

# David Hume Kennerly

## IMAGES THAT HELPED DEFINE AMERICAN HISTORY

By Erica Wheeler



U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy in his chambers with his clerks at the Supreme Court June 25, 2002 in Washington, DC. (All photos by David Hume Kennerly/Getty Images)

In 1968, while working for United Press International (UPI), David Hume Kennerly photographed the last few weeks of Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign, including his final public moments before he was assassinated in Los Angeles. Two months ago, he shot pictures for *Newsweek* of Arnold Schwarzenegger with his staff as they planned his run for the California governorship. During the intervening years, this 56 year old, Pulitzer Prize winning photographer advanced the types of visual images that illustrate printed news media.

"I think that Kennerly basically invented modern political photography by using the techniques of war coverage which he learned in Vietnam, and the use of the 35mm camera and black-and-white high-speed photography, and taking them into places like the oval office

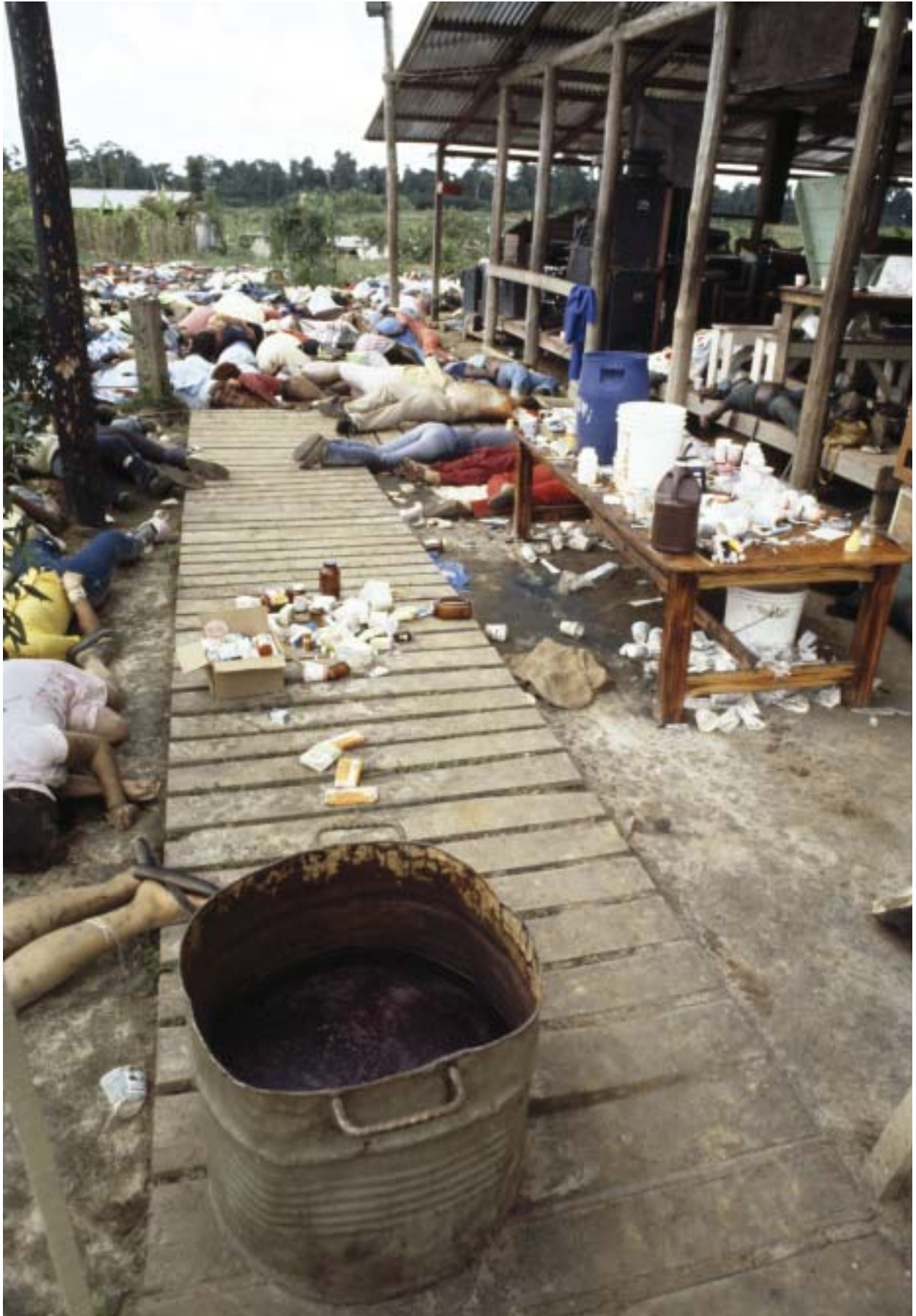
and the campaign trail," says Howard Fineman, chief political correspondent of *Newsweek*. "When he was with *Time* in the seventies he basically invented a way of seeing power in action in a manner it hadn't been seen before."

