Photographic Presidents

Finnegan, Cara A.

Published by University of Illinois Press

Finnegan, Cara A.
Photographic Presidents: Making History from Daguerreotype to Digital.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/83119.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/83119

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2842147
PART IV

The Social Media President
On the evening of August 8, 1974, President Richard Nixon prepared to deliver a live address to the nation to announce his resignation. The CBS network cameras started rolling before the broadcast was to begin, preserving for posterity about seven minutes of Nixon before he went live on the air. As the video opens, the television crew is readying the room for the live broadcast. One of them sits in the president’s chair so that the camera operator can check the lighting. Suddenly the president himself appears in the room and the man leaps up to offer him the seat. “Hey, you’re better lookin’ than I am; why don’t you stay here?” Nixon jokes as he sits down, a copy of his speech in his hands. Then, referencing the man’s hair color, he adds, “Blondes, they say, photograph better than brunettes. That true or not?”

Seated now, Nixon asks the production crew whether they have a backup camera (they do), whether they have set the lights properly (they have), and he makes a joke about the brightness of the lights and his aging eyes. The entire scene is understandably awkward. Then Nixon notices something off to his right and says, speaking through a forced smile, “That’s enough. Thanks.” Nixon turns to the television crew to explain: “My friend Ollie always wants to take a lot of pictures. I’m afraid he’ll catch me pickin’ my nose.” More awkward laughter on the part of the president. (No one
else seems to be laughing.) “Ollie” is Oliver Atkins, the president’s official White House photographer. Then Nixon hastily adds, “He wouldn’t print that, though, would ya, Ollie? Yeah.” Off camera, Atkins’s reply is inaudible; presumably he says no, he wouldn’t. Then the president gets more serious with his photographer: “No, you can take a long shot, but no, that’s enough, really.” Next, Nixon runs through the opening of the speech so that the crew can check his sound. Less than a minute later an increasingly strained Nixon addresses his photographer again, making a sweeping gesture with his left hand as if he is clearing off the desk: “Ollie? Now, only the CBS crew now is to be in this room, during this. Only the crew.” Off camera, Atkins begins to ask, “Would it be possible if I . . .,” but Nixon cuts him off: “No, there will be no picture. No. After the broadcast. You’ve taken your picture; didn’t you take one just now?” Atkins answers, “Yes, sir.” Nixon continues: “That’s it. Because you know, we don’t want to be . . . we didn’t let the press take one, so you’ve taken it, you, just take it right now.” Nixon pauses with his script in his hand, serious-faced, consenting to a brief pose. Then, a second later, agitated: “You got it? Come on. OK.” The camera clicks several times as Atkins says something inaudible about the TV cameras. Nixon replies, “OK fine, all right, fine.” The camera clicks a few more times. Nixon taps his manuscript on the desk and says, his tone even sharper, “I’m gonna make the other photographers mad; I’ve given you too many. That’s enough, OK?” Two minutes later, Nixon goes live on the air to announce his resignation.

There is so much that is striking about this moment, but at the core of it is this: literally moments before he became the first U.S. president to resign from office—before he performed the single most consequential act of his long, storied, and controversial career—Richard Nixon chose to spend a full two minutes berating a photographer. This exchange animates key themes of the relationship between presidents and photography in the late twentieth century. Volumes have been written about media and the twentieth-century presidency, research that explores presidents’ relationships with the press, presidential campaigning, and presidents’ communications operations. Transitioning from the era of the candid camera to that of social media, this chapter examines three topics affecting presidents’ relationships with photography in the late twentieth century. Each of these topics emerges vividly in the verbal and visual exchange between Nixon and Atkins. The first of these is presidents’ relationships with the visual press. The resignation video offers hints of the push and pull of the
Changing Visual Media from the Mid-Twentieth Century to the Digital Age

