

# **PRESBYTERIANS AND MILITARY SERVICE**

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

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Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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## **PRESBYTERIANS AND MILITARY SERVICE—Q AND A**

### ***What is the draft?***

The draft is compulsory enrollment in the armed services. The last draft in the United States occurred during the Vietnam War. Registering for the draft is not the same as enrolling to serve with the armed services. While registering for the draft is required and is unique to men, enrolling in the armed services is not required and is an option to both men and women in the United States.

### ***Is there a draft now?***

There is no draft in the United States at the present time; the last ended in 1973. However, the draft (or conscription) can be reinstated at any time by an act of Congress. If Congress were to authorize a draft, the first draftees would be inducted in an estimated thirteen days.

### ***What if the draft were resumed?***

The following steps would occur:

1. A random selection process known as a lottery would go into effect.
2. A number (starting with one) would be assigned to every day in the calendar year.
3. These numbers would be publicized.
4. You would be drafted according to the number assigned to your birthday during the year in which you turn twenty. It is possible, therefore, to be drafted as young as nineteen. Your vulnerability to being drafted decreases each year until age twenty-six, when most people are no longer eligible.

### ***What if I have special circumstances or object to war?***

The following special circumstances are taken into account if a draft occurs:

1. Postponements, deferments, and exemptions are allowed for persons with physical and mental health conditions, in cases of extreme hardship to dependents, ministerial students and ministers, and anyone whose father, brother, or sister was killed in action or died as a result of injury or illness incurred while on active duty.
2. If you are the only child in your family you can still be drafted.
3. There are no student deferments, but your induction can be postponed until you complete the term or graduate if you are in the last year of school.
4. There is a special service category, conscientious objector, provided for persons with moral, ethical, and religious objections to participation in war. This classification system does not go into effect until a draft is authorized.

Once induction orders are issued there will be the opportunity to claim classifications. As it stands, draftees would have ten days to return SSS (Selective Service System) Form 9, making their initial classification claims for deferment, exemption, or conscientious objector status. The rules and regulations for this system are published in the Federal Code of Regulations at Section 1600.

### ***Who registers for the draft and where does one sign up?***

All male citizens and resident aliens are required by law to register for the draft with the Selective Service System. There is a sixty-day period in which to do this, which begins thirty days before their eighteenth birthday. Women are not required to register, and there would have to be a congressional amendment in order for this to change.

You register by filling out a form at a local post office, at an overseas consular office, or registering on the listed Web site. Failure to register is a felony, and the penalty is up to five years in prison, a \$250,000 fine, or both. Federal law also requires that young men be registered

for the draft before they are eligible for government-backed financial aid for higher education, job training programs, or employment in any capacity by the federal government.

Selective Service System Web site – [www.sss.gov](http://www.sss.gov)

You may register for the Selective Service on-line – <https://www4.sss.gov/regver/register1.asp>

***What have the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessors said about military service and draft registration?***

106th General Assembly (1966)—Presbyterian Church in the United States declared:

“In the complexities of political, social, and economic affairs, there is seldom any single unanimously ‘Christian’ solution. The church and individual Christians will choose from the available solutions that one which seems most clearly to point in the direction of the will of God. To say nothing or do nothing because no single solution is perfect is not to take a Christian position, but to silently support whatever status quo happens to prevail, or to leave change entirely to others—and thus to refuse altogether to try to bring the will of God to bear on the life of the world” (*Minutes*, 1966, p.165)

181st General Assembly (1969)—United Presbyterian Church in the USA (UPCUSA) declared in the statement

“War, Peace and Conscience”:

