

## Assault and Reform:

Hunter S. Thompson's 1970 Campaign for Sheriff of Aspen, Colorado

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*So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*

-F. Scott Fitzgerald



## Introduction

“...a town where people could live like human beings, instead of slaves to some bogus sense of Progress that is driving us all mad.”<sup>1</sup>

—Hunter S. Thompson.

Late in the day, on November 3, 1970, Hunter S. Thompson approached the lights to make his final statement as a political candidate. He wore an American flag around his neck and a matted gray wig askew on his newly shaven head. The crowd inside Aspen’s Hotel Jerome was overflowing; friends, supporters, and journalists packed into the room to witness the final chapter of one of the most bizarre elections in American history. Hunter S. Thompson, the outlaw writer and the mastermind behind Aspen’s Freak Power uprising, had gathered 38 percent of the vote in a three-way race for sheriff of Pitkin County, Colorado. An eccentric candidate who talked openly about his drug use, Thompson led the vote most of the day, winning in the city of Aspen. However, he lost the down-valley vote. The dismal results that arrived in the evening from the rural communities outside of Aspen sealed his fate. In the three-way contest, his opponents coalesced around the incumbent sheriff Carrol Whitmire, abandoning the Republican candidate and denying the Thompson supporters their victory. As Thompson faced the cameras, he gazed at the floor and muttered in his low staccato voice.

“I think I unfortunately proved what I set out to prove,” he began. “That the American Dream really is fucked. I didn’t believe it until now.”<sup>2</sup> Without his ever-present beer can and his cigarette in its disposable plastic holder, Thompson looked

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, “The Battle of Aspen,” *The Great Shark Hunt* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003) 160.

<sup>2</sup> *High Noon in Aspen*, British Broadcasting Corporation, 1970.

slightly naked and vulnerable, displaying the emotions of a turbulent race. He had mobilized the largely apolitical youth of Aspen—the service employees, hippies, radicals, and ski bums—and lost only to the combined effort of the Democratic and Republican parties. His candidacy helped redraw the battle lines in Aspen, intensifying a generational and philosophical schism that would dominate politics in the Roaring Fork Valley for a decade. Committed in his quest to reshape law enforcement in Pitkin County, he pledged to end the crackdown on victimless crimes and better integrate the sheriff's department into the community in order to address the causes of crimes. Six years later, these ideas were implemented when Dick Kienast—the man who would have effectively run the department if Thompson had won—was elected sheriff. Still, despite Thompson's sincerity and the eventual triumph of progressive law enforcement in Pitkin County, the popular conception of his race focuses on its more outlandish elements.

Since its inception, Thompson's run for sheriff in 1970 has been an enigma to observers. Most accounts disproportionately focus on his first platform, a comedic attack on Aspen's establishment that was first published in the September 17 issue of *The Aspen Times*.<sup>3</sup> Two weeks later, the platform hit national newsstands when Jann Wenner of *Rolling Stone* published Thompson's first article in the magazine, titled "The Battle of Aspen." In the piece, Thompson informed readers of his plan to run for sheriff on what he labeled the "Freak Power" ticket. The article ended with his six-point platform, an over-the-top piece of political comedy, pledging, among other things, to rip up the streets and replace the asphalt with grass, encourage a referendum changing the name of Aspen

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<sup>3</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, "Sheriff Candidate Hunter Thompson Discusses Law and Order," *The Aspen Times* 17 Sept. 1970: 5-A

to “Fat City,” and install a set of stocks on the courthouse lawn to punish profit-oriented drug dealers.<sup>4</sup>

Within a week, reporters from newspapers around the country descended on Aspen to write stories about the race. Thompson’s bizarre image, atypical ideas, and incendiary rhetoric provided good fodder for colorful articles about hippy political involvement in the internationally known ski town. Thompson campaigned with a shaved head, calling the crew-cutted incumbent sheriff “my long-haired opponent” and deriding the malignant “greedheads” and “land-rapers” profiting on Aspen’s success.<sup>5</sup> After writing their initial stories, the national newspapers ignored the rest of the race, reporting on its outcome but failing to document Thompson’s evolving rhetoric. On October 29, the Thompson campaign placed a full-page advertisement in *The Aspen Times* presenting “Hunter’s Real Platform.”<sup>6</sup> In stark contrast to the casual, vulgar comedy of his first platform, the second adopted a more formal tone, presenting a clear and reasoned analysis of the ways in which law enforcement could improve in Pitkin County. The document—evidence of the changed character of the campaign near its finish—is not mentioned in any of the accounts of the race I have found in my research.

National news articles published at the time, the incomplete accounts of this period in the scholarship on Thompson, and his own accounts of the race in his later writings and interviews only tell one side of the story, overemphasizing his first platform and ignoring his second. These accounts neglect the campaign’s evolution and fail to provide the context necessary to understand its important role in Thompson’s life and in the history of Aspen. As a result, most people aware of his candidacy only know of its

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<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 173.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, “Hunter’s Real Platform,” *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 7-D

more bizarre elements. Overwhelmingly, people familiar with the fact that he ran for sheriff point to his first platform, laughing about his bizarre platform and clever wordplay.<sup>7</sup>

The inconsistent, vague, and outlandish character of Thompson's campaign has caused observers and commentators to project their own preconceptions and politics onto the race. His comical and incendiary first platform exacerbated this problem, remaining the focus of most treatments of the campaign and overshadowing his more serious and straightforward second platform. In this paper, I argue that Thompson's campaign, assessed in its entirety rather than its most outlandish elements, deserves to be reassessed as a powerful catalyst for positive change in law enforcement and local government in Aspen and an important example of nonviolent, nonconformist, radical political involvement in the midst of the left-radical political violence of 1970.

This project serves multiple purposes. First, I will discuss the function of the campaign in the context of Thompson's life and of the history of Aspen, focusing on the origins of the "Freak Power" movement from both perspectives. In my research, I have not found any studies that have attempted to merge these two strands of scholarship. In telling both sides, I hope that people interested in either Aspen or Thompson can better understand how their stories intersected in the election of 1970. Next, I will use the available materials in order to reconstruct a more accurate account of the campaign. Given the large amount of commentary about the race but relative lack of primary documents, this is admittedly a difficult task, but an important one.

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<sup>7</sup> Given the understandable lack of polling data on the question of the public's knowledge of Thompson's campaign, I have come to this conclusion informally, browsing the internet and asking people familiar with Thompson's work about their knowledge of this period.

Afterward, I will analyze different accounts of the race in light of my findings, examining the historiography of the campaign and addressing its significance in popular culture. I will explore the reasons why certain accounts focused on different aspects of the race, identifying ways in which journalism and popular history encourage misunderstandings. Finally, I will argue for the importance of the campaign locally and nationally, both at the time and in the present day.

In researching this campaign, I have encountered a number of problems of evidence, largely due to the lack of primary sources. The Thompson archives are still closed for public research; therefore, the volume of unpublished correspondence, manuscripts, tapes, and memorabilia that would greatly increase the depth of this study is unavailable for inclusion.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, many of the central participants, including Thompson and all of the central figures of the anti-Freak Power coalition, are deceased. Furthermore, the effect of time and Thompson's subsequent rise to superstardom have most likely distorted the memories of those who were close to him during this period. Finally, and most importantly, much of the campaign went unrecorded. Debates, registration drives, meet-and-greets, strategy sessions, and radio advertisements are all lost to posterity. Perhaps tapes exist in Thompson's files of these events (he is known for meticulous preservation), and will someday be available to researchers. However, for this project, I have to rely on much less material; my study will suffer accordingly from the relative scarcity of primary evidence.

Despite these limitations, I believe that I have had access to enough materials to make important judgments on the nature of the race and its impact on the histories of

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<sup>8</sup> As far as I have been able to tell, Johnny Depp bought the archive in 2008, but he has not announced where it will reside.

Aspen and Thompson. For primary sources, I rely mostly on newspaper accounts, particularly *The Aspen Times*, at the time the only newspaper in Pitkin County. Comparing the local stories at the time to national articles and later scholarship has served as the basis for much of my argument. This method runs the risk of overly trusting a single source; however, most of my lines of argumentation derive from advertisements placed by candidates and from quotes in stories, rather than from the assessment of the reporter.

I have conducted interviews with several individuals close to Thompson during this period, including Bob Braudis, longtime sheriff of Pitkin County and Thompson's best friend for years, Joe Edwards, the 1969 Freak Power candidate for mayor and a Pitkin County Commissioner during the 1970s, and Ed Bastian, Thompson's political organizer during his campaign and longtime friend and neighbor. I have also lived in Aspen and asked individuals around town about their perception of this event, although relatively few people remain who were politically active at the time.

In the course of researching, I have examined national and local newspaper articles, magazines, works by Thompson, published correspondence, interviews, biographies, documentaries, websites, and secondary literature on Aspen. Without the benefit of his archives, I feel I have done the best I can do with the available resources in order to construct an accurate picture of the election. Afterward, I will compare my account with other published accounts, discussing the attractions and difficulties of writing about the campaign.

Through my research and planning, I have discovered that I have succumbed to many of the pitfalls that entrap other observers, forming assumptions about the nature of

Thompson's political activism based on my own political beliefs. I first became interested in this topic through a desire to learn more about one of my favorite writers, seizing an opportunity to do more in-depth history research on a topic that interested me (and spend three months in Aspen). The project appealed to my interests of radical political activism, sixties counterculture, and the history of mountain resort towns. Additionally, I felt I had an opportunity to bridge the shift in my primary life focus—from a Stanford history degree to an intensive Buddhist meditation practice—in the campaign of Hunter S. Thompson. Thus, while I will make every effort to keep my opinions from influencing my critical assessment of the evidence, I admit my bias in favor of the beliefs of Thompson and his supporters. I am writing this paper partly to fulfill a desire to produce a lengthier paper on a topic that interests me, but also to encourage my readers to consider the ideas in a new context—not only within the abstract world of historical scholarship but also in relation to their lives. It is my hope that others are inspired to reexamine their society and discover how to most skillfully work towards their ideals after reading this paper.

Thompson spoke to the corrosive effect of greed in American culture, using Aspen as a case study. Focusing on the environmental and social externalities of unchecked growth, he railed against the degradation of the town. He spoke in the language of the sixties counterculture, adapted to Aspen and embellished with his characteristic, hyperbolic flourish. Pollution, civil liberties, nonviolence, and personal freedom all featured prominently in his campaign. Equal parts conservative and revolutionary, Thompson drew apolitical radicals into the democratic process. At a time when many sixties radicals were either going "Clean for Gene," dropping out of politics

completely, or turning to violence, Thompson's candidacy offered individuals an opportunity to fight for political change without sacrificing their values in the process.<sup>9</sup>

It is not my intention to write a hagiography of Thompson. Many aspects of his life illustrate the harm he caused through his alcoholism and drug abuse. He was an absent father and an abusive husband, categorically unfaithful and prone to fits of rage. The list of individuals harmed by Thompson's narcissism is long. Still, Thompson's personality was multifaceted. He was revered among his friends for his loyalty and his charm, and he gained the respect and admiration of public figures ranging from Jimmy Carter to Allen Ginsberg. A lifelong crusader for justice, his writing exudes passion—a savage attack on the politics of greed, cowardice, and deception.

Thompson's optimism about American politics and society peaked in his campaign for sheriff in 1970. He truly believed that he could awaken a nascent political force—the young, radical, and marginalized—and lead a new coalition to victory, reshaping American politics in the process. In researching the “death of the American Dream,” Thompson suddenly found that its promise was alive—that meaningful change could be effected through political involvement.<sup>10</sup> Thompson once wrote that America had the potential to be a “fantastic monument to all the best instincts of the human race.”<sup>11</sup> It is in his campaign for sheriff in 1970 that one finds his most impassioned defense of that idea.

