

A Savage Journey into Hunter S. Thompson's American Dream

A Critical Investigation Into the Theme
as Found in His Writing and Lifestyle

Authored by:

Peter W. Knox

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Thesis Advised by:

Adam Goodheart

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To Hunter S. Thompson

For living the American Dream
and taking good notes along the way

And for my brother, Jason

Who gave me *Fear and Loathing* at
the exact right time in my life

You've also referred to your beat as the "Death of the American Dream." That was the ostensible "subject" of "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas." Has it just sort of been on its deathbed since 1968?

I think that's right.

A lot of people would argue with you about that anyway, and believe that the American Dream is alive and well.

They need to take a better look around.

But in a way, haven't you lived the American Dream?

Goddammit! [pause] I haven't thought about it that way. I suppose you could say that in a certain way I have.

- Salon interview (3 February 2003)

Introduction

The scene is a crowded auditorium at the University of Colorado, where hundreds of students have gathered and are eagerly awaiting the entrance of the already infamous Dr. Hunter S. Thompson. After 45 minutes, a representative of the Student Union takes the stage and introduces the speaker, apologizing for a hold-up at the Denver airport. Thompson mumbles a comment about his delay, citing "some local Nazi at the gate" for hassling him over a parking permit, and takes the lectern.

Prompting students to approach the microphones to satisfy "any dominant curiosity" Thompson anxiously tolerates a few moments of awkward silence before a male student tests the mic: "Is this one on too?" He launches into a nervous question about *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* that the student union representative takes over to clarify for the author.

"When you were writing about the American Dream in *Fear and Loathing*, we weren't quite sure what you were talking about, really."

The statement creates some confusion for Thompson. "What puzzled you, what bothered you about it?"

"Well the whole idea about the American Dream, is it really something out there to be looking for?" The student emcee is still struggling to establish the Q and A. "It's

all college students here, that's the kind of thing we're all looking for, to find out, that's why we're all here, right?" The student audience voices its approval as Thompson unsteadily grips the microphone, visibly grasping for the right words.

Probably no one, save Hunter S. Thompson himself, has been able to read everything he ever wrote. That may help explain why not a lot of criticism has been written about his work. His writing style is difficult to penetrate and many established literary critics refused to take his rantings seriously. However, the man saved everything, and the thousands of letters, hundreds of articles, and two dozen published and unpublished books that Thompson left behind, following his death in February 2005, offer many insights into the legend and legacy of a man who spent his 67 years writing everything down.

This thesis is an analytical compilation of sources that attempt to make sense of the words and life Thompson dedicated to his concept of the "American Dream." Many useful insights are found in the boxes of correspondence he carbon copied and stored dating back to May 1955 when Thompson was still a teenager; which isn't surprising considering that he started his own newspaper in 1947 when

he was ten years old. As he wrote to a friend in 1958, Thompson understood that, "Just as some people turn to religion to find meaning, the writer turns to his craft and tries to impose meaning, or to lift the meaning out of chaos and put it in order." (Thompson, *The Proud Highway* xxiii) Just as Thompson used letters to "look at life objectively," so this essay will employ the only two currently published collections of his personal correspondence (from 1955 to 1976) to impart intimate wisdom from the author himself, uncensored and unedited, to connect the events of his lifetime.

Thompson's books, essays, and articles provide the remaining material of my thesis. Each offers different facets of his cultural interpretation of the sixties and seventies - the time period that troubled Thompson and yet gave him the most to cover. As journalist David Halberstam writes in his foreword to *Fear and Loathing In America*, the second collection of Thompson's letters, the historical and cultural setting of his writing is important to note:

It is not the best of times in America. It is post-Tet, the Vietnam War is winding down, the Democratic Party is badly divided, the backlash against a more optimistic liberalism that marked the Civil Rights movement is growing. Tensions in society abound, over the war, over race, and over class. Literal journalism often seems inadequate, facts seem futile to many people.

All in all, it is fertile time for someone with a sensibility like Hunter's. (xii)

That era brought a transition for Thompson, in the course of which he left counter cultural groups like the Hell's Angels and Berkeley student protestors, and infiltrated the core of American politics. The deeper he dug, the more appalled and addicted he became, and those moods are conveyed in his private letters and published articles.

This transition set the stage for perhaps his most popular and prominent work - *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. This book, recently recognized as an American classic when it was selected for inclusion in the Modern Library, cannot be dismissed as mere comedic pleasure reading though some have tried to do so. Author Edward Abbey explains: "His style is mistaken for fantastic, drug-crazed exaggeration, but that was to be expected. As always in this country, they only laugh at you when you tell the truth." (TPH xxviii) Even then, on the surface, it is shrugged off as an example of masterful writing, tight prose, and extraordinary control - as it should be recognized; Thompson took his writing quite seriously. Repeated readings bring out the intricacies in its themes and characters. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is Thompson's Great American Novel and can be studied

formally, analyzed down to every line, every word (you should see my highlighted copy).

The only secondary sources I used were the three available biographies of Thompson all published in 1992 and 1993. Only after Thompson's death has the Internet exploded with anecdotes and information on the last thirteen years of his life. Thompson was relatively guarded about his life, and tried to be the only source for his life and thoughts. Yet, much of this thesis progresses in chronological order. Not because it attempts to be a biography, but to allow its readers to experience the American Dream as Thompson did himself. The letters, articles, and novels offer more than enough to understand Thompson intimately - he left very little unmentioned.

As for his passion, Thompson spent the majority of his life covering the American Dream. His work, reflected in thousands of words on the subject, necessitates critical study. James Cullen, author of *The American Dream*, offers sage advice in approaching such a subject: "Beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no *one* American Dream. Instead, there are many *American Dreams*." (Cullen 7) Thompson's is indeed one of them.

To read Thompson and interpret his lifestyle, his American Dream seems broad and at times contradictory.

He believes strongly in freedom when he commends the Hell's Angels for being the last few pioneers of America and when he writes protected under the First Amendment. Thompson lives in excess when running up huge bills on expense accounts, consuming enormous amounts of drugs, and destroying hotel rooms and rented convertibles alike. Finally, Thompson's American Dream rests on the American idea of capitalism he fights during his campaign for sheriff and later embraces in Las Vegas.

In Text Citations Key:

HST - Hunter S. Thompson (all sources below are his own)

TPH - The Proud Highway (letters) 1955-1967

Hell's Angels - A Strange and Terrible Saga (book) 1965

FALIA - Fear and Loathing In America (letters) 1968-1976

FALILV - Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (book) 1971

GSH - The Great Shark Hunt (collection of articles) 1979

SOD - Songs of the Doomed (book/memoir) 1990

KOF - Kingdom of Fear (book/memoir) 2003

Chapter I



The Edge . . . There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over.

Hunter S. Thompson, *Hells Angels*, 1965

Hunter S. Thompson spent twelve years as a journalist before finding his true beat: the death of the American Dream. Prior to that, Thompson, through his life experiences, financial struggles, and launching his career as a writer, demonstrated the beginnings of what would become his life's work. The earlier concepts of this "American Dream" are apparent in much of his unconventional youth, brushes with the law, and ascent to the status of a recognized writer made famous by his coverage of the Hell's Angels - a gang that Thompson had always identified with, and that would come to exemplify for him some important aspects of his grand scale idea of the "American Dream."

The words "American Dream" bring to mind images of immigrants flooding New York City with aspirations of a better life through hard work. Horatio Alger published his novels on finding prosperity and success through moral straightness and determination popularized during the height of immigration to America. Jim Cullen, author of *The American Dream*, breaks down this larger idea of one American Dream into three different elements of "the Good Life." At the root of the Dream lies "the Puritan Enterprise," emphasizing both hard work and the accompanying moral code. Next is "Upward Mobility," which explains that in America's capitalistic system everyone has

an equal chance - establishing success as "Home Ownership." Finally, Cullen explores the idea of "Manifest Destiny," making "the Coast" the last ultimate destination for living "the Good Life" or the "American Dream." Thompson would come to embrace all three aspects in the first twenty-five years of his life.

The social status Thompson was born into disadvantaged him, making his success all the more an example of the upward mobility in America. His hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, was divided in terms of family wealth, and Thompson's father died when Thompson was a boy of fourteen, leaving a strain on his single mother suddenly forced to support her three sons. Childhood friend Stewart Smythe clarifies the situation: "All the kids had money. Hunter had none. The difference in wealth and power created an enormous resentment . . . And the biggest factor was, in so many ways, he had more than they did, but nothing to show for it." (Whitmer 50) This lack of money and parental attention left Thompson with much bitterness.

A well read Thompson found power and attention excelling at what he would come to do as a career - his writing. Having taken up amateur journalism as early as age 10 in a neighborhood newspaper, *The Southern Star*, it was natural for Thompson to enter into Louisville's

prestigious Athenaeum Literary Association (Whitmer 45). Here he felt the pressures of his lower-class status even more and took to improving his status in a more creative fashion - he became Athenaeum's outlaw, much as the Hell's Angels would do a decade later. As Thompson wrote for Athenaeum's annual 1955 *Spectator*, "Who is the happier man, he who has braved the storm of life and lived, or he who has stayed securely on shore and merely existed?" (HST, TPH 5) This mentality would stay with him throughout his life, and as those around him found success in "Puritan Enterprise," Thompson sought to exist outside the box of morality.

For someone seeking to amplify his status by defying social convention, Louisville was the perfect place to do it, as Thompson's friend, Porter Bibb, recollected:

And what this meant was extravagant, free alcohol, for underage drinkers. I mean total free bars. Not bottles, cases. Anything you wanted. And it all had the blessing of the establishment of Louisville. You were untouchable. Hunter was in Athenaeum, the most prestigious literary association in Louisville, and so he was untouchable. We all started drinking at about fourteen. (Carroll 47)

Thompson found social pleasure in such parties and carried its tradition throughout his entire life, but he wanted freedom from everything - not just drinking laws.

