Assembly Language: Function Calls

Goals of this Lecture

Help you learn:

- Function call problems
- AARCH64 solutions
  - Pertinent instructions and conventions

Function Call Problems

(1) Calling and returning

- How does caller function **jump** to callee function?
- How does callee function **jump back** to the right place in caller function?

(2) Passing arguments

- How does caller function pass **arguments** to callee function?

(3) Storing local variables

- Where does callee function store its **local variables**?

(4) Returning a value

- How does callee function send **return value** back to caller function?
- How does caller function access the **return value**?

(5) Optimization

- How do caller and callee function minimize memory access?

Running Example

```
long absadd(long a, long b)
{
   long absA, absB, sum;
   absA = labs(a);
   absB = labs(b);
   sum = absA + absB;
   return sum;
}
```

Calls standard C **`labs()`** function

- Returns absolute value of given **`long`**

Agenda

Calling and returning

Passing arguments

Storing local variables

Returning a value

Optimization

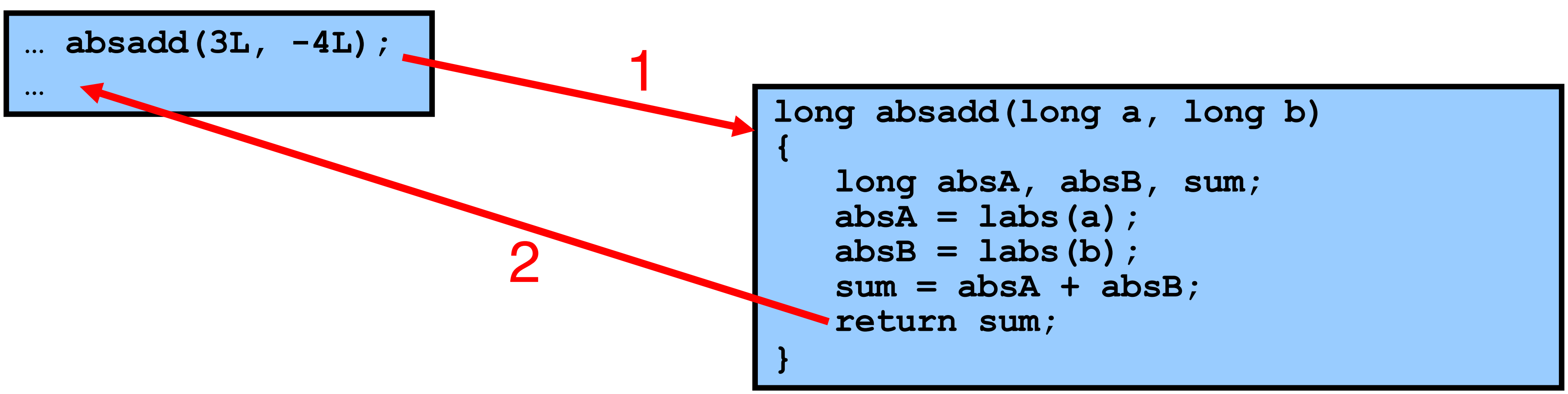
Problem 1: Calling and Returning

How does caller *jump* to callee?

- i.e., Jump to the address of the callee's first instruction

How does the callee *jump back* to the right place in caller?

- i.e., Jump to the instruction immediately following the most-recently-executed call instruction



Attempted Solution: `b` Instruction

Attempted solution: caller and callee use **`b`** (unconditional branch) instruction

```
f:
   …
   b g      # Call g
fReturnPoint:
   …
```

```
g:
   …
   b fReturnPoint      # Return
```

Attempted Solution: `b` Instruction

Problem: callee may be called by multiple callers

```
f1:

   …

   b g       # Call g

f1ReturnPoint:

   …
```

```
f2:

   …

   b g       # Call g

f2ReturnPoint:

   …
```

```
g:

   …

   b ???       # Return
```

Partial Solution: Use Register

`bl` (branch and link) instruction stores return point in X30

`ret` (return) instruction returns to address in X30

```
f1:
   bl g        # Call g
f1ReturnPoint:
   …
```

```
f2:
   bl g        # Call g
f2ReturnPoint:
   …
```

```
g:
   …
   ret        # Return
```

Correctly returns to either f1 or f2

Partial Solution: Use Register

Problem: Cannot handle nested function calls

```
f:
   bl g          # Call g
    ...
```

Problem if **f()** calls **g()**, and **g()** calls **h()**

Return address **g()** → **f()** is lost

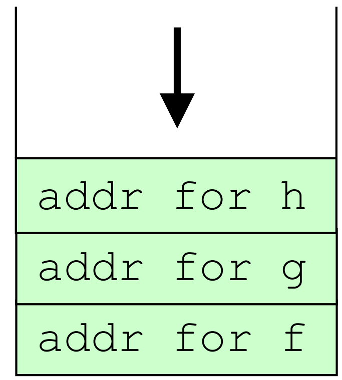
```
g:
   bl h          # Call h
   ...
   ret           # Return
```

```
h:
    ...
   ret           # Return
```

Rest of Solution: Use the Stack

Observations:

