

# Branch Prediction and Predication

CS/COE 1541 (Fall 2020)  
Wonsun Ahn

# Branch Prediction

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# Solution 3: Branch Prediction

- Comparator at **ID** stage is not completely satisfactory
  - Still creates one bubble on a taken branch
  - Also extra bubbles due to data hazards at the ID stage
- What if ...
  - We were able to **predict** the branch outcome?
  - But **without comparing registers**?
- What would that get us?
  1. We could make the prediction at the **IF** stage
    - We can start fetching on the correct path at very next cycle!
  2. No extra data hazard bubbles
    - We are not even reading register values, remember?



# Types of Branch Prediction

- **Static Branch Prediction**
  - Predicting branch behavior based on code analysis
  - **Compiler** gives hints about what to fetch next through ISA
  - Not used nowadays due to inaccuracy of compiler predictions
- **Dynamic Branch Prediction**
  - Predicting branch behavior during program execution
  - Typically using **hardware** that tracks history information
  - *Premise:* **history repeats itself**
- Either way, a misprediction results in a pipeline flush
  - Misprediction is a performance issue, not a correctness issue

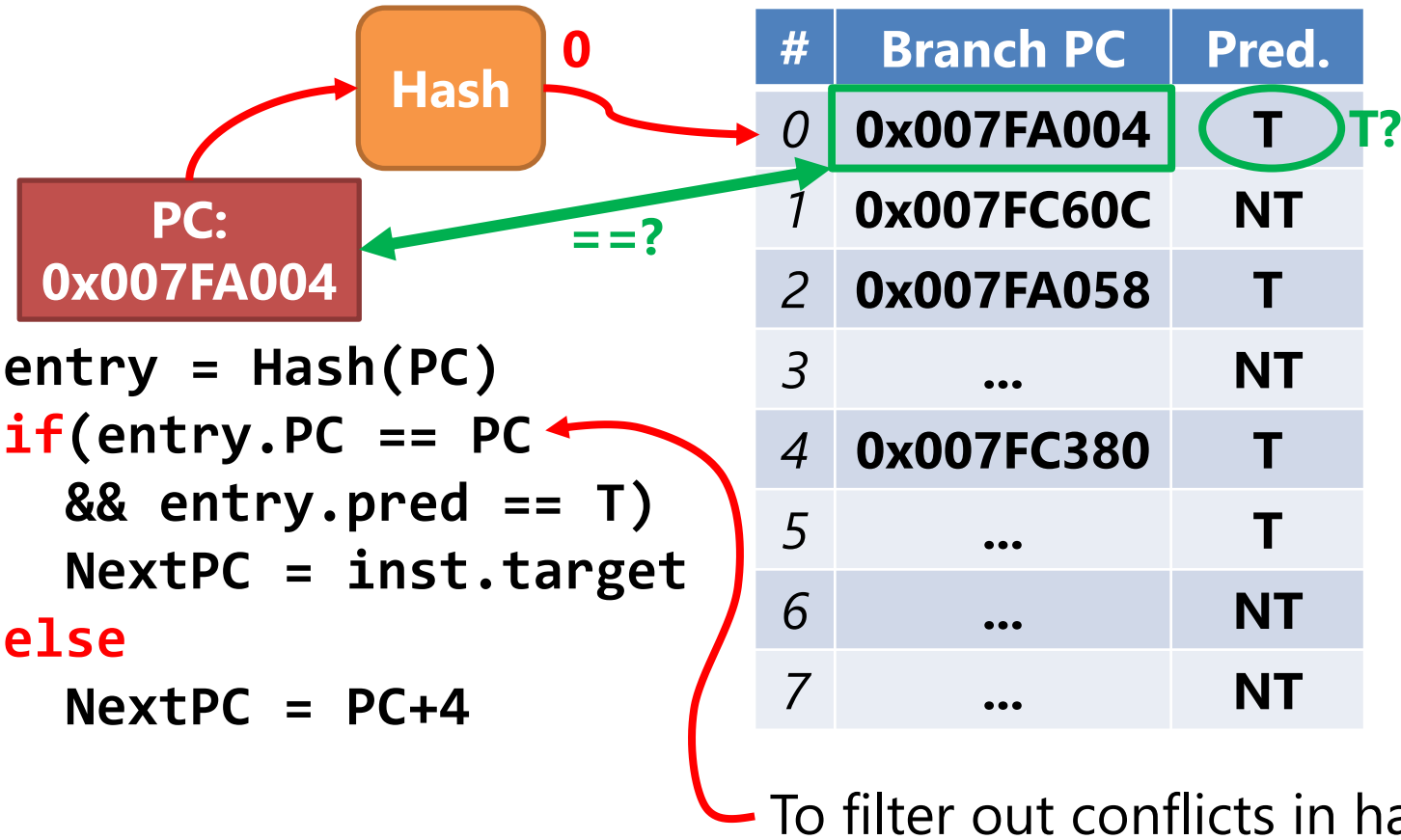
# Dynamic Branch Prediction

- We have been doing a form of branch prediction all along!
  - We assumed that all branches will be **not taken**
- Two simple policies:
  - Predict **not taken**: continue fetching PC + 4, flush if taken  
*Pros*: Can start fetching the next instruction immediately
