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## Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo journalistic coverage of Richard Nixon

James Chandler Patrick

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by James Chandler Patrick entitled "Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo journalistic coverage of Richard Nixon." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Communication.

Paul Ashdown, Major Professor

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Edward Caudill, Bonnie Riechert

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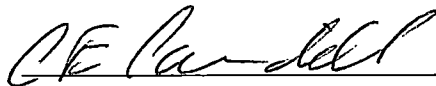
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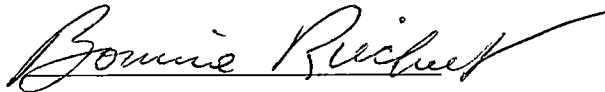
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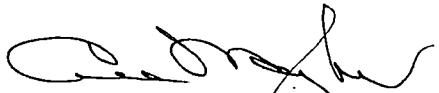
  
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Interim Vice Provost and  
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**Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo Journalistic Coverage of Richard Nixon**

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**A Thesis**

**Presented for the Master of Science Degree**

**The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

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**James Chandler Patrick**

**August 2001**

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To Sherry Carroll, for being there.

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## Abstract

This thesis explores Hunter S. Thompson's writings about Richard M. Nixon from 1960 to 1994. Thompson expressed strong animosity toward Nixon, but most of the more outlandish articles he wrote about Nixon were fabrications. Thompson's writings were often ambiguous and contradictory. Sources used for research included books written by Thompson, books of letters Thompson sent to family and friends, books about Thompson and Richard Nixon, and books about the Watergate scandal. This thesis addresses the questions of why Thompson was so fascinated by Nixon, and why he wrote on Nixon for almost 40 years. It also addresses the question of whether Thompson actually despised Nixon as he claimed to, or whether he felt a kindred spirit with Nixon.

The purpose of this thesis is to identify themes and rhetoric in Thompson's writings before, during and after the Watergate scandal, to compare what Thompson wrote about Nixon to what other writers were writing, and to determine if Thompson's style and viewpoint changed during the period of study.

The important factor that distinguished Thompson from other writers during the Watergate scandal was that Thompson wrote in the "gonzo" style—a reportorial term he adopted and glorified that emphasized subjectivity, satire, humor, entertainment and fabrication. Another important difference is that gonzo is about process—the story is usually as much about the author getting the story, as it is the story itself.

It is also important to note that while Thompson did advocate Nixon resigning the presidency, many reporters at the time had the same desire to see Nixon resign. Thompson distinguished himself from the more mainstream press by voicing his attitudes

and opinions in the “gonzo” reporting style, which openly satirized the presidency and other reporters.

During the research-gathering portion of the thesis, it was ascertained that Thompson wrote approximately 40 articles that focused mainly on Nixon, and 150 more articles that mentioned Nixon. Many of Thompson’s articles that were used for the thesis were written for *Rolling Stone*, the main magazine he wrote for during the Watergate scandal, and were compiled in books that were used for the thesis research.

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# 1. Introduction

As an author, political activist, and counter-culture icon, Hunter S. Thompson has been writing a singular form of journalism for almost 40 years. From his earliest articles in *The National Observer* and *The Nation* to his later articles in *Rolling Stone* and *Cycle World*, he has given exaggerated accounts of political and cultural experiences. Many of Thompson's articles focus on Richard Nixon. In some of his articles, as in "The Scum Also Rises" and "Fear and Loathing at the Watergate: Mr. Nixon Has Cashed His Check," he writes exclusively on Nixon and his activities. Thompson was often emphatic about his dislike for Nixon. A politician who met Thompson when he came to watch the Watergate hearings recalled thinking that Thompson thought "he was here to clean up Dodge. He kept talking about his search for honesty in politics as though he had been sent on some mission from God."(1)

Thompson's earliest writings reveal his antipathy to Nixon and his politics. He followed Nixon's political career from the time Nixon lost the 1960 presidential election to John F. Kennedy until Nixon's death in 1994. This study will concentrate mainly on the comments Thompson made about Nixon before, during and after the Watergate scandal.

The study addresses these research questions:

- (1) Why did Thompson devote so much space to Nixon?
- (2) How was Thompson's coverage of Nixon a departure from more mainstream press coverage?
- (3) What rhetoric did Thompson use to describe Nixon before, during, and after the Watergate scandal?

(4) How did Thompson's coverage of Nixon change during the period under study?

(5) Did Thompson offer any substantive criticism of Nixon?

(6) What narrative strategies did Thompson use in his reporting about Nixon?

Articles for study were *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time*, *Gonzo Papers Vol. I*, *Generation of Swine: Gonzo Papers Vol. II: Tales of Shame and Degradation in the '80's*, *Songs of the Doomed: Gonzo Papers Vol. III: More Notes on the Death of the American Dream* and *Better Than Sex, Confessions of a Political Junkie*.

Also included in the study were the books of letters by Thompson, *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman*, which ranges in time from 1955 to 1967, and *Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist*, which ranges in time from 1968 to 1976. Some of the books written about Thompson that were used were *Fear and Loathing: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson*, *When the Going Gets Weird: The Twisted Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson: A Very Unauthorized Biography*, and *Hunter S. Thompson*. Some of the books used about Nixon and Watergate were *Nixon: A Life*, *The Offenses of Richard M. Nixon: A Guide for the People of the United States of America*, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*, and *The Breaking of a President: The Nixon Connection*.

Each article was read carefully by the author in light of the research questions. No attempt was made to code themes or rhetorical devices systematically. Rather, each article was studied impressionistically, and continuities between articles were noted. This method was deemed most appropriate for a study of "gonzo" journalism. Generous

amounts of quotations from Thompson's work are included in order to document the extraordinary nature of his prose style. This necessitated inclusion of his scatological and ostentatiously vulgar prose, which is central to the gonzo style as he defined it.

## 2. Hunter S. Thompson

Hunter Stockton Thompson was born in Louisville, Kentucky on July 18, 1939 to Jack and Virginia Thompson. After a brief jail term in 1956 for petty robbery, he enlisted in the United States Air Force in 1956. While in the Air Force he began his journalistic career, writing as the sports editor for the Eglin Command Courier. He was honorably discharged in 1958 when his commanding officer discovered Thompson was also moonlighting as a writer for the local civilian newspaper. After working for the *New York Herald* and the *National Observer*, according to William McKeen's book *Hunter S. Thompson*, his first taste of fame came in 1969 from a series of articles he did for the *Observer* entitled, "Motorcycle Gangs and Outlaws: Losers and Outsiders." The serial evolved into his first book, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Gang*.

In 1970, while working for *Scalan's Magazine*, a counter-culture magazine, he wrote "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved." For the first time, he was associated with the term "gonzo journalism." The term originally came from Bill Cardoso, a friend of Thompson's who was then editor of the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*. According to Robert Sam Anson's book *Gone Crazy and Back Again: The Rise and Fall of the Rolling Stone Generation*, Cardoso had heard the word when he was going to Irish bars in his Chicago neighborhood. The original meaning was for someone who was still drinking after everyone else had quit. When Thompson was referred to as gonzo in relation to his writing, he changed the meaning:

Not so much a manner of writing, as an assault on it, a rhetorical light show of images, flashes, and truths, squawks, hisses, and grunts, obscure literary references, fragments of autobiography, confessions of failure, and continual

reminders to the reader that all of it, like life itself, was maddening, gibberish, shit. Gonzo recognized no limits. It could be somber and sane one moment, bizarre and fantastic the next. One could never know how much of it was contrived and how much was true. The genius of the style was that, after reading it, one didn't care. (2)

Thus, Thompson's journalism is difficult to access at face value. It is a style full of hyperbole, satire, fabrication, and self-righteous posturing. It can be "gibberish." But gonzo could also be effective commentary on the political process. Thompson's reporting on Nixon is written in the gonzo style.

Thompson's gonzo style was what set him apart from other journalists who covered Nixon. His style was seen to be "dependent almost deliriously on insult, vituperation, and a stream of stream-of-invective...wildly erratic yet really gives the impression of having been there." (3) His style was also described as requiring "virtually no rewriting, with the reporter and the quest for information as the focal point. Notes, snatches from other articles, transcribed interviews, verbatim telephone conversations, telegrams---these are elements of a piece of gonzo journalism." (4)

Thompson's reporting on Nixon involved fabricated conversations, satire on other journalists, entertainment and satire on Nixon's entire life, especially during the Watergate scandal. Thompson's critics recognized this in his works. Arthur J. Kaul, who is partially quoting Thompson, writes:

Hunter S. Thompson emerges from his works as the practical joker of New Journalism, a clown whose comic antics—he's a character in Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury"—and satirical put-downs obscure the underlying moral seriousness of his cultural criticism. His Gonzo-style reporting speaks with a shrill, prophetic voice, warning readers that their quest for salvation and transcendence invariably leads to self-delusion in a culture in which "the yahoos never sleep." Thompson performs with "An acrobat's sense of things, a higher and finer touch" and "a fatal compulsion to find a higher kind of sense in things that make no sense." In a culture afflicted with terminal craziness, Thompson's demented ravings represent the voice of sanity. (5)

John Hellmann, in his book *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction*, states:

Thompson has developed a journalism which communicates, both formally and thematically, his black humorist vision....The result is journalism that reads as savage cartoon....The warlike sound of "gonzo" is appropriate to Thompson's journalism, for it is, both in the persona adventures as participant and in his rhetoric as narrator, an individual rebellion against the homogenization and perversion of man. Face with the task of reporting falsity and horror, he resorts to self-induced hallucinations, laughter, vengeance, and invention—all acts of reckless freedom which serve as weapons for survival. (6)

For Thompson to achieve the desired gonzo affect he wanted, he created the persona Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and would use that persona to convey the things he wanted to say. Duke is a composite character who allowed Thompson to say the things he wanted to say, and ostensibly be the person he wanted to be. Duke is a composite made from Thompson, political reporters of the time, and Horatio Alger, the nineteenth century author of popular "rags to riches" tales.

Hellmann states:

(Thompson) presents facts through two versions of the self, narrator and participant persona, who are separated by time and perspective....By keeping differences in time and perspective negligible, Thompson creates only one personae who serves as both narrator and protagonist. This personae may appear at first as a simpler creation, a mere self-caricature; but that self-caricature is in fact a highly sophisticated tool....(The persona) has virtually no complexity of thought or motivation, and he does not undergo subtle changes from experience. He is instead a two-dimensional cartoon character, a caricature resulting from Thompson's flattening and exaggeration of certain of his own characteristics. Thompson identifies his personae closely with certain vivid trademark objects and mannerisms as a substitute for the subtle complexities of a realistic characterization; he provides him with a dual nature that embodies the innocent idealism and compulsive violence found also in America's national character; and he portrays him as a trickster figure. (7)

Critic Roger Matuz, citing Jerome Klinkowitz, also stated that Thompson's

Fondness for firearms and his legendary capacity for alcohol and drug use, Thompson may be better remembered for his renegade behavior than for his talent as a writer. Nevertheless, “for all the charges against him, Hunter S. Thompson is an amazingly insightful writer,” wrote Jerome Klinkowitz in *The Life of Fiction*. His ‘journalism’ is not in the least responsible. On the contrary, in each of his books he’s pointed out the lies and gross distortions of conventional journalism....Moreover, his books are highly intelligent. (8)

Also in *The Life of Fiction*, Klinkowitz wrote:

Thompson has placed himself at the center of most important American events of the past ten years, and in the hands of a readership inhabiting a world not shared by the celebrated Post-Modernist writers, whose works one can read without having any sense at all that they were written during the student revolution, the shift of recognition and eventually some sharing of power with ethnic minorities, the war in Vietnam, and countless other events from the major (the fall of President Nixon’s administration) to the transitory (the Hell’s Angels Motorcycle Club and the National Football League). (9)

Thompson first mentions Nixon in a letter he sent to Phillip L. Graham of *The Washington Post* in 1963, included in Thompson’s first book of compiled letters *The Proud Highway*. He wrote: “Politics: opposed to Nixon, Norman Mailer & George Lincoln Rockwell; Draft Status: Vet; Religion; Seeker. At this point it gets difficult.” Thompson last mentions Nixon, besides the references to him in his second book of collected letters, *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist, 1968-1976*, in his 1994 book *Better than Sex: Confessions of a Political Junkie*. In the book, published just after Nixon’s death, he wrote that

Nixon had the unique ability to make his enemies seem honorable, and we developed a keen sense of fraternity. Some of my best friends have hated Nixon all their lives. My mother hates Nixon, my son hates Nixon, and I hate Nixon, and this hatred has brought us all together. (10)

Thompson expressed contempt for Nixon, and this contempt is seen through

numerous books and articles he wrote for more than 40 years. Through the articles Thompson wrote about Nixon, he used Nixon as a literary device to help to sell articles. Thompson would write about Nixon to use as a focus point in his writings as a way to keep in the public eye. Thompson also wrote numerous articles about Nixon because without Nixon, Thompson really did not have much to write about in the way of political reporting. When Nixon resigned from the presidency, Thompson's writings suffered and were not as well focused and numerous as before or during the Watergate scandal.

