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PHOTO JOURNALISM

THE PROFESSIONALS' APPROACH



Kenneth Kobré
SIXTH EDITION





President George W. Bush speaks to fewer than 100 people who accepted invitations to a Republican fundraiser toward the end of the President's second term. The photographer looked for a picture that said "disappearing president."

Olivier Douliery, Abaca Press

General News

BEYOND THE PHOTO OP

Olivier Douliery had been assigned to cover President George W. Bush speaking at a Republican Party fundraiser. Shooting for the French agency Abaca Press, he found himself among 20 other photographers covering a planned event that attracted fewer than 100 attendees. The president's popularity in his final year in office was in a downward spiral, even among his former supporters.

As the photographers moved about the room, shooting from one position and then another, Douliery knew he did not want another routine picture of the president lecturing and gesturing.

A thinking person's photographer, he decided to go for an interpretive shot that would visually express the downward trend in the president's popularity.

First, though, he got his safe picture of the president speaking. Then he noticed that if he stood exactly beneath the podium that the President seemed to disappear behind the podium and the microphones.

Douliery waited in the same spot for 25 minutes. From his position beneath the podium, the presidential seal framed in the middle of his viewfinder, Douliery first got a shot of one presidential arm extending from the side of the podium. Then the other arm. Finally, and in only two frames, Douliery found the shot he was looking for.

Douliery's wide-angle lens captured President Bush hidden behind the microphones, both arms outstretched on either side of the podium. The president had faded away, leaving only his arms to wave up and down, the presidential seal standing in for his head.

The picture was an instant success. It was picked up by Getty Images, Polaris, United Press International, and Black Star picture agency, and then reproduced in many newspapers and magazines around the world.

Politicians plan media events that attract the camera, even if the events themselves have little news value. Called "photo opportunities or photo ops" these non-events, often filled with balloons and confetti, have been designed for the camera journalist.

If a senator puts on a stupid hat for a photo, editors can't resist the picture. Politicians and photographers manipulate each other, to their mutual benefit. Politicians look for free publicity and photographers want visual events. The picture of the senator wearing a cowboy hat is not wrong. It is simply not good journalism.

The challenge—and one that is not easy for photojournalists to meet when assigned to cover these orchestrated situations—is to look beyond what the politicians have planned and focus instead on the reality behind the staging. Douliery met the challenge.

GOING BEHIND THE SCENES

Politicians come alive at election time. The old "pol" leaves the desk in his plush office and starts pressing the flesh at ward meetings, cultural parades, and organizations for the elderly. The young challenger, by contrast, walks the streets of the ghetto with her suit jacket thrown over her shoulder. Both candidates plaster stickers on cars, erect billboards, appear in "I promise" TV ads, and attend massive rallies.

A photographer can take two sets of campaign pictures. One would show the candidate's public life—shaking hands, giving speeches, and greeting party workers. The other would reveal the candidate's private life—grabbing a few minutes alone with the family, planning strategy behind closed doors, pepping up the staff, and collapsing at the end of a 14-hour day.

All too often, news outlets present their readers with a one-sided visual portrait of the candidate—the public side, planned and orchestrated by the candidate's campaign directors. Editors tend to publish only upbeat, never downbeat, pictures; only happy, never sad, moments. Photographers continue to churn out photos of the candidate shaking hands and smiling—photos that reveal little about the person who wants to run the city, state, or federal government.

The major U.S. news magazines have done a much better job of behind-the-scenes coverage than most of the country's newspapers and web sites. To capture insightful pictures of politicians, some magazine photographers and their news organizations have developed special access to high-level officials. While these photojournalists have uncommon access, their techniques are still useful for photographing people whose lives seem to be one long photo op.

Diana Walker, contract photographer for *Time* magazine, has been covering the White House since the last year of the Jimmy Carter administration. Presidents come and go at the White House. Walker remains. Walker says she is afforded access behind the scenes at the White House to show readers what the president is about when he is offstage. "I can show you relationships and atmosphere," she says, "how these people look when they are not in front of the lights and microphones."

Walker tries to act like a "fly on the wall" when photographing private moments in a president's life. "My whole approach is for the president not to know I am there. I try not to engage with him—ever. I don't talk unless he talks to me," she says.

