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Examining The Thin Blue Line

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By Bryan Lutz and Carson Babbit

Examining The Thin Blue Line by Professor Bryan Lutz and Carson Babbit

The Thin Blue Line (TBL) is a symbol defining police as a metaphorical line of protection between order and chaos. This sentiment has been [echoed in politics](#) as well as [popular media](#). But in 2014, [the TBL became embedded within the American Flag](#). This flag (TBLF) has been controversial as many have viewed it as a repudiation of Black Lives Matter protests. The debate has largely centered on whether it serves as an expression of respect for police or as a hate symbol.

What is a “Hate Symbol”?

Hate symbols are a subset of hate speech. [Hate speech is](#) speech, writing, or nonverbal communication that attacks, threatens, or insults marginalized persons or groups generally based on national origin, ethnicity, color, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability.

Defining a hate symbol can be difficult because hate symbols can be an appropriation of religious or cultural symbols. A swastika hanging from a set of bamboo prayer beads is an adornment symbolizing good luck and fortune in Buddhism, but a swastika embedded in a white and red flag indisputably symbolizes the Nazi Party. Symbols, like languages, derive their meanings from context, and context involves variables such as time, place, and location, along with connections to other symbols, language, and acts.

Two prominent databases exist classifying hate speech and hate groups in the US. [The Southern Poverty Law Center’s \(SPLC\) Fighting Hate campaign](#) keeps a database of long-tenured hate groups like the Klu Klux Klan as well as newly emergent extremist groups like the Oath Keepers. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) classifies hate groups and keeps [a database of hate symbols entitled Hate on Display™](#) for use by scholars, activists, and law enforcement.

Hate symbols like the Nazi emblem are widely accepted, but classifying new hate symbols can stir controversy. The ADL drew criticism when they [classified the “Okay” hand gesture as a hate symbol](#). This gesture is used for the benign purpose of signaling a temperate mood, but the ADL determined that the sign too often collocates with other known white supremacists slogans and phrases within online spheres such as 4Chan and Reddit. This does not mean that any random use of the Okay Sign constitutes hate speech. However, when the image collocates with other acts of speech, writing, or nonverbal communication associated with hate speech and hate groups, the likelihood of its nefarious meaning is significant.

What is the Thin Blue Line and The Thin Blue Line Flag?

In the book *Law Talk*, [Clapp, Thornburg, Galanter, and Shapiro](#) show how the TBL in the US began as a European import from the Crimean War, where the “thin red line” of Scottish Infantry Forces defended the border and handed an unlikely defeat to Russian forces. In 1922, New York police commissioner Richard Enright changed the color of the phrase from red to blue as part of a PR campaign to rebrand the police as a line of defense against illegal alcohol use, sex work, and gambling. Later, the TBL [was adopted by US Police in the 1950s](#) by Los Angeles Police Officer Bill Parker as part of his campaign for police reform.

The TBLF was invented by Andrew Jacob, who then sold the merchandise under an endorsement of policing. After creating the TBLF, Andrew Jacob would go on to create ThinBlueLineUSA in 2016, an online retailer of the TBLF and related merchandise. Retailers across the world now sell variations of the image. No less than 32 such retailers have been created since 2014. The creation of TBLF coincided with Black Lives Matter protests in response to the killing of Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner. The TBLF would later appear at the [Charlottesville Rally](#), which involved multiple white supremacist figures and organizations before being broken up after a white supremacist car attack led to the death of counter-protester Heather Heyer.

How is the Thin Blue Line Flag Used and What Might it Mean?

There are three ways that the TBL is used.

Tier 1: Police Intended Use

First, some use the TBL as a symbol of mourning for fallen police officers. As of 2018, the [Mesa, Arizona's Police](#) Department specifies a blue or black line across the shield in its mourning protocols; [Seattle's Police Department's mourning protocols](#) also require either black or blue bands as of 2020. But use of the TBL is not prolific. Many police departments specify a black band only, such as police forces in [Columbus](#) and [Cleveland](#), OH, or the [Lexington, KY Police Force](#), or the [El Cerrito Police Department in California](#). [The non-profit Officer Down Memorial page](#), a non-profit dedicated to data gathering on police deaths in the US, states that a black band is appropriate for mourning, but the blue band is not.

Tier 2: Retailer Use

Second, The TBL has become big business. Andrew Jacob runs the retailer ThinBlueLineUSA which sells TBLF and related merchandise. No less than 32 such retailers have been created since 2014 spanning more general e-commerce retailers such as Etsy and proprietary retailers with names like Thin Blue Line Shop and Blue Line Beats. This merchandise is highly politicized and its popularity directly [correlates with the BLM movement and the Trump presidency](#). While not inherently harmful, the proliferation of the TBLF makes the symbol available for unintended uses.

Tier 3: Hate Group Use

Third, where TBLF exists in retail spaces, it sometimes collocates with other symbols used by hate groups. For example, [The SPLC has chronicled](#) how the extremist group The Oath

Keepers founded “Spartan Training programs” for the purpose of violent intervention against politically left groups that have no documented history of violence. Several journalists have photographed Oath Keepers wearing [spartan helmets](#) and [armor](#), [spartan helmet-adorned gun straps](#), [spartan-head flags](#), and [spartan-head tee shirts](#). While the creators of the TBLF assert that “The flag has no association with racism, hatred, bigotry,” [The Thin Blue Line USA sells Spartan-themed merchandise](#) alongside the TBLF as part of its catalog of products.

Conclusion

The TBL and the TBLF should be understood in context. It can represent mourning and respect, but the TBLF also collocates with divisive symbols used by hate groups. Journalists work largely from inference by collecting conflicting testimonies about the TBLF. Whether the TBLF is a hate symbol in itself, or an appropriation of a symbol for the purpose of hate, is a possibility worthy of scholarly inquiry. It is worth examining how the TBLF is sold and used in ways that may compromise public trust in police.

Assistant Professor Dr. Bryan Lutz and Political Science student Carson Babbit have cataloged 32 websites like Jacob’s ThinBlueLineUSA. All websites were created between 2012 and 2020 and continue to sell TBLFs and related merchandise. Lutz and Babbit hope to look at the time, place, and location of this image as well as the other images that collocate around the TBLF. Lutz and Babbitt collected and cataloged over 1,200 images in order to establish the meaning of the TBLF, and consulted the SPLC’s *Fighting Hate* and The ADL’s *Hate on Display*[™] databases to explore potential similarities between known hate symbols and the products found on TBLF retailers.