

# Floods and Photo-Ops

## A Visual Historiography Approach

*Throughout the history of photography, visual communicators have assigned meaning to the significant images produced by the medium. But as Michael Lesy in the classic Wisconsin Death Trip and others have shown, a valued analysis can also be accomplished by closely analyzing ordinary photographs. By concentrating on two pictures from the 1927 and 2005 Mississippi environmental catastrophes, this work will show how politicians have used media events to their political advantage. Through a visual historiography methodology, two ordinary photographs will illuminate little known details about the two disasters, the field of political photography, as well as the two American political leaders and the differences in media coverage between the two eras.*

**By Paul Martin Lester**

“Everything looked at closely is full of wonder.”<sup>1</sup>  
Jacob Grimm

The two photographs, at first glance, would probably not warrant a second look. By any professional standard, the images of two American political leaders visiting victims of flood-ravaged Mississippi regions would not be put in a portfolio or any year-end anthology of news events. The pictures are far too obviously set-up and stage-managed media events by politicians intent on showing their concern to warrant much notice. In fact, the two images are so ordinary that they would no doubt be passed over and easily forgotten by page-flipping readers, finger-clicking users, weary contest judges, or overworked archivists.

But it is precisely because of their mutual banality that they were chosen for this analysis.

A famous, award-garnering photographic icon, for example, Dorothea Lange’s Depression-era portrait of Florence Thompson with three of her children, has so much previously discussed historical significance, symbolism, and cultural meaning to be of little interest to a researcher intent on experimenting with an analytical technique. For example, James Curtis’ *Mind’s Eye, Mind’s Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* includes an excellent analysis of FSA photographers, their methods, and their work (Curtis, 1992). But if it is true, as it has

sometimes been said, that either God or the Devil “is in the details,” a phrase usually attributed to the Swiss architect and furniture designer, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, or Le Corbusier (“The devil is in the details,” 2002, par. 2), a thorough examination of any photograph, whether miraculous or mundane, should reveal hidden, universal truths.

Four visual communication theorists, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan, have written of three key concepts that aid in the understanding of photographs:

- From Barthes: The need to see a picture as “a witness to layers of meaning.”
- From Barthes and Benjamin: The relative importance of the words that are used to explain a picture.
- From Foucault and Lacan: The “gaze” or “psychological and sociological realms of photographer, subject, and viewer” (Hudson, 2003, pp. 45–57).

From such theoretical ideas, methodological approaches for image meaning construction should be able to be conceived so that significance can be found in the tiniest details, a story for those elements can be constructed, while larger implications for those on both sides of the camera can be considered. The goal of any type of visual analysis should be to assign meaning—whether personal, professional, or cultural. Visual historiography, semiotic analysis, or the trendy yet equally awkward terms “forensic visual analysis,” “photobiography,” and “steganography” are some of the ways visual researchers uncover meanings from images. “Historiography” is an accepted term that refers to the way the past is studied and described (“Historiography,” n.d.). Obviously, visual evidence is a part of that procedure. In “A Semiotic Analysis of a Newspaper Story,” Helen Gambles uses semiotic signs (iconic, indexical, and symbolic) to compare and contrast the way visual and textual displays for the same story are different in various newspapers (Gambles, April, 1998). Perhaps the newest term, at least in this setting, steganography, comes from a Greek phrase that means, “hidden writing.” It is a method for embedding messages in a picture or some other innocuous communication so that only the recipient is aware of the secret message (“Steganography,” n.d., par. 2). The field gained recent popularity after it was learned that Valerie

Plame, the CIA wife of U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson, was trained in the use of an “AK-47, how to blow up cars, and the art and craft of steganography” (“Valerie Plame,” n.d., par. 1).

David D. Perlmutter (1994) argues that a visual historian’s goal with an analytical technique is to find meaning that “stems from the perception that [an image] tells a story.” Toward that end he identifies “ways of thinking about the parts or elements of a visual image and the meanings they denote or connote” through eight co-existing ways to help illuminate all the possible stories an image possesses: production (technical and organizational considerations), content identification (when and where picture elements were made and how they are ordered), functional (how the image was used), expressional (feelings and moods from the image), figurative (symbolic meanings), rhetorical-moral (ethical considerations), societal or period (the image’s place in history), and comparative (relative evaluations). Perlmutter admits that such an analysis “involves a great deal of effort beyond that of text-based research” (pp. 168–170, 181).

