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Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima: The Photo to Give Hope to a Nation

Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima is one of the most famous American war photos of all time. It has been used in everything from advertising to satire to adult cartoons and has been replicated in memorials and on t shirts alike (Robertson, 251). In the following pages, I will do my best to shed light to the significance of *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* through its historical context and composition and why it has come to be so widely parodied and reproduced.

Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima is a black and white photograph from World War II taken on February 23, 1945 by Joe Rosenthal. It depicts six men (five Marines and a Navy corpsman) raising the American flag on Mount Suribachi on the Japanese island of Iwo Jima. However, the flag raising that the photo depicts was not the first flag raising at Iwo Jima and it did not symbolize the victory so many thought it did.

To give some context, up to this point the depictions of the war in the Pacific were bleak. Soldiers lying dead on beaches and stuck in foxholes. There was nothing glamorous about the

war, it was brutal and was killing thousands upon thousands of US soldiers. The battle of Iwo Jima was no different.

The US had been bombing Iwo Jima for months until February 19, 1945 when they made their first land assault (Renn, 254). It took the soldiers days to finally reach and secure Mount Suribachi, where the flag was raised. In Melissa Renn's work on the topic, "While popular legend has it that the soldiers had to fight their way up Suribachi, their real obstacle was actually the Japanese troops hiding in the tunnels below ground" (254). The flag raising was purely symbolic. Additionally, the flag pictured in *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* was the second flag raised on the mountain. "Those in command, immediately recognizing its potential inspirational power, quickly sent five men from the Second Platoon Easy Company up the mountain with a new flag—twice the size of the original so that it could be seen from a distance" (Renn, 254). The flag was not by any means demonstrating victory in Iwo Jima, contrary to its usual symbolism, in fact the battle of Iwo Jima went on for another month and many of the soldiers depicted in the now famous photograph died during that time (Renn, 256). However, publications did not make any of this clear when they chose to publish their articles on Iwo Jima alongside the image.

Most did not specify the fact that this was the second flag that was raised at Iwo Jima and nearly every caption and article title gave the impression that things were going well in the Pacific. As Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites found, "*Time* magazine dubbed it 'the most

beautiful [picture] of the war” and no wonder as the lack of dead bodies and the messy terrain of Iwo Jima coupled with a slightly cloudy sky void of bombers would definitely qualify it for that title (363). The public completely ate it up.

“Public reception was immediate and resounding. Newspapers were inundated with requests for reprints as families began to hang it up on their living room and dining room walls” (Hariman & Lucaites, 343). The photo was a symbol of hope in an otherwise bleak war. It was one of the first signs that the US might be making some headway in the Pacific, and people jumped on any indication that this war might be coming to an end. However, for others this image was simply a lie.

Life magazine waited the longest to publish the photo and when it did, the editors were very intentional with their captioning and overall framing of the photo. For one, they published the photo alongside the 1851 painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware in hopes of demonstrating the staged aspects of the photo and then on the following page a photo of soldiers lying face down, dead, on the beaches of Iwo Jima (Renn, 259-260). They had hoped to contrast the idyllic qualities of Rosenthal’s photo with that of reality, but in framing the photo alongside the painting of George Washington they instead equivocated the work with something legendary and patriotic, making it look equally iconic.

Life magazine was fighting for the truth following Susan Sontag's philosophy that "Photographs furnish evidence" (Sontag, 3). In other words, they tell us the state of things and in the case of *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* it told the public that the US was dominating in the Pacific, when that wasn't the case. I think Sontag puts it best when she says, "Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as painting and drawings are" (4). In choosing to angle the picture away from the chaos down below, in choosing to take the picture from the same height as the soldiers, in choosing to take it at the particular time he did, in choosing to have the sky take up most of the background, Rosenthal changed how people would interpret reality. When people saw the photo, they would not be distracted by tanks and bombers and machine guns, they would be focused on the flag and six men doing their best to raise it.

Similar to how the photo was framed, the shape the subjects make is instrumental in how we have come to interpret this photo. In this case, the men and the ground along with the flag form a triangle of sorts. In his book *Visual Communication: Images with Messages*, Paul Lester states that a triangle's stability comes from its base "but from its peak comes tension" (28). The men in the photo are the strength and the stability while the flag contains the tension. The men struggle with the flag to make it stand straight and stand without assistance from any of them. The effort the men put into making sure their country's flag is standing is what demonstrates the

patriotism, in a way it is as if they are what is holding up this country and what it stands for, not just a flag. In contrast, if the flag had already been in a standing position when Rosenthal took the photo, the subjects would have formed more of an isosceles triangle which “draws power not from its base but from its sharp point” which would be the flag (Lester, 28). This would not have been a message of civilian patriotism, but simply of conquering without showing any struggle in getting there.

Since its publication in 1945, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* has been a symbol of patriotism, victory, and triumph. A statue of the event was placed in the Marine Corps War Memorial and as such has “served as a cultural model upon which Marines and US citizens alike have inscribed, revised, and debated the performance of patriotic citizenship” (Robertson, 251). It has been used to critique the military as a whole with satirical images. For example, one such cartoon portrays the men of the photo holding closed a closet door representing the military’s adversity towards gays in the military (Edwards & Winkler, 293). The photo has become so removed from its context in the grueling battle of Iwo Jima to become a symbol of American power and the military in addition to everything it represented before.

When I first came across this image in an art class in high school, I thought similarly to the public that first experienced it. It represented hope, patriotism, and victory, but now I’m not so sure. I have begun to see it as another problematic image of war. Now it seems to represent

pomp and circumstance. Its effect was propaganda like. The fact that these men risked their lives for a more blatant symbol of hope, for a bigger flag on a hill doesn't sit right with me. It seems so pointless. The photo taken of the event does not demonstrate the horror of what was actually happening just below where these men stood. It does not demonstrate the horrors they still had to face and many of them died in. This image was so powerful that it was able to blind those back home to what was going on. However, it also gave them hope in a time where there was so little. A simple photograph of men raising a flag on a hill did all of that.

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Appendix A