Thompson was not the only journalist to advocate Nixon's resignation. Along with Thompson, and Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of *The Washington Post*, many other writers were seen as opposing Nixon. Some entire papers were against Nixon. William E. Porter, in his book *Assault on the Media: the Nixon Years*, wrote: "The *Post-Dispatch* was an ancient Nixon enemy, of course. The *Des Moines Register* had been consistently Republican for decades and supported Nixon in his three presidential campaigns, but reversed their stand as the Watergate affair developed." (11)



### 3. Richard M. Nixon

Richard Milhous Nixon (1913-1994), the 37th President of the United States, was born in Yorba Linda, Calif., on Jan. 9, 1913, the son of Francis A. and Hannah Milhous Nixon. When he was nine, the family moved to Whittier, California, where he attended the local public schools. At age 17 he entered Whittier College, a small Quaker institution.

Upon graduation in 1934, he won a scholarship to the Duke University Law School in Durham, N.C. After graduating from Duke, he joined the Navy, and upon his discharge in January 1946, Nixon ran for the U.S. House of Representatives from California. He won the Republican primary and defeated incumbent Jerry Voorhis, a nationally known New Deal Democrat, in the general election. While in Congress, Nixon was appointed by party leaders to the House Un-American Activities Committee.

In 1952, Nixon ran as the vice-presidential candidate on a ticket with Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, and was elected. He was reelected with Eisenhower in 1956. As vice president, Nixon gained importance as a result of the three illnesses Eisenhower had while president--a heart attack in 1955, an ileitis operation in 1956, and a stroke in 1957. During these periods the vice president assumed control of the president's ceremonial and executive duties. Also, while vice president, he went to Moscow in 1959 to open the American National Exhibition. There, at a display of kitchen appliances, he engaged in a verbal clash with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. This clash with Khrushchev was called the "kitchen debate." The debate occurred when Nixon went to Moscow as the U. S. senior representative at the first ever American trade exhibition. The debate started when Khrushchev made the statement that Americans did not really have the appliances

that was in on display. Khrushchev also made a comment on how the workers in the Soviet Union could afford all the appliances that were on display, but the people had rather let the government use their money to build better rockets. According to

Jonathon Aitken in *Nixon: A Life*:

This was the beginning of a morning of Capitalist versus Communist theatricals. As the two leaders progressed round the exhibition they traded keen debating points and gestures to the crowd. Nixon was the more restrained, keeping to the line that America was a great country because of free competition and the free exchanges of ideas. Khrushchev, aggressive and rude in his tone, accused the guest of ignorance ('You don't know anything about Communism except fear of it') and kept needling Nixon for being a slick and manipulative lawyer in comparison with his own 'honest' background as a simple peasant and mine worker. (12)

After his failed campaign for the presidency in 1960 against Kennedy, Nixon returned to California, became counsel of a large Los Angeles law firm, and wrote his political memoir, *Six Crises* (1962). In 1962 he was persuaded to seek the governorship of California on the assumption that he would have to have a power base if he wanted to ever run for president again, and he could avoid having to run against President Kennedy in 1964 by having a commitment to finish his term in California. This idea proved costly because Gov. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown defeated Nixon by 297,000 votes, and, according to J. Anthony Lukas' *Nightmare: The Underside of the Nixon Years*, a book about the Watergate break-in, this loss prevented Nixon from having a power base to run for president in 1964. (13)

On the morning after his defeat for governor, an angry Nixon lectured a televised media conference about the reportorial transgressions of journalists and broadcasters. In bitter conclusion he made the infamous statement, "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference." He conceded that such a

tongue-lashing could come only from one who harbored no further political ambitions, for to attack the press so savagely violated an unwritten rule of politics.

After withdrawing from politics, Nixon moved to New York City and became a partner in a Wall Street law firm. Nixon's political fortunes revived in 1966 when he was campaigning for congressional candidates. He earned new popularity in his party, and entered the race for the 1968 presidential nomination.

Aitken wrote that Nixon used a political strategy aimed at settling the nomination in a series of primaries in order to regain his political reputation. His prospects were so favorable for victory in New Hampshire, the first primary, that one of the candidates, Gov. George Romney of Michigan, withdrew. After Nixon had won most of the primaries, Governors Nelson Rockefeller of New York and Ronald Reagan of California entered the contest late. When pre-convention polls showed that Nixon had a good chance to win the election in November, his nomination was assured. Even his campaign slogan, "Nixon's the one," seemed to indicate that Nixon would win the election. In 1968 he won his first term as president.

During the 1968 campaign, the Vietnam War was a source of constant debate between the candidates. In *Breach of Faith: The Fall of Richard Nixon*, Theodore H. White wrote:

The 1968 campaign was fought on many levels—erratic, symbolic, romantic. But underneath all lay the agony of a people trapped in a war they had not sought and could not understand. Nixon was scrupulous in the support he gave Lyndon Johnson's efforts at peacemaking. Frustrated by his inability to lash out on the hard side, as he had been frustrated by his inability to take the cold-war side on Cuba against (John) Kennedy in 1960, he was learning, nonetheless, that the people wanted peace and the next President must give it to them. It startled many to discover that Nixon, within the party, was privately on the dove side. Henry Kissinger, for example, arrived at the Miami convention of 1968 as (Nelson A.) Rockefeller's guide on foreign policy. Both Kissinger and Rockefeller were

prepared to do battle against the platform advanced by primitives of the Republican Party who wished to call the nation to total victory by a march on Hanoi. Rockefeller was prepared to tear the party apart once more, as he had against (Barry) Goldwater, if Nixon shared their position of extreme escalation. But in the midst of the pre-convention struggle, Kissinger found himself in contact by telephone with Richard Nixon, then at Montauk, Long Island—and found Nixon to be *with* him and Rockefeller *against* escalation. It was the first of many Kissinger-Nixon understandings in foreign policy, and their alliance underwrote the keynote phrase in Nixon's acceptance speech—"after an era of confrontations, the time has come for an era of negotiation"—which made possible later their state diplomacy. (14)

Despite Nixon's efforts "to bring us together," the Vietnam War continued to contribute greatly to the strained relationship between the Nixon administration and the press. According to J. Anthony Lukas in *Nightmare: The Underside of the Nixon Years*:

As the Vietnam War dragged on and racial tensions persisted, the late 1960s and early 1970s had been a period of nearly perpetual protest in America. Campus unrest, intensifying through the decade, reached a peak in 1969-1970 with nearly 1800 demonstrations, many of them accompanied by bombings and other violence....The President did his best to project an air of lofty disdain for such activities, letting word leak out that he had been watching football on television during one protest march. But now it appears that he and the men around him were far more concerned, even desperate, than they let on. Nixon—who often felt powerless in the world's most powerful office—was increasingly obsessed by real or imagined threats to his own authority. (15)

Vice President Spiro Agnew delivered speeches criticizing the news analysis of some newspapers and television networks. One of the criticisms Agnew had of the media involved the Pentagon Papers, which was a massive account of information on tactics used to combat the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam conflict. When the Pentagon Papers were published, there was a debate between about whether it had been legal or not for the newspapers to publish them. The ethical debate about the publication of the papers continues.

Nixon believed the Pentagon Papers were a threat to national security, and the Department of Justice, also believing they were a threat to national security, tried to halt

their publication in June 1971. The U.S. Supreme Court held, in light of strong constitutional protection of the press, that the government had failed to justify any restraint on publication. (16)

Aitken states that despite his slender margin in 1968 and no improvement in Republican fortunes in the 1970 congressional elections, Nixon ran for re-election as an overwhelming favorite. Although he campaigned little, Nixon easily defeated George McGovern. Nixon and Agnew were inaugurated for second terms on Jan. 20, 1973. Nine months later Agnew resigned after pleading no contest to a charge of income tax evasion. The move foreshadowed Nixon's own troubles during the coming months.

Gradually, according to Stanley Kutler's book *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*, White House efforts aimed at opponents of the war blended into the campaign for Nixon's reelection. The "plumbers," who included James W. McCord, Frank Sturgis, Eugenio R. Martinez, Virgilio R. Gonzalez and Bernard L. Barker, were involved in the wiretapping of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C. Agents employed by officials of the Committee for the Re-election of the President (CREEP) were arrested at the Watergate on June 17, 1972. The event, occurring four months before the election, prompted Nixon and his leading aides to cover up White House and CREEP involvement in Watergate.

Nixon's last 16 months in office were beset by legal defeats and personal humiliations. After it was learned that he had taped conversations that later proved incriminating to himself and others, Nixon fought without success in the courts to keep the tapes from the prosecutors. According to Aitken, during the hearings conducted by a Senate committee investigating Watergate, Nixon was linked to the cover-up by his

former counsel John Dean. The tapes also revealed he wanted to get revenge on a number of "enemies." These enemies were on what was called the Nixon enemies list. Thompson claimed he tried in vain for years to be put on the list. Thompson wrote this for self-promotion, and to try to make his readers believe he had enough of Nixon's attention to warrant being put on the enemies list.

In 1974, a grand jury named Nixon a co-conspirator in the cover-up. The House Judiciary Committee recommended that he be impeached for covering up Watergate, abusing his powers, and refusing to honor committee subpoenas. His attorney, James St. Clair, insisted that he make public the taped conversation of June 23, 1972, which implicated Nixon in the cover-up. Realizing that he would be impeached and possibly removed from office, Nixon announced his resignation on Aug. 8, 1974. Gerald Ford was sworn in as his successor. On September 8, Ford granted him a pardon for any federal crimes that he might have committed. (17)

While Thompson's criticism of Nixon was different in tone compared to other writers at the time of the Watergate scandal, editorial criticism of Nixon by reporters was common during the era. Two of the most notable reporters were Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who first reported the Watergate story for the *Washington Post*. Another example of the media hostility toward Nixon came during an October 1973 media conference. During the conference, CBS News reporter Robert Pierpoint asked why Nixon was so angry with reporters, to which Nixon replied, "Don't get the impression that you arouse my anger. You see, one can only be angry with those he respects." (18) Also during the same press conference, Clark Mollenhoff of Cowles publications asked

Nixon a rhetorical and insulting question, and Nixon ended the press conference. Then, according to William E. Porter's book *Assault on the Media: The Nixon Years*,

James Renton, in his *New York Times* column the next day, figured it was a temper tantrum; so did *Newsweek* in its next issue.... Regardless of the amount of spontaneity on the scene, there was an elaborate pattern of follow-up on the part of the administration and some continuing waves within the news business. The charge of lying and vicious reporting was picked up by the National News Council, as described elsewhere in this book.... Only a fragment of the United States press was by that point supporting Richard Nixon. Even such dependable stalwarts as the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Detroit News* were calling for his resignation. (19)

Nixon felt that members of the press were among his enemies. Nixon even wanted to know who was for or against him in the press. But Nixon's efforts to manage the press were often clumsy. Stanley Kutler gives an example:

In October 1969, Nixon pushed (Henry Robbins) Haldeman for "that hard list" of media workers that would allow the Administration to concentrate on friends. Get the list, he told Haldeman, and then "get in (Herbert G.) Klein, (Patrick J.) Buchanan and (Ronald L.) Ziegler and give them their marching orders." Three months later, the President told Haldeman he wanted to give Medals of Freedom to "outstanding people" in the press... Nixon thought the move would have a 'great affect' and wanted the idea check out with 'the PR types.' A Haldeman aide developed a 'friendlies list' of over eighty men and women in the media, ranging across the political spectrum from William Buckley to Sam Donaldson. (20)

It was not just the print media that were investigating Watergate. Walter Cronkite, the respected anchorman for the CBS Evening News, began to speak about Watergate and Nixon's involvement.