- May need to store many return addresses
  - The number of nested function calls is not known in advance
  - A return address must be saved for as long as the invocation of this function is live, and discarded thereafter
- Stored return addresses are destroyed in reverse order of creation
  - **`f()`** calls **`g()`** ⇒ return addr for **`g`** is stored
  - **`g()`** calls **`h()`** ⇒ return addr for **`h`** is stored
  - **`h()`** returns to **`g()`** ⇒ return addr for **`h`** is destroyed
  - **`g()`** returns to **`f()`** ⇒ return addr for **`g`** is destroyed
- LIFO data structure (stack) is appropriate



AARCH64 solution:

- Use the STACK section of memory, usually accessed via SP

Saving Link (Return) Addresses

Push X30 on stack when entering a function
Pop X30 from stack before returning from a function

```
f:
    // Save X30
    ...
    bl g   # Call g
    ...
    // Restore X30
    ret
```

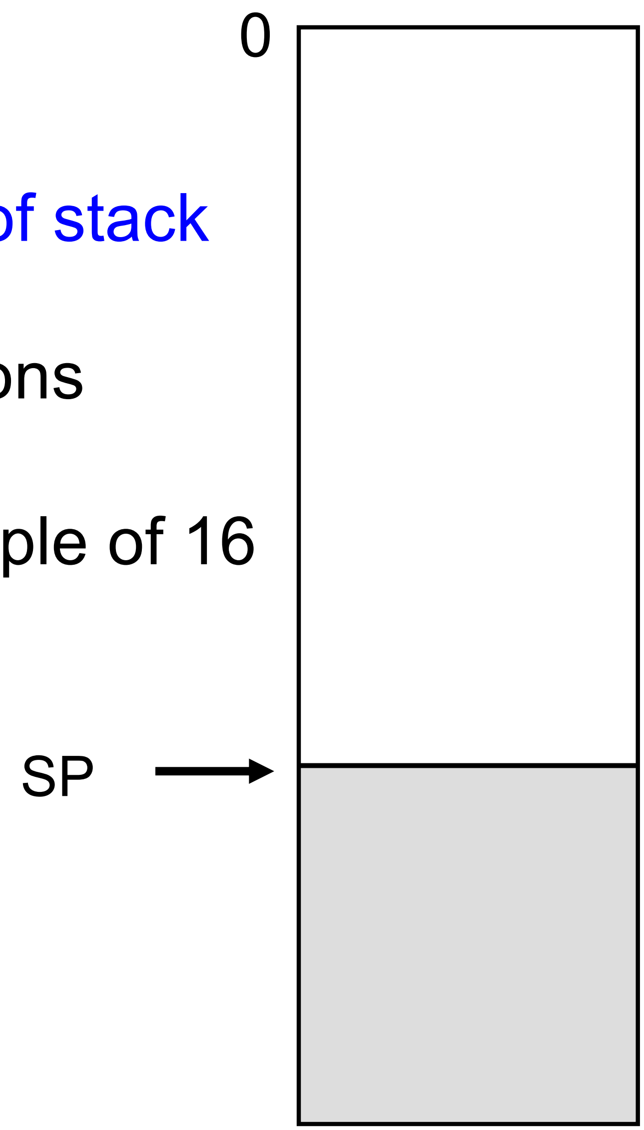
```
g:
    // Save X30
    ...
    bl h   # Call h
    ...
    // Restore X30
    ret
```

```
h:
    ...
    ret
```

Stack Operations

SP (stack pointer) register points to *top* of stack

- Can be used in **`ldr`** and **`str`** instructions
- Can be used in arithmetic instructions
- AARCH64 requirement: must be multiple of 16

