

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

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ Like a "primitive theater," photography is grounded in phenomenological devices crucial to creating the performative experience.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²²

Within the performative space created by the iconic photograph a series of transcriptions occur.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²³

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



FIGURE 1
(Reprinted with the permission of AP/World Wide Photos)

effort is no longer necessary, still straining to add any last effort that might be needed. The visual analogies evoked by the image are to similar forms of manual labor: a community barn raising or putting one's shoulder to the wheel.²⁶ There is a palpable harmony to the bodies as they strain together in the athleticism of physical work. Although the poses shift from being bent close to the ground to bearing a load to lifting upwards, one can draw a horizontal line across their belt lines, their knees all move together as if marching in step, all their physical energy flows along their common line of sight to the single point of impact in the earth.²⁷ The figure planting the pole could be a Renaissance sculpture as the dynamic energies of the human form are concentrated in the exquisite muscularity of his back. He also concentrates the energies of those poised behind him as their forward movement is channeled down the pole and through his legs, back, and arms into the earth. We see the sure coordination of bodies with each other and with an instrument dedicated to their task.²⁸

This coordination of the figures in the picture mimes the icon's coordination of interpretive motifs. An image from a horrific battle shows war as labor rather than killing; the only weapons are hardly visible, not in use, and aligned neatly in the vertical plane of the picture. The labor is on behalf of a flag, of nation building, not the destruction of other cultures, although the image remains a symbol of military victory culminating in the enemy's unconditional surrender. As is the case for each dimension

of the photograph, it can be read *both* as a symbol of conventional ideas of conquest and cultural superiority *and* as a more flexible model of citizen action that extends beyond the topical field of war precisely because it already embodies widely available structures of motivation. These patterns of political representation include egalitarianism, nationalism, and civic republicanism. These are not the only motifs at work in the image, but they are crucial principles of design and appeal. Because of their joint articulation, each has a slightly different inflection than might be expected. By identifying each briefly in turn, one can begin to account for the icon's compositional richness, a richness that proves to be an inventional resource for a wide range of appropriations.

Egalitarianism

As Paul Fussell notes, "The photograph is not about facial expressions but about body expressions, suggesting, in a way bourgeois faces can never do, powerful and simple communal purpose."²⁹ Fussell's observation captures a conventional relationship between depictions of the working class, the acceptance of anonymity, and political community. Hal Buell sees the same thing: "six Americans, all for one, working together in victory and valor."³⁰ In other words, the photograph depicts the U.S. war effort as essentially egalitarian. The soldiers are wearing identical uniforms, in field dress, with no brass or other indication of rank. They become ordinary men in common labor for a common goal. The pants and field jackets cling to the men's bodies from long use, and the dark tones suggest the sweat of honest labor. Thus, the composition also has the affective resonance of genre painting. The men in the picture are immersed in the deep rhythms and resonant emotions of their labor while bathed in a sublime aura they can barely recognize. The full implication of this portrait of the working class is that they are equal to the task *because* equal alongside each other, just as they are prepared to labor on for the military without regard for their personal safety until all are equal in death. This visual icon of the idea of political equality fuses the lesser sacrifice required in any egalitarian society—setting aside received rank, privilege, or other advantages for the common good—with the ultimate sacrifice of giving one's life for the nation or for one's comrades. Thus, the photo appeals directly to a foundational national value, while it also refigures that value by presenting military action as the purest form of its expression. That the military is a hierarchical organization is irrelevant, an awareness displaced by other hierarchies in the picture: the subordination of the men to the flag rising above them, and their superior position to the invisible Japanese positioned below.

This strong egalitarian appeal has to be contained in order to articulate consensus. Any egalitarian appeal soon draws attention to actual conditions in the society; while calling for common effort, it also implicitly condemns any denial of equality. Frustrations experienced by workers, women, and people of color were in fact barely contained by the war or were being fueled by the economic mobilization, tension already strong enough to require management across the spectrum of commercial and government propaganda.³¹ The ideological dilemma was that strong images of egalitarian effort were needed to mobilize the home front, but these carried unsettling implications about established social organization. The flag-raising photograph seems to have neutralized any radically egalitarian implications, which may stem from its depictions of the dominant social group and of military service, as well as its idealized embodiment of working class routine. We believe the stronger constraint comes from placing the

egalitarian appeal within two larger patterns of motivation: the symbolic structure of nationalism and a civic republican political style.