- A. “The United Presbyterian Church does not teach a single response to war which all members must accept, for God alone is Lord of the conscience and not the state or church.
  - God is Lord of the conscience of those who, in good faith and sensitive spirit, conclude that military power must sometimes be employed to establish the preconditions for justice, order and freedom.
  - God is also Lord of the conscience of those who conclude that they cannot support military action because they judge either that it is contrary to order and justice or against the teachings of the Gospel.
- B. Both of these—the concerned participant in war and the pacifist who objects to war—can draw equally upon the church’s teaching in support of their position. And it is also clear that a third group—individuals who object to particular wars which they judge to be unjust or unconscionable—is entitled to appeal to the teaching of the church as the foundation of their moral stand.
  - God is the Lord of conscience, not only of a participant in war for moral reasons, or of the objector to all war on pacifist grounds, but also of those who conclude that a particular conflict is morally unconscionable and indefensible . . .
- C. Faced with the agonizing choices of war, each Christian must satisfy his or her own conscience under God and before other citizens, that any war is “just and necessary.” We call upon each church member, facing these choices, to inform and enliven her or his conscience, using as resources the community of the Church, the counsel of the clergy, the Bible, sacraments, and prayer as a means of grace, the Confessions, statements, and traditions of the church, together with adequate information on the facts of a particular war. Without these resources, decisions may be ill-informed, ill-advised, and contrary both to the will of God and the best interest of humankind . . .”(*Minutes*, 1969, pp. 696–697; 699–700, paraphrased to use inclusive language).

195th General Assembly (1983)—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
enacted the following:

1. "Reaffirms previous General Assembly pronouncements (UPCUSA) 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1979, and 1981) opposing peacetime conscription and supporting the rights of individuals to exercise their consciences.
2. Directs the Co-Stated Clerks to communicate to members of Congress that this Assembly favors the repeal of the Military Selective Service Act and the cessation of funding for draft registration.
3. Urges agencies, governing bodies, and individual Presbyterians to work for the repeal of laws that deny funding of employment training or financial aid for students who exercise their conscience and to support legal challenges to those laws so long as they exist.
4. Affirms that the church has a responsibility in the formation of conscience in its members . . .
5. Urges all ministers and governing bodies to provide competent draft counseling for young men as they approach the age of 18 so they can make informed, conscientious decisions as they face draft registration.
6. Urges churches and governing bodies to provide counseling and support, especially for those who conscientiously refuse to cooperate with the Selective Service system . . .
7. Urges Presbyterian attorneys to make their services available to non-registrants on a pro-bono basis, and to register their willingness with an appropriate General Assembly agency to be designated by the new program structures of the Presbyterian Church.
8. Reminds Presbyterian conscientious objectors that they can register with the Co- Stated Clerk's offices; and urges them to do so to help document their claims, since Selective Service regulations will not allow them to file as a conscientious objector until after they receive an induction order."

### ***What does the peacemaking emphasis of our denomination say about the draft/registration?***

"Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling," the General Assembly policy basis for peacemaking, does not discuss or make a recommendation about the various Christian positions on war. Instead, it talks about peace. It reads in part, "peace is the intended order of the world with life abundant for all God's children." God's grace is experienced as peace, and Christians in response become peacemakers in their families, congregations, communities, and internationally. It is central to our lives as Christians. It is wholeness, harmony, and justice for all people.

"Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling" may be ordered through Presbyterian Distribution Service at (800) 524-2612. The item number is **PDS OGA88047** and cost is \$1.50 each. You may also find this item on the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program's website at [www.pcusa.org/peacemaking](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking).

The Confession of 1967, which calls Presbyterians to reconciliation in the world, may be a helpful resource for those considering military service to read.

### ***What if I decide to enlist in the armed forces?***

The church teaches that one way Christians can be faithful is through service in the armed forces. The 200th General Assembly (1988) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states:

“There is a long Presbyterian tradition of individuals serving in the armed forces. Many Presbyterians have decided that obedience to God leads them to participate in the military and to work from within for policies that will reduce nuclear threat and promote justice” (*Minutes, 1988*, p. 447).