  - Predict **taken**: fetch branch target as soon as ID, flush if not taken  
*Pros*: 67% of branches are taken, on average (due to loops)
- What if we use past history as a guide?
  - Branches not taken in the past → likely not taken in the future (e.g. branches to error handling code)
  - Branches taken in the past → likely taken in the future (e.g. branch back to the next iteration of the loop)

# The Branch History Table (BHT)

- BHT stores Taken (**T**) or Not Take (**NT**) history info for each branch
  - If branch was taken most recently, **T** is recorded
  - If branch was not taken most recently, **NT** is recorded
- BHT is indexed using PC (Program Counter)
  - Each branch has a unique PC, so a unique entry per branch
- BHT, being hardware, is limited in capacity
  - Cannot have a huge table with all PCs possible in a program
  - Besides, not every PC address contains a branch
  - Best to use **hash table** to map branch PCs to (limited) entries

# The Branch History Table (BHT)



# Limitations of Branch History Table (BHT)

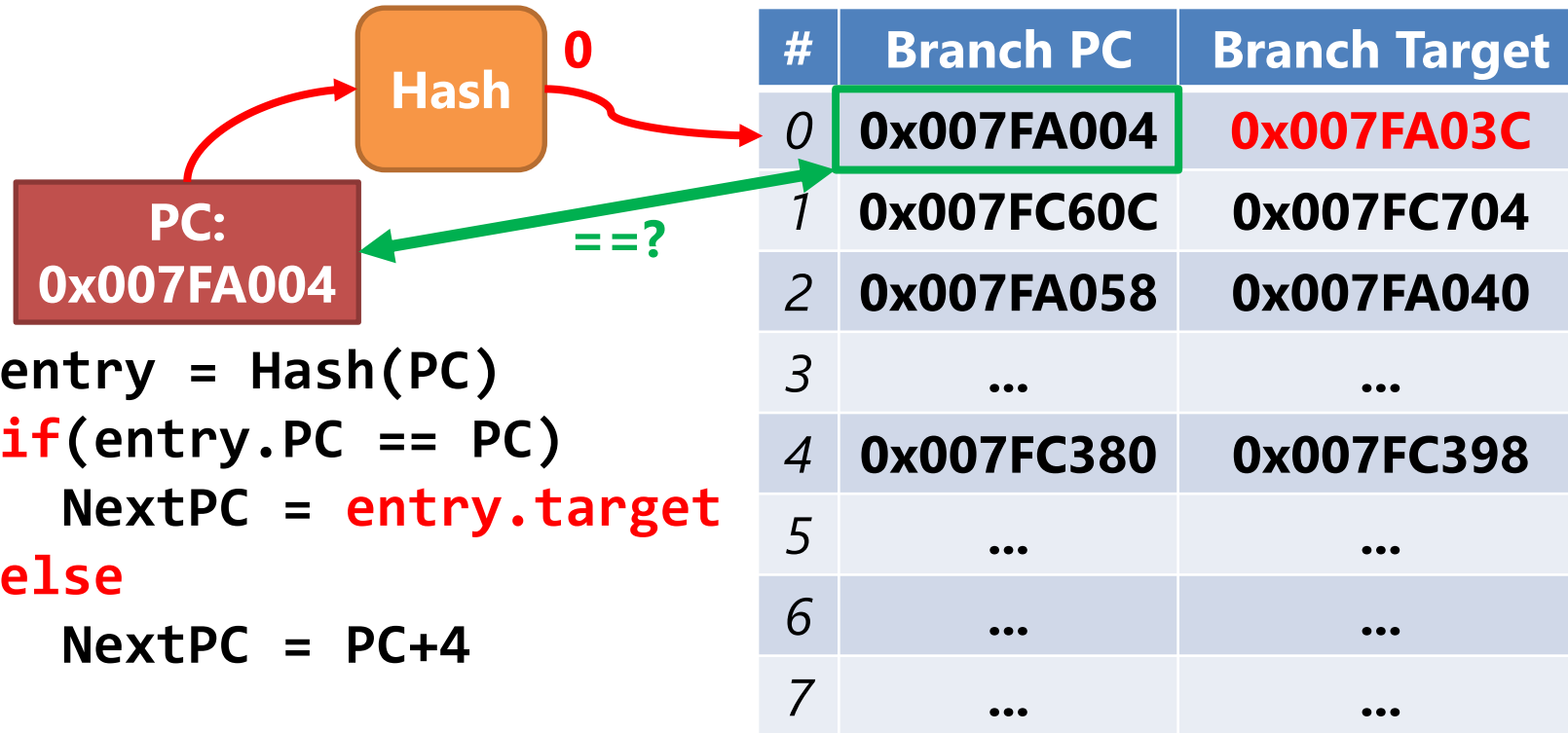
- Ideally, we would like know what next to fetch at the **IF** stage
  - So that correct instruction is immediately fetched in next cycle
- BHT can give us branch direction **IF** stage
  - All the information needed is the PC (which is available at IF)
- But also need the **branch target** to know what to fetch
  - Must wait until the **ID** stage for branch target to be decoded
  - If **NT** in BHT: no need to wait (branch target is irrelevant)  
But if **T** in BHT: need to wait until ID stage
- That introduces a **bubble** for **taken branches**



