

# 1.26

## The Situation Room, Washington, DC, 2011

*Liam Kennedy*

The photograph widely referred to as “The Situation Room” was posted with eight others at 1:00 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, on 2 May 2011, on the White House’s Flickr site. The caption states, “President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, along with members of the national security team, receive an update on the mission against Osama bin Laden in the Situation Room of the White House, May 1, 2011.”<sup>1</sup> It rapidly became one of the most viewed images on Flickr (1.4 million views within twenty-four hours) and has been subject to multiple interpretations. It was published on the front pages of leading national newspapers across the globe. Mainstream media such as CNN and the *Washington Post* lined up experts to comment on varied features of the images, including body-language experts, and remarked in particular on the facial gestures of Clinton and Obama. On-line, legions of conspiracy theorists have questioned every aspect of the image’s production and framing, while Photoshoppers have created multiple memes.

All the commentary on and remediation of this image exemplify its production and circulation as a significant visual event, and it has been widely labeled “iconic.” However, there has been little reflection on what this labeling of the image means beyond assertions that it is “historic.” The definition and function of *iconicity* requires more careful attention. As Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites have observed, iconic images foreground the affinities between the democratic ethos of photojournalistic image-making in American culture and moral and national investments in collective memory, but they also register the tensions inherent in the formation and transmission of collective memory.<sup>2</sup> The iconicity of the Situation Room image is symptomatic of the conditions of visuality under which it has taken on meanings about the power of the state.

While this image was widely disseminated as a news image, it was not initially produced as such; rather, the White House photographer, Peter Souza, produced it for archival purposes. The White House photographer produces a documentary record of the President’s day-to-day life. Although the primary objective in creating the imagery is archival, the White House also uses it to publicize the President’s current activities. Obama’s communications team created a Flickr page for the White House in February 2009 and has released a much greater volume of imagery than any previous administration. Souza and his three assistants take between 20,000 and 80,000 photographs each month. The White House photo editor, together with Souza, choose images for the Flickr site, and the White House Communications



**Figure 1.26** Pete Souza, President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, with members of the national security team, receive update on mission against Osama bin Laden in the Situation Room of the White House, 1 May 2011. Reused in accordance with the terms of Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/us/>).

Office signs off on these. This volume and form of distribution is claimed as a democratization of the documentary visualization of the presidency, an opening of new windows on the man and the environment.

The Flickr stream sends out the message that there is nothing to hide, that we have visual access to the events as they unfold. The illusion is enhanced by the irreducible if fragile “reality effect” of the documentary image that denotes the authenticity of the moment, the slice of time captured in the frame. With this image the reality effect is activated and enhanced, first, by the viewer’s sense of seeing “behind the scenes” of power—of having special, momentary access to a reality usually unseen—and by the apprehension that this is a singular moment of national import (there is an added *frisson*, of course, of the possibility that the people in the room are watching the killing of bin Laden).

The sense of reality effect is also enhanced by its banality. The room appears a bland example of corporate conference rooms, and we note the general informality of dress and gesture—the image challenges our assumptions, influenced by movies and TV shows, about what such a space looks like. The scene presents an intimate, unguarded moment when power is in play and leaders appear vulnerable in relation to the unknown outcome, and so they become humanized, revealed as something more than figures of power. This reading of the image was common in the national media. In the *Washington Post*,

Joel Achenbach remarked: “Protocol fell away. They were all, in that moment, spectators to an historic event—and they didn’t know which way it was going to go.”<sup>3</sup>

This illusion of transparency needs to be resisted and debunked. This idea ignores the various ways that the image is staged or edited (not faked). The sense of tension that commentators rightly pick up in the image is due mostly to the composition, for Souza has selected a very tight frame, with the actors confined in a space that is much smaller than the Situation Room—the effect both dramatizes the tension of the moment and levels the actors. His point of view also optimizes his own invisibility and hence that of the viewer and so increases our sense of watching a scene to which we would not normally be privy. He also edited the image digitally before its publication. Details on paperwork in front of Clinton have been erased, and the lighting in certain areas has been highlighted, most notably on Clinton’s face. We should also note that many images were taken between this image and those on either side of it in the Flickr sequence, further evidence of the careful process of selection.

Beyond these technical issues, the illusion of transparency should be questioned as an ideological conceit. In particular, the claim that the people in the image were “spectators” who “didn’t know which way it was going to go” displaces the agency of power and violence to a distant, invisible elsewhere. It describes actors as spectators and focuses on the reactions of those exposed to the event rather than on the event itself, or, more correctly, the staging-as-reaction—the “situation”—becomes the event. What occasioned most of the media commentary was this fixation on reading the meaning of the event off the gestures and expressions of the people in the room and off their arrangement within the confined frame of the “situation.” Following such readings, we might conclude that the “shock and awe” of this image resides precisely in the dramaturgy of human vulnerability and anxiety of those in power. It is an apt conclusion, perhaps, for viewers are implicitly asked to identify with the role of spectatorship that those in the Situation Room appear to take up on our behalf. But this reading elides recognition of the agency of power and violence that appears to be offscreen but is before us in this room. In the age of drones, this is indeed an iconic image of war, which confirms the now commonplace disavowal of the “costs” of a war that is hidden in plain sight.

## Notes

- 1 See photograph P050111PS-0210 in “The White House’s Photostream,” Flickr, posted 2 May 2011, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/5680724572> (accessed 21 October 2014).
- 2 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, “Public Identity and Collective Memory in US Iconic Photography,” *Critical Studies in Media Communications* 20.1 (2003): 38.
- 3 Joel Achenbach, “That Situation Room Photo.” [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/achenblog/post/that-situation-room-photo/2011/05/04/AFrx7KmF\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/achenblog/post/that-situation-room-photo/2011/05/04/AFrx7KmF_blog.html) (accessed 2 January 2014).