relationship between presidents and the press in Nixon’s fretting that “I’m gonna make the other photographers mad” that they did not get the photo access that Atkins got. The second of these topics is television. By 1974 television had become the dominant medium of presidential image making, a development that is evident in the entire event of Nixon’s resignation, from the television cameras recording him live to his jokes about bright lights and blondes. Finally, the presence of Atkins points to the rise of the role of official White House photographer and Nixon’s particular inability to embrace its full possibilities. Nixon’s jokes about nose-picking and his irritated declarations of “that’s enough” echo previous eras’ anxieties about camera fiends and highlight ongoing tensions between publicity and control faced by twentieth-century presidents. Presidents needed media to get their messages out yet simultaneously sought to retain control over the shaping of their presidential image. Moving beyond the politics of the moment, Atkins’s relatively passive, yet some might say heroic, attempts to document the historic occasion highlight the role White House photography

Figure 8.1: Official White House photo, President Nixon announces his resignation, Aug. 8, 1974. (Bettmann via Getty Images.)
was coming to play not only in documenting the president in real time but also in documenting the president for all time. After exploring these three themes, I then turn to the final technological transformation I am treating in this book: the rise of digital photography and social media. Once social media photography emerged, presidents’ relationships with the visual press, their reliance on traditional mass media, and the way they used the White House photographer role shifted yet again.

**Presidents’ Relationships with the Visual Press**

After many years of Franklin Roosevelt, photographers covering Harry Truman found him an enthusiastic, active, and affable subject. One Truman biographer observed, “His brisk activity was a noted contrast to the sedentary poses of President Roosevelt to which newsmen had been accustomed for fifteen years.” Known for a “good-natured fussiness” with photographers, Truman jokingly referred to photographers as his “One More Club” because they always seemed to be asking for “one more photograph, please.” Part of Truman’s interest in photographers stemmed from his own interest in the medium itself. As one of the first U.S. presidents to have come of age in the Kodak era, Truman enjoyed making and posing for snapshots, and his youthful interest in photography extended into his presidency. White House news photographers even honored Truman’s interest by giving him a movie camera and a Speed Graphic for his birthday.

Dwight Eisenhower was less fond of the pictorial press. Stanley Tretick, who covered the White House for United Press, called Eisenhower “impatient with photographers.” Eisenhower faced serious health challenges during his presidency, the most public of which was a 1955 heart attack and subsequent surgery that required weeks of recovery and the delegation of daily responsibilities to others. Because the administration was accused of being less than transparent about Ike’s health, White House communication officials welcomed press photographers who could communicate to the public that the president was feeling and looking better. But this openness came only after Tretick and a colleague snuck into the hospital dressed in patients’ pajamas and made unauthorized photographs of the president sunning himself on a porch. When most of their photographs were confiscated, the photographers agreed to collaborate with Eisenhower’s press secretary, Jim Hagerty, who wanted to control the presentation of
the president to the press after surgery. Like Truman, Eisenhower also practiced photography, but he did so less for its own qualities than to capture images of places he later wanted to paint. Despite his impatience, President Eisenhower played along and was even given an honorary award by the White House News Photographers Association for a photograph he made of the press corps in 1955 with the new Polaroid Land camera, which produced an image instantly after exposure.

Young, photogenic, and media-savvy, John F. Kennedy built his political story in large part on skillfully deployed photographic images of him, his active family, and his attractive wife. The building of Kennedy’s pictorial image began well before his political career was launched, calculated by his father, Joseph, who was no slouch at publicity himself. Another key participant in the construction of that narrative was Kennedy’s wife. While Jacqueline Kennedy discouraged spontaneous snapshots of the children, Courtney Caudle Travers writes that she was a crucial agent in the visual construction of the Kennedy family and presidency. “She took seriously the visual presentation of the First Family and thought carefully about the means by which” she might do “strategic political work through a cultural agenda.”