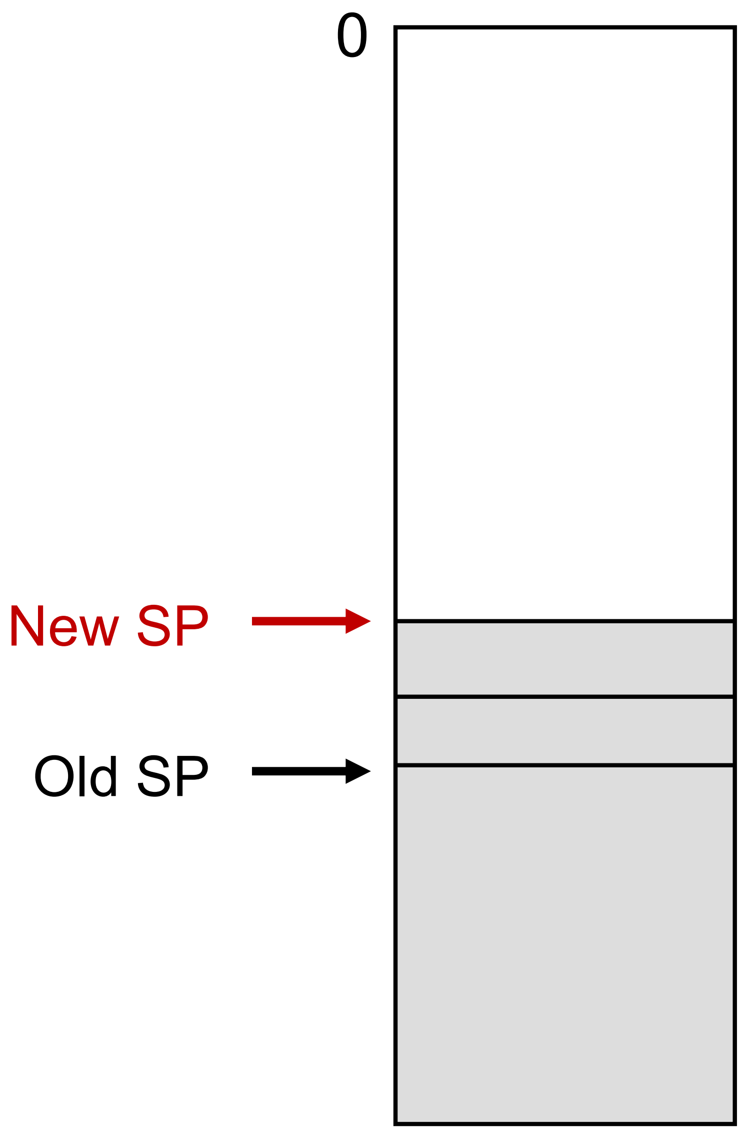


Stack Operations

To create a new *stack frame*:

- Decrement **`sp`**

```
sub sp, sp, 16
```

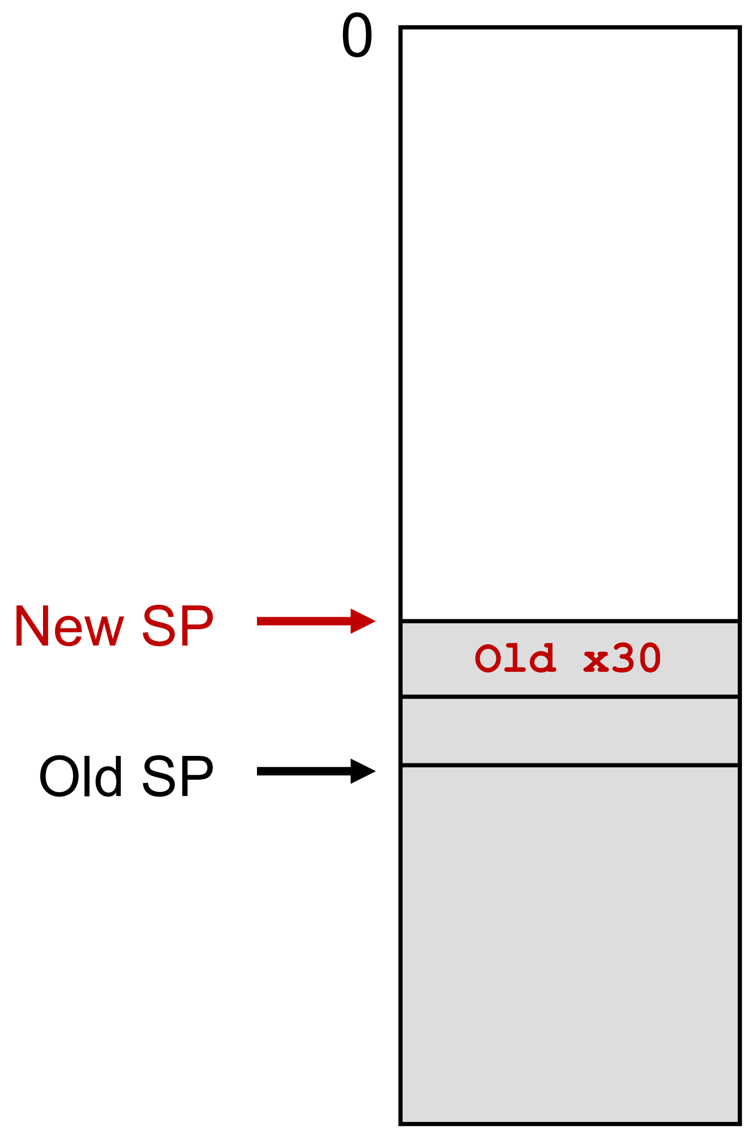


Stack Operations

To use the *stack frame*:

- Load/store *at* or *offset from* **sp**

```
str x30, [sp]
...
ldr x30, [sp]
```

