

## Performing Civic Identity: The Iconic Photograph of the Flag Raising on Iwo Jima

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*Iconic photographs are widely recognized as representations of significant historical events, activate strong emotional response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics. The appeal of the iconic image of a group of Marines raising the U.S. flag on Iwo Jima arises from its embodiment of three discourses of political identity—egalitarianism, nationalism, and civic republicanism. Its appropriations reflect a range of public attitudes—civic piety, irony, nostalgia, and cynicism. The role of visual icons in constructing civic attitudes to mediate historical events was underscored by the use of the flag-raising image following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Key words:* icons, identity, performance, political emotion, visual rhetoric, public sphere, ideology

THERE is arguably no image that resonates more with the popular understanding of the U.S. role in World War II than the photograph of five Marines and a Navy hospital corpsman raising the Stars and Stripes atop Iwo Jima's Mt. Suribachi on February 23, 1945. The photograph, taken by AP photographer Joe Rosenthal, appeared prominently two days later on the front page of Sunday newspapers across the country; shortly thereafter it was reproduced in virtually every local newspaper and weekly news magazine.<sup>1</sup> The first news editor in Guam to see the photograph remarked, "Here's one for all time!"<sup>2</sup> The *New York Times* quoted an editor who dubbed it "the most beautiful [picture] of the war."<sup>3</sup> The following week *Time* magazine reported, "Henceforth, Iwo would be a place name in U.S. history to rank with Valley Forge, Gettysburg, and Tarawa. Few in this generation would ever forget . . . the sculptured picture of Old Glory rising atop Mt. Suribachi."<sup>4</sup>

Public reception was immediate and resounding. Newspapers were inundated with requests for reprints as families began to hang it on their living room and dining room walls. The *Times-Union* of Rochester, New York, compared it with Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*.<sup>5</sup> On March 12<sup>th</sup> the *New York Times* published a letter dated February 28<sup>th</sup> that proclaimed, "On the front page of the *Times* of Feb. 25 is a picture which should make a magnificent war memorial. . . . Reproduced in bronze, this actual scene should make good art and a fitting tribute to American men and American valor."<sup>6</sup> The point was not lost in Washington, D.C., as several members of Congress quickly urged passage of a bill that would fund the building of a monument based on the image. The permanent monument was not unveiled until 1954, but by mid-March Congress had appropriated the Rosenthal image as the symbol for the Seventh War Loan Drive; at the same time the photograph became the subject of a public campaign to have the U. S. Post Office issue a special "Iwo Jima" stamp. More than 3,500,000 posters bearing an artist's rendition of the photograph were produced for the bond drive, as well as nearly 15,000 large billboards and over 175,000 cards to be placed on the sides of streetcars and buses; the postage stamp sold over three million copies on the first day and 137 million copies before going out of print in 1948.<sup>7</sup> The original photograph was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the only time the award was given by acclamation in the same year the prize photo was taken.<sup>8</sup>

Photographs from the war were numerous, of course, but none evoked such an immediate, positive reaction, and only a few have come close to withstanding the test of

time. By most accounts the photographic print has been reproduced more than any other photograph—ever—and the image itself has been placed on inspirational posters, commemorative plates, silk screens, gold etchings, woodcuttings, key chains, cigarette lighters, matchbook covers, beer steins, hats, t-shirts, calendars, comic books, cacheted envelopes, trading cards, postcards and more.<sup>10</sup> Recently, in celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second World War, it has been featured as *the* symbol of the war throughout the mass media on countless books and videos and on numerous websites.<sup>10</sup> References to it have become a common trope of public argument while it continues to be featured in popular appeals to patriotism and as a vehicle for ironic commentary in editorial cartoons.<sup>11</sup>

As a distinctive and enduring image in the public media, the image of the flag raising on Iwo Jima presents a special opportunity to explore the role of visual imagery in the formation of public culture. To that end, this essay seeks to account for its rhetorical power: why has it achieved such distinctive status in public discourse and collective memory? Instead of supplying a single answer, our analysis follows an interpretive logic we believe is best suited to understanding visual eloquence. The iconic photo enacts the constitutive function of public discourse and coordinates multiple transcriptions of the historical event to manage fundamental contradictions in public life. This rich articulation of civic action in the Iwo Jima photograph provides performative resolution of the tension between liberalism and democracy in U.S. post-war public culture. The varied appropriations of the image across successive generations demonstrate how liberal-democratic public life is continually redefined in respect to an array of attitudes ranging from civic piety to cynicism.