In the fall of 1972, the action passed to the dominant delivery mechanism of the American news system, television. Or, specifically, CBS. Or, more specifically, within that broadcasting system, to Walter Cronkite, who on two evenings in October 1972, highlighted his newscasts with an examination of the Watergate break-in. And with that, with the public authority of television insisting that the Watergate affair must be placed on the agenda to be explored, no politician could escape the insistence. It was as if the church had detected a heresy; the inquisition

must pursue the suspects, extract the evidence and then turn the culprits over to the secular arm for punishment. (21)

Two other television reporters who were noticeable in investigating Nixon were Dan Rather from CBS and Tom Brokaw from NBC. At Nixon's last public news conference, he and Rather had an exchange of hostile words. Nixon asked Rather if he was running for something, to which Rather replied "No sir, are you?" Brokaw asked the next question, but he wrote that his question "got lost in the backwash of history."

Brokaw also wrote:

What always amused me about the Nixon doctrine of executive privilege was that it was applied selectively. Dealing with the Judiciary Committee, it was absolute, except when the White House felt it would gain advantage by making a conspicuous display of cooperation by shipping a truckload of expurgated transcripts to (Capitol) Hill. (22)

Of all the mainstream media that followed the Watergate scandal and advocated the resignation of Nixon, it was the *Washington Post*, the paper that originally reported the Watergate story, which followed the story the closest. The main reason for the efforts of the *Post* was due to its editor, Ben Bradlee. Theodore H. White, in his book *Breach of Faith: The Fall of Richard Nixon*, wrote:

It was the news system, thus, that was the first to break forward in pursuit of Richard Nixon; and since all systems are moved by individuals, if one had to choose a name with which to begin the story of the systems, it would be that of a pale-faced, hollowed-eyed, debonair editor called Ben Bradlee—the executive director of the *Washington Post*, crown-piece of a major publishing and communications empire threatened by the Nixon administration with reprisal and dismemberment. (23)

Nixon, of course, was well aware of the news media and their influence during his political career. Nixon did view the media in different terms according to and when he needed something from them. As Kutler explained:



Nixon had both an instinctive, visceral hatred of the news media and a compulsive desire to manipulate and tame them. At times, they were an enemy; at other moments, useful instruments to be played for political and public-relations gain. Richard Nixon and his aides spent much time attempting to master both drives. The Nixon Administration mounted an unprecedented, transparent assault on the media and individual reporters; yet that Administration, like others, went to extraordinary lengths to cultivate the press. (24)

In the end, Watergate was something that still haunted Nixon. Aitken summed it up this way:

Watergate was a Shakespearean tragedy for Richard Nixon. According to most Watergate reviewers, he was the actor who played all the most villainous parts: motivator of the break-in; architect of the cover-up; betrayer of the Constitution; tape-wiper extraordinary; venal tax dodger; obscenitor most foul; and criminal-in-chief. Such characterizations brought comfort to America's liberal establishment and joy to its journalists. Their righteous certainty that Nixon got what he deserved has, until recently, been the authorized version of history. (25)

## 4. Discussion

Why did Thompson devote so much space to Richard Nixon? His writings often portray in opposition to fundamental American value. He portrayed Nixon as the man who would ruin the presidency. He referred to him as a “monument to all the bad genes and broken chromosomes that have queered the reality of the ‘American Dream.’ Nixon is the Dorian Gray of our time, the twisted echo of Jay Gatsby—the candidate from almost—Los Angeles.” (26)

Thompson wrote that he originally wanted to cover Nixon because he saw him as a political loser who had no chance of being elected president due to the fact that Robert Kennedy was going to be running in the 1968 election, and was expected to win the Democratic nomination and the White House. However, upon Kennedy’s assassination, the race for the presidency was once again open, and Thompson saw Nixon as more of a political outsider who was trying to get back into the world of politics than as an actual contender. In fact, he thought Sen. Eugene McCarthy was the more exciting candidate, and was the most likely to have a chance to win the 1968 election.

Thompson originally met Nixon during the 1968 campaign when he interviewed Nixon for the magazine *Pageant*. Thompson claimed he wrote the article because he wanted Nixon to have a cameo role in the book he was writing on President Lyndon B. Johnson (which he never completed). In his 1979 book *The Great Shark Hunt: Gonzo Papers, Volume 1: Strange Tales from a Strange Time*, a compilation of his collected articles from various magazines, he wrote of that first encounter:

Nixon is a serious pro football freak. He and I are old buddies on this front: We once spent a long night together on the Thruway from Boston to Manchester, dissecting the pro & con strategy of the Oakland-Green Bay Super Bowl game. It was the only time I’ve ever seen the bugger relaxed--laughing, whacking me on

the knee as he recalled Max McGee's one-handed catch for the back-breaking touchdown. I was impressed. It was like talking to (Stanley) Owsley about Acid. (A legendary LSD chemist who made the drug for The Grateful Dead) The trouble with Nixon is that he is a serious political junkie. He's totally hooked... and like any other junkie, he's a bummer to have around. Especially as President. And so much for that... I have all of 1972 to fuck around with Nixon, so why hassle it here? (27)

In several of Thompson's other writings, and writings by others about Thompson, this meeting is referred to as the only time Thompson actually liked Nixon, and the only time he could relate to him. The football talk is also the only documented occasion during which Thompson actually was seen with Nixon, and the only time they shared a private moment. According to John Hellmann's book *Fables of Fact*, all the other times Thompson claimed to have either been with Nixon and his insiders, or acting as a fly on the wall listening to what Nixon was saying and doing, are fabrications. These imagined meetings are in the classic sense of gonzo because they are, in essence, entirely made up.

It is possible the reason Thompson could relate to Nixon in terms of football is because the sport could be directly related to gonzo journalism. In gonzo journalism, it is a mixture of thoughts, ideas and words thrown onto a paper almost without rhyme or reason. In football, it is a mixture of strategy, people, rules and fans thrown into a stadium almost without rhyme or reason. Since Nixon was a football fan, Thompson may have seen him as relating to gonzo journalism through Nixon's admiration of the gonzo sport. Both the sport and Nixon had similarities in the way that there was a use of power, players were far from respecting each other, and there was a winner and a loser.

After his first meeting with Nixon, Thompson wrote in a 1968 letter to Nick Ruwe, a midlevel Nixon advance man, that he had interviewed Nixon assuming that he was a monster, and

Although I left N.H. with a strange affection for the man, *as a man*...I still tremble at the prospect of 'President Nixon.' He is the unlucky personification of all the root problems that I'm beginning to suspect are going to croak us very shortly. He doesn't realize this, and I think if he did he would want to be something else...but he's not, and he can't be. (28)

Thompson's other writings on Nixon seem consistent with this quote. The "strange affection" he has for Nixon is replaced by the misgivings and mistrust he feels for the president, and he presents Nixon as the source of America's problems.

During the 1972 election, Thompson wrote a series of articles for *Rolling Stone* when he was with George McGovern during the campaign. The series was compiled in the 1973 book *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, and depicted how he thought McGovern would lose the election, but was willing to support anyone who was trying to beat Nixon. In the preface, Thompson wrote: "It is Nixon himself who represents that dark, venal and incurably violent side of the American character almost every other country in the world has learned to fear and despise." (29)

At this point Thompson might have backed anyone who had a chance of defeating Nixon. He backed McGovern because he thought McGovern would restore honesty and integrity in the White House. But Nixon defeated McGovern by a landslide.

Thompson followed Nixon from the inception of his presidency through the last days of his life. In his latest book of compiled articles, the 1994 book *Better than Sex*, a book about Bill Clinton, Thompson explained why Nixon was such an important subject for him.

The death of Richard Nixon in April 1994 came just as this book was going to press and made it necessary to change the ending. No book about campaign junkies and politics addicts would be complete without including Richard Nixon. He was the ultimate campaign junkie, and his addiction to politics were total. Cheating and lying and stealing were all he really understood in life. Richard

Nixon was the real thing, and I will miss him for the hideous clarity that he brought to my understanding of American politics, and for the anger he inspired in my work. He brought out the best in me, all the way to the end, and for that I am grateful to him. What follows is the obituary that I just delivered to *Rolling Stone*. Read it and weep, for we have lost our Satan. Richard Nixon has gone home to hell. (30)

Thompson's book was already in the press when he heard of Nixon's death, and he stopped production just to include his obituary for Nixon. In the same book, Thompson had already included an obituary for Pat Nixon, Nixon's wife, which was just as unflattering as the one he wrote for Nixon. While he said he would miss Nixon for "the anger he inspired in my work," Thompson could not resist the chance to include one more column dedicated to his arch-nemesis.

In the same book, Thompson wrote that he was poorer for not having Nixon around anymore.

It was Richard Nixon who got me into politics, and now that he's gone, I feel lonely. He was a giant in his way. As long as Nixon was politically alive--and he was, all the way to the end--we could always be sure of finding the enemy on the Low Road. There was no need to look anywhere else for the evil bastard. He had the fighting instincts of a badger trapped by hounds. The badger will roll over on its back and emit a smell of death, which confuses the dogs and lures them in for the traditional ripping and tearing action. But it is usually the badger who does the ripping and tearing action. It is a beast that fights best on its back: rolling under the throat of the enemy and seizing it by the head with all four claws. That was Nixon's style—and if you forgot, he would kill you as a lesson to the others. Badgers don't fight fair, Bubba. That's why God made dachshunds. (31)

It is possible that Thompson felt he was poorer for not having Nixon around because now the symbiotic relationship between Nixon's political career and Thompson's journalistic career was now forever gone. Thompson also felt that now his chance of recovering the fame he had while covering the Watergate scandal was also now forever gone.

This is how Thompson assessed Nixon's political career. When Nixon lost the 1960 presidential race to John F. Kennedy, and again when he lost the race for governor of California in 1962, his political career seemed over. Just when he seemed dead, however, he bounced back and beat his political "enemies" and won the presidency twice. The badger quote is also a reference to how Nixon treated his enemies during the Watergate scandal. If someone was against him, he would seem to be saying one thing, while acting in a totally different manner. For example, he claimed to stand for law and order while authorizing the break-in and cover-up of the Watergate Hotel.

Nixon had Thompson's attention because Nixon represented the side of politics that Thompson claimed not to understand: the lying, betraying, and cheating for the purpose of getting ahead. Another reason Thompson devoted so much time to Nixon is that both were addicted to politics. Nixon sought power, and Thompson sought political stories. Nixon was a good story. Thompson, hoping to be portrayed as a moralist in his writings, framed his reporting as a dualism. By casting Nixon in Manichean terms, Thompson used his gonzo style to exaggerate Nixon's darker impulses. Nixon was a perfect foil for Thompson. Gonzo journalism permitted no ambiguities.

How was Thompson's gonzo coverage of Nixon a departure from more mainstream press coverage? It was much different because of two things.

Thompson claimed to have a personal involvement in the story. He was not being objective about his subject. He was far more openly antagonistic toward Nixon than most reporters, and wrote articles slanted toward getting Nixon out of office, and praised articles from other papers that also advocated Nixon's impeachment or resignation.

Thompson first wrote about Nixon in the gonzo style after Thompson attended the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago and was beaten by the police in the riots that ensued. He created the alter ego Raoul Duke, famous in later years as the protagonist in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, to write about his experience in Chicago. He wrote that when he was punched by a police officer, he decided to “vote for Nixon,” something he in fact never did. He wrote that to show that even though he despised everything Nixon stood for, he still thought Nixon was better than the police in Chicago.

I returned (to Aspen) from Chicago and told everybody to vote for Nixon, as the surest means of seizing the Demo party from the hands of croakers like (Texas governor John B.) Connally. But now—as I ponder that heinous reality—I suspect I won’t be able to bring myself to do that, unless I’m convinced that my Nixon vote is really a contribution to a far, far better thing, as it were....Otherwise, I wouldn’t want it on my conscience. (32)

Thompson also wrote that Nixon had an odd view of reporters in general.