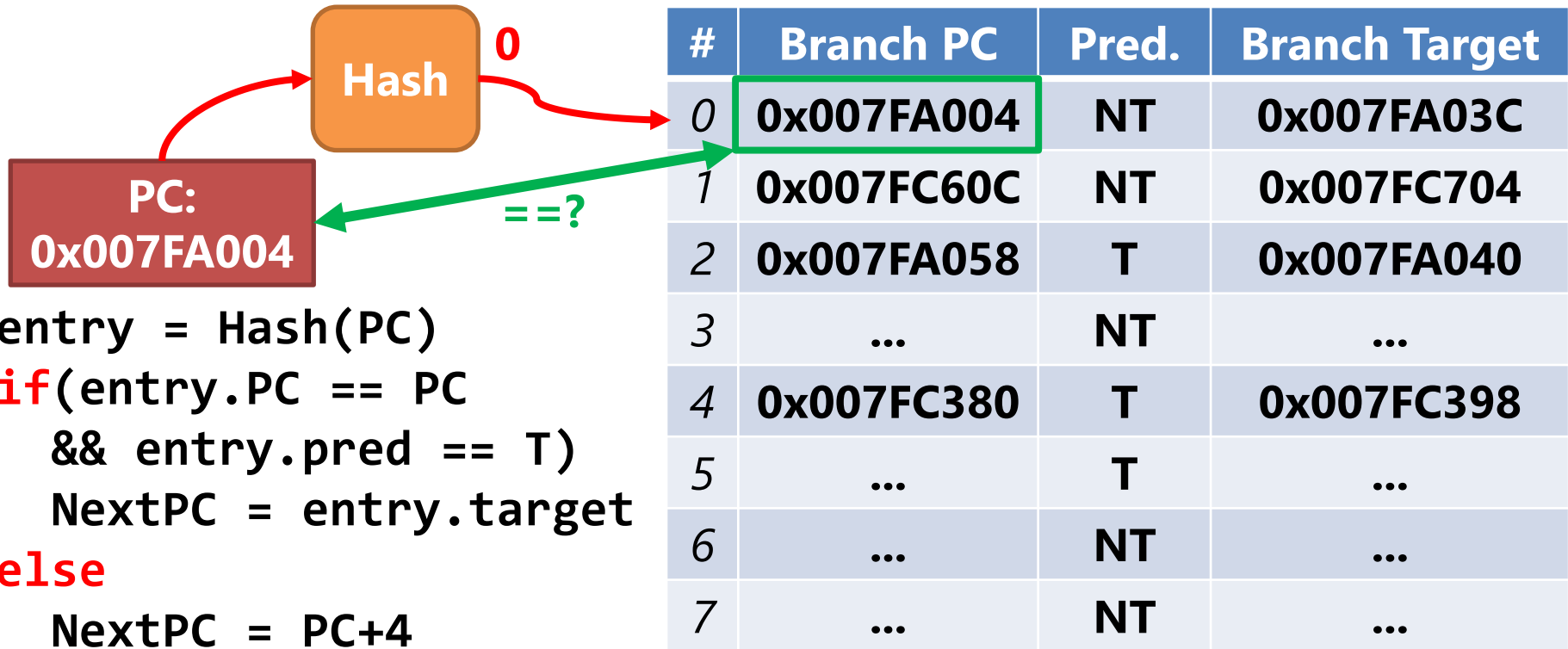
# The Branch Target Buffer (BTB)