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<sup>9</sup> Eugene McCarthy was a Democratic Senator from Minnesota who was the first candidate to challenge President Lyndon Johnson in the 1968 Democratic Primary on an anti-Vietnam platform. McCarthy's candidacy inspired a number of radicals to cut their hair and shave their beards in order to campaign for him, leading to the claim that they went “Clean for Gene.”

<sup>10</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2001) 185.

<sup>11</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (New York: Popular Library, 1973) 414.

## Chapter 1 – Hustle and Flow

“I do not know about that now but this is how Paris was in the early days when we were very poor and very happy.”<sup>12</sup>

–Ernest Hemingway

Both Hunter S. Thompson and Aspen, Colorado, emerged from obscurity to become cultural icons. Thompson, the son of middle-class parents in Louisville, Kentucky, and Aspen, the shell of a formerly robust mining town, came of age in the 1950s. Both figures eschewed the predominant values of postwar America, and as the cultural tides shifted in the 1960s, the two rose to prominence, their separate niches rapidly expanding into the mainstream. Thompson capitalized on the growing popularity of the counterculture, achieving notoriety as much for his eccentric behavior and drug use as the development of his unique style—“gonzo journalism.” Aspen, on the other hand, cashed in on mainstream Americans’ newfound wealth and love of skiing. Within twenty years, it was transformed from a small mountain town to a booming resort.

Thompson and Aspen both encouraged and lamented their fame—simultaneously reveling in and recoiling from the spotlight. Both figures were irrevocably altered by their celebrity. Thompson’s most famous incarnation, his drug-crazed alter ego Raoul Duke, plagued him throughout his life. Unable to cover stories due to his popularity, he retreated to his compound in Woody Creek, increasingly reliant on drugs as his creative output dropped off. Meanwhile, the once-funky Aspen lost its character, slowly evolving into a town of absentee landowners and upscale shopping. Middle-school sized mansions overlook a town as likely to be featured in celebrity gossip pages as snowsport

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<sup>12</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Scribner 2009) 220.

magazines. However, in addition to the pursuit of fame and pleasure, both figures are famous for their appeal to higher values—art and music on one hand, and justice and authenticity on the other. Aspen is home to the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies as well as the Aspen Music Festival. Thompson wrote with a keen moral sense, unafraid to call out hypocrisy when he saw it. Both figures are prisoners to their stereotypes. Aspen is more than fur coats and Fiji Water, and Thompson is more than Wild Turkey and explosions.

Thompson's campaign for sheriff in 1970 illuminates many of these schisms—the changing demographics of Aspen, Thompson's own rising celebrity, and the tension between checking out and digging in. Most of Thompson's supporters sought refuge in the town from what they deemed the chaos of big cities—retreating to the mountains in search of a life filled with freedom and beauty. However, by the end of the 1960s, they were caught in a struggle for the future of Aspen—a generational war of values and ideals. Wealth versus simplicity, development versus conservation, the overriding question of Aspen for whom—these were the lines on which “The Battle of Aspen” was fought.<sup>13</sup>

This chapter seeks to examine the histories of Aspen and Thompson, addressing critical events in their past and exploring the process by which their stories eventually intersected. Due to space and time constraints, the narratives will naturally be oversimplified. My goal is not to construct a comprehensive history of either but rather to address important themes in their past that came to the fore in the election of 1970. Thus, the manner in which I tell their respective stories will naturally be biased by my sense of the pivotal issues in Thompson's campaign. Additionally, the relative scarcity

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<sup>13</sup> Thompson, The Great Shark Hunt 151.

of scholarship on Aspen and the necessity of relying upon the memoir by Peggy Clifford, a longtime columnist for the *Aspen Times*, for much of the postwar information hinders my ability to examine Aspen's history in the 1950s and 1960s with more objectivity. However, despite these limitations, I believe that this chapter begins to answer the question of how a middle-class boy from Louisville came to run for sheriff of Aspen, Colorado on the Freak Power ticket.

### Aspen

In the spring of 1883, Jerome B. Wheeler stepped down from his stagecoach and took his first look at Aspen, a small mining community high on the western slope of the Continental Divide. The town was only three years old—founded by a group of prospectors from Leadville, Colorado, intent on striking it rich. The region contained promising amounts of gold and silver, but the outfits lacked the necessary capital to establish a competitive mining industry. Wheeler, a New York native and Civil War veteran, married into the Macy family, eventually owning a 45% stake in the successful department store—the largest in New York City at the time. He was, in the words of historian Malcolm J. Rohrbough, “the personification of that fabled figure sought by every western mining town—the eastern capitalist.”<sup>14</sup> Before he arrived in Aspen, Wheeler had bought a \$20,000 stake in two mines outside the camp. Within fifteen months, his investments totaled an estimated \$500,000.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Aspen: The History of a Silver Mining Town, 1879-1893* (New York: Oxford University Press 1986) 67.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 72-73.

Wheeler brought to Aspen the infrastructure it needed to compete in the mining industry. He built a smelter, opened the town's first bank, and began developing several claims on the outskirts of town, incorporating his holdings into the Aspen Mining and Smelting Company.<sup>16</sup> Small businesses sprang up to cater to Aspen's ever increasing population. In the fall of 1884, the town boasted ten saloons, eight grocery stores, three churches, and two newspapers.<sup>17</sup> Municipal services were expanded to accommodate the rising population, including the addition of electric lights powered by a hydroelectric plant, a major source of pride for the Aspen population.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the 1880s, the town continued steadily to grow. Two railroad companies, one of which was heavily funded by Wheeler, raced to complete the first tracks into Aspen.<sup>19</sup> Finally connected to Leadville and Denver by railroad, Aspen's economy boomed. It became, in the words of one newspaper "the finest mining city in the world."<sup>20</sup>

By 1892, Aspen was the largest silver producer in the country, mining an estimated one sixth of the total production in the United States.<sup>21</sup> It was the third largest city in Colorado with twelve thousand people, ten churches, six newspapers, four schools, and three banks.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the city boasted a magnificent opera house and a grand three-story brick hotel, both financed by Jerome B. Wheeler. To this day, the Wheeler Opera House and the Hotel Jerome are Wheeler's two most enduring contributions to the city of Aspen.

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<sup>16</sup> Rohrbough, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 116-117.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 152.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 172.

<sup>21</sup> "The Mining Boom: 1879 – 1893," *Aspen Historical Society* 2008, 21 Jan. 2011

<<http://www.aspenhistorysociety.com/miningboom.html>>.

<sup>22</sup> Madeleine Osberger, "Roaring Fork Valley towns bursting with history," *The Aspen Times* 20 May 2011, 2 July 2012 <<http://www.aspentimes.com/article/20110520/NEWS/110529975>>.

However, in 1893, tragedy struck silver mining communities. In response to a financial crisis and dwindling gold reserves, President Grover Cleveland called on Congress to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890, causing the price of silver to plummet. Combined with the effects of the Panic of 1893, the repeal ruined Aspen's economy. According to Rohrbough, "economic depression rolled west, leaving in its wake business failures, bank closings, and lengthening unemployment lines... This tidal wave of economic disaster struck Colorado in late June. Within thirty days, every silver mine in the state closed."<sup>23</sup> While the mines eventually reopened, the damage was done. Out-of-work miners combed the streets for coal and food, many fleeing the area in search of better conditions elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> Jerome B. Wheeler, with much of his money invested in the failed mining and banking industries, eventually filed for bankruptcy in 1901.<sup>25</sup>

As quickly as it rose to prominence, Aspen slid downward. Between the Panic of 1893 and the end of the World War II, Aspen enjoyed what is now called its "Quiet Years".<sup>26</sup> The population decreased for years before bottoming out in the 1930s at around 700.<sup>27</sup> While mining continued for many years after the panic, it never proceeded as ambitiously as before. Farming and ranching replaced silver mining as the dominant sources of revenue for the community. Amid the relics of its decedent past the residents of Aspen waited to return to their former glory. *Aspen Times* columnist Peggy Clifford wrote in her book "To Aspen and Back"—an account of Aspen's second boom—"For decades after the demonetization of silver, hope rang in the Roaring Fork Valley like a

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<sup>23</sup> Rohrbough, 219

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 220

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 231

<sup>26</sup> "The Quiet Years: 1893 – 1936," *Aspen Historical Society* 2008, 21 Jan. 2011

<<http://www.aspenhistorysociety.com/quietyears.html>>.

<sup>27</sup> Peggy Clifford, *To Aspen and Back: An American Journey* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1980) 15.

bell... Again and again the *Aspen Times* proclaimed NEW ERA ABOUT TO BEGIN. Hubris prepares one only for success.”<sup>28</sup> However, despite the high hopes for recovery, schemes to boost the town’s economy all failed. It took over fifty years and the arrival of another starry-eyed financier to jumpstart Aspen’s next boom.

When Walter Paepcke arrived in Aspen in the spring of 1945, he found a dilapidated town with few municipal services and a struggling economy, but he also saw its great potential. Paepcke, a wealthy Chicago industrialist, had a vision for a town devoted to the nourishment of “the whole man”—a cultural center in the high Rockies where writers, thinkers, and artists could congregate in close proximity to the outdoors, encouraging the creation of great art and new ideas in between mountain adventures.<sup>29</sup> Paepcke joined forces with veterans from the Army’s 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division—soldiers who were stationed in nearby Leadville during the war and trained in the Aspen area—and formed the Aspen Ski Corporation. Paepcke’s plan for the town’s economic recovery focused on two seasons—skiing in the winter and culture in the summer. Work was soon begun installing chairlifts and cutting trails on Aspen Mountain in addition to planning for summer events. In the wake of the success of the 1949 Goethe Bicentennial Celebration—a gathering of thinkers from around the world to pay tribute to the German writer (including Albert Schweitzer in his only visit to the United States)—Paepcke founded the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, the Aspen Music School and the International Design Conference.

Aspen grew slowly but steadily during the 1950s. Skiing was not yet popular with mainstream America, and Paepcke protected the town from overexposure, turning

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Clifford 19.

down an offer to host the 1952 Winter Olympics in Aspen. In her book, Peggy Clifford paints a picture of Aspen in the early 1950s as pastoral and idyllic—the perfect mix of elite culture, non-materialistic values, skiing, and enough tourists to support the locals but not to make them rich. She wrote, “The countryside and town were spacious, serene and unspoiled. It seemed the best of all possible worlds.”<sup>30</sup> However, given that she was writing at the end of the 1970s, looking back on her years in Aspen and bemoaning the changes that had taken place, one has to take her characterization of her early years in Aspen with a grain of salt. Still, it is true that Aspen’s development began to take off a few years after she arrived in the town. In the late 1950s two new ski resorts were constructed in the area, making Aspen the largest ski resort in America.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, a small group of investors began purchasing large tracts of land at the base of Baldy—a mountain eight miles down valley from Aspen—with the intention of constructing yet another ski resort. The resort, later named Snowmass-at-Aspen, eventually grew to be larger than the other three resorts in Aspen combined.<sup>32</sup>

In 1960, Squaw Valley, California, hosted the United States’ first Winter Olympics. They were also the first games broadcasted to the American public on national television. Captivated by the new sport, Americans flocked to ski resorts. Americans’ postwar affluence made jaunts to the mountains economically feasible, and the newfound ease and popularity of jet travel allowed travelers to vacation at destinations like Aspen. Without the leadership and control of Walter Paepcke—he died of cancer in the spring of 1960—Aspen entered a period of rapid growth.<sup>33</sup> Developers

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<sup>30</sup> Clifford 49.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid 74.

<sup>32</sup> “Snowmass: Stats,” Aspen Snowmass, 28 Jan. 2011 <<http://www.aspensnowmass.com/en/snowmass>>.