#### Important suggestions

- Talk with your pastor, family, and church community if you are considering military service. Through talking you may clarify your reasons for joining.
- Talk with recruiters from each of the services. Examine the options they provide and decide which one meets your skills, interests, and needs.
- Talk with other individuals who have served in the armed forces, specifically, those who served in the branch that interests you.
- Be sure to get in written confirmation of every promise of training and have the recruiter sign it. Take a witness with you.
- Take all materials home with you and review them before signing anything. Understand what you are signing.
- If you are or will be a college student, examine the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program carefully before enrolling. Be aware of the expectations.
- Inform your pastor and the session about your decision.

#### ***What support will I find once I have enlisted?***

The church helps recruit, train, and support chaplains who provide worship and pastoral care for members of the armed forces. Seek out a chaplain upon arrival. Inform him or her that you are a Christian and ask for a schedule of worship and other church-related activities. The church also teaches that members should support those in the armed forces with prayers and regular communication. Use this time to communicate with your church community about specific prayer requests you may have. If you are interested in more information, please see Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel in the Helpful Contacts section.

#### ***What if I am opposed to participation in war?***

The church also supports conscientious objectors, those who are conscientiously opposed to participating in war of any form. This conviction must be based on religious training and belief, which the Supreme Court has ruled also includes deeply held moral and ethical beliefs.

#### Levels of Conscientious Objection

1. Those opposed to their own use of weapons in war but willing to serve in the armed forces would be inducted and assigned to noncombatant service, such as a medic. In some cases, noncombatants must carry a weapon for their own safety and the safety of others.
2. Those opposed to any military service, instead of being inducted, would be ordered to alternative service, such as church-sponsored programs that meet legal requirements in the “national health, safety, or interest.”

Under current regulations, alternative service workers must serve as long as those drafted into the armed forces. There are no special benefits upon completion of alternative service.

#### ***What do I do if I believe I am a conscientious objector?***

If conscription were enacted you would be asked to:

1. Submit written answers to questions; and
2. Appear in person before a local draft board.

The board would ask you to state your beliefs, explain how you came to them and demonstrate how sincerely your beliefs are held. The board will determine whether your beliefs will allow you

to serve as a noncombatant in the armed forces. The board can disqualify your request if it believes your motivation is “expediency” or that you are trying to get out of serving for selfish reasons. Therefore, you must be clear in your own mind what it means to be a conscientious objector and be ready to present your reasons for being one.

**Important Steps to Take:**

- Talk with your family, pastor, church community, and/or friends about your beliefs and feelings.
- Contact a counseling organization (see below) for the latest materials on qualifying as a conscientious objector.
- It is **IMPORTANT** to show that your beliefs are long-standing, but a recent development or understanding of beliefs is not necessarily a barrier to the acceptance of a late claim. Start a file of thoughts and activities about peace and nonviolence.
- Keep copies of the most important papers such as those documenting your beliefs and activities regarding those beliefs and, if possible, put another set in the care of someone trustworthy.
- Gather letters of support from family members, pastors, church leaders, teachers, classmates, and friends that can support your beliefs. Many claims have been strengthened by such support. Sometimes the board will find convincing a letter from a person who disagrees with you but can attest to your beliefs. When you are required to substantiate your claim, these records will be important.
- **AN ESSENTIAL STEP!** Individuals seeking status as a conscientious objector must register with the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PC(USA). The Clerk’s office will officially validate the date of your decision and will send certified copies of your entire file to your draft board, federal officials of the Selective Service Administration, and any others upon your request. The Stated Clerk may also interpret the Presbyterian Church’s position regarding war and military service.

Please see Center on Conscience & War (NISBCO) in the Helpful Contacts section for more information.

***How do I register with the Stated Clerk as a conscientious objector?***

The following documents are needed:

1. A letter from your pastor, associate pastor, or the clerk of session stating that you are an active member in good standing of your congregation.
2. A letter from you, signed and dated in your handwriting, that you are conscientiously opposed to participation in war. You may use one of the following statements:
  - a. I, \_\_\_\_\_, because of my Christian understanding of the love of God as shown in Jesus Christ and my belief in basic principles that guide my life, am conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form.
  - b. I, \_\_\_\_\_, because of my Christian understanding of the love of God as shown in Jesus Christ and my belief in basic principles that guide my life, am conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form, but am willing to perform noncombatant service.