By becoming as familiar—and as unobtrusive—as the wallpaper in the Oval Office, Walker quietly records intimate moments inside the White House. The night before President Clinton's impeachment trial began, she recalls, "The president turned to his wife, suddenly put his arms around her neck and held on to her just for a quick second." That photograph, she says, captures a personal moment and an emotion that the president would not necessarily reveal in public.

While the president knows that Walker is in the room, neither he nor his staff can

control how the people in the Oval Office will behave, she points out. “The scene is set, but the characters are themselves.”

Walker, by the way, shoots only black-and-white when photographing inside the White House. *Time* signals its behind-the-scenes access by publishing these kinds of stories in black and white.

P.F. Bentley has covered every presidential election since 1980. Shooting solely in black-and-white all these years, Bentley has followed the campaigns of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Robert Dole, and Newt Gingrich for up to a year at a time. As Bentley says, the campaign stops are just the tip of the iceberg. “In the hotel room is your picture.”

At the 1992 Democratic convention, Bentley’s picture of Bill Clinton warming up his vocal cords in the steam room before going onstage was more revealing than any picture of the candidate at the podium.

STRATEGIES FROM THE PROS

Not every photographer has the chance to shadow presidential candidates for months at a time or to document the president of the United States on a daily basis. However, the

experiences of shooters like Bentley, Walker, and other magazine professionals provide insights into how to cover any official—from governor to mayor to local supervisor.

WATCH BUT DON’T TALK

Diana Walker has developed several techniques for avoiding conversation with her subjects. If someone looks at her, she immediately breaks eye contact by looking at her watch. If they try to start a conversation, she adjusts her camera.

“Of course, if the president begins to talk to me,” she admits, “I have no choice but to answer back.” She describes her working manner as “trying to be as discreet, quiet, out-of-the-way, and unobtrusive” as she can. “Of course, he knows I am in the room,” she continues, “but it is the closest I can get to the way people really are.”

Covering politicians on the campaign trail has taught Bentley to be flexible. The observer should remain unobserved, he says. “You have to become a chameleon,” he explains. “You have to adjust to who (the politicians) are and to their routine. After awhile, you kind of know their moods. You know when to go in tight, when to back off, and, finally,

Senator Barack Obama campaigns for president at the University of Chicago. The photographer had unusual access since he had been traveling with the candidate for many months.
Pete Souza, Chicago Tribune



when to lay low.” If things aren’t going on, for example, he will usually walk out of a room and check in later. “I don’t hover all the time,” he notes.

Newsweek photographer David Hume Kennerly is a well-known raconteur when he is not working, but he finds it advantageous not to chat when he is trying to catch candid. “Usually I am in a place where there is no reason for me to talk,” he observes.

ZIP YOUR LIPS

All the photographers interviewed for this book who work behind the scenes have made tacit agreements with their subjects not to reveal what they overhear. “I don’t talk about what I hear, and my writers never ask me,” says *Time*’s Walker. Bentley agrees: “Of course, there is a trust that I won’t ever talk about anything I hear.”

Kennerly points out that still photographers have a real advantage over their television counterparts. Politicians can be themselves and say what is on their minds with still photographers in the room. They know their comments will stay off the record. With video cameras rolling, he says, politicians are unlikely to be their usual loquacious selves.

“If you introduce sound into the situation, politicians will not talk naturally,” he says.

NO GEAR YOU CAN HEAR

To carry out this unobtrusive approach, photographers rely on fast lenses and a high ISO to avoid using flash. Bentley’s mantra is “No gear that you can hear.”

Walker, too, prefers to shoot with rangefinder cameras but carries a single lens reflex with a longer lens—“just in case.” In each frame, she says, she tries to include the president and other players who are in the Oval Office. “I am not doing tight head shots,” she explains. Walker looks for relationships not portraits. But if a portrait is appropriate, the longer lens is in her bag.

SELL YOURSELF

You can have the right approach, the right ISO, and the best cameras, but without access to politicians, you can’t make revealing pictures. Bentley talks to politicians ahead of time about recording their entire campaigns from the inside. “I tell them about the type of pictures I will take and the type I won’t take. They know they are part of history.”

Bentley assures politicians that he is not out to ridicule them by taking “cheap-shot” pictures. No photos of scratching or adjusting, no images of people eating, he assures potential subjects. “I have been in the hotel room where the candidate is in

Diana Walker, who covers the White House for *Time* magazine, had behind-the-scenes access to Bill and Hillary Clinton during a trip to Africa. Walker was able to catch this rare, unguarded moment of President Clinton and his wife joking together.

