
Presidential Images

It is a rare week on American television when viewers do not get at least a 20-second voice-and-picture glimpse of the Man in the Oval Office, and a rare night when they do not see the White House at least as a backdrop for a TV correspondent's brief "stand-upper" on the President's doings that day. All this has encouraged new notions in Washington of the power and importance of the "presidential image" in assuring the man's popularity and ability to govern. Here, David Culbert examines such images, past and present, and how Presidents have sought to shape them.

by David Culbert

During the Republic's early days, there were no mass media, no media consultants, no pollsters to impel George Washington and his immediate successors to worry about how they looked to the public at large. While malicious cartoons did appear, the target was generally White House policy; little attempt was made to mock a Chief Executive's physical appearance. The images we have of the Founding Fathers—portraits in oil or pen and ink, busts of marble—were done for posterity, not for political impact.

So it was when Presidents and former Presidents first confronted photography.

A photographic likeness partakes of reality, *seeming* to communicate a spirit of fact. And every photograph does freeze a moment in time.

During the early 1840s, hoping to capitalize on public fascination with newly developed camera images,

American daguerreotypers rushed to capture the likenesses of former Presidents. John Quincy Adams, by then in his 70s, sat for posterity, though he thought the camera made him look "hideous." Walt Whitman, studying a picture of Adams, thought otherwise: "those eyes of individual but still quenchless fire."

Today, it is a rare college history survey text that does not include a daguerreotype of Adams, sitting in his parlor, in Quincy, Massachusetts, a few months before his death. The intensity of Adams' gaze, so in keeping with his record of advocacy, seems a sign of the inner man.

Surviving daguerreotypes of Andrew Jackson, taken in 1845, are less kind. We see a dying man propped up in his chair, a camera portrait which intrudes upon final private moments, not a representation of character. And, if James Polk was the first President to have his camera

portrait taken while in the White House, the surviving image merely reflects the mask Polk always displayed to the outside world (he was dubbed by his critics "Polk the mendacious").

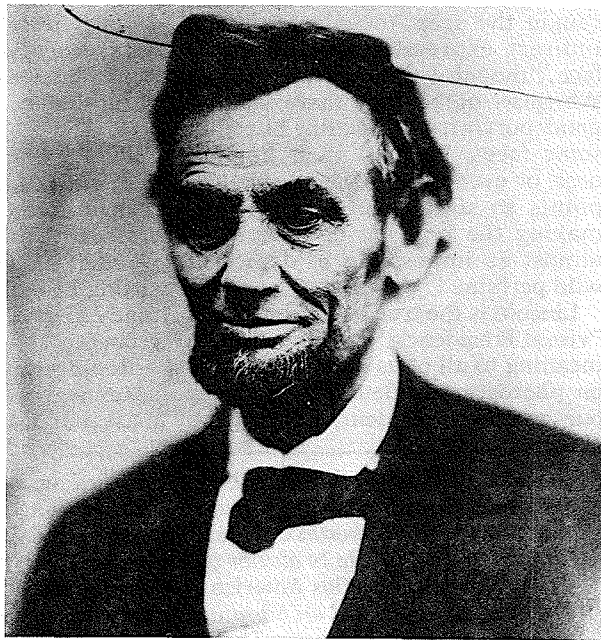
Yet, in a way that is hard to explain, the very fact that his features, and those of Jackson and Adams, are preserved photographically is important. The photographs change our perceptions, perhaps make these men seem more "real" than do monumental busts and oil portraits of their predecessors.

The President whom the camera best revealed was surely Abraham Lincoln. The noted portrait taken by Alexander Gardner is considered by the specialists to be the most significant photograph of Lincoln (more than 100 likenesses survive). In my view, it is the most valuable Ameri-

can photograph ever taken.

The story behind the photograph partakes of legend. Lincoln sat for a number of small portraits by Gardner in the latter's Washington studio on April 10, 1865, the day after Appomattox and four days before the assassination. At the conclusion of this session, Gardner moved his camera closer for a final large image. When he developed the picture, the glass plate cracked. In spite of this, Gardner managed to make a single oversized print before tossing away the glass negative. (Historian Lloyd Ostendorf believes the story not only partakes of legend but *is* legend—insofar as the date is concerned, at any rate, which he places in February. The matter remains in dispute.)

What does this photograph reveal? First, of course, it tells us that Lincoln was not just homely, but of sur-



McLellan Lincoln Collection,
John Hay Library, Brown University.

passing ugliness. Historical context heightens the meaning of the picture: the last image before death. Yet we see not a man a few days from martyrdom but one dying of sadness, wearing a deathlike mask, a deeply etched weariness from directing one part of the country's conquest of another. In the words of poet Wilfred Owen, the President's expression seems to be saying: "My subject is War, and the pity of War."

