PART III

The Candid Camera Presidents
A week after he became president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt had a public run-in with an amateur photographer in Washington, DC. The Buffalo Courier—still very much on the case in the weeks after McKinley’s death—noted it on the front page under the headline “CAMERA FIEND REBUKED BY PRESIDENT: Roosevelt hotly resents an attempt to ‘snap’ him as he leaves church.” The story went like this: A young man stood outside the church waiting for the president to emerge, getting his camera in just the right position to photograph the president as he exited. As the Courier told it, “Mr. Roosevelt took in the situation as he emerged from the church door. A signal to a policeman and the broad blue back of the officer of the law was before the camera and probably exposed plate. As the President passed the offender he said to him slowly and with considerable force: ‘It is a despicable thing to take a man’s picture as he is leaving the church.’” Presumably this particular young man was not alone, for the writer then added, “This little incident deterred other camera ‘fiends’ from leveling their instruments at the President, as with a long, swinging stride he walked down the street.”

Theodore Roosevelt maintained few boundaries where cameras were concerned. On this occasion perhaps he was simply surprised and irritated
by the intrusion of the public on what he thought was a private outing. Or, given that it was only weeks since McKinley had been shot in public, the new president might have been unnerved by the approach of strangers with unknown objects in their hands. Yet even as he reportedly “rebuked” and “resented” the cameras of the amateurs, Roosevelt was no stranger to photography’s power to build a public image. In 1884, not long after losing both his mother to typhoid and his wife in childbirth on the very same day, a grieving Roosevelt left New York and headed west to his cattle ranch in the Dakota Territory, where he visually reinvented and publicly styled himself as a frontiersman. Portraits made to coincide with the publication of his 1885 book, Hunting Trips of a Ranchman, illustrated the transformation. The photograph presented Roosevelt, without his trademark spectacles, dressed in buckskin, wearing a beaver-skin hat, and carrying a Winchester rifle. (The knife tucked into his belt came from Tiffany and Co.) Roosevelt’s visual reinvention resulted from real personal changes in his life and outlook. But Ronald Tobias writes that it also “played a critical role in defining his political persona. He loved the camera, and the camera loved him: his persona filled the screen.” Roosevelt continued to be deeply invested in his public image throughout the rest of his life.

Roosevelt also recognized the value of the camera as a tool for the public communication of ideas that were important to him, such as conservation and social reform. Though he was not fond of the camera fiends who stalked him, he had no problem with using the camera to stalk animal prey. Roosevelt advocated for the practice of “camera hunting,” the activity of photographing wild animals in their natural habitats. Grounded in the idea that hunting with a camera produced the same heightened masculine experience as hunting with guns, camera hunting served as way for Roosevelt to promote public interest in wildlife conservation. Back home on the East Coast, Roosevelt became head of the New York City Board of Police Commissioners. There, his understanding of the camera’s power to convey visibility led him to befriend social reformer Jacob Riis, a journalist and activist who used his camera to document the city’s poorest citizens and share his findings in vivid public presentations. Roosevelt read Riis’s 1890 illustrated book, How the Other Half Lives, and was so moved that he wrote to Riis with offers of help. Roosevelt later joined Riis on a few of his expeditions through the city and the two became friends.
By the time Theodore Roosevelt inherited the presidency, he was a skilled visual communicator who relied on the camera to construct his political image and recognized the power of the camera to advance his policy agenda. But as the run-in with the camera fiends at church made clear, the new visual values of timely photography often clashed with evolving public norms of decorum. By the time his cousin Franklin ascended to the presidency thirty years later, camera fiends had hardly gone away. In fact, they now wielded new cameras that could make more photographs faster.
and less conspicuously. The period between the Roosevelts saw the rise of professionalized visual news and the emergence of more formalized relationships between the White House and the press. Changes in news-gathering techniques, circulation of photographs, and cameras themselves shaped presidents’ abilities to get their policy messages to the public.

Photography between the Roosevelts

By the turn of the twentieth century, what Ulrich Keller has called the “constitutive elements of photojournalism” were largely in place. In the years between the Roosevelts, new cameras transformed the production of photographs, new modes beyond the halftone became central to the reproduction of photographs, and photo agencies amplified the circulation of photographs. These three ingredients combined to provide the public with lively and timely visual news.

The rise of photographic reproduction in newspapers ushered in the idea that photography provided readers with not just timely but instant access to news. While instant access was rarely the case, because visual news gathering was only in its infancy, during this period journalism grew increasingly invested in the narrative of instantaneousness. Jason Hill points out that it was not the photograph’s actual “capacity to freeze an instant” that made photography seem instantaneous so much as it was the institution’s “ability to reduce the delay between an event and its newspaper public.” That is, the photograph became an important element of news not necessarily because of what it showed but because of how the structure of journalism framed photography. Photojournalism’s ethos of instantaneousness came not from freezing a newsworthy moment but from getting photographs of that moment to the public as quickly as possible.