He took his lifestyle as an adolescent to an extreme, running amok under almost no supervision. Having been "expelled from school once," Thompson participated in a weekend "habit of stealing five or six cases of beer" and then "very carefully [throwing] twenty whole bottles right through every pane in the front of [the school superintendent's] house." (HST, Carroll 47) Other notable early occurrences of the social defiance that would continue throughout his entire life include the time that "Hunter and [friend] Semonin stuffed a gunny sack with cotton in such a way that it resembled a human being and then stood on an overpass and threw it in front of a passing car," and also when "Hunter pretended to lash a friend with a bullwhip in the middle of a downtown street." (Perry 19) When these deviant acts brought power and respect to Thompson, he felt the same vigor, living the same American Dream many gangsters and outlaws had lived before him - one that sidestepped Puritan values on the way to success. Thompson certainly thought he was untouchable and quickly became idolized by his peers and feared by his community, a trend that would continue as Thompson brought the same chaos with him to New York City, San Juan, Big Sur, San Francisco, and Woody Creek.

Thompson, however, was well aware of the authority behind the social structure he terrorized, as he "was raised to believe that Police were our friends and protectors - the Badge was a symbol of extremely high authority." (Thompson, KOF 3) When, as a nine-year old boy, Thompson was questioned by FBI agents concerning a vandalized federal mailbox, he turned the tables on the system and asked what witnesses the FBI had in their possession. Perhaps breaking the law for creative pleasure and neighborhood admiration without being thrown in jail seemed truly the best freedom America offered in postwar suburbia.

Yet, Thompson did not last on the other side of the law for long. In May 1955, as a high school senior shortly before graduation, Thompson was arrested for robbery. Thompson was unable to avoid his past, as Juvenile Court Judge Louis H. Jull saw records of his "underage drinking, buying liquor as a minor, and destruction of property" and consequently "sentenced a tearful Hunter to sixty days in the Children's Home, to begin immediately, and to reform school or the military when he got out of detention." (Perry 20) Ashamed and embarrassed, Thompson missed his graduation, instead sitting in the detention center angry that the two friends he had been arrested with had been set

free. The difference was that "everybody else had money. And got out and went to college. And Hunter was the only one, cause he couldn't afford, nobody could afford to pay his way." (Judy Wellons Whitehead, Carroll 58) Due to Thompson's position in the social caste system there was to be no graduation, no chance at college, and an uneasy feeling that he never belonged with peers who had such chances. The American Dream had turned its back on Thompson.

Although the Air Force was the only way out of the detention center, it did not hold much glamour for Thompson. It did, however, allow him to launch his career as a journalist, taking on sports editor and writing duties for the Eglin *Command Courier*. Here Thompson tested his new bounds, reaching for as much power as possible:

At one point, in Florida, I was writing variations on the same demented themes for three competing papers at the same time, under three different names. I was a sports columnist for one paper in the morning, sports editor for another in the afternoon, and at night I worked for a pro wrestling promoter writing incredibly twisted "press releases" that I would plant, the next day, in both papers. (HST, Carroll 60)

Writing, even unaccredited, was Thompson's way of testing the treacherous waters of journalism, beyond what his position at the Air Force sports desk would allow.

Pseudonyms gave Thompson the chance to quote his own

thoughts in one of his own articles, allowing him supreme control, but eventually Thompson was discharged for various reasons. Yet he had found his talent for making the most out of his situation, working hard to gain more power and move upwards out of his position - a mobility and freedom inherent in the American Dream.

The American Air Force did not want the untraditional Hunter S. Thompson, and he was released in 1957; Colonel W.S. Evans stating, "Hunter S. Thompson has done some outstanding sports writing, but . . . this Airman, although talented, will not be guided by policy . . . He has little consideration for military bearing or dress and seems to dislike the service and want out as soon as possible" (Carroll 59) Now Thompson lived without commitment or obligation, bouncing from career to career and city to city.

Thompson lived in seven places before finding what he called "the ultimate flower of the American Dream, a nightmare of failed possibilities" in California (HST, TPH 572). He had attempted many jobs along the East Coast and even the Caribbean, yet found there were no opportunities to move upwards in a society where classes were segregated. Like many in his situation, Thompson looked to California as being the ultimate place to succeed - the American

Dream. Like most Americans, Thompson had followed his dream to "The Coast."

California provided Thompson with a metaphor for what had been occurring on a grand scale across the entire country. He saw "the destruction of California [as] a logical climax to the Westward Movement" where "for 100 years the bunglers and rapists [have] had an escape valve; they could always move west, to something new. But now they have come to the end, and they have to live with whatever they can make of it." (HST, TPH 572) Here was perhaps the last chance for this concept of an "American Dream" and Thompson discovered that the elements of the idea lay in the "NonStudent" at Berkeley College.

While researching a new law defining and restricting the rights of an individual not enrolled at Berkeley but still taking advantage of its classes and programs, Thompson found a part of himself in the typical nonstudent at the school. Living in San Francisco and writing for the *National Observer*, Thompson spoke to one "nonstudent" who told him:

As a nonstudent I have nothing to lose. I can work full time on whatever I want, study what interests me, and figure out what's really happening in the world. That student routine is a drag. Until I quit the grind I didn't realize how many groovy things there are to do around Berkeley: concerts, films, good speakers,

parties, pot, politics, women – I can't think of a better way to live, can you? (HST, "Nonstudent Left" 1965)

Further expanding on the nonstudent mantra, Thompson wrote,

Being a "non" student on an urban campus is not only simple but natural for anyone who is young, bright and convinced that the major he's after is not on the list. Any list. A serious nonstudent is his own guidance counselor. The surprising thing is that so few people beyond the campus know this is going on. (HST, "Nonstudent Left" 1965)

This college trend seemed to represent the rift between the conventional and unconventional sides in California. These nonstudents were the first in a transformation in the traditional American Dream, and while their actions may be considered scrupulous, they were simply taking advantage of the many possibilities provided by the country – they were just not giving back in the way the college demanded. These elements of a new American Dream appealed to Thompson and would certainly resurface many times in the next few years, but on a broader scale.

It was only natural that Hunter S. Thompson be solicited to write an article on the Hell's Angels, having been an outlaw his entire life. Carey McWilliams, an editor at *The Nation*, commissioned the piece, noting that he "saw 'the edge' [in the Hell's Angels;] a new life form

squeezed out from underneath a rock by the pressures of a society in flux." (Whitmer 143) Thompson agreed, noting that "The Hell's Angels and I had a lot in common, but I had a gimmick. I could write." (Whitmer 145) He was also eager to revisit and act on his early fantasies of gang life.

Bill Murray, another journalist at the time, observed that Thompson quickly blurred the lines between writer and subject in his investigation into the Hell's Angels, "It seemed to me that Hunter was sort of becoming a para-Angel. I mean he was *really* into it. He was as inside as any outsider can get." (Carroll 105) To be passionate on a topic and receive money for writing about it was in fact truly Thompson's Dream, and a move towards upward mobility having been living in bankruptcy for so long. In short, the Dream was being paid for riding with the Angels.

Thompson agreed with Murray, writing that by the summer of 1965, "I had become so involved in the outlaw scene that I was no longer sure whether I was doing research on the Hell's Angels or being slowly absorbed by them." Thompson was spending weeknights in "Angel bars, in their homes, and on runs and parties." (HST, Hell's Angels 46) He, with the Angels, was granted freedoms from police that avoided citations with the gang for fear of

retaliation - it was a life that allowed extended freedom from the legal structure of America once again.

The Hell's Angels, like the Berkeley nonstudents who wanted free education, were another circle on the outskirts of the societal norm. They were celebrating the free possibilities in what was left of the American Dream in California, and Thompson felt that "any group [that could] find a way to exist outside the chalk circle of normal, acceptable society is a group worthy of investigation."

(Whitmer 145) The Angels considered themselves a group of elite "One-Percenters" who lived contently outside society, not paying taxes or following laws, and believing that "the only thing we're concerned about is what's right for us. We got our own definition of 'right.'" (HST, Hell's Angels 109) The police and society refused to break up the motorcycle fraternity, and Thompson fit right in alongside the chaos that existed by its own rules.

Thompson's idea of the American Dream dictated excessive consumption and it was with the Hell's Angels that Thompson first witnessed group sex and dabbled in heavy psychedelic drugs. While the traditional American Dream taught moral straightness and moderation for one to succeed, Thompson had discovered excess was the Hell's Angels' only agenda and Thompson enjoyed the release.

Thompson had stayed away from LSD until the famous party when he introduced the Hell's Angels to Ken Kesey and his gang of Merry Pranksters. He later wrote about the experience:

I refused to take [LSD] because I figured I might go crazy and do something violent. But I finally took it down there, in a fit of despair, the night that the Angels showed up . . . I felt responsible for whatever was going to happen. I thought the Angels were going to beat people up and rape them. So I figured, why not get it on, and I asked somebody to give me a hit of acid. I thought, whatever I do can't be worse than what's already going on around me, so I may as well do it. I can't stand it straight. I took it and it was quite a ride. (*Songs of the Doomed*, 121)

LSD would later provide a hallucinogenic filter for discovering the ugliness in America and Thompson would be forever altered by his drug use. The Angels and Kesey's Merry Pranksters exercised freedom and excess in their large and infamous parties - examples of hedonistic pleasure in the American Dream of the Good Life.

At times, usually following rape and violence cases, the Hell's Angels were considered a threat to America - but the Angels themselves believed that no one could be more patriotic than they were. Despite being on the outside of convention like the Berkeley non-students, the Angels disagreed with the anti-war protesters, at times interrupting peaceful protests by threatening violence or

inciting riots. When more men were drafted for Vietnam, one Hell's Angel sent President Johnson a letter stating, "On behalf of myself and my associates I volunteer a group of loyal Americans for behind the line duty in Viet Nam." (Hell's Angels 253) The Angels seemed at such times a paradox in remaining lawless and signing up for patriotic duty - a freedom allowed in the American Dream of individualism.