When these two documents arrive at the Stated Clerk’s office, a file will be created in which they will be kept with any other letters of support received. A certificate stating your registration as a conscientious objector will be sent to your home church for delivery to you. It will include a copy for the church records.

If you are drafted:

1. You will be ordered to induction.
2. You will then file a claim for conscientious objector status.

3. At the time you officially file a claim for conscientious objection, you will be given an appointment to appear before your draft board.
4. PLEASE send the address of that board and the name of its chairperson to the Office of the General Assembly.
5. The Stated Clerk will notify the board of your admission to the Registry of Conscientious Objectors of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and will send copies of the documentation that supports your claim to conscientious objector status.

### ***What if I object to some wars but not others?***

“Selective conscientious objection” is the objection to participation in a particular war or wars. Both the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (181st General Assembly, 1969) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (106th General Assembly, 1966) supported selective conscientious objection. The 195th General Assembly (1983) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reaffirmed this position.

Many Christians who claim selective objection base their claim on an understanding of the “just war” tradition. “The term ‘Just War’ should never be construed as meaning ‘righteous war,’ but should be understood closer in meaning to ‘justifiable war’ in the sense that armed conflict may be determined as the most responsible of various moral options in a given situation” (*War, Peace and Conscience*, 181st General Assembly, 1969).

This traditional teaching of the church, which has been adopted by and incorporated in international law, includes criteria for deciding to go to war and rules for limiting the conduct of the war. The criteria for going to war are as follows:

- War as a last resort—exhausting all other means to resolve conflict before resorting to violence
- A justifiable goal—a declaration of reasons for going to war ( as in the Declaration of Independence)
- Due proportion—having proportionality (the situation should turn out better than if the nation did not go to war)
- A just cause—having morally just purposes (self-defense or coming to the defense of another country)
- Declared by a legitimate authority—the actual declaration and conduct of the war must be subject to the restraint of legitimate political leadership
- Reasonable possibility of success—reasonable assurance that success will take place with the fewest possible casualties and the least damage in the shortest amount of time

To have a just war all of these criteria must be met. Thus, just war principles are a strong presumption against violence, not a means for easily justifying war.

The rules for the conduct of war, embodied in the Geneva Convention and the treaty condemning the use of chemical weapons, include:

- Just means—prohibits cruel weapons or indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction (such as napalm, antipersonnel bombs, and chemical, nuclear, and biological weapons)
- Just attitude—the conduct of war to reverse an injustice rather than annihilation, vengeance, or revenge
- The discrimination of combatants and noncombatants and the immunity of noncombatants, especially civilians, from the violence of war
- Proper treatment of prisoners of war

Although the law prohibits those who want to “choose their wars” from obtaining CO status, the selective objector may qualify as a legal conscientious objector under present law. Therefore, a

person should keep a record of beliefs. Even if a person is denied CO classification by a local board and loses all appeals, the evidence of conscience and sincerity in the file might be a mitigating factor in any subsequent court case. (Please file a copy of your beliefs with the Stated Clerk in the Office of the General Assembly as described earlier.)

### ***What if I object to nuclear war?***

There are those who believe that any modern war has the potential to be a nuclear war and the use of nuclear weapons will never meet any standards of a just war. Some such claims have been honored by legal authorities though other claims have not. (Please file a copy of your beliefs with the Stated Clerk in the Office of the General Assembly of the PC(USA) as described earlier.)

### ***What if in good conscience I decide not to register?***

Failure to comply with the law and regulations of the Selective Service System is a felony. Nevertheless, some young men opposed to the act and/or preparation of war have refused to register. Presently, only a handful of the most vocal or self-reporting non-registrants have been prosecuted.