Nationalism

As one of the men in the picture remarked much later, "You think of that pipe. If it was being put in the ground for any other reasons. . . . Just because there was a flag on it, that made the difference."³² All the actions of the campaign, from strategic planning to the awful work of hand-to-hand combat, are folded into the symbol of national unity. The men's channeling of their private identities and energies into a common task is amplified, the whole composition a visual metonym that links the material embodiment of labor and abstract national identity. The image itself becomes a standard: egalitarian labor should serve the nation, which needs only egalitarian labor to thrive. Rarely has a photo arrived so perfectly tailored for subsequent use by the state. Witness the poster for the seventh war bond drive, which captioned an illustration of the image with the words, "Now. . . All Together." The public is hailed as fellow soldiers, united in their sacrifices for and defense of the nation, and called to increase their efforts toward total victory.

The flag's significance in the photo goes beyond any one interpellation of citizenship, however. Through its presence, it activates nationalism as a powerful mode of definition and identification; through its position within the composition, it gives nationalism a particular inflection uniquely suited to iconic appeal. This positioning comes, first, from the relationship between the abstract symbol of citizenship and the figural representation of anonymous, citizen action, and second, because the flag is caught in a moment of pure potentiality: the moment of unfurling. These elements then acquire additional meaning through the transcriptive linkage of national identity with an egalitarian ethos and a civic republican aesthetic. One result is that the image grounds national identity in vernacular life while attributing transcendental status to the nation.

The significance of each of the compositional designs becomes evident once one recognizes that the U.S. flag is itself a field of multiple projections; how else could it be used both to drape coffins and advertise used cars? Such projections include direct assertions of territorial conquest and possession, totemic evocations of blood sacrifice, demands for political loyalty to suppress dissent, representations of consensus, tokens of political participation, articulations of civil religion, ornamental signs of civic bonding amid a summer festival, and affirmations of political identity and rights while dissenting. Given the rich intertextuality of the iconic photo, it is unlikely that only one of these registers is in play, and probable that any of them could be activated by particular audiences. In the case of the Iwo Jima flag raising, some of the more obvious attributions are mere background: the connection between victory and territorial occupation was given only formulaic emphasis in the original publications (e.g., the *New York Times* caption, "Old Glory Goes Up Over Iwo"). With the widespread dissemination that quickly followed, the image became separated from its geographic locale in the Pacific theater and came to represent national unity on behalf of the more general objective of winning the war. Likewise, although the battle on Iwo Jima would continue for another four weeks of carnage (and over 26,000 U.S. casualties), the image has been appropriated more as a model of civic virtue than as a symbol of blood sacrifice.

The iconic appeal of this image stems in part from its ability to articulate an abstract conception of national identity through figural composition. The abstract extension of

the image is possible because the behaviors modeled are not specifically military actions, and because the actors are not behaving as if they are self-consciously affirming a cause. The soldiers are not engaged in the instrumental acts of deploying, maneuvering, or fighting, and although engaged in an act of display, there is no hint that anyone is performing for the camera.³³ The significance of this absence is evident from comparison with the follow-up photograph, which, according to the common sense of amateur photography, should be the preferred picture: There we see a larger, somewhat more varied group of men facing the camera; they are smiling, waving their weapons, and cheering before the flag whose size is evident now that it is fully unfurled.³⁴ This picture, of course, is powerless, a thoroughly conventional snapshot of men obviously acting on cue. By contrast, the power of the iconic image comes in large measure from the unselfconsciousness of those in the picture. Because of the apparent lack of artifice (including the artifice of emotional display) within the iconic photograph, the image can become a performance of war as a national event. By fusing a pure moment of military action with a sense of visual transparency, the photograph creates a truth effect: (It seems that) this is the image through which the meaning of the war can be seen.³⁵ Even more important, that meaning is teleological. The war is meaningful because it will end in victory, a victory foretold by the flag raising and equated with the raising up of the nation.³⁶

This transmutation of ordinary men into a national symbol is motivated by both the structure of the photograph and its captioning. As the only sign in the picture, the flag becomes the representative of all that signifies and is signified. It stands not just for the state, but also for *all* the values and conventions of civil society. Against the blasted scene, the flag calls the audience to the task of building their society in the same manner as the men in the picture, through sacrifice and coordinated labor. Likewise, the captions for the photograph that referred to the flag as "Old Glory" and placed the battle for Iwo Jima in line with other great battles from the Revolutionary War forward, situated World War II within a historical tableau that framed the common purpose of this war, as with all U.S. wars since the country's inception, as nation building.³⁷ Thus, the flag alone does not articulate a particular sense of nationalism or nationhood; indeed, it is an abstract and undefined symbol that fails to express any action with sufficient particularity to be the basis for allegiance. Rather, it is only when the flag is situated within the context of specific social types or signs of vernacular life that it resonates as a performance of the sociality that is the ground of politics and the motivational basis for taking up the banner of allegiance to the country. The scene and figures depicted by the photograph define the flag, and the photograph as a whole enacts a specific performance of nationalism that emphasizes coordinated effort by ordinary people toward a collective good.