Longtime New York Times photographer George Tames recalled of Jacqueline Kennedy, “She had her own favorite photographers and she had her own ideas about what made the best picture of herself.” Those photographers included Jacques Lowe, who photographed John F. Kennedy during the campaign and continued doing so regularly after he took office, and Stanley Tretick, who made one of the most famous Kennedy White House pictures: John Junior peeking out through the door of the Resolute desk in the Oval Office. Tames received good early access to Kennedy when he was invited to document a day in the life of the president for a New York Times Magazine feature in February 1961, just a few weeks into the Kennedy presidency. Among the published images was one of Kennedy made from behind, the president in silhouette against Oval Office windows, leaning over a table to read a document. While it later became famous as the “Loneliest Job in the World” photograph, the Times initially published it with a more prosaic caption and buried it in the middle of the feature. Tames recalled that when Kennedy saw the magazine spread, he remarked of the “loneliest job” photograph, “This should have been on the cover.” Tames recalled, “It struck him right off that he knew that was an important picture and that it was not being played properly.”
Recalling his relationship with Kennedy’s successor, whom he had photographed for years in the Senate, Tames complained, “LBJ used to blame me for every picture that he considered unflattering that ran in the New York Times.” Lyndon B. Johnson was adamant that he be photographed on his left side and routinely complained to photographers when he didn’t like their images. Yet much of the visual trouble LBJ got into was his own fault. While he courted members of the press by inviting them to his ranch and offering impromptu press conferences, these events often did more harm than good. Eager for media exposure, Johnson sometimes went too far. Photographers captured such a moment in 1964 when President Johnson lifted one of his beagles by the ears while meeting with White House visitors (ostensibly to get it to howl). The subsequent press photos of the incident caused public outrage. While Johnson maintained his act was not cruel, the letters and phone calls that flooded the White House proved that many Americans did not agree. Neither did the president do himself any visual favors the following year when he spontaneously lifted his shirt to show members of the press the scar from his gallbladder surgery. In the context of the times, such images seemed emblematic of the troubled Johnson White House more generally and haunted LBJ until he left office.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, spontaneous press photographs of the president and his family became harder to come by, and they could become controversial when they did appear. In 1997, for example, photojournalist John Mottern received criticism when he photographed President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton walking on the beach in their bathing suits while on vacation on Martha’s Vineyard. Accused by some of deploying paparazzi (the modern-day term for “camera fiend”) tactics, Mottern maintained there was nothing unethical about his images. He said that the Clintons knew he was making pictures, they did not ask him to stop, and they were photographed on a public beach where dozens of other citizens and members of the Secret Service were also present. Mottern’s photographs circulated around the world but quickly came to seem more invasive when just two days later Princess Diana was killed in a car crash in Paris as her drunk driver attempted to outrun the paparazzi. Only a few months after that, in early 1998, new photographs of the Clintons in bathing suits received direct criticism from the White House. The images included photographs of the president and first lady slow-dancing on a beach in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The pictures had been made, as one journalist inviting
camera fiend language described them, by “photographers lurking in bushes about 100 yards away.” This time the Clintons were unaware that they had been photographed. When President Clinton was asked about the picture, he said, “I like it quite a lot, but I didn’t think I was being photographed.” His communications staff was less sanguine, as were some in the press. Some members of the White House press corps argued the photographs were a violation of the first family’s privacy and suggested that the mainstream press was behaving just like paparazzi.

### The Rise of Television

If presidents could not always control how photojournalists represented them, television offered the dream of direct visual and verbal communication with the public. Television not only transformed how presidents interacted with citizens and presented themselves visually, but it also affected the ways they interacted with the photographic press. By 1956 television had the capacity to reach more than three-quarters of U.S. homes, offering a new and large audience for presidents to reach. Television brought to presidential communication new demands for how a president should look, move, and behave on camera. Although Truman had appeared on television, Eisenhower was the first president to fully embrace professional media training designed to shape the way he appeared on the small screen. The White House hired actor Robert Montgomery to coach Eisenhower on how to speak to the camera. Eisenhower offered the first filmed presidential press conference in 1955 and delivered the first televised Oval Office address. The rise of television also changed the ways press photographers interacted with the White House. George Tames recalled arriving to events in the early days of television and finding television cameras given priority “in a roped off area,” while he—as a New York Times photographer, who “was usually front and center”—was shunted to the side and forced to scramble for good vantage points.