Photographic news agencies served as vehicles for the quick delivery of those newsworthy visual moments. George Grantham Bain was a journalist, writer, and friend of William McKinley who created one of the first photo agencies to provide newspapers and magazines with newsworthy images. Bain recognized the increasingly important role of photographs in newspapers and magazines, and by 1898 he had established the George Bain News Service to provide photographs to news outlets. News agencies themselves had been around since the mid-nineteenth century, but an agency specifically designed for the distribution of pictures was a new idea. Building on Bain’s success, other agencies soon emerged.
While pictures became increasingly important as visual news, newspapers and magazines also needed better ways of printing and displaying those photographs. As discussed in chapter 5, halftone photographs were ubiquitous in newspapers and magazines by the turn of the twentieth century. But they often suffered from poor reproduction and had to be presented together on a separate page, apart from the actual story. The introduction of processes such as rotogravure eliminated this problem by allowing for photographs, text, and other visuals to be printed together on the same plate. Produced on round cylinders that used not the dots of halftone but a screen that allowed for a greater variety of tones, rotogravure made it possible to print more photographs of better quality and to do so affordably.

During the 1910s, U.S. newspapers began to introduce special rotogravure sections, called “rotos,” to attract readers with interesting pictures. The *New York Times*, for example, introduced a regular roto section called *Mid-Week Pictorial* in 1914 (it was later revived as its own picture magazine in the mid-1930s). The rotos did not practice the polished narrative photojournalism found later in mass magazines of the 1920s and ’30s. Instead, the reader often encountered densely populated, chaotic layouts containing a dizzying mix of images and topics.

Even so, rotogravure sections remained popular well into the next two decades, and dozens of U.S. newspapers included rotogravure sections in their Sunday issues. Not surprisingly, the demand for pictures grew when celebrities and other public figures appeared in them. For example, when President Warren Harding died while visiting San Francisco in 1923, *Mid-Week Pictorial* ran fifteen pages of photographs. By the 1920s and early 1930s, European magazines had fully embraced the capacity of photogravure and rotogravure, publishing sophisticated and visually complex designs.

From World War I until the 1930s, photo magazines and newspaper roto sections brought a new energy to the visual field of news.

Cameras continued to transform during this period. Kodak dominated the amateur camera market. Despite the presence of dozens of other camera manufacturers in the United States, Kodak most successfully exploited the value of selling not just cameras but the dream of photography as well. In the early years of the twentieth century, Kodak heavily marketed itself to travel, tourism, and women’s magazines. Kodak advertising targeted women, children, and families with newfound leisure time, the company designing not only the cheap Brownies discussed in previous chapters but also more expensive amateur cameras like the Kodak Vest Pocket, which
offered both the high image quality and portability that camera-happy families required. The continued improvement of portable cameras meant the persistence of anxiety about camera fiends as the culture continued to wrestle with concerns that smaller amateur cameras might record strangers’ activities unawares.

For the most part, professional photographers who made the kinds of news photographs sold by agencies like Bain’s did not use these smaller cameras. Their jobs required different instruments. The first of the press cameras, the Press Graflex, appeared in 1908, produced by a subsidiary of Kodak. But it was a later Graflex, the Speed Graphic, that became famous. Introduced in the United States in 1913, the Speed Graphic became the go-to camera for photographers needing to capture the busy world of spot news. The Speed Graphic offered multiple viewfinders, two shutters, and allowed the user to change lenses, which provided photographers with flexibility in their picture-taking. Yet the process was no point-and-shoot affair. The Speed Graphic used sheets of film loaded into the camera using film holders, and only a few sheets could fit into a camera at one time. Because the photographer was limited by the amount of film that could fit into the camera, use of the Speed Graphic required the photographer to work accurately and quickly. All told, the camera’s operation required the photographer to perform a sequence of four or five discrete steps to make a single photograph and then get ready to make the next one. While a skilled photographer could work fast, the camera itself was comparatively slow and bulky; the camera, flash gun, and holder together weighed just over nine pounds. Even so, news photographers valued the versatility of the Speed Graphic, keeping it as their primary press camera from the early twentieth century well past the introduction of 35 mm photography and on into the 1950s.