This definition is reinforced by a number of smaller motifs. The flag is underscored by signs of aspiration: arms pointing, lingering upward along a rising trajectory from earth to sky.³⁸ The picture is brushed with touches of the natural sublime, from the craggy mountaintop to a sky of alternating dark and light clouds, and even the wind is flowing in the right direction. This fusion of nature and culture in a heroic uplifting gives the image a sense of destiny. Although the scene of desolation and the figures' battle dress imply that there is much work yet to be done, it will be done by a nation that has tapped into transcendental power. This power is channeled by the formal composition of the picture.³⁹ Vertical figures thrust up from a horizontal background. A strong diagonal line perfectly bisects the pictorial frame, and that high, single line to the left

leans against the men's lower massed movement to the right. The men are arrayed in action poses from a powerful kneeling figure to those stretching upward, from full body bent to the pole to those having to let go, from the forward figure wearing no equipment to supplemental gear on the back of the last figure. These oppositions extend to the deepest structure of the image, which is a fusion of dynamic action—men straining to raise the flag unfurling—in a static, permanent tableau. The corresponding implication is clear: action in history becomes transcendental, individual moral striving achieves collective immortality.

Civic Republicanism

Even conceptions of the transcendental have specific cultural inflections. This image is thought to be timeless because it conforms to a conception of political action that emphasizes how politics is constrained by history and oriented toward maintaining a community across time. The image also implies that community is achieved in part by remembering its heroes. In other words, the picture appears beautiful because it represents a traditional sense of virtue that conforms to the political style of civic republicanism:

The aesthetic sense of the republican style includes an appreciation of form and function taken from public arts such as architecture and commemorative statuary. This aesthetic favors figural representation of the civic culture and artistic definition of its public space. . . . This artistry typically displays political leaders and audiences who have figured in the history of the republic, it represents civic virtues and accounts for political achievement and the common good in terms of those virtues, and it follows habits of representation that feature the whole, clothed body and standard typifications of gender.⁴⁰

This description applies point for point to the picture, particularly as one adjusts for a martial republicanism typical of wartime. Soldiers are substituted for politicians while representing the audience on the home front through their clothes, labor, and subordination to the symbol of national unity. They epitomize common purpose and exemplify a wide range of virtues found in military action. Finally, the entire set of values is presented through and reinforced by conventional notions of masculinity. This inflection is telling; although war provides the natural setting for depicting men as aggressive, physically powerful, and fully realized in conquest, these men fulfill a more domestic version of masculinity. They are outside, working, as a team, in manual labor, to erect a symbol of collective organization. The many descriptions of the photo mirror these appeals: its beauty is synonymous with its depiction of virtue, and that virtue is deeply encoded in the conventional hierarchy and habits for organizing civic life.

This civic republican style of political representation is further articulated through monumental and quotidian appeals. "The monumental figure is the one that is supposed to extend across the entire public space and through historical time," and the quotidian example is a matter of detail "on a small scale in order to manage a specific situation."⁴¹ One reason the photo of the flag raising is so powerful is that it operates in both registers. The image has a monumental outline—a group of men dwarfed by the standard they are raising against a huge sky and distant horizon—and sculptural qualities—the massed figures are as if cut from stone, powerful yet immobile. No doubt these features and their corresponding sense of "timelessness," not just the patriotic message so familiar to the war-time audience, made for such strong extension into posters, public statuary, and war bond drives. Monumental appeal is self-limiting, however. Public statuary typically

becomes an allegory of civic republicanism itself: although still visible to subsequent generations, it is unseen or unappreciated because overly familiar and set too far above the private concerns of the individuals passing by in their day-to-day routines. The iconic photograph counters this tendency through the inadvertent reproduction of the details of everyday life, such as the swatch of undershirt on the last soldier's arm or the creases in the jacket of the first soldier. This sense of photographic detail can undercut the values being evoked by the monumental dimensions of the icon, but here it complements that dimension. The vernacular features of the photograph provide an additional basis for identification with the figures, one that is less heroic because more ordinary and so a compelling reassurance that the event is personally meaningful.¹²

These two dimensions of the republican aesthetic merge into a common telos: the heroic scale and collective victory, signified by a flag rising above the battlefield, and the common life, signified by the uniforms and coordinated actions of the soldiers laboring beneath the standard, converge in the republican ideal of consensus. Within the republican orbit, collective action requires prior and renewed commitments to the common good, commitments that are evident from setting aside personal differences and material interests. These qualities are easily identified with the action in the picture in both its monumental outline and everyday detail. Here, as rarely observed in public or private life, we see the features of everyday labor coordinated through an action taken to communicate national purpose across a great space.