If Robert Montgomery trained one president to speak to the camera, soon a president emerged who had himself been a Hollywood actor. David Greenberg argues that although Ronald Reagan was “the first president to spend his pre-political career working in the mass media,” he was not so much the founder of modern presidential media strategy but “a master of methods that a long string of forbears had incrementally developed.”
Well before his career in elected office began in the 1960s, Reagan honed those skills in radio, film, on television, and in thousands of speeches he delivered in conjunction with his job as host of television’s *General Electric Theater*. Reagan’s presidency notably reduced the value of the presidential press conference and replaced it with the primarily visual, heavily scripted presidential performance of the photo op. Reagan’s speeches staged televsional spectacles, from cutaway shots of the Washington Monument and other national landmarks during Reagan’s first inaugural address to the skillful placement of the president near the cliffs of Normandy at the fortieth-anniversary commemoration of the D-Day invasion. Of these visual strategies, Reagan White House spokesperson Larry Speakes said, “We learned very quickly that when we were presenting a story or trying to get our viewpoint across, we had to think like a television producer.”

If presidents through Reagan lived in the era of three television networks, the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations had to deal with two additional challenges: the rise of the twenty-four-hour news cycle and the increased fragmentation of media. As a result, viewers’ experiences of politics became more fragmented, partisan, and self-selected—a change that arguably began with the birth of the Fox News Channel in 1996 and increased exponentially with the rise of the internet. Both the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations took advantage of this fragmentation. Bush, for example, was interviewed on cable networks such as CBN (Christian Broadcast Network) and BET (Black Entertainment Television), while Clinton took advantage of opportunities to appear on cable talk shows such as CNN’s *Larry King Live*, “where he might showcase his gift for more pleasant conversation.” As the first baby boomer president, Clinton grew up with television and had internalized its power. The new era of television never fit the elder Bush, however. Writes Lori Cox Han, “Bush’s public style . . . would have been better suited for the news media environment of an earlier time like the 1960s, when the national news cycle was more driven by words than by images.”

**Emergence of the Official White House Photographer**

While the visual press and television shaped the image of presidents from the outside looking in, the role of White House photographer emerged in the late twentieth century as an increasingly important countervailing
force. Earlier chapters mentioned presidents who built mutually beneficial relationships with photographers, most notably William McKinley’s and Theodore Roosevelt’s cooperation with Frances Benjamin Johnston. But the idea of hiring someone to document the president officially, on a daily basis, came later. National Park Service photographer Abbie Rowe was hired during Franklin Roosevelt’s third term to document official presidential activities; he worked at the White House into the Johnson administration. Navy photographer Robert Knudsen worked at the White House through five administrations, from Truman to Nixon. Army photographer Cecil Stoughton was assigned to the Kennedy White House in 1961 and made several famous presidential photographs of the era, including the poignant image of Lyndon B. Johnson’s swearing-in on Air Force One in Dallas, just hours after President Kennedy was assassinated. In addition to Stoughton, Knudsen, and other White House photo staff, other photographers already mentioned, such as Jacques Lowe and Stanley Tretick, were given exclusive access to President Kennedy and his family at particular times.

