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The Photographer and the President

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The Photographer and the President
Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Gardner, and the Images That Made a Presidency
Richard S. Lowry
For Joyce and Eleanor
I began this book as an effort to understand Alexander Gardner’s photograph of Abraham Lincoln that appears as plate 15. I am sure I had seen copies of the portrait many times before I saw the original at the National Portrait Gallery several years ago, but none of them had impressed me like the actual photograph. It is very large—nearly a foot and a half tall and more than fifteen inches wide—with deep sepia tones and an almost holographic intensity to the details. A fracture line, caused by the breaking of the delicate glass-plate negative, veers from the upper left corner, across the top of Lincoln’s head, all the way to the right edge, giving the picture its nickname, the cracked-plate portrait. Lincoln looks frail, even vulnerable, but the photograph itself possesses an uncanny power. The picture invites us close to Lincoln—his wan smile suggests he shares something with us—but it also insists on our distance from him. He looks past us, not at us, which makes his expression inscrutable. It is as if he visits us from another world.

At the time, I was more interested in the photographer than his subject. I knew him for *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, an album of one hundred images by more than a dozen photographers that follows the Army of the Potomac during its four years of fighting. Some of these, including those of the battlefield dead at Gettysburg, have become icons of the human cost of war, though one of them is notorious for Gardner’s perhaps having moved a corpse to get the shot. When I visited the gallery I didn’t know that he was also an accomplished portrait photographer who took more pictures of Lincoln than anyone else. Nor was I prepared for his artistry, which seems as experimental and provocative as that of his English contemporary Julia Margaret Cameron and anticipates the great portraitists Walker Evans and Diane Arbus.

As I went deeper into my investigation, I came to realize that Gardner brought to his subject the same sophisticated understanding he did to his
medium. He shows Lincoln as his contemporaries saw him in early 1865: a man worn down by the burdens of leading the Union through four years of unprecedented strife and heartbreak. In his faint smile, they would have recognized the Westerner of humble origins whose seemingly endless reservoir of anecdotes, sympathetic attention, and self-deprecating humor could disarm the most ardent opponent and charm his supporters into calling him Father Abraham, a name that mingled the stern authority of Old Testament patriarchs with domestic comfort. They would also have recognized in Lincoln's distant stare a man of deep reserve—a natural politician, with all the calculation and veiled intentions that the term implies, but someone whose dedication to democratic ideals thrived alongside an appreciation of the absurdity of human aspiration.

Gardner's photograph led me in other directions, as well. During his lifetime, Lincoln was the subject of more than 130 photographs, more than virtually any other person of his generation. About half of these were taken during the four and a half years between his nomination as the Republican presidential candidate and his death. Clearly Lincoln understood the new medium—photography had become commercially viable only in the early 1840s—as an emerging force in politics, capable of bringing the face of the president to the electorate with unprecedented objectivity and variety.

Gardner took some thirty-eight photographs of Lincoln during their time together in Washington. The image that first caught my eye was one of the last anyone made of him. Most of the pictures were done in the studio, but other portraits were taken on the Antietam battlefield, at the second inauguration, and at the ceremonies that included the Gettysburg Address. Add these to the dozens of images he took documenting Lincoln's assassination, including the hanging of four of the conspirators, and it becomes clear that Gardner followed Lincoln's presidency with the same attention as he did the Army of the Potomac. By the end of his career, Gardner's pictures, reproduced as engravings in national magazines and sold as prints large enough to frame and small enough to fit in family albums, helped make Lincoln's not only the most recognizable face in the country, but also the face of the nation.

*The Photographer and the President* tells the story of the partnership between these two remarkable men who, in very different but complementary ways, changed the way their generation saw, and thus ultimately how they experienced the Civil War. As president, Lincoln endured personal loss, negotiated social turmoil, and mastered the demands of being both commander in chief and the political leader of a country he fought to restore. In time he
framed a new vision for the nation, born of the upheaval of war, grounded in ideals of equality, and guided by a pragmatic commitment to bettering the life of all its citizens. Gardner documented for the public the unprecedented carnage and destruction on the dead-strewn battlefields of Antietam and Gettysburg and in the ruins of Richmond. He portrayed the president with an increasingly sophisticated subtlety both as a leader indelibly immersed in the challenges of the moment and as a figure who was worthy of memorializing for history.

I place Gardner's artistry and Lincoln's political genius at the heart of my story by building each chapter around Gardner's portraits, using them as a doorway into the historical circumstances that brought the two men together. The first session, in early 1861, introduced the president-elect to a nation that was already splitting apart. The second recorded the intrigue and high drama of Lincoln's meeting with General George McClellan on the Antietam battlefield in October 1862, weeks after Gardner had braved the flies and stench to document the grim aftermath of fighting and weeks before Lincoln would change the course of the war by announcing the Emancipation Proclamation.

Gardner photographed Lincoln twice in 1863. They first met in August in Gardner's newly opened studio, a month after Gardner had again photographed battlefield dead, this time at Gettysburg. The second took place just eleven days before Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, his brief rhetorical masterpiece that would come to keynote the nation's understanding of freedom. Their final session, in February 1865, came with the end of the war in sight and the hopes and fears for the future looming large; there the president posed for the cracked-plate portrait. The last chapter follows Gardner and Lincoln on their separate visits to the newly fallen Confederate capital, Richmond. Only days after photographing the somber beauty of the city ruins, Gardner took up the challenge of translating into pictures the grief, rage, shock, and fascination that followed Lincoln's assassination.

When he made them, Gardner's photographs allowed people to see for the first time in history the crisis they lived through and the president who led them through it. Since then they have played an important role in shaping our national memory of those events. Even for the millions of people who visit the battlefields, the Civil War lives on most persistently in the thousands of pictures produced by Gardner and his fellow photographers. The same holds true for Lincoln. For all the sculptures of and memorials to our sixteenth president, from Mount Rushmore to the National Mall in Washington, D.C., for all the countless representations of him on the penny, on the five-dollar bill, and in the exuberantly
corrosive nonsense of a popular culture that makes him into a square-bearded, stovepipe-hatted salesman for anything from sleep aids to auto insurance, Lincoln lives in our contemporary public imagination through photographs.

We cannot avoid this double vision of who Lincoln was at the time and what he is to us now when we look at Gardner’s portraits. This is certainly the product of the power of myth to obscure the past, but it is also an effect of the photographs themselves as they evoke the uncanny experience of time’s passing. Anyone who has looked at photographs has experienced the wavering dislocation that comes when we first respond to a picture’s realism by feeling we are there when the picture was taken, only to then realize that there or then is no longer now or here. (Can one even imagine looking at a picture of the present?) That poignant mix of loss and pleasure, distance and presence, lies at the heart of photography’s power to fascinate us. It also defines the dynamic that led the two men to understand making pictures as making history. We make Lincoln’s story our story, because he and Gardner made their story ours.