- BTB stores **branch target** for each branch
- BTB is also indexed using PC of branch using a hash table
- BTB allows branch target to be known at the IF stage
  - **No need to wait until ID stage** for branch target to be decoded

# The Branch Target Buffer (BTB)

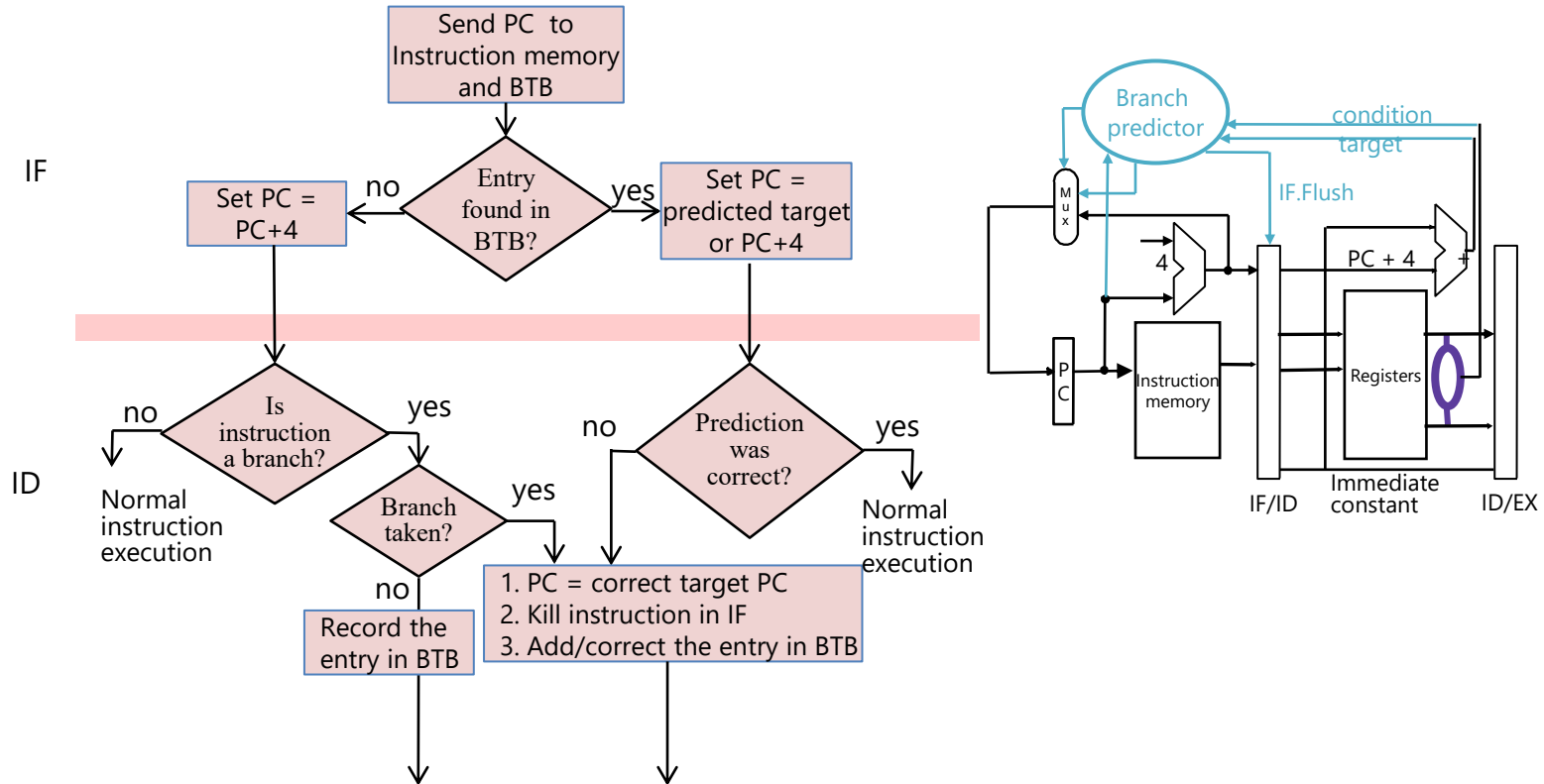


# BHT + BTB Combined Branch Predictor



# Branch Prediction Decision Tree

Assuming that branch condition and target are resolved in ID stage



# Limitations of 1-bit BHT Predictor

- Is 1-bit (T / NT) enough history to make a good decision?
- Take a look at this example:

```
for (j=0; j<100; j++) {  
  for (i=0; i< 5; i++) {  
    A[i] = B[i] * C[i];  
    D[i] = E[i] / F[i];  
  }  
}
```

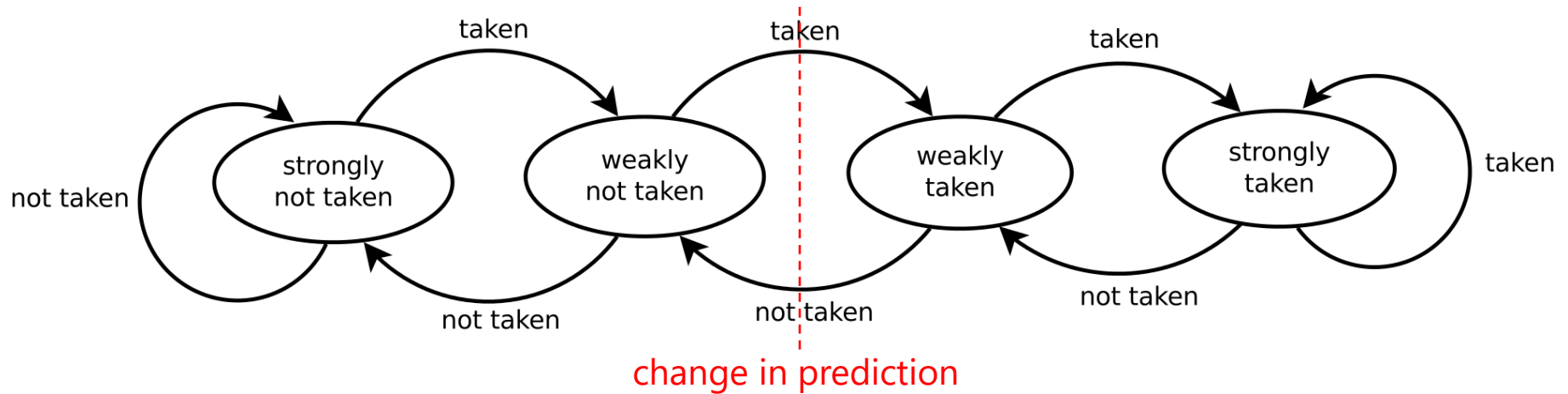
Predicted	-	T	T	T	<b>T</b>	<b>NT</b>	T	T	T	<b>T</b>	<b>NT</b>	T	T
Actual	T	T	T	T	NT	T	T	T	T	NT	T	T	T

this branch is predicted wrong  
twice every inner loop  
invocation (every 5 branches)

- It would have been better to stay with T than flip back and forth!
- Idea behind the 2-bit predictor: make predictions more stable
  - So that predictions don't flip immediately

# 2-bit BHT Predictor

- State transition diagram of 2-bit predictor:



- Can be implemented using a 2-bit saturating counter
  - Strongly not taken: 00
  - Weakly not taken: 01
  - Weakly taken: 10
  - Strongly taken: 11

# 2-bit BHT Predictor

- How well does the 2-bit predictor do with our previous example?
- Our previous example:

```
for (j=0; j<100; j++) {  
  for (i=0; i< 5; i++) {  
    A[i] = B[i] * C[i];  
    D[i] = E[i] / F[i];  
  }  
}
```

Predicted	-	T	T	T	<b>T</b>	T	T	T	T	<b>T</b>	T	T	T
Actual	T	T	T	T	NT	T	T	T	T	NT	T	T	T

this branch is predicted wrong  
**only once** every inner loop  
invocation (every 5 branches)

- Does it help beyond 2 bits? (e.g. 3-bit predictor, or 4-bit predictor)
  - Empirically, no. 2 bits already cover loop which is most common.
  - 2 bits + large BHT gets you **~93% accuracy**
- We need other tricks to improve accuracy!