A former U.S. Army and U.S. Information Agency photographer, Yoichi Okamoto was hired as the president’s personal photographer when Lyndon B. Johnson became president, and “Oke,” as he was known, defined the role as it generally has been practiced since. Okamoto was the first photographer to demand of the president the kind of access that would transform the role into one that chronicled the presidency for history. Writes John Bredar, “Okamoto told Johnson that his goal wasn’t simply to make portraits but also ‘to hang around and try to document history in the making.’” A former photo assistant recalled that Oke “was the first person who basically had unfettered access to Johnson’s Presidency. Oke didn’t work for anyone except the President. He didn’t work for the press office, he didn’t work for the special assistant to the President, his secretaries, or anyone else.” For his part, Johnson demanded to see and approve all the photographs Okamoto produced and to sign off on every photograph released to the public. New York Times photographer George Tames recalled of Johnson’s investments in photography, “I got on him about this habit of his having the White House photographers shoot pictures of him all day Monday, and Tuesday morning when he came into his office, they had to have the stack of prints on his desk, shot from the day before.” Tames noted that Johnson “was always conscious of pictures.” David Hume Kennerly, Gerald Ford’s photographer, suggested that Johnson’s personal investments in photography grew out of
a combination of envy and a sense of the importance of visual documentation: “L.B.J. wanted pictures like J.F.K. was getting. . . . L.B.J. just let him [Okamoto] in to do whatever he wanted to do. And L.B.J. did that out of a sense of vanity and a sense of history.”

Not all presidents welcomed the constant attention of an official White House photographer, however. According to Oliver Atkins, who took the job after working briefly as a photographer for the 1968 campaign, Richard Nixon initially refused the idea of an official photographer but was then convinced of the value of recording activities of the White House for posterity. However, as the opening of this chapter makes clear, Atkins and Nixon had nothing like the relationship Okamoto had with Johnson. He had no security clearances or arrangements that would allow him to cover Nixon in a personal, behind-the-scenes way, and he was required to clear all photo ops with Nixon’s press secretary. Jimmy Carter ultimately chose not to hire his own official photographer, though First Lady Roslyn Carter had one and there continued to be White House photographers on staff. Many viewed President Carter’s choice as a mistake. Michael Evans, who served as official White House photographer under President Reagan, said of Carter that he “had no understanding of still photographers. . . . He didn’t
trust them and Carter suffered enormously because of it.”59 Perhaps not coincidentally, no president has gone without one since.

It is also no coincidence that the presidents who provided the most access to official White House photographers became the most compelling subjects of White House photographs. Political scientists sometimes speak of “reconstructive” presidents, those presidents who substantially transformed the very functions and meanings of the presidency.60 We might also speak of reconstructive White House photographers: those whose efforts fundamentally transformed official presidential image making. Three fit that label: Yoichi Okamoto, who defined the role; David Hume Kennerly, who had the most intimate access to a president; and Pete Souza, who named Okamoto as a model and transformed presidential photography for the social media age. Okamoto defined the role of president’s photographer by demanding complete access and free rein over the image-making process. Kennerly, a Pulitzer Prize–winning war photographer in his twenties at the time of his hiring by Gerald Ford, built extremely close personal relationships with the president and his family.61 Kennerly’s access compared to that of no photographer before him or since, as he was able to move freely not only in the official office spaces of the White House but in the private family quarters as well. His close relationship with the president also gave him opportunities to perform jobs that were not typical for White House photographers. For example, in the spring of 1975, Kennerly asked President Ford for permission to accompany the army chief of staff to Vietnam to make photographs and report back on conditions there.62 Kennerly used photographs from the trip to brief the president on the impending fall of Saigon; some of them were even hung in the West Wing for other staffers to see. In Shooter, his memoir of this period, Kennerly wrote, “My stark, black-and-white photographs of refugees and civilian casualties soon replaced the color prints of dancers, state visits, and similar events that hung in the corridors of the West Wing. My pictures were everywhere you turned, even in the hallway leading to the staff dining room, and many people reportedly couldn’t eat after seeing them.”63 As the next chapter details, Pete Souza combined unfettered access with a good personal relationship with the president to transform White House photography for the digital age. His successes were made possible in part by the new opportunities for photographic sharing and connecting afforded by digital photography and Web 2.0.
Digital Photography and the Rise of the Social Media President