Thompson was able to continue his outlaw lifestyle following the official outlaw gang for his career and - despite a brutal "stomping" at the end of their relationship - benefited quite well in the long run. Acclaimed as the tale of a credible journalist who was able to "ride with the Hell's Angels" the printing of his first book sold out its first printing before its actual publication date. *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* hit the top fifty bestseller list in 1967, providing the gang with national fame and Thompson with considerable money for the first time in his life. In 1965, Thompson had been writing, "at \$150 a piece, and expenses for travel, raising a family of three on \$2,400 a year, [far] below the poverty belt." (Whitmer 140) And as a Hell's Angel said of the recent and unexpected crush of publicity, "Since we got famous we've

had more rich fags and sex-hungry women than we ever had before. Hell, these days we have more action than we can handle." (Whitmer 146) In a sense, the Hell's Angels' notoriety served to elevate their status to celebrities, living by their own rules but now with fame and fortune - a formula easily endorsed by the cultural American Dream.

The Thompson family was feeling the American success in their life too. Thompson's wife Sandy spoke of the time when

Hell's Angels came out and things began to change. We went to a party in Aspen. And all of a sudden for the first time I was at a party where people were sophisticated and well-to-do and I wasn't feeling sophisticated . . . They all seemed very, very aristocratic . . . And I went into this room and saw a woman on Hunter's lap . . . And this was my first taste of fame. I didn't like it at all. I was scared to death. (Carroll 114)

Perhaps Thompson had reached his first real success in attaining his American Dream by writing a definitive book on the outlaws he had always identified with without ever wearing the colors.

As the Hell's Angels' president, Sonny Barger, commented, "I don't think we affected Hunter's philosophy at all. He had his Magnums before he met us. I saw him shoot his guns out the window of his house in San Francisco. He had his whiskey and his speed. He had a

motorcycle before he met us." (Carroll 106) Thompson had always been an individual, and in this experiment of the American Dream, he merely traveled parallel to the group, taking notes and furthering his career in the process - getting paid to live as he wanted and now absorbed in the idea that in California something had surfaced. Something that was at the heart of America and he would have to delve deeper to discover its meaning.

Chapter II



Without Chicago I would never have run for Sheriff - or even launched the Joe Edwards campaign. So it all makes a very definite kind of progressive sense - at least in my own mind, and hopefully in print.

Hunter S. Thompson, Nov. 23, 1970, FALIA 334

Hot on the trail of the rapidly rising counter culture in California, Hunter S. Thompson was living off the success of Hell's Angels when a letter from Jim Silberman, the editor of Random House, would send him to cover the beat he would pursue throughout the rest of his life. While Thompson may have been enjoying the materialistic benefits of the American Dream, the country seemed to be on the brink of self-destruction as national politics were meeting with increased protest. Looking to sustain himself as a writer, Thompson needed another gig.

In a letter dated January 29, 1968, Thompson proposed a new book to "be made up of existing individuals whose lives, words, actions, fears, hatreds, etc. best illuminate the various keys we need to show *how and why* the American Dream is dead." (HST, FALIA 23) This initial outline had Thompson vowing to find "a fitting penalty for the killers of the 'American Dream'" despite not being sure "about taking on the whole Establishment in one swack." (HST, FALIA 21) His proposal demonstrates an inherent contradiction between Thompson's lifestyle and writing as it relates to the American Dream; the paradox of which puts Thompson in the middle of things as he connects the counter culture to mainstream political action. Even when submitting himself to the traditional American Dream of career success,

Thompson feels a need to remain the spokesman for the outsiders in society. The outlaw in him continually wants to attack the same establishment that made him a successful writer.

At the time, Thompson wrote, "I don't know enough right now to say anything, for sure, about what I'll finally write" but "I don't want to just *comment* on it; I want to *show* it, and show it in terms of a narrative that will also be an exercise in selective judgment . . . so that even people who disagree with my triumphantly subjective thesis will have to come to grips with the book in order to quarrel with it." (HST, FALIA 26) Here Thompson is assuming the American Dream is on its deathbed, and believes he can dig up more than enough evidence to support his conviction. Looking back on his initially vague contract with Random House, Thompson wrote in 1990 that, "I had agreed without thinking, because all I really cared about, back then, was the money. I could go just about anywhere I wanted to just as long as I could somehow tie it in with 'The Death of the American Dream.'" (HST, KOF 78) For a while Thompson had been broke, and an expense account at times was more important to him than the actual story.

This venture, while necessary to keep the Thompson family afloat financially, provided Thompson himself with initially more than he could handle. He asked for "a lot more help on this book than the other, at least in the formative stages" (HST, FALIA 45) because while he believed there to be much truth in his developing thesis, he was without much experience in true politics. He wrote to Silberman on June 9, 1968 that "the Death of the American Dream has thus far confused me more than it's helped . . . to the extent that I'm losing any hope of a focus, and I think that would be unhealthy." (HST, FALIA 92)

So lost was Thompson in his original idea of this assignment that he jokingly suggested sending a query letter to the thirty-some people he was researching that read:

"Dear Sir, I'm investigating a rumor that somebody killed the American Dream and since the neighbors recently reported screams from your apartment, I thought I'd ask if you might possibly be able to suggest an explanation for these rumors, and perhaps name a few suspects."
(HST, FALIA 92)

Forty days later, Thompson's good nature had soured, and he realized "there is absolutely *no humor* in the Death of the American Dream." (HST, FALIA 109) In a sense, Thompson was finding himself out of his element with all his secondhand research and becoming quite worried at the discouraging

prospect of being unable to fulfill the Random House contract.

Although Thompson had begun his journalism career as a sportswriter, by 1968 he wasn't totally new to covering politics. In 1962 the *National Observer*, a new publication meant to promote "understanding, not reportage," hired him to cover the political scene in South America (Perry 68). For two years Thompson had traveled South America on his own tab, sending stories to be printed in the *Observer*. Political stories included "elections in Peru and Brazil, mining strikes in Bolivia, and the rise of democracy in Ecuador." (Perry 73) His editor, Cliff Ridley, noticed that while he was writing about politics, he was still experimenting, commenting that, "his political stuff was the only writing of his that we had to add to." (Perry 72) However, in 1968, American politics were more foreign to him than what he had seen in South America.

While this new assignment to autopsy the "American Dream" was just beginning for Thompson, his personal investment in national politics was cemented with the assassination on June 5, 1968, of Robert Kennedy, the only presidential candidate that Thompson strongly supported. Biographer Paul Perry notes "although Hunter had been away from the screen at the moment when it happened, he felt he

had witnessed the death of the American dream on television." (Perry 130) Thompson later recalled his disquieting emotions the day of President John F. Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963:

I was in Woody Creek when Kennedy was killed. I had no radio or telephone. Some rancher from up the road knocked on the door and said some Cuban shot Kennedy and he's dying in Dallas. I was extremely jolted and angry and distraught. I immediately went into town and started doing a piece on the reaction. Just a journalist's instinct. I had just returned from South America, and I had regained that sort of beat generation attitude about the country. I sort of liked the great American West, and a sense of renewing, and I was feeling good about the country. But all of a sudden that day the country looked different to me, and I felt very bad about it. (HST, KOF 111)

At a time when Thompson had been optimistic about life in the country, the assassination depressed him greatly. Both Kennedys had been Democratic heroes who Thompson imagined carried the hope of the sixties and represented the lifeblood of American possibility. The Kennedy assassinations were brutal reminders that politics were real and sometimes deadly - to write about them properly, Thompson would need to further involve himself in the American process.

The sixties were a time for everyone to become involved in politics. As even the Hell's Angels were volunteering for Vietnam, massive political changes were

occurring nationwide. There was violence worldwide (including Vietnam and the Kennedy assassinations), the national government in struggle with the Goldwater Republicans against the Kennedy Democrats, and the anti-war hippie culture against American involvement in Vietnam. With the 1968 presidential contest between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey coinciding with Senate elections, political journalism became a popular way to make money, and Thompson was destined to cover politics for the counter culture.

Despite a fervent interest in American politics, Thompson had not yet found a proper outlet for published writings on such issues, and the Random House assignment would provide the advance, expense account, and credentials necessary for such a first hand investigation into a world from which Thompson had always been barred. "A presidential campaign would be a good place, [Thompson] thought, to look for the Death of the American Dream" (HST, SOD 122) and so Thompson "went to Chicago in August of 1968, on [his] Random House tab with a packet of the finest, blue-chip press credentials - issued by the Democratic National Committee - for the purpose of covering the Convention." (HST, KOF 78) This example of an unknown political journalist being given as much access as possible

to a political event is - perhaps, ironically - the American Dream of equality and upward mobility in action.

Thompson was right in predicting that "the '68 conventions may be the last of their kind" (HST, FALIA 109), as Chicago was primed to explode due to high tensions between the city police and the hundreds of anti-war protesters who demonstrated right in the middle of the crucial convention. The Democrats had to nominate a presidential candidate, and with the recent assassination of the popular Robert Kennedy, only Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey remained. McCarthy was decidedly anti-war and campaigned to withdraw US troops immediately from Vietnam, but Humphrey's policy fell in line with President Lyndon Johnson's plan to reduce the forces overseas gradually. Chicago Mayor Richard Daley was actively provoking the protesters by refusing proper permits for marches and rallies as well as telling his police force to use whatever force necessary to subdue the crowds, making the convention ripe for rioting.