One such effort is Michael Francis Gibson’s *The Mill and the Cross*, a fascinating book-length analysis of a single, albeit, extraordinary painting from 1564—Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s, “The Procession to Calvary.” Housed at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Bruegel’s masterpiece is an example of his narrative, storytelling painting style (“Pieter Bruegel the Elder,” n.d.). Gibson’s work is an example of how a visual message can be illuminated, enhanced, and made transcendent by words. But his method defies an easy analytical categorization. Gibson divided Bruegel’s painting into several sections for chapters in the book and attempted to identify and explain all the visual elements within each sector down to their last literal and symbolic intricacy. Toward that end, Gibson relied heavily on primary and secondary historical data as well as a keen, observational sense.

Although the following visual historiographic analysis will come nowhere near the elegance of Gibson’s work, the procedure used here equally relied upon the good works, the gracious communications, and the unblinking eyes of many passionate parties.

## Photograph of Secretary of Commerce Hoover at Natchez, Mississippi, 1927

President Calvin Coolidge assigned Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover and Secretary of War Dwight Davis to tour and give aid to the needy due to flooding unlike Americans had ever seen before. When above-average rainfall throughout the Mississippi River valley from August 1926 to April of 1927 caused levees along the river to break, 27,000 square miles flooded (a little less than the size of South Carolina). There were about 137,000 properties under water, 1,000,000 persons displaced, more than 1,000 died, and about \$1 billion (\$11 billion adjusted for 2005 dollars ("What is a dollar worth?" n.d.) in direct and indirect economic losses. Hoover's visits successfully supervised the building of camps and helped raise funds for the Red Cross (Barry, 1998, pp. 283–289).

*National Geographic* Magazine staff photographer Clifton Adams made a picture of Hoover and Davis standing with children in an evacuee camp at Natchez, Mississippi. Adams worked for *National Geographic* from about 1923–1934 and produced picture stories from Sardinia to Southern California. His grand nephew, Jeffery Blake Adams, an ordained minister in the Universal Life Church and also a professional photographer knows little about his great uncle. Jeffrey did reveal that Clifton probably used "an old Speedgraphic press camera" (J. Adams, personal communication, December 1, 2005). If that is the case, Adams probably used the "Top Handle" Speed Graphic model that was manufactured by Graflex of Rochester, New York from 1912 to 1927 ("Graflex Graphic Model History," n.d., par. 3). The caption for the picture as it appeared in the April 1927 issue of *National Geographic* read "YES, WE HAD BREAKFAST, BUT WE HAVE NOTHING TO PLAY WITH." It was not easy to explain to children why pets and toys had to be abandoned when families fled before the rising floods. At Natchez, Mississippi, Secretaries Hoover and Davis visited the youngsters in camp. One bashful boy, dodging the camera, hid behind the friendly coattails of Mr. Hoover. (Simpich, 1927, p. 244).

A caption written on the back of a copy of the photograph in the collection of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library reads, "946. Temporary shel-

ters—refugee tent camp—life in camp—life in tent camps white children, with white officials. 1927-59A" (P. Daniel, personal communication, November 30, 2005). Interestingly, the term "refugee" was used to describe displaced American citizens from Hurricane Katrina by newsmakers and news outlets until several individuals, mostly from New Orleans, objected to the term (Pierre & Farhi, September 7, 2005, p. C01).

The *National Geographic* version of the photograph is different from the print in the Hoover Library. The printed version is cropped a little above the hats of Hoover and Davis, at the edge of Hoover's right arm, a little below the children's feet, and at the edge of the left shoulder of a child to the right. The result is an almost square format, 5 x 4 3/4 inches. This analysis is largely based on the Hoover Library version, a 6 x 4-inch print scanned at 300 dpi (P. Daniel, personal communication, November 30, 2005).

Secretaries Hoover and Davis stand among nine children in the approximate center of the frame on a grass and dirt clearing in front of two tents at the edge of a forest. The black and white photograph was made with a normal lens, a medium-size aperture, without fill-in flash, and 10–20 feet away from Hoover.

Hoover stands at the left, slightly apart from the Anglo children. Hoover's stance may be attributed to his shyness. According to Pete Daniel in *Deep'n as It Come The 1927 Mississippi River Flood*, "[P]ersonally he was shy, and so low key that many Mississippians who heard him speak complained that his voice did not carry beyond the first few rows (Daniel, 1996, p. 77). Incidentally, a low-speaking voice is among the behaviors associated with the chronically shy (Henderson & Zimbardo, n.d., par. 3).