Wild Perfume

Walt Whitman was fascinated by photographs in general and by Lincoln's appearance in particular. He wrote that he had observed Lincoln at close hand 20 or 30 times during the Civil War years. In 1863 he described the "dark brown face, with the deep-cut lines, the eyes, always to me with a deep latent sadness." He later complained that no portrait, photographic or otherwise, "has caught the deep, though subtle and indirect expression of this man's face," though I think he was wrong. Whitman noted that there was no good portrait of Lincoln, but that some faces, "behind their homeliness, or even ugliness, held superior points so subtle, yet so palpable, making the real life of their faces almost as impossible to depict as wild perfume."

Lincoln is the true beginning of the "visual Presidency," for his symbolic meaning to all of us depends heavily on photographic detail. As perhaps our greatest President, Lincoln de-

mands iconic uniqueness, a symbol of martyrdom based on assassination but defined through photography. Contrast the pallid imagery of the Lincoln penny, itself based on a photographic likeness. The penny provides a general outline, but nothing of the suffering that Lincoln's symbolic image must convey. As Whitman noted, "I should say the invisible foundations and vertebra of his character, more than any man's in history, were mystical, abstract, moral and spiritual."

As printing improved and drawings and photographs got into the newspapers, Presidents began to be worried about the impression they made, via pictures, on the public. The first was Theodore Roosevelt. To the delight of photographers and cartoonists, Roosevelt in real life was a caricature: the oversized teeth, the thick glasses reflecting light, the bristling moustache, the substantial paunch despite all the talk about fitness. Roosevelt loved being President; he was always on stage, a natural ham.

From TR to FDR

In our photograph of TR, only the woman to the left of the retired officer seems to have let her attention wander, though two of the newsmen sitting beneath the podium seem already to have decided what they will report.

Roosevelt was the first President to seem warm and affectionate to a mass public and the first to be known

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The Bettmann Archive.

by his initials. Yet TR was careful about photographers and warned his bulky successor, William Howard Taft, about being shown playing golf (in a pre-Eisenhower age, the game connoted aristocratic tendencies): "I'm careful about that; photographs on horseback, yes; tennis, no. And golf is fatal."

TR's term of office marks the end of visual innocence: Presidents had become self-conscious about being "caught" by the camera.

Ahead of his own time was Franklin Roosevelt, whose understanding of publicity and persuasion remains unsurpassed. Roosevelt, the ablest political speaker of his generation, had an instinctive understanding of radio, the new medium, which

explained much of his enduring popularity. Voters knew that his legs were crippled by polio, but it seemed impossible that one who sounded so vigorous could be seriously handicapped.

Careful, defensive management of the "visual" helps to explain why. The White House discouraged the publication of photographs showing FDR from the waist down—and few such photographs appeared in print. Roosevelt's patrician artifices—the pince-nez and the cigarette holder—helped to make him look supremely self-confident.

In our pictures of Roosevelt, we see a man so sure of himself that his vitality bursts out of the frame. The props help: that so-called fighting

jaw, the angle of the cigarette holder, the rumpled hat. Roosevelt was our modern presidential salesman, the man who knew how to flatter and cajole.

Today, as during the 1930s and '40s, we can look, we can admire, but we cannot see inside. Turn back to Lincoln. Photographs invite us to examine the inner Lincoln; nobody ever saw the inner Roosevelt.

Nixon and Johnson

Dwight Eisenhower was, in his way, no less artful than FDR. World War II newsreels showed a serious General Eisenhower urging continuing sacrifice; the 1952 election campaign against Adlai Stevenson demanded beaming self-confidence. The newspaper photograph defined Ike's notable campaign asset, the grin, conveying a simple image of humanity and trustworthiness. That grin masked a shrewd, seasoned manager of men, but Eisenhower's photographs, then as later, never penetrated the genial exterior.

In 1953, Helen Keller, blind, deaf, and dumb almost from birth, asked to visit the White House so that she could "see" Eisenhower's smile. The image captures the pleasure of Miss Keller, who, unable to see, did not know how to appear shy in front of the camera. Eisenhower humanized himself by allowing Helen Keller to touch his face as he grinned. One can barely see the smile, but Ike's eyes and the laugh lines around his eyes and on his forehead all suggest it powerfully.

With Richard Nixon, as Eisenhower's running mate, television became part of our concept of "visual" politics and the "visual" candidacy. His famed "Checkers speech" of September 23, 1952, was an emotional rebuttal to Democratic charges of



Wide World Photos (Associated Press).

misappropriating campaign funds. Nixon's cocker spaniel, Checkers, was a supporting actor. Drawing an avalanche of favorable telegrams from the public, Nixon showed every politician how the new visual medium could inform and affect the American people directly. (Lyndon Johnson touched on the legacy of the Checkers speech when he told a network producer shortly before his death, "You guys. All you guys in the media. All of politics has changed because of you. You've broken all the machines and the ties between us in Congress and the city machines.")

