the time and they recall similar feelings.

My own notebooks and reports of that period and other reports in the British press give some insight into what the world thought at the time and how they perceived events in Rwanda. Certainly few people thought that the plane crash that killed President Juvénal Habyarimana of Rwanda and President

Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi would trigger one of the worst genocides of the twentieth century. Although the disarming and murder of the Belgian paratroopers, part of the UN force, and the open killings in the streets of Kigali, the capital, began the next day, these events were not interpreted as a spur to international action. On the contrary they instigated withdrawal. The reasons for this lie in the failure to understand what was happening in Rwanda at the time and that failure has much to do with the importance – or lack of it – that outsiders gave to Africa, the way in which they thought of Africa and the language they used to describe it.

Rwanda simply wasn't important enough. To British editors, it was a small country far away in a continent that rarely hit the headlines. The words Hutu and Tutsi sounded funny, hardly names that an ambitious news editor or desk officer would want to draw to the attention of a busy boss and claim that they were of immediate and vital importance. Within a few days of the plane crash, *The Times* ran several articles about what it obviously considered an angle to interest its readers: the fate of the Rwandan guerrillas. Being a former Belgian colony and Francophone, it was of little interest to the Foreign Office, which had been forced to cut its staffing levels in Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s. Rwanda was not a country that had historical or commercial links with Britain and Britain had no diplomatic representation there. In London, as the crisis developed, Douglas Hurd's staffers were reduced to telling the foreign secretary what they had seen on CNN that day. This was Britain's main source of information about what was happening on the ground.

On 7 April, all major newspapers reported the plane crash that killed the presidents and followed it with reports of the murder of the Belgian soldiers and then the evacuation of foreigners. There was little attempt to analyze Rwanda's politics beyond the fact there had been a civil war that had been frozen by the Arusha accords. For most newspapers, the foreign story of the moment was Bosnia and its coverage was already stretching budgets and staffing levels.

Furthermore, on 27 April, South Africans were to vote in the country's first democratic elections. That would mark the end of apartheid. The implications for Africa and black people throughout the world were immeasurable. This was clearly going to be a momentous event in itself, but at the time, many Western commentators were also predicting a ghastly bloodbath in South Africa. They said that the African National Congress (ANC) would break its promises and begin a campaign of murder and destabilization. Others, observing the continuing violence in KwaZulu-Natal, predicted a tribal conflict between Xhosa and Zulu. Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the leader of the Zulu Inkatha movement, had not signed up to the national deal, and more and more people were dying in the gang warfare between Inkatha gangs and the ANC.

In the end, Buthelezi signed the agreement days before the election, the voting was vast and peaceful and the miracle was completed by the saintly wisdom and demeanour of Nelson Mandela. The expectations of journalists who headed en masse for Durban in search of a bloodbath, were not fulfilled. As a result they missed the worst bloodbath of all.

This group of journalists included most of the stringers for the world's press based in Nairobi who usually covered East Africa. Normally, they would have been in Rwanda on the next flight, but the world's press could not apparently cover more than one Africa story at a time. Some did not even try. The *Financial Times* of London, always squeamish about stories that involve blood but not business, did not send its Nairobi correspondent to South Africa, but nor was she sent to Rwanda for more than a week after the country collapsed.

Burundi, Rwanda's neighbour and twin, offered more evidence that the world would not be moved by Rwanda's plight. The previous autumn, the first democratically elected president of Burundi, Melchior Ndadaye, had been murdered. He was the country's first Hutu president and his death was followed by the massacre of at least 50,000 people (FIDH 1995). Some said it was five times that number. According to the Commission Internationale, Hutus and Tutsis were killed in about equal numbers. Reviewing the report, Professor René Lemarchand wrote:

A blind rage suddenly seized Frodebu militants and peasants alike in almost every province, and they killed every Tutsi in sight ... the picture that emerges is one of unadulterated savagery. In one commune after another, scores of men, women and children were hacked to pieces with machetes, speared or clubbed to death, or doused with kerosene and burned alive. Of the active involvement of some communal and provincial authorities in the massacres, there can be no doubt ... From all appearances, however, little prodding was needed for the crowds to heed their incitements. (Lemarchand 1995)

Not a single staff journalist from the British press had covered this story. It barely made the headlines and was hardly reported in British national newspapers or on national radio in Britain. Any news editor or desk officer who made a check through the records would have found that massacres of Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi had occurred with appalling frequency in the second half of the twentieth century. The word genocide was frequently used to describe these massacres, but no one had ever proposed sending a peacekeeping army to stop them. So why should they now? The United States whose airlift and financial muscle were – and are – essential to any rapid UN peacekeeping operation, had been traumatized by the deaths of 18 of its special forces in Somalia on a single night the previous October. As far as Washington was concerned, Rwanda was Africa and Africa was Somalia. President Clinton was not going to allow the UN – let alone the US – to get sucked into local conflicts that might end in another disaster.