<sup>33</sup> Clifford 80.

began constructing condominiums and lodges throughout the town, and wealthy visitors purchased second or third homes in Aspen. Property values appreciated steadily, attracting more development that pushed the price of land even higher. Clifford wrote, “In the 1880s and early 1890s, silver had been Aspen’s principal commodity. In the late 1940s and 1950s, culture and snow had been sold, though very chastely. In the 1960s the place itself was for sale.”<sup>34</sup> Municipal services rapidly expanded as city and county budgets burgeoned. To the dismay of many in Aspen, the city streets were paved in 1962.<sup>35</sup> The town was changing quickly, and not all of its residents approved of its trajectory.

As the 1960s progressed and Aspen continued to boom, the town began to experience many of the problems associated with rapid growth. Officials said the sewer system was overloaded, prompting concerns about the quality of the drinking water and contamination of the Roaring Fork River.<sup>36</sup> The influx of vehicles in the valley—including tour buses that idled their engines when parked—increased air pollution and made parking downtown more difficult. The zoning laws adopted in 1955 were insufficient to mitigate the externalities of large-scale development. Larger buildings obscured views of the mountains. In protest, one businessman highlighted the need for new regulations by threatening to build an “eight-story, spire type lodge” on his property—a move that would have been legal in 1963.<sup>37</sup> Aspen approved a “Master Plan” for controlling future growth a few years later, but critics continued to deride the town’s priorities.

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<sup>34</sup> Clifford 97.

<sup>35</sup> “Modern Aspen: 1961 – Present,” Aspen Historical Society 2008, 28 Jan 2011 <<http://www.aspenhistorysociety.com/modernaspen2.html#>>.

<sup>36</sup> Clifford 120.; “Is pollution spoiling our river?” The Aspen Times 7 Aug. 1969: 13-B.

<sup>37</sup> “Editorial: tortoise and the hare,” The Aspen Times 15 Apr. 1971: 2-A.

While many residents lamented Aspen's development, others praised its entry into the mainstream. Businesses thrived, and landowners watched as their property quickly made them rich. Large-scale development provided jobs, and some workers were wary of efforts to limit growth. A letter published in the fall of 1967 in the *Aspen Times* illuminates the reasoning of many pro-growth residents. D.L. Wilson, a carpenter living in Aspen, wrote, "We have an investor who wants to invest approx. a million dollars in Aspen. If he can build this building me and a lot of guys like me will have jobs through February." He continued, "a project like this will help the restaurants – the drug stores – the ski shops – the clothing stores and every other business in town to some degree or another because of the money it will add to the economy and because of the tourists it will attract when finished."<sup>38</sup> Wilson framed his argument with economic growth and financial security as paramount values—an assumption that the critics of growth continually attacked.

In her columns in *The Aspen Times*, Peggy Clifford returned over and over to the theme of quality versus quantity, highlighting the need for Aspen to clarify its values. Rather than criticizing Aspen's tourist economy, Clifford and many other anti-growth activists often framed their arguments in terms of the protection of Aspen's attractions. In their view, limiting Aspen's growth promoted the town's long-term economic health in addition to maintaining a high quality of life for its residents. In a 1968 column, Clifford wrote, "Unbridled growth can only diminish and perhaps eventually destroy that crucial essence, that quality which makes Aspen unique."<sup>39</sup> In her first column in the paper, Clifford discussed what she saw as the prevailing ethic in Aspen, warning against the

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<sup>38</sup> D.L. Wilson, "new projects," *The Aspen Times* 12 Oct. 1967: 3-B.

<sup>39</sup> Peggy Clifford, "tempests and teapots," *The Aspen Times* 27 Jun 1968: 8-B.

threat of overdevelopment. “Aspen is a unique town,” she wrote, “a sort of last frontier for dreamers, a haven for naturalists who find the intricacies of the seasons more fascinating than the intricacies of high finance.”<sup>40</sup> Clifford criticized the strong connection in American society between quality of life and economic development, arguing for the importance of other values—conservation, simplicity, humility, and beauty. Contrasting the views of Wilson and Clifford illustrates a philosophical schism in Aspen at the time.

Of course, to divide the town neatly into opposing camps—one pro-growth and the other anti-growth—would oversimplify the matter. The complex reality of the time was that most residents fell somewhere in between, generally supportive of Aspen’s success and its role in securing their financial future, but increasingly wary of its negative externalities. The effects of Aspen’s rapid growth sparked many of the town’s most passionate debates, including fights over zoning, approval of new developments, and the expansion of municipal services. With each battle, residents took sides on specific issues that, over time, illuminated and exacerbated deep divisions in the town over basic values and life philosophies. In addition to opinions about growth, these differences were revealed by the ways in which residents reacted to another contentious issue at the time—the influx of young hippies into Aspen and the subsequent backlash by older residents.

As the 1960s progressed, the counterculture inevitably found its way into Aspen. Hippies flocked to the small mountain town for many of the same reasons as everyone else—clean air, beautiful vistas, and a laid back vibe. Aspen quickly became a destination for the nation’s youth, especially during the summer. Many new residents sought refuge in the Rockies away from the pressures of big cities—the crowds and the

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<sup>40</sup> Peggy Clifford, “town or commodity?” *The Aspen Times* 25 May 1967: 4-C.

crackdowns, harder drugs and rising violence. They quickly made a home in Aspen, starting co-ops in town and the surrounding forests, sharing meals, and working menial jobs in order to make ends meet. In many ways, they were no different from the overeducated young people who had settled in Aspen since the '50s. Both groups rejected the dominant cultural values of their time, preferring simplicity and a connection with the natural world to success and wealth. However, the hippies' more relaxed attitude toward personal hygiene and nudity and their interest in illegal drugs provoked the ire of many citizens.

Prominent residents worried about the newcomers' effect on Aspen's tourist industry, considering the financial repercussions of Aspen becoming known as a "hippy Mecca."<sup>41</sup> In a letter to the *Aspen Times*, an angry resident characterized the arrivals as "uncouth and filthy humans who resemble disheveled barbarians."<sup>42</sup> The author then predicted Aspen's demise, writing, "If the swinies leave by winter, when spring arrives they will return to Aspen en masse, their ranks multiplied tenfold. Aspen, by next July, will be internationally synonymous with Haight-Asbury [sic] and other once attractive places, now ruined and avoided plague-like by the monied tourist."<sup>43</sup> In the summer of 1967, Aspen City Councilman Dave Stapleton complained to the *Aspen Illustrated News* about the newcomers, stating, "I'm talking about the ones who are leeches and walk around dirty with their little sunflowers on their bibs... The community right now is ready to have some people harassed."<sup>44</sup> With the presence of the counterculture at an all-time

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<sup>41</sup> "Old Pictures," *Counterlight's Peculiars* 8 Mar 2009, 15 Feb 2011  
<<http://counterlightsrantsandblather1.blogspot.com/2009/03/old-pictures.html>>.

<sup>42</sup> P. Sheehan, "of swines," *The Aspen Times* 1 Aug 1968: 7-B.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Peggy Clifford, "about hysteria," *The Aspen Times* 27 Jul 1967: 6-A.

high, the Aspen establishment searched for ways to restore Aspen's image as a resort rather than a happening.

After years of simmering close to the surface, the conflict finally exploded into the open during the summer of 1968. On July 1, a group of businessmen presented a resolution to the City Council asking it to crack down on "undesirable transients" and to "strictly enforce any and all ordinances dealing with hitch-hiking, vagrancy, loitering, illegal assembly, indecent exposure, littering, etc."<sup>45</sup> While the City Council effectively ignored the pointed language, voting to "enforce all the laws for all citizens without discrimination and without regard to who is in violation," Aspen's police took the suggestion and began harassing Aspen's youth. Over the next two months, police officers interrogated individuals at will, arresting young people for hitchhiking and on suspicion of vagrancy.<sup>46</sup> In one case, a visitor named Paul Wilkinson was arrested for blocking the street and vagrancy. He defended himself in court, arguing that he had been standing on the street and looking at the sun, "'worshipping' so to speak." He continued, "If someone had asked me to move, I would have been glad to. But nobody did." He concluded his defense pleading, "I would be happy to leave your town." Before handing down his sentence, the Magistrate retorted, "A lot of people will be leaving town when they hear about this."<sup>47</sup>

Appearing in Magistrate Court, the defendants were sentenced to 90 days in jail and \$200—the maximum penalty the Magistrate could hand down—by Guido Meyer, a European émigré and openly prejudiced restaurant owner. Meyer was well known in Aspen for his hatred of the counterculture, posting a sign outside his restaurant that said

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<sup>45</sup> "Council to crack down on all laws," The Aspen Times 4 Jul 1968: 3-B.

<sup>46</sup> O. Louis Wilder, "harassment," The Aspen Times 25 Jul 1968: 2-A.

<sup>47</sup> "Magistrate sentences 3 to jail" The Aspen Times 25 Jul 1968: 1-B.

“No Beatnicks Allowed,” and publicly asserting that hippies were “supported by Communists.”<sup>48</sup> While serving as Magistrate, he penned a letter to the *Rocky Mountain News* illuminating his opinions of American society, writing,

The biggest problem is law and order. Everybody should help the police forces. Get rid of the Supreme Court in Washington and get some cowboys in instead. Put the hoodlums and hippies into Vietnam and get the good boys home to save their own country before it is too late. Form vigilante groups all over the country and taxpaying members only. This would scare the hell out of these bums living off the taxpayers.<sup>49</sup>

The aggressive enforcement of specific laws by the Aspen police and Meyer aimed at driving the hippies out of Aspen divided the community. Some residents praised their actions, hoping to banish the “undesirables” from the town, while others worried about the threats to civil liberties and the establishment of a police state.<sup>50</sup>

In response to the crackdown, some concerned citizens unleashed a torrent of criticism on the police department and Meyer. The liberal *Aspen Times* proclaimed that there was a “reign of injustice” and compared the crackdown to the early days of Nazi Germany.<sup>51</sup> The pages of *The Aspen Times* overflowed with letters to the editor, with businessmen criticizing the paper for “bigotry” and “stirring agitation,” and residents either attacking or defending the actions by the police and the Magistrate.<sup>52</sup> A “special emergency meeting” of the local ACLU chapter was called, alleging that police had ordered hippies “to get out of town within 24 hours or face arrest.”<sup>53</sup> Lawyers in Aspen had been protesting the appointment of Meyer for months, asking the City Counsel to

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<sup>48</sup> “Quotes by Meyer compiled in article,” *The Aspen Times*, 28 Mar 1968: 3-C.

<sup>49</sup> “Guido Meyer views in letter to RM news,” *The Aspen Times* 20 Jun 1968: 11-B.

<sup>50</sup> Peggy Clifford, “on undesirableness,” *The Aspen Times* 11 Jul 1968: 8-B.

<sup>51</sup> “Editorial: reign of injustice,” *The Aspen Times* 25 Jul 1968: 2-A.

<sup>52</sup> “Businessmen answer Times editorial,” *The Aspen Times* 1 Aug 1968: 6-B.

<sup>53</sup> “Aspen justice, to get ACLU scrutiny,” *The Aspen Times* 25 Jul 1968: 3-C.

appoint a lawyer in his place. They finally got their wish in early August, as the City Council unanimously voted to remove him from office, citing his prejudices and his inability to act as an impartial judge.<sup>54</sup>

On August 12, local attorney Joe Edwards and Paul Bender, a Philadelphia lawyer, sued the city of Aspen in U.S. District Court. The plaintiffs asked the court “to end ‘illegal harassment’ of non-conformists in Aspen and to declare Aspen’s vagrancy ordinance unconstitutional.”<sup>55</sup> In his ruling, Judge Alfred Arraj neither granted an injunction against the city nor ruled on the vagrancy law. However, he took a strong stand against the Aspen police and the City Magistrate for their discrimination towards hippies, stating, “the police department of the City of Aspen from the chief through the assistant on down to the patrolmen have acted with undue aggressiveness toward this class of persons.”<sup>56</sup> While Judge Arraj refused to grant an injunction, he left the case open to discourage future harassment by the city.