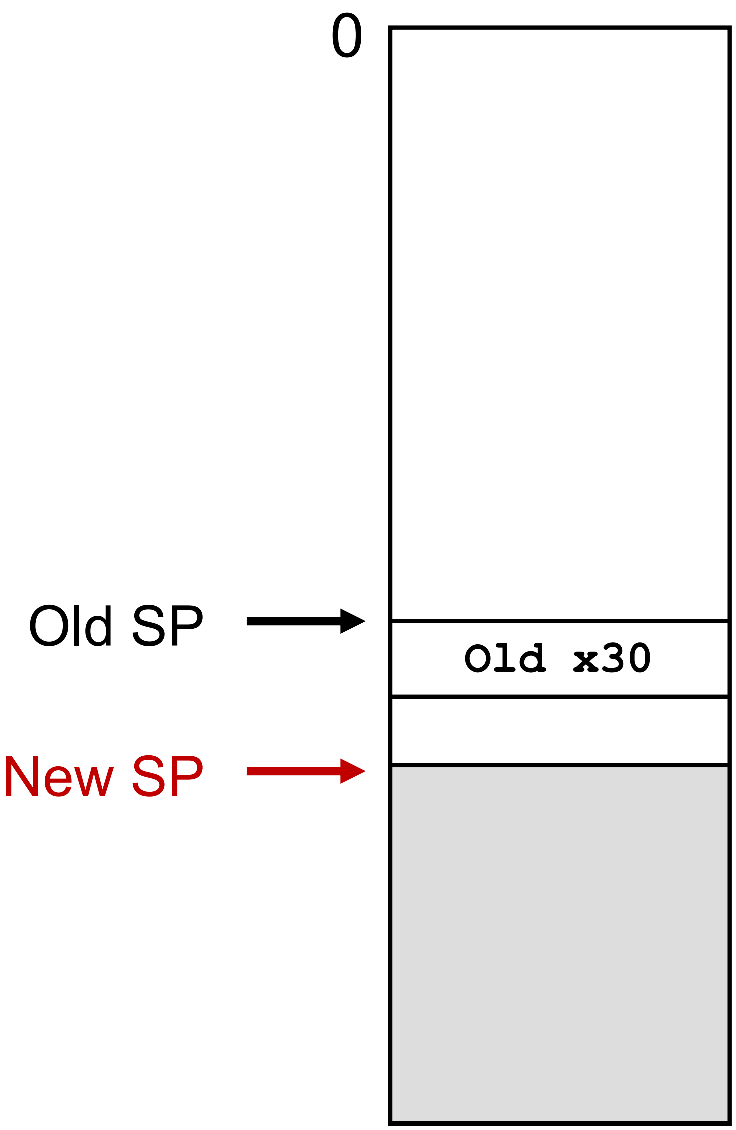


Stack Operations

To delete the *stack frame*:

- Increment **`sp`**

  `add sp, sp, 16`



Saving Link (Return) Addresses

Push X30 on stack when entering a function
Pop X30 from stack before returning from a function

```
f:
    // Save X30
    sub sp, sp, 16
    str x30, [sp]
    ...
    bl g   # Call g
    ...
    // Restore X30
    ldr x30, [sp]
    add sp, sp, 16
    ret
```

```
g:
    // Save X30
    sub sp, sp, 16
    str x30, [sp]
    ...
    bl h   # Call h
    ...
    // Restore X30
    ldr x30, [sp]
    add sp, sp, 16
    ret
```

```
h:
    ...
    ret
```

Running Example

```
// long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
    sub sp, sp, 16
    str x30, [sp]
    // long absA, absB, sum
    ...
    // absA = labs(a)
    ...
    bl labs
    ...
    // absB = labs(b)
    ...
    bl labs
    ...
    // sum = absA + absB
    ...
    // return sum
    ...
    ldr x30, [sp]
    add sp, sp, 16
    ret
```

Agenda

Calling and returning

Passing arguments

Storing local variables

Returning a value

Optimization

Problem 2: Passing Arguments

Problem:

- How does caller pass *arguments* to callee?
- How does callee accept *parameters* from caller?

```
long absadd(long a, long b)
{
   long absA, absB, sum;
   absA = labs(a);
   absB = labs(b);
   sum = absA + absB;
   return sum;
}
```

ARM Solution 1: Use the Stack

Observations (déjà vu):

- May need to store many arg sets
  - The number of arg sets is not known in advance
  - If this function calls any others, arg set *must be saved* for as long as the invocation of this function is live, and discarded thereafter
- Stored arg sets are destroyed in reverse order of creation
- LIFO data structure (stack) is appropriate

ARM Solution 2: Use Registers

AARCH64 solution:

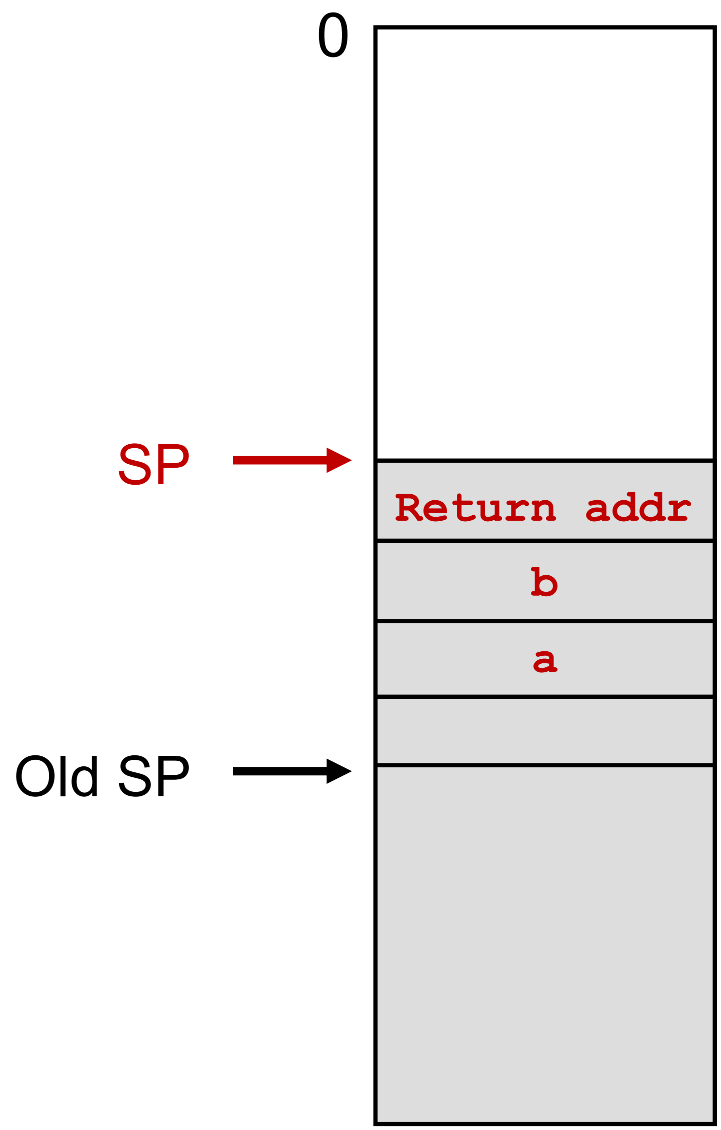
- Pass first 8 (integer or address) arguments in registers for efficiency
  - X0..X7 and/or W0..W7
- More than 8 arguments ⇒
  - Pass arguments 9, 10, … on the stack
  - (Beyond scope of COS 217)
- Arguments are structures ⇒
  - Pass arguments on the stack
  - (Beyond scope of COS 217)

Callee function then saves arguments to stack

- Or maybe not!
  - See “optimization” later this lecture
- Callee accesses arguments as positive offsets vs. SP

Running Example

```
// long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
   sub sp, sp, 32
   str x30, [sp]          // Save x30
   str x0, [sp, 16]       // Save a
   str x1, [sp, 8]        // Save b
   // long absA, absB, sum
   ...
   // absA = labs(a)
   ldr x0, [sp, 16]       // Load a
   bl labs
   ...
   // absB = labs(b)
   ldr x0, [sp, 8]        // Load b
   bl labs
   ...
   // sum = absA + absB
   ...
   // return sum
   ...
   ldr x30, [sp]          // Restore x30
   add sp, sp, 32
   ret
```



Agenda

Calling and returning

Passing arguments

Storing local variables

Returning a value

Optimization

Problem 3: Storing Local Variables

Where does callee function store its *local variables?*

```
long absadd(long a, long b)
{
   long absA, absB, sum;
   absA = labs(a);
   absB = labs(b);
   sum = absA + absB;
   return sum;
}
```

ARM Solution: Use the Stack

Observations (déjà vu again!):

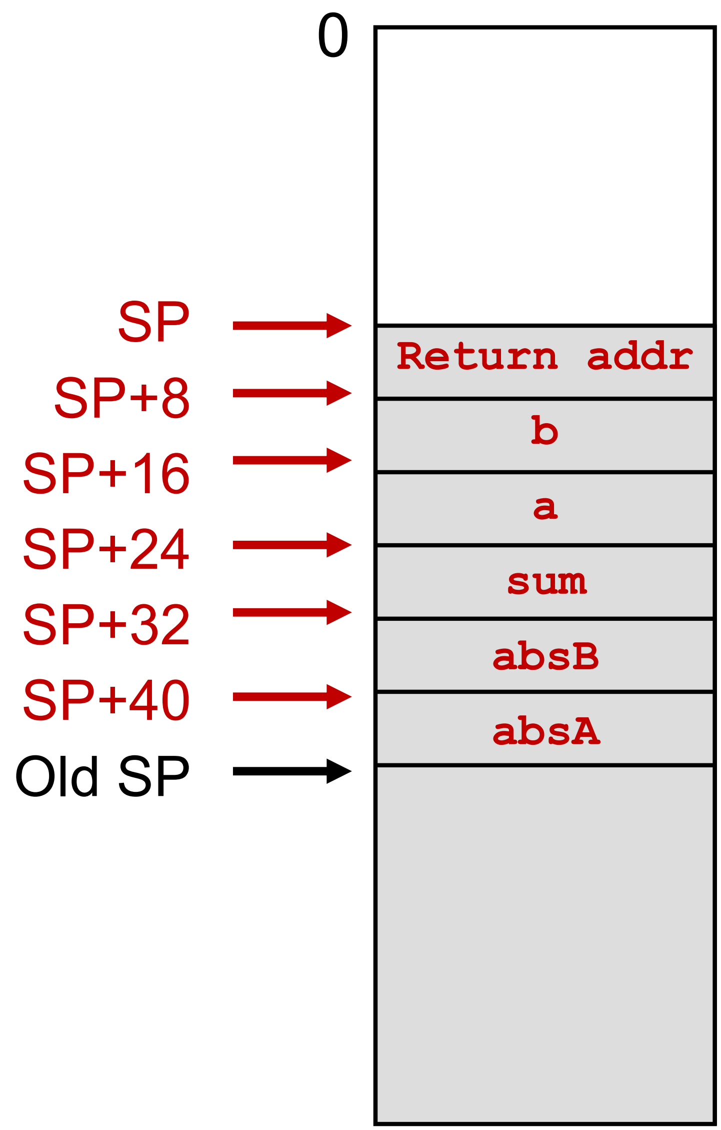
- May need to store many local var sets
  - The number of local var sets is not known in advance
  - Local var set must be saved for as long as the invocation of this function is live, and discarded thereafter
- Stored local var sets are destroyed in reverse order of creation
- LIFO data structure (stack) is appropriate