The language used by the press to describe Rwanda reinforced the impression that what was going on was an inevitable and primitive process that had no rational explanation and could not be stopped by negotiation or force. A report in *The Times* warned of an 'eruption of tribal violence' (Bone 1994). The local Reuters correspondent, Thadée Nsengiyaremye (1994), reported 'gangs of youth settling tribal scores hacking and clubbing people to death'. He quoted Western diplomats as saying 'continuing tribal slaughter between the Hutu majority

and Tutsi minority in the Central African states was feared'. Lindsey Hilsum (1994a), writing in the *Guardian*, spoke of Kigali descending into chaos and quoted a diplomat as saying it was getting 'messier and messier ... various clans are murdering others, there is a general score settling going on in Kigali.'

All this was reported in the context of renewed fighting between the RPF and government troops. After the plane crash, the RPF abandoned the ceasefire and advanced. In Kigali, the presidential guard attacked the 600-strong contingent of RPF fighters that had been allowed to come to Kigali to protect the politicians who had joined the government as part of the Arusha accords. The civil war was resumed.

Most journalists accepted the diplomats' implicit agenda that the killing of civilians was an offshoot of the renewed civil war. Hutus were afraid that the RPF would overrun the country and were attacking their Tutsi neighbours whom they regarded as RPF supporters or even a fifth column. After the killing of President Ndadaye in Burundi by Tutsi soldiers it was easy to persuade them that there was a Tutsi conspiracy to re-establish their supremacy in both countries. They may also have been persuaded that the RPF had shot down the plane and killed President Habyarimana. Those early reports of 'tribal bloodletting' (AFP 1994) also implied that Tutsis were trying to take over Rwanda and were killing Hutus indiscriminately. The assumption was that the anarchy created by renewed fighting had allowed these 'ancient tribal hatreds' to burst forth and that they could only be suppressed by the establishment of a ceasefire.

It was not until 12 April when Catherine Bond (1994a) in *The Times* stated that 'Tutsis were the target plus Hutus who had made the mistake of supporting the [Arusha accords]'. Two days later she wrote:

The majority of the killings are carried out by militias, trained at the instigation of (President) Juvénal Habyarimana. The militiamen belonged to two political parties, which are opposed to power sharing with rebels from Rwanda's minority Tutsi tribe ... Increasingly in the past two days the militiamen have appeared on the streets armed with guns and stick grenades given to them by the remnants of a government led by extremists from the majority Hutu tribe. (Bond 1994b)

There were several references in the media to genocide in Rwanda and Burundi, but these referred to past massacres. This – a week after the killings had begun – was the first hint that what was happening was not mere mayhem or madness but well organized. Three days later, however, the *Guardian* was still reporting 'thousands have died in a orgy of ethnic violence between the majority Hutu and the minority Tutsi tribes' (Hilsum 1994b).

The *Interahamwe* – the organized death squads – was not mentioned in the press until 30 April, when Reuters began to use the name. Meanwhile the use of words and phrases like 'tribe', 'orgy of violence', 'bloodletting' and 'settling old scores' implied that these were something incomprehensible to

outsiders and uncontrollable, not amenable to reason or negotiation. There was no sudden breakthrough among outsiders in understanding that this was not just another round of fighting between two ethnic groups but an organized mass murder of an entire population. The language of newspapers gradually changed throughout April from a story about a civil war to a story of genocide.

In a continent not known for the ability of its governments to command obedience, instil discipline or organize huge public works programmes, it is difficult to attribute the genocide purely to mobilization and obedience. Nor do most African people believe or obey everything they are told on state-run radio. Some Rwandans killed out of fear of being killed themselves. The orders to kill Tutsis resonated with long held fears and feelings. They were accepted as a permission – even welcomed – by vast numbers of Hutus. The Hutu refugees that I spoke with in Goma later in 1994 mostly denied that any killings had taken place. The few who admitted that Tutsis had been killed said that it had to happen. ‘They were going to do the same to us,’ one told me (Henri, personal communication, 1994).

