PART II

The Snapshot President
CHAPTER 4

Handheld Photography and the Halftone Revolution

Photography changed dramatically between John Quincy Adams’s bodily struggles with the daguerreotype and the later nineteenth century. The daguerreotype faded in popularity by the mid-1850s, replaced first by other one-of-a-kind images, such as the ambrotype (a non-mirrored, positive image on a glass plate) and its cheaper cousin the tintype, then eclipsed almost entirely by the wide introduction of photographs printed on paper.¹ Paper photographs offered the possibility of endless reproduction, something earlier photographic technologies had not. By the end of the nineteenth century, photography became a mass medium, capable of being printed in newspapers and magazines in ways that brought visual news to the masses. In addition, by the end of the nineteenth century those masses had cameras of their own and began to make their own photographs. Presidential portraiture adapted to these changes, becoming less formal and posed. But presidents struggled with new possibilities that photographers with increasingly portable cameras would force on them in both public and private spaces. As the century progressed, the daguerreotype’s visual values of fidelity and wonder made way for the shift to a timely photography made possible by the emergence of handheld cameras and the ability to reproduce photographs in print.
The rise to public prominence of Abraham Lincoln paralleled the earliest of these changes. Before and during his presidency Lincoln was photographed more than 120 times, making him one of the most photographed Americans of the nineteenth century.² Harold Holzer writes, “During the five years of his national fame from 1860–65, he unfailingly made himself available to photographers, painters and sculptors even during periods of crisis, strongly suggesting that he personally appreciated, and endorsed, the importance of portraiture in recording his triumphs.”³ The oldest known photograph of Lincoln is a daguerreotype by N. H. Shepherd made in Springfield, Illinois, in 1846 or 1847.⁴ By the late 1850s, as the daguerreotype waned in popularity, Lincoln sat instead for the newer photographic technology of the ambrotype as he traveled around Illinois in his unsuccessful bid to become a U.S. senator.⁵ During the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858, for example, Lincoln sat for portraits in towns where the debates took place, including Pittsfield and Macomb, the latter photograph made as a thank-you gift for his local host.⁶ Closer to the 1860 presidential election and after, Lincoln was increasingly photographed using glass-plate negatives from which positives would be printed on paper using salt or albumen solutions. One of these glass negatives, made at Lincoln’s last official portrait sitting in Washington in February 1865, famously (and, some contend, ominously) cracked during processing; all that remains today is the single, poignant paper print that Alexander Gardner pulled from it before he threw away the plate.⁷

Lincoln’s most famous prepresidential photograph was initially encountered by most Americans as an engraving. In February 1860 Lincoln traveled to New York City to give a speech at Cooper Union (also known at the time as Cooper Institute). As Holzer explained, it was Lincoln’s “very first speech in the media center of the nation” and “presented him with a great opportunity to convince Easterners that he was more than a frontier debater, and a further chance to produce a document that the New York publishers might reprint and circulate nationwide.”⁸ To commemorate the candidate’s visit and important speech, Lincoln’s companions brought him to Mathew Brady’s New York City studio to sit for a photograph. Brady was at the height of his fame, his studio as much a place to see and be seen as a place to have one’s picture made.⁹ What became known as the “Cooper Union photograph” is a three-quarter-length portrait of a beardless Lincoln in a slightly rumpled suit, standing next to a low table and resting his left hand on a pair of books. Brady made the unusual choice to photograph Lincoln
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standing, which no photographer up to that point had done. Lincoln looks directly at the viewer, a serious expression on his face, his full height reflected in the pose. Brady chose to frame Lincoln against a relatively plain backdrop that includes a pillar, which when combined with the books and table gives the image a vaguely civic gravitas. Both the speech and the photograph succeeded in introducing Lincoln to the nation. Holzer writes, “The picture captured Lincoln in all his western vigor, refracted by a new and convincing dignity. It was a work of art. It is no wonder that Lincoln later said: ‘Brady and the Cooper Institute made me President.’”