Despite the fact that the mean temperature for Mississippi in April 1927 was 68.2 degrees ("Mississippi Climate Summary," n.d., par. 4), Hoover wears formal attire: a rolled brim fedora hat, a double-breasted, three-piece suit, a dark tie, white shirt, dark slacks, and black leather shoes. He also wears a detachable "Berwick" collar. Such a collar confines the neck two and one-half inches in the front and two inches in the back. According to historical



< **Secretary of Commerce Hoover at Natchez, Mississippi, 1927. Photograph by Clifton Adams.<sup>2</sup>**

fashion expert and Director of the Kent State University Museum Jean Druessedow, Hoover wore this type of collar often. "Hoover was one of the hold-outs in wearing the stiff detachable collar. Most men had moved on to softer attached collars within a year or two of this photograph" (J. Druessedow, personal communication, November 28, 2005). Hoover and Secretary Davis are cleanly shaven.

Hoover's right hand appears to be holding a cigar. Hoover enjoyed an occasional cigar; however, later in his career he banned photographs of him smoking one ("Maladies and Conditions," n.d., par. 14). Pete Daniel's book *Deep'n as it Come* displays a photograph of Hoover and Davis (in similar attire as the analyzed picture) with James Fieser, vice chairman of the Red Cross. Hoover holds a cigar in his left hand (Daniel, 1996, p. 77).

Hoover looks toward the photographer. He has a folded white paper in his right coat pocket. If it is morning (which the *Geographic* caption seems to indicate), it is before noon as indicated by the shadows on the ground.

Secretary Davis also wears a rolled brim fedora hat, a light-colored tie with an eight-pointed star pattern, white shirt, and an open jacket. The light color of his "shooting or fishing jacket with game pockets" gives him a more informal appearance (J. Druessedow, personal communication, November 28, 2005). Davis, with a slight smile, looks down, most likely at one of the children. President Coolidge named Dwight Filley Davis Secretary of War in 1925. After Hoover became president in 1929, he appointed Davis to be the Governor General of the Philippines. However, Davis is more famous for what he created as a senior at Harvard University in 1899. An avid tennis player, Davis believed that "countries engaging in sports competitions would likely get along with each other." He conceived a tennis competition in which teams of players compete internationally for a silver trophy. When Davis died in 1945, the trophy was renamed the "Davis Cup" in his honor, one of the most prestigious awards in sports (Dodds, September 1, 2000, par. 2–9).

The nine children with Hoover and Davis, all roughly under the age of 7 years old and with four

who appear to be girls, stand dutifully and slightly turned to their right facing Hoover (except for one child in the back turned in the opposite direction). All the children appear to wear loose-fitting cotton garments. Fashion expert Druessedow wrote, "The smallest child in the front seems to have a sailor collar on his shirt—very typical of children's clothing at the time for both boys and girls. The others seem to be sort of general "urchins"—nothing fits or looks laundered—after all they are refugees—perhaps the clothing pieces are donations. They are the loose sorts of summer children's clothing typical of the 1920s" (J. Druessedow, personal communication, November 28, 2005).

One girl in the center has her hands clasped in front and smiles as she looks up at Hoover. She appears to wear a sailor collar on her shirt. A boy behind her wears a triangular woven, oversized hat. He may also have a sailor collar on his shirt with a U. S. Navy insignia possibly representing a chief petty officer or chief gunner's mate on his left sleeve ("United States Navy," n.d., par. 10). Six of the nine children appear to be barefoot.

Behind the group are two, open air "teepee" style tents. According to *Backpacker* magazine's website, this type of tent is called "floorless." It is a "Tent with walls and poles but no floor, usually in the form of a Teepee tent with one central straight pole and a pyramidal shape. Allows gear and boot storage inside the tent since campers need not try to keep tent floor free of water and dirt" ("More Jargon," n.d., par. 10). Obviously with such a tent style, those inside were subject to insects, rain, temperature extremes, and other uncomfortable conditions. A woman can be seen sitting on what appears to be a leather footlocker next to an open flap. She wears a cloche hat, a tight-fitting hat made popular by "flappers" of the 1920s. She probably wears a skirt with a tunic or jacket (J. Druessedow, personal communication, November 28, 2005). Her left hand covers her mouth.