Yet, had the politicians, diplomats and journalists discovered earlier the organizational element that made the genocide – created from the top-down as well as bottom-up – they perhaps would have had a different attitude to the Rwanda government and the RPF. They would have seen that the massacres were not an offshoot of fighting between government and rebels. They would have seen them as the main issue far sooner.

How might that have changed things? As always, might-have-beens are impossible to judge. But had the world’s powerful governments realized and accepted sooner that genocide was taking place, they might have ensured that the UN did not see the two parties as equal combatants in a civil war. That might have meant they would not have been so keen to work for a ceasefire. The United States and other Security Council members may not have given the UN orders to abandon Rwanda when they failed to secure that ceasefire but, on the contrary, they might have encouraged the RPF to take over the country more quickly to end the killing and establish order. The UN and aid agencies backed by Western governments may not then have treated the Hutu refugees and the soldiers that accompanied them to eastern Congo as victims in need of aid, but might have taken action earlier to disarm them and start to identify who among them was responsible for the genocide.

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How the Media Missed the Rwanda Genocide

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From April to July 1994, approximately 500,000 Rwandan Tutsi, some 80 per cent of the country's Tutsi population, were exterminated in the most efficient and complete genocide of modern times. Western media blame the international community for not intervening quickly, but the media must share blame for not immediately recognizing the extent of the carnage and mobilizing world attention to it. They failed to report that a nationwide killing campaign was under way in Rwanda until almost three weeks into the violence. By that time, some 250,000 Tutsi had already been massacred.

During those first weeks, Western reporting was marred by four lapses. First, it mistook genocide for civil war. The country had been wracked by a low-level civil war from 1990 to 1993 between the government, controlled by the Hutu majority, and a rebel force comprising mainly Tutsi. Although a minority, the Tutsi had ruled until the late 1950s when the Hutu took power and forced many Tutsi to flee as refugees. In both the 1960s and 1990s Tutsi refugee rebels had launched intermittent offensives against Rwanda, so on the outbreak of genocide on 6 April 1994, Western correspondents reported the initial burst of violence in Kigali as the resumption of a bloody civil war.

On 11 April, an editorial in London's *The Times* pondered international calls for a ceasefire and asked rhetorically, 'Which parties would be asked to cease fire against whom?' (Times Editors 1994). A 12 April report in Belgium's *De Standaard* on government violence in Kigali added that 'it is absolutely certain that a large number of acts of terror were committed' as well 'in the area controlled by the rebels' (Buyse 1994). Early reports also indicated that the Tutsi rebels were winning the civil war and had rejected government offers of a nationwide ceasefire, which contradicted any notion of Tutsis as victims. By 13 April, Radio France International reported that 'the fall of Kigali seems imminent' (Anon. 1994a). On 14 April, *The Times* and *Le Monde* reported that it was now the Hutu who feared vengeance from Tutsi rebels who had gained the upper hand in Kigali (Bond and Prentice 1994; Hélène 1994a).

A second mistake by international news media was to report that violence was on the wane when in fact it was mounting. On 11 April, just four days after the

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fighting started, *The New York Times* reported that violence had 'appeared to slacken' (Schmidt 1994a), and *Le Monde* concurred the next day that fighting had 'diminished in intensity' (Hélène 1994b). Two days later, *Le Monde* said that 'a strange calm reigns in downtown' Kigali (Hélène 1994a). On 15 April, it reported this calm spreading to the capital's suburbs, allowing 'humanitarian organizations to cautiously resume their activities' (Hélène 1994c). Only on 18 April did Brussels' La Une Radio Network question this consensus by explaining that the decline in reports of violence was because 'most foreigners have left, including journalists' (Anon. 1994b). The exodus of reporters was so thorough that it virtually halted Western press coverage. European newspapers that had been providing daily coverage of the violence in Kigali stopped cold on 18 April, for four days in France's *Le Monde* and seven in Britain's *Guardian*. Ironically, this was when the slaughter reached its peak.

The third reporting error was that early published death counts were gross underestimates, sometimes by a factor of ten. On 10 April, three days into the killing, *The New York Times* quoted estimates of 8,000 or 'tens of thousands' dead in Kigali (McFadden 1994). During the second week, media estimates did not rise at all. On 16 April, the *Guardian* still reported only an 'estimated 20,000 deaths' (Hilsum 1994). Two days later, *The New York Times* repeated this same statistic, underestimating the actual carnage at that point by about tenfold. Not until a few days later did the scope of killing rapidly emerge (Schmidt 1994b).