Thompson wrote that in 1960 and 1962, the years Nixon ran for the presidency and governor of California, that Nixon

treated the press like a bunch of scorpions, playing ‘influential’ reporters off against each other and awarding private interviews like gold stars for good behavior. I spent 10 days following him around in New Hampshire and by the time I was finally granted an audience I felt almost lucky. This feeling passed very quickly, however, and now— on the basis of what I wrote--I have no illusions about getting a job as a White House correspondent. For the same reasons, I’ll have a jaundiced view of any correspondents who seems ‘close to Nixon.’ (33)

Thompson assumed that writers who wrote favorable columns for Nixon were granted an audience with him during his presidency. Thompson knew he would never get the private audience with Nixon he desired. He fabricated meetings with Nixon, and this is illustrated in the movie about Thompson’s life, *Where the Buffalo Roam*. The screenplay was partially written by Thompson. To gain a moment with Nixon in the

film, Thompson, played by actor Bill Murray, drugs a reporter Nixon was fond of, takes over his identity, and confronts Nixon in the men's room. When Thompson asks Nixon what he is going to do about the doomed of the world, Nixon replies: "Fuck the doomed."

After Nixon had been elected president, Thompson wrote several stories about him that did not make it into the mainstream press because the facts to substantiate them were not there. One article he wrote for *Rolling Stone* some years later was titled "Nixon and the Whale Woman." Thompson wrote:

In Rio Vista, a small riverside town about an hour's drive east of San Francisco, I met an elderly Chinese woman who claimed to be the former mistress of Richard Nixon. She lived on a houseboat that was moored in a slough near Antioch, she said, and the ex-president had often visited her there when he came to California. "Sometimes he came in a helicopter," she said, "with a bunch of Secret Service Agents. They would sit on the dock and drink long-necked Budweisers while we went below deck and played cards. That's all he ever wanted to do. People said he drank too much gin, but I never saw him that way. We did it for 13 years and nobody ever found out."

I had a bottle of gin that I'd planned to drop off with Nixon's Chinese woman on my way out of town. The press was still on the whale-watch—but not me; I delivered the gin and ran. (34)

Nixon's Chinese mistress was not mentioned anywhere else, and is believed to be a fabrication by Thompson. If Nixon did have a mistress, it would have been more commonly known and reported, especially during the Watergate hearings. Thompson seems to want to "honor" Nixon by giving the woman a bottle of gin, supposedly Nixon's favorite liquor. This story also is making fun of Nixon's masculinity and is ironic. It is making fun of his masculinity because he has a mistress, and all he can do with her is play cards. It is also seen as ironic because Nixon was, as Thompson would say, "screwing" America, while all he does with his mistress is play cards.



In a letter he wrote to his friend Charles Kuralt at CBS News, Thompson suggested items for Kuralt to report on his "On the Road" segments for CBS nightly news. He suggested that Kuralt do a segment on Justice William O. Douglas because Thompson thought he was dishonest, or the summer freak festival in Aspen. Thompson then wrote: "Maybe you should come out here for Jack Benny's concert. Yeah...I'm serious. He's doing a straight classical concert for the Aspen Music Associates...the old, respectable folks. Can anyone doubt that Nixon is running things?" (35)

Thompson could not believe that Jack Benny, who was seventy-five years old when this letter was written and had been doing comedy routines for years, was now doing a straight classical routine for "respectable folks." The reason he said that Nixon must have been running things is because he sees Nixon, who was so serious in life as not to even take off his suit at the beach, was now trying to make the rest of the country just as serious.

At the first signs of a problem with the Watergate break-in, Thompson wrote in this excerpt in a *Rolling Stone* article included in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*:

Our Barbie doll President, with his Barbie doll wife and his boxful of Barbie doll children is also America's answer to the monstrous Mr. Hyde. He speaks for the Werewolf in us; the bully, the predatory shyster who turns into something unspeakable, full of claws and bleeding string warts, on nights when the moon comes too close....

At the stroke of midnight in Washington, a drooling red-eyed beast with the legs of a man and a head of a giant hyena crawls out its bedroom window in the South Wing of the White House and leaps fifty feet down to the lawn...pauses briefly to strangle the Chow watchdog, then races off into the darkness...towards the Watergate, snarling with lust, loping through the alleys behind the Pennsylvania Avenue, and trying desperately to remember which one of those four hundred identical balconies is the one outside Martha Mitchell's apartment....

Ah...nightmares, nightmares. But I was only kidding. The President of the United States would never act that weird. At least not during football season. But

how would the voters react if they knew the President of the United States was presiding over a complex, far-reaching and sinister operation on the part of White House aides and the Nixon campaign organization...involving sabotage. Forgery, theft of confidential files, surveillance of Democratic candidates and their families and persistent efforts to lay the basis for possible blackmail and intimidation. (36)

The “drooling red-eyed beast” personifies Nixon’s lust for power. He has given Nixon’s unlawful actions a conventional literary form, the beast within. Thompson puts in the reference to football because the only time he liked Nixon was when they first met and talked about football. He wished the “Mr. Hyde” part of Nixon was not the President, but the “Dr. Jekyll” he met in 1968 during the election. The allusion is to the 1886 novel by Robert L. Stevenson. Thompson tried to distance Nixon from the man he could relate to in that earlier meeting.

At the onset of the Watergate scandal, Thompson, using his alter ego Raoul Duke, wrote in an article for *Rolling Stone* titled “Memo from the Sports Desk & Rude Notes from a Decompression Chamber in Miami,” that Thompson was locked in a decompression chamber in Miami, and he seemed “blindly obsessed with the day-to-day details of the Watergate hearings.” (37) Thompson added that he was “one of the original victims of the Watergate syndrome—but nobody recognized it then; they called it Paranoia.” (38)

In the September 1973 issue of *Rolling Stone*, Thompson wrote about Nixon and his relation to the Watergate scandal. He refers to the “vicious tentacles of Watergate” because the scandal seemed to be drawing more and more people into it as time went by and facts were uncovered. He also said Nixon was giving in to psychosomatic illness, and that if Nixon ever had to give a testimony on the event of Watergate, “he won’t be able to give away dollar bills in Times Square on the Fourth of July.”

Thompson in the same article wrote that the break-in haunted him because he was in the Watergate Hotel the night of the break-in. He wrote:

On the night of June 17th I spent most of the evening in the Watergate Hotel: From about eight o'clock until I was swimming laps in the indoor pool, and from 10:30 until a bit after 1:00 AM I was drinking tequila in the Watergate bar with Tom Quinn, a sports columnist for the now-defunct *Washington Daily News*. Meanwhile, upstairs in room 214, (Howard) Hunt and (G. Gordon) Liddy were already monitoring the break-in, by walkie-talkie, with ex-FBI agent Alfred Baldwin in his well-equipped spy-nest across Virginia Avenue in room 419 of the Howard Johnson Motor Lodge. Jim McCord had already taped the locks on two doors just underneath the bar in the Watergate garage, and it was probably just about time that Quinn and I called for our last round of tequila that McCord and his team of Cubans moved into action-and got busted less than an hour later. All this was happening less than 100 yards from where we were sitting in the bar, sucking limes and salt with our Sauza Gold and muttering darkly about the fate of Duane Thomas and the pigs who run the National Football League. (39)

There are two reasons that Thompson could claim to be troubled about the Watergate break-in. He could claim to be upset about it because he was unaware of the break-in. He felt that he should have known it was happening, and because he felt he should have known, the Watergate scandal was a constant theme in his writings for the next 20 years. The other reason could be because this was what Thompson considered a perfect gonzo event, and Thompson was not a part of it. It could have been gonzo because of the absurdity of the break-in, and the absolute disregard for the law the break-in was going against.

As Thompson took a stand against Nixon in *Rolling Stone* during the hearings, he was also pleased when some major newspapers followed suit. In an August 1973 letter to Katherine Graham, publisher of *The Washington Post*, whose reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein wrote about the Watergate scandal from the beginning to Nixon's resignation, Thompson wrote:

Okay for now. In closing, however, I'd like to congratulate you on the king-hell of a job the *Post* has done on the Watergate story. If you keep up this kind of coverage, you'll put me permanently out of work—which I'd consider a real favor at this point, so keep hammering the bastards. (40)

Another difference in Thompson's writing is that he was able to fabricate events, and report them as if they actually occurred. The best instance comes from the October 10, 1974 *Rolling Stone* article "The Scum Also Rises." Thompson was still in Washington covering the Watergate story when he reported on what Nixon and his press secretary, Ron Zeigler, were talking about and doing at San Clemente while they were waiting to hear if Nixon was in danger of being impeached. The entire scene is comical. Nixon is portrayed as insecure and half mad at the prospect of being impeached. The scene starts with Zeigler telling Nixon that the jury has returned and how they voted, and Nixon misunderstands and thinks he is not going to be impeached. When he finally realizes what is really happening, he goes into a tirade about what he has to do to get out of the situation.

Thompson also wrote of an imaginary meeting with Nixon during the Watergate trials. Thompson wrote:

The music, yes. I hear the sound of drums now...an interview with Richard Nixon, who calls me at my Chicago hotel, during the course of my research, and offers me \$20,000 for my information...then a meeting with Nixon and his advisors, they want me to exploit the freak-out...but an argument erupts when one of Nixon's aides makes a crude remark about his daughter—undertones of drugs and nymphomania, Julie caught on the 14 green at Palm Springs with a Negro caddy at midnight, the caddy now in prison, framed on a buggery count. (41)

Thompson portrays himself in the scene as an egomaniac giving information to Nixon. Thompson writes himself into the story as a character with the "information" that can help make Nixon popular with the counter-culture, and he is delighted that the

president is asking for his help, although there is a price. Thompson satirizes Nixon's circle of advisors. Thompson creates a satirical double standard by advocating Nixon's downfall while writing fabricated scenes in which he gives Nixon key information to save his presidency.

In a May 1978 issue of *Rolling Stone*, Thompson complained about ads being for Honda motorcycles, and related his distaste for Honda to another fabricated meeting at Nixon's home with some of the important members of his staff. Thompson wrote:

Fuck those people. I wouldn't ride a Honda to Richard Nixon's funeral...and in fact the last person I knew who owned a Honda was Ron Ziegler; that was down in San Clemente, just before The Resignation, and I recall that Zeigler was eager to lend the thing to me, for reasons I never quite understood...but I remember a cocktail party down at Nixon's house, crazed on mescaline and bending the casual elbow with Ron, Henry Kissinger, General Haig and others of that stripe, who were all very friendly with me at that point in time. Even to me...Annie Laibovitz was there and I was negotiating with Ziegler about trading me his Honda for my Z-Datsun for a few days, while Ziegler's deputy, Gerald Warren, was laughing with Annie about how Kissinger thought I was "an Air Force Colonel in mufti..." (42)

Thompson also imagined another meeting with Nixon after he originally met him when Nixon was campaigning for the presidency in 1968. The article started out with the 1984 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, but drifted into an imaginary meeting with Nixon in 1968 about the Tet offensive in Vietnam. Thompson wrote:

I remember watching TV film of the '68 Tet offensive on the American embassy in Saigon with Richard Nixon in a room at the Holiday Inn in Manchester, New Hampshire. It appeared on the evening news, with no warning, while we were having a drink and talking about something else—and Nixon went half mad with rage at the very idea of such a thing, much less the televised reality of a few dozen gooks in black pajamas actually *firing weapons* into the U.S. Embassy compound. There were no immediate reports of American casualties, but the mere sight of foreigners crazy enough to assault Our Embassy drove Nixon into a frenzy, as if we were witnessing the end of the civilized world as we knew it. A thing like that had not happened since the time of the first Roosevelt, and even then they were punished with the same kind of terrible ferocity that Harry Truman visited on the

Japs for bombing Pearl Harbor. It was unthinkable, to Nixon, no matter what he said later in his memoirs, that *anybody* would physically attack a U.S. Embassy. I remember the moment very clearly, and in truth I was almost as shocked as he was. The incident, a mere firecracker compared to what happened yesterday in Lebanon, blew George Romney out of the race for the GOP nomination almost overnight and confused Nelson Rockefeller's long-awaited challenge so totally that Nixon was able to walk away with New Hampshire and the White House. (43)

This scene is another example of Thompson fabricating a meeting with Nixon. He attempted to connect the events of the 1984 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon through the Tet offensive, another hostile attack taken against the U.S. during the Vietnam conflict. This is one of the few instances where Thompson does not belittle Nixon's words or actions in one of the fabricated events he writes about. Instead, it would seem that Thompson was actually praising Nixon for his rage and patriotic spirit.

