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media release



President in Petticoats! Civil War Propaganda in Photographs

On view from
May 18, 2012
through
September 2, 2012

Media Preview
May 17, 2012
11:30 am–1:30 pm

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Unidentified Photographer, "Jeff Davis and His Last Ditch," 1865.
International Center of Photography.

President in Petticoats! Civil War Propaganda in Photographs, on view at the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street) May 18–September 2, 2012, presents over 40 extraordinary examples of photography used in early political propaganda targeted at Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America.

Slightly less than 150 years ago, the American Civil War was grinding to a dispiriting and unheroic end. After the surrender of General Robert E. Lee's rebel forces and the shocking assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in mid-April 1865, Davis was a political fugitive—accused of plotting Lincoln's assassination as well as committing treason—and the future of the Union remained uncertain.

At dawn on May 10, 1865, a contingent of Michigan cavalry captured Davis in a makeshift camp just outside Irwinville, Georgia. In trying to flee, Davis grabbed his wife's overcoat rather than his own and his wife threw her shawl over his shoulders. Instantly, news reports circulated that Davis had been apprehended in women's clothes and that he was attempting to disguise himself as a woman.

Northern artists and caricaturists seized upon these rumors of cowardly escape and created wildly inventive images, some using photomontage, to sensationalize the political story by emasculating Davis. Photographers circulated and even pirated dozens of fanciful photographic cards. Many used a photographic portrait of Davis by Mathew Brady on a hand-drawn body in a woman's dress, hat, and crinoline, but wearing his own boots, the detail that supposedly betrayed him to his captors.

(more)

“These images are excellent examples of political propaganda. Visitors will recognize many of the same elements of contemporary political propaganda: manipulated images paired with statements fabricated or taken out of context and disseminated as truth,” said Erin Barnett, Assistant Curator of Collections. “The country was bitterly divided during the Civil War. Davis’s capture was an inglorious (and, from the perspective of many Northerners, a fitting) end to the Confederacy. These caricatures further damaged Davis’ reputation just as Lincoln was being revered as a martyr, especially in the North.”

The work in this exhibition was recently donated to ICP by its compiler, collector Charles Schwartz, with support from the ICP Acquisitions Committee. The collection contains more than 90 works on the theme of Davis’ capture, including photographs, lithographs, newspapers, and illustrated sheet music.

This exhibition was made possible with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.



About ICP

The International Center of Photography (ICP) was founded in 1974 by Cornell Capa (1918-2008) as an institution dedicated to photography that occupies a vital and central place in contemporary culture as it reflects and influences social change. Through our museum, school and community programs, we embrace photography’s ability to open new opportunities for personal and aesthetic expression, transform popular culture, and continually evolve to incorporate new technologies. ICP has presented more than 500 exhibitions, bringing the work of more than 3,000 photographers and other artists to the public in one-person and group exhibitions and provided thousands of classes and workshops that have enriched tens of thousands of students. Visit www.icp.org for more information.

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