

**NATION: Media**

# When Your Eyes Tell You Lies

By Timothy W. Maier

**Government and the media commonly manipulate video and photographs using modern computer technology, raising ethical questions concerning truth and deception.**

**A** picture may be worth a thousand words, but doctored a photo sometimes says a lot more. Hollywood certainly has played doctor more than once. Remember the movie *Capricorn One* — in which the plot centers around a mission to Mars, faked in a movie studio, that convinced the whole world we had landed a team of astronauts on the Red Planet? Such a conspiracy might seem hard to pull off in real life, but don't bet your mortgage on it.

During the last 150 years, photographs repeatedly have been manipulated for propaganda, fraud, humor, profit and just to rewrite history. In the mid-1800s, supernatural spirits sometimes were "photographed" by unscrupulous photographers through the expediency of overexposing pictures and superimposing an old photo of a deceased husband or wife.

"Historically people have done it for years with simply scissors and paste, but modern technology has made it much easier," says Larry Nighswander, director of Ohio University's School of Visual Communication. A former photo editor at *National Geographic*, Nighswander recalls the famous "moving-pyramid" shot in which editors before his time appeared to have moved the pyramids for a cover shot. "Immediately after they did it, they were caught," he says. "They rotated the image; they didn't move the pyramids. They moved the photographer to make it appear he shot it from a different angle."

But after critics cried foul, Nighswander says, *National Geographic* immediately implemented a policy



**Oswald:** Some say this photo is a fake, but the CIA says it's the real thing.

against photo manipulation. Today, he says, advances in technology have created a monster. "The danger is that we can mislead anybody — a reader, a family member. In our attempt to deceive we have crossed an ethical barrier."

While the technical advances assuredly have had a positive impact, with law-enforcement agencies using computer simulation to project the ages of lost children, to reconstruct crime

scenes and to catch criminals, the downside to this evolving technology has left the public wondering if it can trust what it sees. John Long, ethics chairman of the National Press Photographer's Association, warns: "You can't believe anything you see. It's been an epidemic. It has threatened the credibility of visual news reporting."

Indeed, photographs are being manipulated at an alarming rate. Each year, 38 million pictures are taken in the United States and, according to the Rochester Institute of Technology, 10 percent of those photos are altered.

It is common practice to publish altered photos along with a small, barely readable disclaimer explaining the picture has been enhanced or modified by a computer. The *National Enquirer* used computers to place bruises on Nicole Brown Simpson's face — an image that many still remember as a

true and accurate photograph. More recently the *Enquirer* displayed computerized shots of John F. Kennedy Jr.'s airplane with the small-print disclaimer that it was a computer rendition created by a photo illustrator.

"Does the average viewer understand what a photo illustrator is?" wonders Nighswander. "What's the difference between a photo illustrator and a photographer? I don't think people know. We are blurring the perception of reality."

Of course sometimes the media designers do it for artistic or humorous

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

reasons, such as when *Insight* engaged in a little computer fun by superimposing Bill Clinton's head on the chained body of Harry Houdini to suggest the president had become an escape artist (Jan. 11-18, 1999). While the humor depends on making it obvious the photograph has been altered, some famous manipulated shots have gone down in history as the truth.

For example, the Library of Congress displays a statuesque and robust portrait of Abraham Lincoln. The real thing? Look again. After Lincoln's death, the head from a portrait of Lincoln by Mathew Brady was reversed and placed on the body of Sen. John Calhoun to make this famous picture. More recently, a photo of three U.S. soldiers supposedly left behind in Vietnam appeared mysteriously in 1991. Relatives claimed that the men were Vietnam fliers Col. John Robertson, Lt. Cmdr. Larry Stevens and Maj. Albro L. Lundy Jr., who were listed as missing. It turns out the image was a doctored 1923 photo of three Soviet farmers that appeared in a 1989 issue of a Khmer-language publication, according to the CIA.

Such photo fakery is getting harder to detect. No longer are the manipulators simply using watercolors and dyes to retouch portraits. Advertisers, politicians and the media often add, move or delete individuals in photos to show people or events in their best light. For example, on the Aug. 26-Sept. 1, 1989, cover of *TV Guide*, Oprah Winfrey's head was put on dancer Ann-Margret's body. Five years later ABC News duped Americans after the State of the Union address when Cokie Roberts was shown standing in a trench coat reporting on the reaction to the president's speech from in front of the Capitol. One problem: She wasn't there but was inside a studio at the ABC Washington bureau in front of a projection of the Capitol building.