In a 1974 *Playboy* interview, Thompson was asked what he thought of critics attacking his style, most notably the Columbia Journalism Review, as part commentary, part fantasy and partly "the ravings of someone too long into drugs." He replied:

Well, fuck the Columbia Journalism Review. They don't pay my rent. That kind of senile gibberish reminds me of all those people back in the early Sixties who were saying, 'This guy Dylan is giving Tin-pan Alley a bad name—hell, he's no musician. He can't even carry a tune.' Actually, it's kind of a compliment when people like that devote so much energy to attacking you. (44)

During the 1988 presidential race, another race Thompson watched and wrote about, he reported that George H. Bush had no chance at becoming the next president, and placed him in the same category as Nixon. In an article he wrote after Nixon died, Thompson said

Some people will say that words like *scum* and *rotten* are wrong for Objective Journalism—which is true, but they miss the point. It was the built-in blind spots of the Objective rules and dogma that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place. He looked so good on paper that you could almost vote

for him sight unseen. He seemed so all-American, so much like Horatio Alger, that he was able to slip through the cracks of Objective Journalism. You had to get Subjective to see Nixon clearly, and the shock of recognition was often painful. (45)

This is an instance where Thompson relates Nixon to Horatio Alger, who Thompson claimed as a favorite author from when Thompson was a youth. Thompson compared Nixon to Alger throughout Nixon's life, mainly because in Alger's novels the hero always had to overcome adversity to triumph. But Thompson saw in Nixon a dark version of Alger's character, a man who would do anything to succeed, even if it meant by less than honorable means.

Thompson was not a mainstream reporter. He fabricated stories. He commented on the president in an unusual way. He was not objective. He put stories into the first person. His articles were different because the story was about him getting the story.

What rhetoric did Thompson use to describe Nixon before, during, and after the Watergate scandal? Thompson used derogatory terms nearly every time he mentioned Nixon. From his earliest letters, to the final compilation of articles, Thompson was highly critical, and in some instances what he wrote was completely scandalous. In the first volume of letters, *The Proud Highway*, Thompson simply mentions he is opposed to Nixon. As the years went by, his criticisms got stranger and stranger. During the 1968 election, he wrote:

It seems to have been a really awful year for everybody except maybe Nixon, that evil scheming bastard. My mail is a snowballing nightmare; there is *no* good news. And no hope of any. Nixon is going to win and then implement the Wallace program-like Johnson became Goldwater. (Republican vice president-elect) Agnew is the wave of future, a stupid shithead, so cheap and useless that he can't understand his own failure. My depression with current politics in this country is so vast that I can't find words to express it. (46)

Even before Nixon had been elected, Thompson anticipated his presidency would fail. He also predicted Agnew would be a thorn in Nixon's side, which he was when news of Agnew's mental treatment came to light while he and Nixon were campaigning in 1972. During the 1972 election, while Thompson was on the McGovern trail, he still referred to Nixon in the articles he published for *Rolling Stone*, later turned into *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*. In one excerpt he wrote:

Neither the press nor McGovern's hard-core staffers ever took (Sargent) Shriver seriously--except as a pragmatic necessity and a vaguely embarrassing burden. It was like Nixon's abortive plan to send Jimmy Hoffa to Hanoi to negotiate the release of American prisoners--or sending a used-car salesman from Pasadena into public debate with the Prime Minister of Sweden on the question of Richard Nixon's moral relationship with the ghost of Adolph Hitler. (47)

Thompson is relating Nixon to the ghost of Hitler because he claimed to see the two as kindred spirits: both had the support of their country, and both ended up losing the power they sought. In many of Thompson's articles, he associates Nixon, or some member of his political staff, with the Nazi party in some allusive way. Such extreme name calling was a risky rhetoric device. Thompson got away with the slander, perhaps, because the audience did not take him seriously. Nixon was indeed being called a fascist by many at the time, especially on university campuses. This was the ultimate slur, and ostensibly a counter to Nixon's Red-Baiting earlier in his career. The implication, perhaps, was that Nixon himself had engaged in rhetorical name calling and smearing of opponents. Now he was getting his own media line. In the quote Thompson also mentions Jimmy Hoffa, the Teamster's leader, and an unknown used-car salesman as being members of Nixon political party. He is including these two because both Hoffa



and used-car salesmen are figures in American society who are not trusted. Thompson is suggesting Nixon's corruption through association.

When the Watergate story came to light, Thompson was at his most venomous toward Nixon. In different articles, such as "Fear and Loathing at the Watergate: Mr. Nixon Has Cashed His Check" and "The Scum Also Rises," Thompson called Nixon a criminal geek, a liar, a treacherous bastard, a sick junkie (in relation to politics), and a paranoid degenerate. In a 1974 *Playboy*, Thompson was asked if he felt any sympathy as he watched Nixon go down, he replied:

Sympathy? No. You have to remember that for my entire adult life, Richard Nixon has been the national boogeyman. I can't remember a time when he wasn't around—always evil, always ugly, 15 or 20 years of fucking people around. The whole Watergate chancre was a monument to everything he stood for: This was a cheap thug, a congenital liar....What the Angels used to call a gunsel, a punk who can't even pull off a liquor-store robbery without shooting somebody or getting shot, or busted. (48)

Through the whole Watergate scandal, from the break-in to the day Nixon resigned the presidency, Thompson saw Nixon as a failure as a man and a president. In the quote he refers to Nixon as a 'gunsel,' and this implies that he saw Nixon as an incompetent president because he could not handle anything himself, and when he tried to, he only made matters worse. The main point when Thompson saw Nixon as the gunsel was when Nixon refused to hand over the White House tapes. If he had done that, perhaps he would not have had to resign, and the whole scandal eventually would have blown over. But since he made such a spectacle about the tapes, he lost every chance he had of resolving the scandal.

A 91-year-old woman, Carrie Neftzger, accidentally received a *Rolling Stone* subscription and read Thompson's article "The Scum Also Rises." She wrote in a letter

to the editor that Thompson is so “ignorant that he doesn’t know that people with adequate vocabularies and something worthwhile to say do not need to resort to such obvious means of getting attention and that profanity is a ‘crutch for conversational cripples.’” (49) Responding to her, he wrote that he would be

Enclosing the most recent *RS*, with my compliments—and despite your nasty language about me, I’m sure you’ll read it. You’ve lived long enough to know that words are just *tools*, for a writer, and when I write about Richard Nixon I’ll use all the tools I can get my hands on, to make people like you *think* about why Richard Nixon was elected by a landslide in 1972. My primary idea, whenever I sit down to write, is to *get the attention* of people like you, and make you *think*—and your letter of cancellation tells me I was successful in your case. If you read the enclosed piece with any kind of wit, you’ll see that what you react to as “vulgarity” is only a prod to make you *listen*...and if you disagree, well...I’ve done what I can, eh? (50)

There are two main points to discuss here. One is that Thompson was willing to listen to the woman’s complaints about him and his portrayal of Nixon. However, while Thompson was willing to listen, he made sure to illustrate to her, by sending her another issue of *Rolling Stone*, that he thought he was still correct in his opinion of Nixon and she was wrong in hers. The second point is that Thompson explained to her that his words were his tools, and his rhetoric was a device he used to draw attention to his writing. Gonzo, in other words, was a journalistic strategy to attract attention. This quote is important because here is one of the few instances where Thompson has declared that his writing is intended to make people think about the situation in the country, and is not necessarily what Thompson believes.

Despite what Nixon had put the country through during his presidency, Thompson contended the alternatives were not much better. He wrote:

This is the horror of American politics today—not that Richard Nixon and his fixers have been crippled, convicted, indicted, disgraced and even jailed—but that

the only available alternatives are not much better; the same dim collection of burned-out hacks who have been fouling our air with their gibberish for the last twenty years. How long, oh Lord, how long? And how much longer will we have to wait before some high-powered shark with a fistful of answers will finally bring us face-to-face with the ugly question that is already so close to the surface in this country, that sooner or later even politicians will have to cope with? Is this democracy worth all the risks and problems that necessarily go with it? Or, would we all be happier by admitting that the whole thing was a lark from the start and now that it hasn't worked out, to hell with it." (51)

Since the President had made such a shambles of the presidency, would the country not be better off getting rid of the presidency and the Constitution and living without them? Clearly not, but Thompson saw Nixon as undermining the faith the American people had in the White House and the Constitution. He saw the threat to the Constitution as profound, and developed a rhetorical reportorial strategy to emphasize the danger.

In a 1973 article included in *Generation of Swine*, Thompson wrote:

Why does Nixon use the clumsy Dex machine, instead of the Mojo? Why does he drink martinis, instead of Wild Turkey? Why does he wear boxer shorts? Why is his life a grim monument to everything plastic, de-sexed and non-sensual? When I look at Nixon's White House I have a sense of absolute personal alienation. The President and I seem to disagree on almost *everything*—except pro football, and Nixon's addiction to that has caused me to view it with a freshly jaundiced eye, or what the late John Foster Dulles called 'an agonizing reappraisal.' Anything Nixon likes *must* be suspect. Like cottage cheese and catsup... 'The Dex machine.' Jesus! Learning that Nixon and his people use *this*—instead of the smaller, quicker, more versatile (and portable) Mojo Wire—was almost the final insult: coming on the heels of the Gross sense of Injury I felt when I saw my name was not included on the infamous 'Enemies of the White House' list." (52)

Thompson again uses hyperbole to exaggerate his difference with Nixon. The articles Thompson sent in to his publishers by using the "Mojo Wire," an early form of the fax machine. The one Nixon was using was the "Dex," an older and bulkier version of the Mojo. The implication is that Nixon is a reactionary, a man both repressed and

repressive, resistant to change, and of doubtful taste. Thompson had held out the possibility that he could perhaps relate to Nixon as a 'regular guy' who liked professional football, but even that is now questioned.

Thompson also feigns disappointment at not being on Nixon's enemies list. He assumed Nixon would place him on the list due to the articles he would write and the things he would say about Nixon in public. When Thompson found out he was not included on the list, he claimed to be offended.

During the 1988 campaign, when Thompson was compiling articles for *Generation of Swine*, he began to comment on what Nixon had said about then-Vice President Bush. Thompson uses what Nixon said about Bush to run the comments back on Bush. Thompson wrote:

In a June '87 memo, titled "The 1988 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION," Nixon scanned the whole field of candidates and had this to say about George Bush: "Bush continues to have a substantial lead in the polls. His major assets are that he has the broadest experience of any of the candidates, by far the best organization, the most money, and most important—can campaign as the Vice President." Nixon understands these advantages. He had all of them when he ran back in 1960, and he got his head handed to him by a gang of young upstarts who worked for Jack Kennedy—and that name had given him nightmares ever since. He knows what it feels like to be the rich boy at the wedding in "The Graduate." ...It was "Joe Biden's revenge," said some, or maybe "the law of karma"...but Richard Nixon knew what it really was. He has been elected to almost every office in America except sheriff, and he understands politics as well as almost anybody. He is a *mechanic*, a true leverage junkie—and what he saw at the end of those (Judge Robert) Bork hearings was a gray-haired gent named *Kennedy*, who was sitting to Biden's left and adding up the votes. (53)

The advantages Thompson was talking about was Nixon having power and influence in Washington, just like George H. Bush had at the time he was running for president in 1988. Thompson mentions both the Kennedy's just to show contempt for Nixon. Since Nixon feared the Kennedy's politically, Thompson included a reference to

at least one Kennedy in most of his writings. Perhaps this was intended to remind readers that Nixon lacked legitimacy. He was a poor surrogate for a Kennedy. The references also reminded readers that Nixon lacked the glamour of the Kennedys.

In an article for *Rolling Stone*, included in *Better than Sex*, Thompson wrote that Nixon

Approved my first White House press pass and never had me busted for the horrible things I wrote about him. He had more Dobermans on his staff than anybody I've ever seen in politics, but he never sicced them on me—at least not on the level of 'termination with extreme prejudice' that he applied to so many others. Who knows why? Maybe he was just 'too busy' with China or counting brown bags of cash that he often solicited on White House stationery from rich thugs who wanted influence. Richard Nixon knew pimps, and they knew him. He was criminally insane from birth, and so was his unhappy wife. They were genetically fated, and they had no choice but to act like the rodents they were. (54)

He also wrote:

If the right people had been in charge of Nixon's funeral, his casket would have been launched into one of those open-sewage canals that would empty into the ocean just south of Los Angeles. He was a swine of a man and a jabbering dupe of a president. Nixon was so crooked that he needed servants to help him screw his pants on every morning. Even his funeral was illegal. He was queer in the deepest way. His body should have been burned in a trash bin. (55)

Even after Nixon's death, Thompson still did not show Nixon any respect.

