

## INTRODUCTION

# The Age of the Photo Op



On Thursday, May 1, 2003, President George W. Bush soared above the Pacific in a Navy Viking jet. The Navy pilot then made a dramatic tail-hook landing on the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, just returning from the Iraq War. Bush emerged from the plane in a flight suit and helmet, strode across the deck, shook hands, posed for pictures with members of the crew, and then watched a dramatic flyover by F-18 fighter jets. Later, in suit and tie, with a big banner proclaiming “Mission Accomplished” in the background, Bush stood before the assembled crew and dignitaries and declared the end to major combat operations in Iraq.

It was a perfect set of pictures, and the media was quick to take note of the fact. One after another, television newscasts described Bush’s tail-hook landing as “historic,” and compared it to heroic landings in blockbuster Hollywood movies like *Top Gun*, *Air Force One*, and *Independence Day*. Reporters noted that Bush took control of the Viking jet for a third of the journey, and they interviewed the self-effacing pilot about the awesome responsibility of having the president of the United States as his copilot. To heighten the excitement, CNN had one of their correspondents ride in another F-18 fighter jet with her cameraperson to be an “eye in the cockpit” to describe the sights and sensations of taking off and landing.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, even as television reporters praised, even reveled, in the pictures, they were also quick to call attention to the stagecraft. So similar was the language of the commentators from the three major cable news networks that they sounded like theater critics

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comparing notes. “Who dreamt this up?” asked Keith Olbermann, host of MSNBC’s show *Countdown*. “Who orchestrated this?” “Probably somebody from their communication shop. . . . Whoever it was, it was brilliant,” observed Kirk Hanlin on FOX News Network, “There’s an election less than a year and a half away and having him standing on the deck of one of the mightiest warships on the planet is definitely a good image.” It’s the “ultimate photo opportunity” declared CNN anchor Aaron Brown. Chris Matthews of MSNBC saw the event as Bush’s direct challenge to the Democrats: “Do you really think you’ve got a guy in your casting studio . . . who can match what I did today?”<sup>2</sup> The *New York Times* joined the chorus, declaring in a subsequent front-page story: “George W. Bush’s ‘Top Gun’ landing on the deck of the carrier *Abraham Lincoln* will be remembered as one of the most audacious moments of presidential theater in American history.”<sup>3</sup>

Television and newspaper reporters spent a lot of time taking their readers backstage and behind the scenes. A controversy raged for months afterward in the media about who put up the sign that read “Mission Accomplished.” Was it just a group of enthusiastic sailors aboard the ship, or was it Bush’s savvy media team who were embedded aboard the ship days before the event? At first, Bush claimed that he did not have advance men that “ingenious,” and it was all the sailors’ idea. Later news reports noted that the Bush team (headed by a top former television news producer) had indeed produced and arranged for the sign to be placed strategically before the cameras. It also came out that the *Abraham Lincoln* was supposed to be hundreds of miles out at sea for the big event, but the ship had made faster progress than anticipated and was only thirty miles from the California shore. To simulate the feel of a ship far out at sea, the massive nuclear-powered aircraft carrier was turned around so as not to reveal the coast of San Diego in the background.<sup>4</sup>

Some eight months after the “Mission Accomplished” pictures aired on television, Joseph Darby, a sergeant and army reservist stationed in Iraq, was hoping to take home some of his snapshots of the Babylon Palace, Al Hillah, and other places he’d been. But the sun and heat of Iraq had not been kind to his photos.<sup>5</sup> To his

dismay, the pictures had begun to curl and peel. So Darby thought of a great solution for his melting photos: Why not borrow some digital photos of the places he wanted to remember? One evening, with his laptop at the ready, Darby was volunteering at a satellite cybercafe on the military base. He spotted a fellow reservist, Spec. Charles Graner, and asked him if he could borrow a digital picture file of the sights and scenes of their Iraq tour. Graner was happy to oblige and handed Darby a couple of CDs. Darby downloaded the picture files onto his laptop computer and gave them back to Graner. An evening or two later, Darby sat down to look at the pictures. The first CD contained the pictures Darby had asked for. The second CD contained photos of a very different sort. An image appeared of a pyramid of naked Iraqi prisoners with American guards posing for the camera.

This was the first of a series of photographs of prisoner abuse by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad, once an infamous place of torture and death under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. The Abu Ghraib photographs were troubling not only for the abuse they depicted but also for their style. The photographs, taken by U.S. servicemen and women with digital cameras and shared via e-mail, conveyed the happy normalcy of snapshots from a family vacation: “Look at me and see what a great time I’m having.” One of the first images to come up was of Charles Graner and a female prison guard, Pvt. Lynndie England, standing arm in arm, smiling broadly, and giving a thumbs-up to the camera as they stand behind a pyramid of naked Iraqis. In another photograph, Lynndie England poses holding a leash attached to a naked prisoner’s neck. The mugging for the camera continued as England poses for the camera, cigarette dangling from her mouth, while pointing to the naked bodies of Iraqi prisoners lined up against a wall. Other photos showed prisoners being beaten or made to assume sexually explicit and humiliating poses. One of the starkest pictures (which later became an icon of the Abu Ghraib prison abuse) showed an Iraqi prisoner with a black pointed hood over his face, draped in a black cloth, and standing on a box with electrical wires attached to his body.

Viewing picture after picture on his computer screen, Joseph Darby was disgusted. It was not that he considered himself a Boy Scout. He knew that in the heat of the moment during the war he had exceeded the proper use of force. He had kept secrets in the past for his fellow soldiers and did not consider himself the kind of person who would “rat” on others. But these pictures “crossed the line,” and Darby felt he had no choice but to do what was “morally right.” He burned a copy of the CD and turned it in to the authorities. The pictures prompted an investigation by the U.S. military in January of 2004 that later pronounced the acts of the guards at Abu Ghraib prison as “sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses.”<sup>6</sup>

The Abu Ghraib photographs became public when *60 Minutes II* broke the story on April 28, 2004, and the photographs were soon disseminated worldwide via the Internet, newspapers, magazines, and on television. Arab television stations showed them repeatedly as evidence of the hypocrisy and brutality of America’s effort to bring democracy to Iraq. What started as the sharing of private picture files among friends was soon magnified on multiple screens imprinting the images over and over again. Joseph Darby thought that when he turned in the CD of the Abu Ghraib photos the offending prison guards would be taken off duty and tried, but he did not think “the world would ever hear about it.”<sup>7</sup> “If there were no photographs, there would be no Abu Ghraib, no investigation,” observed Javal Davis, a member of the military police who was charged with prisoner abuse, court-martialed, and sentenced to six months in prison. “It would have been, ‘O.K., whatever, everybody go home.’”<sup>8</sup> An Amnesty International spokesperson noted that the Abu Ghraib pictures are “an object lesson for human rights activists in terms of the visual impact of the horrible stuff we write about all the time. . . . People can’t understand the description, but they can understand the pictures.”<sup>9</sup>

Two and a half years after the Abu Ghraib story broke, Americans pondered a different set of pictures—this time video images. As the sun was ready to rise over Baghdad on Saturday, December 30, 2006, Saddam Hussein, Iraq’s brutal dictator, was hanged after

being tried and convicted by Iraq's Shiite-led government.<sup>10</sup> Only Iraqi officials, executioners, and guards were present.<sup>11</sup> The Iraqi government released an official video of the hanging, which aired on the state-controlled Iraqi television and then on American television. In a war filled with brutal, bloody, and violent images, the official execution video was not a standout. A subdued Saddam Hussein dressed in a black overcoat and white shirt is led to the gallows by a group of executioners wearing black ski masks. They converse with Hussein, tie a black scarf around his neck, and then fit him with the noose. The actual hanging is not shown. The video had no soundtrack. Iraqi and American television networks provided the commentary and context.

For those who oppose capital punishment, the notion of a dignified execution, much less a dignified videotape of an execution, is an oxymoron. For their part, Iraqi officials declared that justice had been served, that the execution was carried out by the letter of Iraqi, Islamic, and international law, and that Saddam Hussein had gone to the gallows soberly and quietly.<sup>12</sup> After the hanging, a statement issued by President George W. Bush praised the execution as "an important milestone on Iraq's course to becoming a democracy," noting that, "We are reminded today of how far the Iraqi people have come since the end of Saddam Hussein's rule."<sup>13</sup>

Then all hell broke loose. The semblance of order conveyed by the silent state-sponsored video of the execution was shattered by the appearance of an unauthorized, eyewitness cell phone video of the execution that shot across the Internet and television. Shot from below the gallows, the camera jerks back and forth from the gallows to the floor, to the staircase, to the noose around the dictator's neck. But the force of the video was not its raw, cinema verité quality or its resemblance to an amateur horror film. It was the presence of sound, sound that shocked the sensibilities of the American public. Guards and witnesses chant "Muqtada, Muqtada," referring to Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shiite religious leader and leader of a large Iraqi militia with death squads. Saddam Hussein tells the guards to go to hell, and they tell him to go to hell. Voices call out the name of a revered Shiite leader executed by Saddam.