# Correlating Predictors

- Sometimes you need to know more than the PC of your branch

```
for (j=0; j<100; j++) {  
    if (j % 2) {  
    }  
}
```

You get the prediction **wrong every single time!**

Predicted	-	NT	T	NT	T	NT	T	NT	T	NT	T	NT	T
Actual	NT	T	NT	T	NT	T	NT	T	NT	T	NT	T	NT

- For a 1-bit predictor, but a 2-bit predictor doesn't do well either
- Should base the prediction also on the history of that branch!
- This is called **local branch history** (*involves only current branch*)
- Knowing the result of other branches in your history also helps

```
If (j == 0) {  
}  
...  
If (j != 0) {  
}
```

previous

current

Knowing result of a **previous different branch** in your history helps in predicting **current** branch!

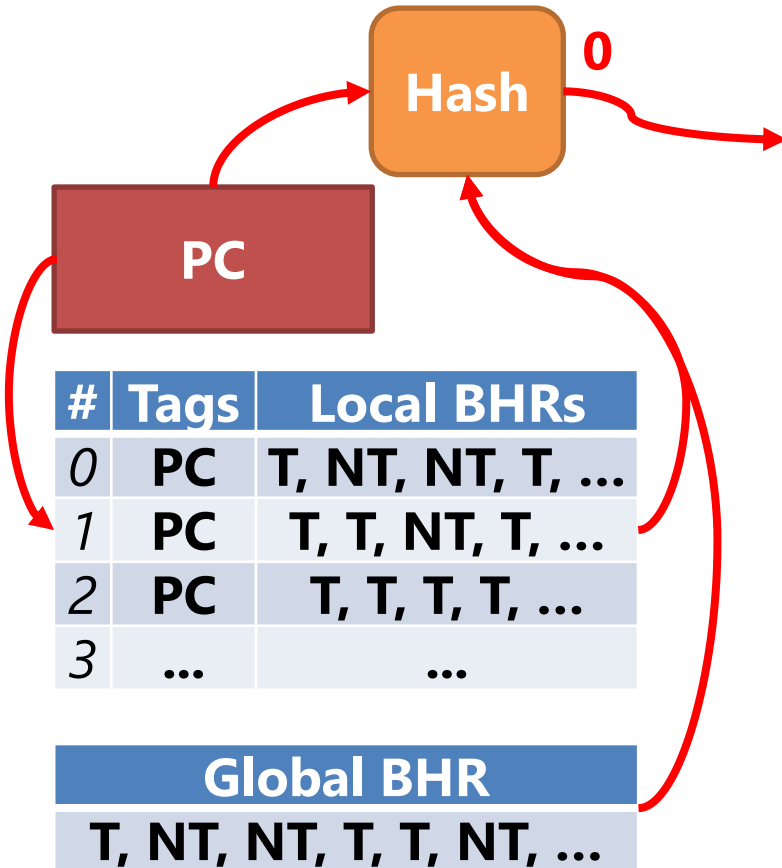
- This is called **global branch history** (*involves all branches*)



# Correlating Predictors

- Idea: have **multiple predictions per branch** depending on **history**
  - Local branch history + Global branch history
  - An entry with matching history gives more precise prediction!
- Now, instead of indexing into BHT by branch PC only
  - Use hash(PC, Local branch history, Global branch history)
- History is stored in register called Branch History Shift Register (BHR)
  - T/NT bit is shifted on to BHR whenever branch is encountered
    1. One Global BHR (there is just one global history)
    2. Multiple Local BHRs (local histories for each branch)

# Correlating Predictors



#	Tags	Pred.	Branch Target
0	PC+History	01	0x007FA03C
1	PC+History	00	0x007FC704
2	PC+History	11	0x007FA040
3	...	01	...
4	PC+History	10	0x007FC398
5	...	00	...
6	...	10	...
7	...	11	...

