The Stories Behind the Pictures

By Stephanie Tames\*

**President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his dog Fala at his Hyde Park, New York, home in 1943. He is driving a specially modified Ford convertible, which was operated with hand controls.**

My father first photographed FDR during his 1941 inaugural parade and photographed him last when his flag-draped casket returned to Washington from Warm Springs, Georgia, in April of 1945. My father and the other photographers who regularly covered the White House willingly helped deceive the public about the extent of FDR’s paralysis by never photographing him being carried or in any other compromising situations. In return, the White House promised the President would make himself available for photographs more than any other President. Yet as the President’s health declined, the White House limited the photographer’s access to him, increasingly staging their encounters. For my father, however, FDR’s charismatic personality and overpowering presence always made him seem larger than life no matter what his physical condition. During the five year span before FDR’s death, my father photographed the President about 100-120 times.

**Vice Presidential nominee Harry S. Truman and President Franklin D. Roosevelt under the Jackson magnolia tree on the South Lawn of the White House after they returned from Chicago, where he picked Truman for his running mate. 1944**

This photograph was taken on the day FDR and Truman formally opened their campaign for the 1944 presidential election. My father was classified an assistant photographer working for *Time Life* and had to allow the regular photographers access before he made any shots. There were only about 20 photographers and reporters covering the event compared to the hundreds that would cover such an event today. My father was using a Rolleicord with a flash off the camera. The bulbs were huge and filled with a kind of aluminum foil. When the bulb went off, it created a terrific light and loud noise. The President was a little annoyed but Truman just laughed out loud, which you can see in the photo. Since he made this photograph, my father photographed every other president and vice president in his career under that same tree.

**President Harry S. Truman outside the White House in 1947. Truman succeeded to the office of the president in 1945 upon the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt.**

President Truman was the first and only member of the “One More Club” organized by photographers assigned to the White House. President Truman was sympathetic to the needs of photographers and was always willing to pose for another picture. Once, he even pointed out to my father that he had forgotten to put a bulb in his flash.

**On President Harry S. Truman’s 63rd birthday in 1947, photographers threw him a party, complete with cake and candles. The President shared his cake with the photographers.**

President Truman was a favorite of the photographers, and the President liked the photographers as well. The President brought the photographers into the West Wing of the White House and into the press room which up until his presidency had been restricted to print journalists. Previously, photographers operated out of a room referred to by most everyone as “the dog house,” a room to the left of the entrance to the West Wing formerly used by the White House florist and gardener. President Truman made sure the photographers had the same privileges as writers. He often remarked to visiting dignitaries that he was the leader of the most powerful nation in the world and took orders from no one except photographers!

**President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at Camp David, MD, in September 1959.**

President Eisenhower chose three of my father’s photographs of the four official portraits the President used during his eight years in the White House. The first one, taken in 1953, was also used for the Eisenhower stamp. That photograph was made just before the President went on national television to announce the end of the Korean conflict. My father had watched the President make a familiar gesture while reading. He would be deep in thought, whip off his glasses, and stare off into the distance. It was this look of contemplation that was captured in the photograph the President chose for an official portrait and the same look he seems to have in this photograph as well.

**Dwight D. Eisenhower as he arrived in Chicago for the 1952 Republican Convention.**

President Eisenhower’s approach to photographers differed markedly from that of President Truman. Photographers were no longer family. Still, however, the President was by nature a smiling, genial man who enjoyed jokes, even on himself. The Eisenhower years were quiet and prosperous, and many Americans saw the President and First Lady as surrogate grandparents watching over the nation and each family. For my family the President and Mrs. Eisenhower even acted as grandparents! One Christmas, my family received a large box from the White House filled with presents for each of the children. My sisters made a little paper crèche as a thank you which my father delivered to the White House on Christmas day. Several weeks later my sisters each received a note signed by Mamie Eisenhower.

**John F. Kennedy being sworn in as the 35th President at noon on January 20, 1961.**

The day President Kennedy was sworn in as President was historic – the youngest president to take the oath of office. The day of his assignation, November 22, 1963, was historic in another way. At that time, no photographs (and no television) were allowed on the Senate floor. When news of the President’s assignation reached the Capitol, my father grabbed his cameras and ran to the Senate Press Gallery. He leaned over the gallery and started taking pictures of the senators reacting to the news. The Capitol Police immediately came after him and confiscated his film. He tried to tell them that the moment was historic. He never found out what happened to the film.

