

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.¹ The first news editor in Guam to see the photograph remarked, "Here's one for all time!"² The *New York Times* quoted an editor who dubbed it "the most beautiful [picture] of the war."³ 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."⁴

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*.⁵ On March 12th the *New York Times* published a letter dated February 28th 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."⁶ 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 1948.⁷ 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.⁸

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.¹⁰ Recently, in celebration of the 50th 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² As Michael Warner summarizes, “publics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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