Aspen’s hippy crackdown thrust the issues of civil liberties and the role of law enforcement into Aspen’s political consciousness. The divisive nature of the crackdown further solidified ideological schisms in Aspen, dividing the town over issues of lifestyle choice. Residents inevitably took sides in the drama, either supporting the actions of the police to rid the town of “undesirable transients” or defending individuals’ right to freedom of expression. While unable to be proved, the breakdown among residents on this issue most likely mirrors the schism in the town over the town’s development. The crackdown was precipitated by a group of Aspen businessmen eager to protect the town’s economy. Many prominent residents took strong stands against both issues, including

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<sup>54</sup> “Magistrate ousted by city council,” The Aspen Times, 8 Aug 1968: 5-A.

<sup>55</sup> “Aspen harassment suit in US court,” The Aspen Times 15 Aug 1968: 1-B.

<sup>56</sup> “Record dispels hippie suit puzzle,” The Aspen Times 29 Aug 1968: 1-B.

writer Peggy Clifford and artist Tom Benton (no relation to the famous artist, Thomas Hart Benton). Additionally, it is likely that a resident skeptical of the wisdom of Aspen's growth would empathize more with the plight of Aspen's counterculture, as both groups questioned the conservative American values of conformity and economic progress. In the process, older liberals came to be more closely aligned with younger nonconformists—an important coalition that later challenged the more conservative Aspen power structure at the ballot box. As the 1960s came to a close, issues of growth and lifestyle became inseparable, and the stage was set for the entrance of Hunter S. Thompson and "The Battle of Aspen."

#### Hunter S. Thompson

In the fall of 1961, Hunter Thompson visited Aspen for the first time. Heading eastward across the country, he contracted with an agency to drive a car full of "oriental straw goods" from San Francisco to a decorator in Aspen.<sup>57</sup> In his own words, he arrived in the town "with \$2, drunk as a loon, sliding violently in the snow."<sup>58</sup> After searching around town for help finding the decorator, someone directed him to the house of Peggy Clifford—then the owner of a small bookstore in town. Years later, Thompson described himself that night as a "total stranger, a freak from Kentucky with a pile of trash on top of a car."<sup>59</sup> Clifford took him in, made him dinner, and helped him find the owner of the car. Edgy from the nonstop drive, Thompson resented waiting at the decorator's house while she finished a game of bridge. In letters, Thompson's childhood friend Paul

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<sup>57</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *The Proud Highway*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Villard 1997) 294.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Clifford xix.

Semonin, who was out of town when Thompson arrived, had expounded on Aspen's charms. According to Clifford, as Thompson waited to collect his fifty dollars and move on, he "stared bleakly at players for a while and finally said, 'Jesus, Semonin's dream looks just like the God damn Louisville Country Club.'"<sup>60</sup>

Thompson was on his way back to Louisville, Kentucky when he stopped off in Aspen. He had been recently evicted from his cottage in Big Sur for writing a revealing article about the community for a men's magazine—his first published work after years of writing.<sup>61</sup> Now, penniless, he headed back home to plan his next move.

Born in summer 1937, Thompson had been a precocious child, stunning adults with his presence and charisma at a young age. A natural leader, Thompson had no trouble gathering boys around him to make mischief. As a result, his relationship with law enforcement began early. One day when he was five years old two FBI agents showed up at his family's door, accusing him of overturning a mailbox into the path of a school bus.<sup>62</sup> Soon enough mischief evolved into trouble, accelerating after the death of Thompson's father when the boy was fourteen. Throughout high school, Hunter was in and out of court for stealing and drunk driving, finally receiving a two-month sentence for robbery and threatening to rape a girl.<sup>63</sup> Thompson spent his high school graduation in jail while his two accomplices, sons of prominent attorneys, got off with probation and fines. This humiliating experience remained with him for the rest of his life. Despite his legal troubles, he was an avid reader and writer during his childhood, joining a prestigious literary society in high school. Even at a young age, Thompson was an

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<sup>60</sup> Clifford 90.

<sup>61</sup> William McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company: 2008) 66.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid* 12.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid* 19.

enigma, scorned by some and loved by others, with both sides agreeing only on the power of his personality to move others.

After his release from jail, Thompson enlisted in the Air Force in order to escape Louisville, winding up at Eglin Air Force Base on the Florida panhandle. He got a job on the base's newspaper by lying about his credentials, but Thompson did not adapt well to life in the military. Constantly in trouble with his superiors for drunkenness and insubordination, he finally managed to secure an honorable discharge and head back home. Over the next few years, Thompson bounced between New York, Louisville, Puerto Rico, and California, living the poor and nomadic lifestyle of an unsuccessful writer. He failed to maintain steady employment in journalism due to his erratic behavior. He was fired from one job for destroying his boss's car while on a drunken date with the boss's daughter and another for kicking in the candy machine at his office. Throughout the period, Thompson developed his craft, drafting two novels and studying his favorite authors by typing out *The Great Gatsby* and *A Farewell to Arms*. Lacking steady income and unable to publish either of his own novels, he depended on the income of his long-time girlfriend and future wife, Sandy Conklin, as well as on loans from friends to survive.

Ironically, it was in South America that Thompson got his first break into the world of American journalism. Traveling on his inheritance from his grandmother, he penned a series of articles for the *National Observer*, an experimental newspaper published by Dow Jones. Although his money soon ran out and he suffered from stomach problems, he managed to write a series of quality articles about life on the continent, beginning to hone his characteristic style in the process. Often inserting

himself in the middle of the action, Thompson wrote with hyperbolic flourishes—a tendency that caused some of his editors in the states to doubt the accuracy of his work.<sup>64</sup> Thompson's penchant for exaggeration came to dominate his style in subsequent years, which is part of the difficulty of reading his work critically. While some articles comically explored the frustrations of being Hunter Thompson in South America, others proceeded more seriously, reading like traditional features and tackling important issues of the time, including the plight of democracy, class tensions, state-sponsored violence, and the legacy of imperialism.<sup>65</sup> Slowly finding his voice, Thompson developed the elements of his style that would feature prominently in his campaign for sheriff—the comedy of exaggeration combined with a savage attack on traditional power structures.

Back in the states, Thompson and Conklin married on May 19, 1963 before heading to Colorado to visit Paul Semonin in Aspen. They quickly fell in love with the Roaring Fork Valley, abandoning their plans and renting a house in Woody Creek—a small town fifteen miles down the valley from Aspen. Ultimately, the combination of Conklin's pregnancy and Thompson's inability to find consistent work drove them out of Colorado. They settled in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, then in the beginning stages of cultural upheaval. While Thompson wrote a book about the Hell's Angels, he immersed himself in the counterculture, befriending many key figures of the movement, including the members of Jefferson Airplane, Allen Ginsberg, and Ken Kesey, who introduced him to LSD.<sup>66</sup> With Thompson's life a revolving door of drugs and alcohol, his research about the Angels often had them coming over to his house for

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<sup>64</sup> McKeen 93.

<sup>65</sup> See "Why Anti-Gringo Winds Often Blow South of the Border," "Democracy Dies in Peru, but Few Seem to Mourn Its Passing," "The Inca of the Andes: He Haunts the Ruins of His Once-Great Empire," and "Brazilshooting".

<sup>66</sup> McKeen 107.

binges. While he eventually produced a successful book that challenged mainstream assumptions about the motorcycle gang, Thompson neglected his family, leaving his wife to take care of their infant son.<sup>67</sup> After two years in San Francisco and pessimistic about the direction the counterculture was going, Thompson decided to return to Colorado in the fall of 1966. He rented a house in Woody Creek that he named “Owl Farm”—a 130-acre property that remained his home for the rest of this life.<sup>68</sup>

After the publication of *Hell's Angels* in 1967, Thompson spent the next few years writing free-lance articles and working on his next book. The haste with which he finished *Hell's Angels*—he wrote the entire second half of the book in a four-day stretch—emboldened him to push the boundaries of traditional journalism. Increasingly, Thompson placed himself at the center of the story, writing articles more about his experience as a journalist than about the content of the story.<sup>69</sup> Biographer William McKeen referred to this style as “metajournalism, journalism about the process of journalism.”<sup>70</sup> The more he used this technique, the more his offbeat personality intruded into his stories.

Thompson had always had a penchant for performance art. According to McKeen, growing up, Thompson and his group of friends would fake seizures and pretend to whip each other in public.<sup>71</sup> Once, they executed a staged kidnapping—an act

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<sup>67</sup> McKeen 104.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid 115.

<sup>69</sup> See “The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy” and “The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved” for examples of this style. The Derby article was Thompson’s biggest breakthrough in finding his voice. Facing a looming deadline and unable to write, he began tearing out pages of his notebook and sending them to the printer. The resulting story—a collection of fragmented notes taken during the event—was praised by the writer Bill Cardozo as “totally Gonzo.” Thompson liked the word and began using it to define his style: Gonzo journalism.

<sup>70</sup> McKeen 73.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid 11.

that made the newspapers the next day.<sup>72</sup> Accounts of Thompson's life are rife with examples of his (often literally) explosive pranks. His desire to shock people persisted throughout his life. In the words of Peggy Clifford, "His eyes and his smile contain more mischief than any one person should have. He is one of those men who get the attention of the world and keep it."<sup>73</sup> As he focused more on his own experience as a journalist in his articles, the lines between his life and his art became increasingly blurred. His lifestyle and his work fed each other, amplifying his eccentricities in the process. The more bizarre Thompson acted when covering a story, the better the resulting article would be. For this reason, some observers dismissed his campaign for sheriff as a publicity stunt—an elaborate joke to generate material for his writing. On one level, I have to agree with this analysis. Thompson planned to write about his experience running for office in order to fulfill the obligations of a book contract, and he used the episode throughout the rest of his life to strengthen his myth. However, as I argue in the next chapter, I do not believe that these reasons were his primary motivations for running.

In his writing, Thompson fused his abnormal lifestyle and his desire to shock with an impassioned defense of his values. His prose is overwhelmingly negative in tone, upholding ideals of justice by denouncing perceived agents of injustice. He attacked social institutions and political figures, skewering his targets with biting comedy. Thompson described Richard Nixon as "a foul caricature of himself, a man with no soul, no inner convictions, with the integrity of a hyena and the style of a poison toad...I couldn't imagine him laughing at anything except maybe a paraplegic who wanted to

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<sup>72</sup> McKeen 17.

<sup>73</sup> Clifford 91.

vote Democratic but couldn't quite reach the lever on the voting machine."<sup>74</sup> In his articles, Thompson denounced individuals for inauthenticity, lamenting the corrosive power of money in American society.<sup>75</sup> He once described his style as "hammer and tongs," adding, "God's mercy on anybody who gets in the way."<sup>76</sup> Much of Thompson's comedic potential relies on his linguistic precision when attacking figures. The negativity in his writing reflects his attitude towards politics during this period, as he avoided proposing positive solutions for the problems he highlighted in his articles.

While Thompson had long recognized the importance of politics, he shied away from personal involvement. For much of his life, he described himself as an anarchist, writing in 1964 to Paul Semonin, "my position is and always has been that I distrust power and authority, together with all those who come to it by conventional means—weather it is guns, votes, or outright bribery."<sup>77</sup> After moving to California and reporting on the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, Thompson debated how to respond to the political upwelling. In another letter to Semonin, he dismissed the idea of participating, writing, "In a world like this I want to stay as tough as possible and I've never derived much strength from sitting in a mob and chanting in unison. Which is not to say the Berkeley mobs aren't right. They are."<sup>78</sup> Throughout his life, Thompson struggled to integrate his desire for political change with his disdain for political involvement. His two political heroes—John and Robert Kennedy—were both assassinated. Facing the

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<sup>74</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 185.

