



WORD ON THE STREET

BEN ZIMMER

A Military Unit's Name Becomes A Political Label

FOR SEVERAL DAYS, President Trump has been taunting four progressive Democratic congresswomen known collectively as “The Squad” with insults widely condemned as racist.

The four lawmakers—Reps. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts—adopted the

“squad” label shortly after they were elected

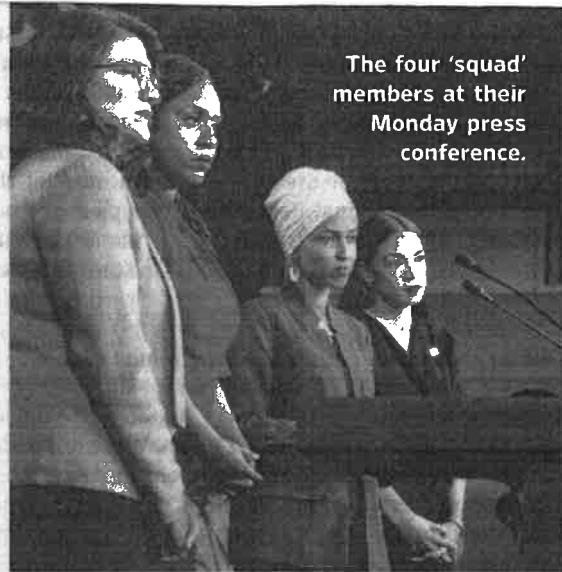
last November, as they quickly joined forces on Capitol Hill.

When the four appeared together Monday to respond to Mr. Trump’s initial inflammatory tweets, Ms. Pressley sought to assert a broader “squad” of like-minded supporters. “Our squad is big,” she said. “Our

squad includes any person committed to building a more equitable and just world.... And given the size of this squad, and this great nation, we cannot—we will not—be silenced.”

How did the word “squad” become a proud label for a political cadre? It traces back to ancient military usage.

In Vulgar Latin—the amalgam of informal dialects that became the colloquial source of the Romance languages—the word began as “exquadra,” meaning “square.” That evolved into “squadra” in Italian, “escuadra” in Spanish and “esquade” in French. In these languages, the term could refer to the square formation that infantry troops used when under attack by cavalry. This kind of formation was used by Roman legions and carried on through



The four ‘squad’ members at their Monday press conference.

the Napoleonic wars, eventually rendered obsolete by the development of modern weaponry.

English borrowed French “esquade” as “squad,” appearing in the language by the late 16th century, not long after the related word “squadron” also entered the lexicon via the Italian form. Both “squad” and “squadron” originally referred to small groups of military personnel; a note from the earl of Essex dated 1596 refers to a captain who “commanded a squad of horse” (meaning a cavalry squadron) in France.

“Squad” developed new meanings in the military and

rapid-response team), “vice squad,” “murder squad,” and “riot squad.”

“Fraud squad” shows up in press reports in the early 1960s, and that rhyming pair was matched by “God squad”—a term first used on college campuses for evangelical Christian groups—and of course “The Mod Squad,” the ABC crime drama that made its debut in 1968 featuring a trio of hip undercover cops.

“Squad” spread to other fields, notably sports, where it came to refer to the roster of players from which a team on the field is chosen, as in the vic-

torious 23-player squad that recently represented U.S. women’s soccer at the World Cup in France. In hip-hop circles, “squad” began to be used in the 1990s for a different kind of roster: rap groups that went by such names as the Def Squad and the Hit Squad.

In rap usage, “squad” flourished in recent years to refer to one’s “posse” or close circle of friends. In 2015, Taylor Swift appropriated “squad” to refer to her coterie of young celebrities, popularizing “squad goals” (often rendered on social media with the hashtag #squadgoals) to allude to the aspirations of such an intimate group.

Reps. Ocasio-Cortez, Pressley, Tlaib and Omar became known as “The Squad” after Ms. Ocasio-Cortez posted a photo of the four of them on Instagram during the orientation for incoming House members. She captioned it “Squad,” and the term quickly caught on. This week, Ms. Tlaib directed a message on Twitter to her constituents, writing, “You are all my squad!” While “squad” may be outgrowing its close-knit origins, it remains a powerful expression of solidarity.