During the course of his 35-year career, which also included working for *Life*, *George*, and the United States government, he documented eight presidential campaigns, several wars, many high-level government meetings, the living conditions of people throughout the world, and some of the most important peace talks and treaty negotiations in recent history. For many Ameri-

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(Right) A wounded soldier, near death, alongside Highway 13, Lai Khe, Vietnam 1972.





20 OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2003



**Heavyweight Muhammed Ali is knocked down by Joe Frazier in Madison Square Garden March 8, 1971 in New York City. Frazier later won by a unanimous 15-round decision over Ali.**

cans, his archive of more than one million images would contain a near-complete political history spanning their entire lifetime.

"When we talk about the power of photography, in my case I've had a cumulative effect," Kennerly says during a recent telephone interview that had to be postponed because he was helping his wife and their three children, ages 5, 8 and 18, get ready to leave the house. "I have a lot of really good pictures taken at really important events over a huge span of time."

This would have surpassed the dreams of the 17-year-old Kennerly who was selling pictures to his local newspapers and shooting for his high school paper with a camera he borrowed from his girl friend's father. That was the year he saw the work of Larry Burrows in *Life* depicting the Vietnam War. "His pictures really showed the emotion and the drama of Vietnam. After seeing those, it was clear to me that that was the kind of career I wanted to choose. To do stories like that, if possible," he says.

Six years later, he convinced UPI to give him the

chance. "It was very important for me to go to Vietnam because it was the biggest story of my generation, and as a photographer, I would have hated myself if I hadn't gone," he says, adding emphatically that he has no patience for people who regret missed opportunities. He was also looking forward to meeting Larry Burrows.

The day after Kennerly's twenty-fourth birthday he arrived in Saigon, but never got the chance to meet his idol. "In fact, I was en route to Vietnam to replace one of the UPI photographers in the bureau, and that person and Larry Burrows and an AP photographer and a *Newsweek* photographer were on a helicopter that got shot down," he says.

Their deaths scared him. His ambition, however, to "get the story" coupled with the arrogance of youth, propelled him to work in combat areas. Within the year he became UPI's bureau chief for photographs for Southeast Asia, and at the age of 25 he won the Pulitzer Prize for his images of the war in Vietnam.

After spending two and a half years documenting the devastations of war, Kennerly came home to the United States in time to record the self-destruction of the nation's leaders; Vice President Spiro Agnew for a kickback scheme and President Richard Nixon for the Watergate scandal. With their fall came the rise of a new leader, President Gerald Ford, and a new job. At 27, Kennerly became the Personal Photographer to the President.

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**(Left) On November 18, 1978, more than 900 members of the People's Temple Cult, led by Reverend Jim Jones, died in Jonestown, Guyana, victims of mass murder and suicide. In the foreground a tub of cyanide-laced punch which was used to assist in the suicides of people in Jonestown. This photo appeared on the cover of *Time*.**



Marking the 50th Anniversary of People's Republic of China parade in Tienanmen Square, 0in Beijing, China, October 1, 1999.

The two previous Presidents had also employed personal photographers. Kennerly, however, was not content to take traditional staged shots like his predecessors where the President and his advisors posed for the camera. He got a top security clearance and gained access to high-level meetings to photograph his subjects while working.

"Because of his political connections and the force of his personality, he got in the Oval Office in real time to see real events which other people hadn't really been able to do...David was able to take the private vanity photography of the past and make it public and journalistic," Fineman says. "Why is that important? Because we need to see our leaders in action and photography reveals things about the character of people that printed journalism and history cannot."

