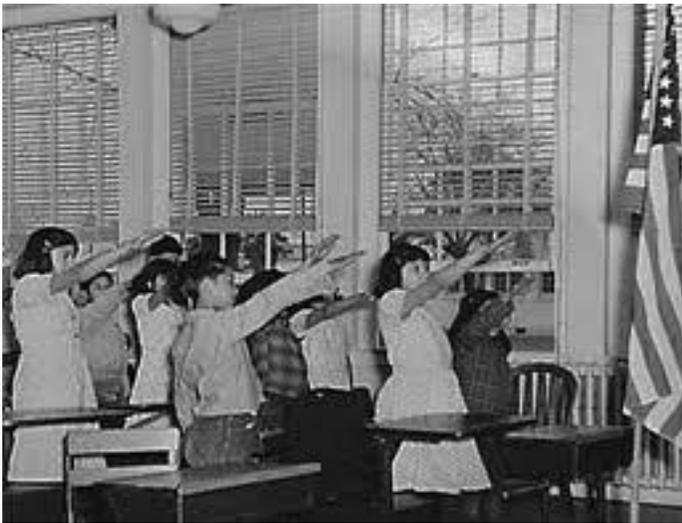


The “Nazi Salute”

I was recently finishing up writing a magazine article on the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and came across a photo of the Imperial Wizard of the organization giving what appeared to be a left-handed Nazi salute, or at least that was my interpretation. The philosophies of the Klan and the German National Socialist Party of the 1920s and 1930s had a lot in common, so I thought it would be appropriate to say a few things about the correlation. The seemingly common use of a fascist salute might be a good place to start. What I found both surprised me, and revealed the depth of my ignorance about American history.



Americans rarely salute. Historically, we are not a militaristic society, reserving overt displays of patriotism for times of national crisis and war. In our daily lives we tend to limit our salutes to the playing of the national anthem or during the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. To my amazement, I discovered that up until the late 1930s, the standard and accepted way of saluting the American flag was what we now refer to as the “Nazi Salute,” the right arm extended upward and outward.

The Pledge of Allegiance was written by Francis Bellamy in 1892. It was originally published that year in a children’s magazine, *The Youth’s Companion*, accompanied by instructions that the right arm be extended, palm upward, toward the flag during the recitation of the pledge. The gesture soon became known as the “Bellamy salute,” and became the standard way of addressing the flag over the following decades. It was incorporated in The National Flag Code in 1923, which in turn was voted into Federal law in June 1942 during the early days of World War II.

Meanwhile in Europe, the Italian Fascists had adopted the so-called “Roman salute,” exactly equivalent to Bellamy’s. In the early 1920s, German National Socialists – the Nazis – embraced it, making its use in certain situations a compulsory part of daily life after they came to power in 1933. During the turbulent years of the 1930s, the Bellamy salute remained in common use in the United States while becoming increasingly associated with the militarism and oppression of Hitler’s Germany.

In December 1942, some seven months after making the Bellamy – and now Nazi – salute a part of the law, Congress modified its language to make the hand-over-the-heart gesture the prescribed form of addressing the flag during the Pledge of Allegiance. So it remains today. In Germany and other parts of the former Third Reich, the raised hand salute has been illegal and its use can result in imprisonment.