Behind the tents is a forest. The large tree at the right is most likely a loblolly pine (*pinus taeda*). Rob Draper of the Federal Highway Administration wrote, "The only tree that is somewhat clear in the photo appears to be a pine. Could be a Virginia, Slash, Loblolly, or long-leafed pine. [The area is

most likely in the] Southern Floodplain forest which is dominated by bald cypress, black gum, and five species of oaks" (R. Draper, personal communication, November 30, 2005). Jim Conrad a naturalist who runs backyardnature.net wrote, "The tree bark looks like the typical Loblolly pine of the area. Around Natchez itself you have a mixture of pines, mostly Loblolly, with other trees, especially oaks, hickories, and maples. As you travel inland from the river, however, the forest grows more piney and the hardwoods drop out" (J. Conrad, personal communication, November 30, 2005). From a 1597 reference book the word loblolly means a "thick gruel or stew." The pine tree was probably so named because it usually grows in swampy or muddy terrain ("Loblolly," August 29, 2000). An unusual feature of the loblolly's bark is that it smells like vanilla or root beer (Osorio, 2001, p. 226). Tied to the tree is probably the carcass of a deer. "The thing hanging in the tree could be what remains of deer carcass. Looks like a thoracic cavity and minus the loin and rear legs. Could be wrong," explains Draper. (R. Draper, personal communication, November 30, 2005).

## Photograph of President Bush at Pass Christian, Mississippi, 2005

On Tuesday, October 11, 2005, 43 days after Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast, President George W. Bush and the First Lady, Laura visited the DeLisle, Mississippi Elementary School on Whitman Road. The occasion was to celebrate the reopening of the school.

DeLisle Elementary is a K–5th grade public school about six miles north of Pass Christian (pronounced "pass chris-tee-ann"). "The Pass," as locals know it, was one of several coastal communities decimated by Hurricane Katrina (Jonsson, April 11, 2006, p. 3). All four public schools in the Pass were destroyed by Katrina's storm surge along with every other public building, almost all businesses, and 80 percent of the homes. DeLisle elementary was also damaged with flooding as high as four-and-one-half feet (Mehren, February 21, 2006, p. 8).

At least 75 percent of the students, staff, and teachers of the school district were "homeless and



< *President Bush at Pass Christian, Mississippi, 2005. Original in color. © 2005 Keith Matthews.*<sup>3</sup>

living in trailers, tents, or with other families in the area” (“What had RMHS done?”). One DeLisle Elementary student confessed to a reporter, “We had to get in the attic and bust out the roof, ‘cause the water’s up to the roof, and it was my sister’s birthday.” Another 10-year-old student said, “I was scared, and we had to wade through the water and it was nasty” (“Only Surviving School Reopens in Pass,” October 10, 2005).

Despite such an overwhelming catastrophe, students still needed to be educated. It was decided that the relatively dry ground of DeLisle Elementary would be used for all students remaining in the district—kindergarten, elementary, middle school, and high school—and taught in classrooms created from portable trailers brought in by emergency personnel. Although starting a bit late in the school year, at least a sense of normalcy might be established for the students, staff, and teachers who had been through unimaginable terror. And besides, how often does the President of the United States with the First Lady visit the tiny town of DeLisle?

A news report of the day noted that the President upon “Mingling with dozens of children gathered in a grassy courtyard, heard one boy say he had a dream

he was president. ‘Someday you may be,’ Mr. Bush replied with a laugh. He then visited a classroom of kindergarten children wiggling in their seats and running to hug him and Mrs. Bush” (“Bush Hammers Rebuilding Message,” October 11, 2005, par. 12).

Photographer Keith Matthews was asked by the Mississippi Valley District’s public affairs office of the Corps to complete a voluntary 30-day mission named “Task Force Hope” and take photographs of the areas in Mississippi affected by Hurricane Katrina. Matthews is a GS11 Visual Information Specialist for the USACE out of Vicksburg, Mississippi (K. Matthews, personal communication, December 2, 2005). Matthews is hearing impaired and was assisted during interviews by Michael Logue, Public Affairs Chief of the Corps, also out of the Vicksburg office. In an e-mail Logue wrote, “the photo Keith (the most talented individual I have ever met) took of a sunflower rising among the debris [was] turned into a poster called ‘Life Returns to the Gulf Coast’” (M. Logue, personal communication, December 3, 2005).