Granted access through Random House, Thompson was ready for conflict at the convention, later writing:

So when Chicago came around, my head had gotten into politics, and I thought, well if we're going to have a real bastard up there I may as well go. I went totally prepared. You don't take a motorcycle helmet to Chicago, normally, without a

motorcycle . . . And I still got the shit beaten out of me by police. (HST, SOD 123)

The experience troubled Thompson greatly, as he said, "I went to the Democratic Convention as a journalist, and returned a raving beast." (Perry 131) Thompson wrote how "that week at the Convention changed everything I'd ever taken for granted about this country and my place in it." Having suffered emotionally, from, "Cold Shock on Monday, to Fear on Tuesday, then Rage, and finally Hysteria," "every time [Thompson] tried to tell somebody what happened in Chicago [he] began crying, and it took years to understand why." (HST, KOF 78) Thompson had been waiting for access with other journalists outside the convention hall when he saw a group of protesters converge on the corner of Michigan and Balboa against a flank of policemen. Unprotected by his press credentials, Thompson was shoved through a plate glass window when the riot erupted. (HST, FALIA XVIII)

"Raoul Duke," an alter ego Thompson first created to write about the convention brutality, provided the separation Thompson needed to deal with the unsettling scene. This character provided Thompson with the out-of-body experience necessary to creatively write of the riots. By establishing this character, Thompson could have his own

unreliable narrator allowing for published thoughts that weren't necessarily Thompson's own. "Raoul Duke" became more than a simple nom de plume, it was also a nom de guerre that existed as a symbol of a rebel representing the counter culture. Or perhaps it was Thompson's paranoia after the event that caused him to use the pseudonym Raoul Duke or maybe Thompson was serious when he said the convention "permanently altered [his] brain chemistry" (Perry 131) and Raoul Duke was the result.

As Duke is seeking sanctuary from the riots in the streets, he writes, "The desperate scene outside seemed light-years away; only the plywood windows reminded those of us inside that the American Dream was clubbing itself to death just a few feet away." (HST, FALIA 117) Thompson wrote in a letter to Silberman that he had "witnessed at least ten beatings in Chicago that were worse than anything [he] ever saw the Hell's Angels do." (HST, FALIA 119) And the Hell's Angels were supposedly lawless, while the police were the law.

This physical act served as a political awakening for Thompson. He realized later that "it was not a fear of being beaten or jailed, but the slow-rising shock of suddenly understanding that it was no longer a matter of Explaining my Position" because "these bastards knew my

position, and they wanted to beat me anyway." (HST, KOF 80) Thompson saw Mayor Daley and President Johnson as "pigs [who] didn't care what was Right. All they knew was what they wanted, and they were powerful enough to break anybody who even thought about getting in their way." (HST, KOF 81)

The sixties represented, to Thompson, a period of protest when people had a collective voice in government, and the hope "that the men in charge of whatever you're protesting against are actually listening, whether they later admit it or not, and that if you run your protest Right, it will likely make a difference." (HST, KOF 81) It was this optimistic hope that individuals could positively influence the higher powers through demonstrations to "make them see the light" that carried the anticipation of the era. When this voice was violently silenced in Chicago in 1968, Thompson foresaw "the end of the sixties." (HST, KOF 79)

To further understand the movement that Thompson had been following with such interest since the start of the decade, it's necessary to realize that these groups protested to be heard and directly influence government change by more immediate means than an annual vote. Thompson felt that after Chicago:

This is what the bastards never understood-that the "Movement" was essentially an expression of deep faith in the American Dream: that the people they were "fighting" were not the cruel and cynical beasts they seemed to be, and that in fact they were just a bunch of men like everybody's crusty middle-class fathers who only needed to be shaken a bit, jolted out of their bad habits and away from their lazy, short-term profit-oriented life stances . . . and that once they understood, they would surely do the right thing. (HST, KOF 81)

The 1968 Democratic Convention saw the government's physical response to a decade of protest, and with it this "American Dream" of influence was changing. Thompson thought that the "general political drift of the 1960s was one of the Good Guys winning, slowly but surely, over the Bad Guys," but "nobody was ready for what began to happen that summer." (HST, KOF 82) The Chicago Convention riots gave way to the political rise of Nixon, Agnew, and Mitchell. Thompson returned to Colorado in "a state of hysterical angst, convinced . . . that we were all in very bad trouble . . . and in fact that the whole country was doomed unless somebody, somewhere, could mount a new kind of power to challenge the rotten, high-powered machinery of men like Daley and Johnson." (HST, KOF 83)

Still recovering from the bloody Chicago Convention, Hunter S. Thompson attempted to convey the death of the American Dream in a personal letter to his brother Davison.

Thompson felt that despite the fact that "my depression with current politics in this country is so vast I can't find words to express it," he was still trying to write about it. However, "it's hard to explain except as a final loss of faith in whatever this country was supposed to stand for." (HST, FALIA 137) Having faced national politics at their absolute worst, Thompson understood that "it was time to do something else. We'd been beaten in Chicago. The lesson was very clear. I figured that first, you change a small town. Politics in a small town is very apparent. You can get hold of things much more easily." (HST, SOD 123)

This made Thompson look at his own town of Aspen, Colorado, and surmise that if "politics is the art of controlling your environment" (HST, FALIA XVIII) he would need to be involved locally. Thompson's decision to work in local politics "was perhaps a longer step . . . and looking back I'm not sure what launched me. Probably it was Chicago." When constructing a platform, his "first new idea - when [he] finally calmed down - was an absolute conviction there was no possibility for any personal truce in a nation that could hatch and be proud of a malignant monster like Chicago." (HST, GSH 168) Thompson would have

to take arms against the nation and recreate the American Dream according to his own principles.

"When Will Aspen Become the Place You Left?"

Aspen Times Newspaper Headline, circa 1970 (Perry 133)

The year was 1969 and Eve Homeyer, a Republican who believed that "progress" and development would benefit Aspen's economy, was running unopposed for mayor of the town. Thompson felt that "when the system is as rotten as [he] saw in Chicago, nobody should run unopposed, particularly a bad candidate." (HST, SOD 123) He convinced Joe Edwards, a 29-year-old biking enthusiast, to run on what Thompson called the "Freak Power ticket." Thompson wrote the clearest description of his party on one of many campaign posters explaining his frustration:

This is the real point: that we are not really freaks at all - not in the literal sense - but the twisted realities of the world we are trying to live in have somehow combined to make us feel like freaks. We argue, we protest, we petition - but nothing changes. (HST, FALIA 331)

His creation of the "Freak Power Party" was the answer to the unchecked development in Aspen, nay the entire country, as the looming seventies threatened imminent change.

Thompson's *Rolling Stone* article originally titled "Freak Power in the Rockies" (now "The Battle of Aspen") covered the political scene in Aspen. Homeyer's platform called for "building a four-lane highway through the middle of town and more blockhouse condominiums to humor more tourists." (HST, GSH 159) Thompson was concerned with preserving Aspen for the "hundreds of Haight-Ashbury refugees" instead of letting the "greedheads" and "landrapers" turn it into a fashionable metropolis. And Joe Edwards would be the man to protect this last bastion of the original American Dream, with Thompson running his campaign.

Joe Edwards's program was constructed in order to keep the real estate "powermongers" out of the valley, put a stop to the State Highway Department's four-lane highway project, and to "ban all auto traffic from every downtown street." (HST, GSH 160) The plan to convert all of the streets into grassy fields would effectively make the police into maintenance men for a "fleet of municipal bicycles." These drastic changes would keep apartment complexes from blocking the mountain view and the capitalists from running up the costs of living. Basically Edwards wanted to "create a town where people could live like human beings, instead of slaves to some bogus sense of

Progress that is driving us all mad." (HST, GSH 160)

Thompson had escaped to Aspen from California and selfishly wanted to preserve its natural beauty and privacy. Here his campaign was acting as the voice of protest in an otherwise uncontested election for progress. Thompson challenged the traditional American Dream of capitalistic development by imposing his own desires to sustain political competition and keep Aspen undeveloped and free.

The biggest hurdle for the Edwards campaign in 1969 was voter apathy among the very people Edwards were trying to defend. As Thompson observed, "to the average dropout, the idea of registering to vote is a very heavy thing" (HST, GSH 155) and discovered that:

Somewhere in the nightmare of failure that gripped America between 1965 and 1970, the old Berkeley-born notion of beating The System by fighting it gave way to a sort of numb conviction that it made more sense in the long run to Flee, or even to simply hide, than to fight the bastards on anything even vaguely resembling their own terms. (HST, GSH 155)

However, Thompson's frenzied last-minute work brought in 486 new registered voters, more than 300 of whom voted for Edwards. In the end, on that November election day, Edwards lost by one vote (taking into account the five absentee ballots to arrive past deadline) out of 1200. This close race, rather than infuriating Thompson, inspired

him to run for County Sheriff in 1970. He saw the Edwards campaign as being "more of an uprising than a movement" because it "had nothing to lose." (HST, GSH 168)

Thompson's brush with grassroots politics had turned him into an addict as he made the Aspen political scene work for him. This "Aspen technique" in politics was created by "neither opting out of the system, nor working within it . . . but by calling its bluff, by using its strength to turn it back on itself . . . and by always assuming that the people in power are not smart." (HST, GSH 163) Thompson believed that while he had tried to start a nationwide precedent with the Edwards campaign, "if Freak Power can do that in Aspen, it can also do it in other places," that Aspen still held the greatest potential for his career in politics. Thompson wrote in *Rolling Stone* that "if [Freak Power] can't be done here, one of the few places in America where we can work off a proven power base - then it is hard to imagine it working in any other place with fewer natural advantages." (HST, GSH 172)

Feeling that Aspen was now suffering "whirlwind-big-city problems too malignant for small-town solutions, Chicago-style traffic . . . and Oakland-style drug busts" (HST, FALIA 330) Thompson began his campaign for sheriff.