**Presidents Engage Photography in the Early Twentieth Century**

Photography between the Roosevelts was marked by increased interest in visual images as news, wider circulation of photographs across print culture, and better, livelier reproductions of photos themselves. Americans saw and made more photographs than ever before. As photography neared its centenary, the presidency changed along with it. In the nineteenth century, national power was presumed to lie with Congress, not with the executive branch. As a result, the press filled press galleries and back rooms at the U.S.
Capitol, while the White House offered no space to reporters. This began to change near the turn of the twentieth century. Historians and political scientists have chronicled the rise of the “modern presidency,” which they describe as involving an increase in the size of the White House staff and the addition of administrators to manage it, more formalized relationships with Congress, a rise in the power of the president, and a new interdependence between the executive branch and media organizations. Though scholars have disputed when precisely the modern presidency emerged, the consensus places its origins in the presidency of William McKinley, who, as we saw in chapter 4, embraced motion pictures and other new media, professionalized the staffing of the White House, and collaborated with photo agencies and photographers like Frances Benjamin Johnston to construct his presidential image. McKinley’s secretary, George Cortelyou, who stayed on after the assassination to work briefly in the same capacity for Theodore Roosevelt, arguably should get much of the credit for these early transformations, the core of which remained in place for decades thereafter. Lewis Gould dates the rise of the modern presidency to the years between 1897 and 1921, when the executive branch grew in power during the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

This growth was especially true in the case of these two presidents’ relationships with the press. Roosevelt was the first president to offer a permanent space to reporters covering the White House. He made sure that journalists covering him on trips got good access to him and his events—though to gain access they had to get (and stay) on the sometimes volatile man’s good side. As the first celebrity president of the twentieth century, Roosevelt knew the value of his fame. George Juergens writes of Roosevelt, “Publicity was so essential to his style of leadership that he worked constantly to generate it.” Roosevelt adeptly manipulated the press through what today are recognized as standard presidential public relations strategies, such as leaks, trial balloons (“floating” policy ideas into the press to gauge public support), carefully planning the release of information, and staging news events for cameras. Less fond of the press than was Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson nevertheless instituted regular press conferences. In addition, during his administration the White House Correspondents’ Association was formed to serve as an organizational bridge between the media and the presidency and in recognition of the fact that the press itself was becoming more professional and institutionalized.
From Theodore Roosevelt through to Taft, Wilson, Harding, and Coolidge, all presidents during this period had to deal with the sometimes unwelcome intrusions of the press photographer. Individual presidents varied considerably in their willingness to pose for photographs or participate in events staged for the cameras. As a result, presidents and their handlers had their own rules about what, who, where, and when photographers could photograph. In the story that opened this chapter, in which President Theodore Roosevelt angrily chastised a young “camera fiend” for photographically accosting him outside of church, the young man with the camera stood accused of stepping across a boundary that he perhaps did not know was in place. Another story about a violation of unwritten rules of photographic decorum came from the pre-presidency of Woodrow Wilson. Just after his election in 1912, Wilson and his family vacationed in Bermuda, where reporters followed along and sought to catch a few words and images of the president-elect. As Wilson and his teenage daughter Jessie returned from a morning of activity on their bicycles, they discovered members of the press camped out on their doorstep. Disheveled from their ride, Wilson asked photographers not to photograph his daughter, reportedly pleading, “Gentlemen, you can photograph me to your heart’s content. I don’t care how I look. But I request you not photograph my daughter. You know how women feel about such things.” Yet at least one photographer refused the president-elect’s request. According to New York Times writer Charles Willis Thompson, who chronicled (and perhaps embellished) the incident in his memoir, “Before he [Wilson] could finish the sentence, a cad of a photographer aimed his camera at Jessie Wilson and snapped her.” What happened next was dramatic: “Wilson’s face turned the color of a strawberry, and the high flush mounted to his eyes. . . . He clenched his fists and rushed on the photographer with the certain intention of punching his head.” Catching himself in an impulsive moment of imprudence, the president-elect slung angry words instead: “You’re no gentleman!” he cried. “I want to give you the worst thrashing you ever had in your life; and what’s more, I’m perfectly able to do it!” The president-elect walked off without following through on the threat, but the incident made news back in the states. The next day, the New York Times published a brief, less detailed piece on the incident with the headline “Wilson Threatens to Beat Camera Man.” Having named a firm boundary he did not want photographers to cross, Wilson snapped when the “ungentlemanly” photographer “snapped” his daughter.
As the necessity to pose for the press became more commonplace, presidents made decisions about where to draw the line. One general boundary was drawn around the president’s family. While Roosevelt took advantage of his celebrity, he asked that photographers leave his young, energetic family alone. Yet, true to his character, Roosevelt also understood the value of a good picture under controlled circumstances. Rodger Streitmatter notes that “many of Roosevelt’s personal activities may have been staged for their publicity benefit,” including, ironically, a presidential meet-and-greet with fellow churchgoers after services near his New York home of Sagamore Hill. Streitmatter also claims that Roosevelt may have been the first president to participate in a modern photo opportunity. The president had apparently arranged for a photographer to cover his signing of a Thanksgiving proclamation. When the photographer arrived late, Roosevelt left a meeting with the secretary of state so that he could pose for a photograph of the signing, essentially delaying the work of the presidency for a photo op. Even after he left the presidency, Roosevelt continued to weigh in on issues of image politics. For example, he told President Taft that he should not allow himself to be photographed playing golf, “a rich man’s game,” for it would fuel the public’s impression that the president was not a true man of the people. Roosevelt offered Taft his rules for presidential posing: “photographs on horseback, yes; tennis, no. And golf is fatal.” Golf photos or not, Taft rejected the press more generally. Although he was the first president to hold a press conference, he abandoned them soon after and largely hid from the cameras.