Saddam utters a final prayer. There is the sharp bang of the trap door as he falls to his death. The camera jerks around. A final close-up shows the dead dictator's face, his neck wrenched by the hanging, then darkness.

Paired with the dark, murky, jumpy images, the soundtrack revealed the violent sectarian divisions in Iraq and the dark disordered soul of war. It also had the startling effect of making the brutal dictator and mass murderer look like the victim and the taunting Shiite witnesses look like thugs. John Burns, veteran reporter of the Iraq War for the *New York Times*, when asked by CNN's Anderson Cooper if the Iraqi government was trying intentionally to mislead people with the official video, responded, "Of course, they had their own expedient reasons in those first hours to present this thing as having been done in a dignified fashion. And now they are trying to reconstruct it in the face of that video, which you know, is, it seems to me, whistling against thunder. We know what that video meant. We know what happened there with an absolute certainty."<sup>14</sup>

Taken together, the "Mission Accomplished," Abu Ghraib, and Saddam execution pictures tell more than a story about the Iraq War. They reveal much about the media landscape in which we live, and the power of pictures in our time. In the age of the Internet, the battle for control of the pictures, once waged primarily on television by politicians and the networks, now includes a host of new players. Digital, satellite, and wireless technology, the proliferation of cell phone video cameras, laptops, blogs, and the 24-hour news cycle have speeded the transmission of news and vastly increased the picture-taking power of the individual. A citizen activist in Albuquerque or a terrorist in hiding in Afghanistan can take a picture with a webcam, video camera, or cell phone, and immediately send it via e-mail, or post it on the Internet for worldwide viewing. Major news organizations now regularly incorporate and solicit cell phone pictures taken by ordinary citizens of breaking news and offer an array of online offerings—photographs, slide shows, podcasts, picture-sharing sites—in order to keep viewers engaged and tuned in.

The presence of the camera today in all its many forms—cell phone cameras; webcams on home computers; “pan, tilt, and zoom” surveillance cameras in stores, buildings, on city streets and highways; satellite cameras; and military surveillance drones—means that we can survey the world or be surveyed, expose someone or be exposed at any time. The documentary power of the camera has vastly increased, but so has the ability of the camera not only to falsify information but also to falsify ourselves. We have more opportunities to live at the surface, continually posing, to see and measure ourselves by the images we make and the images others make of us.

### **The Photo-Op Culture**

My book is the story of the rise of a new form of image consciousness—a photo-op culture—that has been unfolding since the Second World War in photography, politics, popular movies, television, the Internet, and in everyday life. When the photograph was first invented in the nineteenth century, people were fascinated by the realism of the camera even as they acknowledged the artifice of the pose. In contemporary American culture, our sensibility has shifted. Now we are alive as never before to the artifice of images. Today we pride ourselves on our knowledge that the camera can lie, that pictures can be fabricated, packaged, and manipulated.

We have even developed an affection for artifice and an appreciation of slick production values, whether in political campaigns, Super Bowl commercials, celebrity photographs, or a favorite movie. A political cartoon that appeared during the 1992 presidential primaries captures this tendency well. Two rural southerners sit on the front porch of a ramshackle general store called Bubba’s, talking politics. One says to the other, “I like Buchanan’s sound bites, but Clinton and Tsongas have slicker production values.” Now, the guys at Bubba’s could log onto their laptop computers and evaluate the Web sites of the current batch of political candidates, or create their own political blogs, or

watch a video of the latest misstep or gaffe of a politician on Internet picture-sharing sites like YouTube or MySpace.

If one side of us appreciates, even celebrates, the image as an image, another side yearns for something more authentic. We still want the camera to fulfill its documentary promise, to provide us with insight, and to be a record of our lives and the world around us. But because we are so alive to the pose, we wrestle with the reality and artifice of the image in a more self-conscious way than our forebears.

### **Photo-Op Politics**

This tension is most vividly displayed in television coverage of presidential politics. As politicians mastered the art of television image making, reporters shifted from recording their words to exposing their images and revealing their contrivances. George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" moment on the deck of an aircraft carrier was part of a long tradition of attempts by presidents to control their television image and to use images to convey their political messages. In the early 1960s, John F. Kennedy mastered the new medium of television. He knew how to play to the camera in the Nixon-Kennedy debates. He created the Camelot presidency, which featured warm, inviting, and arresting photographs of his young family and glamorous wife. He displayed a quick wit, humor, and an easy repartee with reporters in his televised press conferences. Yet Kennedy's mastery of the medium still drew mostly on traditional forms of political events—speeches, rallies, and debates.

It was not until the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s that a politician and his media team mastered the art of the media event. So successful was the Reagan team at setting up compelling television images—from using the beaches at Normandy as a backdrop to portraying Reagan sitting astride his horse at his ranch looking like a classic American cowboy—that subsequent presidents and presidential candidates emulated the art of stage

sets, backdrops, and gripping visuals to convey their messages through pictures.

Politicians became so adept at manipulating television images that the reporters who covered them had to find a way to strike back, to bring to the attention of their viewers and readers all the contrivances and manipulations behind the images they were seeing. This desire to remind the viewers and readers of the behind-the-scenes attempts to control the pictures fundamentally changed the way politics and especially political campaigns have been covered over the last three decades. Today, presidential campaign coverage is as much about *how* candidates are setting up their pictures and projecting their images as it is about their policies and pronouncements. Reporters try to unmask the image making to expose the staged media events and machinations of media advisers.

Yet, for all their attention to the pose behind the picture, the networks remain entangled in the artifice of the images they show. By lavishing attention, even critical attention, on photo opportunities, media events, and political commercials, they give yet more airtime to the politicians' potent pictures. And, too often, no amount of reporting on their status as images diminishes their impact.

Such television and newspaper coverage conveys, in effect, a paradoxical message: Behold these striking pictures. But as you behold them, beware of them, for they are not real. They are setups, the products of politicians, media consultants, and spin-control artists who are trying to move you or manipulate you or persuade you. So do not take these pictures at face value. They are photo ops, contrived for the sake of our television cameras, and in this sense, our cameras lie.

The term *photo op* is so familiar that it has become synonymous with the word *picture* itself. It wasn't always this way. In 1968, in the presidential campaign between Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and George Wallace, the term *photo opportunity* was used only once on the network evening newscasts during the entire general election coverage. This despite the fact that Richard Nixon had learned from his loss of the 1960 television debate to

John Kennedy the importance of television and went to great lengths to control his television image.

Television reporters in 1968, however, still concentrated on what the candidates said and did and not on how they constructed images for television. The one lone example of the use of the term *photo opportunity* came in a *CBS Evening News* report by John Hart on October 15. Reporting on Nixon's appearance with television star Jackie Gleason on a Florida golf course, Hart used the term with derision. Nearly everything Nixon does these days is programmed. Hart then described Nixon's "deliberately casual moments, moments his programmers have labeled 'photo opportunities.'" <sup>15</sup>

"In 1968, I thought it was a joke," Hart recalled. "I thought if you said the campaign is calling this a 'photo opportunity,' people would laugh, and photo opportunities would be disgraced. People would say, 'Oh, we see through it now.' But over the years, I've seen reporters use it in a neutral sense without the irony. It was created cynically, in a manipulative sense. And suddenly the act and what it represents is accepted." <sup>16</sup>

But if many pictures of politicians today are mere photo ops, why do the television networks persist in airing them? Why not simply refuse to show them? Some network reporters and producers reply that their job is to show what happens each day since presidential campaigns consist largely of contrived media events, ads, and Web images, and that is what they must show on the evening news. Others, including politicians, media advisers, and some television journalists, observe that given competitive pressures for ratings and profits, the networks cannot resist showing the visually arresting pictures the campaigns produce.

There is truth, no doubt, in the various explanations—economic, political, and technological—for the transformation of television news. But what intrigues me most in watching political coverage and talking to the participants is something else. Whatever the causes of the photo-op style of television news, it creates a tension or dilemma for television and newspaper journalists. On the one hand, the growing entertainment orientation of network news compels reporters and producers to get the best possi-

ble picture, even if this makes them accomplices in artifice; on the other hand, the traditional documentary ambition of television journalism compels them to puncture the picture, to expose the image as an image. Although network reporters and producers do not think of their job in these terms, they find themselves engaged in the dual role of first perfecting and then puncturing the picture, by calling attention to its self-conscious design.

Although we often blame television for all that is wrong with contemporary politics, the preoccupation with political image making is not unique to our time. Since long before the advent of television, politicians have sought to manipulate the power of images, and journalists have struggled with the realism and artifice that pictures convey.