- Can reach up to **97% accuracy!**

# How about jr \$ra?

- **jr \$ra**: Jump return to address stored in **\$ra**
  - When a function is called, the caller stores return address to **\$ra** (**jal funcAddr** stores PC of next instruction to **\$ra**)
  - When a function returns, **jr \$ra** jumps to return address in **\$ra**
- Why is this a problem?
  - Unlike other branches, branch target is not an immediate value! (Jumping to a variable target is called an **indirect branch**)
  - Target can change for same **jr** depending on who caller is
  - Makes life difficult for BTB which relies on target being constant
- Target of **jr** is predicted using the **Return Stack Buffer**
  - Not the Branch Target Buffer (BTB)

# The Return Stack Buffer

- Since functions return to where they were called every time, it makes sense to cache the return addresses (in a stack)

```
4AB33C  jal  someFunc
4AB340  beq  v0, $0, blah
...
someFunc:
...
  jr  $ra
```

When we encounter  
the jal, push the  
return address.

When we encounter  
the jr \$ra, pop the  
return address. Easy!



40CC00
46280C
4AB108
4AB340
000000
000000
000000
000000

- On misprediction or stack overflow, empty stack
  - Not a problem since this is for prediction anyway

# Performance Impact with Branch Prediction

- Now,  $CPI = CPI_{nch} + \alpha * \pi * K$ 
  - $CPI_{nch}$  : CPI with no control hazard
  - $\alpha$  : fraction of branch instructions in the instruction mix
  - $\pi$  : **probability a branch is mispredicted**
  - $K$  : penalty per pipeline flush
- With deep pipelines, mispredictions can have outside impact

**Example:** If 20% of instructions are branches and the misprediction rate is 5%, and pipeline flush penalty 20 cycles, then:

$$CPI = CPI_{nch} + 0.2 * 0.05 * 20 = CPI_{nch} + 0.2 \text{ cycles per instruction}$$

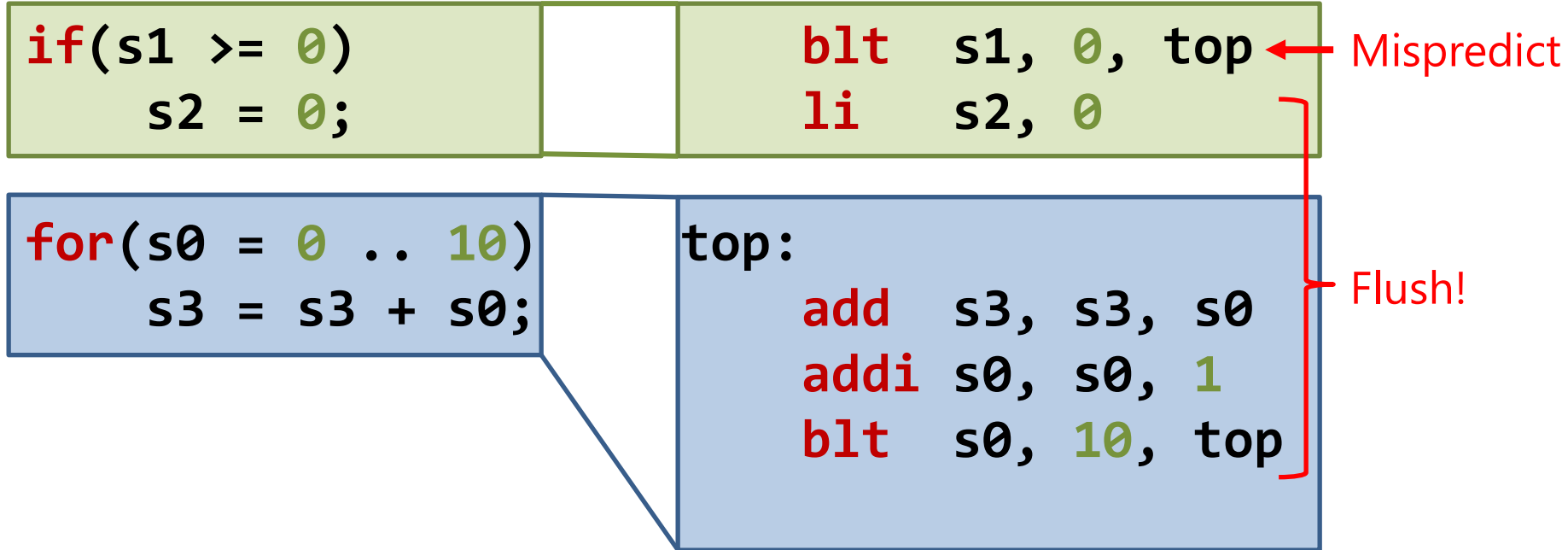
- If,  $CPI_{nch}$  is 0.5, then that is 40% added to execution time!
- Problem is a small percentage of hard to predict branches
  - How do we deal with these?

