

George Bush's Binoculars

Jack Russell Weinstein

There is a photo of George W. Bush circulating on the Internet. He's wearing an army jacket, standing behind some hedges, looking through binoculars while two camouflaged officers look on as well. It's a funny photo. The binoculars, it seems, have their lens caps on, and our esteemed president clearly doesn't notice. He just happily looks through the eyepieces, oblivious to the darkness. As my fiancé quipped when she saw it, "Like his father, George W. Bush has trouble with 'the vision thing'."

The picture is obviously a photo-op gone awry. Bush wasn't really looking; he was posing, so actually being able to see was irrelevant. Photo-ops are like that. They are constructed to manipulate the viewer; they do not record spontaneous events. The people on camera are playing a scene. The audience is hand chosen, the figures next to the politician are intentionally placed, and any signs or posters are designed and distributed by the staff. By the time a candidate reaches the level of presidential contender, every public move is precisely orchestrated. Photo-ops are pre-fabricated, packaged, and distributed with care. If one insists that character is important to the presidency, I can only ask in response, how do we actually *know* anything about a candidate's character? How can we get past the theater?

We can still learn from photo-ops, though. We can discover which choices politicians prioritize: primetime ops are more important than early morning events. We can know the target voters: Do the people in the photo look like you, have similar jobs, or seem sympathetic to your way of life? If so, they're targeting your vote. We can also determine who disapproves of an issue. In large groups, there are often isolated people, figures who seem strangely out of place. They are tokens: symbols being used to win over a piece of the opposition. This reminds me of the 2000 Republican convention, when the networks got criticized for overly emphasizing the very few African Americans in attendance. By focusing disproportionately on the minorities, the major networks gave the false impression that the Republican Party was more inclusive than it really was. Republicans were thrilled with the coverage. Conventions are photo-ops too.

Bush is posing with the military because he's selling security and he's selling the war. He wants to

lead us to battle, promise victory, and suggest that our soldiers – our children – will be safe. This would be more convincing if the lens caps weren't on the binoculars, of course, but the message is still clear. Despite his own lack of experience, Bush wants us to think that he's a military president.

Every photo op has an unacknowledged participant: us, the audience. And every photo op is in some sense a distraction. We look at what our leaders want while other people, unseen people, do something else. More legislation was passed during the Clinton impeachment trial than at any other time in American history. Why? Because we were looking the other way.

This photo of Bush and the binoculars brings to mind the Homeland Security Act, a group of laws packaged as a legislative photo-op. It has a simple and catchy name, but its content is complex and its technicalities are barely comprehensible. It claims to help protect us, but it actually shields medical companies from lawsuits and helps businesses avoid taxes by using offshore mailing addresses. It claims to watch the activities of terrorists, but it actually records us: our credit card purchases, our magazine subscriptions, our medicines, our grades, and much more.

What the Homeland Security Act reminds us, is to truly understand a photo-op, we must not ask what is in the picture, but what is *not* in the picture. What are we not watching that can be changed, manipulated, or exploited while we are distracted? In the photo, we see the military, but we don't see the economy as it plummets. We see war but we don't see education or social services while their funds are being raided. We see Bush posing in public but we don't see Cheney, Ridge, or Rice acting in secret.

What strikes me most about this picture is how Bush has managed to take a prelude for war and make it funny. War is never funny, it is always tragic and it should always be feared. The one thing that is not in the picture, the one thing that we are truly being distracted from is death. Death and war are always intertwined, and no photo op can fix that. This is one of the lessons we learned from Vietnam: by the time the images of death appear on the screen, it is too late. By the time we can no longer be distracted from death, it has taken over our lives. And then the photo just isn't funny any longer.