The photograph of Bush and the DeLisle children was published with others in a Web-based photo gallery titled, “Hurricane Katrina Photos” as part of

the Mississippi Valley Division's website. The color photograph was made with a wide-angle lens, a medium-size aperture, without fill-in flash, and less than 10 feet away from the President. The original technical specifications for the image included:

- Filename: "bush2000.jpg" (the number designation refers to the number of pixels (picture elements) along its horizontal edge and not the year)
- Size: 2000 x 1333 pixels (27.778x18.514 inches)
- Dots per inch (dpi): 72, an acceptable setting for images designated for web presentations.

Since Matthews was on an informal, voluntary photographic mission for the Corps, he was almost not allowed to take pictures of the President because he did not have press credentials approved beforehand by the White House. However, he easily convinced Bush's security entourage that he was legitimate. Matthews explained that the "Secret Service agents were very nice and cooperative" and he was able to photograph the scene (K. Matthews, personal communication, December 2, 2005).

The original caption for the photograph was, "President Bush is greeted by students at DeLisle Elementary School where portable classrooms provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Army Corps of Engineers have allowed students to resume some degree of normalcy in this devastated community (USACE photo by Keith Matthews)."

President Bush is in the foreground to the left of the photograph in front of children and adults configured in a receiving line. Laura Bush is not visible. The President appears to be moving from the left to the right in front of the children. He smiles and looks at something off camera to the right with his right shoulder toward the camera. His hands are at his sides. He does not wear a hat. The top and back of his head are lit by bright sunlight. His gray hair is trimmed above his right ear. He is cleanly shaved.

Bush wears a blue, long-sleeved striped business shirt with vertical and horizontal dark blue lines that form a grid pattern. The shirt, a Hugo Boss "LawrenceX Check Shirt," can be found at Nordstrom's for about \$95 ("Hugo Boss LawrenceX

Check Shirt," n.d., par. 1). Incidentally, Nordstrom's also is the favored store of former FEMA director Michael D. Brown. On August 29, the day Katrina hit, Brown had an E-mail exchange with his deputy director of public affairs, Cindy Taylor in which she told him, "You look fabulous." Brown wrote back, "I got it at Nordstrom's.... Are you proud of me?" An hour later Brown wrote, "If you'll look at my lovely FEMA attire, you'll really vomit. I am a fashion god" ("Can I quit now?" 2005, par. 11–15).

President Bush's shirt in the photograph has no buttons on the collar. The top button of the shirt is undone. He does not wear a tie. This informal appearance may be a result of the weather. The mean temperature reported for October 2005 in Mississippi was a moderate 64.6 degrees ("Mississippi Climate Summary," n.d., par. 1). However, his sleeves are buttoned at the wrists. His left pocket on his shirt appears empty.

At various times while touring the Katrina stricken states of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, President Bush's sleeves would be rolled up (to appear casual or hard-working) or buttoned at his wrists (for a more business-like appearance). The rolled-up versus the buttoned-down choice made the news in November 2005 when e-mails between former FEMA director Brown and Sharon Worthy, Brown's press secretary advised Brown to "Please roll up the sleeves of your shirt, all shirts. Even the president rolled his sleeves to just below the elbow. In this [crisis] and on TV you just need to look more hard-working" ("Can I quit now?" 2005, par. 15). Maybe Brown did not want to wrinkle his Nordstrom's shirt.

In the photograph, President Bush does not wear cufflinks. For formal affairs, however, he does wear them. Conservative blogger and independent businessperson Rex Hammock detailed a meeting with President Bush in 2004 and included this fashionable observation: "He wore cufflinks which, since I was about six inches from his arm, noticed were about the size of a dime and even looked like a dime, but had a colorful enamel finish—perhaps Lady Liberty?" (Hammock, 2004, par. 16).

It cannot be determined from the view presented in the photograph whether the President wears a

wristwatch. Nevertheless, when once asked by a reporter, President Bush admitted that he usually wears a Timex® brand wristwatch (Associated Press, 2005, par. 6). White House Photo Director and personal photographer for the President, Eric Draper, also took pictures of Bush's visit at the DeLisle school ("Eric Draper," n.d., par. 1–4). In one of Draper's images from inside a classroom, Bush can be seen wearing a watch on his left wrist ("President and Mrs. Bush Visit Elementary School in Mississippi," October 2005). A white short-sleeved undershirt can be seen under the President's dress shirt. Business etiquette often requires that such attire be worn to avoid unsightly underarm stains.

