The election of Barack Obama opened a new chapter in the history of the U.S. presidency and transformed the visual practices of the office. Just a few months after the 2009 inauguration, the Obama administration announced it would use the popular social media site Flickr to share White House photographs with the public. Previous administrations employed official White House photographers to chronicle each president’s time in office with an eye toward posterity, but Obama expanded presidential photography into an unprecedented, real-time social media strategy. By the time he left office, the White House Flickr photostream contained more than six thousand images that offered viewers a carefully curated behind-the-scenes look at the president of the United States. These photographs continue to circulate widely today as visual exemplars of presidential leadership. By communicating his visual image to the public in ways that bypassed traditional media almost entirely, Barack Obama changed the history of presidential image making and, in the process, became a key player in a dramatic transformation in the history of photography itself.

But Obama was not the first president to shape photography in the public sphere. Throughout U.S. history, presidents have participated in photography as subjects, producers, and consumers of photographs. They have posed for portraits, been captured in snapshots, orchestrated photo opportunities,
and in at least one memorable case threatened to punch a photographer. *Photographic Presidents* tells a history of photography through stories of how presidents shaped and participated in transformative moments in the history of the medium: the rise of the daguerreotype portrait after 1839, the dawn of the “halftone era” in the late nineteenth century, the emergence of so-called candid camera photography in the late 1920s, and the digital revolution of the early twenty-first century. From daguerreotypes to selfies, from the earliest photographs printed in newspapers to online slide shows, the technological developments I chronicle here transformed our practices of photography and introduced new visual values to the medium. These new visual values became the evaluative standards by which photography would be judged moving forward. Thus, as photography itself changed, so too did the way its practitioners and consumers understood its significance, impact, and role in the culture. Because presidential photographs represented elite leaders who symbolized the nation, they became prominent contexts in which the implications of these new visual values played out in public, often clashing with existing social and cultural norms.

Stories of presidents’ participation in photography offer a compelling lens through which to study how photography shapes public experience. I begin with George Washington, who, more than fifty years after his death, emerged as a crucial subject for early photography in a nation eager to consume portraits of elite leaders. Subsequent chapters feature stories of presidents’ engagements with key moments of transformation in photography: John Quincy Adams, who in the early 1840s lamented in his diary his failure to get a good daguerreotype (“all hideous,” he said); William McKinley, whose 1901 assassination set off a morbid race to find and publish the dead president’s “last photographs”; Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt, each vexed by encounters with “candid cameramen” who had the capacity to catch their subjects unaware; and Barack Obama, whose use of social media photography embodied the tensions inherent in early twenty-first-century digital photography.

The president of the United States is a singular citizen who at the same time symbolically represents the nation; in short, the president’s image is the nation’s image.¹ Yet no one has examined the 180-year relationship between U.S. presidents and photography in any depth.² This lack of attention is surprising, given that photography emerged as a public art early in the nation’s history, that presidents participated in photography from its beginnings, and that strategic use of photography helped to elect
leaders from Lincoln to Kennedy and beyond. Presidential biographies and memoirs of White House photographers offer intriguing yet frustratingly brief anecdotes about presidential encounters with the camera. Histories of presidents’ relationships with the press may mention photography in passing but are more interested in the institutional features of the White House press operation than in presidential photography specifically. Political communication researchers typically treat photography as a tool that politicians use to build an image, get elected, or wield authority; furthermore, they usually ignore the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in favor of the decades after the dawn of television. Overall, while a few people have studied what photography can tell us about a few presidents, no one yet has asked what studying presidents’ relationships with photography tells us about the history of photography itself.

*Photographic Presidents* tells that story. In our present moment, when former Obama White House chief photographer Pete Souza has garnered two million Instagram followers for his pointed visual criticism of President Donald Trump, and photographs of presidents past and present circulate endlessly via online news, social media, and memes, the time is ripe for a history of presidents’ relationships with photography. I bring together primary sources such as diaries, letters, newspapers, magazines, images, and memes with scholarship from the fields of communication, political science, media, literature, and art history to tell a new story about a medium and an institution that have largely grown up together. My goal is to move beyond the popular but narrow characterization of presidential photography as a political tool. Because I want to think more broadly about how presidents participate in the visual public sphere, I treat the presidents I discuss in a somewhat unconventional manner. While they are key characters in my story, they do not by themselves drive the plot. This is not a book about the presidency as an institution, nor does it focus closely on the relationship between presidents and the press. The reader will not find presidential biographies or tales of policy victories and defeats. In fact, some of the presidents I take up were not even serving in that role during the time periods I discuss. For example, John Quincy Adams was a congressman decades beyond his presidency when he was first photographed, and both George Washington and William McKinley were dead for most of the chapters that focus on them. By flipping the conventional script from “presidential photography” to “photographic presidents,” I invite readers to picture the visual past in a new way.
In addition, the story I tell reminds us that every era grapples with the opportunities and challenges of its own new media. By studying moments of technological transformation across the history of the medium, I show how not only presidents but all Americans have made sense of the changing visual values through which we experience and engage one another. Each moment of technological change I take up in the book—the daguerreotype, the news photograph and snapshot, the candid camera image, social media photography—activated lively public conversations about the social and cultural implications of these new visual values. Was photography a suitable medium for the depiction of the nation and its leaders? Could photography be relied upon to communicate both accurate and instantaneous news to the public? Was photography’s increasing capacity to make private moments public a blessing or a curse? And how, in the age of endlessly circulating digital photographs, can twenty-first-century citizens control their image in a hypermediated culture of sharing and remixing? Using photographic presidents as a historical and critical lens, I identify and track these conversations and questions across a landscape that stretches from the founding of the nation to the present.