Diana Walker, *Time* magazine



his underwear,” he says. “That is not the kind of picture I care to take. It is not a picture that has any meaning.”

Kennerly, who has been on the inside as the White House photographer for President Ford and on the outside as the *Newsweek* photographer covering Clinton, has learned about getting access under difficult conditions. “The picture is only a small part of what I do. I am a salesman first and foremost. I have to sell myself to people to come into their lives.”

Members of the House and the Senate are, for the most part, easy to deal with, he says. They have to be re-elected and they have to get along. “Photographers are not considered to be the enemy,” he says. “Reporters fall into that category.”

Having worked in Washington on and off since the Ford administration, Kennerly has excellent connections. “I actually know a lot of senators,” he says. “I would count 10 senators that I am well acquainted with and could call on a moment’s notice.”

During President Clinton’s impeachment trial, photographers were denied access to the Senate chambers during the proceedings. Kennerly likens the situation to covering a bullfight when you can’t see the bull or the matador. He wanted to take exclusive photographs at a high-level meeting of the representatives who were bringing the ominous charges against the President. He called on an old friend for whom he had done a favor 20 years ago. The friend was now a representative—and one of the managers of the impeachment trial. The 20-year-old favor paid off, and Kennerly got exclusive access for *Newsweek*.

MEETINGS GENERATE NEWS

In large cities and small towns, journalists cover the news of governmental meetings because the results of those meetings are important to readers. Meetings possess the same news value as fires and accidents. Often, the results of a governmental meeting—those involving changes in the tax rate, for instance—directly bear on readers’ lives even more than yesterday’s fender-bender.

Meetings and press conferences carry a challenge. They test the photographer’s creativity. Unfortunately, a critical meeting of the Senate Armed Services Committee looks very much like an ordinary meeting of the local zoning board. If the pictures remained uncaptioned, readers could easily be confused. Press conferences as well as awards ceremonies all tend to look identical after a while. Sometimes, through the creative application of framing techniques, catching the

moment, and using long lenses and light, the photographer can help portray the excitement, the tension, the opposition, and the resolution of the meeting.

FACE AND HANDS REVEAL EMOTION

Ray Lustig of the *Washington Post* has covered some of the most momentous as well as some of the most trivial political moments in the country’s recent history. Capitol Hill is his beat as the *Post*’s chief political photographer. When Lustig raises his 70–210mm f/2.8 zoom lens at a committee hearing or press conference, he looks for expressive faces. “A wrinkled brow, a grin, or a curled lip can add life to a routine meeting picture,” Lustig says. “Hands, too, reveal a speaker’s emotion.” Readers, of course, understand the meaning of a clenched fist or a jabbing finger.

REVEALING VERSUS ACCIDENTAL PHOTOS

A speaker’s facial expressions and hand gestures can be accidental and misleading. They might have nothing to do with the personality of the individual or the thrust of the message. Suppose that during a luncheon the governor is discussing closing the border to illegal immigrants. You take 100 to 200 frames. You might catch a shot while he is eating—showing him with his mouth screwed into a knot. This picture, although an actual moment, reflects nothing about the nature of the topic or even the speaker’s character. The misleading picture, in fact, tends to distort the news rather than reveal it.

As *Time*’s Bentley says, “I don’t care who it is, eating pictures are ugly. Once people start to eat, it is not a picture I care to have.”

WHO’S WHO IS IMPORTANT

Meetings, speeches, or press conferences in a town take on news value based on the personalities involved and on the importance of the subject debated. The photographer must know or be able to recognize the players in the game without a scorecard. If you are not familiar with the participants in a meeting, ask someone for information about the speakers. What are their names? Which ones are elected officials? Who is best known? With this information, you can zero in on the most newsworthy individuals.

Here is how Ray Lustig prepares for a day on Capitol Hill. “When I am preparing to go to the Hill, I first review the Reuters daybook. (The daybook lists all upcoming activities, including Congressional caucuses, press conferences, speeches, etc.) If I have questions, I try to meet with the appropriate editors—national or defense, for example. When I get to the Hill in the morning, I check the web



The hands of former Massachusetts Secretary of Human Services Jerald Stevens reveal the pressure, the pleasure, the tension, and the ease of this powerful state official.