His platform followed the original guidelines Thompson had created for Edwards, but to a more extreme degree:

*Tentative Platform, Thompson for Sheriff,
Aspen, Colorado, 1970*

- 1) Sod the streets at once . . . All public movement would be by foot and a fleet of bicycles, maintained by the city police force.
- 2) Change the name "Aspen," by public referendum, to "Fat City." This would prevent greedheads, land-rapers and other human jackals from capitalizing on the name "Aspen" . . . And the main advantage here is that changing the name of the town would have no major effect on the town itself, or on those people who came here because it's a good place to *live*. What effect the name-change might have on those who came here to buy low, sell high, and then move on is fairly obvious . . . and eminently desirable. These swine should be fucked, broken and driven across the land.
- 3) Drug Sales must be controlled. My first act as Sheriff will be to install, on the courthouse lawn, a bastinado platform and a set of stock-in order to punish dishonest dope dealers in a proper public fashion . . . And in the meantime, it will be the general philosophy of the Sheriff's office that no drug worth taking should be sold for money . . . The realistic approach is to make life in this town very ugly for all profiteers - in drugs and all other fields.
- 4) Hunting and fishing should be forbidden to all non-residents
- 5) The Sheriff and his Deputies should *never* be armed in public. Every urban riot, shoot-out and blood-bath (involving guns) in recent memory has been set off by some trigger-happy cop in a fear frenzy . . . The whole notion of disarming the police is to *lower* the level of violence while guaranteeing, at the same time, a terrible punishment to anyone stupid enough to attempt violence on an un-armed cop.
- 6) It will be the policy of the Sheriff's office savagely to harass all those engaged in any form of land-rape . . . My first act in office - after setting up the machinery for punishing dope-

dealers - will be to establish a Research Bureau to provide facts on which any citizen can file a Writ of Seizure, a Writ of Stoppage, a Writ of Fear, of Horror, even a Writ of Assumption . . . against any greedhead who has managed to get around our antiquated laws and set up a tar-vat, scum-drain or gravel-pit. These writs will be pursued with overweening zeal . . . and always within the letter of the law. Selah. (HST, GSH, 175)

These platform points, on the surface, contradict the unfettered capitalism that constitutes the traditional the American Dream. Sodding the streets and prohibiting automobiles would be working against the progressive society America had come to represent. The renaming of the city would just be the first step towards protecting residents from out-of-towners taking advantage of their local resources - in a sense taking away capitalistic opportunity. Instead of waging war on drugs, Thompson's plan would embrace drug distributing (Thompson himself promised to never use mescaline *while* on duty) and further remove power from the police by denying them firearms. And by threatening those who "land-rape," Thompson would have supreme rights to persecute anyone that disagreed with him - all in all sounding less like a democracy. Maybe Thompson's American Dream only served him and those like him, rending police powerless, land untouched, and drugs pure.

The year 1970 would show a paranoid and protective Hunter Thompson who believed that all that remained of the American Dream, one where the general public had direct influence on government policy, was in local politics. Every point in his platform was to keep control in the hands of the Aspenites and money out of those of the dishonest capitalists he felt were taking over. And coming off the Edwards campaign, Thompson thought that "the die is already cast in my race - and the only remaining question is how many Freaks, heads, criminals, anarchists, beatniks, poachers, Wobblies, bikers and Persons of Weird Persuasion will come out of their holes and vote for me." (HST, GSH 172)

"Freak Power in the Rockies" was printed on October 1, 1970, in *Rolling Stone*, and did much to mobilize the non-voters upon whom Freak Power depended greatly. Thompson wrote, however, of his election loss, "the record will show that . . . we actually carried the city of Aspen and pulled roughly 44 percent of the vote in the entire county. This was the real shocker. Not that we lost, but that we came so close to winning." (HST, KOF 92)

Thompson went on to write in retrospect, "in a town where no candidate for public office had ever considered it necessary to pull more than 250 votes, a stone-bald and

grossly radical Freak Power candidate for sheriff pulled 1,065 votes in 1970, yet lost by nearly 400 votes" proving that he succeeded in scaring the establishment. In fact, Thompson "frightened the bastards so badly that on Election Day they rolled people in wheelchairs - and even on stretchers - into the polling places to vote against [him]." (HST, KOF 95) Despite the excitement in his brief foray into local politics, Thompson was quoted in the *New York Times* the day following his loss as saying that "If we can't win in Aspen, we can't win anywhere." (Carroll 134)

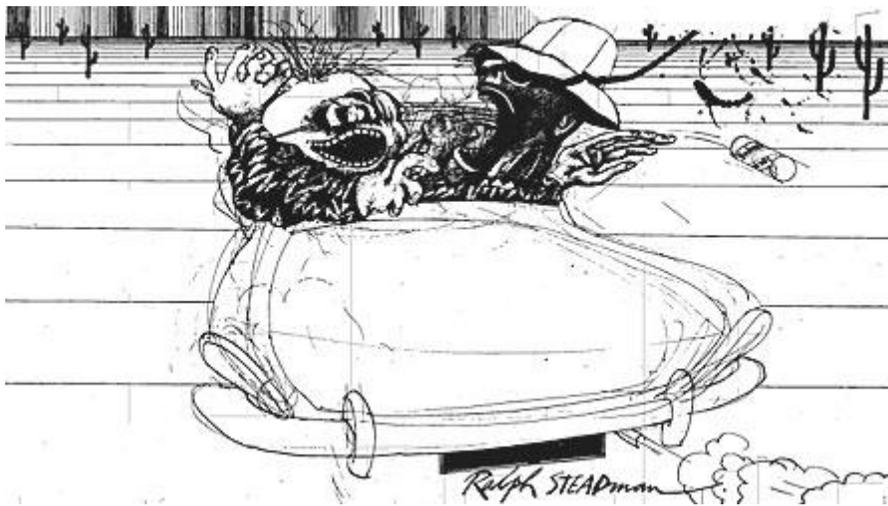
Thompson's political romp through Chicago and Aspen had not only affected him deeply but also changed the style of political journalism now available to the public mainstream, specifically through *Rolling Stone*. It was also 1970 when Thompson broke the mold of reporting with "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" the result of Thompson, with writer's block, simply tearing out pages from his notes and having them printed as is for the article. Reading the article in June, 1970, Bill Cardoza, the editor of the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*, wrote to Thompson, "Forget all the shit you've been writing, this is it; this is pure Gonzo." (Perry 142) Since then, Thompson is credited as the creator and proponent of the genre "Gonzo Journalism." Thompson, himself, describes pure

Gonzo Journalism as "to buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing, *as it happened*, then send in the notebook for publication - without editing." (HST, GSH 106) "Gonzo" conveys the sense "learning to fly on the way down" that fits into the American Dream, as a catch all for the pioneers that by chance succeeded instead of failed. The Derby article would pave the way for this new style of writing, providing an alternative to the straight-laced objective journalism plaguing the America presses.

Having seen ugliness in Chicago and Aspen, Thompson attended the great American tradition of the Kentucky Derby in his hometown state to write up the article for *Scanlan's Monthly* magazine that paid his expenses to attend the event. There, in the bastion of upper class gambling and wealth, Thompson saw the same debauchery and grotesqueness in the gentry and debutantes that he eventually came to see in himself. The American Dream is visible in Thompson's use of freedom of speech to relate the horrible scene at the Derby. This style of writing would pave the way for Thompson to discover depravity in other aspects of America than national and local politics. After watching the death of American protest in Chicago and losing to voter apathy in Aspen, Thompson still didn't have the "American Dream"

book, and was left searching for the last place it existed
as of 1971.

Chapter III



"Because I want you to know that we're on our way to Las Vegas to find the American Dream."

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas:
A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*

Early mornings around dawn in his Ramada Inn suite at Arcadia, California, Hunter S. Thompson would take a break from writing his heavy investigative article on the late Ruben Salazar, a Chicano journalist allegedly killed by L.A. police, to unwind on paper for what later became *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. "The book," he later wrote, "began as a 250-word caption for *Sports Illustrated*" (HST, GSH 105) and was the result of several trips to Las Vegas in the spring of 1971. The novel - or travelogue, since it blurred the lines between fiction and nonfiction - came to not only be recognized as the standard of "Gonzo Journalism" and "the best book on the dope decade" (*New York Times Book Review*), but also to represent the culmination of years of Thompson's research into the death of the American Dream.

Originally, Thompson had taken advantage of the magazine's offer to cover the annual Mint 400, a motorcycle race in the desert, in order to obtain more information about the Salazar case from Thompson's attorney and friend, Oscar Acosta. Later, Thompson wrote of the weekend's climax:

[Acosta had left] me and a massive hotel bill that I knew I couldn't pay, and the treacherous reality of that scene caused me to spend about 36 straight hours in my room at the Mint Hotel . . . writing feverishly in a notebook about a nasty

situation that I thought I might not get away from. These notes were the genesis of *Fear & Loathing*. (HST, Great Shark Hunt 107)

After the fifteen thousand-word manuscript was "aggressively rejected" by *Sports Illustrated*, Thompson thanked his contact at the magazine, writing, "sooner or later you'll see what your call (to me) set in motion - a fantastic mushroom." (HST, FALIA 376)

Thompson's main concern at this juncture was finding someone to pay for the trip, at expenses of more than \$1000 beyond what *Sports Illustrated* was willing to cover.

Rolling Stone's Jann Wenner and David Felton were interested in publishing Thompson's account, but Thompson wanted more than just magazine style articles - he wanted to see the "Vegas Book" in print. For this, Thompson struggled with Jim Silberman at Random House, who was still working with Thompson on what they called "The American Dream / Battle of Aspen Book." The biggest point of debate in their ongoing correspondence throughout 1971 was over whether the Vegas story should be included in the American Dream / Aspen book. "Unless you can convince me that I'm absolutely and finally wrong in the way I see the two books now [then] Vegas and Aspen are two different stories," (HST, FALIA 428) Thompson had tried to persuade Silberman that July in a letter.

Credit cards were declined, expense accounts frozen, and contract deadlines discussed - Thompson spent 1971 negotiating between *Rolling Stone* and Random House over the Vegas story. He even tangled with Oscar Acosta, who demanded co-author credit for the character of "Dr. Gonzo" that Thompson had created to protect his attorney's reputation. Against all odds, the book was picked up for publication, as Thompson wrote to tell artist Ralph Steadman:

The kicker here, however, is that everybody now involved with "Vegas" is on record, unofficially, to the effect that I should never have gotten involved in a piece of shit like that in the first place. My agent advised me against even *going out there* for the Mint 400, *Rolling Stone* refused to pay my expenses for either trip, and Random House refused to even *consider* the ms. [manuscript] *for a book* until I arrived in NY with the bastard totally finished. (FALIA 458)

Eventually, the Vegas story had cannibalized the American Dream / Aspen Book by the time it was finished and subtitled "A Savage Journey To The Heart of The American Dream."

