

V-sign: How the hand symbol has evolved as a master symbol over time



**Rachel Hojnacki
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Origin of a Symbol

The two-finger V symbol has evolved over time to hold many different meanings. Most commonly and unconsciously it is used when people are counting to represent the number two. It is also the symbol to represent the number two in American Sign Language. (V-sign, 2013)

Although, this symbol holds some simple meanings, it has also evolved to become a symbol of greater significance, in our society. This symbol is "understood around the world as a symbol of resistance" (Zelinsky, 2011) and this analysis will focus on the evolution of this symbol in the United States. Specifically, as a V for victory

during World War II and Richard Nixon's time as president and its use as a sign of peace and resistance to war during the 1960's peace movement and today.



John Lennon a member of the Beatles

World War II: Sign of Victory



Prime Minister Winston Churchill waving the V for Victory hand symbol.

Using your hand to signal V for victory was first suggested by Douglas Ritchie, on his radio show, for resisters in German lands to use the symbol (Zelinsky, 2011). It was later picked up by Winston Churchill (pictured to the right) and used by the Allies during World War II. It came to be a rallying symbol for the allied troops and their supporters throughout the war. The symbol was linked to both the French word for victory and the Dutch word for freedom. (Zelinsky, 2011)

The use of the V for Victory then spread like wildfire. A double V was used by African Americans in the United States for both an end to World War II and racism. United States Presidents also used the symbol to celebrate victories in elections. (Zelinsky, 2011)

Nixon: Vietnam & Resignation



President Nixon departing the White House after resigning.

The V sign was used very often during Nixon's presidency. Nixon used this symbol to represent victory in his presidential campaign and most memorably when he was removed from office (pictured to the left) (Zelinsky, 2011).

Towards the end of Nixon's presidency the V sign started to be used by the counter culture peace movement to end the war. Giving the symbol another meaning for the American people. Using the symbol to represent peace is one that is still thought of today.

Peace Movement

From 1960 to 1973 demonstrations protesting the Vietnam War ensued. Americans protested the war on college campuses in large and small groups demanding that we withdraw from Vietnam (Radical Times, 1999).

The protesters took the V sign from the government that they used for victory and adopted it as a sign of peace. Transforming the meaning of the symbol from victory to peace, but keeping the underlying theme of resistance associated with the symbol alive.



Poster used to protest the war during the 1960's

Present Day



Lady Gaga on the cover of Vanity Fair.

The V sign is known by most American's as a sign of peace, not as well known as a sign of victory from war. Students can now be seen flashing this sign casually in a picture with friends, instead of at a protest against the war going on.

The V sign can often be seen in use by people in our country for their fight for gay rights. Although, the use of the V sign during activism for gay rights is perpetuating the symbols meaning, it is not as prominent as it's use during the 1960's peace protests. The meaning and symbol has seemed to seamlessly transfer for use in activism movements and protests across generations.

What does it mean to you?



Theoretical Implications

The evolution of the V sign for the American people is different than what those have experienced in other countries. It first started as a symbol of victory and resistance. By the end of the 60's it transformed into a sign of peace, still used by the counterculture to resist war but the meaning had shifted entirely.

Baran and Davis state "master symbols are associated with strong emotions and possess the power to stimulate beneficial large-scale mass action if they are used wisely" (p. 84, 2010). The use of the V sign, both for victory and peace, was done on a large-scale, effecting people all around the world during World War II and across the country during the protest of the Vietnam War. Although the meaning changed, the symbol was still used as one of resistance during both periods.

The different meanings that this symbol sees today by the American people and other cultures, speaks to limited effects theory. This theory says that media has a limited effect on their audience, reinforcing ideas that they already have (Lewis, 2008, p. 408). After the V sign's meaning changed to one of peace in the 60's, this idea has been reinforced by the media and consumer culture. As a consumer of

today's media, not having been alive during World War II, I was unaware that the V sign first started out as a symbol of victory for the Allied troops.



This symbol's evolution over time has helped it to become a master symbol within our society. It will always have a meaning when flashed, even if that meaning is as simple as the number two or having a broader meaning for resistance against an aspect of society.

References

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