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MEMBER FEATURE STORY

# Does the OK Sign Actually Signify "White Power," or What?

The answer is neither simple nor straightforward, which is why it's such an effective trolling tactic

Emily Pothast Follow
Sep 5 · ★ 7 min read

When held to the chest with the thumb on top, the OK sign also means "asshole" in American Sign Language. Its ambiguity is precisely why it's so useful. Credit: Adan Perez/EyeEm/Getty Images

When held to the chest with the thumb on top, the OK sign also means "asshole" in American Sign Language. Its ambiguity is precisely why it's so useful. Credit: Adan Perez/EyeEm/Getty Images

1K

Last April, as you might recall, Kanye West had a bit of a media moment during which he tweeted a photograph of himself wearing a MAGA hat, prompting predictable outrage. (Recently, he issued an apology.)

The photo from Kanye's viral tweet from April 25, 2018.

What does it mean for Kanye, who once sparked a very different sort of media moment by announcing on live television that "George Bush doesn't care about Black people" to appear in a photograph in a MAGA hat with some guy—namely music industry executive Lyor Cohen (more about him later)—flashing the OK gesture?

Well, it's complicated, which is what prompted Nick Douglas to write this post for *Lifehacker* back when it happened. To help explain why some people thought that flashing the OK sign in this photo was such a big deal, Douglas dug into the history of this hand sign as a meme:

> *Some time around 2015, the OK sign became popular among Trump supporters. Know Your Meme gives a meticulous history, showing its use by figures like Mike Cernovich (a brain-pill salesman who believes Hillary Clinton ran a pedophile ring out of a pizza shop) and Milo Yiannopoulos (who swears he's not a neo-Nazi but surrounds himself with neo-Nazis). Both of these men famously thrive on publicity and controversy, which explains a lot of what happened next.*

The "what happened next" is that people started associating the hand sign with white supremacy, and not unreasonably. As Douglas points out, on election night back in 2016, open white supremacist Richard Spencer tweeted a photo of himself flashing the OK sign in front of a Trump International Hotel with the caption "Tonight's the night."

**Richard Spencer**
@RichardBSpencer

Tonight's the night.

11:29 PM - Nov 8, 2016

230 90 people are talking about this

Several months later, an anonymous post appeared on 4chan detailing "OPERATION O-KKK," the intentional use of the OK sign as an ironic meme designed to "force" leftists to dig themselves deeper into "lunacy," "until the rest of society ain't going anywhere near that shit."

File: IMG_2263.jpg (75 KB, 1073x531)

INTRODUCING: OPERATION O-KKK Anonymous (ID: GqQuAU8x)
02/27/17(Mon)03:32:18 No.114482325 ▶ >>114482375 >>114482572 >>114483103
>>114483235 >>114483753 >>114483969 >>114484471 >>114485569 >>114485688
>>114485751 >>114486015 >>114486043 >>114486249 >>114486520 >>114488048
>>114488197 >>114489614 >>114489933 >>114490057 >>114490153 >>114491182
>>114492623 >>114492860 >>114492995 >>114493101 >>114493153 >>114493173
>>114493296 >>114493406 >>114493456 >>114493554 >>114493725 >>114493753
>>114493814 >>114494238 >>114494627

We must flood twitter and other social media websites with spam, claiming that the OK hand sign is a symbol of white supremacy. Make fake accounts with basic white girl names and type shit like: OMG that's so truuuuu

Use as many emojis as you please. It would also be good for us to associate the OK sign being a symbol of white supremacy because Mel Gibson used it.

Use the hashtag "#PowerHandPrivilege" in all of your tweets and whatnot related to this.

Bonus points if your profile pic is something related to supporting feminism.

Leftists have dug so deep down into their lunacy. We must force to dig more, until the rest of society ain't going anywhere near that shit.

But of course, by the time this post was made in February 2017, the OK sign was well established as a far-right meme. The 4chan post is therefore evidence not of the creation of a hoax *ex nihilo*, but an instance of obfuscation, generating confusion over the origins of a preexisting phenomenon. Perhaps the only thing about this post that can be taken at face value is its intention, which is most certainly to bait leftists into acting "crazy" so that liberals and centrists will keep their distance. (More about that later.)

