



Lemkin Institute

for Genocide Prevention
and Human Security

Red Flag Alert - United States of America The Rise of the Nazi Salute

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Studies and Prevention is without words after the billionaire Elon Musk gave the Nazi salute *twice* during his speech at the inauguration of President Donald Trump in the United States of America. Musk's act is a frightening signal of things to come, an offense to the nation, and, possibly, an effort to embarrass and weaken an aging Donald Trump, making him vulnerable to a Musk takeover.

In light of Musk's important influence on the new administration, the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention is issuing a Red Flag Alert for genocide in the United States.

We at the Lemkin Institute had no misperceptions about the possible threats of a Donald Trump presidency, particularly to the rights of refugees and the LGBTQ community, as well as the likelihood that America's weakened democratic institutions will be undermined if not completely destroyed by an administration that is formed by people who have lauded autocrats and dictators in other regions of the world. We made this clear in our *Statement on Genocide and the US Presidential Election* on 4 November 2024.

However, we did not expect to be issuing a Red Flag Alert for genocide on the very first day of President Trump's presidency after one of his closest advisors gave the Nazi salute twice to a crowd of cheering Americans.

We remind Americans that many of their fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers died fighting the Nazi regime during World War II in the name of the aspirational goals of the United States to be a beacon of liberty. The memory of those lost fighting fascism is honored by memorials in most US cities and towns – their names sit on street signs and

their faces are remembered in portraits in the houses of patriotic Americans proud of their anti-fascist history. They were heroes. Many of the victims of Nazi terror and Nazi genocide found a safe haven in the United States after 1933, including Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the term genocide and who was the driver behind the adoption of the Genocide Convention by the United Nations in 1948. Lemkin, who was Jewish and Polish, lost 49 members of his family in the Holocaust.

That Elon Musk, an unelected figure close to the president, should feel free to flash the Nazi salute on inauguration day, a day that this year coincides with Martin Luther King day, is hard to fathom. It is an insult to this country, to its Constitution, to its veterans, and to the many survivors of the Holocaust who created new lives and new families within our safe borders.

Should Mr. Musk argue that he “did not mean” to flash the Nazi salute, or that he was doing some other arm gesture, we ask Americans to respond with critical thinking. Is it possible that any person – especially in South Africa (where support for Nazism was very strong) or the USA (where the History Channel has introduced almost all but the youngest generations to the Nazi salute) – is unaware of this salute or what it means? And we ask Americans to try it out: The salute is not at all a “natural” gesture of the arm as it moves the hand from the heart into a wave to an audience. It is almost impossible that this was an unfortunate mistake. Finally, can we really believe that someone who is so often in the public eye would risk an arm gesture – twice – that looks almost exactly like the Nazi salute while he is supposedly celebrating Donald Trump’s election to president? We strongly believe that Elon Musk’s gesture was intentional. We will be happy to be proven wrong.

Nazism must be fought everywhere it rears its head. It imbues more generic forms of fascism with racialized fantasies of natural hierarchies of humanity and always calls for the elimination of certain groups from society in the name of self-preservation. Racialist fascism is at heart a genocidal process that often starts with one group and moves on to others. Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist movement in Germany saw Jews as its principal and cosmic enemy, although Jews constituted less than 1 percent of the German population. Jews were singled out – along with the Roma-Sinti people – for total annihilation. But the Nazis, as part of their genocidal remaking of Germany, also targeted a host of other groups for sterilization, torture, murder, and ‘partial’ elimination, such as gays, trans people, Jehovah’s witnesses, black Germans, communists, socialists, trade unionists, Social Democrats, the physically disabled, people deemed to be mentally ‘unfit,’ and many more. The Polish nation was slated for a 75% decimation and was to be rendered a permanent slave class.

The Nazis began their genocidal process by targeting their primary political enemy, the German Communist party and its members. The popularity of this terror campaign among pliant, timid middle class Germans, who were staunchly anti-communist, weakened German institutions and paved the way for Hitler to institutionalize his dictatorship, which eventually sought to root out all difference and all dissent from the German social body. We know now that Hitler brought ruination on Germany, destroying those same middle class families with war and economic devastation, and burdening the entire nation with responsibility for the murder of 6 million Jews alongside the massive casualties experienced by all sides in the war. Germany will be branded by Hitler, World War II, and the Holocaust for as long as it exists.

We cannot forget these facts. The worst mistake any American can make at this time is to believe that Musk is stupid or to be pliant and timid in the face of this provocation.

At the Lemkin Institute we have learned that we must absolutely take leaders, and people in positions of great power, like Elon Musk, at their word when they signal allegiance with hate groups through signals or through speech.

Musk's Hitler salute cannot and must not be swept under the rug. The US press, cowed as it has been under President Biden, cannot be trusted to cover the new president's administration with any backbone or honesty. It is up to the American people to defend the Constitution and this country's core values against all threats.

Trans people, refugees, and migrants are not the threats. The billionaires with close ties to our new president who flash the Nazi salute and seek to replace the old elites with a new caste – that is the real threat to America.

We hope that President Donald Trump will see this threat for what it is and that he will have enough love of country to do what any patriot would do in his shoes: Repudiate Musk and strip Musk of the position and the access that he has been granted, assuring the American people that a Trump Presidency will not serve to empower present-day Nazis of any stripes.