AARCH64 solution:

- Use the STACK section of memory
- Or maybe not!
  - See later this lecture

Running Example

```
// long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
   // long absA, absB, sum
   sub sp, sp, 48
   str x30, [sp]      // Save x30
   str x0, [sp, 16]   // Save a
   str x1, [sp, 8]    // Save b
   // absA = labs(a)
   ldr x0, [sp, 16]   // Load a
   bl labs
   ...
   // absB = labs(b)
   ldr x0, [sp, 8]    // Load b
   bl labs
   ...
   // sum = absA + absB
   ldr x0, [sp, 40]   // Load absA
   ldr x1, [sp, 32]   // Load absB
   add x0, x0, x1
   str x0, [sp, 24]   // Store sum
   // return sum
   ...
   ldr x30, [sp]      // Restore x30
   add sp, sp, 48
   ret
```



Agenda

Calling and returning

Passing arguments

Storing local variables

Returning a value

Optimization

Problem 4: Return Values

Problem:

- How does callee function send return value back to caller function?
- How does caller function access return value?

```
long absadd(long a, long b)
{
   long absA, absB, sum;
   absA = labs(a);
   absB = labs(b);
   sum = absA + absB;
   return sum;
}
```

ARM Solution: Use X0 / W0

In principle

- Store return value in stack frame of caller

Or, for efficiency

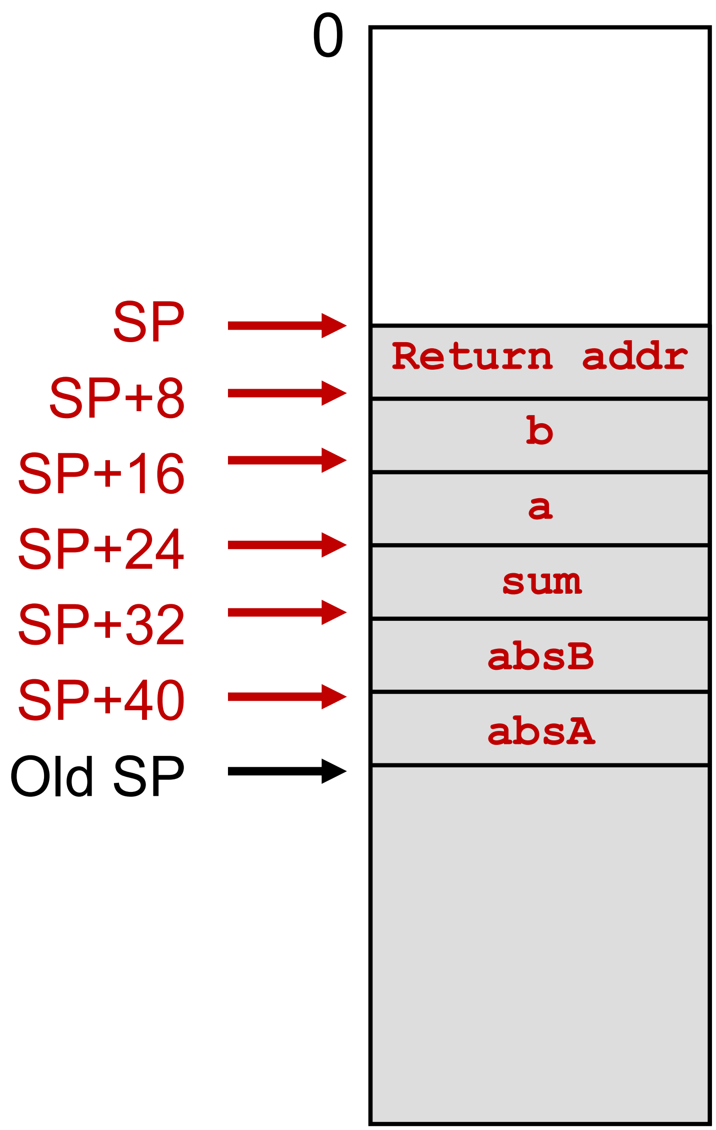
- Known small size ⇒ store return value in register
- Other ⇒ store return value in stack