<sup>75</sup> See "The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy," "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," and "The 'Hashbury' Is the Capital of the Hippies."

<sup>76</sup> Kevin Simonson and Beef Torrey, eds. *Conversations with Hunter S. Thompson* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi) 19.

<sup>77</sup> Thompson, *The Proud Highway* 429, 472.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid* 474.

entrenched American power structure, Thompson decided to attack it in his articles rather than work for reform.

The 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago forced Thompson to reassess his position. After the success of *Hell's Angels*, Thompson pitched his idea for his next book: *The Death of the American Dream*. Enraged by the war in Vietnam and the national crackdown on drugs, Thompson set out to document the downfall of his country. Overwhelmed by the expansive topic, he decided to focus on national politics, traveling to Chicago as part of his research. The brutality of Mayor Daley's police shocked him into reconsidering his aversion to political involvement. In "The Battle of Aspen," Thompson's 1970 *Rolling Stone* article discussing his political activities in Aspen, he wrote,

my own political involvement amounted to the willful shattering of what had been, until then, a very comfortable truce...and looking back I'm still not sure what launched me. Probably it was Chicago—that brain-raping week in August of '68. I went to the Democratic Convention as a journalist, and returned a raving beast...Suddenly it seemed imperative to get a grip on those who had somehow slipped into power and caused the thing to happen.<sup>79</sup>

In the wake of Chicago, Thompson decided to challenge authority in the realm of politics rather than attack it in print. It took him over a year to finally take the leap into local politics, but when the time came, Thompson and his radical friends in Aspen mounted a takeover bid. In researching "The Death of the American Dream," Thompson discovered that the idea still held promise—that society's outcasts could band together to seize power legally and reform the institutions that governed their lives.

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<sup>79</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 167.

## Chapter 2 – Thompson for Sheriff

“I didn’t come here for brighter lights and better hotdogs.”<sup>80</sup>

–Hunter S. Thompson

In the wake of Aspen’s 1969 mayoral election, Thompson wrote to Warren Hinckle, editor of the new magazine *Scanlan’s Monthly*, about his time managing the campaign of lawyer Joe Edwards—Thompson’s first involvement in local politics. In the letter, he discussed Edwards’s campaign and the potential for the “Freak Power” political movement to take power. Looking ahead to the fall of 1970, when the county sheriff and the most powerful county commissioner would be up for reelection, Thompson predicted the wild campaign that was to come. He wrote, “our man for Sheriff is...well, shucks...I hate to sound uppity, but I may as well admit that it’s me. Right: Sheriff Thompson... Which is only a rumor, but the mere possibility has made a lot of people physically sick.”<sup>81</sup> Energized by the near success of Edwards, Thompson was optimistic about his coalition’s ability to take power, writing, “we are clearly capable of almost anything; we are sitting on the largest Bloc Vote in the county...and even the pig-people realize it. I tell you this politics gig is a wild and heavy trip.”<sup>82</sup> Already in 1969, Thompson was laying the groundwork for his campaign for sheriff in 1970, planning his assault on the Aspen establishment.

In the following chapters, I reconstruct Thompson’s campaign for sheriff of Pitkin County, exploring the relationship between the history of the event and the narratives about it in the media. In this chapter, I examine the campaign itself, telling the story of

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<sup>80</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” *Aspen Illustrated News* 24 Sept. 1969: 13.

<sup>81</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 225.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

the race and exploring the ways in which it changed over time. I argue that the campaign evolved from a comedic and incendiary political statement to a serious attempt to reform law enforcement in the county. In Chapter 3, I analyze different accounts of the race, including local and national newspaper and magazine articles, Thompson's own discussion of the campaign, and biographies of his life. Contrasting the content of these accounts with the findings of my research, I argue that most accounts overemphasize the more bizarre aspects of the race, ignoring its shift in tone towards the end of the campaign. In the process, I will explore possible reasons for this disparity, addressing the role of entertainment in journalism and the construction of the myth of Hunter S. Thompson.

### "Freak Power"

Thompson's campaign for sheriff effectively began a year earlier, in September 1969. Overcoming his prior resistance to political involvement, especially in his hometown, he attacked Aspen's establishment in the *Aspen Illustrated News*.<sup>83</sup> Dismissing the city council as a "horrible joke" and its members as "yahoos and fools, at best," he lamented the direction he saw the town heading.<sup>84</sup> The acerbic "screed," as he later called the piece, singled out members of the community, calling them "greedheads" and accusing them of ruining the town.<sup>85</sup> Foreshadowing his political strategy, the essay

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<sup>83</sup> Thompson, "For Whom the Bell Tolls."; This was not Thompson's first appearance in the local papers; he had written letters to the *Aspen Times* purporting to represent Nazi leader Martin Bormann (widely believed to be alive and to have escaped Europe following the war) in his search for a suitable vacation destination. However, the essay departed from the satire of his previous efforts, attacking particular individuals and, in effect, announcing Thompson's entry into the political scene.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 224.

focused on the potential of mobilizing Aspen's so-called "political dropouts"—the town's largely apolitical youth—and winning local elections by mounting a third-party challenge.<sup>86</sup> His target was the town's mayoral race, a contest he described as "almost a set-up for any consensus Under-Seventy Candidate."<sup>87</sup> Still, direct political action was, to Thompson's eyes, a dangerous move. He later wrote, "My lifestyle, I felt, was not entirely suited for doing battle with any small-town political establishment...in my very limited congress with the local authorities I was treated like some kind of half-mad cross between a hermit and a wolverine, a thing best left alone as long as possible."<sup>88</sup> Despite the risks of breaking what he called his "very comfortable truce" with the town's authorities, Thompson returned from the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago with, in his words, "a sense of impending doom, of horror at politics in general."<sup>89</sup> His fear outweighed his reluctance to enter politics, and in the fall of 1969 he decided to challenge Aspen's power structure at the ballot box.

Thompson had been meeting regularly with politically inclined friends, including *Aspen Times* columnist Peggy Clifford, filmmaker James Salter, and local artist Tom Benton. One night in early October, they discussed the upcoming mayoral election, searching for candidates that would appeal to both older liberals and younger dropouts. After rejecting a potential candidate who, in Thompson's words, "wasn't quite weird enough to galvanize the street vote," the group decided to draft Joe Edwards—the lawyer who successfully sued the city a year earlier for its crackdown on "undesirable

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<sup>86</sup> Thompson, "For Whom the Bell Tolls."

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>88</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 167.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid* 168.

transients.”<sup>90</sup> After calling Edwards in the middle of the night to propose the idea, Thompson and two of his friends met with him the next night and convinced him to enter the race. Thompson valued Edwards’s potential to unite Aspen’s traditional liberals with the town’s hippy population, a coalition that Thompson saw as necessary for victory.<sup>91</sup> The problem of appealing to both groups—loosely in agreement about liberal values but differing in lifestyle—plagued Thompson throughout his career in politics. The same issues reappeared in his campaign for sheriff, as he simultaneously juggled the tasks of energizing his young and apolitical base with incendiary rhetoric and references to his copious drug use while convincing the town’s liberals that he was serious about progressive reform.

The available accounts of the race illustrate the methods by which the Edwards campaign sought to speak to both sides of the liberal spectrum.<sup>92</sup> Edwards’s official platform used conventional language to address the controversial issues at the time, including density, land use, pollution, police discrimination, and transportation.<sup>93</sup> His statements in newspaper articles and his campaign advertisements contrast sharply with Thompson’s account of the Edwards campaign’s goals. In a letter after the election to John Wilcock, editor of the *Los Angeles Free Press*, Thompson wrote,

The program, in a nut, was to drive the real estate goons completely out of the valley: to prevent the State Highway Dept. from bringing in a 4-lane highway into town and in fact to ban all auto traffic from every downtown street... The cops would become trash collectors and maintenance men for

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<sup>90</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 166.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Problematically, the only available narrative accounts of this race are, for obvious reasons, pro-Edwards accounts (a problem with studying Thompson’s campaign a year later as well). I have drawn on Peggy Clifford’s “To Aspen and Back,” Thompson’s “The Battle of Aspen” and Thompson’s letters published in “Fear and Loathing in America,” in addition to articles published in *The Aspen Times* and the *Aspen Illustrated News* at the time in reconstructing the race.

<sup>93</sup> “Joe Edwards speaks out for Aspen,” *The Aspen Times* 30 Oct. 1969: 12-A.

a fleet of municipal bicycles, for anybody to use. No more huge, space-killing apartment buildings to block the view...No more land-rapes, no more busts for “flue-playing” or “blocking the sidewalk”...fuck the tourists, dead-end the highway, zone the greedheads out of existence.<sup>94</sup>

There are multiple ways of interpreting this statement. A classic example of Thompson’s comedic hyperbole, I do not think that he believed that Joe Edwards, if elected mayor, would ask the police department to start collecting trash. Thompson’s description of Edwards’s platform perhaps says more about Thompson’s writing style and penchant for exaggeration than the nature of the campaign’s ideas. However, while Edwards would never have implemented this exact vision, Thompson’s ideas in this letter address the same themes as Edwards’s official platform: controlling Aspen’s growth, addressing problems of traffic and pollution, and protecting the youth from police crackdowns. This reading of the statement reveals the degree to which the Edwards campaign radically tailored the tone of its messages for different audiences. This was certainly not a new trend in politics, but the degree to which the messages differed illustrates the confusion surrounding the “Freak Power” movement, and, perhaps, the outcry against it, as multiple narratives competed for the public’s approval, some aggressively radical and others more moderate.<sup>95</sup>

Thompson was likely promoting versions of the radical platform he described in his letter in the campaign to register Aspen’s apolitical youth. The success of the Edwards campaign depended on the ability of its leaders to energize the dormant voting

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<sup>94</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 236-237.

<sup>95</sup> The origins of the term “Freak Power” are difficult to determine. The first recorded instance of its use I have found was in a letter from Thompson to his book editor Jim Silberman on November 19, 1969. Since the phrase is not present in the local newspaper accounts of the race or in any of Edwards’s official advertisements, it was most likely used by Thompson (and probably others) during the campaign informally as a rallying cry to energize their underground base. However, this is only a conjecture.

bloc. In an interview, Joe Edwards discussed the importance of younger voters and his campaign's strategy for convincing them to register, stating, "That was a very aggressive organized part of the whole campaign, to go into the bars and sit down and talk to these guys after skiing and chat with them about what was going on and encourage them to get themselves registered."<sup>96</sup> In the effort to connect with younger voters, the Edwards campaign, led by Thompson, promoted their candidate's counterculture lifestyle in addition to his ideas about governance—a style of campaigning that would also feature prominently in Thompson's run for sheriff a year later. In an article written after the Edwards race, Thompson wrote, "at the time it seemed necessary to come up with a candidate whose Strange Tastes and Para-Legal Behavior were absolutely beyond question...whose massive unsuitability for the job would cause even the most apolitical drug-child in the town's most degenerate commune to shout, 'Yes! I must *vote* for that man!'"<sup>97</sup> In addition to focusing on Edwards's lifestyle in order to reach out to younger voters, it is likely that the campaign also adopted a more radical tone in their appeals to Aspen's counterculture.

The Edwards campaign's multiple arguments illustrate the difficulty of assessing the motives of the campaign's leaders. On one hand, in an article after the election, Thompson claimed that the watered-down official platform was a political ploy designed to appeal to Aspen's older liberals. He wrote, "*power* was our first priority. The platform—or at least our public version of it—was too intentionally vague to be anything but a flexible secondary tool for wooing the liberals and holding our coalition."<sup>98</sup> He

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<sup>96</sup> Joe Edwards, Personal Interview, 26 Jan 2011.

<sup>97</sup> Thompson, The Great Shark Hunt 166.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

dismissed the campaign's public platform, arguing that an Edwards victory would lead to more radical change along the lines of Thompson's personal ideology.