There is a glint from the sun's reflection off a plain gold wedding band on President Bush's left ring finger. The fact that Bush wears a simple gold band probably reflects the modest start to his marriage. George Bush and Laura Welch met at a backyard barbecue party given by a mutual friend in Midland, Texas in 1977. They were married three months later in the Methodist church where Laura was baptized as a baby. It was a modest affair with 75 guests, no bridesmaids or groomsmen, and not even a ring bearer. The invitations were written by hand. They skipped the honeymoon (Stritof & Stritof, n.d.). Four years later they had twin fraternal daughters, Jenna and Barbara, named after their grandmothers ("George W. Bush," n.d., par. 2).

In the picture Bush wears a black leather woven belt with a small silver, 5-point star. The "Lone Star" has been a symbol of Texas since 1839. Although the person who first imagined the design for the flag is unknown, Peter Krag created the original artwork that was approved by state officials. He also designed the artwork for the Texas state seal that includes a star as well. The 1993 Texas legislature finalized the exact specifications of the flag's elements including the star, "a white, regular five-pointed star in the center of the blue stripe, oriented so that one point faces upward, and of such a size that the diameter of a circle passing through the five points of the star is equal to three-fourths the width of the blue stripe" ("Flags of Texas," n.d., par. 7). Although President Bush was born in New Haven, Connecticut, he most likely wears the Texas star belt buckle because he lived in Midland and

Houston and served 6 years as the 46th governor of the state ("Biography of President George W. Bush," n.d., par. 2).

Bush wears dark-colored dress slacks. There is no bulge from a wallet in his back pocket. When asked by an Argentine reporter for *La Nacion* newspaper what he carries in his pockets, President Bush confessed that he does not carry money, keys, or a wallet "since all his needs are carefully catered to, including people who open doors everywhere he goes." He did show the reporter the only object in his pocket—a single hankie (Associated Press, 2005, par. 3).

To the President's left and configured horizontally along the photograph's plane are approximately 20 Anglo and seven African American elementary-aged children. There are 10 boys (7 Anglo and 3 African-American) and 17 girls (13 Anglo and 4 African-American) visible. Before Katrina struck, DeLisle Elementary had about 413 students enrolled with 51 percent male, 49 percent female, 78 percent Anglo, 21 percent African-American, and 1 percent Latino (DeLisle Elementary School, n.d., par. 4). Given the demographic figures, there should be more boys in the photograph. A random group of 27 students should have 14 boys and 13 girls. However, the racial distribution would be almost the same as shown.

Sixteen of the children look directly at President Bush, 3 look at the photographer, 14 children smile, 2 seem to laugh, and 1 child attempts to touch the President's arm. Thirteen of the children wear t-shirts of various colors. One girl at the right has on a pink, blue, and yellow horizontally striped shirt with the words "I Love My Bug" and an illustration of a Volkswagen "bug" printed on it. She also has a nametag attached to her shirt with "My name is" printed and "Jettie" handwritten on the tag. Two other girls in the front row also wear nametags, but their names cannot be determined. No other nametags can be seen on any other children.

Four of the children wear dress shirts. One boy has an unbuttoned dress shirt that shows a t-shirt underneath. Two of the girls wear earrings. One girl in the front row can be seen with a hair clip. Two African-American girls wear their hair tied in the

back with plastic colored balls. None of the other girls have their hair tied behind them.

One tall African-American girl in the center and toward the back has her hair in a "cornrow" style. Hair fashion expert Pauline Weston Thomas notes "the girl with the cornrows has seen a hairdresser quite recently as the rows look tight" (P. Thomas, personal communication, December 21, 2005). According to Thomas, cornrow hairstyles "were depicted in wigs in paintings from ancient Egyptian tombs. Later favored by black activists, cornrows or braids came into the mainstream when Bo Derek wore them to great effect in the film "10". Now both Black and White women and men wear braids with or without the help of extensions. They stay in the hair for 4 to 6 weeks, but need checking to see that damage to both the hair and the scalp is kept at a minimum"(Thomas, n.d., par. 20). All the boys have recently trimmed haircuts that show their ears.

None of the children appear to wear dental braces. According to one medical website, "the ideal age for starting orthodontic treatment ranges from 3 to 12" ("Dental Braces," n.d., par. 3). The lack of braces may indicate the children's economic status. Of the students at the school, 51 percent are eligible for the free lunch government program (DeLisle Elementary School, n.d., par. 5).