Bill Collins



Without the woman's sign in the picture, few readers would guess that this meeting focused on free dental care for the aged. Tom Strongman, *Kansas City Times*

for committee schedules. I read the *Washington Post* thoroughly before I arrive, and when I get to the pressroom I take a look at *The New York Times* and the *Washington Times*. I also will do a quick scan of our newspaper's web sites. I also carry a pager that gives me information from both Houses' radio/TV gallery of events. I am doing my homework. I've got to know what is going on. That's my business."

The advantage of all this reading and preparation is that Lustig has a broad grasp of all the day's planned news. This allows him to select the most visual or most newsworthy events to cover.

Fully briefed on the day's events, he is the first to arrive at a packed hearing or overcrowded press conference. He gets there early and stakes out a spot. His meticulous forethought gives Lustig the edge on his competition.

PROPS ADD MEANING

Props can add meaning to a routine meeting photo. If someone holds up a prop, the reader will have an easier time understanding the point of the photo. If the speaker who denounces the lack of gun control laws brings to the meeting a few "Saturday Night Specials," the photographer can photograph the person examining or displaying the guns. A photo of an elderly woman, minus a few teeth yet holding aloft a poster of a toothy smile, helped summarize a meeting on free dental care for the aged (facing page).

SURVIVAL TACTICS

When Lustig covers an important committee meeting on Capitol Hill for the *Washington Post*, his gear bag contains two strobes and two SLR camera bodies: one with a 28–70mm (18–50mm digital) zoom lens and the other with a 70–210mm (50–140mm digital) zoom lens. He uses the short zoom for overalls of the conference room but saves the telephoto zoom for close-up portraits. The close-up brings the viewer and the subject nearer than they normally would meet in public.

Lustig also carries a small aluminum stool, which allows him to sit rather than kneel while waiting for a picture. "You need it," he says, "because it saves wear and tear on your body." He also carries a monopod and cable release.

Seated on his stool, his camera mounted on the monopod, and his cable release at the ready, Lustig can shoot at slower shutter speeds when necessary and also keep his lens aimed at his subject during those long, drawn-out meetings. Without tiring his arm



Republican Senator Dan Coates (Indiana) holds legislation that would create a comprehensive health care package. Republicans critical of the plan claimed it was too big, complicated, and bureaucratic. Both the Senator and the photographer know that props help visualize the story behind a meeting or press conference. Ray Lustig, *Washington Post*



Avoid shooting perpendicular to the line of speakers. The perspective results in a picture with large blank spaces between each person, and each face appears quite small.

Jan Ragland



Shooting these dignitaries from the side eliminated dead space between the subjects. Photographing with a telephoto lens appears to bring the individuals closer together.

James K.W. Atherton, *Washington Post*

or having to keep his eye glued to the viewfinder, Lustig can train the lens on his target and look for gestures, mannerisms, and expressions—all the way through each politician's speech.

PHOTOGRAPH THE ISSUES

Most political issues can be translated into pictures. If the mayor says city education is

poor and should be improved, the photographer must search for supporting evidence of the claim. Are schools overcrowded? Do students hang around in the halls with nothing to do after class? If racial tension exists between white and African-American students, can the journalist photograph the situation?

A set of realistic photos will transform rhetoric into observable issues.

More than a million immigrants enter the United States illegally each year to join the millions of others already living here.

Politicians debate what to do, activists hold protests, and Congress appropriates millions of dollars to staunch the flow.

These pictures go beyond the numbers and the staged events to see where some of the money spent on immigration control goes.

Two thousand three hundred federal agents of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security are assigned to "detect, detain, and deport" the illegal immigrants.

(TOP) Immigration Enforcement Agents Paul Kouame and Greg Dews prepare shackles for the people they will transport to San Diego for that evening's flight to a detention center in Arizona. Illegal aliens are processed in Arizona and then flown to the Los Angeles field office of the Department of Homeland Security. They will then be returned to Mexico and Central America. Most will attempt to return. (See pages 302–304 for a story about the dangerous journey many of these immigrants undertake.)

(BOTTOM) A female detainee sits on her cot in a women's pod at a detention facility in Florence, Arizona. Criminal detainees must wear red jumpsuits.

Mary Calvert, *Washington Times*