Those who despair at the triviality of modern campaigns often complain that Abraham Lincoln would never have triumphed in our picture-driven age. But Lincoln was far from innocent of the political use of pictures. When he became president he wryly thanked his photographer Mathew Brady for providing him with the dignified image that helped him win the White House. His presidential campaign was the first to distribute mass-produced portraits of the candidate. Their popular appeal led one of Lincoln's advisers to conclude, "I am coming to believe that likenesses broad cast, are excellent means of electioneering."<sup>17</sup>

When Nancy Reagan, on stage at the 1984 Republican convention, blew a kiss to an image of her husband, Ronald Reagan, portrayed on a giant video screen above the podium, the delegates applauded wildly. But for all its technological novelty, the scene recalled an earlier celebration of a presidential likeness in Abraham Lincoln's bid for the presidency. As the Republican convention of 1860 nominated Lincoln, supporters in the balcony showered the delegates with portrait prints of the candidate, which they greeted with "perfectly deafening applause, the shouts swelling into a perfect roar." When Lincoln was declared the nominee, a large portrait was exhibited from the platform, to further cheers.<sup>18</sup>

The Lincoln likenesses distributed at the 1860 convention and during the election campaign differs from the now-familiar Lincoln image that adorns the penny. Between his election and inau-

guration, Lincoln made an apparently image-conscious decision, encouraged by supporters who hoped to improve his appearance: he grew a beard. “[A]fter oft-repeated views of the daguerreotypes,” a group of Republicans wrote Lincoln, “we have come to the candid determination that these medals would be much improved in appearance, provided you would cultivate whiskers and wear standing collars. Believe us nothing but an earnest desire that ‘our candidate should be the best looking as well as the best of the rival candidates,’ would induce us to trespass upon your valued time.”<sup>19</sup>

Replying to a young girl who had written with similar advice, Lincoln seemed to resist the suggestion. “As to the whiskers, having never worn any, do you not think people would call it a piece of silly affect[at]ion if I were to begin it now?” But just as later politicians would overcome their distaste for wearing makeup on television, Lincoln overcame his fear of affectation. By the time he was inaugurated, the whiskers had appeared.<sup>20</sup>

### **Failed Photo Ops and the Obsession with Gaffes**

In the fall of 2005, President George W. Bush went to Beijing to meet with President Hu Jintao of China. The *New York Times* reported the story on the front page, noting in the lead paragraph, “In a day of polite but tense encounters, President Hu Jintao of China told President Bush on Sunday that he was willing to move more quickly to ease economic differences with the United States but he gave no ground on increasing political freedoms.”<sup>21</sup>

The article proceeded with the usual thoroughness and gravity. The accompanying pictures were a different story. Four large color pictures of Bush stretched like a cartoon panel down the front page and below the fold. The first picture shows Bush walking toward a door in a formal meeting hall with bright red panels, the second catches Bush with a goofy expression on his face as he clutches a large brass door handle, the third shows Bush looking across the room as an aide gestures toward the proper exit, and the last shows Bush waving as he begins his exit. The caption reads, “After meeting with reporters in Beijing, Mr. Bush tried to

exit through a locked door. Realizing the mistake, he made a mock grimace, and an aide pointed the way. He joked: ‘I was trying to escape. It didn’t work.’”

Why were these pictures in the paper? And why do similar photos appear with growing frequency in the *Times*, other newspapers, and on multiple Internet sites? The answer has less to do with any overall policy or political bias on the part of the media than with a larger cultural trend. One side of photo-op coverage features how public figures set up their “perfect pictures.” The *Times*’s front-page coverage of Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” moment, “Keepers of Bush Image Lift Stagecraft to New Heights,” falls into that category. Another side of photo-op coverage is to elevate minor mishaps—gaffes, spills, squealing microphones—or backstage behavior—putting on makeup, combing one’s hair, or choosing a jacket and tie—into front-page news.

The magnification of politicians’ mishaps or the construction of “failed photo ops” reflects a kind of guerrilla warfare between the media and politicians, an attempt to resist manipulation by puncturing the images the politicians and their media teams dispense. The more the politicians seek to control their images, the greater the temptation among reporters and photographers to beat them at their own game, to deflate their media events by magnifying a minor mishap into a central feature of the event.

One gets a glimpse into how the press rationalizes what they do by looking at the way the public editor of the *New York Times*, Byron Calame, responded to readers’ criticism of the Bush in Beijing photos about two weeks after they appeared. Calame noted that, “Mr. Bush gets his fair share of serious, staged appearances on Page 1,” and quotes *Times* editor Martin Gottlieb’s rationale for running the Bush pictures as “a choice between a photo op [a picture of Mr. Bush riding a bicycle with a group of Chinese riders] or a picture of something that happened spontaneously.” Bill Keller, the *Times*’s executive editor, thought the locked-door photos of Bush were “amusing,” “depicted a real event,” and “would draw people into the paper.”<sup>22</sup>

We can see the *Times* editors straining to find news value in the picture, rationalizing that it was “spontaneous” and “a real event,” when in fact it was a scrimmage in the battle between the

press and politicians for control of the picture. Making bloopers and minor gaffes big news is an alluring, often irresistible ploy, even if it means a departure from standard news values. Readers, used to watching baseball bloopers or outtakes of their favorite stars goofing up scenes during the final film credits, will laugh or be outraged depending on how they feel about Bush.

The public editor of the *Times* was right about one thing. The *Times*, along with other newspapers and the television networks, gives Bush his fair share of “serious staged appearances.” In fact, like the networks, the *Times* helps produce and perfect them. Photo ops, after all, are not facts of nature. It always takes “two to tango” with a photo opportunity. The media advisers set up the “opportunity,” but the press has to take the photo. Here is where the news decision comes in: Does the press accept or reject the opportunity? Do you take the picture, and, more important, do you decide to run it?

Just as television embraced Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” moment, the *Times* embraced the photo opportunity on many occasions. During the Iraq War years, the *Times* ran various flattering front-page photos of Bush: presenting a Thanksgiving turkey to the troops in a Norman Rockwell–like scene; defending a classified eavesdropping program while framed by a painting of Teddy Roosevelt as a Rough Rider on a rearing horse; or standing tall in a heroic *Star Wars*–style photo at the U.S. Naval Academy, framed in rich blue and gold with not one, but two strategically placed signs saying “Plan for Victory.”

The question remains: Does fairness and balance in reporting mean perfecting some photo ops and puncturing others? Is there a way the press can resist the photo-op mentality altogether?

### **The Pros and Cons of Framing the Flaw**

There are times a politician’s misstep caught on camera reveals an important, if unsavory, part of who he or she is. In such cases, the camera provides an important reality check; it witnesses and documents what might otherwise be hidden from public view.

This was the case when Republican senator and presidential contender George Allen of Virginia used an obscure racial epithet, *macaca*, in reference to a young American college student of Indian descent who was videotaping his reelection campaign rally for his Democratic opponent, Jim Webb. Tracking opponents is a common political practice. In fact, Allen had met the young man, and his campaign had treated him courteously, even offering him food at their public events. But on this day, Allen decided to acknowledge his presence for the first time: “Let’s give a welcome to macaca here,” declared Allen as he played to the crowd. “Welcome to America and the real world of Virginia.”<sup>23</sup> The Webb campaign posted the video on YouTube; it went “viral,” spreading quickly on the Internet and getting huge media exposure on television and in newspapers, magazines, and blogs. Within weeks, the Allen campaign was in a nosedive; his macaca gaffe was compounded by awkward, defensive statements about his mother’s Jewish background. He lost his bid for reelection.

The presence of the digital—cell phone and video camera and picture-sharing sites—widens the opportunities for “gotcha moments” when a public figure is brought down. As one *Washington Post* headline put it, “Blundering Pols Find Their Oops on Endless Loop of Internet Sites.” The author of the article, Paul Farhi, makes an important point: “Unlike a ‘negative’ campaign commercial, online video is typically cheap to produce and distribute. Video clips also aren’t subject to campaign finance limits of Federal Election Commission disclosure requirements (the ubiquitous ‘My name is [blank] and I approve this message’). Since YouTube allows users to post videos under aliases, it can be nearly impossible to tell exactly who is disseminating a particular clip.”<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes critics deplore a politics of “gotcha moments” and negative campaign ads, but such a generalization is a mistake. The question is, “gotcha” doing what? If it is singing “The Star Spangled Banner” off key, a minor slip of the tongue, or choking on food, the gotcha moment trivializes and dehumanizes politics. It turns the camera into a petty panopticon, forever searching for mistakes, and turns politicians into overly cautious, guarded figures contriving to avoid mistakes. The American public is

left disenchanted with politics, even if temporarily amused with the foibles of politicians. Instead of political debate fostered by a searching press acting as democracy's watchdog, we have an image war of posing and posturing between the media and the politicians.