Wilson did not welcome photographers. In addition to the incident in Bermuda, he had also threatened to fire his Secret Service head if anyone snuck through to snap a photo of Wilson and new wife, Edith Galt, on their honeymoon. Yet his administration was not above using photography for its own advantage. After his stroke in 1919, Wilson removed himself from the public eye while photographers sought in vain to snap a picture of the recovering president. Months later, under increasing pressure, the White House brought in a photographer to make a photograph of the president at his desk (with his wife by his side) so that Americans could be assured the president was on the job. The resulting photograph arguably showed the opposite, as the first lady appears to be steadying a document the president is reviewing, suggesting not his strength but his infirmity.
The presidents of the 1920s were more willing to pose. A newspaperman himself, Warren Harding generally exhibited warmth toward the press. He affably posed for news photographers and embraced both news photography and newsreels.\[54\] During the campaign, Harding’s staff advocated for the value of up-close, seemingly informal shots of the candidate and his wife, sending out thousands of photo releases and putting ads on billboards and in magazines.\[55\] After the candidate took office, photographers received lists of Harding’s daily events and good access to the president.\[56\] Furthermore, Harding seemed happy to pose. Stephen Ponder writes, “Taft and Wilson regarded posing for photographers as burdensome and submitted reluctantly. Harding, however, cheerfully walked out into the White House garden to be photographed or filmed with the visitors of the day, whether they were Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, golfers, printers, delegations from service clubs, or even Albert Einstein.”\[57\] As presidents made themselves more visually accessible, more photographers began to cover the White House. The White House News Photographers Association was formed in 1921 to formally authorize those photographers who could have access to the president.\[58\]

Rising to the presidency after Harding died, and then elected himself in 1924, Calvin Coolidge similarly embraced photography.\[59\] One journalist recalled, “He avoided every appearance of publicity seeking, but he probably
was the most photographed man who ever occupied the White House.”

Coolidge walked a fine and often fuzzy line of presidential decorum. On the one hand, he seemed willing to appear in public in ways that some might deem unpresidential. For example, Coolidge liked to dress up. He infamously wore a headdress while addressing members of the Lakota tribe and dressed as a cowboy (complete with chaps) at a Fourth of July celebration in South Dakota. He received criticism for such displays. One journalist wrote, “Certainly no president has ever been willing to submit to such nauseating exhibitions in the news reels as has Coolidge. . . . Cultured Americans wince at the thought of their president putting on a smock frock to pose while pitching hay and milking a bossy.”

Despite Coolidge’s willingness to pose in ways that some deemed imprudent, he worked to avoid the impression that his photo ops were in fact photo ops. The *Boston Globe* explained Coolidge’s unwritten rules in a May 1929 article headlined “Mustn’t Photograph Coolidge While He Is Posing for Another.” Explaining the now former president’s “indignation” that a newsreel operator recorded Coolidge posing for photographers, the *Globe* pointed out that the unwitting man had violated a rule that presidential photographers knew well: “Calvin Coolidge must not be photographed in such a way as to show that other photographers were taking his picture at the same time.” Even though the former president’s “patience has been seemingly limitless in his compliance with every request of the news photographers,” the *Globe* wrote, Coolidge did maintain some boundaries. The president did not like “to be taken unaware.”

While Coolidge was more than willing to participate in staged photo ops, he was not interested in

**Figure 6.3:** Rise Studio, “President Coolidge in cowboy outfit, Rapid City, South Dakota,” 1927. (Library of Congress.)
having the fact of those photo ops themselves become part of the story. That would be indecorous.

Calvin Coolidge decided not to run for reelection in 1928, paving the way for the landslide election of fellow Republican Herbert Hoover. The man who had been solicitous to photographers and embraced the new media of radio and film—Coolidge delivered the first presidential speech on the radio in 1923 and became the first president to appear in a sound film in 1924—retired from public life just as a new form of photography was ascending in Europe. The so-called candid camera would introduce new visual values to photography that would transform the possibilities for picturing political leaders and challenge the already tenuous space between public and private for both Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt after him.