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## From the Writer

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My essay was inspired by discussions in my WR 150 section about an article by Michael Carlebach in which he argued, as I later would, that the FSA photographs were both propaganda and legitimate political communication. As we discussed Carlebach's thesis, two things struck me: first, that the question depended largely on what propaganda is to begin with, and second, that this was more something to decide (within reasonable bounds) than to discover.

I consulted a couple of dictionaries and used the information therein to form a working definition that I thought conformed to the word's everyday use and provided clear conditions for its satisfaction. Another question emerged from the fact that my definition contained words like "information" and "deceptive," which are associated with saying things, whereas an image cannot literally say anything. I set out to determine how photographs communicate information, and under what conditions they can be considered propaganda.

Then it remained to use historical evidence to show whether the FSA photographs met these conditions; this was the step that required the most actual research. By carefully analyzing the main points of my argument, I was able to ensure that I made a convincing case, and that my essay would have a coherent structure (since I simply had to address each issue in turn). Finally, I was enormously helped by the mandatory first draft, which forced me to think about, research, and begin writing my essay early, counteracting my strong tendencies toward laziness and procrastination and helping me produce a complete essay on time.

— Chris Meyer

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*Prize Essay Winner*

## THE FSA PHOTOGRAPHS: INFORMATION, OR PROPAGANDA?

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During Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, the Farm Security Administration, a part of his New Deal bureaucracy, produced a multitude of well-known photographs documenting the impact of the Great Depression on rural America. This photographic record of the Depression, which provided work for photographers as well as illustrated the need for often vigorously opposed New Deal programs, has been the subject of substantial controversy regarding its objectivity: was it simply information, a mirror in which America could have a look at itself, or did it constitute propaganda? This question was particularly crucial during the 1930s, when two world powers—Germany and the Soviet Union—were increasingly infamous for their governments' efforts to control the flow of information. To answer it, it is necessary first to clarify exactly what propaganda is, then to examine the FSA photographers' methods and products, as well as their historical context. Because the issue is partly a semantic one, and reasonable people can disagree on the meanings of words, it is difficult to provide a conclusive answer; however, given the combination of the FSA photographers' documentary methodology with the manner in which the photographs were used, it is safe to say that they were propaganda. But they were not *just* propaganda; that is to say, they bore the identifying marks of propaganda, but they were not in the same class as totalitarian propaganda. Rather, they were a legitimate form of political communication.

What is propaganda? Especially because it is a fairly abstract and contentious concept, it is helpful to know what the word means before deciding whether it applies to any particular historical campaign. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word originally referred to an

assembly of cardinals in the Roman Catholic Church that was responsible for the *propagation* of the faith, and carried no negative connotations. But it has evolved into the modern sense, which is “the systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view” or “information disseminated in this way” (“Propaganda, *n.*”). So it is necessary not only for the information to have political content, but also for it to be circulated with the intent of bringing about a political effect. And in accordance with common usage and the word’s reputation, it is an important part of the concept of propaganda that it is in some way deceptive.

But these standards apply most naturally to statements, which convey information and can be true or false. What does it mean for an *image* to be propaganda? While an image is not itself a statement, images often imply or express statements. In particular, there are three statements that a photograph can express, and whereby it can communicate a political message:

1. This really happened;
2. This happened independent of the photographer;
3. This scene is representative.

“*This really happened*”: Because of the way a photograph is produced, it, unlike a drawing, painting, or verbal description, generally depicts a scene that actually existed at some point. This is not always the case, since photographs can be altered; but when alteration is not either obvious or made explicit, a photograph is expected to depict reality. “*This happened independent of the photographer*”: For a photograph to effectively communicate a political message, it is not enough for it merely to claim to portray a scene that actually existed; the point is that the scene naturally occurred. Not every photograph makes this claim—a portrait, for example, depicts a transparently contrived situation—but in similar manner to (1), when manipulation is not overt, it is expected that a photograph’s content did not originate in the photographer’s mind. “*This scene is representative*”: This last statement has less to do with the content and production of photographs than the way they are used, but it is crucially important to their political effects. Photographs intended to bring about some governmental action to combat a social ill must be presented in such a way as to

give the impression that the events they depict are widespread. Given all this, an organization can use photographs to accomplish a political goal by creating and disseminating images whose content is favorable to its cause in such a way as to assert these three statements of those images. When at least one of the statements is actually false, the photographs qualify as propaganda.

In light of these considerations, the most important questions about the FSA photographs concern how they were made—whether they were altered or their subjects manipulated—and how they were used—whether and to what extent political considerations overrode factual considerations in their selection and presentation. They were part of the tradition of documentary photography, which began in the late nineteenth century and disdained “photographic tricks” and “gimmicks,” aiming “to record real life without artifice” (Carlebach 11). This did not mean, however, that the documentary style was neutral or apolitical. In fact, from the movement’s inception, documentary photographers attempted to expose social ills so as to bring about reform. For example, John Grierson, who was the first to use the term “documentary” (in 1926, referring to film rather than still photography), “found in the documentary approach a way to directly connect the human experience with personal compassion” (Szto 95). Similarly, Lewis Hine, an influential early documentary photographer, intended that his work would “influence public opinion in order to induce corrections to a flawed system gone amok” (Szto 100). Documentary was such a useful tool for social change because of Americans’ increasing receptiveness to scientific evidence at the turn of the twentieth century. “The Progressive Era (1890–1920) increasingly embraced science as the basis for social reform and solving social problems,” which “positioned photography to affect [*sic*] change because of its straightforward and truth-telling qualities” (Szto 95). Because of this scientific perspective, it was precisely the honesty of documentary photography that gave it its persuasive power.