The 181st General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (1969) stated that this may be an option of some people: "With such men, the church affirms that God is Lord of their conscience also, and hence along with those who make other response to war, the church offers them her ministries of compassion and pastoral care without necessarily approving or encouraging such responses." (*Minutes*, pp. 699–700)

The 184th General Assembly (UPCUSA 1972):

". . . recognizes that some individual United Presbyterians will be led by conscience to make their witness in public places, refusal to cooperate with the Selective Service System, refusal to pay certain federal taxes voluntarily, and that some such acts may entail peaceful civil disobedience. We therefore urge the prayerful support of the whole church for persons who engage in such individual acts of conscience."

The 195th General Assembly (1983) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reaffirmed both of these positions.

If this is your stance

- Begin to prepare spiritually and psychologically for possible trial and imprisonment.
- Decide whether to talk with your family, pastor, and session.
- Contact one of the groups listed for referral to an attorney knowledgeable about current draft law.
- Keep records of your conscientious conviction and behavior.
- Send a copy of your beliefs to the Stated Clerk in the Office of the General Assembly as described in an earlier answer about registering as a conscientious objector.

The 200th General Assembly (1999) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states:

"When on the basis of informed conscience, Christians conclude that obedience to God forbids the willing payment of a specific tax, the church must respect their actions as honorable expressions of Christian conscience. Those who take such action are advised to secure good legal advice, a strong support group, and be prepared to suffer full penalties of the existing law" (*Report of the Advisory Council on Church and Society*, page 452).

### ***What about my financial aid?***

Presently, if you are in college, you must sign a form stating you have registered for the draft in order to receive federally funded financial aid. Women (and men who are not of draft age) must sign a statement saying they are not required to register. If you have chosen not to register or

sign the statement saying you are not required to register and have been refused financial aid, ask your aid officer for suggestions.

### **HELPFUL CONTACTS:**

#### **Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel**

4124 Van Ness Street, NW, Washington, DC 20016-2120

Tel: (202) 244-4177/8 Fax: (202) 237-0983

E-mail: [info@pccmp.org](mailto:info@pccmp.org) Web site: <http://users.erols.com/pccmp/>

This organization will assist anyone who is in the military or considering military service options. A key responsibility is to remind presbyteries of their role to support the ministry of chaplains and other service personnel on their rolls or those within their bounds. Several resources are available, including the pamphlet "Opportunities for Christian Service with the Armed Forces."

#### **Center on Conscience & War (NISBCO)**

1830 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20009

Tel: (202) 483-2220 Fax: (202) 483-1246

E-mail: [nisbco@nisbco.org](mailto:nisbco@nisbco.org) Web site: [www.nisbco.org](http://www.nisbco.org)

The Center on Conscience & War (CCW), formerly the National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors (NISBCO), was formed in 1940 by an association of religious bodies. CCW works to defend and extend the rights of conscientious objectors. The Center is committed to supporting all those who question participation in war, whether they are U.S. citizens, permanent residents, documented or undocumented immigrants, or citizens in other countries. Many of their resources are available for free via the Web.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

#### **The Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (CCCO)**

630 20th Street, Suite 302, Oakland, CA 94612

Tel: (888) 231-2226 E-mail: [cccowr@peacenet.org](mailto:cccowr@peacenet.org) Web site: [www.objector.org](http://www.objector.org)

1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102

Tel: (215) 563-8787 Fax: (215) 567-2096

CCCO assists individuals and groups on matters of conscience, war, and militarism; trains and maintains a nationwide listing of draft counselors and attorneys who know about draft law; and provides counseling and legal help to those who need to be discharged from the military. This committee also educates potential recruits about numerous problems in military life that recruiters don't mention. It publishes a variety of materials on conscientious objection, including *The Objector: A Journal of Draft and Military Counseling* (first edition free on-line)

**Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)** Web site: [www.pcusa.org/oga](http://www.pcusa.org/oga)

**Stated Clerk**, Office of the General Assembly, Room 4408, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202 Tel: (888) 728-7228, ext. 5424. E-mail: [jevans@ctr.pcusa.org](mailto:jevans@ctr.pcusa.org)

The Stated Clerk in the Office of the General Assembly can assist you with the process of filing as a conscientious objector. (If you have any questions concerning this process please contact the office.)

