

## Review

# Eyes on the Prize

For Pulitzer-winning photographs, timing is everything **By Paul Zakrzewski**

**S**ome Pulitzer Prize-winning photographs are so well-known, they stand in for our memory of the historical moments they represent: the flag raising at Iwo Jima, say, or Kent State. Other times, the images remind us of local dramas, or of the sort of private moments that never make headlines. But as the title of Newseum/NY's current exhibit, "The Pulitzer Prize Photographs: Capture the Moment," suggests, what unites all great Pulitzer photos is something other than the fame or notoriety of the event they record—it's a powerful combination of skill and luck that transforms them into the moments that sum up an era.

In the most comprehensive display of Pulitzer Prize-winning images ever shown in the U.S., "Capture the Moment" crams poster-size reproductions of every prizewinner since the Pulitzer for photojournalism was initiated in 1941 onto every square inch of wall. While World War II dominates the images from the early 1940s, and the Vietnam War shadows those from the 1960s and early '70s, more recent pictures focus on the fall of Communism, troubles in Haiti and Africa, and other incidents from the 1990s.

Since the show doesn't bother to give the viewer much background on the award's selection process, it might help to know that each year the Pulitzer board elects a jury of peers, who then sift through submissions from newspaper editors

in two categories: Spot News and Features (the latter was added in 1968). "There are some pictures that anyone would select as winners, because there's something about an effective photograph that attracts us like a magnet," says exhibit organizer Eric Newton, news historian of the Virginia-based Newseum (parent of the New York gallery).

He credits good pictures with three defining elements: They capture a moment, they tell a story, and they move people. But something else separates the immortal shots from the simply good ones, says Newton—a little bit of luck in timing the shutter's snap. Invoking Mark Twain's explanation of the difference between the right word and the *almost*-right word, Newton explains, "It's the difference between lightning and a lightning bug, and for the photographer, one fraction of a second is the difference between lightning or not."

The exhibit's photos emphasize this element of chance. In a 1979 image of a Kurdish rebel facing an Iranian firing squad, the photographer captures the exact instant before the rebel is shot, just as the

other already executed prisoners are crumpling to the ground next to him. A 1973 photo of a reunion between a Vietnam POW and his family was similarly transformed by a fleeting detail: As the daughter bounds toward her father, her feet completely leave the ground. Looking at other, less successful photographs, however, the Pulitzer board's choices seem a little puzzling. Sure, an impish Boris Yeltsin clicking his heels to the delight of backup singers and politicians is funny, but is it really a

liant flashes of lightning, they do correct some misunderstandings. Take the example of Edward Adams's infamous 1968 photograph of a South Vietnamese general firing a gun at the head of a Viet Cong lieutenant. The accompanying story explains that the lieutenant had just murdered an entire South Vietnamese family; it's a story that sheds new light on something that, at first, appears to be a random execution.

The inclusion of these blurbs greatly adds to the experience of the show. So when the organizers shy away from describing other controversies, the absence is even more noticeable. Joe Rosenthal's 1945 image of the U.S. Marines hoisting the flag over Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima is perhaps the most renowned photo in the collection, but critics have long claimed that Rosenthal staged the picture. Newton and others have researched and completely rejected this charge, but they make no mention of it in the show.

Other current debates are omitted as well. Have the quality of winners degenerated in the past several years, as some critics contend? Do the Pulitzers glorify violence, or merely reflect it? Yet even with these gaps, one thing is certain: "Capture the Moment" packs in some of the

most potent images from the past 60 years, ones that truly move us—even if we don't know all the details behind the stories they tell.

**"The Pulitzer Prize Photographs: Capture the Moment" is at Newseum/NY through September 23.**



**WE BRING GOOD THINGS TO LIFE** A hero resuscitates his electrocuted coworker in this 1967 winning shot.

Pulitzer-worthy moment?

Perhaps in an effort to give the audience a basis for answering such questions, the show's organizers chose to include the story behind each image. And while these blurbs of wall text can't transform lightning bugs into bril-

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