Structure of the Book

The book is structured in paired chapters that alternate short narratives about the history of photography in a particular time period with longer, substantive stories about specific photographic presidents. The short chapters are there to provide the reader with sufficient historical and cultural context for understanding each photographic president’s story in the longer chapters. I begin by asking why George Washington emerged as a subject of early photography after its introduction in the United States in 1839. Unavailable to be photographed from life (he had died fifty years before), Washington’s image nevertheless circulated in daguerreotypes of busts and painted portraits. The urge to photograph Washington illustrated the immediacy with which photography and the presidency became linked in the public mind.

Portraiture was a vital art of national character in the early American republic. The daguerreotype brought to portraiture new visual values that highlighted the nascent medium’s paradoxical capacity to produce images of perfect fidelity to reality and astounding wonder. In Washington, DC, itinerant daguerreotypists and, later, permanent studios became integrated
into the social life of the U.S. capital as photographers sought out the nation’s elites to photograph. John Quincy Adams sat for upward of fifty daguerreotypes between 1842 and his death in 1848. Adams wrote about his experiences with photography in his diary, experiences that were mostly frustrating. My analysis of his writings reveals a thoughtful, anxious public figure grappling with the question of what photography’s capacity to produce images that Adams called “too true to the original” might mean for building a visual record of national memory. The medium introduced new visual values of fidelity and wonder to the culture, but Adams doubted whether photography was the best art for producing what he termed “true portraiture of the heart”—portraits that were, in his words, “worthy of being preserved” as images of and for the nation.

The next pair of chapters brings the reader from the daguerreotype era of fidelity and wonder to the beginning of the twentieth century, which featured the new visual value of timely photography. This period included the rise of printed, reproducible photographs; the introduction of amateur cameras (and subsequent anxieties about how they would be used); and the so-called halftone revolution that made it possible to print photographs in newspapers and magazines. With these developments in mind, I explore photographs of William McKinley published in the wake of his 1901 assassination at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. After the president’s death, editors rushed to publish what they defined as the “last photographs” of President McKinley, images made while he toured the exposition in the days before his death. These “last photographs”—which did not include actual images of the shooting—were sought after in part because they represented photography’s recently developed capacity for capturing timely news events. The new visual value of timeliness that dominated the halftone era of the snapshot and news photograph produced often unreasonable expectations for images that could capture a single historic moment in time.

Moving from the early twentieth century to the 1930s, the next two chapters explore the period “between the Roosevelts,” from Theodore to Franklin. This era was marked by the rise of photo agencies designed to circulate news photographs widely, the publication of photo-heavy sections in newspapers and magazines, the increasing professionalization of photojournalism, and, beginning in the late 1920s, the rise of miniature photography, also known as “candid camera” photography. I examine how Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt engaged with the new visual value
of candidness that was grounded in the access, intimacy, and energy offered by the new miniature cameras. The candid camera gave viewers insight into processes of political deliberation that previously had been invisible to them, yet it also posed risks for politicians who worried that they might fall victim to the candid camera’s prying eyes. The new visual value of candidness clashed with fragile norms of presidential decorum that had developed since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The next pair of chapters brings the reader from the mid-twentieth century to our present digital era, which brought with it yet another group of new visual values: those of sharing and remixing. I explore the impact on photography of television and the internet, examine the push-pull relationship between the visual press and the president, outline the history of the job of official White House photographer, and highlight the impact of Web 2.0 on presidential communication. I then turn to the visual archive built when the Obama White House chose to make official White House photographs available to the public via the social media photography site Flickr. The Obama White House Flickr photostream—still preserved in its original form today—constituted a discrete, real-time social media photography archive and also operated as an axis around which other social media practices and public debates about photography circulated. Social media privileges the visual values of sharing and remixing, and my analysis of the Obama Flickr site shows how those visual values were often in tension with the administration’s desire for image control.

The presidents I study in this book—from John Quincy Adams, the daguerreotype president, to Barack Obama, the social media president—are photographic presidents not only because they participated in photography but also because they engaged the medium at precisely those moments when its visual values were in flux. New visual values like fidelity, wonder, timeliness, candidness, sharing, and remixing emerged at moments of technological change in the new medium and activated new relations between presidents and the public. Adams’s frustrating encounters with the fidelity and wonder of the daguerreotype, McKinley’s contradictory representations in the context of timely news photography, Hoover’s and Roosevelt’s struggles with the candid camera, and Obama’s desire for control amid a culture of sharing and remixing: these stories all serve as a powerful lens through which to explore the history of photography and its changing visual values.