Figure 4.1: Mathew Brady, Abraham Lincoln, candidate for U.S. president, before delivering his Cooper Union address in New York City, 1860. (Library of Congress.)
The initial public impact of the image derived not from the photograph itself but from engravings and other nonphotographic reproductions that circulated throughout 1860. Brady’s image first circulated widely in May 1860, when *Harper’s Weekly* magazine put a head-and-shoulders engraving of it on its cover to commemorate Lincoln’s nomination for the presidency. Throughout 1860, popular engravers Currier and Ives issued several versions of the Cooper Union portrait, including a lithograph titled “Our Next President.” *Harper’s* revisited the Brady photograph again after Lincoln won the election in November. This time the engraver added drapery and a window behind Lincoln; in the distance, buffalo graze on a flat prairie that presumably signified the president-elect’s western origins. During the campaign the image was also reproduced on all kinds of memorabilia, such as ribbons and buttons. Eventually, Brady and other photographers issued copies of the photograph as cartes de visite (visiting cards), a new type of paper print glued to cardboard that became popular in the United States immediately following the campaign of 1860. The Cooper Union photograph and subsequent images of President Lincoln would participate extensively in this new mode of visual commerce.

**The Visual Commerce in Paper Photography**

That visual commerce was fueled by the new ability to reproduce photographs on paper. Paper negatives and positives had existed since the invention of photography. But paper lacked commercial viability, so it remained in the background while the daguerreotype and subsequent related technologies came to dominate U.S. photography. That began to change in the late 1850s. Once it became commercially feasible to expose images from glass negatives onto sensitized paper, the market for paper photographs took off. The process allowed for endless copying of the same image and enabled extended commerce in images like the carte de visite, cabinet card, and stereograph. The carte de visite was invented in France in the 1850s. Originally intended to be a visual calling card, it quickly became more than that. Consisting of images printed on shiny albumen paper glued to heavier cardstock, cartes de visite could be easily mass-produced, collected into albums, and shared via the postal service. A writer for *Art Journal* in 1862 described cartes de visite as the “most felicitous expressions of the photographer’s art. They are such true
portraits, and they are so readily attainable, and so easily reproduced, that they may well aspire to become absolutely universal.” While cartes de visite were more commonly made for and exchanged with loved ones, they also served as a powerful medium for communicating likenesses of celebrities and political figures. The Art Journal writer emphasized this dual role, arguing for cartes de visite as extensions of national portrait galleries like those the daguerreotypists of Washington, DC, and New York constructed in the 1840s and 1850s: “They produce the family portrait of the entire community. They form portrait collections, on a miniature scale, but with an unlimited range and in every possible variety—family collections, collections of portraits of friends, and of celebrities of every rank and order.” An 1862 catalog from Mathew Brady illustrated the popularity of celebrity prints, listing hundreds of card photographs for sale, organized into eleven separate categories. Seven of those categories featured celebrated figures in politics, literature, the military, and the stage, and included images of all sixteen presidents to date. Presidents occupied a popular space in carte de visite culture. Take, for example, a carte de visite called “Presidents of U.S.,” a composite of portraits of every president up to Ulysses S. Grant. A petite two and a half inches by four inches in size, it likely dates from the mid-1870s, perhaps produced as part of the centennial celebration of the Declaration of Independence. Cartes de visite remained popular until the 1870s, when they were generally replaced by the larger, four-by-six-inch cabinet card or “imperial” carte de visite that used the same formula of paper affixed to card stock.

The stereograph is rare among nineteenth-century photographic technologies in that it successfully made the transition from the glass to the paper age of photography. Made possible by the physical fact of human binocular vision, the stereograph pairs two slightly different images of the same subject that, when viewed through a stereoscope, appear to be one three-dimensional picture. Stereographs served as instruments for acquiring visual knowledge, and they were often sold as themed collections of faraway places one might never be able to visit in person. In a series of essays published in the Atlantic in the early 1860s, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. touted stereography as a way to see the world from one’s armchair. Compared to other photographic technologies, the stereograph had a long life. Scholars estimate that between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s, between three to six million stereograph images were produced.
As a result of its longevity and wide circulation, Simone Natale argues, stereography should be recognized as “the first mass visual medium.”

