

# PHOTOGRAPHING POWER

DO CANDID, INTIMATE, STORYTELLING IMAGES SHOT “FOR THE SAKE OF HISTORY” HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE WAY THOSE IN POWER REPRESENT THEMSELVES? A SURVEY OF AMERICAN PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA’S OFFICIAL COVERAGE BY WHITE HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHER PETE SOUZA.

**PARIS, QUAI d'ORSAY, AUGUST 1931:** During a reception at the Paris Foreign Ministry, where photographers were not admitted, photographer Erich Salomon takes a picture just as Aristide Briand, the French foreign minister, points at him after having discovered his presence, saying: “Ah, there he is, the king of the indiscreet!”

**WASHINGTON, DC, JANUARY 2009:** Pete Souza, the official White House photographer, takes a picture of President Barack Obama lending First Lady Michelle Obama his jacket so she can keep warm, as they ride in a freight elevator to get from one inaugural ball to another, surrounded by staffers. No statement was reported in this case.

By Rino Pucci

MILAN, ITALY

**T**HE HISTORY OF PHOTOJOURNALISM OVER last century lies between these two pictures. Sumptuous tapestries versus a bare freight elevator. Photo opportunity versus snapshot. The Minister pointing at the shooter versus Secret Service agents awkwardly trying to avert their eyes. Black-and-white film versus digital color.

Centripetal composition versus a centrifugal one. An Ermanox camera versus a Canon EOS 5D Mark II. And, above all, power that finally allows itself to be photographed, even if only at its formal events, versus power that explicitly asks photography to portray it showing its human face, its everyday reality, its democratic being as “one of us.” For almost 80 years, the men in tuxedos have been turning from Ministers into “aides-de-camp,” and now power has the features of an attentive husband.

It's easy to predict that Souza's picture is going to follow in the footsteps of Salomon's, becoming an icon, a point of no return in the history of power's

representation.

Both pictures convey the same feeling of freshness and surprise. Both are real and believable – or, better, seem to be real and believable – because everything in them reveals that there was a photographer (incidentally, a real paradox, for a picture ...).

Nowadays Pete Souza, the man behind the lens, is changing into the second human guinea pig in an interesting (and a bit disquieting) media experiment that has been taking place since January 20, 2009. The first one, obviously, is Barack Obama: never has a public man been so invasively, and literally, brought into focus.

**THE STREAM.** Here is Obama holding an umbrella himself, Obama playing with a football in the Oval Office, Obama offering a fist-bump to someone during a meeting, Obama wiping his face with a cloth, Obama checking his BlackBerry, Obama pulling out a chair for the First Lady, Obama wearing an Air Force One jacket, Obama greeting kitchen staff, Obama placing his hand on his heart as the national anthem is played, Obama lifting a baby, Obama getting his change after paying for his lunch, Obama being helped by someone

**BEHIND THE SCENES.** President Barack Obama looks out the window of Marine One as the helicopter lands on the South Lawn of the White House after a flight back from the U.S. Naval Academy commencement ceremony in Annapolis, MD, on May 22, 2009.

White House photograph  
by Pete Souza





**CURIOSITY.** A young Oval Office visitor asked whether the President's haircut felt like his own. He got to find out for himself.

to move a couch in the Oval Office, Obama touring the pyramids, and so on.

Just a few examples of the never-ending stream of pictures that everyday is sent from the White House to the White House's own Web site as slide shows and onto Flickr as a constantly updated gallery: hundreds of shots multiplied by hundreds of folders multiplied by hundreds of comments that anyone is allowed to post.

An in-depth analysis of how this coverage is related to history will be carried out later on. Right now, we can define the availability of this official coverage as truly "historical," in that we have never seen anything like it before.

Three factors allow Souza to have the new style of candid, intimate, and storytelling images that compose this behind-the-scenes iconography. First: a presidency that is a turning point even in communication strategies. Second: a deep understanding of how the White House works (Souza was in the same office as a photographer for President Reagan during Reagan's second term). Third: Souza's familiarity with Obama, whom he's covered since 2005.