Since the children are shown from the waist and higher, the photograph does not show if the students have shoes on their feet. In a website maintained by the U.S. Department of Education, Melody Brooks, the school nurse for DeLisle Elementary, who was present the day President Bush visited the school (M. Brooks, personal communication, December 5, 2005), wrote an impassioned plea for the donation of shoes for her students, "I see a great need for SHOES. We have kindergarten thru fifth grade students—probably shoe size 11 (child's) up to adult sizes for some of our fifth graders. I purchased three pairs myself this weekend at Wal-Mart for students whose parents had called me on Friday" (Brooks, n.d., par. 1).

There are approximately 12 adults standing behind the children. Before the hurricane, 28 teachers taught at the DeLisle school (DeLisle Elementary School, n.d., par. 2). Dr. Sue Matheson, Superinten-

dent of the Pass Christian School District was reported to say, "80 percent of her personnel lost their homes. She is asking for donations of mobile homes, so those teachers and staff left homeless can have a place to stay" ("Pass Christian Schools in Ruins After Katrina," 2005, par. 16).

The adults are all Anglo women. In a study of the national demographics for the teaching profession, "Fewer than 2% of pre-K/Kindergarten and 14.6% of elementary teachers are male" (Klecker & Loadman, 1999, par. 2). All of the women appear to smile, two seem to laugh, and two hold inexpensive cameras. All have unassuming hairstyles.

Pauline Weston Thomas offered these observations about the women's hairstyles, "Most of these women have probably not visited a hairdresser for some weeks, probably 2 months at least. They all appear to have clean hair and probably have done their best with it just by washing it themselves. The overgrown fringes also suggest [that they] need a trim soon and the dry quality on some hairstyles (left of Bush) means they may have lacked anything other than a cheap, all-purpose shampoo and no hair conditioner or other styling products. [The] one woman holding the disposable camera appears to have been trimmed recently. The ends of her hair look fairly well-conditioned and do not seem broken" (P. Thomas, personal communication, December 21, 2005).

Nine of the women have on white t-shirts with "PASS CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS" in an uppercase blue sans-serif typeface. Two of the women show an identification card attached to a blue strap around their neck. Four women have on necklaces. Two of the necklaces have crucifix symbols attached. One laughing woman to the left of the President has long brunette or blonde hair, a dress shirt open that shows a white "PASS CHRISTIAN" t-shirt underneath, and wears a dragonfly pin. Three women wear eyeglasses and one sports sunglasses.

In the background approximately 30 feet from the photographer are 8 men, although 2 might be older boys. One of the men might be a Latino, one is African-American, and the rest are Anglo. Three of the men wear sunglasses. One man appears to be dressed in a police uniform. The African-American

man has on a white t-shirt with “MBI” printed on the left side. According to Captain Ronnie Turan of the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation (MBI), the man is with the MBI and “lived in Bay St. Louis and lost his home, clothes, and personal belongings” (R. Turan, personal communication, November 29, 2005).

There is a school structure at the back and right with “T-4” printed on a building. To the left, there is at least one portable trailer with windows at the back. According to an USACE press release, “The Corps installed 52 24 x 36-foot portable classroom units plus three bathroom units, and two office units for the school district” (Smith, n.d., par. 4). “The Corps funded and helped set up the doublewide trailer type classrooms along with Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) and FEMA” (K. Matthews, personal communication, December 2, 2005). Fleetwood, the recreational vehicle company based in Riverside, California, manufactured many of the trailers. The company received a \$170 million order from FEMA for “7,500 travel trailers and 3,000 single-section manufactured homes as part of the agency’s disaster relief plan in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina” (“Fleetwood Accepts Orders,” September 20, 2005, par. 1).

However, 8 months after the catastrophe, over 10,000 trailers sit empty in Hope, Arkansas, about 500 miles northwest of DeLisle while “133 households live in tent cities in Pass Christian, D’Iberville, and Long Beach” because of government regulations that prevent trailers being erected by non-government employees and within potential flood zones. Guian McKee, a policy professor at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville remarked, “This reminds me of the very cautious, clumsy policy responses of the Hoover administration” (Jonsson, April 11, 2006, p. 3).

## The Two Photographs Compared

As might be expected with two photographs separated by about 78 years and only 200 miles, there are significant differences and striking similarities. Most obviously, the major dissimilarities include the fact that one was taken with black-and-white film and printed in a large circulation magazine while the other was shot in color with a digital

camera and buried deep within a government’s website. The Hoover image is more staged as he looks at the photographer with the others huddled in the center of the frame. The Bush picture is a more informal composition with the President, the children, and the adults seemingly much more comfortable being photographed. One might expect that because a photojournalist took the Hoover image while a public affairs photographer shot the Bush picture that the amount of stage managing would be reversed. However, the setting and situation differences—a camp for displaced persons that shows barefooted children and a deer’s carcass in a pine tree versus a public school area that provides a chorus of smiling, laughing faces—tip the set-up scale back towards the Bush side.