**President John F. Kennedy greets supporters on his western tour, 1962.**

The “Kennedy” aura only grew stronger after the election as the nation lived vicariously with the young and charming First Family through newspaper, magazine, and television stories. President Kennedy routinely drew huge crowds of supporters where ever he went and was happy to “hit the wall,” (the title of this photograph) and greet those awaiting him. He was also very media savvy and conscience of all of his movements in public. One photographer lost his access to the White House for photographing and publishing a picture of the President with his glasses perched onto of his head. The President was sensitive about his appearance and thought wearing glasses diminished his youthfulness.

**“The Loneliest Job in the World.” President John F. Kennedy in the Oval Office. February 19, 1961.**

This is my father’s most well-known photograph, and the most widely imitated. President Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963 added significance to the photograph and it quickly came to symbolize the tragedy of his Presidency. But in the 50 years since it was taken, the haunting image of a silhouetted President bent under the pressure of the office has become iconic. It transcends the Kennedy Presidency to encompass all U.S. Presidents.

The photograph was made for a *New York* *Times Magazine* story on a day in the life of the President. At that time, photographers had incredible access to the President, often alone (for contrast, see the caption for the photograph of President Reagan in the Oval Office). For my father, it gave him an opportunity to interact informally with the President and also to observe him. It was in this way that he made “The Loneliest Job in the World.” My father observed that the President often moved to the table to read while resting his injured back. During his day photographing the President for the story, he waited and when the President moved to the table he made his shot. Later, when my father showed the President a preview of the article, the President pointed to that photograph and said “that’s the shot that should have been on the cover.” He immediately recognized, as did my father, the power of this particular photograph.

Interestingly, my father only made two exposures from behind the President then he left the room and moved to the side to take a shot from a different angle. It was then that the President heard the shutter click, looked up and, seeing my father, made a comment about a *NYT* editorial he had been reading. Whether he was reading the newspaper or other documents when my father made “The Loneliest Job” no one really knows. It’s certain, however, that the weight of the world and that of the media were on his shoulders.

**President Lyndon B. Johnson, right, listens to President-elect Richard M. Nixon in the White House press briefing room, November 1968, in Washington.**

As with the previous President and those that followed, my father’s relationship with President Johnson stretched back to the halls of Congress. He knew the President well, and both men shared a love of bawdy jokes and political gossip. However much the President may have liked and respected by father, he also held my father personally responsible for any unflattering photographs that appeared in *The New York Times* despite my father’s complete lack of control of what the newspaper published. My father was reprimanded more than once by the President for such photographs. President Johnson particularly didn’t like being photographed with his glasses on, and he nearly always positioned himself so he was photographed from the left side.

**“The Johnson Treatment.” Lyndon B. Johnson, left, the Senate majority leader, is shown working over Theodore F. Green, D-RI, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1957.**

Lyndon Johnson knew how to use the political process. He was a master of persuasion. A big man with a big personality, he seemed to grow even bigger when he was trying to get his way. “The Johnson Treatment” is a classic study of LBJ’s particularly successful form of lobbying. Sen. Barry Goldwater once remarked to my father that LBJ was the only man he knew who “when he’d talk to you would breathe in your mouth.”

**Vice President Richard M. Nixon at Burning Tree Country Club, Bethesda, Maryland, 1954, getting ready for a round of golf with President Dwight Eisenhower.**

The history of Richard Nixon’s Presidency often colors our emotional response to photographs of him. Even in photographs of him during his early years in Congress and as Vice President we scan the pictures for any signs of what was yet to come. There are a few photographs, however, that capture a sense of his basic humanness. This is one such photograph.

**President Richard Nixon trying out one of my father’s cameras.**

The White House News Photographers Association began in 1921. In 1971, my father asked the five original members still living to meet with President Richard Nixon at which time they presented him with a gift. During the meeting, my father got the idea to have the President take a picture of the members using my father’s camera.

**Former President Richard M. Nixon defends his administration during a speech at dedication of a gym in his name, Hyden, Kentucky.**

While Richard Nixon had years of experience with the media beginning with his days as a member of Congress, he was not very comfortable being photographed. He also was not the easiest subject to photograph. Here is a classic picture of the former President, deep in his own thoughts, angry, unmoved by history.