Lighthearted moments and official meetings immortalized by Souza's touch have become fodder for discussion and argument everywhere: in liberal news Web sites like *The Huffington Post*, in the section "Showing Kindness" of the Web site marriage.about.com, in documentary photography courses at the Sewanee University.

Souza himself has become popular and more than once has been interviewed on television. In an interview with CNN's John King focusing on Obama's first 100 days in office, this is how Souza described his current position: "I look at my job as a visual historian. The most important thing is to create a good visual archive for history, so 50 or

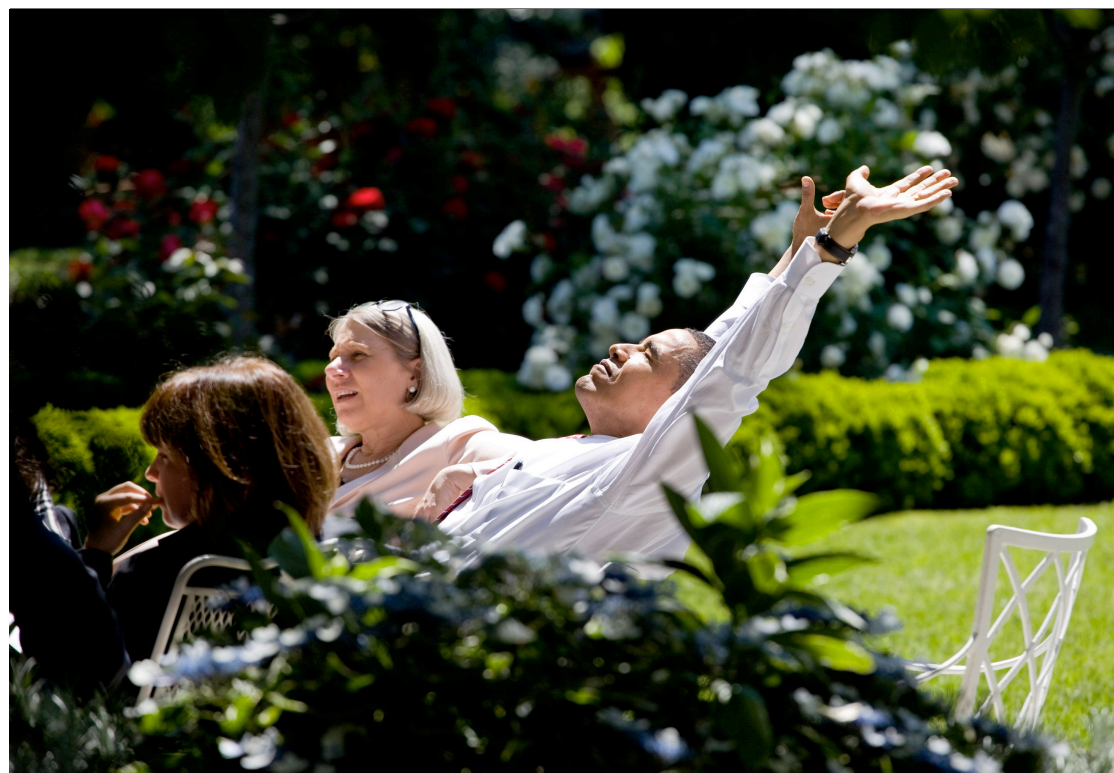
100 years from now, people can go back and look at all these pictures."

**A VISUAL HISTORIAN?** The basic paradox of being an official photographer is that they are granted admittance to the most confidential events, sometimes as their exclusive eyewitness (and, in this way, they can be really defined as "historical"). However, at the same time, they are photographers with an official assignment (and therefore they do have not the neutral approach that belongs to a historian).

We do not know if just a second before or after "the shot" (the photograph released by the official press office), the personality has had a different facial expression or a different hand gesture, or if the bystanders have had a different posture.

Probably those differences would portray the story in much more journalistic and historical way. But we have just "the shot." So, we could say that an official picture is "storytelling" – and many of Souza pictures really are – but it simply tells the story that was chosen for release.