Television images differ from still pictures, which allow time for study and reflection.

We show a photograph taken off a television monitor during the Checkers speech just before Nixon says, "One other thing I probably should tell you, because if I don't they'll probably be saying this about me too. . . . Our little girl—Trisha, the

six-year-old, named it Checkers." I studied a kinescope of the Checkers speech frame-by-frame, looking for any evidence of Nixon's character. There wasn't much. But just before he introduces Checkers, he momentarily touches his nose with his hand, and then his face fleetingly takes on an unhappy, almost haunted expression.

Television served Nixon in 1952 and, with elaborate White House staging, through most of his Presidency. Nixon served television on August 9, 1974, when he made a farewell speech to his White House staff after formally resigning. His rambling talk will continue to interest scholars because of how Nixon looked and what his appearance seemed to say about the impact of,

and responsibility for, Watergate.

Our TV image, also of poor quality, shows the moment when Nixon cries as he speaks of his mother: "Yes, she will have no books written about her. But she was a saint." In his *Memoirs*, Nixon says "the memory of that scene for me is like a frame of film forever frozen."

What does Nixon mean? That he remembers crying? And what does this image tell us? Nixon speaks of tragedy and suffering. Look one more time at the Lincoln photograph, then at this. Above all, Nixon's shows us failure; Lincoln's, sadness. No longer able to "shape" his image, Nixon stood humiliated before his favorite enemy, the news media, and admitted, to the extent that he was capable, that his quest for his mother's



U.P.I.

approval—his quest for a role in history—would not gain what he had sought.

What about Lyndon Johnson, the U.S. President most fascinated by the media? "Television and radios were his constant companions," biographer Doris Kearns tells us. "Hugging a transistor radio to his ear as he walked through the fields of his ranch or around the grounds of the White House, Johnson was a presidential teenager, listening not for music but for news."

His obsession with what others were saying stemmed from an inordinate concern with his own image, both aural and visual.

LBJ vs. JFK

Johnson seldom sounded convincing in public. Senator Paul Douglas (D.-Ill.) once observed that "[I] never saw Lyndon Johnson win a debate conclusively on the Senate floor, and I never heard him lose one in the cloak room." Johnson said that he felt uncomfortable before the TV camera because it allowed viewers to focus on his awkward physical appearance rather than on the substance of what he said.

Television also emphasized the way he spoke. Johnson's rise to prominence in the U.S. Senate coincided with the emergence of civil rights as a major issue. To talk "corn pone," he felt, ruined his attempt to sound credible on this issue to Northerners.

No device, whether new glasses, a new TelePrompter, a shirt of a different color, or a new backdrop, could turn Johnson into a winsome performer on television. Johnson's great skills in wheeling and dealing, however important in getting major legislation through Congress, failed to inspire confidence in him as the



Man in the Oval Office, his critics wrote. Johnson was the old dog who just could not learn new tricks. And his Texas accent and garbled syntax betrayed him, he thought, when he talked in public in anything like the same manner that he employed on the telephone or in private. The architect of the Great Society did not look or sound statesmanlike—he looked like a politician.

Johnson felt particular uneasiness over the endless unflattering comparisons, real or imagined, between him and his handsome predecessor, John Kennedy.

A New England accent, good looks, and playful banter during televised news conferences went a long way toward creating Kennedy's image of youthful vigorous leadership. Kennedy looked and sounded as though he could get results. He was photogenic (imagine Lyndon Johnson running along a beach), and his 1960 campaign speech (defending himself as a Catholic candidate) to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association looks good on film today. Yet Johnson ignored one fact: Just before his death, judging by the polls, Kennedy was no more popular than any other President, including LBJ, after 1,000 days in office.

Carter's Cardigan

Johnson was the first President to use video tape playback equipment to record TV broadcasts for later viewing. In our picture, he studies a replay of his November 17, 1967, press conference, in which he used a lavalier microphone so he could walk about the room. His aide, Walt Rostow, termed Johnson's performance "electrifying." But Johnson told his assistant press secretary, Robert Fleming, "You're trying to make me into an actor and I'm not an actor, I'm a President. I won't wear that god-damned microphone again." And he didn't.

Johnson's presidential image converged in photographs and cartoons, memorably in the notorious scar photograph of October 20, 1965, which fixed a portrait of Johnson as lacking Kennedy's elegance and presidential stature. The UPI caption read "President Johnson, in good spirits after a walk around the hospital grounds and buoyed by the thought of leaving [after a gall bladder operation], pulls up the tails of his sport shirt to show his

surgical bandage and to illustrate just where it was that the surgeons 'messed around' in his abdomen." The photograph appeared the next day in newspapers across America, in some instances with an enlargement of the scar "transmitted in answer to requests." Thousands wrote to protest the photograph's poor taste. What possessed Johnson to pull up his shirt remains a mystery.