Yet, the presence of cell phone cameras and video cameras is an important check on misconduct, and can enlarge the meaning of the public square or the town meeting writ large. A politician can no longer pander to the prejudices of select audiences. He or she is forced to speak in a larger, more open public square. As one Republican strategist put it: "YouTube has every campaign on notice that someone's watching. This has been a real wake-up call to a lot of candidates who shoot from the lip when there isn't a big TV affiliate standing in the room."<sup>25</sup>

Another argument for calling attention to photo ops is that failed photo ops, like successful ones, function as metaphors, symbols, or condensed arguments in public debate. Pictures, like words, are fair game, part of the language of partisan politics in a democracy. For example, when the Democratic nominee John Kerry went goose hunting in Iowa to boost his appeal to hunters and rural voters during the 2004 presidential campaign, the Republicans were quick to strike back. "The Second Amendment is more than a photo opportunity," quipped Vice President Dick Cheney. "I understand he bought a new camouflage jacket for the occasion, which did make me wonder how regularly he does go goose hunting. My personal opinion is his new camo jacket is an October disguise, an effort he's making to hide the fact that he votes against gun-owner rights at every turn."<sup>26</sup> For their part, the Democrats, as the party out of power for eight years, used the term *photo op* as a stand-in for all they considered misguided about Bush's policies, accusing Bush of "photo opportunity" politics and a photo-op foreign policy. After Bush's Thanksgiving visit to the troops in Iraq generated great front-page pictures, for example, retired general Wesley Clark, a Democratic presidential hopeful, remarked on CNN, "A visit, a photo op, or whatever it was to Baghdad does not make up for a failed strategy."<sup>27</sup>

The battle to control the picture and the use of failed photo ops extends well beyond domestic politics. Even the U.S. Army is deploying failed photo ops in their antiterrorist campaigns. During the Iraq War, American troops raided an abandoned hideout of Al Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in a town south of Baghdad. Zarqawi, along with other camera-savvy terrorists, was a master at manipulating pictures and had released Internet videos of beheadings, hostage takings, threats to opponents, and proclamations to adherents. His latest video portrayed him as a picture-perfect jihadist firing long bursts from his machine gun. In the raid the U.S. Army confiscated Zarqawi's videos and used the outtakes to mock him at a news briefing in Baghdad. In one scene, Zarqawi appears not to know how to use the machine gun, and an aide off camera calls, "Go help the sheik." Another scene shows the fearsome terrorist wearing white New Balance sneakers beneath his flowing black robe. "What you saw on the Internet was what he wanted the world to see," General Lynch said. "Look at me, I'm a capable leader of a capable organization, and we are indeed declaring war against democracy inside of Iraq. . . . What he didn't show you were the clips that I showed."<sup>28</sup> The "failed images" video may have been satisfying to make, but it was not viewed on the most popular Arab channels, Al Jazeera and Arabiya, stations attuned to a different sort of photo-op politics.<sup>29</sup>

For all the framing of the flaw and creation of failed images, one has to ponder the failed images that we do not even recognize—the ones that look right, that we believe are documents, but fail us because they are not what they seem. This was the case with the image of the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein early in the Iraq War. The way the picture played on the news, it looked like the toppling of the statue had the force of the Berlin Wall coming down. That's because the networks showed the statue close up. But if they had pulled the camera back, it would have revealed a different truth. The square was fairly empty. There were few Iraqis present. The operators of the equipment were members of the U.S. military.<sup>30</sup>

## The Photoshopped Photo Op

In the age of the Internet and digital technology, perfecting the picture has been taken to a new level—the “Photoshopped photo op.” These days, if the setting or backdrop or camera angle is not good enough to get the perfect picture, political campaigns may be tempted to doctor or enhance the picture using digital technology and photo-editing software like Photoshop.

During the 2004 presidential campaign, for example, President Bush’s campaign had to pull a television ad after admitting that a photograph of the president addressing American soldiers had been digitally enhanced. A liberal blog, DailyKos, exposed the fact that the same soldiers’ faces appeared in several different places in the crowd, and word of the doctored photo quickly spread via the Internet. A spokesman for the Bush campaign explained that the original photograph had been altered because the president and his podium obscured part of the crowd. In defense of the digitally enhanced picture (which had removed the president and the podium to make room for the duplicated soldiers), Republican adviser Steve Schmidt told the *Los Angeles Times*, “The soldiers are all real.”<sup>31</sup>

Another example of a digitally altered photograph occurred earlier in the 2004 presidential campaign. Republican opponents of Democratic front-runner John Kerry tried to undermine his status as a war hero by portraying him as an anti-American war activist who exaggerated his military record. To dramatize the point, someone not officially connected to the Bush campaign decided to create a digitally doctored picture of John Kerry standing next to controversial Hollywood actress Jane Fonda at an anti-war rally. The photo combined a photograph of Kerry attending a 1971 antiwar rally with a photo of Jane Fonda at a different rally. To make the doctored picture of Kerry and Fonda look like an authentic news photograph, it was circulated on the Internet with the official logo of the Associated Press.<sup>32</sup>

Media advisers of politicians are not the only ones who digitally enhance images. When reality won’t do, the major television net-

works have also engaged in digital manipulation. A long-standing television tradition is to cover the countdown to the New Year in Times Square and to show the New Year's ball fall. What if you are CBS and plan to usher in the new millennium live from Times Square, but right next to the New Year's ball is a Budweiser ad and the logo of a rival network—the NBC Astrovision? No problem. CBS digitally imported its own billboard and logo, obliterating the other images. As anchorman Dan Rather commented on the festivities during the live broadcast on December 31, 1999, he was framed by a prominently placed CBS billboard. The billboard, of course, did not exist in Times Square. You only saw it if you were watching CBS news. CBS executive producer Steve Friedman defended the digital doctoring by claiming it did not distort the content of the news: “We were looking for some way to brand the neighborhood with the CBS logo. . . . It's a great way to do things without ruining the neighborhood.”<sup>33</sup>

As the line between news and entertainment, serious news and tabloid news has eroded, the producers of the news are embracing theater rather than apologizing for it. Picture-perfect news needs pretty faces, and, in the case of women, pretty bodies on display. Especially on local and cable news channels, women are encouraged to dress as if they are going out on the town, wearing sequined sweaters and low-cut tops. A CNN ad for news anchor Paula Zahn gained notoriety before it was pulled off the air after it stirred a controversy. In promoting Zahn's show, *American Morning*, a male announcer asks, “Where can you find a morning news anchor who's provocative, super-smart, oh yeah, and just a little sexy?” The word “sexy” then flashes on the screen, accompanied by a noise that sounded like a zipper unzipping.<sup>34</sup>

Even *Watch*, the in-house magazine for the more sober CBS network, could not resist giving their first solo woman anchor, Katie Couric, a “digital diet” to slim down her face and figure in a picture featured in their pages.<sup>35</sup> Would they have done the same for Walter Cronkite?

Katie Couric's digital diet follows a practice long employed in fashion photography and increasingly on the cover of magazines. An issue of *TV Guide* displayed a picture of Oprah Winfrey with

the actress Ann-Margaret's body. After homemaking maven Martha Stewart was released from prison, a *Newsweek* cover showed her confidently smiling, with the title "Martha's Last Laugh: After Prison She's Thinner, Wealthier and Ready for Prime Time." But she was not thin enough for *Newsweek*. The image was actually a composite of Stewart's face and a model's body. Lynn Staley, assistant managing editor at *Newsweek*, saw no problem with the digital doctoring: "The piece that we commissioned was intended to show Martha as she would be, not necessarily as she is."<sup>36</sup>

Some editors argue that digitally enhanced photographs are labeled "photo illustrations" and should not be held to the same standard as news photographs. Lynn Staley made this argument during the flap over the Martha Stewart *Newsweek* cover, noting that a credit accompanying the table of contents stated that the picture was a photo illustration. The same argument was made by James R. Gaines, managing editor of *Time* magazine, in response to the controversy generated by a 1994 *Time* cover portrait of O. J. Simpson that was digitally darkened by an artist who was asked to "interpret" the Los Angeles Police Department's photo of Simpson. *Time* credited the artist and the "photo-illustration" on the bottom of page three of the magazine. Since few readers look at the fine print, these episodes raises some hard questions: Doesn't the display of photographs in news magazines constitute a contract with the readers that they are seeing photographs of people and places as they actually are? Or should we look at *Newsweek* or *Time* as we would a supermarket tabloid where we expect outlandishly doctored photographs, or fashion magazines that digitally enhance the faces and bodies of the models as a matter of course?