The 4chan post was picked up by the Anti-Defamation League, which apparently took it at face value, completely missing the years-long context of the OK sign which had already been established. The ADL published a post declaring the whole thing a hoax which has since been widely cited as evidence that crazy leftists are just seeing things when they point out far-right uses of the meme.

In September 2017, philosophy scholar and YouTube star Natalie Wynn, aka ContraPoints, made this excellent, informative video about tactics used by the alt-right. The whole video is well worth a watch, but the part about the

OK sign starts at about 10:10:

> *Nazis have always taken an interest in occult symbols, like the black sun, or the swastika. But more obscure symbols can be useful as a kind of secret handshake that lets Nazis recognize each other without normies taking notice. The best symbols to use for this purpose are ones that are not primarily associated with fascism, or at least have some other meaning, such as the othala rune, or the iron cross. Better still are symbols that, until adoption by fascists, are completely innocuous. Modern fascists have taken to using almost arbitrary emoji as a way to wink and nod at each other, notably the frog, after Pepe, the milk, and the OK sign.*

"Another advantage of using innocuous symbols," Wynn continues, "is that when leftists try to point those symbols out, the fascists can always say, 'These gullible SJWs now think that even the OK sign is racist. Is there anything they *don't* think is racist?'"

Without a doubt, the plausible deniability is a huge part of why these symbols are used in the first place. After the image of Kanye in the MAGA hat went viral, Lyor Cohen denied that his hand gesture in the photo had anything to do with the hat. For him, the gesture represents his media management company 300 Entertainment, and indeed, there seems to be evidence of him doing the hand sign in other, more innocuous circumstances. After all, there's nothing about this gesture which makes it *necessarily* indicative of anything. This is why it's such a slippery tactic when employed by Trump supporters and members of the alt-right.

Nevertheless, the dynamic described in the ContraPoints video has played itself out many times since it was posted a year ago, and each time has gone almost precisely as scripted. When White House intern Jack Breuer was photographed making the OK sign in his class photo, his response was that he was simply copying the president, who often touches his thumb to his index finger for emphasis while speaking.

**Aaron Prescott**
@ACoolHandFluke

Supposedly this White House intern is flashing a White Power symbol. But are we more shocked that there are racists in the White House or that even the ghost of George Washington is pointing them out.

3:05 PM - Dec 29, 2017

855 389 people are talking about this

Breuer's "apology" includes something else that has become common in far-right defenses of the OK sign: the invocation of his own Jewish heritage as evidence that he cannot possibly be a white supremacist—as if Stephen Miller, one of the principal architects of Trump's border separation policy, did not also have Jewish heritage. (Make no mistake: Jewish and non-white people who are willing to sell out immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and Black Lives Matter activists are not only welcome in many of today's far-right movements, they are prized for their ability to legitimize those movements by giving them more mainstream appeal.)

Speaking of Stephen Miller, he has also been photographed with his hands in an OK sign, most notably in this photo, which some observers thought resembled the "white power" hand signs thrown up by members of actual white supremacist gangs.

**Stacy Friday**
@stacy_friday

Replying to @KassandraSeven
Stephen Miller flashed the "OK" White Power symbol from the White House last spring. Also shown, variations of the symbol from gang members.
10:06 PM - Aug 11, 2017
10 29 people are talking about this

Not surprisingly, the reaction to this photo was swiftly dubbed a “fake news freakout” by far-right and mainstream sources alike. Even Snopes answers the question “Did Stephen Miller Throw a White Power Sign?” with FALSE, citing the Anti-Defamation League’s post that traces the origin of the OK sign meme to the 4chan hoax, completely missing its history prior to February 2017.

(But did we really need a hand sign to clue us in that the man behind Trump’s family separation policy is a white supremacist?)

Which brings us to yesterday, when a Trump White House advisor named Zina Bash appeared to hold her hand in an OK sign for what looked like an uncomfortably long time just behind Brett Kavanaugh at his confirmation hearing.

As soon as people on social media began pointing it out, Bash’s husband went on the offensive, tweeting that “Everyone tweeting this vicious conspiracy theory should be ashamed of themselves.” Like Jack Breuer, John Bash quickly offered his wife’s Jewish-Mexican heritage as evidence that she could not possibly be involved in hate politics.