The photograph later inspired David Levine's best-known cartoon. Levine exaggerated the size of the President's ears, the length of his nose (Pinocchio-like), the thinness of his hair, and gave him a pronounced double chin, along with watchful, shifty eyes. Levine's cartoon presumed a collective memory of the scar photograph and made the scar into a symbol of Johnson's Vietnam policies and the "credibility gap" plaguing his administration. In May 1968, Johnson told a group of edito-



rial cartoonists, "Thank goodness [columnist] Walter Lippmann never learned to draw."

Johnson tried assiduously—and in vain—to create a flattering visual image of himself. Staff photographers took more than 500,000 photographs during the White House years. A weekly 30-minute color film, *The President*, was produced at his orders from 1966 to 1969. The President regularly gave away inscribed pictures and had albums of White House activities prepared for visiting dignitaries.

He examined himself in picture after picture, looking for indications of credibility and Eastern urbanity. His aide, Harry McPherson, tells of a conversation with the President about one photograph. "God, look at that photograph," Johnson said.

It had what I call his John Wayne look—you know, the smile as we look into the Western sunset with Old Paint. It's the inverted "V"s in the brows and smile on the face: weathered, troubled, but still philosophical, Uncle Lyndon looks to the West. And he said, 'Have you ever seen anything phonier in your life?' And I said, 'No, I haven't.'

He had one of those smiles on, standing next to somebody, and he said, 'I didn't want to be there with that guy. I don't care anything about him; I didn't want to be there with the picture, and I knew that would show. So I tried to put on a smile. And every time I try to do that, I look phonier. It all comes through and I can't break it.'

Johnson finally got the photograph he was looking for after he left the White House. Taken at the LBJ ranch, it is filed at the Johnson



Yoichi Okamoto/Courtesy of LBJ Library.



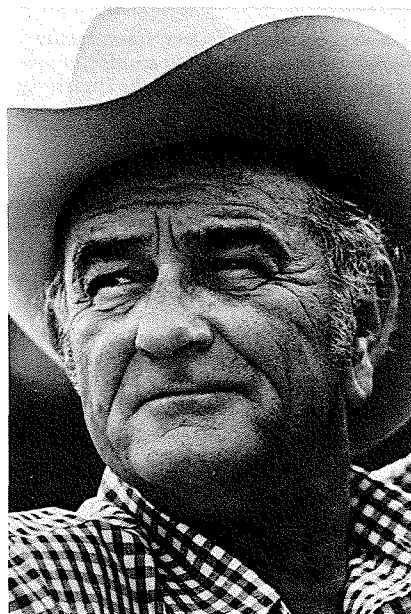
Drawing by David Levine. Reprinted with permission from The New York Review of Books. Copyright © 1968 Nyrev, Inc.

Library in Austin under "John Wayne Photo." The photographer, Frank Wolfe, explains what Johnson liked about the image: the cowboy hat and shirt gave an "earthy look," making him appear "tall and robust." It is the image of a man who comes from the land—tough, grizzled, dependable, not given to boasting—the heroic figure John Wayne played in so many Hollywood productions. Apparently, Johnson decided that being an actor was not so bad after all.

That Lyndon Johnson was obsessed with his "image" tells us more about the man than it does about the impact of TV or photography. So do the calculations of the Nixon White House; returning from Peking in 1972, President Nixon sat in Air Force One for nine hours in Anchorage, Alaska, so that he could arrive home triumphantly in prime time. So do President Carter's revival of the fireside chat to discuss energy problems, dressed in a cardigan, and his early effort to show himself as a populist Chief Executive by spending the night with an ordinary family in Clinton, Massachusetts.

Oddly enough, Ronald Reagan, the first President to have been a professional actor, has largely eschewed such elaborate image-making, confining himself, Truman-like, to quips and fairly conventional political gestures. Indeed, he seems hardly to notice that he is on camera.

The modern Presidency, in fact, does not require an actor. It does require someone who is not terrified by television and able to make a coherent speech to rally public support for his programs. Photographs and TV



Frank Wolfe/Courtesy of LBJ Library.

coverage provide reminders of his role as our Chief Executive, and the President is expected to keep his shirt-tail tucked in. But the "image" in people's heads does not necessarily correspond to the pictures of the Man in the White House seen on television.

The perceived effects of presidential words or decisions (or indecision) soon tend to create their own popular images—and every President in the Age of Television has suffered almost the same steady erosion of popularity in the polls over time, regardless of White House "media events." In truth, presidential images are what *we* make of them.