In the 1994 senatorial race in Virginia, Democratic challenger Mark Warner's head was superimposed on a photo of someone else shaking hands with President Clinton, who was unpopular in the Old Dominion. Warner's opponent, GOP Sen. John Warner, pulled the ad — but only after it had been run for four days.

Today it is not uncommon to see long-gone celluloid heroes such as John Wayne pop up in commercials. Woody Allen, of course, interacted years ago with Humphrey Bogart in *Play It Again, Sam*, and Tom Hanks managed to be present



DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

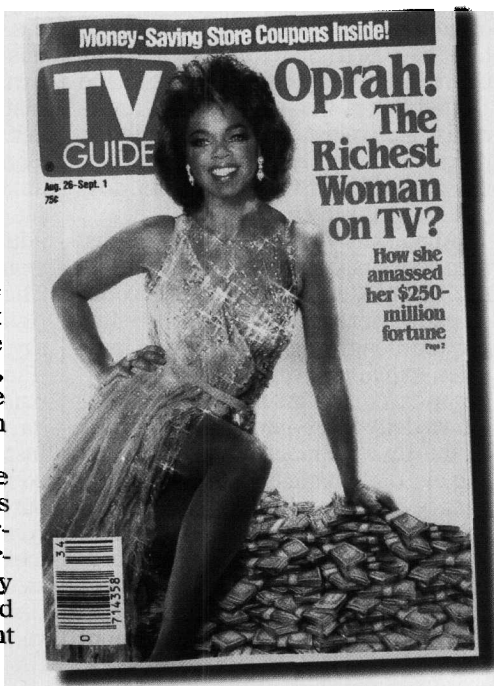
**Unreal:** The Soviets released faked photographs that appeared to show cosmonaut Gagarin in space in 1961.

during the Watergate scandal as well as shake hands with John F. Kennedy in *Forrest Gump*. Can we be that far away from some clever cinematic techie splicing together hundreds of scenes from John Wayne movies to create *Return of the Duke*?

What harm could that be? No one ever will die in fantasyland. But it's the real world that scares image experts. Faked photography is not going away, and computers are being used to make fakes nearly impossible in some cases for even the world's leading image analysts to detect.

"What you see isn't necessarily the truth," says Dino A. Brugioni, the founder of the CIA's National Photographic Interpretation Center and author of *Photo Fakery: The History and Techniques of Photographic*

**Sneaky:** *TV Guide* placed Winfrey's head on Ann-Margret's body.



*Deception and Manipulation*. While no credible imagery expert is saying that NASA has pulled a *Capricorn One*, it is clear that with today's cutting-edge technology governments have the capability to dupe an entire nation, Brugioni says. "The technology is there and it's only going to get worse."

Brugioni has spent years debunking faked photographs, such as when he informed media heavyweight Ted Koppel that the *Nightline* team had been misled by a bogus film showing a two-reactor meltdown at Chernobyl. Only one had gone into meltdown. In 1978 he was the one who discovered aerial photos of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination complex, which showed Nazi prisoners being marched to the gas chamber. They were the real thing.

"Communists, Ghosts, Monsters and Aliens" is the title of a chapter in Brugioni's book on fakery. It details the findings of the U.S. Air Force's "Project Blue Book" in 1948 which concluded that hundreds of photos of alleged UFOs and many strange phenomena were the result of film defects, soot, grease marks, moisture, lint, lens flare and camera movement. Some of the shots were submitted simply as attempts to dumbfound the experts, such as the photograph of a hubcap tossed into the air.

The Air Force created three categories: hoaxes, insufficient data and rational explanation. But not everything could be explained, and three years ago the CIA admitted that more than half of the unexplained UFO sightings during the 1950s and 1960s eventually were accounted for as observations of secret reconnaissance flights.

Other countries long have used faked photos and photographic manipulation to push their agenda. Russia and Communist China have been frequent offenders. Lately countries in the Middle East also have been dab-



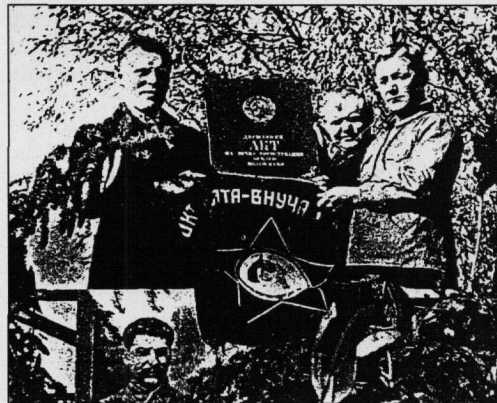
**MIAs?** Photo, top, was doctored from an image of Soviet farmers, below.

bling in such deceptions, Brugioni says.