While Americans might collect presidential cartes de visite in albums, or study stereographs of faraway places in their stereoscopes, it was not until well into the 1890s that they would find photographs of presidents accurately reproduced as photographs in newspapers and magazines. While news imagery predated the introduction of the halftone printing process,
halftone transformed the public’s experiences of the news and marked an important moment in the shift to a new kind of photography oriented toward timeliness.

The Rise of Halftone and the Birth of News Photography

Throughout the final decades of the nineteenth century, printers sought ways to print photographs directly onto the same paper used to produce newspapers, books, and magazines. The first successful experiments with halftone appeared in the early 1880s, beginning with the March 1880 publication of a photograph titled “A Scene in Shanty Town” in the *New York Graphic*. The publishers captioned the halftone image (in all caps) as a “REPRODUCTION DIRECT FROM NATURE,” suggesting both their level of excitement about the new process and the extent to which halftone seemed to erase the distance between the photograph and its mode of reproduction.30 While halftone reproduction developed and became more nuanced over time, at its core the process involved the use of a screen that divided the image into a system of tiny black and white dots. The density of these dots would produce the visual impression of a range of gray tones that appeared as a continuous image.31 After 1880 it took some time for publishers to catch up with the possibilities of the new technology. By the 1890s the use of halftone in book publishing was common; one historian designated the year 1897 as the moment when halftone came to saturate U.S. newspapers.32

While we tend to associate it most with photography, halftone soon came to be the preferred mode for printing all kinds of images. Halftone cost significantly less than traditional engraving; while a woodcut in the early 1890s might cost close to three hundred dollars, a halftone would be closer to twenty.33 Publishers moved quickly to adopt the new technology, and between 1890 and 1900 the ratio of engravings to halftone in some journals essentially flipped.34 Weekly magazines also eagerly bought into the new market for visual images.35

Halftone changed the viewer’s experience of visual illustration, drastically increasing the quantity of images that people encountered in their daily lives.36 But halftone also changed the quality of the images that people engaged. Halftone images looked decidedly different from engravings, and even from the photographs upon which they were based. As a result, viewers needed to learn how to interpret the images.37 In addition, largely because
of the dots, early halftones were not seen as an aesthetically pleasing mode of image reproduction, especially when compared with exquisitely rendered engravings.38 Commentators at the time also lamented the impending loss of the art of engraving itself.39 In 1895 a writer for the New York Times observed, “While the half-tone has many advantages, and is perhaps in many respects a more satisfactory medium for the reproduction of picture, portrait, landscape, and incident, making possible much that before was impracticable, still, with the decline of wood engraving, art will be greatly the loser.” But for this writer at least, the tradeoff was worth it: “What we lose in the beauty of line we gain in the increased number of the illustrations.”40

By the dawn of the twentieth century, halftone had become integrated into the visual experiences of media-consuming Americans. If they regularly read a big-city newspaper or subscribed to general weekly magazines such as Frank Leslie’s, Harper’s, or Collier’s, they encountered page after page of halftone photographs. In the newspapers, special Sunday supplements highlighted the week’s news by featuring halftone reproductions of photographs representing all topics, from the most important to the silliest. The halftone revolution helped to change photography’s relationship to time because it changed photography’s relationship to mechanization. Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone write of this period, “Pictures adopted greater claims to status in the hierarchy of news values. Newspapers advertised scoops—the last picture or the latest picture. That change was accompanied by the loss of image-as-handicraft” as earlier modes for rendering images were “replaced by the supposedly mechanical photograph.”41 Mechanization sped up the number and frequency of photographs Americans encountered and, as a result, changed their expectations for photographs’ timeliness.

**Handheld Cameras and Camera Fiends**

While printers worked out the complexities of how one might faithfully reproduce a photograph in newspapers, books, and magazines, other practitioners focused on making improvements to cameras and processes. These innovations eventually led to the rise of amateur snapshot photography, made possible first by the shift from wet-plate to dry-plate photography and then the subsequent introduction of the handheld camera. As with halftone, these technological changes transformed the average person’s relationship to photography. By the end of the nineteenth century,
millions of Americans turned from consumers of photographs into makers of them. But with the rise in the number of camera-wielding Americans came a parallel rise in anxiety about what people might do in public with those cameras, creating a fear of the so-called camera fiend that lasted until well into the twentieth century.