This stylistic accomplishment also helps to account for the photograph's subsequent use. The flag is a timeless image of eternal national values in part because it immediately leaps across the divide between war and civil society. Set on a battlefield, it reproduces an action seen more often at civic ceremonies. More important, the republican style valorizes public arts precisely because they "are understood not so much as accounts of what happened, but as designs for imitation while preparing for events to come."¹³ If it had merely been read as a sign of success on Iwo Jima, the photograph's future would have been brief. It succeeded, however, because it so beautifully filled the need for civic statuary, because it was an example of republican artistry transposed into the public medium of the age. An actual mural or sculpture would have been consigned immediately to the back rooms of a military museum, but this was an achievement of civic artistry in photojournalism, that is, front and center within the public space created by the newspapers, news magazines, government posters, and other mass media. Within that space, the photo could function as a model for imitation, not in respect to future battlefields, but to the entire field of civic action. The republican style valorizes arts that can focus the public's attention on public values and on a civic community's need for continued service, which includes the performance of selfless action before other members of the community.

From Civic Piety to Public Cynicism

One photograph has been celebrated among all others of the Second World War not because it was the best representation of the nature of war or because it provides the strongest statement of national beliefs or power, but because it enacted the best performance of deep norms of our public culture. It was a work of civic art having the qualities of public sculpture and the features of a common life. Most important, perhaps, through the successive transcriptions from egalitarianism to nationalism to civic republicanism, the photograph directs civic action into channels of cooperation that need not

have radical implications for social change. Thus, the iconic image could appeal to the public audience while remaining consistent with the institutional interests of media and political elites. To be an icon, however, the image has to retain a sense of autonomy from either popular taste or elite interests; that autonomy comes in part from the aesthetic quality and cultural richness of the image.

We believe that the photo continues to be a force in public discourse because it is a performance of civic action that seems to be “above” the many social conflicts that emerged, first, in the post-war period, then with the cultural revolution of the Vietnam era, then again with the end of the Cold War, and now, following the events of September 11, 2001, with the advent of a new cold war that recreates a national security state defined against a transnational phenomenon. The historical details defining the photo do not direct its application. This war, that era, it doesn’t matter. What does matter is that the photo has become the single most powerful image of democratic solidarity in our culture. It has set the standard for collective action: There they are, the “greatest generation,” individuals working together, rising as one to unexpected obligation, and mutely, without question or hint of cynicism.⁴⁴ They remain individuals who will go their separate ways in private life, but when duty calls, they respond without personal regard and with the unconscious coordination that comes from a good faith acceptance of the disciplines of large-scale institutions. And they do so humbly; the defense of liberty is guaranteed by workers who take pride not in themselves but in getting the job done.

History actually falls short, but the rhetorical problem is more interesting: The formal perfection of the photograph becomes a burden as it condemns subsequent generations to a narrative of decline and fragmentation. The high degree of aesthetic cohesiveness makes its model of citizenship too distant, particularly when such civic piety is transposed to a democratic culture whose dissension and partisanship are no longer kept in check by war and older, more stringent norms of social conformity. It is no accident that this is a characteristic anxiety of civic republicanism. The image of willing subordination to the higher good of the nation has an unconscious coherence that can rarely be realized and is not often seen in the give and take of ordinary life. The ability of the image to move easily across contexts, from military to civilian life, and from one generation to those following it, also makes it a vehicle for the republican pathos of liberty’s defenders having to watch their sacrifice be squandered by those who enjoy its benefits.

Thus, a paradox emerges: the more literally a later generation reproduces the actual conduct of a prior generation, including the beliefs, norms, and structure of feeling that make that conduct meaningful, the more out of step it will be in its own time; conversely, the more it develops without regard for the dominant model of citizenship, the less virtuous it will seem. The more idealized or “timeless” the model, the more difficult its application in each successive generation. Ultimately, the most positive images available to a community would become a catalog of all it cannot do. We know from experience, however, that the process of representation somehow avoids this end state. The Iwo Jima icon demonstrates that the idealized image can continue as a basis for imitation. We already have identified the ways in which it conforms to strong conventions of aesthetic and civic composition and draws on widely available patterns of identification. An additional characteristic of this form of civic performance is that it leaves a key basis for identification undefined. From this perspective, iconic photographs operate as collective symbols that are in some sense “empty” of political