Las Vegas was the obvious destination for such a trip. As author Jim Cullen explains in his book The American Dream, "Las Vegas became a proving ground for the elasticity of the American Dream" with "the promise of secular fulfillment, in all its forms, [as] the basis of

its existence.”(Cullen 165) As Thompson and his attorney discover in the book, “the American Dream embraced most fully by earlier incarnations of Las Vegas focuses on getting something for nothing.” (Cullen 167)

Certainly, if the American Dream still existed anywhere, it would be found in Las Vegas. Thompson wrote to Jann Wenner at *Rolling Stone*, of “driving around the countryside with my attorney, asking for the American Dream. We got some very strange replies: ‘ . . . burned down by junkies’ . . . ‘got electrocuted while taking a shower in the car’ . . . ‘The American Dream? In this town?’” (HST, FALIA 379) Luckily, Thompson would stumble upon the scene at a desperate point in his research on the topic and have the perseverance to record his journey.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is a semi-autobiographical account of Thompson’s personal experiences in Las Vegas during the first two years of the seventies. With the help of his real life attorney, Oscar Acosta, and the genre Thompson created with “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” the book employs Gonzo Journalism to read as cohesive, embellished, creative non-fiction. Thompson deployed the alter ego he had spawned to tell the

ugly realities of Chicago '68, Raoul Duke, to deal with the horrors in the main vein of Las Vegas. He also created the character Dr. Gonzo, a 250-pound Samoan attorney, to protect Oscar Acosta's identity (and legal career). These characters, as Duke proclaims, are "on [their] way to Las Vegas to cover the main story of [their] generation." (HST, FALILV 19)

Even though *Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas* is classified as "Nonfiction/Journalism" and chronicles the real life exploits of Thompson and Acosta throughout several trips to the city, in order to analyze the book a distinction must be made between its characters and their likenesses. Thompson sets up his alter ego as the unreliable narrator of the book, distancing himself as author from the gruesome tale, and takes advantage of this figure to convey the many paradoxes present throughout. When reading Raoul Duke's statements, it's important to realize in their occasional contradiction that Duke is seeing several sides of what he calls a "classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character." (18)

Drawing a distinction between Thompson and "Raoul Duke" is similar to deciding to treat *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as an accurate travelogue or a fictional novel.

The truth is found in a combination of both accounts. Traditionally in novels if the narrator's name is the same as the author's then the story is meant to be nonfiction, but in this case, Thompson's name is only mentioned once in the book - when Duke receives a telegram for "Hunter S. Thompson, c/o Raoul Duke." (79) The blurring between a novel and travelogue is intentional, as Thompson is challenging his readers to decide for themselves what to believe as well as adding a surrealistic aspect to an already weird journey.

While the stated goal of these characters is to locate the "American Dream," the entire book is stitched with symbolism as the journey is, as Duke explains early on, to be "a gross physical salute to the fantastic *possibilities* of life in this country." (18) The juxtaposition of the words "gross physical salute" in this mission statement conveys the character's true intentions to experience life on the edge. A proper "salute" is never usually considered "gross" unless, as Duke perpetuates, it is meant to both condemn and celebrate just how far the characters can take their unorthodox actions.

Indeed the book is quick to explore the possibilities of life as Duke and Gonzo race across the desert, stopping to pick up a hitchhiker. Immediately, Thompson has touched

on national themes of "the road trip," Kerouac's hitchhiking idealism, and the melting pot of American ethnicities (as Dr. Gonzo is Samoan). Having the hitchhiker on board allows Duke the opportunity to explain their present situation:

Jesus, just one hour ago we were sitting over there in that stinking baiginio, stone broke and paralyzed for the weekend, when a call comes through from some total stranger in New York, telling me to go to Las Vegas and expenses be damned - and then he sends me over to some office in Beverly Hills where another total stranger gives me \$300 raw cash for no reason at all . . . I tell you, my man, this is the American Dream in action! We'd be fools not to ride this strange torpedo all the way out to the end. (11)

In one short monologue, Duke conveys much of this American Dream, in which an unexpected phone call can propel an American into a job with unlimited credit, cash, and mobility. By offering the stranger who had "never rode in a convertible before" (17) a ride, Duke was imparting a "genuine American" experience for the boy. Even the role of New York City as the catalyst for the entire trip, conveys that it essentially holds the power of the American Dream, as traditionally the city represents the ideology of upward mobility, immigration, glamour, and opportunity - all historically components of this American Dream.

Duke tells another convoy of reporters covering the Mint 400 that "we're just good patriotic Americans like

yourselves" (39) and this idea of mocking exaggerated patriotism pervades the book. When Duke trades in the rented "Red Shark" Chevy convertible and the agency offers a "Mercedes 600 Towne-Cruiser Special," Duke retorts, "Do I look like a goddamn Nazi? I'll have a natural American car, or nothing at all!" (104) This allegiance carries over to the ten cases of Budweiser, dozen or so grapefruit (91), and 600 Neutrogena soap bars (86), as well as the continuous soundtrack of American rock (such as the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, and Jefferson Airplane) in the convertible that exist as consciously national symbols serving as reminders of the American Dream of material pride and excess.

The idea of ownership and material wealth represents a common view of the American Dream in which success is gauged by a person's possession of a house and car. Cullen writes that "No American Dream has broader appeal, and no American Dream has been quite so widely realized." (Cullen 136) Raoul Duke demonstrates such drive in explaining "once you get locked into a serious drug collection, the tendency is to push it as far as you can." (HST, FALILV 4) However, Duke and Gonzo seem to only own dispensable goods like drugs, beer, soap, and fruit.

The larger items, like the two convertibles and hotel rooms, are leased on expense accounts and illegitimate credit cards. These rented things are trashed and abused by the pair, as they seem to devolve into animalistic beasts. When Duke returns the rented Cadillac convertible, "there was no way to explain the massive damage" describing the car to be "finished, a wreck, totaled out." (197) Regardless, Duke merely "pointed to the small-print clause where it said [he] was insured against *all damages*, for only two dollars a day." (196) In this way, Duke exercises the freedom in legal loopholes, leaving both his room and car destroyed, yet Duke free of responsibility.

There is an inherent sense of freedom in leaving a situation responsibility-free that is found in the American Dream. Thompson captured that sensation of gambling with something at risk; a feeling almost like a drug, luring many to Las Vegas to see if they too could also get away with it:

It is a weird feeling to sit in a Las Vegas hotel at four in the morning - hunkered down with a notebook and a tape recorder in a \$75-a-day suite and a fantastic room service bill, run up in forty-eight hours of total madness - knowing that just as soon as dawn comes up you are going to flee without paying a fucking penny . . . go stomping out through the lobby and call your red convertible down from the garage and stand there waiting for it with a suitcase full of marijuana and illegal weapons . . . trying to look casual,

scanning the first morning edition of the Las Vegas Sun. (72)

The gamblers in the casinos may have felt this same thrilling awareness of risk that Duke did upon eluding the hotel authorities.

As Duke explains, "the mentality of Las Vegas is so grossly atavistic that a really massive crime often slips by unrecognized." (173) Escaping from the first hotel, Duke gets so far as two miles from Baker when he's pulled over by a highway cop. Even though he's been caught speeding and driving while intoxicated, the cop simply lets him off the hook "for driving too fast for conditions, and [advises him] to proceed no further than the next rest area." (93) Duke imagines the cop isn't "ready for the vicious, time-consuming scene that was bound to come if he took [Duke] under arrest." (92) When leaving the second hotel room in the condition of "some disastrous zoological experiment involving whiskey and gorillas" (181) Duke fantasizes being pursued to the Caribbean driving up the cost of the prosecution to \$44,066.12 (177). These extreme cases of legal entanglement demonstrate Duke's perseverance of this American Dream of freedom and protected rights.

Obviously, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* deals with the idea of money as part of the American Dream. The

concept of Las Vegas relies heavily on gambling and the American Dream that, like the lottery, one can win "something for nothing." The Mint 400 itself is "the richest off-the-road race for motorcycles and dune-buggies in the history of organized sport - a fantastic spectacle in honor of some fatback *grossero* who owns the luxurious Mint Hotel in the heart of downtown Las Vegas" (9) and Duke is being paid for covering a story that comes from money in the first place. Although bankrupt in the beginning of the story, Duke and Gonzo abuse their expense account with hotel room service orders and convertible cars, creating the impression of high rollers in Las Vegas.

It is thanks to this pose of false wealth that Duke and Gonzo manage to assume celebrity status in a very expensive town. They pull the Red Shark up and over the curb at the entrance of the Desert Inn, but instead of being told to move the car, it's valet parked instead. When initially there were "no seats left, at any price" for a Debbie Reynolds concert, eventually the pair were let "in for nothing" only to be thrown out moments later (44). Duke and Gonzo didn't necessarily want to see Debbie Reynolds perform; they just wanted to prove that it was possible. The room service bill is "\$29 to \$36 per hour for 48 consecutive hours." (69) At the next hotel, Duke

slides past all the waylaid cops in the lobby to receive immediate service for simply having a reservation (108).

Duke's egregious confidence in the treacherous town of Las Vegas serves as an example to the gambling "caricatures of used-car dealers" that are "still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino." (57) It's this small possibility of hope that draws even non-gamblers like Lucy to Las Vegas for the chance to present her paintings to a famous Barbra Streisand at the Americana Hotel (114).

The gambling theme, with a willingness to accept risk for a potential payoff, is apparent throughout the book. Besides the optimistic idea that gambling has the potential to make people rich quickly is the American Dream of upward mobility. This is demonstrated in the hotel maid's eager willingness to cooperate with Duke and Gonzo posing as policemen. As soon as Duke mentions they "should put her on the payroll" the old maid "no longer seemed disturbed to find herself chatting with two naked men, one of whom had tried to strangle her just a few moments earlier." (183) At the false promise of one thousand dollars a month, the maid readily accepts the dangerous duty of operating undercover on the hotel staff - all in aspiration of more

money despite compromising behavior, again in the spirit of the American Dream.