Like earlier documentarians, the Farm Security Administration photographers had a political mission. According to Michael Carlebach, the program was “conceived as a means of illustrating the necessity and effectiveness of New Deal agricultural programs” (10). They were not isolated in this regard, but were part of the Roosevelt administration’s larger-scale efforts to sway public opinion in favor of his economic

recovery programs. In fact, “the disposition to form public opinion and a keen sense of how this might be done were integral parts of [Roosevelt’s] political outlook” (Steele 5). Thus the photographs met the first criterion of propaganda, being information spread systematically for a political purpose. But the documentary adherence to factual photography was also an important part of the FSA work. The program’s photographers “were warned repeatedly not to manipulate their subjects in order to get more dramatic images, and their pictures were almost always printed without cropping or retouching” (Carlebach 20). Of course, overt manipulation is not the only way a photographer can affect the content of his or her work. The very presence of a camera can influence subjects’ behavior – especially if the subjects know that producing a particularly down-and-out-looking image could improve their well-being by promoting a program that will give them economic aid. But according to a 1977 interview with Arthur Rothstein, one of the FSA photographers, the photographers were constrained by necessity to minimize their conspicuousness. Rothstein called the technique he developed “the unobtrusive camera” and described it as “becoming a part of the environment that people are in to such an extent that they’re not even aware that pictures are being taken” (Doud and Rothstein 20). As a result of these scruples, the FSA photographs, on the whole, satisfied statements (1) and (2) of the above criteria.

However, in one notable controversy, critics alleged the opposite—that the FSA photographers manipulated their surroundings for political effect. This concerned a photograph taken by Rothstein, *The Bleached Skull of a Steer on the Dry Sun-baked Earth of the South Dakota Bad Lands* (see Figure 1). According to Rothstein, the photograph was one of a series he made as exercises, experimenting with “the texture of the skull, the texture of the earth, cracks in the soil, the lighting, how the lighting changed from the east to the west as the sun went down” (Doud and Rothstein 21–22). The picture went into the FSA files, and an Associated Press editor later ignorantly published it, believing it to illustrate a severe drought that was going on at the time. (In fact, according to Rothstein, the scene is a common one in the West regardless of drought conditions.) A newspaper editor saw the picture, and, not knowing “that there was a caption on it that [Rothstein] hadn’t contributed, that it was sent out by the Associated Press, not the government,” determined that it was “a real

example of fakery” (Doud and Rothstein 22). The other pictures Rothstein had taken of the skull, in some of which he had moved it around in his immediate vicinity, were made public, and news of the apparent fake spread to the point that cartoons were published portraying Rothstein “wandering all over the United States with a skull, planting it here and planting it there” (Doud and Rothstein 22). This example demonstrates how some of the harsher accusations against the FSA photographs came into being, as well as how the use of an image can introduce deception as easily as its production (even if this particular case seems to have been an honest mistake).



*Figure 1. Arthur Rothstein. The Bleached Skull of a Steer on the Dry Sun-baked Earth of the South Dakota Bad Lands. May, 1936.*

Although the above extreme allegations were false, assuming Rothstein’s account is accurate, there was another kind of deception involved in the FSA photographs. This did not concern individual photographs, which realistically depicted true events, but the higher-level decisions of what pictures would be taken, and what pictures published. For example, as the 1930s wore on, the guidelines for what material the photographers were to focus on changed as the government moved the focus of its public-relations campaigns. “Emphasize the idea of abundance – the ‘horn of plenty’ and pour maple syrup over it,” Roy Stryker, the head of the FSA’s Information Division, said as the impending war turned the government’s attention to projecting America’s rebounding prosperity (Carlebach 23). This change was not entirely disconnected from reality—“Farm conditions were improving in the late thirties, and . . . to some extent the new FSA

guidelines reflected the changes”—but, crucially, the decision of what to include and what to omit was guided by politics, and was therefore misleading (Carlebach 22). Thus, strictly interpreted, statement (3) fails for the FSA photographs—and not just the later ones, for Stryker and his superiors exerted politically motivated editorial control throughout the program’s existence—and hence they were, in fact, propaganda.

The Farm Security Administration’s graphic record of the Great Depression was produced and disseminated by the Roosevelt administration in order to advance its political goals; the information contained in it was significantly, if not dramatically, misleading, as a result of the politically motivated editorial control exercised by those who led the program. From this it follows, given the stipulated definitions, that it did constitute propaganda. However, as is apparent from the nature and extent of the deception involved, it was a mild form of propaganda, containing no outright lies. Furthermore, the political goal it was meant to advance was not a particularly odious one. Whether or not it was good policy, the Farm Security Administration threatened neither Americans’ lives nor their liberty; the same cannot be said for the regimes Roosevelt’s critics compared him to. (Whether some of the president’s other policies were more insidious is irrelevant, since these were not the purpose of this particular propaganda campaign.) As one of many sources of information available in a democratic society, the FSA photography campaign was an acceptable form of government publicity.

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CHRIS MEYER is a member of the CAS class of 2011 from Boxford, Massachusetts, a Wasilla-sized town full of squirrels and trees to the north of Boston. He is studying math and philosophy, and minoring in German. He was originally in the Core Curriculum, but switched into WR 150 due to a scheduling conflict, and enrolled in the art and politics section out of interest in both and a desire to learn more about their interaction. This essay was written for Amy Chmielewski's WR 150: Art and Politics in the Twentieth Century.