Despite his optimism, Thompson understood the difficulties of holding to this assumption. Immediately after the statement I just quoted, he wrote, "On the other hand, not even the handful of people in the power nexus of Joe Edwards' campaign could guarantee that he would start sodding the streets and flaying the sheriff just as soon as he got elected...I think we all knew, although nobody ever said it, that we really had no idea what the bastard might do if he got elected."<sup>99</sup> After Edwards eventually won an election for county commissioner in 1972, he implemented reforms more along the lines of his public platform in 1969 than Thompson's radical ideas. In this light, Thompson's idealistic rhetoric in the bars talking to young people in 1969 could be seen as the "flexible secondary tool"—energizing a powerful voting bloc with unrealistic promises in order to achieve more moderate reforms. Part of the challenge of assessing the motives of the Edwards campaign is due to the fact that Thompson—the head strategist and campaign manager—was not running for office himself.

While the near-success of the campaign was a product of the collaboration of many people, Thompson held a central role in its activities, from talking to younger voters in the bars to drafting advertisements. In a letter after the campaign, Thompson described himself as "the guru, the main hustler, the hype-monger."<sup>100</sup> While he displayed his penchant for self-aggrandizement in this statement, his characterization in the same letter that his "gig is saying and writing all the shit that a candidate can't say, for fear of alienating huge blocs of voters" is likely an accurate assessment of

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<sup>99</sup> Thompson, The Great Shark Hunt 166.

<sup>100</sup> Thompson, Fear and Loathing in America 249.

Thompson's role. He canvassed the bars and the communes, convincing Aspen's counterculture that Joe Edwards was a candidate worth voting for. He also promised that if Edwards won the election, Thompson himself would run for sheriff the following year.<sup>101</sup>

This promise is telling in that it reveals the degree to which Thompson desired more control over the campaign he was running. He could make promises and pontificate on local issues, but, ultimately, Edwards, who Thompson referred to as the "ghost candidate" for his minor role in the campaign, was the candidate and would be holding office.<sup>102</sup> In addition to wanting more power, one part of Thompson's personality likely coveted the spotlight that Edwards received as the candidate. He drew attention to himself throughout his life; Thompson's biographies are full of anecdotes about his love of performance art. A potential campaign for sheriff probably seemed like a perfect venue to exercise his sense of the absurd and provoke a reaction from others. These desires would, in part, lead Thompson to run for sheriff the following year. Additionally, his promise to run for sheriff illustrates that members of Aspen's counterculture were potentially more concerned with issues of law enforcement—undercover informants, drug arrests, and Aspen's hippy crackdown—than municipal government. While the mayor has some power over the police department, attacking the sheriff's office speaks directly to these concerns.

In the end, Edwards narrowly lost the race for mayor by six votes, capturing 37 percent of the vote in the three-way race.<sup>103</sup> Thompson's plan to forge a coalition of underground radicals and establishment liberals almost triumphed. The campaign

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<sup>101</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 158.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid* 166.

<sup>103</sup> "Homeyer in close win," *The Aspen Times* 6 Nov. 1969: 1-A.

managed to attract many prominent liberals, important individuals in the town whose endorsements were trumpeted in radio and newspaper advertisements.<sup>104</sup> However, according to Thompson, other liberals began withdrawing their support as the election grew near, frightened by the prospect of the counterculture wielding power.<sup>105</sup> Without the benefit of more material, including polling data and more complete election results, there is no way to judge the validity of this argument.<sup>106</sup> Still, the *Aspen Times*, known in the town for its liberal views, endorsed Eve Homeyer, the Republican candidate who won the race.<sup>107</sup> In the end, the truth of how the Edwards campaign narrowly lost is less important than the lessons Thompson took away from the loss, as his interpretation of the race affected his approach to his campaign for sheriff a year later. In Thompson's opinion, Edwards's strength in the beginning of the race—his ability to appeal to both underground radicals and establishment liberals—harmed his chances for victory, as he was “a bit too straight for the acid-people, and a little too strange for the liberals.”<sup>108</sup> Thompson took away from the race the lesson that Aspen's liberals could not be counted on for support.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, he saw the political power of mobilizing Aspen's counterculture. As he began to plot his race for sheriff the following year, Thompson decided to fully embrace his radical ideas and rhetoric, rejecting the more moderate public tone of Edwards's campaign.

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<sup>104</sup> “Joe Edwards speaks out for Aspen.”

<sup>105</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 165.

<sup>106</sup> In addition, there is no way of answering the question of how successful the Edwards campaign was at registering new voters, or the question of how many new voters made it to the polls. While the number of registered voters nearly doubled from 1967 to 1969, from 875 to 1607, the percentage of registered voters who voted only increased by one percent, from 71 percent in 1967 to 72 percent in 1969. Much of the increase in the number of registered voters is due to the fact that the city of Aspen grew tremendously during this period, partly due to an overall population increase, but also due to an annexation of a neighboring community into the city proper. Thus, with the data available, I cannot make any assessments about the ability of the Edwards campaign to create a new voting bloc.

<sup>107</sup> “Editorial: tough choices,” *The Aspen Times* 30 Oct. 1969: 2-A.

<sup>108</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 166-167.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid* 165.

Thompson emerged from the Edwards campaign optimistic about the possibilities for radical political action. After years of researching “The Death of the American Dream” for his second book, Thompson suddenly saw its promise.<sup>110</sup> In a letter to Jim Silberman, his book editor, Thompson noted the irony, writing “The joke in all this is that I suddenly see a bedrock validity in the American Dream; the Joe Edwards campaign was a straight exercise in Jeffersonian Democracy.”<sup>111</sup> While Edwards’s loss technically freed Thompson from his promise to run for sheriff, the campaign’s near success energized him. As soon as the campaign ended, he began plotting his strategy for 1970, analyzing the Edwards campaign and planning his approach for the following year.

In order to keep his base interested in politics and to have an outlet for his political commentary, Thompson founded a bimonthly newsletter with artist Tom Benton called the Aspen *Wallposter*. A large single piece of paper, the *Wallposters*—seven in total—displayed a large graphic by Benton on one side with an essay by Thompson on the back. As he had full creative control over the content (although he ran into trouble having one of the issues printed—the front displaying a drawing of Nixon with blood dripping out of his mouth), the pieces are classic Thompson—a comedic blend of fact and fiction, copious references to drug use, and, as always, vitriolic attacks on traditional power structures. All of the issues discuss Aspen politics; the *Wallposters* functioned as a propaganda outlet for Thompson to reach his base and energize them for the upcoming election. Throughout the year, he maintained a high profile in the town, either offending or delighting Aspen’s residents with each issue as he prepared the town for the his campaign in the fall.

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<sup>110</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 216.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*

At this point, it would be helpful to explore Thompson's possible motives for running for sheriff. There is no single answer to the question, and to argue for only one motive would oversimplify the ambiguity of Thompson's statements and the complexities of the situation. At the heart of this exploration is a series of linked questions, all of which people likely asked in Aspen during the summer of 1970. Would Thompson actually run for sheriff? Rumors abounded, but it remained to be seen whether he would officially enter the race. Why did he want to run? Did he want to win? Or was the campaign a political statement, or, worse, a joke or a publicity stunt? With the exception of the first, correct answers to these questions are most likely a combination of all the possible answers. Thompson was unsure of his own motives, and the idea of running a campaign for sheriff appealed to him on several levels.<sup>112</sup>

The most cynical interpretation argues that Thompson ran for sheriff in order to advance his career as a writer. In this view, which residents were likely voicing during the campaign, Thompson's candidacy was an advertisement for himself, designed in order to attract the attention of the media and introduce wider audiences to his writing. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Jerry Cohen voiced this idea in an article on Thompson's campaign, writing, "It is difficult to distinguish put-on from dead-earnest. Or is the whole bit merely to publicize Thompson, the writer of provocative prose?"<sup>113</sup> A letter Thompson wrote after the Joe Edwards campaign reveals the degree to which he worried about the perception of his political activity as opportunistic. Comparing the Edwards campaign and Timothy Leary's bid to become governor of California (which he called a "suicidal joke"), he wrote, "There is a massive difference between self-promotion and

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<sup>112</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 298.

<sup>113</sup> Jerry Cohen, "Freak Power Candidate May Be Winner in Sheriff's Race," *The Los Angeles Times* 7 Oct. 1970: 1.

self-preservation.”<sup>114</sup> Given the way in which Thompson’s career would, and did, benefit from his candidacy, it would be surprising if his political opponents did not argue that his candidacy was largely motivated by his ambitions to become a successful writer.

This critique is closely linked to the argument that Thompson decided to run for sheriff in order to create material for his long-overdue book. In this view, Thompson entered the race for immediate financial gain. He recognized this argument, writing in a letter to his book editor, “the final chunk of my book depends on my running for sheriff. It would make feel a bit shitty to get rich off the shattered remains of our action.”<sup>115</sup> Even though Thompson ultimately benefited from the publicity, I do not think that financial gain was his primary motivation in running for sheriff.

In the early 1970s, as Thompson’s popularity skyrocketed due to the success of his books *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, his “Freak Power” bid for sheriff became part of his legend. In the next chapter, I will address the specific ways in which Thompson selectively recalled his candidacy in order to strengthen his myth. The publicity his campaign generated and the connections Thompson made greatly advanced his career.<sup>116</sup> Thompson’s first article for *Rolling Stone* was about the campaign, starting a lifelong relationship between the writer and the magazine that propelled both to superstardom. Thus, the argument that Thompson would, and did, benefit personally by running for sheriff is true. However, I do not believe that it explains the entire episode. Thompson spent over a year of his life

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<sup>114</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 239.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid* 313.

<sup>116</sup> In an interview, Bob Braudis, longtime sheriff of Pitkin County and Thompson’s best friend for years, reflected on this aspect of the campaign, stating, “For a writer, trying to market in those days, running for sheriff probably was good publicity. Hunter never announced that he was in it for the publicity, and if confronted he wouldn’t comment. So we don’t know. But I’m sure the publicity didn’t hurt.”

working tirelessly on the campaigns, from staying up for days at a time during the races to barely breaking even publishing the *Wallposters*. Additionally, he took a large risk in entering local politics, immediately making a number of new enemies and subjecting his illegal activities to greater official scrutiny. In the same letter that he contrasted himself with Timothy Leary, he wrote, “electoral politics is such a foul and rotten game that only a fool would play it except to win and move on to something better.”<sup>117</sup> Thompson’s passion about the issues and the risks he took in campaigning illustrate that other factors in addition to personal gain compelled him to run for sheriff.

As it became clear that Thompson would enter the race, Thompson’s supporters and his opponents wondered whether the campaign was a political statement, a joke, or a serious attempt to take power. As with the previous motivation, the ambiguity of Thompson’s statements and behavior obscure any definitive answers to this question. Undoubtedly, he used the campaign as an opportunity to have fun at others’ expense. Throughout the campaign he reveled in the spotlight, seizing the opportunity to infuriate his opponents. In a letter to Jim Silberman before the campaign, Thompson described the campaign as “a wonderful fear-joke to keep the greedheads off balance.”<sup>118</sup> Later in the letter, he justified the aggressive rhetoric of his candidacy by putting it in the context of American society in 1970, decrying the ascension of Nixon and Agnew and the killings at Kent State. Summing up his analysis of the Aspen political landscape, he wrote, “it seems only right & reasonable to push the fuckers until they go completely crazy.”<sup>119</sup> Still, in other parts of the letter he wrote that he was serious about running, and, presumably, winning.

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<sup>117</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 239.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid* 298.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid* 299.

