

Photographic Presidents: Making History from Daguerreotype to Digital

Cara A. Finnegan

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The president of the United States is one of the most visible people on the planet, and photographs of presidents have been an important part of their legacies for generations. Cara A. Finnegan explores the history of presidential photography, focusing on a few important case studies, in her informative, knowledgeable, and enjoyable book *Photographic Presidents*.

Described as a project that flips “the conventional script from ‘presidential photography’ to ‘photographic presidents,’” Finnegan’s text tells the story of advances in photography through how those advances were used to depict the presidency. These examples begin with the practice of taking daguerreotype images of painted portraits of George Washington, making iconic the images of the first president still popular today and foreshadowing the shift from painted to photographic portraiture.

The book goes through its examples in detail, covering the experiences of John Quincy Adams as the first widely photographed president, and Dolley Madison’s routine appearances with new presidents; of Abraham Lincoln posing with an understanding that those images would help to define his legacy; of Franklin Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover managing photographers’ new ability to take candid, unposed images; and of Barack Obama’s innovative use of social media to distribute images.

All of these examples are fascinating, both because of the way that Finnegan uses them to tell the story of photography’s evolution as a technology, and for how they demonstrate the changing role that photography played in the American people’s relationship with their leaders. The book also includes numerous high-quality images for each example, giving context to the discussion of the photographic techniques and their powerful subjects, and makes use of presidents’ quoted reactions from the relevant periods.

By tracking that relationship between imagery and politics through both anecdotes and a big-picture view, *Photographic Presidents* is a valuable addition to presidential history.

JEFF FLEISCHER (March / April 2021)

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