Thompson has no real reason to be "grateful" to Nixon for giving him a White House press pass, or not having him murdered. Nixon, apparently, took no notice of Thompson, nor would Thompson really have expected him to. Nixon was not interested in what *Rolling Stone* said about him. The *New York Times* was another matter. In the next paragraph, Thompson mentioned that if the "right" people, most likely Thompson himself, had been in charge of the funeral, it would have been handled the correctly.

Thompson wanted to send him out into the sewage canals where he believed Nixon belonged.

Thompson's rhetoric in describing Nixon was always derogatory and degrading. He vehemently disliked Nixon and everything he stood for, and showed the audience through his gonzo writing style what he personally thought about Nixon as a man and as a president, and did not pull any punches. His readers would have expected no less.

How did Thompson's coverage of Nixon change during the period under study?

In his early letters, Thompson makes reference to being opposed to Nixon. He opposed him throughout his life. He is fearful when Nixon is running for president in 1968 that he will ruin the presidency, and even mentions that he is ruining the stock market because Thompson listened to his advice about what stocks to invest in and lost money.

When Nixon was running for re-election in 1972, Thompson wrote about the state of the country.

What happened between April and November of 1968, Nixon plunged a whole generation of hyper-political young Americans into a terminal stupor. Nixon blamed it on communist drugs and said he had The Cure, but what he never understood was that the simple stark fact of President Nixon *was* the problem, or at least the main symbol. It is hard to even remember precisely—much less explain—just what a terrible bummer the last half of '68 turned into. Actually, it took less than three months. Martin Luther King was murdered in April, Bobby Kennedy in June...then Nixon was nominated in July, and in August the Democrats went to Chicago for the final act. By Labor Day it was all over. "The Movement" was finished, except for the trials, and somebody else was dealing. The choice between Nixon and Humphrey was no choice at all—not in the context of what had already gone down, between Selma and Chicago. To be offered Hubert Humphrey as a sort of withered booby prize for all those bloody failures seemed more like a deliberate insult than a choice. (56)

Thompson was relating how Nixon neutralized the youth vote in 1968. Nixon blamed the nation's problems on everything but Nixon himself and what he had come to

represent. Thompson also told how with the nomination of Humphrey as the Democratic candidate offered little alternatives to Nixon. While writing about the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., Thompson implied that Nixon's election was the assassination of honesty and integrity in American politics.

After Nixon had won the 1972 election, and the Watergate break-in and cover-up was beginning to be exposed, Thompson wrote this about Nixon:

It is difficult for the ordinary voter to come to grips with the notion that a truly *evil* man, a truthless monster with the brains of a king rat and the soul of a cockroach, is about to be sworn in as president of the United States for the next four years....And he will bring his *gang* in with him, a mean network of lawyers and salesmen and pimps who will loot the national treasury, warp the laws, mock the rules and stay awake 22 hours a day looking for at least one reason to declare war, officially, on some hapless tribe or a heathen fanatic. (57)

As before, Thompson associates Nixon with all that is vile and evil, warning that his election will mean the end of morality in public life.

When Thompson went to Washington to cover the Watergate hearings, he was even more critical of the president because he claimed to feel the need to be absolved for not being aware of what was happening the night of the break-in. Ostensibly feeling the need for absolution, he attacked Nixon in a vindictive and critical analysis that appeared in the August 1973 issue of *Rolling Stone*.

What almost happened here—and what was only avoided because the men who made Nixon President and who were running the country in his name knew in their hearts that they were all mean, hollow little bastards who couldn't dare turn their backs on each other—was a takeover and total perversion of the American political process by a gang of cold-blooded fixers so incompetent that they couldn't even pull off a simple burglary...which tends to explain, among other things, why 25,000 young Americans died for no reason in Vietnam while Nixon and his brain trust were trying to figure out how to admit the whole thing was a mistake from the start. (58)

This is a rare example of Thompson alluding to the fact that while Nixon was a corrupt president, he might just be the face of the presidency, and the actual power was in the hands of “mean hollow bastards.” It is also an allusion to the “gunsel” term Thompson had mentioned earlier. He makes this allusion when he said they could not even pull off the simple burglary. Still, in Thompson’s eyes, whoever actually had the power of the presidency was truly evil, and had sent thousands of Americans to their death for no reason. This sort of claim is typical of Thompson, who enjoys spoofing vast conspiracies of indeterminate origin.

In the midst of the Watergate investigation, Thompson had his own ideas about what should happen to Nixon. He was worried that Nixon would somehow manage to escape the impending trial, and even if he was brought to trial, the trial would leave a hole in the political system that could not be filled before the election of 1972. He was also concerned with what would happen to the presidency and the Constitution if Nixon were brought to trial. Thompson had already suggested that perhaps the Constitution might need to be rewritten. He suggested that a trial could severely damage American democracy. Thompson wrote:

By the time Richard Milhous Nixon goes on trial in the Senate, the only reason for trying him will be to understand how he ever became president of the United States...and the real defendant, at that point, will be the American Political System.

The trial of Richard Nixon, if it happens, will amount to a *de facto* trial of the American Dream. The importance of Nixon now is *not* merely to get rid of him; that’s a strictly political consideration...the real question is why we are being forced to impeach a president elected by the largest margin in the history of presidential elections.

So, with the need for sleep coming up very fast now, we want to look at two main considerations: 1) The necessity of actually bringing Nixon to trial, in order to understand our reality in the same way the Nuremberg trials forced Germany to confront itself...and 2) The absolutely vital necessity of filling the vacuum that the Nixon impeachment will leave, and the hole that will be there in 1976. (59)



A letter Thompson sent to his friend in 1977 is especially revealing. Thompson explains how Nixon was good for Thompson's career, if not for the country or the "American Dream."

My behavior as a person, writer, advocate, midnight strategist, hatchet man, and serious gambler for at least the past ten years has been generally beneficial to myself, my friends, my wife and son, and most of the people I tend to side with, whenever the deal goes down...Which is not a bad thing to look back on: and if I seem a bit cynical, at this point, or a trifle uncertain about the Meaning of It All, it is probably because of my secret conviction that a whole generation of journalists went over the hump with the Nixon/Watergate story itself, and that the odds against any of us ever hitting that kind of peak again are impossibly long. It was not just the Watergate story itself, but the fact that nobody who worked on the leading edge of journalism in the years between 1960 and 1975 could have asked for or even hoped for a better or more dramatically perfect climax to what now seems like one long violent and incredibly active story. When I proposed that book on "The Death of the American Dream" back in 1967 and then rushed off to cover the first act of Nixon's political "comeback" in the '68 New Hampshire primary, my instinct was better than any of us knew at the time—because the saga of Richard Nixon *is* The Death of the American Dream. He was our Gatsby, but the light at the end of his pier was black instead of green...Whoever writes the true biography of Richard Nixon will write the definitive book on "The Death of the American Dream." (60)

"The American Dream" is itself a largely rhetorical concept of uncertain origins and dubious definitions, a concept that sometimes was used in the 1960's to illustrate the search by a young generation for something to believe in. By conflating Nixon's importance, by making him in some way the equivalent of The American Dream, or its "death," Thompson is again using the gonzo technique. Nixon is no longer just Nixon, but Jay Gatsby, from F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. Or, he is the Dream itself. But the Dream was now going to destroy the nation that created it.

Also in the quote, Thompson mentions the book he was going to write entitled "The Death of the American Dream." This was an idea that he has mentioned several

times, but he has never written yet. He also says in the quote that his instincts were right about Nixon. This is purely a claim by Thompson, and was written just for him to seem to be right about what he predicted about Nixon.

Thompson saw Nixon as a political assassin, and he believed that Nixon fulfilled his prophecy with the Watergate scandal. He saw Nixon as the person to destroy American politics and even journalism itself. Without Nixon, according to Thompson, journalism would never be the same. He claimed many journalists were never able to go back to the kind of reporting they were doing before Nixon and the Watergate scandal.

Also in 1977, when Thompson was at the beginning of writing a book based on his experiences in the 1970s, he was still claiming to be upset because Nixon had not included him on his enemies list. In a partial manuscript he was preparing to give to his editor, he wrote:

There is probably some kind of weird and perhaps even “poetic” justice in a thing like that—but the logic escapes me right now, and I don’t have the time to brood on it; except maybe to fall back on that old and usually accurate piece of folk-wisdom about “knowing a man by his enemies.” Which gives me a definite sense of inner peace and public satisfaction, because the three names that have hovered near the top of my own “enemies list” for the past fifteen years are Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey and *Time* magazine. I have dealt with them all, at close range, and my only regret is that I stomped too softly on the bastards.... (61)

This is in direct reference to Thompson’s earlier comments about not being included on Nixon’s enemies list. As the years had passed since Thompson wrote about the enemies list until he wrote this article, he had decided to make his own enemies list. Because Nixon had not included Thompson on his list, Thompson was sure not only to include Nixon on his, but to place him at the top of the list.

Early in the 1988 presidential election campaign, Thompson was reflecting

on the chances George H. Bush had of winning the election. He made a connection between Bush and Nixon again when he wrote:

George prospered, nonetheless. He went to Yale and made friends in national politics—so many, in fact, that he was soon offered jobs like U.S. ambassador to Beijing, national chairman of the Republican Party, and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, by Richard Nixon.

That was in the good old days, when real men were still running the White House and the president roamed the hallways at night with a beaker full of gin in his fist, raving and jabbering at huge oil portraits of Abe Lincoln and John Phillip Sousa while Henry Kissinger followed him around and made notes.

Nixon was a bad drunk when he got his hands on a pint of gin, and in those last ugly days when his whole life was draining away like hot Jell-O and all of his boys were being hauled off to prison by federal marshals, he came more and more to love his gin.

His brain was gone, by then, and on nights toward the end it was only the butler, Manolo, who kept him from getting busted for public drunkenness.

On some nights he wanted to drive—maybe over the bridge to Virginia or down to his private dock on the river where he kept the presidential yacht tied up—The Sequoia, which he used as a personal hideout where he could gamble all night with friends.

Reagan seems to have no friends—only Nixon, who calls him every day in his new role as the heir apparent to the doomed and disloyal George Shultz. (62)

This is another fabrication. Thompson could not know how Nixon was acting in the White House, or if he actually was walking the halls drunk on gin. And, it is in classic Thompson gonzo style that an article that focused on George H. Bush's chances of winning the presidency somehow became related to Nixon.

In a 1990 memoir, Thompson writes about the January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1974 column he wrote for *The New York Times* op-ed page. In it he attacked Nixon, and while he was commenting on Arab oil and Kissinger, he advocated a scenario for the United States to attack the Soviet Union and take the oil fields there. Thompson, along with the *Times*, received a letter from an Arab embassy attacking the *Times* for putting such 'madness' in the paper. Thompson also took the opportunity while writing the column to bash Nixon.

Thompson wrote:

Christ, it wasn't seven months before Kissinger himself proposed this, as well as Ford, and the idea of invading the Middle East to seize the Arab oil became a definite policy option in the energy crisis.

But none of them approached Nixon. He had the classic absolute lack of any integrity or honesty or decency.

Nixon was a monument to everything rotten in the American dream—he was a monument to why it failed.

He is our monument. (63)

When Nixon died in 1994, Thompson wrote a lengthy article for *Rolling Stone* that showed he was still critical of him and Watergate more than 20 years later. He wrote that there should be no historical error about Nixon.