In defense of digital enhancement in fashion photography, Pascal Dangin, the founder and head of one of the foremost photo retouching firms in the United States, told a reporter, "Hey, everybody wants to look good. Basically we're selling a product—we're selling an image. To those who say too much retouching, I say you are bogus. This is the world we're living in. Everything is glorified. I say live in your time." Holding a printout from an Yves Saint Laurent ad campaign, he quipped, "This world is

not reality. It's just paper." Yet even Dangin drew a line when it came to making digital composites of a head with a different body: "I would not put an actress's head on a stylist's body—no! People can get very upset. They put it in the same pool as human cloning."<sup>37</sup>

These days even world leaders can catch a break from the media and get a digital slim down. Recently a media stir was created when French president Nicolas Sarkozy's love handles magically disappeared in a photo of him in a swimsuit taken while vacationing with his family at Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire. As one newspaper quipped, "President Nicolas Sarkozy is one of the rare democratic leaders who can say the media helps him look better in print than he does in real life."<sup>38</sup> *Paris-Match*, the celebrity magazine owned by one of the French president's best friends, Photoshopped away his roll of fat to give him a svelte figure in a photo that showed Sarkozy canoeing with his nine-year-old son. The Élysée Palace denied it had a hand in tweaking Sarkozy's physique. "We only deal with the President's political and diplomatic line," presidential spokesman David Martinon said. "For the rest, we're rather bad at working with Photoshop." *Paris-Match*, while admitting to enhancing the photo, tried to squirm out of accepting full blame. "The position of the boat exaggerated this protuberance," the magazine coyly responded. "When we reduced the shadows, the correction was exaggerated in the printing process."<sup>39</sup>

One does not have to be a television star or a media personality to crave a little enhancement. Hewlett Packard's new Photosmart digital camera promises a lot more than correcting for red eye. Press the right setting and it can slim off up to ten pounds even *before* the picture is taken. The Photosmart is being pitched to the growing market of female digital camera users who do not want to bother with computer software to retouch photographs. "Slimming" is one among twenty-seven "artistic" features including "gauzy," a convenient way to do away with wrinkles as well as extra pounds. The appeal of the "slimming" feature was discovered in focus groups in which people "admitted that they did not like to be photographed because they didn't like the way they

looked.” “We want to lower people’s resistance,” noted product manager Linda Kennedy. When asked if the “slimming” feature “will contribute to visual fraud,” she responded, “I can’t imagine it’ll be the first time. We’re not enabling anything other than what’s already out there.”<sup>40</sup>

For those who want to take the plunge into photo retouching, there are a lot of options. You can purchase many digital retouching programs for your computer for a reasonable price, teach yourself, or take a course to brush up your skills. Or you can go online and let one of the many photo-retouching services do it for you. There is a brisk business for companies that market their services to the 40 million people who use Internet match-making sites. LookBetterOnline.com offers professional photo shoots and digital enhancement of existing photographs to their clients.<sup>41</sup> Other companies like E-Cyrano.com and ProfileHelper.com will actually write up the personal statements and guide their clients in crafting their initial e-mail conversations with prospective dates. A Touch of Glamour offers from “light” to “extreme” “glamorization,” a process that includes shaving inches from the waist, reshaping noses, enlarging lips, rebuilding eyelashes, and straightening teeth. Another company, Anthropics Technology is marketing a software program, PortraitProfessional, for only \$39.95 that will give the user around eighty different ways to enhance “beauty” with “algorithms that automatically shift and reshape the parts of the face.”<sup>42</sup> The CEO of the company, Andrew Berend, noted that his research team tested their product by posting before and after pictures on HotOrNot.com (a popular picture-ranking site with a 1 to 10 scale) and transformed a lowly 2-rated photograph into an appealing 8.<sup>43</sup>

Even as people try to look as good as the celebrities, some celebrities have said, “enough is enough” when it comes to digital enhancement. Actress Kate Winslet got a lot of media attention when she protested a 2003 British edition of *GQ* that showed her in a skin-tight outfit, high heels, amazingly thin thighs and a “to die for” flat stomach. “I look about 100 pounds in that thing,” Winslet told the *New York Post*, adding: “After I did *Titanic*, I realized that there was a lot of pressure on women to be a certain

size to be successful as an actress. And I thought, isn't that insane? So I just came out in an interview and said, 'Look, I'm doing well at the things that I love doing and I'm not starving myself.'"<sup>44</sup> Tennis star Andy Roddick mocked a 2007 cover of *Men's Fitness* magazine that showed him standing confidently in a t-shirt with bulging arms crossed under a barrel chest flanked by two banner headlines, "Lose Your Gut" and "How to Build Big Arms." Referring to the way *Men's Fitness* decided to make their point by building his big biceps digitally, Roddick quipped, "little did I know I have 22-inch guns," noting with self-deprecating humor: "[I'm] not as fit as the *Men's Fitness* cover suggests."<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, high school yearbook companies now offer a range of digital enhancements. It's really an extension of the elaborate way senior pictures are now staged with special outfits, backgrounds, locations, and poses all intended to make the students "feel like stars."<sup>46</sup> Photographers and students alike find digital imaging liberating. No need to reschedule the photo for the usual glitches that can ruin a picture. Standard fare is digitally removing blemishes and braces and whitening teeth, but some studios "keep libraries of teeth images to use as replacements during the retouching process." Others discourage this practice. "When you start replacing the whole smile line, the family is going to notice," noted Willard "Mac" McDonald, who works as a photo lab associated with studios that cater to high school students.<sup>47</sup>

In the quest for the perfect senior picture, studios can also slim students, fix closed eyes and open mouths, and do a bit of digital plastic surgery like removing scars and moles. Here again the question is: when does a picture become so perfect that the person is lost in the process? "It's those little imperfections that make you who you are," noted one high school senior.<sup>48</sup> But then again, it is hard to resist the allure of digital enhancement. Portrait studios hope that students will be so happy with the results that they will return for wedding and family portraits.

It is no mystery that people, no matter how media savvy, and no matter how inner directed, do not like the way they look. The camera-enhanced, Photoshopped body is everywhere—in fashion magazines, movies, billboards, ads, and on television. We know

the images are fake, but, on another level, we are seduced by what we see, and we measure ourselves by the images around us.

### Broadcast Yourself

In striking ways, the picture-perfect mentality, the self-conscious attention to the construction of images, and the focus on gaffes that reveal the artifice of the pose figure prominently in everyday life and contemporary culture. One way to appreciate our changing relation to the camera is to think of the difference between *Candid Camera*, *America's Funniest Home Videos*, and the videos posted on YouTube, MySpace, and other Internet picture-sharing sites.

In the 1960s, the popular program *Candid Camera* regaled viewers with the spectacle of ordinary people encountering unexpected circumstances, but the point of the comedy was that the subjects were innocent, unaware of the television camera. Only the punch line, "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*," revealed that others were watching. By the 1990s and early 2000s, Americans tuned in to watch and laugh at scenes of people getting stuck in dishwashers, having their pants fall down, or finding a hand reaching out of their soup pot on the popular program *America's Funniest Home Videos*. But there was a difference, which marks an important shift in American popular culture.

In *America's Funniest Home Videos*, the presence of the camera is no surprise. The participants hold the camera in their hands. Many episodes are not candid but posed, home videos self-consciously constructed to play before a national audience on television. While *Candid Camera* enjoyed a revival in the 1990s, the far more popular *America's Funniest Home Videos* exemplified the new photo-op mentality.

Unlike *Candid Camera*, *America's Funniest Home Videos* draws our attention to the image as an image. In the opening of the show, the camera focuses on the upper tier of the television studio, where a family watches television in a staged living room. A variation of this theme is played out in the studio below. A huge

screen displays the home videos competing for the prizes. The stars of the program are the contestants themselves, now in the studio audience, shown watching their videos on television.

With the advent of Internet social networking and picture-sharing sites, homemade videos of all kinds can be uploaded directly from a home computer. No need for a television program to play the middleman. With a few clicks, you can post your own video for the world to see. Many of the most popular videos on sites like YouTube are crazy stunts and embarrassing moments generated by high school- and college-aged kids. It is a way of generating a failed photo op for comic ends, though sometimes, embarrassing pictures are uploaded without the permission of the person featured.

On *Candid Camera* and *America's Funniest Home Videos*, the identity of the person in the picture was no secret. On YouTube, MySpace, and other Internet sites, the line between the person and the picture is often traversed since the posters often use pseudonyms. A popular video blog on YouTube called “lonely-girl15,” for example, began as a chronicle of the daily life of a home-schooled teenage girl from a strict religious family. When the daily musings became infused with a bizarre narrative of secret occult practices and the mysterious disappearance of the parents, fans of the blog began to suspect that the whole story was a fabrication. And indeed it turned out to be true. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that “lonely girl” was actually an actress, Jessica Lee, assisted by two professional screenwriters.<sup>49</sup> The exposé and new round of media attention did not diminish the appeal of the blog. Fans enjoyed following the fabrications as much as the so-called authentic memoir.