As its name suggests, wet-plate photography required the photographer to coat a glass plate with light-sensitive chemicals just before making an exposure—in other words, while the plate was wet—and then immediately develop it. While this process often produced exquisite images, it also required photographers to develop their own pictures, which limited the practice of photography largely to professionals and highly motivated amateurs. The commercial emergence of dry-plate photography in the 1880s changed this. Dry-plate photography offered precisely what its name suggested: a way to coat chemicals onto plates so that they could be exposed when dry. Photographers could then coat many at once and store them for later use. Eventually photographers did not need to coat their own plates at all, because they could purchase prepared plates from manufacturers. The gelatin coating on the dry plates turned out to be more light-sensitive than what was used in the wet-plate process, another benefit. As a result of increased light sensitivity, exposure times for dry-plate images plummeted, speeding up the entire process.

The shift to dry-plate photography eventually led to the development of roll film and the handheld film camera, two technologies that lasted in some form for more than a hundred years and lost popularity only with the digital revolution. As with most technological developments in photography, however, these changes happened in a series of smaller steps. Because of the greater light sensitivity of the dry plate, cameras now required a shutter, a small door that opened and closed inside the camera, limiting the amount of time the plate inside was exposed to light. Because of sped-up exposure times and the use of a shutter, cameras no longer needed to be as large in order to let the light in. Sometimes called “detective cameras,” these smaller cameras were designed primarily for amateurs, who did not require the levels of individual control that professionals wanted. Compared to later box cameras, the detective cameras were still large but nevertheless represented a distinct change from past devices.

Here George Eastman became a prominent part of the story. Eastman started out in Rochester, New York, as a bank clerk with a deep interest
in amateur photography. Like other devoted amateurs of the time, he began with the wet-plate process but later experimented with dry-plate photography. After making many improvements to the process—so successfully that his photographer friends began asking him to prepare their plates too—Eastman went into business for himself. By 1883 Eastman operated his own factories and a profitable international business. He also made experiments with flexible film, which could be coated with the proper chemicals and spooled on a roller, removing the need to exchange glass plates between exposures.

Eastman’s successes were only modest until he introduced the first Kodak camera, which combined the small size and portability of the earlier detective cameras with flexible film. Kodak Number One, as it was known, cost twenty-five dollars and came with a roll of film long enough to provide the user with one hundred exposures. In today’s terms this would have been the equivalent of about six hundred dollars, or what a farm laborer of the time might have made in a year. Because of the steep price, the cameras did not fly off the shelves. Even so, Eastman’s factories in the United States and England produced more than one hundred thousand of them by 1896. Advertised with the slogan “You press the button, we do the rest,” the Kodak camera offered amateurs the chance to learn photography without having to worry about developing the pictures. While users could develop the photographs on their own, Kodak encouraged photographers (whom it called “Kodakers”) to mail the whole camera back to the company. The film would be unloaded, developed, and the resulting photographs printed. Photographs would then be returned to the customer, along with a new roll of film in the camera, and the process would start all over again.