### Civic Identity and Iconic Photography

Like the art of rhetoric generally, visual media have been thought to be either irrelevant or dangerous with respect to democratic deliberation and the public use of reason. Although part of a pervasive logocentrism in the Western academy, such objections also reflect assumptions about intentionality and influence that recently have been displaced by theoretical claims about the constitutive function of public discourse.<sup>12</sup> As Michael Warner summarizes, “publics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them.”<sup>13</sup> The norms, interests, political effectivity, self-awareness, and substantive claims characterizing public culture are defined by the composition and circulation of texts (including words and images) through mass media or similar practices of dissemination. Because such media continually interpellate audiences and typically model preferred forms of response, their diverse contents of words and images, announcements and advertisements, news and entertainment can structure consciousness in ways that are not reducible to determinations of influence on specific policy decisions.

This broader structuring of consciousness has made constitutive theory a natural ally of ideological critique. As Warner indicates, however, “What the critiques tend to miss . . . is that the tension inherent in the form” of public address “goes well beyond any strategy of domination.”<sup>14</sup> The significant entailment is that the ideological implications of specific texts or images are necessary but not sufficient for understanding how public address fulfills such interrelated functions as constructing public identity, modeling relationships between the individual and the collectivity, and motivating action or quiescence. Because the public is a body of strangers constituted solely by the acts of

being addressed and paying attention, it can only acquire self-awareness and historical agency if individual auditors "see themselves" in the collective representations that are the materials of public culture. Visual practices in the public media play an important role at precisely this point. The widely disseminated visual image provides the public audience with a sense of shared experience that anchors the necessarily impersonal character of public discourse in the motivational ground of social life.

The daily stream of images in the public media, although merely supplemental to reporting the news, define the public through an act of common spectatorship. All viewers *seem* to see the same thing. When the event shown is itself a part of national life, the public seems to see itself, and to see itself in terms of a particular conception of civic identity. At this point, the visual image is a direct and specific social inflection of the impersonal schema of public concepts. As Warner notes, "It is hard to imagine such abstract modes of being as rights-bearing personhood, species being, and sexuality, for example, without forms that give concrete shape to the interactivity of those who have no idea with whom they interact."<sup>15</sup> Of course, this is precisely why there is a fundamental contradiction in public identity. Concepts such as citizenship, emotions such as love of country, acts such as public advocacy, and practices such as critical reflection can only be taken up by others if they also provide some basis for identification, some grounding in the positive content of lived experience.<sup>16</sup> The abstract forms of civic life have to be filled in with vernacular signs of social membership. At that point, supposedly universal concepts immediately become self-limiting, exclusionary, and rightly subject to ideological critique.

What remains to be understood, however, is how ideological articulation operates as part of an unavoidable kink in the constitution of public culture. If specific embodiment becomes completely dominant (e.g., the white male property owner), the public ceases to exist, having been displaced by a specific social group. If the impersonal and rationalized forms and categories of public discourse (e.g., news for citizens) predominate, then the public also ceases to exist, having little motivational basis for uptake and action. To take a specific example, the Iwo Jima icon is celebrated for its egalitarian ethos, yet it also appears to be a picture of white men.<sup>17</sup> The picture could imply that only such men were qualified for citizenship or contributing to the war effort, although that would hardly fit with its use by the government to maintain public support for the war. The rhetorical problem is that affirmation of the principle of equality is necessary for social cohesion in a democratic society, but that principle has no motivational power without social embodiment, which always will be limited to some and exclude others. This dilemma persists in subsequent appropriations of the image that have substituted women and people of color for the soldiers. Thus, both the legitimacy and the power of the public sphere are at stake in any specific articulation of public address, although some forms of public address may prove better suited than others to negotiate this contradiction in modern representation. One could expect, moreover, that such forms would be perceived as both more likely to provide context than argument, and to be means of ideological manipulation rather than rational deliberation. So it is with visual images, particularly those in close daily association with the preeminent mode of public representation: the news coverage of print journalism.