Thompson also could have run for sheriff for the high of a political race. A heavy drinker and drug user for most of his life, he spent much of his time pursuing altered states of consciousness. Beyond the publicity and the comedy, the adrenaline of a political race likely appealed to Thompson. In a 1974 interview with Craig Vetter of *Playboy*, Thompson was asked, “Do you get off on politics the same way you get off on drugs?”<sup>120</sup> He replied, “Sometimes. It depends on the politics, depends on the drugs...there are different kinds of highs.”<sup>121</sup> In a post-election letter to Jim Silberman, his book agent, Thompson described the pleasure he took in campaigning, writing, “after the first few scenes I found myself actually digging it; very strange, maybe a sort of Hitler instinct...but there is something very wild in being able to look out on a huge crowd and actually communicate with it.”<sup>122</sup> While I believe that Thompson’s other motives, including his desire to make a statement and to have fun, were stronger, his addictive personality and his pursuit of altered states potentially factored into his decision to run for sheriff.

Throughout his letters from this period, Thompson remains optimistic about his chances for victory, but the fact that he thought he could win does not answer the question of whether he wanted to.<sup>123</sup> At times in his letters, he reveals his aversion to victory. However, and this is the problem of analyzing Thompson through his writing, he worked hard publicly to build an organization and promote political takeover while privately wavering on whether he wanted to win the race.<sup>124</sup> The most likely interpretation of these discrepancies is that Thompson’s candidacy was driven by several

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<sup>120</sup> Anita Thompson ed. *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* (New York: De Capo Press, 2009) 32.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>122</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 335.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid* 307.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid* 290.

motives, all of which occupied his thinking at different times. On one hand, he appreciated the campaign's entertainment value, laughing at the reactions of conservative residents as they struggled to comprehend his unusual behavior and incendiary platform. On the other hand, he wrote passionately about the potential for his movement to seize power and implement change, putting his campaign in the context of other, more important races, both in Aspen and in the rest of the country.

Another motivation that Thompson discussed is the role of his campaign as part of a larger movement. He identified the race for county commissioner as more important than his own, often describing his own efforts as a "lightning rod" to distract attention away from the candidacy of Thompson's friend Ned Vare, a radical city councilman running to unseat J. Sterling Baxter, the most powerful of the three county commissioners.<sup>125</sup> In a letter written during the summer of 1970, Thompson outlined his plan to help Vare, plotting to campaign "so far to the Crazy Left of him that he will look like a fine moderate by comparison."<sup>126</sup> He often spoke about his larger goals of using Aspen as a test case for a new political movement. In a letter before the campaign, he put his candidacy in the context of larger ambitions, writing, "My sheriff's gig is just a small part of the overall plot, which amounts to a sort of Freak Power takeover bid...If Freak Power can win in Aspen, it can win in a lot of other places."<sup>127</sup> While he may have entertained delusions of grandeur with statements like this, the degree to which he repeats himself in his letters and his subsequent articles, continuing to argue for the potential of

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<sup>125</sup> Thompson, Ancient Gonzo Wisdom 21.

<sup>126</sup> Thompson, Fear and Loathing in America 312.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid* 290.

harnessing the “freak” vote, reveals his commitment to reforming America through the democratic process.<sup>128</sup>

The final potential motive is Thompson’s commitment to winning the race in order to oversee the establishment of progressive law enforcement in Pitkin County. Writing to John Wilcox, editor of the *Los Angeles Free Press*, after Joe Edwards’s loss, Thompson discussed his campaign for sheriff, revealing that as early as 1969 he was thinking about serving a term as sheriff. He wrote, “I am already hard at work compiling a list of qualified deputies to carry the load. My own responsibility, as I see it, will be mainly philosophical.”<sup>129</sup> The following summer, in a letter to *Rolling Stone* editor Jann Wenner, Thompson reiterated that he did not want to win, but he added, “if I *do* win, I’ll serve out the term—although not without the help of a carefully-selected posse and a very special crew of deputies.”<sup>130</sup> These remarks illustrate a different facet of the campaign—Thompson’s potential to win and oversee the department’s transition, delegating the responsibilities of acting sheriff to a deputy of his choosing.

All of Thompson’s potential reasons for running—from personal gain to a comedic statement, a progressive sheriff’s office to the recreation of America—fall into two larger frameworks: hyperbolic verbal assaults attacking powerful institutions and pragmatic strategies designed to reform them. I argue that while all of these motives are present in his campaign, Thompson’s desire to win and change the character of law

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<sup>128</sup> Thompson lamented America’s poor voter turnout for the rest of his life. In an interview late in his life, he commented, “All the blood is drained out of democracy—it dies—when only half the population votes.” Furthermore, he continued to advocate his political theory of “freak power.” When he was covering the 1972 Presidential campaign for *Rolling Stone*—a series of articles that were later published in his book *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72*—he wrote that candidate George McGovern could “pick up a million or so votes by inviting the wire-service photographers to come out and snap him lounging around on the beach with a can of beer in his hand and wearing my Grateful Dead T-shirt.”

<sup>129</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 238.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid* 290.

enforcement in the county emerged as the most important as the campaign progressed. Initially, Thompson's candidacy—especially his first platform and his early advertisements—reflected his desire to shock people for political and personal reasons, distracting attention away from Ned Vare and having fun at his opponents' expense.

On October 1, 1970, *Rolling Stone* published Thompson's first article for the magazine titled "The Battle of Aspen."<sup>131</sup> Thompson, who later described the piece as an "ad for myself," wrote the article in order to draw attention to his campaign and to inspire like-minded radicals to engage in "weird political action" in other parts of the country.<sup>132</sup> In the piece, Thompson recounted the Joe Edwards campaign of 1969, outlining his strategy for radical political takeover in areas with a large counterculture population. At the end of the article, he briefly discussed his upcoming campaign for sheriff, ending the article with his six-point platform—an incendiary commentary on local politics that had appeared in the *Aspen Times* two weeks earlier.<sup>133</sup>

The platform, rife with outlandish humor and acerbic prose, called on Aspen to "sod the streets at once," banning automobiles from the town and to "Change the name 'Aspen,' by public referendum, to 'Fat City,'" preventing "greedheads, land-rapers and other human jackals from capitalizing on the name 'Aspen.'"<sup>134</sup> He continued, "These swine should be fucked, broken and driven across the land." He discussed Aspen's drug culture, writing, "my first act as Sheriff will be to install, on the courthouse lawn, a bastinado platform and a set of stocks—in order to punish dishonest dope dealers in a proper public fashion...it will be the general philosophy of the Sheriff's office that *no*

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<sup>131</sup> McKee 154.

<sup>132</sup> Thompson, Ancient Gonzo Wisdom 66; Hunter S. Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear: Loathsome Secrets of a Star-Crossed Child in the Final Days of the American Century* (London: Penguin Books) 83.

<sup>133</sup> Thompson, "Sheriff Candidate Hunter Thompson Discusses Law and Order."

<sup>134</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 173.

drug worth taking should be sold for money.”<sup>135</sup> Without directly stating the obvious, Thompson strongly hinted that he would not enforce drug laws for possession upon his election. Additionally, he argued that Aspen should exclude non-residents from hunting and fishing in the area and that law enforcement officers should not carry guns except in emergencies.<sup>136</sup>

Interestingly, only three of Thompson’s six points addressed law enforcement, as he pledged to punish drug profiteers, harass real estate developers, and disarm the department. The other points reflect Thompson’s concern with problems outside of the scope of the sheriff’s office. The prominence of his ideas to “sod the streets” and to discourage tourism by renaming the town “Fat City” (points one and two, respectively) reveals the extent to which Thompson was driven, at this point in the campaign, by the motives of self-promotion, making a comedic statement about the state of Aspen, and helping the candidacy of Ned Vare. He wrote the article in his characteristic style for a prominent counterculture magazine, hyping his lifestyle and his talent as a writer in addition to his political agenda. His heavy use of comedy and hyperbole reflects his desire to use the campaign to attack his political opponents in print, making jokes at their expense. Additionally, the idea of a drug-fueled outlaw like Thompson running for sheriff was itself a joke. Thompson and his supporters undoubtedly reveled in the irony.

The platform addressed areas of local governance as much as law enforcement, revealing Thompson’s desire to help Ned Vare win the race for county commissioner—the more important race in Thompson’s eyes. All of these facets of his initial platform depict a talented and somewhat offbeat writer launching a campaign for sheriff for

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<sup>135</sup> Thompson, The Great Shark Hunt 173.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

several reasons, none of which were his desire to win the race and act as sheriff. Still, despite the unserious tone of his first platform, Thompson worked hard to build an organization, campaigning aggressively and gathering support for his bid.

Thompson's political strategy in 1970 mirrored his strategy during the Joe Edwards campaign with a few major differences. Like the year before, he gathered supporters and began a campaign to register Aspen's counterculture to vote, working the bars and talking to the young people, conscious of the need to energize his base. In "The Battle of Aspen," he wrote, "Last year perhaps the Heads voted; this year we will need them all."<sup>137</sup> Thompson had managed the hectic three-week Edwards campaign with minimal knowledge of how to run a campaign. A year later, Thompson convinced his friend and neighbor Ed Bastian—a former field director for Republican Governors George Romney and Nelson Rockefeller in their bids for the Republican Nomination in 1968—to sign onto the campaign to manage logistics. In an interview, Bastian said, "I really helped him on the nuts and bolts of running a campaign."<sup>138</sup> Bastian managed the structure of the campaign—the day-to-day tasks of registering voters, coordinating volunteers, creating voter lists, and establishing a phone bank.

Instead of toning down his public statements in an attempt to court Aspen's more traditional liberals, Thompson initially intensified his rhetoric, calling his opponents "greedheads" and "land-rapers" and proudly referencing his copious drug use.<sup>139</sup> In a letter written after the campaign to Carey McWilliams of *The Nation*, Thompson wrote, "we ran straight at the bastards with an out-front Mescaline platform. My drug tastes were discussed quite openly, not only in the newspaper but also in mass public

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<sup>137</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 172.

<sup>138</sup> Ed Bastian, *Personal Interview*, 1 Feb. 2011.

<sup>139</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 172-173.

forums...and through it all I refused to say I'd stop eating mescaline if I got elected. Marijuana got lost in that scramble."<sup>140</sup> While Thompson was likely bragging to a fellow writer, emphasizing certain aspects of the campaign rather than others (a topic I will explore more in the next chapter), the issue of his drug use was a central focus of the campaign. Thompson's campaign symbol was, in his words, a "double-thumbed fist, clutching a peyote button," designed by his friend Tom Benton and displayed throughout town on "Thompson for Sheriff" posters.<sup>141</sup>

Additionally, in preparation for the campaign, Thompson shaved his head, referring to the crew-cut-sporting incumbent sheriff as his "long-haired opponent."<sup>142</sup> Bastian described the look as a "parody of a California Highway Patrolman," commenting that Thompson's image—complete with cigarette holder, aviator sunglasses, leather jacket, and shaved head—was a "bit of theater."<sup>143</sup> After his experience losing the election for mayor a year earlier, Thompson moved away from the center, waging a highly unusual and entertaining campaign. Still, there is some evidence of his concern for capturing the votes of Aspen's older liberals. He falsely claimed to have received a B.A. from Columbia in Journalism—a fact that would impress Aspen's establishment more than his radical base.<sup>144</sup> Later, as the campaign gained momentum and he became more serious about winning, Thompson tempered his rhetoric, hoping to assuage the fears of Aspen's older residents.

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<sup>140</sup> Mescaline is the active hallucinogenic compound in peyote; Thompson, Fear and Loathing in America 336.

<sup>141</sup> Thompson, The Great Shark Hunt 172.

<sup>142</sup> McKeen 139.

<sup>143</sup> Bastian

<sup>144</sup> Corey Seymour and Jann S. Wenner, eds. Gonzo: The Life of Hunter S. Thompson (New York: Back Bay Books 2008) 107.

