

US military academies investigating use of “white power” hand gesture during annual Army-Navy football game

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Officials at both US military academies are investigating the use of a “white power” hand gesture associated with white supremacists by Army cadets and Navy midshipmen during the ESPN broadcast of the annual football game between the two officer schools last Saturday.

The hand symbol—which looks exactly like the “O.K.” sign held upside down, where the thumb and forefinger make an “O” and the three remaining fingers are extended—was flashed at least five times in the stands directly behind ESPN sports anchor Rece Davis on the sideline during the nationally televised “College Game Day” program.

Lt. Gen. Darryl Williams, 60th superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy issued a statement that said, “I have appointed an Investigating Officer according to Army Regulation 15-6, to conduct an administrative investigation into the facts, circumstances, and intent of the Cadets in question. The United States Military Academy is fully committed to developing leaders of character who embody the Army Values.”

Meanwhile, a spokesperson for the Naval Academy told the *Washington Post*, “US Naval Academy officials have appointed a preliminary inquiry officer to conduct an internal investigation into the hand gestures made during the ESPN ‘College GameDay’ broadcast prior to [Saturday’s] Army-Navy game. Based on findings of the investigation, those involved will be held appropriately accountable. It would be inappropriate to speculate any further while we are conducting this investigation.”

Although the gesture has multiple meanings, it was identified last September by the Anti-Defamation League as a hate symbol. According to a report in the

New York Times, the use of the gesture began as a hoax by a group of users on the anonymous 4chan online message board called “Operation O-KKK.” The aim was to see if they could trick “liberals and the mainstream media” into believing that the gesture was a clandestine symbol of white power.

Then, the *Times* writes, “Neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klansmen and other white nationalists began using the gesture in public to signal their presence and to spot potential sympathizers and recruits. For them, the letters formed by the hand were not O and K, but W and P, for ‘white power.’”

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors the activity of far-right “hate groups,” has said that neo-Nazis and Klansmen “have increasingly begun using the symbol both to signal their presence to the like-minded, as well as to identify potentially sympathetic recruits among young trolling artists flashing it.”

Representatives of the far right, including the former Breitbart editor Milo Yiannopoulos and Richard Spencer, an organizer of the Neo-Nazi rampage through Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, have embraced the gesture’s racist connotation. The white supremacist mass shooter Brenton Tarrant, who killed 51 people and injured 49 others at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand last March, flashed the hand sign to reporters during a court appearance.

In September 2018, a US Coast Guard officer was reprimanded for using a similar hand sign during a live broadcast on MSNBC. As in the present case, the official response of military brass made no reference to the connection between the hand signal and neo-Nazis, white power or fascism.

President Donald Trump, who praised the white

supremacists who rampaged in Charlottesville as good people, has actively appealed to his far-right and fascist base by pardoning convicted war criminals. First Lieutenant Clint Lorange and Major Mathew Golsteyn, both convicted of killing civilians in Afghanistan and pardoned by the president in November, were invited on stage by Trump during a fundraiser earlier this month in Florida.

The likely open use of the white power symbol by Army and Navy cadets is an indication of the growth of fascist elements within the US military. There have been a series of recent incidents, including the presence of an American neo-Nazi organization operating freely within the US military, showing the growth of racist and anti-Semitic tendencies within all branches of the armed services.



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