The first Kodak cameras made truly amateur photography possible and made the medium available to anyone who could afford a camera. Of this period Robert Mensel writes, “The most important cultural consequence of the technological and marketing strategy which produced the Kodak was that it completely changed the conception of who was to practice photography.” In large cities like New York, for example, it seemed that photographs suddenly appeared everywhere: “Photographs were sold in a variety of locations, from the attractive shops of successful professional photographers to general junk shops. They were disposed from vending machines, and even given away free in cigarette packs.” With such ubiquity came anxiety about the role of cameras in public. In 1885 Anthony’s
Photographic Bulletin warned readers, “It behooves every man, woman and child to walk circumspectly while on the streets, for it is impossible to tell when they may be confronted with a photograph showing them in some ridiculous or embarrassing position.”55 Such criticism also extended to the newspapers and magazines that published such images; an 1896 essay in the North American Review complained about “the new illustrated journalism, built upon surreptitiously taken photographs.”56 Soon advertisers appropriated uncredited snapshots to sell their products. In 1902 the New York Times reported that one woman was shocked to discover an unauthorized photograph of herself in a corset advertisement.57 A new term emerged as a label for such behavior: “camera fiend” arose during this time to describe amateur photographers who lurked about in public, taking people’s photographs without permission.58 In an 1897 essay called “Confessions of a Camera Fiend,” the writer jokingly claimed to “have raised the snapshot to a fine art” and to have developed a “special” skill for photographing celebrities in the water and from behind; neither approach offered much opportunity for consensual, flattering poses.59 For the Ladies Home Journal in 1900, the concern was ultimately one of manners. It urged the magazine’s women readers to recognize that “there are those who
have a strong prejudice against being promiscuously ‘snapped at’ through
a camera.” All people—even presidents, the magazine suggested—should be
able to decline being photographed, and they especially should be allowed to
keep their children from being photographed. Not everything, the magazine
warned, “may be considered as fair game for their cameras, and . . . no one
should interpose objections to being ‘snapped.’” While the camera could be a
wonderful educational tool, the writer concluded, “it must not be employed
in violation of private rights.”60 Women and girls often were framed in these
accounts as especially vulnerable. For their part, photographers sought to
differentiate their profession from those amateurs who behaved badly. A
writer in the British journal Photography observed in 1900, “There are, of
course, ‘cads with cameras’ just as there are ‘cads on castors.’ No hobby, or
profession, is free from the all pervading ‘bounder,’ and there is no reason
why we photographers should be exempt. To utter sweeping condemnation
of every user of a hand camera because a few have attempted to abuse is
neither just nor reasonable.”61

The public craving for photographs rose exponentially with the intro-
duction of a cheap Kodak camera in 1900. While the first Kodaks eventu-
ally came down in price and rose in popularity, it was not until Eastman’s
introduction of the Kodak Brownie that snapshot photography came into
its own. Costing only one dollar, the first Brownie used inexpensive, six-
exposure rolls of film that produced two-and-a-quarter-inch-square snap-
shots.62 Just as important as its low price was its ease of use. The small box
camera required very few photographic choices on the part of the user;
even a child could use it. The Brownie, whose name and early advertising
was inspired by popular illustrations of a mischievous sprite from Scot-
tish folktales, became an instant financial success.63 By the end of its first
year on the market, more than 150,000 Brownies had been sold.64 While
Kodak primarily advertised the Brownie to children, early ads targeted to
adults also appeared in places like Scientific American.65 Nancy Martha West
estimates that “adults probably purchased between one-third and one-half
of all Brownie cameras” and argues that the success of the Brownie “was
largely responsible for the fact that roughly one-third of the U.S. population
owned a camera by 1910.”66

The rise of amateur photography transformed people’s relationships to
photography. Not only could they now make photographs themselves, but
they came to know more intimately the impulse to photograph as they made
pictures of what they encountered in daily life. While photography was still a practice of memory (especially for those encouraged to use their Brownies to make photographs of little ones at home who would soon be grown up), it increasingly became identified with the timely qualities that today we associate with news. As people learned to make their own photographs and consumed a greater quantity of images, the snapshot, the news photograph, and even fears of the “camera fiend” all created new expectations about timeliness. People expected cameras to be where the action was and they wanted pictures of it. Public figures, including presidents, needed to get used to that new impulse.

Photographic Presidents during the Rise of Halftone and Handheld Photography

In 1898 a writer for the British journal the *Photographic News* declared, “The camera and the half-tone block have made the appearances of most of our public men and women so familiar to the eye of the community at large that it might seem a matter of impossibility for a prominent personage to pass through a London thoroughfare without being generally recognised.” In the United States things were no different, and presidents needed to navigate the changing expectations for their engagements with photography.