# Predication

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# Branch Mispredictions have Outsize Impact

- Assume a deep pipeline and `if(s1 >= 0)` is hard to predict



- On a misprediction, every following instruction is flushed
  - Not only the control dependent instructions (`li s2, 0`)
  - But also multiple iterations of the "bystander" loop that were fetched

# Solution 4: Predication

- **Predicate**: a Boolean value used for conditional execution
  - Instructions that use predicates are said to be **predicated**
  - A predicated instruction will modify state only if predicate is true
  - ISA is modified to add predicated versions for all instructions
- Example of code generation using predication:  

```
pge p1, s1, 0      # Store result of s1 >= 0 to predicate p1
li.p s2, 0, p1      # Assign 0 to s2 if p1 is true
sw.p s3, 0(s4), p1  # Store s3 to address 0(s4) if p1 is true
```
- Now there is no branch. It is just straight-line code!
  - Control dependencies have been converted to data dependencies



# Previous code with predication

- Now there are no branches!

```
if(s1 >= 0)
    s2 = 0;
```

```
pge    p1, 0, s1
li.p    s2, 0, p1
```

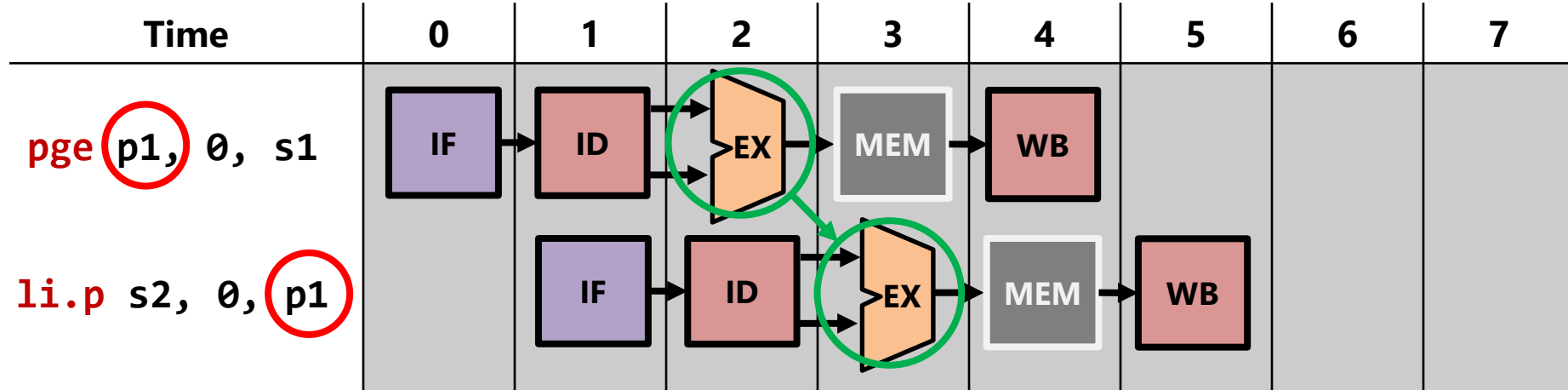
```
for(s0 = 0 .. 10)
    s3 = s3 + s0;
```

```
top:
    add    s3, s3, s0
    addi   s0, s0, 1
    blt    s0, 10, top
```

- Drawback: even if branch not taken, **li.p** fetched (acts like a bubble)
  - But often worth it for hard to predict branches!
  - For easy to predict branches, often not worth it.

# What does predication mean for the pipeline?

- Again, predicates are registers just like any other register
- Predicate dependencies work just like other data dependencies



- With data forwarding, no stalls required!

# Predication in the Real World

- Predication is only beneficial for hard to predict branches
- So how does the compiler figure out the hard to predict branches?
  - Through code analysis
  - Through software profiling (model a branch predictor)
- Supported in various ISAs
  - ARM allows most instructions to be predicated
  - Intel x86 has conditional move instructions (cmov)
  - SIMD architectures use predication in the form of a logical mask
    - Only data items that are not masked are updated
    - Intel AVX vector instructions
    - GPU instructions (e.g. CUDA)