The major similarity between the two photographs is the use of children by politicians to gain positive publicity. Using children for persuasive purposes for staged, media, or pseudo-events is a common public relations ploy. Media critic and communications professor Dennis Dunleavy (May 6, 2005, par. 9) writes “Children have been exploited by politicians to peddle agendas for a long time and the press never ceases to pander to the powerful.” Herbert Hoover was one of the first American politicians to understand that “public relations could change behavior” (Barry, 1998, p. 270). Hoover used publicity to advocate food conservation during World War I (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 2000, p. 123), was the first politician to be transmitted through the television medium, and orchestrated his appearances at flood-damaged sites and camps for maximum public exposure. The publicity given to his relief efforts helped him win the Presidency the year after the flood (Barry, 1998, pp. 273, 286).

President Bush and his political handlers also valued positive images from personal visits no doubt prompted by a recent unprecedented slip in public opinion polls. Five days before President Bush’s visit to DeLisle Elementary, a CBS News poll revealed that Bush’s “overall job approval rating reached the lowest ever measured in this poll” (“Poll: Bush Ratings Hit New Low,” October 6, 2005, par. 3). The DeLisle appearance was the President’s fourth to the stricken region after the hurricane struck. One media outlet made the connection between the visit and

the schoolchildren when it wrote "October 11: Still pushing aid to the South, Bush, with Laura in tow, visits DeLisle Elementary School, Pass Christian, Mississippi, for photo ops with the kids" (Ridgeway, December 14, 2005, par. 13).

## Visual Historiography: Methods and Limitations

Perhaps a Chinese emperor, an Egyptian pharaoh, or an English king at some point in their reigns went to a village flattened by an earthquake, flood, or fire to offer aid to the afflicted. A scribe with an artist might even have recorded these comforting, yet publicity-seeking visits. Since the invention of photography and its subsequent fields of photojournalism and public relations, pictures are such a staple of these visitations by our leaders that we have learned to expect and to easily discount them. But visual historiography teaches that these images should not be disregarded.

Whether through primary verbal and visual data or primarily verbal or visual data, to detect meaning through historical artifacts is at times more of an art than a craft. The task requires knowledge of the medium, its uses and writings, patience to allow the picture details to come to the forefront of the researcher's attention, leaps in intuition and associations, a bit of old-fashioned luck, sympathetic editors and reviewers, and above all, collaboration with those with more expertise. Visual historiography does not require the chosen picture to be a clear example of traditional photojournalism with little to no stagemanaging or, as with the pieces selected for this analysis, obvious media set-ups. Davidson and Lytle cover this issue when they pose the question, "Does the fact that [a] picture is posed make it less useful as historical evidence?" with their answer, "Not at all. Even when people perform for the camera, they communicate information about themselves" (1986, pp. 231–232).

It can be imagined, then, as it can be said of almost any visual message, those persons in the Hoover photograph have been trying to communicate about themselves for almost eight decades and those in the Bush picture will still be trying to communicate their stories for countless decades to come.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Literary and Historical Notes," January 4, 2006, par. 11)

<sup>2</sup>The author conveys special thanks to Lynn Smith, A-V Archivist for the Hoover Presidential Library and her associate Jim Detlefsen. The picture was retrieved December 4, 2005 from [www.ecommcode2.com/hover/research/photos/images/1927-59A.gif](http://www.ecommcode2.com/hover/research/photos/images/1927-59A.gif) with its caption, "Hoover visits children in a refugee camp during the 1927 Mississippi flood."

<sup>3</sup>The photo gallery was retrieved December 4, 2005 from [www.mvd.usace.army.mil/hurricane/chr.php](http://www.mvd.usace.army.mil/hurricane/chr.php) while the picture itself was retrieved the same day from [www.mvd.usace.army.mil/hurricane/KatrinaImages/bush2000.jpg](http://www.mvd.usace.army.mil/hurricane/KatrinaImages/bush2000.jpg).

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*Editor's Note:* Lester's article was submitted and accepted for publication before he was named the editor of *Visual Communication Quarterly*.

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