AARCH64 convention

- Integer or address:
  - Store return value in X0 / W0
- Floating-point number:
  - Store return value in floating-point register
  - (Beyond scope of COS 217)
- Structure:
  - Store return value in memory pointed to by X8
  - (Beyond scope of COS 217)

Running Example

```
// long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
   // long absA, absB, sum
   sub sp, sp, 48
   str x30, [sp]      // Save x30
   str x0, [sp, 16]   // Save a
   str x1, [sp, 8]    // Save b
   // absA = labs(a)
   ldr x0, [sp, 16]   // Load a
   bl labs
   str x0, [sp, 40]   // Store absA
   // absB = labs(b)
   ldr x0, [sp, 8]    // Load b
   bl labs
   str x0, [sp, 32]   // Store absB
   // sum = absA + absB
   ldr x0, [sp, 40]   // Load absA
   ldr x1, [sp, 32]   // Load absB
   add x0, x0, x1
   str x0, [sp, 24]   // Store sum
   // return sum
   ldr x0, [sp, 24]   // Load sum
   ldr x30, [sp]      // Restore x30
   add sp, sp, 48
   ret
```



Agenda

Calling and returning

Passing arguments

Storing local variables

Returning a value

Optimization

Problem 5: Optimization

Observation: Accessing memory is expensive

- More expensive than accessing registers
- For efficiency, want to store parameters and local variables in registers (and not in memory) when possible

Observation: Registers are a finite resource

- In principle: Each function should have its own registers
- In reality: All functions share same small set of registers

Problem: How do caller and callee use same set of registers without interference?

- Callee may use register that the caller also is using
- When callee returns control to caller, old register contents may have been lost
- Caller function cannot continue where it left off

ARM Solution: Register Conventions

Callee-save registers

- X19..X29 (or W19..W29)
- Callee function ***must preserve*** contents
- If necessary…
  - Callee saves to stack near beginning
  - Callee restores from stack near end

Caller-save registers

- X8..X18 (or W8..W18) – plus parameters in X0..X7
- Callee function ***can change*** contents
- If necessary…
  - Caller saves to stack before call
  - Caller restores from stack after call

Running Example

Parameter handling in *unoptimized* version:

- **`absadd()`** accepts parameters (**`a`** and **`b`**) in X0 and X1
- At beginning, **`absadd()`** copies contents of X0 and X1 to stack
- Body of **`absadd()`** uses stack
- At end, **`absadd()`** pops parameters from stack

Parameter handling in *optimized* version:

- **`absadd()`** accepts parameters (**`a`** and **`b`**) in X0 and X1
- At beginning, copies contents of X0 and X1 to X19 and X20
- Body of **`absadd()`** uses X19 and X20
- Must be careful:
  - **`absadd()`** cannot change contents of X19 and X20
  - So **`absadd()`** must save X19 and X20 near beginning, and restore near end

Running Example

Local variable handling in *unoptimized* version:

- At beginning, **`absadd()`** allocates space for local variables (**`absA`**, **`absB`**, **`sum`**) on stack
- Body of **`absadd()`** uses stack
- At end, **`absadd()`** pops local variables from stack

Local variable handling in *optimized* version:

- **`absadd()`** keeps local variables in X21, X22, X23
- Body of **`absadd()`** uses X21, X22, X23
- Must be careful:
  - **`absadd()`** cannot change contents of X21, X22, or X23
  - So **`absadd()`** must save X21, X22, and X23 near beginning, and restore near end

Running Example

```
// long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
   // long absA, absB, sum
   sub sp, sp, 48
   str x30, [sp]      // Save x30
   str x19, [sp, 8]   // Save x19, use for a
   str x20, [sp, 16]  // Save x20, use for b
   str x21, [sp, 24]  // Save x21, use for absA
   str x22, [sp, 32]  // Save x22, use for absB
   str x23, [sp, 40]  // Save x23, use for sum
   mov x19, x0        // Store a in x19
   mov x20, x1        // Store b in x20
   // absA = labs(a)
   mov x0, x19        // Load a
   bl labs
   mov x21, x0        // Save absA
   // absB = labs(b)
   mov x0, x20        // Load b
   bl labs
   mov x22, x0        // Store absB
   // sum = absA + absB
   add x23, x21, x22
   // return sum
   mov x0, x23        // Load sum
   ldr x30, [sp]      // Restore x30
   ldr x19, [sp, 8]   // Restore x19
   ldr x20, [sp, 16]  // Restore x20
   ldr x21, [sp, 24]  // Restore x21
   ldr x22, [sp, 32]  // Restore x22
   ldr x23, [sp, 40]  // Restore x22
   add sp, sp, 48
   ret
```

`absadd()` stores parameters and local vars in X19..X23, not in memory

`absadd()` cannot destroy contents of X19..X23

So **`absadd()`** must save X19..X23 near beginning and restore near end

Eliminating Redundant Copies

```
// long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
   // long absA, absB, sum
   sub sp, sp, 32
   str x30, [sp]      // Save x30
   str x19, [sp, 8]   // Save x19, use for b
   str x20, [sp, 16]  // Save x20, use for absA
   mov x19, x1        // Store b in x19
   // absA = labs(a)
   bl labs            // a already in x0
   mov x20, x0        // Save absA
   // absB = labs(b)
   mov x0, x19        // Load b
   bl labs
   // sum = absA + absB
   add x0, x20, x0    // x0 held absB, now holds sum
   // return sum - already in x0
   ldr x30, [sp]      // Restore x30
   ldr x19, [sp, 8]   // Restore x19
   ldr x20, [sp, 16]  // Restore x20
   add sp, sp, 32
   ret
```

Further optimization: remove redundant moves between registers

- “Hybrid” pattern that uses both caller- and callee-saved registers
- Can be confusing: no longer systematic mapping between variables and registers
- Attempt only *after* you have working code!
- Save working versions for easy comparison!