Kennerly remains driven by the need to make visible that which might otherwise never be seen, from honest portraits of the decision makers in action to the sometimes grisly human fallout of these decisions. In the past, he risked his life to get some of these images. In addition to Vietnam, Kennerly covered fighting throughout Southeast Asia, a war in Mozambique in the early 1970's, the India-Pakistan War of 1971, and

armed conflicts in El Salvador, Beirut and Northern Ireland.

"In the India-Pakistan War, I know for a fact I came close (to being killed) because the guy right next to me got shot and killed. He was an Indian soldier. We were close to a Pakistani machine gun emplacement and they were attacking us, and by bad luck, I was there," he says.

Over the years, Kennerly managed to keep his body intact. But, there was one assignment that cost him his peace of mind. "I think the hardest thing for me was seeing Jonestown and all the kids who were dead, who did not commit suicide but were murdered," he says. Kennerly makes a special note to recall that the 25th anniversary of the mass murder by the Rev. Jim Jones of more than 900 of his followers in a jungle in Guyana is this November.

"Even Vietnam, as bad as it was, you could rationalize in your head. There was neither rhyme nor reason to Jonestown. You couldn't process that as a sane, logical person...It created a sort of upheaval in my mind. Out of every thing I've done it was the only one I wouldn't have done over again if given the opportunity because it was such a horrible thing to do," he says.



Actor Arnold Schwarzenegger (Republican), after at a press conference on the grounds of NBC, moments after declaring his candidacy for governor of California in Burbank, CA, August 6, 2003.

With the house to himself on a Saturday morning, Kennerly is ready to talk for a few hours on the telephone. His manner is friendly and thoughtful, funny and a little self-conscious. He describes how some of the Presidents and Vice Presidents interacted with the camera. "Ford was not an actor. Reagan was. Clinton was. Carter was not. Charisma," he says, "is not something you learn in college.

"Gore was excruciating to cover. He would do these, I called them death-by-discussion town hall meetings...I would see camera men just slumped over, you know TV guys who couldn't leave for fear that he would commit news," he says. "Bush (George W.) has his own problems in that area."

Kennerly's descriptions are not a surprise. His revealing photographs help form the impressions that the public has of presidents and politicians. These are the visual images to which people refer when making character judgments, political decisions and late-night jokes.

One of Kennerly's favorite shots shows then Governor George Bush, Laura Bush, Governor Jeb Bush and Dick Cheney on election night, 2000, while watching the returns on television in the governor's mansion in

Austin, TX. "I think it's one of the best political pictures I've ever taken because it was a great moment combined with something that worked photographically," he says.

"I truly believe that still photography in moments where people are unaware of your presence is the best record we have of what was going on in a room...in the governor's mansion, that was the truth. They looked like ground zero...because it was that startling and it was that important and it was that dramatic. That was a genuine moment."

This photograph appears in his 2002 book, *Photo du Jour*, a collection of photographs that Kennerly made during the first year of the new millennium. While covering the 2000 presidential campaign, he also took pictures of real-life objects each day for the entire year.

"Basically, I wanted to observe the fabric and the texture of what was going on around the campaign like the Love of Christ Detail Shop in Macon, Georgia, or a sculpture garden in Pittsburgh or...the St. Louis Arch. I was astonished at what a great subject this was...The sun was reflecting off the river behind me and lighting up this arch. And, because I'm a lucky person sometimes, a lone runner came by and was silhouetted



**The Oval Office shelves are empty as new President Gerald Ford slips into his own routine, August, 1974, in Washington DC. Two days after Richard Nixon resigned from the Presidency.**



against the arch," he says.

"I'm not a fine art photographer. I'm not someone who just conceives of a shot and makes it all work. I have a tremendous amount of respect for any photographer doing what they do. I mean I love photography. I love other people's pictures," he says. He particularly appreciates the work of Michael Kenna.

Kennerly's pictures have a different relationship to the viewer from those of the fine-art camera artist: they are made to show people something tangible and specific about the world. His primary objective is to show the viewer exactly what he saw. In order to do this, it helps to understand what makes a good story, he says. "A lot of times it's just thinking ahead of the crowd. What's the story? What's the news?"