Richard Nixon was an evil man—evil in every way that only those who believe in the physical reality of the Devil can understand it. He was utterly without ethics or morals or any bedrock sense of decency. Nobody trusted him—except maybe the Stalinist Chinese, and honest historians will remember him mainly as a rat who kept scrambling to get back on the ship. (64)

In regard to his criticism of Watergate after Nixon's death, Thompson wrote:

For Nixon, the loss of (J. Edgar) Hoover led inevitably to the disaster of Watergate. It meant hiring a New Director—who turned out to be an unfortunate toady named L. Patrick Gray, who squealed like a pig in hot oil the first time Nixon leaned on him. Gray panicked and fingered White House Counsel John Dean, who refused to take the rap and rolled over, instead, on Nixon, who was trapped like a rat by Dean's relentless, vengeful testimony and went all to pieces right in front of our eyes on TV. That is Watergate, in a nut, for people with seriously diminished attention spans. The real story is a lot longer and reads like a textbook on human treachery. They were all scum, but only Nixon walked free and lived to clear his name. (65)

Both of these quotes, written after Nixon's death, showed that Thompson still had not forgiven him for the Watergate scandal. By mentioning others in the scandal who fingered Nixon in the break-in, it would seem Thompson was one again referring to them as gunsels, who could only save themselves by exposing their boss.

Was Thompson less critical of Nixon as time went by? According to what he wrote about in articles for magazines, and especially the compilation book *Better than*

*Sex* that was published with the “eulogy” for Nixon, Thompson seemed to have as much hatred for Nixon as he did for him during the 1968 election. In fact, since Thompson thought Nixon had no chance of winning the election then, and was merely reporting on him as a “political loser,” it would seem that as time went by he hated Nixon more and more.

Did Thompson offer any substantive criticism of Nixon? To a certain extent, Thompson’s analysis was different because he was reporting on Nixon as more or less a voice of New Journalism, and his audience was not the same audience as that of the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. Thompson, who claimed it was Richard Nixon who got him into politics, said he was trying to get the youth of the 1960s and 1970s involved in politics and to care about the country. He said he wanted them to know what illegal activities their president was doing.

His first perspective occurs in a letter published in *Fear and Loathing in America*. He calls Nixon’s 1962 memoir *Six Crises* “complete bullshit.” His next perspective came in 1968 when Nixon was attempting to reinvent himself as a political candidate. In the July 1968 issue of *Pageant*, Thompson wrote:

It was with a sense of morbid curiosity that I went to New England not long ago to check on ‘the real Richard Nixon.’ Not necessarily the ‘new Nixon,’ or even the newest model of the old ‘new Nixon,’ who is known to the press corps that follows him as ‘Nixon Mark IV.’ My assignment was to find the man behind all these masks, or maybe to find that there was no mask at all—that Richard Milhous Nixon, at age 55, was neither more nor less than what he appeared to be—a plastic man in a plastic bag, surrounded by hired wizards so cautious as to seem almost plastic themselves... These political handlers were chosen this time for their coolness and skill for only one job: to see that Richard Nixon is the next President of the United States. (66)

At the time Thompson wrote this, he was still unsure of what to think of Nixon. He had gone to meet Nixon, expecting to find a candidate who really did not have much of a chance of winning the presidency. What he found, however, was a candidate to whom he could relate to only on the subject of football. After Thompson met the newest version of Nixon, his view of Nixon as a political loser was reinforced when Nixon only allowed Thompson to interview him on the subject of football. Perhaps this to was a satire because Nixon often posed as a sports expert, a persona the media exploited. Nixon always enjoyed using sports metaphors. The implication for Thompson is that he could always find common ground with Nixon by talking about sports. In other words, no matter how evil they may be, all men have their unique interests. Nixon might be destroying the American Dream, but you could always talk to him about football.

In a letter he wrote to Lawrence Turman in 1968 on the possibility of turning his novel, *The Rum Dairy*, into a movie, Thompson mentions that he was also trying to write a book on the death of the American dream. He said that he would rather finish what he considered the beginning of his political coverage in *The Rum Dairy* than to try to write on the end of politics. Thompson also mentioned that he was going to make a “writing cave” until he could finish his second novel, and will be there until some one comes to take him away. “Which brings me back, in a half-mad sort of way, to my current NY-focused subject: The Death of the American Dream—and the fact that I think I should sit and watch it jell for a while, until Nixon gets in....that’s the ending I think I need, a fitting climax to the second-saddest story of the last 2000 years.” (67)

As the Watergate hearings unfolded, Thompson went to Washington, D.C., to be closer to events as they were happening. He originally wrote this as a letter to Thompson

from Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in America*, and parts of it were later reprinted in *The Great Shark Hunt*:

By 8:00 a.m. EDT it was all over & Nixon had lost his last chance to deflate the notion that his administration—and his continuing presence in the White House—is a disastrous millstone around the neck of the GOP in the upcoming elections, 1976 as well as '74...Without luck, the cheap bastard will slip the noose and resign on some kind of sloppy pretext between and July. If this happens, it will blow one of the best stories of the last 200 years because The Impeachment of Richard Nixon, if it happens, will amount to a de facto trial of the whole American Dream. Because the importance of Nixon now is not merely to get rid of him; that's a strictly political consideration...the real question now is: Why is the American political system being forced to impeach a president elected less than two years ago by the largest margin in the history of presidential elections?...We want to look at two main considerations: 1) The necessity of actually bringing Nixon to trial, in order to understand our reality in the same way the Nuremberg trials forced Germany to confront itself...and 2) The absolutely vital necessity of filling that vacuum that the Nixon impeachment will leave, the lanced boil—and the hole that will be there in 1976. (68)

Even though toward the end of the Watergate hearings Thompson had wrote that he was exhausted covering the story, he still did not want it to end without the impeachment of Nixon. Also, he again made a connection between Hitler and the Nazis and Nixon's administration by comparing Nixon's trial to the trial of the Nazi war criminals, which was another exaggeration. Thompson also speculated that due to Nixon's troubles, the Republican Party would have a tough time winning elections in 1974 and 1976. Thompson saw the Watergate scandal as the albatross around the neck of the Republican Party.

While Thompson covered the Watergate hearings, he wrote in the August 1973 issue of *Rolling Stone*:

As far behind him as possible, if GOP standard-bearers like B. Goldwater and Hugh Scott are any measure of the party's allegiance to the frightened unprincipled little shyster they were calling—when they nominated him for re-canonization ten months ago in Miami—'one of the greatest Presidents in

American History.' We will want those tapes for posterity because we won't hear their like again—from Scott, Goldwater, Duke Wayne, Martha, Sammy Davis, Senator Percy or any one else. Not even George Meany will join a foursome with Richard Nixon these days. The hallowed halls of the White House no longer echo with the happy sound of bouncing golf balls. Or footballs, for that matter...or any other kind....The slow-rising central horror of "Watergate" is not that it might grind down to the reluctant impeachment of a vengeful thug of a president whose entire political career has been a monument to the same kind of cheap shots and treachery he finally got nailed for, but that we might somehow fail to learn something from it." (69)

Thompson here is reflecting on what is going on with Nixon during the Senate hearings, and speculating that not even his oldest friends will want to be seen with Nixon. Thompson also mentioned football once again, and says that the White House did not have the happy sound of footballs or golf balls anymore. As mentioned earlier, sports served as a metaphor for normality. Now, under the pressure of the hearings, even for Nixon the sport was unappealing.

One aspect of the Watergate hearings that Thompson was intrigued with was the recording equipment Nixon had installed in the White House, and how during the hearings Nixon claimed the equipment, and thus the tapes, did not have sufficient quality for investigative purposes. Thompson wrote:

Any serious description of Nixon's awesome tape-recording system would take thousands of words and boggle the minds of most laymen, but even this quick capsule is enough to suggest two fairly obvious but rarely mentioned conclusions: Anybody with this kind of a tape system, installed and maintained 24 hours a day by Secret Service electronics experts, is going to consistently produce extremely high quality voice reproductions. And since the White House personnel office can hire the best tape-transcribing typists available, and provide them with the best tape-transcribing machinery on the market, there is only one conceivable reason for those thousands of maddening, strategically spotted "unintelligibles" on the Nixon version of the White House Tapes. Any Kelly Girl agency in the country would have given Nixon his money back if their secretaries had done that kind of damage to his transcripts. Sloppiness of that magnitude can only be deliberate, and Nixon is known to have personally edited most of those tapes transcripts before they were typed for the printer.... (70)



Thompson wanted to point out to the readers that the only way the tapes could have been damaged would have been for Nixon himself to have damaged them so he would not be incriminated. He also wanted to point out that even though the equipment was sophisticated and had to be run by technicians, it was not so hard to operate as to cause the kind of damage that had occurred.

Thompson also alleged that Nixon wanted to be recorded because he was paranoid. He wanted to be sure he would have everything correct when he wrote his memoirs.

According to Alex Butterfield, Nixon was so obsessed with recording every move and moment of his presidency for the history books that he often seemed to be thinking of nothing else. When he walked from the White House to his office in the EOB, for instance, he would carry a small tape recorder in front of his mouth and maintain a steady conversation with it as he moved in his stiff-legged way across the lawn....And although we will never hear those tapes, the mere fact that he was constantly making them, for reasons of his own, confirms Butterfield's observation that Richard Nixon was so bewitched with the fact that he really was *The President* that his only sense of himself in that job came from the moments he could somehow record and squirrel away in some safe place, for tomorrow night or the ages. (71)

Thompson suggests that Nixon's vanity led to his downfall. If Nixon had not always wanted to be recorded, then he possibly would not have had to fight with the Senate about turning over the White House tapes because they would have never existed. Without the tapes, Nixon might have saved his presidency.

Several years after Nixon had resigned, Thompson wrote an article in an December 1977 issue of *Rolling Stone*, included in *The Great Shark Hunt*, an attempt to locate his friend, Oscar Zeta Acosta, who was the inspiration for Dr. Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson recounted how Acosta had many enemies, including Nixon and people appointed by Nixon. Thompson wrote:

One of the great regrets of my life is that I was never able to introduce you to my old football buddy, Richard Nixon. The main thing he feared in life—even worse than Queers and Jews and Mutants—was people who might run amok; he called them “loose cannons on the deck,” and he wanted them all put to sleep. That’s one graveyard we never even checked, Oscar, but why not? If your classic “doomed nigger” style of paranoia had any validity at all, you *must* understand that it was not just Richard Nixon and all the judges and U.S. Attorneys in those weird years. Were there any of Nixon’s friends among all those Superior Court judges you subpoenaed and mocked and humiliated when you were trying to bust the grand jury system in L.A.? (72)

Thompson affects a momentary regard for Nixon by referring to their football meeting. It almost seemed Thompson was not really trying to reconcile his two “friends.” Again, we see Thompson making a point through sarcasm and hyperbole, his signature gonzo style.

Thompson tried to introduce Nixon to the counter-culture youth. Through his reporting for magazines such as *Pageant* and *Rolling Stone*, Thompson was able to reach a broader group of young people than his counterparts at other non-counter-culture magazines and newspapers could. As the premier voice of gonzo and New Journalism, he was able to go beyond the traditional boundaries other reporters faced and give his view of the facts and transgressions of Nixon to people who might not otherwise would have had a chance to understand what was happening with the political system.

What narrative strategies did Thompson use in his reporting about Nixon? When Thompson referred to Nixon, he referred to him often in terms of an allusion to another person, perhaps a character out of a literary work. The name Nixon was usually synonymous with something other than Nixon.

One such allusion occurred in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* when Thompson mentioned that *Washington Post* columnist Nicholas Von Hoffman “recently pointed out that the Nixon/Mitchell administration—seemingly obsessed with

“recently pointed out that the Nixon/Mitchell administration—seemingly obsessed with restoring Law and Order in the land at almost any cost—seems totally unconcerned that Washington, D.C. has become the ‘Rape Center of the World.’ (73) This is an allusion to a speech Nixon made when he became president in 1968, and advocated a strict adherence to the Constitution to keep peace and order in the country during a time of civil unrest due to the Vietnam conflict. Thompson found it ironic that a president who wanted to restore peace and law to the country was behind one of the biggest scandals to come from the White House.

One of Thompson’s favorite techniques was to talk about Nixon in terms of one of Thompson’s favorite works, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and in relation to Horatio Alger. In the September 1973 issue of *Rolling Stone*, Thompson wrote:

But this time, in the language of the sergeants who keep military tradition alive, ‘he got caught every which way’...and ‘his ass went into the blades.’ Not many people have ever written in the English language better than a Polack with a twisted sense of humor who called himself Joseph Conrad. And if he were with us today I think he’d be getting a fine boot out of the Watergate story. Mr. Kurtz, in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, did his thing. Mr. Nixon also did his thing. And now, just as surely as Kurtz: ‘Mistah Nixon, he dead.’ (74)

Thompson was referring to Nixon’s political death. He was comparing Nixon to Kurtz, who went mad with the power he achieved when he became the ruler of an African tribe. He saw Nixon as also going mad with the power he assumed when he became president.