Short of broadcasting ourselves on the Internet, the home video camera makes it far easier to record family events than the old 8-millimeter home movie camera. This technological change carries consequences for the role of images—and image making—in our lives. Not only birthdays and weddings and family vacations, but also such intimate moments as childbirth are now captured on videotape. As one labor-room nurse notes, “Historically, women developed their birth stories through what they re-

membered, what their families told them, and what they discussed with caregivers. With advanced methods of recording childbirth, women's memories are changing. The 'truth' revealed by today's audio and video technology reframes the memories of labor and birth."<sup>50</sup> As more obstetricians and labor-room nurses find themselves on "candid camera," they've decided to take back control of the delivery room. A 2006 *Newsweek* article, "No Candid Camera," reported that hospitals are banning videotaping of childbirth, citing concerns about privacy, safety, and the fear that the birth videos could be used in malpractice suits.<sup>51</sup>

As always with photography, the camera's eye is never innocent. The documentary ambition to record the moment lives in constant tension with the impulse to pose. In the early 1990s, the *New York Times* ran a story that highlighted the growing tendency for people to arrange their lives and occasions to accommodate the video camera. While some parents still use the video camera, like the old home movie camera, to document the important moments of their lives, others fall into "talking like Hollywood types. [They] do not speak of taking the kids to the park and the zoo. They go 'on location.'"

Our strenuous efforts to capture important moments on videotape often transform these moments by the self-consciousness the camera induces. Even children quickly learn that going to the park to be videotaped is a different experience from just going to the park. As writer Don Gifford notes of the early video cameras, "The tapes made of family occasions would seem to promise spontaneity but . . . tend to be dominated by staged bits of action (just as still photographs of such occasions are so frequently dominated by the posed shot)." Gifford wonders how this new orientation is changing the way we see and live our lives. Much as the image-conscious coverage of presidential campaigns leads to a focus on mishaps and gaffes, he suggests that the growing image consciousness of ordinary life could have a similar effect. "The genuinely funny, unselfconscious family moments may be threatened with displacement by contrived, frenetic, half-comic scenes of pratfalls and other embarrassments."<sup>52</sup>

The phenomenon of “wedding photojournalism,” which has been popular since the late 1990s, is another example of the photo-op sensibility in everyday life. Instead of recording posed or idealized moments, wedding photojournalists aspire to capture the bride and groom in so-called unscripted and unguarded moments on the wedding day. I say *so-called* because bride and groom are fully aware of the camera’s presence. On the day I went online to the site of *WedPix*, the online magazine of the Wedding Photojournalist Association, the feature article was accompanied by a behind-the-scenes photo of a bride in a dressing area having makeup applied, with half her head cut off by the frame and her wedding dress hiked up by a bridesmaid to reveal her garter. “Real moments—you can’t fake them,” notes Peggy Bair, an award-winning Wedding Photojournalist Association photographer.<sup>53</sup>

But what counts as real? Like reality television programs, the so-called real moments often focus on the risqué, the voyeuristic, or like *Candid Camera* or YouTube, the downright silly—people dancing badly, looking bored, or otherwise caught unaware. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in a 2006 article, “Brides Gone Wild,” “Brides are revealing themselves at a time when popular culture has pushed the limits of privacy with boundary-blurring reality TV shows and dating sites that let users swap revealing photos.” As one mother-in-law told the uninhibited bride, “You’re going to have to show them to your kids one day.”<sup>54</sup>

Those in the media find, to their surprise, that the people they cover are now fluent in the language of video production. As early as the 1990s, Beth Pearlman, a producer for the CBS affiliate station WCCO in Minneapolis, was struck by the way media jargon has become public knowledge. “I go out on a story, and the person I’m going to talk to will ask me if I’m doing a feature or just a sound bite. Someone asked me the other day, ‘Do you want to shoot B-roll before we have our interview?’ B-roll is video that you run under the narration of the reporter. How do they know?”<sup>55</sup>

Television is not the only source of the image consciousness that informs everyday life. Giant video screens are now a familiar presence at rock concerts and large rallies, affording mass audi-

ences a better view of the event that is unfolding “before their eyes.” In the past, only those watching a baseball game on television could see an instant replay of a home run or a dazzling play in the field. Now the fans at the ballpark can also see the replay, thanks to the video screens that adorn most major-league stadiums. Mega churches also use giant video screens so that the pastors can be seen and heard by the thousands of congregants, and the congregants can see themselves singing and praying on the big screen.

Video consciousness and the play of images within images are familiar themes in popular entertainment and advertising. Madonna’s 1991 film *Truth or Dare* was a precursor of the image-conscious sensibility that characterizes today’s reality television shows. In the film documentary, Madonna celebrates the pose and denies the distinction between the performer and the person, between the image and the self. Even as a doctor examines her ailing throat, Madonna wants the cameras to roll. Her friend, actor Warren Beatty, questions the “insanity of doing this all on a documentary.” Madonna replies, “Why should I stop here?” Beatty chides her. “You don’t want to talk off camera. You don’t want to live off camera. There’s nothing to say off camera. Why would you say something off camera?” Madonna’s answer comes later in the song-and-dance number that sums her up. “Don’t just stand there, let’s get to it. Strike the pose, there’s nothing to it. Vogue. Vogue.”

The reality television programs that have become so popular in the 2000s incorporate and amplify the photo-op sensibility. Contemporary celebrities such as hotel heiress Paris Hilton, pop singer Britney Spears, and heavy metal rock musician Ozzie Osbourne have gone beyond Madonna. They have developed their own reality television series that take their fans behind the scenes to reveal how they live when they are not performing. In doing so, they frame their own flaws, foibles, and gaffes to create what they hope will be endearing entertainment. Unlike the people who create their own videos for YouTube, the stars have extensive postproduction teams who take the “reality” that unfolds before the camera and edit it into a well-paced show.

*Survivor* and *American Idol*, two of the most popular American reality television shows, work with this same tension between perfecting and puncturing the picture. Front stage is the competition to be the next star singer on *American Idol* or the best at performing the gauntlet of physical challenges in remote exotic locations on *Survivor*. In this sense, both shows tap into the American dream of the ordinary person rising to success and stardom. At the same time, the shows incorporate puncturing the picture as part of the entertainment. *American Idol* does this through the caustic remarks of one of the contest judges, Simon Cowell, who became a star in his own right by bluntly highlighting the flaws of contestants. *Survivor* also plays upon flaws in the many “confessional” interviews. Contestants speak in intimate detail about their “true feelings”—love interests, rivalries, plots, jealousies, and anger directed at members of their own or the opposing “tribe.” The choreographing of the real on *Survivor* goes beyond the fact that the isolated locales are littered with handheld video cameras trained on the contestants. Casting directors search for just the right mix of “real people” to appear on the show, aspiring actors try out to be contestants, and editors work to sharpen the drama by crafting the confessional scenes.

The struggle to perfect and puncture the picture in the age of reality television and the Internet has played itself out in interesting ways in the prelude to the 2008 presidential primaries. In 2007, a tour of the presidential candidates’ Web sites showed how the candidates used the Internet’s multimedia capabilities to control their image. Democrats could tune in to the “Hillcasts” on Hillary Clinton’s Web site or “Barack TV” on Barack Obama’s Web site. On the Republican side, you could watch “MittTV” on Mitt Romney’s Web site or go to the McCain Web site and catch John McCain’s announcement video “Live Free or Die,” in which McCain said, “Don’t change this channel. Put down that remote.”<sup>56</sup> On the unofficial Draft Fred Thompson for President ’08 Web site, fans of Thompson urged potential supporters “to check out the latest video petitions. . . . Politicians, pundits and pollsters have had their say—now it’s your turn. . . . See how to put your voice into action with YourTube4Fred.”<sup>57</sup> After Thomp-

son officially announced his candidacy on the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, you could tune into “FDTV” on Thompson’s Web site and look at a photo gallery of upbeat patriotic pictures reminiscent of Ronald Reagan’s campaign ads. Rudy Giuliani’s Web site also identified the candidate with Reagan and reminded supporters to put “Rudy on Your Blog” and “Call Talk Radio.”

The candidates’ Web sites have their own “newsrooms,” which feature carefully culled videos of television coverage of their campaigns, blogs, and chat rooms, and links to MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, and Flickr (a popular online photo-sharing site), where you can see more official campaign videos as well as videos made by their supporters. Liberals and conservatives alike make a point of reaching out to the “citizen journalist.” John Edwards’s Web site urged his supports to “Become a Citizen Journalist,” noting that “through blogging, video blogging, and podcasting, citizen journalists provide information and insights from many sources in addition to traditional media sources.” John McCain’s Web site reiterated the message in a section called Join the Media List: “We want to make sure all members of the media—whether mass media or citizen media—have access to the information they need.”