**President Gerald R. Ford was appointed Vice President in late 1973 by President Richard M. Nixon after the resignation of Spiro Agnew. He took office as President of the United States in August 1974 after the resignation of Richard M. Nixon.**

Gerald Ford seemed unaffected by the glare of the media even before he was thrust into the spotlight as Vice President, and then as President after the resignation of Richard Nixon. He was easy-going and enjoyed the company of the regular photographers who covered the White House, even allowing them to photograph him during his daily swim and exercise routines.

**President Gerald R. Ford in the Oval Office.**

Soon after Richard Nixon left the White House grounds in August 1974, when he resigned the presidency, a solemn Gerald Ford turned and stared walking back into the White House. My father photographed him as he walked and as he passed my father, my father called out “Good luck Mr. President.” Mr. Ford didn’t look up. My father again called out. His head snapped up and he saw my father, walking over to him and shaking his hand. Mr. Ford said, “I’m not used to that title, thanks for your help and support.” After the tumultuous years of the Nixon Administration, the Ford Administration was a breath of fresh air. President Ford was as open and friendly with the press as he always had been.

**Democratic Presidential Candidate Jimmy Carter in 1976 draining a pond on his Plains, Georgia, farm.**

My father had never been to Plains, Georgia, nor to a pond draining but when he was sent to Plains and saw Jimmy Carter up to his neck in pond water, my father took off his shoes and slid down the muddy bank. Falling on his back and holding his cameras aloft to protect them from the muck, my father slid nearly all the way to the Democratic Presidential Candidate then managed to get to his feet. “Welcome to Plains, Mr. Carter smiled.

**President Jimmy Carter and Vice President Walter Mondale saying a prayer before eating a very sparse lunch in the garden of the White House. This was one of their weekly Wednesday meetings.**

President Carter had a rather cool relationship with White House photographers. He was neither overly friendly nor standoffish. Indeed, he seemed not to be terribly enamored by photographs of himself, possibly feeling that photography was superfluous. After he won the Presidency, he offered my father the job of official photographer. My father was delighted with the offer and asked that his title be Personal Photographer to the President, the title other Presidents used. President Carter thought the title too stately or imperial, an impression he wanted to avoid. President Carter never had an official photographer and therefore the personal, candid shots of his life in the White House are missing. This photograph is one of the few that convey the sense of peace and quiet dignity that was so much a part of who Jimmy Carter is as a man.

**President Ronald Reagan outside the White House.**

President Reagan was a master of the media but for all of his savvy did not particularly like still photography. He seemed more at ease in front of television cameras. He often appeared very formal and controlled in photographs, projecting a “Presidential” image -- unless he was at his ranch or Camp David.

**President** **Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office.**

My father requested a one-on-one assignment with the President to illustrate a magazine story running in the *NYT* and was offered eleven minutes one afternoon. Arriving early, my father set up then moved the President’s chair slightly away from his desk to catch the afternoon light. When the President arrived he was accompanied by several members of the White House photo and press staff. The days of spending time alone (even just eleven minutes!) with the President had gone. The President immediately pushed his chair back to the desk and sat down, ready to be photographed. My father made a few exposures but could not get the President to relax and work as he would normally. Even before his eleven minutes were up, my father told the President he was done. He slowly packed up his gear and as he backed out the door, noticed the President push away from his desk, pick up some papers, stand, and turn toward the window. My father pulled his camera up and took the picture. A candid shot of the President at work.

**George H.W. Bush, Republican National Chairman, during a television interview in 1973.**

My father considered George H.W. Bush to be as friendly and honest with photographers as President Truman. Both men made the White House their home with staff and press as members of an extended family. President Bush often stopped in the White House Press room long after reporters were gone and few photographers left just to talk informally, knowing the photographers would adhere to the unwritten White House rule that anything said would remain private.

**George H.W. Bush during his CIA nomination hearings, 1975.**

President Bush jokingly referred to the photographers covering the White House has “photo dogs” after he heard the photographers protesting while being herded behind ropes in the Rose Garden during photo opportunities. The photographers were half-jokingly “barking” as they were gently nudged. But President Bush cared deeply for his Photo Dogs, knew many of them by name and even knew about their families. As photographers’ access became even more limited, he often made a point of doing something unusual or of interest for his loyal Photo Dogs.

\*The “stories” behind the photographs were gathered from my father’s book, “Eye on Washington,” HarperCollins, 1990; and George Tames, Oral History Interviews, Senate Historical Office, Washington, DC, 1988.