The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
September 1994

AMERICAN POLITICIANS: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM 1843 TO 1993
October 6, 1994 - January 3, 1995

The first comprehensive exhibition to examine the ways in which photography has both recorded and shaped the image of the American politician opens at The Museum of Modern Art on October 6, 1994. **AMERICAN POLITICIANS: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM 1843 TO 1993** demonstrates how advances in photographic technology and distribution have altered our perceptions of politicians and the democratic process. Organized by Susan Kismaric, Curator, Department of Photography, this exhibition ranges from formal, stately portraits of Abraham Lincoln and John Quincey Adams through examples of today's manufactured "photo opportunity." The exhibition, on view through January 3, 1995, and its accompanying catalogue are supported in part by a grant from Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro.

Arranged chronologically, **AMERICAN POLITICIANS** includes approximately 175 black-and-white photographs. The exhibition features two categories of work: portraits and news photographs made on commission by professional news and magazine photographers, and photographs that were made independently. It includes both unknown and well-known works that have been selected from an array of public and private collections, including The Museum of Modern Art, the Chicago Historical Society, George Eastman House, and, significantly, the archives of photo agencies, newspapers, and magazines. The impact of television on the political process is highlighted with fifteen minutes of video excerpts from the first of the Nixon/Kennedy debates in 1960. The video component also shows a compilation of forty-two campaign commercials including the first

presidential television advertisement for Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952 and Clinton's campaign ads forty years later.

Among the earliest works in the exhibition are the carefully posed daguerreotypes *John Quincy Adams* (1843) by Philip Haas and *Harriet Beecher Stowe* (c. 1843) by Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes. In both pictures, the subjects are composed and still, seated in what appears to be a domestic interior. This pose, derived from the conventions of portrait painting, was characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century when portrait photography was highly stylized. Because there was no negative, daguerreotypes could not be made into multiple prints. Consequently, these earliest photographs had little influence on political life.

It was during Abraham Lincoln's presidential campaign of 1860 that photography began to have a far-reaching effect on the careers of political personalities. The development of the collodion negative and the albumen print made the photograph easier and less expensive to produce -- hence quicker to disseminate to the electorate. In such images as *Abraham Lincoln* (1861, a group of four cartes-de-visite or card-mounted photographs) and *The President [Abraham Lincoln] and General McClellan on the Battlefield of Antietam* (1862), both by Alexander Gardner, Lincoln's distinguished and somewhat strange physical appearance could be seen by a broad audience. The carte-de-visite became a popular collectible in the United States. Sold to the public in magazine shops, bookstores, and from the photographer's studio, cartes were the first opportunity for the politician to connect his actual photographic image with his platform.

The development of the hand-held camera and the founding of stock picture agencies at the end of the nineteenth century gave the public access to images of politicians as they moved about the world. With the invention of the halftone process at the turn of the century, the technology for reproducing photographs in

the mass media was in place. It was now possible to create and disseminate an appealing public persona; Theodore Roosevelt (the first president to set up a press room in the White House), in particular, profited from the fact that his political career coincided with the introduction of halftone images in newspapers and magazines. Several examples in the exhibition reveal his skill in playing to the camera: *Col. Theodore Roosevelt* (1898) by Siegel-Cooper Co. shows the President in his theatrical Rough Rider uniform; *The Theodore Roosevelt Family at the White House* (c. 1908) by Harris and Ewing Studio depicts him as the stern patriarch; and *Theodore Roosevelt Speaking at Grant's Tomb, Decoration Day* (1910) by Brown Brothers captures a vigorous, gesticulating, and active leader.

In the aftermath of World War II, a flood of positive images were released, from Dwight D. Eisenhower and his mother on their front porch in *Eisenhower's Homecoming, Abilene, Kansas* (1945) to the gleeful Harry Truman after his defeat of Thomas Dewey in *Jubilant President Truman Holds Up a Copy of a Newspaper Extra* (November 1948). By the early 1960s, however, the image of the American politician had shifted from an essentially reverent and often ennobling portrait to a critical and sometimes undermining one. This is seen in the exhibition in such works as Robert Frank's *City Fathers -- Hoboken, New Jersey* (1955-56) and Garry Winogrand's *Nixon Victory Celebration, Republican Headquarters, New York* (1972). Conversely, the carefully constructed image that surrounded the Kennedy family was created, largely, by photographers like Jacques Lowe as seen in *Diner, Oregon* (Fall 1959), which, characteristically, portrays JFK as thoughtful, dignified, and in control.

After the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Robert Kennedy, easy access to politicians was limited for security reasons. Limited access in combination with the introduction of the photo opportunity -- a controlled version of an actual event -- would help generate innumerable staged photographs in the decades to come. One famous

example is Michael E. Samojeden's *Test Ride* (1988), an incongruous image of helmeted presidential candidate Michael Dukakis riding in a new tank.

A number of contemporary photographers have been able to move beyond these restrictions to produce works that transcend the facts of the occasion and project their subjects in a way that is visually compelling. Teresa Zabala's *President Carter and Congressional Leaders at a Press Conference (1977)* shows the President surrounded by men who look as if they are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. Judith Joy Ross's *Senator Robert C. Byrd, Democrat, West Virginia* (1987) presents a powerful portrait of an aging, ordinary-looking man in dignified dress, placing the viewer face-to-face with the subject. These photographs, while not always flattering or ennobling, candidly portray real human beings.

Ms. Kismaric states in the essay in the book that accompanies the exhibition, "Despite continuing advances in photographic and visual technology, which simultaneously aid and hinder photographers, and despite the increasing sophistication of political strategists, photographers will continue, in the near future anyway, to make meaningful and important photographs of politicians. They will make photographs that will help create and then confirm our image of ourselves through our politicians, the photographs that will exist in our museums and newspapers and magazine archives as history."

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PUBLICATION ***American Politicians: Photographs from 1843 to 1993***, by Susan Kismaric. 200 pages. 175 duotone reproductions. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Hardbound, $39.95, distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York; paperbound, $19.95; both available at The MoMA Book Store.

No. 46
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