The candidates incorporate carefully crafted videos with perfect lighting and makeup that mimic the intimacy of TV talk shows and videos that have the handheld-camera look of digital and cell phone videos. The same cultivation of the traditional and the cutting edge is evident in the use of still photographs. On Hillary Clinton’s Web site you could watch a slide show of Hillary from childhood to the present that has the look and feel of paging through a family album. But the site was also filled with a cascade of photographs taken by supporters. These pictures, unlike the official ones, are “authentic” in a different way. They look like photos from an unedited digital picture file that you’d send a relative or friend—some flattering, others not, but all looking unposed and “real.”

The candidates’ Web sites cultivate the art of looking real in a way distinctive to our times. In the early days of television, candidates had to learn how to pose for the television camera. Then they mastered the media event. In the wake of YouTube, MySpace,

and Facebook, the best pose is to appear unposed. The idea is to present a continually evolving picture of yourself, and to invite your supporters to take pictures of you. Like friends posting pictures on Facebook, supporters are invited to post pictures as well. Everything is personal and connected. From MyBarackObama.com you could go to “My Blog,” “My Friends,” “My Messages.” On McCain Space you could create your own Web site. It’s not that traditional politics or patriotic imagery is left behind. Far from it. The debates, rallies, town meetings, interviews, talk shows, and coffee klatches are all posted on the candidates’ Web sites along with plenty of American flags and red, white, and blue logos and graphics.

For all the candidates’ efforts to control their images on the Internet, opponents had a heyday puncturing their perfect pictures on YouTube. In the summer of 2007, when I clicked on Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, two leading Democratic contenders for president, the first videos to come up mocked the candidates. One widely watched video showed John Edwards behind the scenes, primping and combing his hair for what seems like an eternity accompanied by the song “I Feel Pretty.” A video of Hillary Clinton, which had received over 3 million hits, portrayed her as a Big Brother figure on a giant screen. Clinton’s image is smashed by a woman athlete wielding a huge mallet (a send-up of Apple Computer’s 1984 Super Bowl commercial). Republican candidates were not spared the image debunking. Rudy Giuliani was spoofed hugging Donald Trump, and John McCain was shown singing “Bomb, bomb, bomb Iran” to the tune of a popular Beach Boys song at a campaign appearance. It should come as no surprise that in the world of YouTube, the first batch of videos on George W. Bush were all spoofs, failed photo ops, and highlights of the president’s malapropisms.

### **What’s Real, What’s Not**

From their earliest days, movies have made fun of politicians, and well before the current battle for control of the picture on the Internet and on television, movies have made television’s power

to fabricate images the subject of their stories. It is almost de rigueur for action-comedies and animated movies to self-consciously call attention to their own image making—sometimes in the form of genre spoofs, and sometimes breaking out of the story to call attention to the movie as a movie.

This self-consciousness in movies is an important strain, but not the dominant one. Most movies do not invite us to see the image as an image. They want us to relax, sit back, and suspend our disbelief. While we do just that, movies tell us stories about our lives. Although the movies do not claim to be presenting facts, people often believe and are moved by what they see, sometimes more so than what they see or hear in schools, lecture halls, or on the evening news.

Movies frame interpretations of the world that are often so offhanded that we are not fully conscious of it at the time. Think back on how television and newspaper reporters covered Bush's "Mission Accomplished" landing on the aircraft carrier. They heightened the drama of the event by featuring comparisons of Bush's tail-hook landing to blockbuster movies like *Top Gun*, *Air Force One*, and *Independence Day*. By bringing in the movies, reporters increased the mythic power of Bush's pictures. "Bush: The TV Movie" was orchestrated by Bush's media team, but the networks filmed it, produced it, and added their own narration.

For his part, Bush took on the mantle of the maverick hero long before the Iraq War. In his campaign for governor of Texas and later president, Bush had shed the image of the Yale-educated patrician son of a president and recast himself as a good old boy from Texas. He chopped wood on his ranch, wore jeans and a cowboy hat, and spoke in the plain patois of a cowboy. Criticized by some in Europe as an American cowboy, Bush was able to ride high at home by tapping into the potent rhetoric and image of the maverick hero.

Bush was suited to play the role by disposition and temperament unlike his father, George Herbert Walker Bush, who as president was very much the patrician and experienced Washington insider. In assuming the role of man of the people, the younger Bush was beholden to a different inheritance—a long lineage of

American presidents from Andrew Jackson to Abraham Lincoln to one of Bush's personal favorites, Teddy Roosevelt, in his role as a Rough Rider charging forward on his horse.

Among modern presidents, Ronald Reagan was the most successful practitioner of the politics of the maverick American hero, and Bush followed the path Reagan had forged. Reagan's ability to move within the story he told made for compelling rhetoric. "Go ahead, make my day," he challenged Congress, borrowing a line from Clint Eastwood's maverick cop, Dirty Harry. More than just an outsider, Reagan stood, like the citizen heroes of Frank Capra movies, as the redeemer of American individualism and idealism.

Reagan instinctively grasped that the American people were left reeling, groping for meaning, in the wake of the trauma and uncertainty after the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the hostage-taking in Iran. The mood of that time was captured in the popular and disturbing film *The Deer Hunter*. Shaken by Vietnam, the characters—young, patriotic working people from a Pennsylvania steel town—try to find their bearings. At the film's end, slowly, tentatively, they begin to sing, "God Bless America."

It was as if Reagan heard the faint strains of the melody and used his voice to make it a swelling song. His speeches drew the public into a ceremony of affirmation. The theme was economic and spiritual renewal. "We're going to make this great nation even greater," Reagan proclaimed. "America will be a rocket of hope shooting to the stars." The audiences became his chorus, chanting, on cue, "U.S.A.!"

Reagan deftly fused the image of the maverick with rhetoric that appealed to religious and moral sentiments. Although neither Catholic nor a born-again Christian, Reagan made the causes of school prayer and antiabortion his own. Here again, Reagan benefited from the ambiguity of his status as insider and outsider. Without being bound to a particular church or doctrine, he succeeded in identifying with religious longings and values. One consequence was that his nonfundamentalist supporters could comfortably dismiss the religious side of his appeal as unthreatening campaign rhetoric; for them it was enough that he was the

president of the economic recovery. For believers, meanwhile, Reagan was the defender of the faith.

It should have come as no surprise that after Reagan's death, both *Time* and *Newsweek* chose to eulogize him on their covers in a photograph portraying him as America's confident cowboy, wearing a blue work shirt and big white cowboy hat. Here was a cowboy who could speak a straightforward moral language in the waning stages of the cold war, not afraid to label the Soviet Union as the "evil empire," or challenge its leader: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall."

After September 11, Bush drew over and over again from this familiar rhetorical well, vowing "to hunt down, to find, to smoke out of their holes the terrorist organization that is the prime suspect."<sup>58</sup> Referring to Osama bin Laden, Bush declared after a meeting at the Pentagon: "I want justice. . . . And there's an old poster out West I recall, that said, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive.'"<sup>59</sup> Again and again, Bush spoke of bringing "the evildoers to justice," mixing cowboy talk with religious fervor. As the drumbeat for a war with Iraq intensified, Tim Russert, host of the television program *Meet the Press*, asked Vice President Dick Cheney, a prime advocate of the war, about the perception in Europe and around the world of the president "as a cowboy, that he wants to go it alone." Cheney was only too happy to reaffirm Bush's cowboy image: "So the notion that the president is a cowboy . . . a westerner, I think that's not necessarily a bad idea. I think the fact of the matter is he cuts to the chase. He is very direct and I find that very refreshing."<sup>60</sup>

The descent of the Iraq War into chaos, civil war, and insurgent violence did not turn Bush away from his moral certitudes nor did it diminish the appeal of the maverick hero in American culture. In the era of global terrorism, the maverick hero lives in new forms. Just ask Brig. Gen. Patrick Finnegan of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, who traveled to California in November 2006 to meet the producers of the enormously popular television series *24*. Why? Because the maverick hero of *24*, Jack Bauer,

played by Kiefer Sutherland, presents an attractive view of illegal torture, and this was having a bad influence on the troops.