James Garfield was shot by mentally ill office-seeker Charles Guiteau in July 1881, just four months into his presidency. Garfield lingered for weeks after the shooting, and his physical status remained front-page news during that time, which drove up sales of Garfield’s image. When Garfield died, a Chicago newspaper reported, “In a few short hours manufacturers, photographers, lithographers, and designers were at work, and in an incredibly short space of time the streets were alive with portraits of Garfield, and Garfield shields, mottoes, and badges. The rage for some memento of the dead President was something wonderful.” A photograph dealer reported that although he could not fulfill a request by a wholesaler for “a million ‘cheap photographs of Gen. Garfield,’” he still produced “10,000 a day for three months, and couldn’t begin to fill the orders.” The new impulse for pictures demanded quantity.

Americans voiced interest in the photographic engagements of living presidents too. Some in the press criticized President Chester Arthur for apparently liking photography a little too much. One article that circulated
nationally in 1884 observed, “One of President Arthur’s manias is the taking of photographs.” The writer noted, “It is said that he has over 100 pictures of himself in various positions.” The piece described how Arthur “has an artist to pose him and arrange the surroundings and light and shade” and concluded, tongue firmly in cheek, “Why, let me tell you that there is not a painting of Washington in full uniform, or of the most stately of our chief executives, that is half as impressive as one of the photographs of Arthur in his new spring suit.” What was in John Quincy Adams’s time a nearly singular, noteworthy, rare event—sitting for a photographic portrait—had forty years later become so routine that when indulged in too much it reflected poorly on the presidential sitter. One needed to be a photographic president, just not too photographic. Despite the criticism of Arthur’s supposed “mania,” however, the demand for photographs of prominent public figures only rose over time. When Benjamin Harrison took office just five years later, sellers of photographs in Philadelphia complained that there were not enough photographs of his wife for sale, speculating that it was because “she was never struck [sic] on herself enough to have many taken.”

The appearance of amateur photography and the rise of halftone in the late 1880s and early 1890s coincided with Grover Cleveland’s two nonconsecutive terms in office. The Clevelands’ experiences with photography at the White House included anxiety about images used without permission and the sneaky presence of camera fiends. The White House banned amateur photographers from the grounds because too many crowded outside the mansion trying to get a glimpse of Frances Folsom Cleveland, the president’s much younger, beautiful wife, who married Grover Cleveland halfway through his first term. After the marriage the illustrated weeklies quickly put her on their covers and inside their pages. When soon after advertisers of patent medicines, corsets, and cigarettes used Mrs. Cleveland’s image without permission to sell their products, “a bill was introduced in the House that would ban the public exhibit of any photograph or likeness of a woman without her consent.” Just after Cleveland lost his bid for reelection to Benjamin Harrison in 1888, one writer lamented the loss of a favorite subject: “Mrs. Cleveland has been beyond compare the greatest boon the photographers ever had.”

During Cleveland’s second term, eager photographers sought out images of the Clevelands’ eldest daughter, known popularly as “Baby Ruth.” In 1893 a writer for the American Journal of Photography noted the child’s
popularity with photographers: “The kodak fiends are, of course, trying to get a snapshot at the White House baby.” Offering an anecdote about a photographer who “touched the button’ and got his picture as Mrs. Cleveland took [Baby Ruth] out of the carriage” at church, the writer surmised that the president and his wife were not pleased: “Mr. and Mrs. Cleveland have naturally been desirous that the baby’s picture should not be circulated, but it can hardly be expected that a kodak fiend would respect their feelings, and doubtless the photograph he stole will be on the market before many days.” Even the shakiest of snapshots were coming to be prized for their timeliness as visual news.

Photography changed dramatically during the fifty years between John Quincy Adams’s daguerreotype sittings and the end of the nineteenth century. What first appeared as a medium grounded in the visual power of the one-of-a-kind object of fidelity and wonder had transformed into an abundant, often riotous visual chronicle of private and public life produced by both professionals and amateurs. As President William McKinley took office in 1897, the halftone era was in full swing, bringing with it the rise of the amateur snapshot and the introduction of photography in print. These two practices taken together made possible for the first time a truly timely photography. Just how timely would be tested when William McKinley was shot and killed in Buffalo, New York, in 1901.