

Obama Augustus: the power of images in the age of Obama

Jack Carleson writes at the [portrait of Barack Obama](#), recently expressed disappointment with the President in [unpopular](#)). It was instead by following the lead of Rome's emperors that Obama and his staff created an image campaign (in which Fairey played no small role) to win – temporarily – America's awe and devotion. This sort of ruler cult begins to crumble when the ruler is required to make decisions and take positions under 21st century media scrutiny. But to understand Obama's fall, we must understand his rise; and to do that we must look to the Roman Empire.

In the art of self-promotion through images, Obama's closest parallels lived long before the age of YouTube and the 24-hour news cycle. Rome's first emperor, Augustus (63 bc – ad 14), was a master of manipulating what "mass media" there was, and it was through the propagation of carefully crafted, semi-divine portrait types; vague but appealing buzzwords; and abstract association with heroes of the past that Augustus and his successors garnered the support of the *populus*.

[Paul Zanker's *Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*](#) describes this contrived likeness as "a calm, elevated expression" marked by "a timeless and remote dignity" – not unlike Fairey's Obama. This latter icon is seared into the mind of every American; and like Augustus' portrait, the image's omnipresence seemed to translate naturally into prestige and authority. But this process is not automatic: the image's success was dependent on our Western tradition

of ruler cult, which dates back at least as far as Alexander the Great. The portrait's effectiveness also depended on its aesthetic qualities. Fairey [Continue reading here](#).