The renowned visual professionals with whom I have shared my opinion are divided on this definition. John G. Morris – the legendary photography editor formerly of *The New York Times* and Magnum, also the author of *Get The Picture: A Personal History Of Photojournalism* – is an enthusiastic supporter of Souza's work. "Historian' is not an exaggerated claim: his pictures will go to the presidential library." Morris finds there is no contradiction between being the official photographer and being a propagandist for Obama, "because, of course, anyone who is working so closely to the President is subject to be in his favor."



**SUNLIT.** On a warm Spring day in May the President moved a meeting with senior advisors outdoors, to the Rose Garden.

Others professionals are not so convinced. Kenneth Irby, visual journalism group leader at The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, is outspoken: "Gatekeeping and discussion by officials beyond him about what is released are enough in themselves to preclude any use of the word 'historian.'"

Søren Pagter, photographer and head of the department for photojournalism at The Danish School of Media and Journalism in Århus, Denmark, is on the same wavelength: "We must look at Pete Souza's work as a biography of President Obama, of which he is a kind of 'embedded photographer,' so he is not allowed to take controversial photographs of the people who pay his wages. He is part of Obama's spinning."

To not regard him as a historian, obviously, does not exclude that his pictures could be defined as historical: "What really makes Souza's pictures more interesting and more historical than the ones taken by previous White House photographers is that he has been allowed to publish pictures with a higher degree of intimacy," Pagter says.

Shannon Perich, an associate curator of the Photographic History Collection at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, adds: "His being very sympathetic to the President is the reason why I'm considering him as a personal photographer more than a historian." Perich is one of the curators of the exhibition "I Do Solemnly Swear," a photographic display of more than 30 images taken during the presidential inauguration, among them four by Souza.

**PROPAGANDA AND OTHER RISKS.** Earl Bridger, senior lecturer in Photojournalism at the Queensland College of the

Arts (Australia), has a more shaded opinion. "I don't disagree with Souza's statement, but I think it's incomplete. History is accumulation of many points of view, so no photographer by himself can present a history. He is playing a part in telling this history, but people have to look at those 'approved pictures' with some concern that he is paid by the White House to take those. We need to look back upon this period not just through the Souza's eyes but through the eyes of many photographers."

MaryAnne Golon, independent photography editor and media consultant, also jury chair at World Press Photo in 2008, says: "What is really new is that Souza very clearly defines with the White House his role of being the documentary teller of the informal and the personal face of the presidency. People don't understand how later on how important those imagines can be; this most powerful position in the world needs to be documented, also in that visual way. The only thing that worries me about having a personal photographer doing so strongly the informal documentation is that it makes the politicians feel they don't have to have anyone else and they don't have to allow other coverage by outsiders of the administration."

Does this inexorable process of image-making bring with it a risk of propaganda? Here again, opinions differ. Irby has no doubts: "This is not propaganda, this is part of public relations. It is an authentic message in an attempt to open up the White House to the American people and to the people abroad."

Perich asserts that whether one perceives that as propaganda or not depends on the viewer. Contrariwise, Golon says: "There is a propaganda angle in what they release, and that is natural. Obviously, you have to be more careful





**AMERICAN IN PARIS.** Before flying home to Washington, talking with aides outside the U.S. Ambassador's residence in France.

than you are [with] an independent journalist.”

Pagter summarizes in this way the main points of the question: “Pete Souza would never take a controversial picture: that’s not why he was employed. So, if propaganda means a certain point of view, in favor of the President, yes, it is propaganda, but it’s been done in a very clever way. If you compare these pictures to some of the situations with Bush, for instance, when he gave a plastic turkey to a soldier in Iraq, you can appreciate bad propaganda: in fact everybody could see that this personal insight into his world was so staged, so planned for the media and was in many ways simply comical.”

**HOW TO USE FLICKR “FROM ABOVE.”** All these professionals say they welcome the launch of the official White House pictures on Flickr. Golon expresses a shared vision on that: “In the past there was an exclusive access to those pictures: you had to be a magazine editor, or a historian, or a big publisher to look at them. One of the strengths of the Obama campaign strategy is that the administration can have the feedback from the constituency about the job the President is doing: the more open the presidency is, the more potential there is for improvement to be made. And they can receive feedback also in this way.”