Also in the September 1973 issue of *Rolling Stone*, Thompson made allusions to Caesar Augustus and Presidents Harding and Grant. Thompson wrote:

Six months ago, Richard Nixon was the most powerful political leader in the history of the world, more powerful than Augustus Caesar when he had his act rolling full bore—six months ago.

Now, with the passing of each sweaty afternoon, into what history will call “the Summer of ’73,” Richard Nixon is being dragged closer and closer—with all deliberate speed, as it were—to disgrace and merciless infamy. His place in history is already fixed: He will go down with Grant and Harding as one of democracy’s classic mutations. (75)

Thompson also alluded to *Heart of Darkness* in *Fear and Loathing in America* when he wrote: “And to hell with all that. The official world is crazier and meaner than we know. I just got back from Nixon’s inauguration and my head is still jangled from seeing it. Ah...The Horror. Yes...President Nixon...It’s easier to be fair with the Angels than with that freak.” (76) This is another reference to *Heart of Darkness*. In the book, as Kurtz is dying, he says, “The horror, the horror.” Thompson now uttered the same words because he sees the American Dream dying now that Nixon had been elected president.

Thompson also alluded to the Hell’s Angels, as well as Charles Manson, when he talked about Nixon in the January 1974 issue of *The New York Times* when he wrote:

When the cold eye of history looks back on Richard Nixon’s five years of unrestrained power in the White House, it will show that he had the same effect on conservative/Republican politics as Charles Manson and the Hell’s Angels had on hippies and flower power... and the ultimate damage, on both fronts, will prove out to be just about equal.

Or maybe not—at least not on the scale of sheer numbers of people affected. In retrospect, the grisly violence of the Manson/Angels trips affected very few people directly, while the greedy, fascistic incompetence of Richard Nixon’s Presidency will leave scars on the minds and lives of a whole new generation—his supporters and political allies no less than his opponents. (77)

Thompson likened Nixon’s presidency to the Angels and Manson because they both had the same effect: they all destroyed something in American culture. The Angels and Manson corrupted the hippies and “flower power,” of which Thompson was fond,

through their violence and chaos. Thompson now saw Nixon as destroying honesty in politics, and not only the Republican side of politics, but American politics in general.

Thompson again used the familiar phrase “the horror” from *Heart of Darkness* when talking about Nixon years later. In a 1989 column for the *San Francisco Examiner*, Thompson was commenting on the fact that Gary Hart had dropped out of the 1988 presidential campaign.

It was the kind of news that nobody wants to hear, like having your pre-marriage blood test handed back to you in a lead bag, or getting a job as the next sheriff of Sicily...Richard Nixon might handle a horror like that, or maybe William Burroughs, but no other names come to mind. Some things are too ugly to even gossip about. (78)

Thompson was suggesting that only someone completely devoid of morals could handle a job like those he described. He saw the jobs as something only the worst of characters could accomplish, and he saw Nixon as one of the worst of these characters.

Also in *Fear and Loathing in America*, he wrote after Nixon had resigned from the presidency:

And I am still hearing about it; but I am not quite ready to write the lyrics just yet—and in the meantime I want to write a story that will leap and roll and crackle, a quick and brutal tale of *life in a world without Nixon*. What I need right now, I think, is a bit of a workout, something more along the lines of *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* than the *Saga of Horatio Nixon & the Death of the American Dream*. (79)

This reference again shows Thompson comparing Nixon to the heroes from Alger's novels, although Nixon, according to Thompson, was a perversion of Alger. Instead of fighting for the right thing, Nixon was fighting only for himself, and caused the people around him to suffer.

In a July 1974 issue of *Rolling Stone* Thompson wrote that Charles Colson, an aide to Nixon, was like one of Hitler's henchmen, Martin Bormann, and that "Bormann was the 'Tex' Colson of his time, and his strange relationship with Hitler seems not much different for the paranoid fragments of the Nixon-Colson relationship that emerged from the now-infamous 'White House Transcripts' of April 1974." (80) Thompson repeatedly also likened the Secret Service agents who protected Nixon to the Nazis. Thompson claimed to see Nixon as an American Hitler, although the parallel is ludicrous.

After Nixon had been pardoned by Gerald Ford, Thompson wrote that he wanted Nixon to be associated with something other than being an ex-President of the United States. Thompson wrote:

But that image of him walking awkward and alone across the White House lawn at night, oblivious to everything in front or on either side of him except that little black and silver tape recorder that he is holding up to his lips, talking softly and constantly to "history," with the brittle intensity of a madman: When you think on that image for a while, remember that the name Nixon will seem to give off a strange odor every time it is mentioned for the next 300 years, and in every history book written from now on, "Nixon" will be synonymous with shame, corruption and failure. (81)

Thompson did not want Nixon simply to be pardoned and forgotten. He wanted Nixon to be remembered for what he had done to the presidency, and wanted his readers to always think of him in terms of shame.

In several of his later works, Thompson had many references to other important political figures at different times. During the Iran-Contra scandal, he made a reference to Nixon when talking about President Ronald Reagan. Thompson wrote:

God only knows who that poor old man thinks he is now. Old actors never feel guilty for crimes they committed at work—because all they ever really did was play roles, and that was all Reagan did as president. He is going to have a hard

time understanding some of the things that are going to happen to him when he starts getting treated like Richard Nixon. (82)

Thompson also was never a fan of Reagan, and would liken him to Nixon to show his contempt for him. When the Iran-Contra scandal became public, Thompson assumed that Reagan would have to go down the same path that Nixon had traveled, and be treated with the same contempt that Nixon was.

Also, during the Iran-Contra hearings, Thompson was referring to USMC Lt. Col. Oliver North when he wrote:

The press is already rumbling with talk about 'show trials' and 'white-wash.' It is not a happy posture for Watergate heroes, like Rep. Peter Rodino and Sen. Daniel Inouye, who went up on the ramparts and brought down a crooked government. Richard Nixon was 'not a crook,' he said, and Spiro Agnew swore he would 'never plead guilty.' But they were both run out of Washington like poison rats, and many of those who called them 'Boss' went to prison. (83)

During the Iran-Contra hearings, Thompson also believed that the people who were involved, such as North, would be going to prison the way Nixon's people, such as G. Gordon Liddy, went.

In many of his writings in the late 1980's, Thompson compared the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandal. He did this due to the fact that there were similarities in the people who were involved, the cover-up, and there was a Congressional hearing.

Thompson also referred to Nixon when he was writing about George H. Bush when Bush was campaigning for president in 1988. Thompson wrote that he

relaxed and turned up the radio. It was George Bush again—a news rehash of his speech about shame in Puerto Rico and the need to strip elderly cheats off the Medicaid dole. That Swine! I thought. He's sleazier than Nixon....Never mind that giddy swill James Baker puts out about how much George loves to hum Dylan tunes while racing his Cigarette boat across the waters.... (84)

Thompson also saw similarities in George H. Bush and Nixon in the way they were raised and their prominence in Washington. He saw similarities in the people involved, the cover-up, and the subsequent Congressional hearing.

Thompson also saw a comparison between Horatio Alger and Nixon because Nixon, as in the Alger novels, was ambitious, and a warped product of the American Dream. He alludes to Alger in a 1976 letter to Jim Silberman when he wrote:

And I am still hearing it; but I am not quite ready to write the lyrics yet—and in the meantime I want to write a story that will leap and roll and crackle, a quick and brutal tale of *life in a world without Nixon*. What I need right now, I think, is a bit of a workout, something more along the lines of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* than the *Saga of Horatio Nixon & the Death of the American Dream*.  
(85)



## 5. Conclusion

Thompson saw Nixon as the ultimate political loser who wanted the power that others had. Thompson saw him as a power-hungry, paranoid president who would do anything to keep power.

Thompson made two comments about Nixon that summed up how he felt about the man and his presidency. The first came while Nixon was still in office, and was fighting to keep the Nixon Tapes from being handed over, and the second comment came after Nixon's death. The first comment is from the October 1974 issue of *Rolling Stone*.

There is a bleeding kind of irony in this unnatural obsession of Nixon's with his place in history when you realize what must have happened to his mind when he finally realized, probably sometime in those last few days of his doomed presidency, just exactly what kind of place in history was even then being carved out for him. (86)

After the Watergate scandal, Thompson continued to write about Nixon until his death in 1994. In an October 1974 issue of *Rolling Stone*, Thompson summed up why he continued to follow Nixon after the Watergate scandal:

The end came so suddenly and with so little warning that it was almost as if a muffled explosion in the White House had sent up a mushroom cloud to announce that the scumbag had passed to what will have to pose for now as another generation. The main reaction to Richard Nixon's passing—especially among journalists who had been on the Deathwatch for two years—was a wild and wordless orgasm of long-awaited relief that tailed off almost instantly to a dull, post-coital sort of depression that still endures. (87)

Hunter S. Thompson is a writer who claims to expect morals in politicians. And yet Thompson's own morality as a journalist is questionable. His unorthodox style of reporting was a means to an end. Thompson is the personification of gonzo perhaps because he is the only gonzo author that had received the amount of attention that he had.

Thompson is also perhaps the personification of gonzo because he lived the gonzo lifestyle: reckless, lawless, and unconcerned what others thought about him.

For much of Thompson's career, his primary target was Richard Nixon.

Thompson followed Nixon's political career since Nixon ran for president in 1960 until Nixon's death in 1994 because Thompson saw an opportunity to make a name for himself by criticizing Nixon, while possibly harboring a secret respect for the man. Without Nixon, Thompson might not have written as many articles, or gained as much fame as he did by writing about Nixon.

This duality would be in accord with Thompson's writings. He would write as the voice of gonzo journalism by satirizing the president and the other reporters who were reporting on Nixon and Watergate, and call for Nixon's resignation through *Rolling Stone* magazine and *The New York Times*, but also referred to his meeting with Nixon, called him his "old buddy," and fabricated meetings with Nixon to help him better connect with the youth of America.

Also, a close examination of Thompson's writings suggests that Thompson had a grudging respect for Nixon because he saw him as a gonzo president, one who was disrespectful toward the law, and would do anything to keep the control and the power he had acquired. Thompson, who was the quintessential gonzo journalist, saw Nixon as the quintessential gonzo president. This is possibly the reason Thompson wrote about Nixon for nearly 40 years, and what linked the two personalities together.

Thompson needed to have an individual like Nixon to write about. Before Nixon made his political comeback in 1968, Thompson had only one book, *Hell's Angels*, which had been a success. Before the book was published, Thompson had not had any real

substantial success. With the rebirth of Nixon's political career, Thompson had a focus person to write about. When one looks at the body of Thompson's works, almost half deal with Nixon, or at least mentions him.

Thompson's journalistic career shadows Nixon's political career. During Nixon's two terms as president, Thompson's popularity was at a high. Thompson was being published monthly by *Rolling Stone*, and was the political voice for gonzo journalism. When Nixon resigned the White House, Thompson's writings became less frequent, and he became a recluse at fortified compound in Colorado. When he did write articles, as on the Iran-Contra scandal, he would always include a reference to Nixon. Thompson sometimes seemed similar to Nixon. Both could disregard, or appear to disregard, the law. Both were self-promoters. Both were given to extremes. Thompson was the gonzo journalist. Nixon was the gonzo politician. Nixon's political career was destroyed by Watergate. Thompson's journalistic career was diminished by Nixon's absence.

Thompson also seemed to shadow Nixon in the regard of how they each lived their lives. Both acted above the law, tried to self-promote themselves through their words and actions, and had contempt for anyone or anything that came in their paths. The two were more similar than opposite.

What would be beyond the scope of this thesis is to determine if the Watergate scandal did both Thompson's and Nixon's careers in. It is apparent that Nixon's political career was finished by Watergate. It is also apparent that Thompson's writings were not as numerous or as popular as they had been during the time of Watergate.

Both Thompson and Nixon have had their detractors and supporters, their imitators and opposites. Both men enjoyed the success of being at the top of their craft

for a time. Both men were also never as popular or influential as they had been after the Watergate scandal had ended.

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## Vita

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