Fourth, for nearly two weeks, Western news organizations focused almost exclusively on Kigali, a city that contained only 4 per cent of Rwanda's population, and did not report the far broader tragedy unfolding around them. The few reports of violence in the countryside seemed to indicate renewal of mutual communal strife or civil war, rather than genocide. On 11 April, Paris Europe No. 1 Radio reported that 'Hutus are hunting down Tutsis throughout the country,' but then added, 'and the other way round' (Giesbert 1994). Brussels' La Une Radio Network reported that killing and looting in Rwanda's southwest was targeted against the 'opposition', rather than an ethnic group (Anon. 1994c). Likewise, on 12 April, the *Washington Post* wrote, 'sketchy reports said fighting has spread to Rwanda's countryside,' but in a context suggesting combat between government troops and armed rebels (Parmelee 1994a). The first report of a large-scale massacre outside the capital came on 16 April (Bond 1994; Parmelee 1994b).

American newspapers failed to convey the nationwide scope of the violence until 22 April when *The New York Times* belatedly reported that fighting bands had reduced 'much of the country to chaos' (Lewis 1994). Still, many foreign observers could not conceive that genocide was under way. On 23 April, the *Washington Post* speculated that the dearth of Tutsi refugees fleeing Rwanda was because 'most of the borders have been sealed' (Parmelee 1994c). Only on 25 April was the riddle solved when the *New York Times* reported that violence had 'widened into what appears to be a methodical killing of Tutsi across the countryside', and that the missing refugees 'either have been killed or are trying to hide' (Lorch 1994).

At least three factors help to account for these reporting lapses. First, the evacuation of foreign nationals left few reporters in the countryside after the first few days or in the capital after the first week. Second, the situation was legitimately confusing. Tutsi rebels were winning the civil war and retaliating against suspected civilian Hutu extremists at the same time that the civilian Tutsi population was being systematically exterminated. Third, even experts were slow to appreciate what was happening. The commander of Belgian peacekeepers stated on 15 April to Radio France International that ‘the fighting has ... all but stopped’ (Anon. 1994d). No human rights group even suggested the possibility of genocide until 19 April (Human Rights Watch 1994).

In the wake of Rwanda’s tragedy, the media harshly criticized the United Nations and its Western members for not immediately recognizing the killing campaign and reacting to prevent it. Such criticism is only partly valid. American and other Western officials did drag their feet after the genocide was reported, avoiding use of the word genocide for weeks afterward for fear of being compelled to intervene.

But the media must share the blame for failing to provide prompt notice of the genocide. In obscure parts of the world, where Western governments do not invest significant intelligence assets, the news business is relied on to serve as a surrogate early-warning system. In Rwanda, it did not fulfil this role.

Partly in reaction to this reporting failure in Rwanda, Western media have suffered from exactly the opposite problem ever since. They now exaggerate the extent of civilian atrocities in ethnic conflict. Around the world, rebels and human rights groups learned the lesson from Rwanda that they must declare ‘genocide’ to have any hope of Western intervention. Because the press does not want to get caught napping again, it duly reports such claims even though it cannot confirm them. Thus, Western readers were told for months that genocide was raging in Kosovo, but forensic investigators have been able to find just 5,000 corpses to date, some of whom may have been armed rebels (Garvey 2004).

Likewise, Western media reported that genocide was occurring in East Timor after its vote for independence, but now the UN estimates that only 1,000 were killed before and after the referendum (Anon. 2005). This is not to say that a few hundred or thousand deaths are unimportant. But they do not constitute genocide by any reasonable definition. The UN defines genocide as ‘acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such’ (UN 1951: Article II). The definition has been broadened in practice to include destruction of political groups.

Perhaps the main reason that Western correspondents have had difficulty reporting ethnic violence accurately is that at least one of the sides does not want them to, and reporters cannot confirm many allegations without risking their lives by visiting combat zones. There is no moral requirement for journalists to make such a personal sacrifice. But so long as reporters do not confirm the facts on the ground, they must try to do everything else possible to piece together the real story for readers – in full awareness that combatants, governments and private agencies are all trying to manipulate them.

Rwanda's Hutu government wanted reporters to think that violence was civil war rather than genocide. In a similarly manipulative way, the Kosovo Liberation Army wanted reporters to think that Yugoslav government violence prior to NATO's bombing was genocide or ethnic cleansing rather than counter-insurgency. In both cases, Western reporters were fooled. They should take a lesson from this as they continue their vital task of informing Western policymakers and publics about violent conflicts around the world.

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