



THE BLOG

All the World's a Photo Op

When anyone with a cell phone is a potential member of the paparazzi, and anyone with a laptop a potential blogger, the contest for the control of images has never been more intense.

By Kiku Adatto, Contributor

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The [recent controversy](#) in Germany over whether [Barack Obama](#) should be able to deliver a speech in front of the Brandenburg Gate - - the central symbol of a once divided, now united Germany, and the site where Ronald Reagan famously stated, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall" -- illustrates how all the world's become a potential photo op. Politicians and the press fixate, fret and fight over backdrops and staging with an intensity once reserved for parsing political positions. Backstage has become front stage. And front page news. Consider the recent *New York Times* story "McCain Battles a Nemesis, the Teleprompter" or the earlier flap over an Obama volunteer who didn't let two Muslim women with headscarves sit behind the podium at a televised event.

It wasn't always this way. In 1968, in the presidential campaign between Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and George Wallace, the term "photo opportunity" was used only once on the network evening newscasts -- and with derision. This despite the fact that Richard Nixon had learned from his loss of the 1960 television debate to John Kennedy the importance of television and, in 1968, went to great lengths to control his television image. Reporting on Nixon's appearance with television star Jackie Gleason on a Florida golf course, John Hart used the term with derision: "Nearly everything Nixon does these days is programmed... deliberately casual moments, moments his programmers have labeled 'photo opportunities.'"

"In 1968, I thought it was a joke," Hart recalled. "I thought if you said the campaign is calling this a 'photo opportunity,' people would laugh, and photo opportunities would be disgraced. People would say, 'Oh, we see through it now.'"



The intensity of photo op politics so distinctive to our times was set in motion in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan and his media team, headed by Michael Deaver, mastered the art of the modern media event. So successful was the Reagan team at setting up compelling television pictures -- from using the beaches at Normandy as a backdrop to showing Reagan sitting astride his horse at his ranch looking like a classic American cowboy -- that subsequent presidents and presidential candidates emulated the art of stage sets, backdrops, and gripping visuals to convey their messages through pictures.

In the wake of the Reagan presidency, photo op politics was matched by photo op media coverage. Television reporters decided to strike back, to bring to the attention of their viewers all the contrivances and manipulations behind the images. Instead of acting like Reagan's "film crew" or purveyors of his PR, they would tell the story behind the pictures. By the 1988 presidential campaign between George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, over 50 percent of the network evening news coverage was devoted to talk of photo ops, media events, sound bites, spin control, ads and gaffes.

Now, two decades later, the rise of the Internet and the advent of a 24-hour news cycle have heightened the demand for arresting images, which the campaigns seek constantly to supply. Candidates and their handlers know all too well the power of pictures to persuade -- and to destroy. Flattering camera angles and carefully-staged backdrops can make a candidate look presidential; but a gaffe caught on camera (or worse, on video) can be devastating fodder for ridicule in the endless video loops of cable news, Comedy Central, and YouTube.

When anyone with a cell phone is a potential member of the paparazzi, and anyone with a laptop a potential blogger, the contest



Over eighty years ago, when Republicans mounted a sleek advertising campaign to sell Warren Harding to the American public, a young Democrat named Franklin D. Roosevelt complained that "photographs and carefully rehearsed moving picture films do not necessarily convey the truth." The same could be said today. Whether the new photo-op politics will give voters a more authentic view of the candidates or simply add layer upon layer of contrivance is one of the big questions of this campaign.



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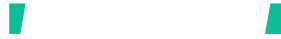
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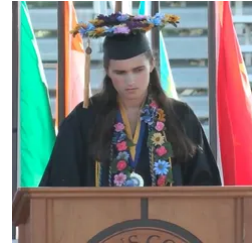


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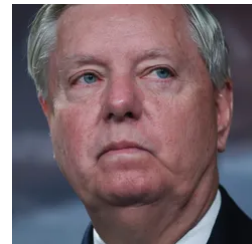




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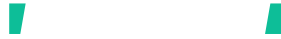


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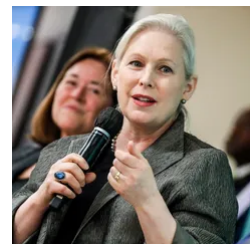
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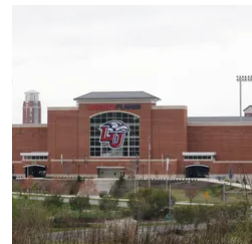
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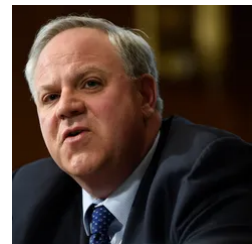
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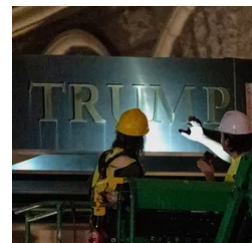
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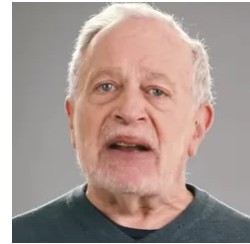




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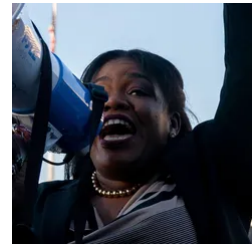
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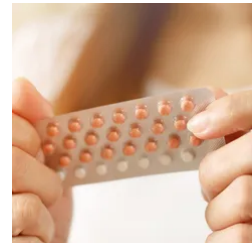
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