In his uncensored book, Brugioni exposes some of the most dubious propaganda schemes of the Cold War. Remember Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, who was launched into space in April 1961? The Soviets made efforts to conceal the details of his spacecraft and equipment from Western eyes by changing the background of the picture. It appears that he is in space but he's not. They even shot a "space walk" in a water tank.

Or how about Mao Tse-tung, who disappeared from public view in late 1965. To calm concerns about his health, Beijing's Chinese News Agency released a picture of Mao swimming in the rough Yangtze River. The Chinese News Agency claimed Chairman Mao, then 72, swam nine miles in 65 minutes. But Brugioni's analysis shows this was no river but, more likely, a lake. Other shots showed a robust Mao entertaining foreign guests, but careful analysis of the ears showed Mao had employed a double — a technique used by U.S. presidents including George Washington and Franklin Roosevelt. During World War II, Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin all employed doubles who often were photographed far away. Recent evidence from Iraqi defectors indicates that Saddam Hussein does the same.

The health of foreign political leaders became a priority for the CIA, says Brugioni, when it became evident that countries were trying to conceal the age or health of their leaders. "If a president was going to make a deal we wanted to know how long the individual we were dealing



with would last," says Brugioni.

In the 1950s the CIA began to take a hard look at the growing number of manipulated photographs and propaganda being circulated by the Soviet Union in the Third World. The objective of such forgeries apparently was to isolate the United States and its allies by convincing emerging countries that the United States was aggressively imperialist and racist. The disinformation program was aimed chiefly at journalists and officials who were sent doctored pictures by mail.

Allen Dulles asked Richard Helms, then assistant director of the CIA, to testify before Congress about the widespread Soviet deception. In 1961 Helms showed Congress dozens of such forgeries, explaining that the "Soviet propaganda campaign against the West grows daily more intense. It's focused on the United States, our government and our diplomatic, military and intelligence services." In 1978 Adm. Stansfield Turner, then director of the CIA, provided similar evidence of KGB forgeries before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

"We were on the watch," Brugioni

says. "There were thousands of photographs. They were brushing out details of their weapon systems and making their leaders look younger and healthier." Some of this manipulation was obvious, such as during the Vietnam War when the North Vietnamese created a bogus photo of Gen. William Westmoreland at an alleged massacre site. The propaganda photo was supposed to show that the killing of innocent civilians was a policy decision made by the U.S. commander himself. To do this hatchet job, the North Vietnamese took a *Newsweek* cover shot of Westmoreland and superimposed it over the massacre scene.

"Some of the stuff from the Czechs and China was pretty damn good," says Brugioni. "While in the Middle East the Palestinians would always show Israelis as a bunch of thugs. An Israeli would have a hand raised in a photograph, and they would put a club in it to show brutality."

After the assassination of President Kennedy, the United States was accused of doctored photographs of Lee Harvey Oswald. Brugioni was asked by the Warren Commission investigating the assassination to determine whether the shot was real. Brugioni was given the negative, he says, and his investigation "proved beyond a doubt that the shot of Oswald

with the rifle was real. No doubt about it," he says. Of course having the top CIA experts claiming the photos were not altered only created more conspiracy theories, Brugioni laughs.

With the arrival of digital computers, says Brugioni, photo technology has seen great advances which have, in turn, opened the door to ready manipulation. "What concerns me about this is its effect on our legal system. Judges I have talked to about it say they are amazed how easy it is to manipulate a photograph. Yet photos are readily admitted into evidence without serious examination as to their authenticity. The legal profession is back in the Neanderthal age on this stuff. They say, 'You mean it's that easy?' I say, 'Photography shouldn't be accepted prima facie in court anymore.' If you have pictures of an auto accident, for instance, you should be aware that a computer technician could have wiped out the skid marks. A photo technician could have skewed the car to make it look like the accident was somebody else's fault. With 3 million accidents a year — that's a lot of photographs" to be validated. ●