The images of photojournalism are at once essentially impersonal texts circulating among strangers and a performative embodiment of the social content essential for attentive uptake of public discourse. Some images, such as the Iwo Jima photograph, acquire unusually high degrees of public response amid continued circulation. These

striking images succeed not from any unconventionality in their content or composition, but rather from an exceptional ability to constitute and negotiate public consciousness. By filling in the impersonal form of that consciousness with corresponding signs of social experience, they provide an affective anchor for political ideas. Through their circulation, they provide a basis for the reproduction of and critical reflection on public culture. Through their aesthetic appeal and plasticity, they provide the public audience with an emotionally complex, performative resolution of basic contradictions. By examining iconic photographs as a genre of public address, one can reassess the role of visual practices in the public media and discern specific problems, anxieties, and attitudes that define public culture in particular historical moments.

We define iconic photographs as photographic images produced in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics.<sup>18</sup> Examples include the migrant mother staring past the camera while three children cling to her amid the Great Depression, John-John saluting his deceased father's passing caisson, the Vietnamese girl running in terror from a napalm attack, and the lone protestor staring down a tank near Tiananmen Square.

Iconic photographs perform several important functions in public address. They reflect social knowledge and dominant ideologies; they shape understanding of specific events and periods; they influence political action by modeling relationships between civic actors; and they provide figural resources for subsequent communicative action. As they do so, they also illustrate the ways that visual communication can underwrite polity by providing resources for thought and feeling that are necessary for constituting people as citizens and motivating identification with and participation in specific forms of collective life. They accomplish this either through the embodiment of symbolic resources that are available throughout the print media or by emphasizing what cannot be said well or at all in print. In any case, the visual medium is particularly good at activating aesthetic norms that can shape audience acceptance of political beliefs and historical narratives.

To advance these arguments, it is necessary to examine specific photographs according to a set of critical assumptions that draw upon their position and frequent reproduction in public media as civic performances. Performances are aesthetically marked, situated, reflexive examples of restored behavior presented to an audience.<sup>19</sup> Like a "primitive theater," photography is grounded in phenomenological devices crucial to creating the performative experience.<sup>20</sup> Framing, for example, whether by the proscenium arch or by the rectangular boundaries of any photograph, marks the work as a special selection of reality that acquires greater intensity than the flow of experience before and after it. As they are framed, photos become marked as special acts of display. This aesthetic status heightens awareness of the stylistic features of any subject as it carries expectations for "communicative competence" in both the production and reception of the work. These expectations emphasize how the photograph is situated and that it is reflexive: it is always of a specific place and time, although it occupies highly programmatic settings in the public media (e.g., front page above the fold, flags and fireworks on the Fourth of July). These settings allow a second-order, reflexive consciousness that comes from foregrounding social actors, from signifying practices such as gesture and fashion, and from the communicative role of the photograph itself.

Equally important is that performative engagements inevitably are emotional. Performances traffic in bodies, and they call forth emotional responses precisely because they place the expressive body in a public space. David Hume observed that we feel more through the public exposure to others' emotions than through an interior circuit of sensations, and contemporary scholarship on the social construction of the emotions provides strong confirmation.<sup>21</sup> The photograph's focus on bodily expression not only displays emotions but also places the viewer in an affective relationship with the people in the picture. These emotional signs and responses operate reliably and powerfully because they are already presented within the society's conventions of display, as anyone recognizes when viewing theater from another culture. Thus, photography operates not just as a record of things seen, but as a way of seeing that is attentive to what is aesthetically distinctive, socially characteristic, and emotionally evocative.<sup>22</sup>

Within the performative space created by the iconic photograph a series of transcriptions occur.<sup>23</sup> One reason images become iconic is that they coordinate a number of different patterns of identification within the social life of the audience, each of which would suffice to direct audience response, but which together provide a public audience with sufficient means to comprehend potentially unmanageable events. Because the camera records the décor of everyday life, the photographic image becomes capable of directing the attention across a field of gestures, interaction rituals, social types, political styles, artistic genres, cultural norms, ideographs, and other signs as they intersect in any event. Thus, the icon does not so much record an event or fix a particular meaning as it organizes a field of interpretations. This coordination of discursive fields through performative embodiment is the reason that the iconic photograph need have little relationship to the conventional journalistic function of reporting information.