The digital transition in photography may be dated to three events: the introduction of the digital camera, the appearance of digital imaging software, and the rise of mobile photography and related applications. Digital cameras first appeared in the early 1970s and emerged commercially after 1988, but only in the early 2000s did they begin to make sustained inroads into journalism and saturate the public market. 64 In 2003 sales of digital cameras outpaced those of analog cameras for the first time. 65 But well before that, digital reproduction played an increasingly important part in the experiences of professional photographers and photojournalists. Beginning in the early 1980s, photographers would turn in images shot on film to be scanned and digitally retouched with complex machines and software. 66 The rise of the personal computer created new markets for commercially available image manipulation software; Adobe’s Photoshop appeared in early 1990 to meet that need. Photoshop put tools of photo editing and graphic design into the hands of professionals and amateurs, eventually becoming its own generic verb as the culture began to wrestle with the implications of digital manipulation. 67 Mobile, or cell phone, photography emerged in the late 1990s, its popularity skyrocketing by the introduction of mobile applications, or “apps,” for smart phones in the late 2000s. 68 Developments such as these made social media photography possible.

The shift to digital photography was about more than technology, however. Broader transformations in digital culture mattered as well. Presidents both participated in these transformations and took advantage of them. In 1994, three years after the World Wide Web appeared, the Clinton administration introduced the first White House website, whitehouse.gov. In 1999 the Clinton White House released a memo urging federal agencies to adopt email as a regular institutionalized form of communication with citizens. 69 After 2000 what came to be called Web 2.0 emerged, creating avenues for two-way interactive communication on networks. 70 Social networking sites (SNS) and other sites enabling user-generated content soon appeared, their platforms both facilitating interactivity and simultaneously constituting its rules of engagement. 71 The data make clear the dramatic shifts that followed. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2005 only 5 percent of adults surveyed said they used at least one social media site. Just after
Barack Obama’s 2008 election, that number rose to 27 percent, and by the end of Obama’s two presidential terms, it had skyrocketed to 69 percent. Among adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, the number was 86 percent. News consumption changed during this period as well. In 2010 journalist Ken Auletta put the changes in perspective: “When George W. Bush was finishing his first term, there was no Facebook, no Twitter, no YouTube; dozens of regional newspapers and TV stations were highly profitable and seemed, at least to themselves, inviolable. Between 2006 and 2008, daily online news use jumped by a third, which meant that one-quarter of Americans were getting the news online.”

The social and political implications of the new interactivity began to reveal themselves during the middle of the George W. Bush administration. As always, the White House sought to take advantage of new ways of visually displaying the president and his activities, such as the White House website’s “photo of the day” feature and the administration’s use of visual backdrops hung at presidential events to highlight the message of the day. At the same time, the rise of the blog and the emergence of online news comments sections offered new, highly visible online spaces for the circulation of criticism. The playful visual-verbal practice of the meme made images of the president especially susceptible to manipulation and appropriation. Heather Woods and Leslie Hahner define memes as “concepts and images that spread virally across culture, largely through social media platforms.” They are “rhetorical images that are designed to move audiences and ultimately shape the larger culture.” Scores of memes mocked the infamous “Mission Accomplished” banner hung behind President Bush on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln as he (erroneously) declared the end of hostilities in Iraq in 2003. After Hurricane Katrina brought widespread death and destruction to New Orleans in 2005, an especially biting meme superimposed a photograph of President George W. Bush and his father, George H. W. Bush, fishing and proudly posing with their catch onto an image of a badly flooded New Orleans street.

Not surprisingly, during this period political candidates took increasing advantage of social media communication as new platforms appeared seemingly overnight: MySpace in 2003, Facebook and Flickr in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Twitter in 2006, Tumblr in 2007, Instagram and Pinterest in 2010, and Snapchat in 2011, to name just a few of the most dominant
players of the period. In the 2008 presidential race between Barack Obama and John McCain, both candidates relied on social media for nearly every campaign function, including mobilizing supporters and raising money. Obama’s campaign successes in this regard were well-documented, and social media practices became a defining feature of the candidate’s brand. The next chapter explores how the Obama White House embraced new visual values of social media photography while at the same time working to carefully control the president’s image and message.