And Bridger believes that the Obama White House operation is going to prompt other politicians around the world to do something similar.

There are many cases in which pictures from Flickr’s folders have been used as a source of “citizen journalism.” Now The Official White House Photostream wrong-foots us, because it is something that invades Flickr from below to above. I talked about this with Jay Rosen, a New York

University journalism professor and long-time campaigner for citizen journalism who devotes himself to studying the news “from above” by non-professionals who use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet. “An official photostream on Flickr sounds pretty new to me,” Rosen says. “There has always been an ‘official version’ of the White House. What is different now is that it’s easily given to the public as well as the news media, shared with everyone, and so other forces can now ‘distribute’ and create images of the President.”

It’s a kind of invasion of the pitch: one is used to seeing Flickr working from below to above, and now finds it working in the opposite way. “There is less control, in the sense of more images scattered more widely; but it would not be surprising if it ends up being a new kind of control.”

Rosen does not believe that this coverage could change the way in which power represent itself: “What changes is the location of the filter. The White House always put out an official message and image stream; now the filter is the body politic itself, not the professional press.” Is this a risk for democracy? “No, but it means that political publics need to learn how to handle it, and put in quote marks what the White House says is true.”

**THE “BEHIND-THE-SCENES” STYLE.** Pagter dwells upon Souza’s distinctive technique of getting inside the sanctum of power, always standing on the side of the situations, finding the good moments by showing the background: “Souza’s attention is now on the scenery, on the President in full figure or half figure. His pictures take time to be read because of the wealth of information inside. He is working from a



**ROMANTIC FIREWORKS.** With First Lady Michelle Obama, the President watched a July Fourth celebration above the Mall.

distance, three or five meters, into what Obama is doing. Right now it’s very interesting because all these situations are new for us to see. We haven’t been in these surroundings, in these offices before, so now the environment creates new pictures for him.”

In Souza’s coverage, there are two levels of photographs: the official and the informal. Pictures that must be taken versus pictures that have been taken at the photographer’s discretion. This means that pictures from planned events and photo opportunities that the other media are also allowed to cover versus pictures from candid, more intimate situations, in which Souza is the only who can shoot.

Obviously, the most interesting pictures belong to that second category. The picture with Obama removing his suit coat as he enters the presidential limousine en route to the airport exemplifies this approach: it shows an informal moment in between two official events, with Obama in a hurry just like the average man, and, between the lines, the labor of being president.

Is Souza creating some stereotypes in that official iconography? “It may happen if he continues just doing this in the next years,” Pagter says. “It will be interesting to look at Souza’s work in two or three years to understand if there will be some development in that area. He has to develop his language by using another visual language, for example moving even closer and capturing more details.”

Arturo Mari, the former official Vatican photographer, wants to congratulate Souza on his job. From the top of his 27 years spent beside Pope John Paul II, Mari appreciates the choice to show the President attending to his work so diffusely. “We can catch how the sympathy with the Obama doctrine is well structured and how the President

trusts Souza. This is the most important thing in covering personalities.”

Mari says he has not found staged situations in the pictures he has looked at. However, he adds, “the most difficult thing in doing this job is to portray the deep, constant mood, not to shoot at an exceptional happening; for that television is enough. The intimate coverage costs sacrifice and patience and implies that you ought to refrain from taking pictures, in some circumstances.”

Here is the dichotomy between photographs and television. Photography helps in showing the candid, ordinary face of power better than television does; this is what follows from the analysis by Mari. At the White House they have noticed it, as these words confirm: “Pete Souza and the White House Photo Office bring us an exclusive, massive, unique look at the President’s term so far. Take a few minutes to get a different perspective from the images on television every day.” That’s the tempting invitation posted by Jesse Lee, the Online Program Director for President Obama, at [www.whitehouse.gov/blog](http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog).

And so we can use one of the images of this celebrity-like leader of the free world as we prefer: as a screensaver or printed out, stuck on a wall, taped on the fridge, or carried around in our iPhone. Maybe this will create a new form of democracy, or, at least, it will be a huge boost for the illusion of intimacy. Time will tell. But, just giving us that option, the old beloved photographic medium is taking its revenge. ■

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