In Jack Bauer's world, torture works. The fictional world of *24* is populated by terrorists who are on American soil plotting to destroy the nation. With an enemy so bent on evil, torture is positively patriotic. The stakes are always high—a plot to kill the president, a plot to blow up an American city with nuclear weapons—but Jack Bauer always saves the day, usually single-handedly just like the classic mavericks of the American westerns. The only difference (and it is not insignificant) is that torture was not in John Wayne's or Gary Cooper's repertoire. Jack Bauer spares nothing when it comes to spilling blood. The torture scenes are horrific, but always done for a higher good. "I'd like them to stop," General Finnegan said of the producers of *24*. "The kids see it and say, 'If torture is wrong, what about *24*?' "61 "Everyone wanted to be a Hollywood interrogator," observed Tony Lagouranis, a former U.S. Army interrogator at Abu Ghraib prison who spoke to the creative team of *24*. "That's all people did in Iraq was watch DVDs of television shows and movies. What we learned in military schools did not apply anymore."62

The movies also formed a dark reference point in the aftermath of Abu Ghraib. In trying to frame a way of understanding the prison abuse, a member of the military police who served at Abu Ghraib observed that it was "like *Apocalypse Now* meets *The Shining*, except this is real and we're in the middle of it."63

### Everyday Pictures

The line between the person and the picture, reality and fiction, is played out in other ways in everyday life. In the old days, people might throw away pictures of ex-husbands and wives, former friends and colleagues. Now they can be digitally discarded or "Photoshopped" out of the picture. The fact that Photoshop is now used as a verb shows how much digital manipulation has become a common coin of conversation. But if we can "Pho-

toshop” our past, how does this transform the meaning of photographs as documents and bearers of memories? How does it transform the very meaning of memory?

Beyond photo manipulation, the digital technology that makes pictures so easy to take and share has transformed how we use pictures in our daily lives. We increasingly experience the world as an occasion for posing. Never has the camera been more ubiquitous, the method of image transmission so quick, the temptation so great to take pictures everywhere. No so long ago we could see the photographer coming—Uncle Harry with his multiple cameras at family events, the tourists with camera bags and cameras strapped around each shoulder, doting parents following their kids with video cameras. Now that digital cameras and cell phone cameras are so small, so easily concealed, and so easy to use, it is hard to know when or where we might become someone’s photo opportunity. A recent cover of the *New Yorker* magazine humorously captured this trend. A young child toddles into his parent’s bedroom in his pajamas, but he hasn’t come to ask for another drink of water or one last hug. He stands at the threshold of the door, cell phone camera in hand, having just taken a picture of his parents, whose startled faces peek up from under the covers.

The use of webcams built into home computers, Internet picture-sharing sites, and reality television programs are the ultimate expression of a picture-driven culture in which all of life can be played out before the camera—waking up and going to bed, talking, sex, love, gossip, crime, courtships, and family fights. We have the capacity to craft our own images for the world to see, but we can also fall prey to the same pitfalls and problems faced by politicians, celebrities, and other media personalities. Who is the self we are broadcasting, and for whose eyes? How will those who view us distinguish the person from the pose? And, for that matter how will we? When everyone with a cell phone is a potential member of the paparazzi, when any picture posted spontaneously among friends can become a part of the permanent record, the line between public and private life dissolves. We are all in the picture now. But like celebrities and politicians, we sometimes lose control of the image.

## What's Real in the Pose

Some, especially those in the media who have to cover one politician's photo op after another, begin to think that the very act of posing makes a picture inauthentic. But criticism of politicians who claim to uphold American ideals cannot rest with simply revealing that they pose for pictures against flattering backdrops. Who in this modern age does not stage events for the camera? The networks, after all, stage their evening newscasts every night with music, backdrops, carefully written scripts, and makeup for their anchors and reporters. The stagecraft of newscasts is far slicker now, but it has always been part of broadcasting the news. A veteran reporter of the 1968 campaign recalls, "we were all sitting around talking, and someone said, 'Nixon is wearing makeup.' I said, 'Look around, guys. Everybody at this table is wearing makeup. Where do we get off criticizing the politicians?' We were in theater, but we didn't like the idea."<sup>64</sup>

To plan or stage an event for the press does not falsify its content, as the history of press coverage of political events amply demonstrates. Before a Vietnamese Buddhist monk burned himself to death in 1963 in protest against his government's policies, his supporters notified the Associated Press, which recorded the event in a famous photograph. Similarly, leaders of the civil rights movement learned to time their demonstrations so that television could carry their message to the nation. Communicating through television images is part of modern discourse.

The distinction between real and pseudo-events must be judged not on the method of presentation but on the content of the event. When an American cardinal visiting Pope John Paul II asked, "if a hometown television crew could film the two together," the pope looked at him, smiled, and said, "If it doesn't happen on television, it doesn't happen." When he assumed the papacy in 1978, John Paul II moved to change the ancient office to become more media savvy. The Rev. Federico Lombardi, head of Vatican radio, observed that "the pope was attuned enough to the media that he held meetings over lunch or dinner with aides

after every trip, dissecting the news coverage.” In 1995, the Vatican began a Web site ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)), and in 2002 the pope issued a lengthy document on the use of the Internet to further the church’s work.<sup>65</sup>

For the pope, the point of all the pictures was not the pose. He cultivated the camera to convey his deeply conservative beliefs about birth control, human sexuality, the celibacy of the priesthood, the role of women, and deference to the church hierarchy. As columnist Andrew Sullivan notes, “the modern-looking stage, the vast crowds . . . the carefully planned photo ops—they all created a series of mirrors focusing back on the man himself. . . . It took a while to realize that this personalization of the Church—and its identification with one man before all others—was more than drama. Wojtyła leveraged this new stardom to reassert a far older idea of the papacy—as the central, unaccountable force in the Church.”<sup>66</sup>

The camera-ready pope has left a legacy of camera-ready faithful. In Pope Benedict’s campaign to make Pope John Paul II a saint, the media has not been neglected. A necessary step on the pathway to sainthood is proof of a miracle. A French nun, Sister Marie Simon-Pierre, stepped forward to offer evidence: she prayed to Pope John Paul after he died and was cured of Parkinson’s disease. A gentle and devout woman, Sister Marie Simon-Pierre had planned to keep her identity secret, but emboldened by the man who provided her miracle cure, she decided to appear at a press conference, noting, “He never shied away from the cameras.”<sup>67</sup>

### Why Words Matter

In a book that focuses so much attention on images, I want to reiterate what to me seems obvious: words matter. For all the attention lavished on Bush’s landing on the aircraft carrier at the beginning of the Iraq War, it was not the pictures that were his undoing. It was those two fateful words on the banner—mission accomplished. The Bush media advisers tried to tighten their con-

trol of the image by building the words right into the picture, like an ad with a logo or tagline. In one glance you see the message. But, in this case, the media advisers had been too sophisticated for their own good. The words came to define the picture.

Bush never uttered the words *mission accomplished* in the more nuanced speech he delivered about the war that day, but the words on the banner stood out as a declarative statement that could be measured and evaluated by unfolding events. Even before Bush delivered his speech on the deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, reporters questioned the meaning of the “Mission Accomplished” banner. CNN reporter John King, for example, observed, “When we see the president stride across the deck of the *Abraham Lincoln* about thirty minutes from now, he’ll walk past two Navy fighter jets and past a banner that says, ‘Mission Accomplished.’ Now that might raise some eyebrows. . . . Many will question, how can you say mission accomplished when the United States has yet to find any evidence of weapons of mass destruction, the reason Mr. Bush launched this war to begin with?”<sup>68</sup>

The networks marked the one-year anniversary of Bush’s landing on the *Lincoln* noting that what was described as the “greatest photo op of all time” was now “the photo opportunity that some Republicans regret,” and noted that the “elaborately staged appearance” now “haunts the president.”<sup>69</sup> Critics noted the rising death toll of American soldiers, the strength of the Iraqi insurgency, and the uncertainty over whether American goals of bringing democracy to Iraq would succeed. The Democrats had a heyday with “Mission Accomplished” during the midterm elections, incorporating them into campaign ads with a new logo “Mission Not Accomplished.” Subsequent anniversaries of America’s entry in the Iraq War continued to be marked by references to Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” banner.

As my story unfolds, I will argue that image-conscious political reporting fails in two respects. It inflates the importance of the process of image making without adequately assessing the meaning of the images. And calling attention to the image as an image may not be enough to dissolve its hold. The reason is not that images are more powerful than words, but that certain images

resonate with meanings and ideals that run deep in American culture. To fulfill its documentary purpose, political reporting must engage the content of public officials' pictures and words and assess the substance of their claims.

The larger message about the relation of words to images is that pictures make no sense without words, without a story to explain them, without a cultural and political frame of reference. Think about some famous American pictures—Joe Rosenthal's World War II picture of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima, or Eddie Adams's Vietnam-era photograph of the execution of a suspected North Vietnamese fighter on the streets of Saigon. Americans of a certain generation may think they instantly "get" these pictures, but these images have been subjected to various interpretations, controversies, and reinterpretations. They are markers of memories, icons of American culture, but would not have the same resonance for people from other parts of the world where different pictures and other stories form the chronicles of collective life.

In telling the story of the rise of a new image consciousness in American life, my aim is not to explain, in causal terms, the developments I describe. It is rather to explore the expressions and problems of America's photo-op culture, and to consider its consequences for our understanding of ourselves. Since I hope to show that our photo-op culture plays out, in heightened form, tendencies as old as the photograph itself, my story continues with the invention of the photograph over a century and a half ago.