Mentioned throughout *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is mid-nineteenth century author Horatio Alger. An American popular novelist, Alger interpreted the American Dream in over one hundred books for young boys in whom the heroes rise from "rags to riches through hard work and virtuous living." (HST, FALIA 392) His novels about down-and-out boys that were able to reach wealth and success served to cement the dream within popular culture. Thompson employed the cultural idea of this American Dream and used it throughout *Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas*. Raoul Duke took Alger's model of the American Dream and twisted it to fit his own, asking, "How would Horatio Alger handle this situation?" (HST, FALILV 70) Duke is by his own admission, "Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas" (12) and adapts the dream of capitalistic free enterprise to function in a gambling city. Where Horatio Alger, in context, comes off as an outdated square model, Raoul Duke represents the alternative sort for turning "nothing into something," thriving in Las Vegas, a city that would leave Alger speechless.

Unlike the world in a Horatio Alger book, Duke paints a scene that is anything but virtuous. The Circus-Circus

Casino is what Duke discovered to be the Vegas version of the "rags to riches" American Dream, carnivalization and parody intact:

Meanwhile, on all the upstairs balconies, the customers are being hustled by every conceivable kind of bizarre shuck. All kinds of funhouse-type booths. Shoot the pasties off the nipples of a ten-foot bull-dyke and win a cotton-candy goat. Stand in front of this fantastic machine, my friend, and for just 99¢ your likeness will appear, two hundred feet tall, on a screen above downtown Las Vegas. (47)

The scene is so grotesque that Duke's description requires exaggeration for the capitalistic entertainment provided at such a venue. But even Duke can't handle "the possibility that any freak with \$1.98 can walk into the Circus-Circus and suddenly appear in the sky over downtown Las Vegas twelve times the size of God" finally conceding that "reality itself is too twisted." (47) And yet Duke sensing the free enterprise system at work, comments that "we came out here to find the American Dream" and "we've found the main nerve." (48) With that realization, Dr. Gonzo balks at being so close to what remains of the American Dream, and says, "That's what gives me the Fear." (48)

Naturally, both Duke and Gonzo are on a strong rush of mescaline at the time they picked up on the American Dream in the Circus-Circus. Drugs fuel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, giving the characters their edge and providing a

vehicle to view the scene through a unique hallucinogenic lens. Duke's kit of drugs fits with the American idea of excess as well as serves to further perpetuate the belief that Americans rely heavily on consumption and waste in a ruling capitalistic process of big cars running on strong drugs. A drive through the desert meant, "the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car." (3) The hotel lobby resembles a reptile zoo to Duke who saw, "right next to me a huge reptile . . . gnawing on a woman's neck, the carpet was a blood-soaked sponge - impossible to walk on it." (24) In Vegas, the culture binges on alcohol and mind altering drugs, and with Duke and Gonzo present, the concept of consumption becomes part of this American Dream.

While pounding mint juleps once enabled Thompson and Steadman to experience the decadence at the Kentucky Derby (HST, GSH 24), the medicine kit of drugs served only to separate Duke and Gonzo from the Vegas culture. "This town is not a good town for psychedelic drugs," (HST, FALILV 47) remarks Duke after experiencing the twisted realities at the Circus-Circus and being removed from the Debbie Reynolds concert. Las Vegas was obviously weird enough without hallucinogens in their systems and instead of

lowering the pair to the level of others; the drugs caused them to drop far below the rest.

In this sense, the use of drugs throughout the book helps to present each scene, existing as the vehicle through which the characters' discomfort is measured. The drugs affect both Duke and Gonzo badly as neon signs invoke horrifying visions of electric snakes (27) and Dr. Gonzo's pleas turn suicidal in order to "get higher" by dropping the electric radio into the bathtub (60). The constant and extreme drug abuse brings on waves of paranoia that drive Dr. Gonzo to flee the Circus-Circus by plane and Duke to assume the authorities are after him instead of simply wishing to deliver a telegram. The extreme levels of drug abuse therefore provide interpretation for the surrealistic scenes and perpetual paranoia.

This paranoia is no longer subtle when Duke and Gonzo infiltrate the Las Vegas National District Attorneys' Association Drug Convention as cops. "If the Pigs were gathering in Vegas for a top-level Drug Conference, we felt the drug culture should be represented," (110) justified Duke as he moved, drug addled, in the midst of "a crowd that was convened for the stated purpose of putting people like us in jail." (109) It was during the conferences that Duke feels true "fear and loathing" for a national

establishment that knows nothing of the culture they were trying to control. Acting in pre-emptive revenge, Duke and Gonzo convince an unassuming Georgia District Attorney of an untrue drug craze involving witchcraft, demonstrating the power in the fear built on lies felt by both sides in the nation's drug war. Despite their constant paranoia, neither Duke nor Gonzo's inebriated identities are revealed.

Duke and Gonzo take the convertible in search of the American Dream, asking along the way if anyone knows where they can find it. Having stopped at "Terry's Taco Stand, USA," Dr. Gonzo tells the waitress, "all we were told was, go till you find the American Dream. Take this white Cadillac and go find the American Dream. It's somewhere in the Las Vegas area." (165) After agreeing, the cook named Lou suggests, "that has to be the old Psychiatrist's Club, but the only people who hang out there is a bunch of pushers, peddlers, uppers and downers, and all that stuff." Lou continues in his description: "you'll see a big black building, it's all painted black and real weird looking . . . And there's a sign on the side of the building that says Psychiatrist's Club, but they're completely remodeling it and everything." (167)

The crux of the book arrives as Duke and Gonzo find the corner of Paradise Road two hours later; the scene only described as "a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds. The owner of a gas station across the road said the place had 'burned down about three years ago.'" (168) Therefore, the physical location of the "American Dream" has been dead and vacant since 1968, confirming Duke's fears that as the sixties faded, so did the original American Dream. This idea is beautifully conveyed by Duke's inner monologue in Part One's Chapter Eight:

Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era - the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it meant something. Maybe not, in the long run . . . but not explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world. Whatever it meant . . . History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of "history" it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time - and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened . . . There was madness in any direction at any hour . . . You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning . . . And that, I think, was the handle - that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and

Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting - on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave . . . So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark - that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (68)

The political movement at the end of the sixties had killed off the culture, and with that, buried the American Dream.

When meditating on the loss of the sixties, Duke alludes to the transformation in the drug culture from the laid back hippie style of the sixties to a hard drug frenzied seventies. The sixties, he believes, fed off "all those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit." (178)

Tim Leary, a sixties LSD guru, was responsible for culturally elevating the use of mind altering drugs to hold the power of "consciousness expansion." By likening their use to a religious experience, Leary was using essentially "the same cruel and paradoxically benevolent bullshit that has kept the Catholic Church going for so many centuries." But when Leary crashed at the end of the sixties, "he took too many others down with him" (178) setting up his followers for brutal failure because they saw that nobody was "tending that Light at the end of the tunnel." (179) In

the seventies, drugs no longer fit into the religious paradigm, but served only to sever users from reality in the model of American Dream pioneer, Raoul Duke.

Duke represents the violent transition from the sixties to the seventies - the battle documented in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. When Raoul Duke surmised early in the book that "this is the American Dream in action" and "we'd be fools not to ride this strange torpedo all the way out to the end" (11) he meant for the "strange torpedo" to symbolize the "wave" of the spirit of the sixties. The protest-laden idealism inherent in the 1960's followed the Horatio Alger model that through action and hard work, the American Dream can be realized for everyone. As the seventies approached, the country was moving towards capitalism and excess. The "realities" of the sixties, Raoul Duke felt, "were already fixed; the illness was understood to be terminal, and the energies of The Movement were long since aggressively dissipated by the rush to self-preservation." (180) The "torpedo," while a wild ride to experience, was primed to explode "in this doomstruck era of Nixon" and the country was culturally headed away from the "speed that fueled the Sixties" and towards what lay ahead in the seventies. This Dream is found in beautiful self-destruction, losing aspects of the sixties

and gaining the power of the seventies, or as Duke sees "we are all wired into a *survival* trip now." (178) Essentially, the final battle was what Raoul Duke had been present to witness - the cannibalization of one American Dream by another.

As Thompson wrote later, "*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* marks the end of an era" and "it was nice to be loose and crazy with a good credit card in a time when it was possible to run totally wild in Las Vegas and then get paid for writing a book about it . . . and it occurs to me that I probably just made it, just under the wire and the deadline." (HST, GSH 110) Nixon's political rise to power subsequently squashed a culture Thompson had been desperately fighting for, and the vacant lot in Las Vegas was proof of that - but he had to find what the new American Dream looked like.

In a letter to Jann Wenner on May 7, 1971, Thompson confessed that "the night before I left [Las Vegas], this last time, I *found* the American Dream, and it might be necessary to go back and drill some wisdom out of the freak who put it together." (HST, FALIA 379) After having already seen the "Old Psychiatrist's Club," Thompson was

referring to returning to the Circus-Circus and being able to finally write the conclusion for his book.

"Raoul Duke" is having a conversation with a guy named Bruce at the Circus-Circus bar when Duke asks, "you remember that story the manager told us about the owner of this place? How he always wanted to run away and join the circus when he was a kid?" (HST, FALILV 191) Bruce responds: "now the bastard has his own circus and a license to steal, too. You're right - he's the model." Duke merely agrees, "Absolutely, it's pure Horatio Alger, all the way down to his attitude." (191) Duke tries to talk with the Boss, but is turned away by his secretary because he "really hates reporters" and afterwards Duke no longer needed to stay in Las Vegas.