The more important task of the iconic image is to manage a basic contradiction or recurrent crisis within the political community. The foundational tension between the universal forms of public discourse and their socially determined content becomes a rhetorical space within which historically specific conflicts can be managed performatively. One of the dilemmas at the heart of liberal-democratic polity is how to negotiate the trade-off between individual autonomy and collective action. These separate though linked principles are central to the political system and are grounded in its foundational documents, asserting, for example, that the government is instituted to secure (not grant) the individual's "unalienable rights," and declaring that "We, the people" (collectively) constitute the sole authority for governing. Commonly, this tension is experienced as a murky gray area of guilt and freedom between self-interest and the common good. This tension comes to a head in the definition of citizenship.<sup>24</sup> Liberal-democratic citizenship is of necessity ambiguously defined, loosely enforced, relatively abstract and, therefore, a questionable basis for collective action. If citizenship is to be an actual mode of participation rather than a merely legal construct or regulative ideal for decision making, then it has to be articulated in a manner that encourages emotional identification with other civic actors. Indeed, in the modern era, which is defined in part by large, heterogeneous states maintained through technologies of mass communication, citizenship may depend on visual modalities that can enact the relationship of the abstract individual to the impersonal state. Likewise, the modern nation-state requires transference of passionate identification with local, embodied, organic institutions to a superordinate, procedural governmentality, and this shift in identification is accomplished in part through images of virtual embodiment that simultaneously reframe locality within

a national context while grounding national symbols in the social experience of everyday life.

One result is that public audiences acquire an appetite for models of how to be “good citizens.” The public media are more than happy to supply them. The typical Fourth of July picture of the child eating her ice cream cone in front of a U.S. flag is just such an image, as is the image of three firefighters looking up at the flag they have raised at ground zero in New York City. In its journalistic form, the photographic image represents and validates the complex identification vital to an embodied citizenship. In every case, however, that embodiment will recapitulate the tensions between the universal inclusiveness of public address and the specific embodiment of public identity, and it will have to be positioned with regard to personal autonomy and collective affiliation. We believe that photographic images become iconic when they provide artistically powerful resolutions of these endemic tensions in modern, liberal-democratic public culture. Accordingly, an icon can continue to shape public understanding and action long after the event has passed or the crisis has been resolved pragmatically. Put differently, the iconic photograph provides the audience with “equipment for living” as a vital public culture.<sup>23</sup>

At its best, the Iwo Jima photograph may appear to be a cliché for U.S. exceptionalism and an idealized conception of national life that sanctions unreflective respect for institutions (especially militarism), a passion for conformity, and other excessively majoritarian attitudes; at its worst, it would seem to be a celebration of “manifest destiny” and the Cold War notion of the United States as “policeman of the world,” while it reinforces the continued exclusion of women and other marginalized groups. We have no doubt that features of the photograph are linked to these larger ideological narratives, or that some viewers, not least those who have given the image totemic status in their personal life, use it to reinforce such a world view. That much is easy to identify today; however, there is another story to tell. The composition itself, its initial reception, its varied appropriations, and its continuing circulation in the public media reveal a complex process in which democratic citizenship is continually renegotiated through artistic variation on what has become a conventional model of civic identity.

### Transcriptions of Civic Piety

They are on a high barren place (Figure 1). No trees, only the twenty-foot pole. No other mountains, only a blank visual field of featureless lowlands and overcast sky. The immediate foreground is a low tangle of shattered wood, rock, and metal debris, the underbrush of war’s devastation. The photograph’s blasted, empty terrain allows the figural composition to project powerfully into the mind’s eye. It also presents an idealized model of the modern battlefield. The island is as featureless as the sea, while the marines are the only soldiers left on the field, struggling against natural forces, not against other men. There are no civilians, no houses or other buildings, not even enemy fortifications; no society is evident except for the one being erected. This barren stage cues the photograph’s conjunction of aesthetic design and political representation. War provides the backdrop for a moment of national celebration, and the battlefield becomes a world to be made in our image.

The soldiers fit perfectly into the scene. They may be the ideal work group: the leader directing the task while laboring no less than the others; those directly behind him in perfect concert with him, attentive and disciplined; those in the rear, whose physical