**Presbyterian Peacemaking Program** Web site: [www.pcusa.org/peacemaking](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking)

Room 1626, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202 Tel: (888) 728-7228, ext. 5624.

E-mail: [acraft@ctr.pcusa.org](mailto:acraft@ctr.pcusa.org)

The Peacemaking Program provides denominational resources on peacemaking. Write for a list of resources that can be mailed to you, or visit the Peacemaking Program website for resources that are available on-line. Suggested resources are *Peacemaking: A Believers' Calling* and *Biblical Witness to Peacemaking*. Many presbyteries and local congregations have peacemaking task forces or committees. Many of these resources are also available at presbytery and synod offices.

**American Friends Service Committee** – web site: [www.afsc.org/youthmil/choices/co.htm](http://www.afsc.org/youthmil/choices/co.htm)  
National Youth and Militarism Program, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.  
Tel: (215) 241-7176; Fax: (215) 241-7177. E-mail: [youthmil@afsc.org](mailto:youthmil@afsc.org)

The AFSC offers an on-line magazine for youth dealing with the choices surrounding military service and conscientious objection. This site offers numerous resources ranging from historical accounts of COs in the Vietnam and Gulf wars to the foundations of pacifism. Also included is a section on how youth can find alternatives to military service.

### **BOOKS and MORE**

The books and resources listed below may be helpful for those interested in learning more about faith and military service. The following resources, however, are not endorsed by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program.

American Friends Service Committee. *CHOICES*. Multimedia software for IBM-compatible computers. This program educates youth people about the realities of military enlistment and presents alternatives for skills training, community service, and college financial aid. Project on Youth and Non-Military Opportunities. \$5.00

Bainton, Roland H. *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace*. Bainton examines the writings of the church fathers and evolving Christian attitudes toward participation in war, showing how Christians came to terms with the state. Abingdon Press. 1979. ISBN 0687070279. \$21.00

*Blood Makes the Grass Grow: Conscientious Objectors and the Gulf War*. Documentary of six former U.S. soldiers during the Gulf War who tell how they changed from gung-ho soldiers to people who questioned fighting about war. Forward Presence Productions. 1997, 48 minutes. Available at [www.afsc.org/youthmil/html/news/Feb99/resource0299.htm](http://www.afsc.org/youthmil/html/news/Feb99/resource0299.htm). \$25.00

Cahill, Lisa Sowle. *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory*. This book examines the theological issues of just war theory and pacifism and their relationship to Christian discipleship and the moral life. Fortress Press. 1994. ISBN 0800627008. \$16.00.

Clouse, Robert G., ed. *War: Four Christian Views*. Writers argue for biblical nonresistance (noncombatant CO), Christian pacifism, just war, or preventive war positions. Intervarsity Press. 1991. ASIN 0830813098. \$10.99, used.

*A Presbyterian Witness on War and Peace: A Historical Interpretation* by Robert F. Smylie. This resource details a history of the United Presbyterian Church's position on peacemaking since the 1930s. A reprint from *Journal of Presbyterian History*, vol. 59, no. 4, Winter 1981. You may order it from the Peacemaking Program office. \$.75. Please call Presbyterian Peacemaking Program for this resource.

Smock, David R. *Religious Perspectives on War: Christian, Muslim and Jewish Attitudes toward Force*. This book explores how these three faiths view the use of force conceptualized by their spiritual disciplines. United States Institute of Peace. 2002. ISBN 1929223374. \$8.95

Yoder, John Howard. *What Would You Do?* An edited collection of pacifist responses to the question, what would you do if a loved one was being attacked? Herald Press. 1992. ISBN 0836136039. \$8.99.

## **Contact Information:**

### **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Stated Clerk**

Office of the General Assembly  
Room 4408, 100 Witherspoon Street  
Louisville, KY 40202-1396  
Tel: (888) 728-7228, ext. 5424 E-mail: [jevans@ctr.pcusa.org](mailto:jevans@ctr.pcusa.org)

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