Non-Optimized vs. Optimized Patterns

Unoptimized pattern

- Parameters and local variables strictly in memory (stack) during function execution
- **Pro**: Always possible
- **Con**: Inefficient
- gcc compiler uses when invoked *without* –O option

Optimized pattern

- Parameters and local variables mostly in registers during function execution
- **Pro**: Efficient
- **Con**: Sometimes impossible
  - Too many local variables
  - Local variable is a structure or array
  - Function computes address of parameter or local variable
- gcc compiler uses when invoked *with* –O option, when it can!

Writing Readable Code

```
// long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
    // long absA, absB, sum
    sub sp, sp, 48
    str x30, [sp]
    str x19, [sp, 8]
    str x20, [sp, 16]
    str x21, [sp, 24]
    str x22, [sp, 32]
    str x23, [sp, 40]
    mov x19, x0
    mov x20, x1
    // absA = labs(a)
    mov x0, x19        // Load a
    bl labs
    mov x21, x0        // Save absA
    // absB = labs(b)
    mov x0, x20        // Load b
    bl labs
    mov x22, x0        // Store absB
    // sum = absA + absB
    add x23, x21, x22
    // return sum
    mov x0, x23        // Load sum
    ldr x30, [sp]      // Restore x30
    ldr x19, [sp, 8]   // Restore x19
    ldr x20, [sp, 16]  // Restore x20
    ldr x21, [sp, 24]  // Restore x21
    ldr x22, [sp, 32]  // Restore x22
    ldr x23, [sp, 40]  // Restore x22
    add sp, sp, 48
    ret
```

Problem

- Hardcoded sizes, offsets, registers are difficult to read, understand, debug

Writing Readable Code

```
    // Stack frame size in bytes
    .equ STACKSIZE, 48
    // Registers for parameters
    a     .req x19
    b     .req x20
    // Registers for local variables
    absA  .req x21
    absB  .req x22
    sum   .req x23

// long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
    // long absA, absB, sum
    sub sp, sp, STACKSIZE
    str x30, [sp]      // Save x30
    str x19, [sp, 8]   // Save x19
    str x20, [sp, 16]  // Save x20
    str x21, [sp, 24]  // Save x21
    str x22, [sp, 32]  // Save x22
    str x23, [sp, 40]  // Save x23
    mov a, x0          // Store a in x19
    mov b, x1          // Store b in x20

    ...
```

Problem

- Hardcoded sizes, offsets, registers are difficult to read, understand, debug

Using .equ and .req

- To define a symbolic name for a constant:
  .equ SOMENAME, nnn
- To define a symbolic name for a register (e.g. what variable it holds):
  SOMENAME .req Xnn

Writing Readable Code

```
...

// absA = labs(a)
mov x0, a
bl labs
mov absA, x0
// absB = labs(b)
mov x0, b
bl labs
mov absB, x0
// sum = absA + absB
add sum, absA, absB
// return sum
mov x0, sum
ldr x30, [sp]     // Restore x30
ldr x19, [sp, 8]  // Restore x19
ldr x20, [sp, 16] // Restore x20
ldr x21, [sp, 24] // Restore x21
ldr x22, [sp, 32] // Restore x22
ldr x23, [sp, 40] // Restore x23
add sp, sp, STACKSIZE
ret
```

Problem

- Hardcoded sizes, offsets, registers are difficult to read, understand, debug

Using .equ and .req

- To define a symbolic name for a constant:
  `.equ SOMENAME, nnn`
- To define a symbolic name for a register (e.g. what variable it holds):
  `SOMENAME .req Xnn`

Summary

Function calls in AARCH64 assembly language

Calling and returning

- **`bl`** instruction saves return address in X30 and jumps
- **`ret`** instruction jumps back to address in X30

Passing arguments

- Caller copies args to caller-saved registers (in prescribed order)
- Unoptimized pattern:
  - Callee pushes args to stack
  - Callee uses args as positive offsets from SP
  - Callee pops args from stack
- Optimized pattern:
  - Callee keeps args in caller-saved registers
  - Be careful!

Summary (cont.)

Storing local variables

- Unoptimized pattern:
  - Callee pushes local vars onto stack
  - Callee uses local vars as positive offsets from SP
  - Callee pops local vars from stack
- Optimized pattern:
  - Callee keeps local vars in callee-saved registers

Returning values

- Callee places return value in X0
- Caller accesses return value in X0