Except that we already know that Zina Bash is active in the Trump administration, and this is perhaps where the stunt was most effective. Instead of acknowledging her *actual* politics—working for possibly the most overtly racist administration since Americans literally owned other Americans—leftists, liberals, and centrists got caught up in a circle jerk about whether a hand sign that members of the far right have been using to troll us since at least 2015 has any significance.

As if on cue, headlines from far-right and “mainstream media” alike arrived to declare that the whole thing had been a hoax; a cruel attempt by leftist lunatics to discredit Zina Bash, and by extension, Kavanaugh. *Breitbart*

declared, "Deranged left-wing activists and anti-Trump agitators falsely accused Zina Bash, the woman of Mexican-Jewish descent who was seated behind Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh during Tuesday's Senate confirmation hearings, of making a 'white power sign.'"

Meanwhile, *Time*'s headline reads: "A Kavanaugh Supporter Was Accused of Making a White Power Symbol. She's a Descendent of Holocaust Survivors." Once again, their article cites that post from the Anti-Defamation League as evidence that there's simply nothing to see here.

So is the OK sign a white supremacist symbol or not? By now, I hope it's crystal clear that its ambiguity is precisely why it's such an effective trolling tactic. (For more on the role of ambiguity as a trolling tactic, here's a post I wrote about alt-right aesthetics in the wake of Charlottesville.)

When successful, this kind of trolling makes otherwise credible journalists and public intellectuals look like buffoons, either by overreacting to an ambiguous stimulus or by missing the whole context of the gesture, as *Time* and other outlets appear to have done.

**Amanda Marcotte**
@AmandaMarcotte

Part of the problem is that if, hypothetically, someone flashed white supremacist symbols at the camera, the point of the stunt would be to get liberals wound up, so they can then claim that liberals are just imagining things.

8:49 PM - Sep 4, 2018

477 170 people are talking about this

**Amanda Marcotte**
@AmandaMarcotte

Replying to @AmandaMarcotte

That was what the OK symbol was literally invented to do: Both serve at a white supremacist symbol and also one that is just ordinary-enough looking that when liberals expressed outrage, the white supremacist could play the victim of liberal hysteria.

8:50 PM - Sep 4, 2018

313 87 people are talking about this

The point of this exercise may very well have been to get the people who noticed it to freak out, and then get everyone else to paint them as crazy—and to mistrust both our own judgment as well as the judgment of those we rely on for information. By that measure, it was a success, and ultimately that success is what prompted me writing this. I wanted to put all of this information in one place so that it can be easily accessed by people who haven't necessarily been following the alt-right memiverse so that we can all make more informed moves when it comes to stunts like these in the future.

But ultimately, none of us needed a hand sign to tell us that a woman who reportedly helped Stephen Miller draw up Trump's immigration policy is a danger to vulnerable people. This is precisely why we must continue to view any attempts to paint members of the far-right as innocent victims with a healthy dose of skepticism.

**The Daily Caller**
@DailyCaller

The woman who sat behind Brett Kavanaugh, Zina Bash, is the victim of a vicious liberal smear campaign
dailycaller.com/2018/09/04/zin…

10:16 PM - Sep 4, 2018

**Liberals Accuse Woman Sitting Behind Kavanaugh Of Being …**
This is scary stuff
dailycaller.com

4,082 2,439 people are talking about this

**m i t h**
@ManInTheHoody

zina bash is either a white supremacist because she threw the white power sign or she is a white supremacist because she has devoted her life to working for people that are pushing white supremacist agendas. take your pick.

or both.

10:24 PM - Sep 4, 2018

12.5K 3,380 people are talking about this

. . .

**UPDATE:** Since this post was published, she did it again. Is she trolling, or was it an innocent gesture? Once again, it's impossible to know. But if she were, the fact that it's impossible to know one way or another is part of the point.

1K

WRITTEN BY

**Emily Pothast**

Artist, curator, critic, and historian whose research-based, interdisciplinary practice is informed by the reciprocal influence of media, politics, and belief.

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