One of his proudest moments of his career involved, "...the picture I took of Reagan staring down Gorbachev before he got into his car (after their second meeting which took place in Reykjavik, Iceland). This was the cover of *Time*. I think *The New York Times* photographer was standing next to me, and he had pretty much the same shot, but that was it even though there were tons of photographers."

Whenever he can, Kennerly edits his own work before submitting it to news editors. "I want my work edited from the point of view of what was really reflective of what I saw out there," he says.

"I think anyone in the news business should not be a partisan person. Period. I'm not objective and I know that. But knowing that I'm not objective I try to bend over backwards to try to let the pictures tell the story."

Once his pictures hit the desk of news editors, however, Kennerly has little control over what gets published. "Most editors will try to find something in your pile that will make whatever point they're trying to push." He tells the story of a picture he took of Bob Dole in January of 1996 during Dole's presidential campaign. "It made him look older than he was...and that picture went along with the cover that said 'Doubts About Dole'...but the interesting thing about editorial spin is that if that same photograph had read 'Senior Statesman Bob Dole,' everybody probably would have looked at it in a different way."

A few weeks later, Kennerly met up with Dole and former President George G.W. Bush in Texas where Dole told Bush that "...he (Kennerly) took a picture of me that cost me six points in the polls."

It was tempting to keep Kennerly on the telephone for another two hours. His stories and his life are a fascinating record of recent history. But he is already thinking about the next assignment.

At press time, Kennerly had just begun a project with the Gateway computer company called "Candidate Camera," in which Gateway provided each of the gubernatorial candidates in California with one of the company's digital cameras. Kennerly will edit a web site on which each candidate can post one photograph per day of his or her campaign. He is motivated by the idea of making the Internet equally accessible to all candidates, and looks forward to participating in this form, "...of democracy in action."





**U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev (right) in front of the Hofdi House during their second summit meeting, October (11/12th) 1986, in Reykjavik, Iceland.**



**Russian composer Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) in Portland, Oregon 1966.**



**Inside the Governor's Mansion on election night (back row): Vice Presidential Candidate Dick Cheney, Campaign Chairman Don Evans, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, former President George Bush; (front row): Mrs. Lynne Cheney, Governor and Mrs. (Laura) George W. Bush. November 8, 2000 in Austin, Texas.**



David Hume Kennerly on a hot landing zone 1971 in the Central Highlands, Vietnam. Photo ©Matt Franjola

In 2002 Kennerly oversaw another project, which aimed to support the American democratic process. He served as Program Chair for Washington Mutual Bank's "Home of the Free"™ Student Photojournalism Project. Kennerly helped teach 7th- and 8th-grade students in New York City "how photography is used in news reporting about government." The kids were assigned to photograph local elected officials or civil servants and learn about their jobs.

"My ultimate goal is...to open up their eyes to what goes on around them. I think one of the problems in our country today is that over the last 25 years or so, civics instruction has really been on the decline. This is a civics lesson in sheep's clothing...I think kids like this are going to be smarter voters," Kennerly says. The project was such a big success that he is helping to develop a curriculum for more cities in the coming years.

In addition to *Photo du Jour* Kennerly has produced three other books (in addition to another new one to be released in 2004), *Shooter* in 1979, *Photo Op* in 1995, and *Sein Off: The Final Days of Seinfeld* in 1998, each of which could be part of a national syllabus on historical figures and events. But one doesn't need to pick up a book to see Kennerly's work. As world events unfold, it is more

than likely that his photographs will continue to capture quintessential political and human moments. ■

*Equipment:*

David Hume Kennerly now shoots primarily with a Canon EOS 10D digital camera. "Because the digital quality is so good, there's really not much reason to shoot film anymore. Plus, they have these Frankenstein-like X-ray machines that will zap your film," he says.

The non-political pictures in *Photo du Jour* were shot with a Mamiya 7 camera using black and white film and a 43mm 4.5 wide-angle lens. He also uses Leica M-6's with a variety of lenses, including a 17 to 35mm f/2.8 zoom lens, a 28 to 78mm f/2.8 zoom lens, a 70 to 200mm f/2.8 zoom lens and a 100 to 400mm f/4.5 and 5.6 zoom lenses.

"I will use the on-camera flash occasionally," he says. "Whenever there's not enough light."

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