In this consequence-free sense of the American Dream, many come to Vegas to win big, yet end up losing it all. This, however, was the point of the Las Vegas machine - like America, it accepts people (immigrants), runs them through with the hope to come away rich and famous, but usually results with the people leaving as losers after playing the game. Even a man that Raoul Duke knew that said to "always quit winners" ended up thirty grand in debt, learning that "for a loser, Vegas is the meanest town

on earth." (HST, FALILV 42) Duke, himself, understands that he has to "learn to enjoy losing." (57)

Duke had found the heart of the American Dream in a free enterprising entrepreneur, who by operating a circus that profits in trickery and cheap thrills no longer fit the morality of the Horatio Alger model, but instead Raoul Duke's formula. As quickly as he finds it, it disappears again and Duke finally learns "it doesn't pay to try to help somebody these days" (117); a lesson he personally ascertained when both the hitchhiker and Lucy were beyond befriending and the last man holding onto the American Dream kept it to himself. 1971 had been a turning point in the sixties culture - where there was once innocence and optimism, only cynicism remains.

Walking off the airplane and snorting an amyl acquired from the airport drugstore, Duke had been changed by the Vegas trip, saying he "felt like a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger." (204) He had tested the model of hard work and virtuous lifestyle, and twisted it to function as his own. The Raoul Duke lifestyle, he imagined, had won out, and the rest of the country would soon follow his lead.

In twisting the Horatio Alger model, Jay Gatsby was forty-six years ahead of Raoul Duke. Thompson no doubt felt compelled to write an updated The Great Gatsby for his generation and had admired F. Scott Fitzgerald's work so deeply that he could not have avoided following in his footsteps. As a younger man, "Thompson would sit for hours reading and outlining The Great Gatsby," keeping a three page-long outline carefully folded in his pocket for years (Whitmer 97). So when it came to writing his American Dream book, Thompson held true to the outline, matching The Great Gatsby down to the exact number of pages - 182 - without Steadman's illustrations or blank pages (Whitmer 179).

Thompson echoes many of the same ideas originally found in Fitzgerald's novel (as Whitmer compares in his biography): race (Daisy and Jordan's "white girlhood"; Dr. Gonzo's foreignness), music in context (Mendelssohn's Wedding March; The Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil"), large American cars, and decadent parties (Gatsby's mansion; the Circus-Circus) (Whitmer 181). All of these elements are crucial to a book about the American Dream. When Raoul Duke reflects on the sixties, remembering how Tim Leary's acid followers held "the desperate assumption that somebody - or at least some force

- is tending that Light at the end of the tunnel" (HST, FALILV 179) it echoes Gatsby standing on the pier searching for the green light. Like Jay Gatsby, Raoul Duke believes in the American Dream, searches for it, and finds it eventually by his own means.

Capitalistic America contains many different dreams to be followed by each unique American, but Gatsby and Duke trace similar paths in separate generations, as did Fitzgerald and Thompson - each facing the culturally changing American Dream through the decades. Duke compares his fragmented health to that of America ("another fucked-up cleric with a bad heart" FALILV 204) as he ingests yet another drug to keep up in a transitioning society, and Gatsby's orgiastic future manages still to elude all who search for the green light.

Conclusion

All eyes are on the balding man with the sunglasses and cigarette dangling from its holder. The auditorium around the early eighties at the University of Colorado holds its collective breath as Hunter S. Thompson speaks concerning the American Dream.

"Whole generations of people in this country have been taught that the American Dream is a sort of guiding ethic: free enterprise, democracy, honesty, truth, beauty, and things like that. And if the myth exists, it's like rainbows; it's a worthwhile thing to chase. There are worse ways to spend your life than chasing the American Dream."

He takes a breath and continues. "Once you've found it - like I did in Vegas; it's called the Old Psychiatrist's Club - then it is kind of puzzling. You feel kind of naked and alone out there. Because once you've found the dream and found it's just a slab of burned-out concrete in Las Vegas called the Old Psychiatrist's Club, then it's kind of hard to go on from there. You don't have the same dedication to journalism."

Hunter S. Thompson did seem in fact to not only be present for, but also live through the transformation of the American Dream in the American twentieth century.

Following World War II, American families, like Thompson's, sought out and defined success as a comfortable home in the suburbs, lending itself to the rise of the conservative 1950s. This period was challenged by a new generation of young Americans in the sixties, whose hippie values contradicted the traditional views of the American Dream. During the "shattering" of this dream in the sixties, Thompson rode with the Hell's Angels, a nationwide gang that tried to survive outside of societal norms. He took part in the hippie revolution that questioned where the nation was heading and successfully documented their revolution. Thompson physically felt his government shove him through a glass window at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968 and fought back on his own turf in Aspen when big money capitalists tried to develop the naturalistic city of Aspen. He finally traveled through Las Vegas where he saw what little was left of the sixties' cultural revolution and the cynicism that had replaced its hopeful spirit.

After all his documentation and hard investigation into the "Death of the American Dream," Thompson ends up leaving much unanswered. His response to the students at the University of Chicago ("free enterprise, democracy, honesty, truth, beauty") could not do justice to what he

had uncovered. Certainly, like Horatio Alger decided in the 1860s, the American Dream was founded on what its forefathers sought out in 1776 with the goal of establishing a new nation built on what no other country at that time had undertaken. Just as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* served to prove, the American Dream resembles the Constitution of the United States - a set of firm ideals open for interpretation and adaptation.

Thompson recognized the idea of change in this American Dream; he simply tried to capture its progress through the transition from the sixties into the seventies. He would write in his memoir *The Kingdom of Fear* that "Chicago ('68) was the end of the sixties, for me." (HST, KOF 79) And essentially that's what his journey boiled down to: the freedom, hope, and spirit of the sixties' protest against the rigid structure of the country's expectations, squelched by the corruption and control the government utilized to regain and reestablish its authority. When his alter ego, Raoul Duke, went toe to toe with the "man" in Chicago and Vegas, he came back defeated so as to exist again within the nation's structure of capitalism controlled by money. Horatio Alger's "rags to riches" failed to survive the transition from the fifties to the seventies. Thompson shows how fashionable and

idealistic following Raoul Duke's example of "something from nothing" can be, living in excess off success.

Thompson had trouble believing the impact he had on society through his writing. In a personal letter to confidant Ralph Steadman on December 16, 1971, after the publication and success of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, he wrote:

We really cracked the buggers with this one; we drove them right down to their fucking knees . . . and the most fantastic thing about it is that the thing is really flat out fucking good. It's a genuine fucking classic; the overall reaction to the thing has put me seriously off balance . . . people are reading far more into the story than I ever intended to write. (HST, FALIA 459)

And it's true that once a writer's words are printed that they are open to anyone's interpretation, whether that reading was something the author intended or not. Although Thompson's lifestyle and writing seem to contradict each other at times, it is the result of his personal adaptation and reflection to the transitioning periods he transcended in society.

A self-aware Thompson would not only acknowledge these contradictions and paradoxes, but also admit intentionally using them as part of his message. Where a good writer says one thing and means it, a great writer can say many things at once and mean all of them. A master of his craft,

Thompson wrote in his own style of prose poetry, understanding the various facets of the American Dream. Thompson believed he was a part of the "gross physical salute to the fantastic *possibilities* of life in this country" (HST, FALILV 18) when he rode the "strange torpedo all the way out to the end" (11) and documented his journey for generations to read long after the sixties had ended.

Thompson lived outside the law as a child and embraced the same ideals in following the Hells Angel's and student protest movements, stubbornly saying "I damn well intend to keep on living the way I think I should." He appreciated his right to freedom and political influence under the American Dream before Chicago in 1968. Seeing the worst in national politics, he returned to Aspen to rid his city of the greedy capitalists he believed were ruining the country, in a sense disputing the established American Dream at the time. But after Vegas, he saw he must cannibalize the Horatio Alger model in order to embrace what the seventies then stood for. And by riding out this "strange torpedo," Thompson managed to not only live by, but also enjoy the evolving American Dream. As his editor Douglas Brinkley wrote in 2000:

His exaggerated style may defy easy categorization, but his career-long autopsy on the death of the American Dream places him among

the twentieth century's most iconoclastic writers. Outsized truths are Thompson's stock-in-trade, and the comic savagery of his best work will continue to electrify readers for generations to come." (FALIA xxii)

Hunter S. Thompson took his own life at the age of 67, in the Woody Creek cabin kitchen where he did most of his writing. On the evening of February 20, 2005, Thompson followed in the footsteps of Ernest Hemmingway, a writer he deeply admired, putting to rest the body that troubled him for several years. While his suicide may have shocked many, those closest to him knew that this had always been his plan - to never lose control over himself. Six months following his death, his cremated ashes were scattered over his property by means of a 153-foot cannon, topped with his iconic "Gonzo Fist." As I witnessed the red, white, and blue colored fireworks accompany the late writer's ashes on their way through the sky, I understood Thompson had not only solidified his legacy in the canon of great American literature, but left his mark on the lives of many, like myself, that he never met. While the American Dream still existed, Thompson had lived it like no other - and found he had changed it as much as it had changed him.

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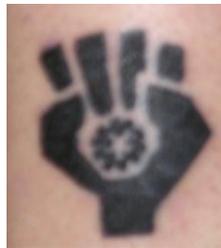




About the Author

Peter W. Knox, Class of 2006, is an English Major with a Minor in Creative Writing and this thesis satisfies his Senior Obligation with the English Department. While attending Washington College, Peter served as the Editor-In-Chief for *The Collegian*, the monthly student features magazine, as well as a weekly columnist for weekly newspaper, *The Elm*.

Recipient of the C.V. Starr Center's Comegy's Bight Fellowship, Peter attended the funeral of Hunter S. Thompson on August 20th, 2005. *Five Magazine* published his account of the event in their premiere issue. He will attend Columbia University's 2006 Summer Publishing Institute intending to pursue a career in magazine publishing.



"Buy the Ticket. Take the Ride."

Special thanks to **Adam Goodheart**, my Thesis Advisor,
whose dedication and countless hours truly echoed
Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*,

"If a thing like this is worth doing at all,
it's worth doing right."

I have abided by Washington College's Honor Code in
completing this thesis:

Peter W. Knox