In the wake of Thompson's *Rolling Stone* article, journalists from around the country came to Aspen to write about the campaign. Journalists from *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The National Observer*, *Life*, *The Village Voice*, *The Denver Post*, *LOOK*, and many others arrived in town to write stories about the race.<sup>145</sup> *Time* magazine ran a picture of a bald-headed Thompson in its "People" section, and the BBC sent an eight-man crew to Aspen to make a documentary about the campaign.<sup>146</sup> Within a couple weeks, the elections in Aspen were national news. The *Aspen Times* ran a column titled "National press gawks at local race," comparing the journalists to "the craven crowd around the geek at a circus side show."<sup>147</sup> I believe the author, Bill Rollins, somewhat accurately describes the motives and character of the arriving journalists. Most likely, they were interested in the story for some combination of the following reasons: Thompson's outlandish ideas, his open drug use, '60s radicals engaging in the democratic process, the potential for their victory, and the fact that the movement took place in Aspen—an internationally renowned ski resort. In the next chapter, I will look at these stories more closely, but the influx of national journalists and the spotlight their articles shined on the town intensified the drama of the campaign.

As the campaign progressed in October, Thompson began to tailor his message, distancing himself from the more absurd and controversial facets of his initial platform. In a debate with incumbent sheriff Carrol Whitmire on October 12 (the third candidate, Glen Ricks, refused to attend due to the media presence), Thompson focused on realistic

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<sup>145</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear* 88.

<sup>146</sup> Peter O. Whitmer, *When the Going Gets Weird: The Twisted Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson: A Very Unauthorized Biography* (New York: Hyperion 1993) 174; McKeen 155.

<sup>147</sup> Bill Rollins, "National press gawks at local race," *The Aspen Times* 8 Oct. 1970: 3-A.

policy changes that he would make if elected sheriff. According to the *Aspen Times*, during the debate, Thompson “explained that his written platform did not contain promises, but was a platform.”<sup>148</sup> For example, discussing the first point of his initial platform (“Sod the streets at once”), Thompson “also explained that his previously published platform did not mean that he would dig up the streets, but that he would use his office to promote the creation of a downtown mall through a referendum.”<sup>149</sup> In addition to downplaying his platform, Thompson promised to turn over the day-to-day responsibilities of the department to a professional law enforcement officer of his choosing.<sup>150</sup> After he made it clear to the county that he was serious about running, Thompson began to focus more on pragmatic policy changes and issues of law enforcement. At his typewriter, Thompson had the freedom to make sweeping indictments and propose comedic solutions to Aspen’s problems. Once he began engaging with voters, he reined in his ideas and concentrated on more realistic reforms.

Thompson’s main opponent in the race was incumbent sheriff Carrol Whitmire. While the candidacy of undersheriff Glen Ricks made it a three-way race, Thompson’s radical ideas and provocative rhetoric effectively divided the county into pro-Thompson and anti-Thompson camps. Closer to election day, his opponents coalesced around Whitmire—the stronger of the two establishment candidates—in a coordinated effort to prevent Thompson from winning the race. Whitmire, a half Cherokee, was born on an Oklahoma reservation.<sup>151</sup> He moved to Colorado when he was 11, moving between small towns before joining the Aspen Police Department in 1961 and winning an election for

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<sup>148</sup> “Shrieval candidates speak at Snowmass,” *The Aspen Times* 15 Oct. 1970: 7-B.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid

<sup>150</sup> “Sheriff candidates discuss issues,” *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 7-B.

<sup>151</sup> “The Sheriff’s Race,” *The Aspen Times* 10 Oct. 1974: 1-C.

sheriff in 1966. Law enforcement in Pitkin County during the 1960s was, in Whitmire's words, a "red-neck operation."<sup>152</sup> In an *Aspen Times* article published during the 1974 sheriff's race, Whitmire recalls the times "when you could walk up and hit a guy over the head or kick a man's door in for no reason."<sup>153</sup> As the decade came to a close, many residents viewed Whitmire as out-of-step with the changing values of the times. Thompson's campaign for sheriff was, in part, an effort to liberalize law enforcement in Pitkin County, especially around issues of drug enforcement and prisoner treatment.

During the campaign, Thompson attacked Whitmire for substandard jail conditions and prisoner abuse. In a well-publicized case in the summer of 1970, Whitmire refused to suspend Fred MacKintosh—a sheriff's deputy charged with perjury and multiple counts of assault (he eventually pled guilty to the charges). During a hearing, a witness testified that Whitmire was in the room with MacKintosh while the deputy hit and kicked a suspect. Thompson referenced the episode throughout the campaign in his attacks on Whitmire, denouncing in one advertisement "Oakland-style drug busts continually bungled by simple cowboy cops who see nothing wrong with kicking handcuffed prisoners in the ribs while the sheriff stands by watching, seeing nothing wrong with it either."<sup>154</sup> In his comments towards the end of the campaign, Thompson argued for better treatment of prisoners, promoting more liberal notions of rehabilitation rather than punishment.

The sheriff's department's strict enforcement of drug laws created a culture of fear and distrust among Aspen's youth towards the police. The Aspen Police and the sheriff's department commonly used undercover informants in order to investigate

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<sup>152</sup> "The Sheriff's Race"

<sup>153</sup> Ibid

<sup>154</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, "Only Serious People Can Laugh," *The Aspen Times* 8 Oct. 1970: 12-A.

Aspen's drug culture. The newspapers from this period are rife with stories about young people receiving significant jail time for possession or sale of drugs, especially marijuana. Thompson focused on this issue in his campaign, decrying the nation's drug laws and professing his "sympathy towards the young, generous, grass-oriented society" in a television advertisement.<sup>155</sup> Additionally, he touted his own drug use, hoping to energize his base and convince them to register to vote.

The Thompson campaign was successful in convincing a large number of his supporters to register to vote. In an advertisement published in the *Aspen Times* on October 8, Thompson taunted the Aspen establishment, professing his commitment to winning the race and arguing that "739 new registrations since the September primary is no joke in a county with a total vote of less than 3000."<sup>156</sup> The large numbers of newly registered voters scared his opponents. Soon after the publication of the advertisement, a group of worried residents met and decided to challenge some of the new registrations in court. On October 22, the County Clerk heard 74 challenges to new registrations on the "grounds of insufficient address," according to an *Aspen Times* article.<sup>157</sup> Only one of the challenges was sustained, and the citizens who had brought the challenges were charged with voter intimidation. While the case was later dismissed, the defense attorney argued during preliminary hearings that, after reading Thompson's article in *Rolling Stone*, the defendants "felt their lifestyle was threatened by an implied take-over in the article and acted in fear of such a take-over."<sup>158</sup> Thompson's aggressive rhetoric achieved his initial aspiration to "push the fuckers until they go completely crazy," but the article may have

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<sup>155</sup> "High Noon in Aspen."

<sup>156</sup> Thompson, "Only Serious People Can Laugh"; The figure of 739 new registrations is also mentioned in a *New York Times* article from October 19, 1970.

<sup>157</sup> "Pitco voter harassment charged," *The Aspen Times* 22 Oct. 1970: 1-C.

<sup>158</sup> "Voter intimidation charges dismissed," *The Aspen Times* 18 Mar. 1971: 1-B.

hurt his chances of winning the election as his priorities shifted.<sup>159</sup> As October progressed, Thompson's opponents organized in response to what they saw as a major threat to their way of life, planning strategies to defeat him in the election.

Thompson's adversaries opposed his campaign for many reasons. First, many of them disliked the presence of the counterculture in Aspen. In "High Noon in Aspen," a BBC documentary about the race, a Thompson opponent discussed his aversion to the hippies, stating, "They are raiding our forests. They're living like, some of them, are living like animals."<sup>160</sup> Another man reacted to Thompson's public comments about his drug use, exclaiming, "This isn't the way of American life... You don't want that type of person in our government, not in my community."<sup>161</sup> Many residents opposed Thompson's campaign due to their disapproval of the lifestyle choices of the Aspen underground. While unable to be proven, it is quite likely that most vehemently anti-Thompson residents supported the crackdown on "undesirable transients" two years earlier.<sup>162</sup> In both cases, individuals used economic arguments in addition to value judgments in denouncing the counterculture. In "High Noon in Aspen," Whitmire argued that a Thompson victory would "destroy Aspen," leading to an influx of hippies and an exodus of wealthy landowners.<sup>163</sup> Finally, many Thompson opponents feared the potential threat to law and order if he were to become sheriff. The BBC documentary ends with a quote from a Whitmire supporter discussing the Sheriff's reelection, stating, "We realized that we must have laws and that we've got to obey these laws, and without

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<sup>159</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 299.

<sup>160</sup> "High Noon in Aspen"

<sup>161</sup> Ibid

<sup>162</sup> "Council to crack down on all laws."

<sup>163</sup> "High Noon in Aspen"

laws we've got anarchy.”<sup>164</sup> Thompson's aggressive rhetoric and controversial platform intensified the schism in Pitkin County, causing emotions to run high on both sides.

Thompson's allies supported his candidacy for a variety of reasons, ranging from interest in his plans to reform law enforcement to approval of his counterculture lifestyle. In “High Noon in Aspen,” a middle-aged woman reveals that she voted for Thompson because of his “new ideas, which is more than the old people had.”<sup>165</sup> *Aspen Times* columnist Peggy Clifford endorsed Thompson in her final article before the election, praising his proposals to institute more progressive law enforcement in the county.<sup>166</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, many of Thompson's supporters championed his candidacy due to unconventional rhetoric and open use of drugs. While the truth is likely quite complex, Aspen's counterculture was probably more energized by Thompson's personality than by his specific ideas about law enforcement. In “High Noon in Aspen,” Thompson described the blind faith of his followers, remarking, “We have about a thousand votes that would, if I went out there and walked through the streets naked with a bomb in each hand, and drugs dripping, you know, covered with various sticky substances that were known to be drugs, they would still vote for me.”<sup>167</sup> While some of Thompson's supporters appreciated his ideas about law enforcement, others voted for him based on his identity.

This analysis of the myriad ways in which Thompson's supporters and opponents conceived of his candidacy reveals an important aspect of the campaign. The individuals who reacted passionately to his campaign, on both sides, responded to his outlandish first

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<sup>164</sup> “High Noon in Aspen”

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>166</sup> Peggy Clifford, “the best man” *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 12-B.

<sup>167</sup> “High Noon in Aspen”

platform and his early statements made in the same style. Their responses, either strongly for or against Thompson, were primed by their own previously held beliefs, which they overlaid on top of Thompson. The combination of vague ideas and incendiary rhetoric with which he wrote the platform intensified either the fears or the hopes of the individual. In both cases, the platform was too unspecific to inform readers of what would ensue if Thompson were to be elected, giving readers the opportunity to construct their own horrifying or utopian predictions, depending on their beliefs. Admittedly, this is a process that takes place in every campaign, but Thompson's shockingly uncharacteristic and radical candidacy intensified the projections in both camps.

On one side, Thompson's supporters looked to him as their savior. In her memoir, *To Aspen and Back*, Peggy Clifford discussed the Thompson zealots, writing, "Thompson's young followers believed that he was Superman, Robin Hood and the Lone Ranger put together."<sup>168</sup> On the other side, Thompson's adversaries saw him as a vicious threat. As Thompson later recalled, "The yahoos couldn't handle it. They were convinced the Anti-Christ had finally appeared—right there in Aspen."<sup>169</sup> While Thompson was likely displaying his penchant for comic hyperbole, many aspects of the race—from voter challenges to bomb threats—indicate the vehemence with which his detractors opposed his candidacy.

While I am focusing specifically on the race for sheriff in this paper, Thompson's candidacy was part of a larger Freak Power slate. After discovering that the coroner was the only official with the power to arrest the sheriff under Colorado law, Thompson's

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<sup>168</sup> Clifford 150.

<sup>169</sup> Thompson, *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 44.

friend Billy Noonan ran for the office.<sup>170</sup> Additionally, after the voter registration challenges, in which the county clerk was alleged to have enabled the discrimination against young radicals, a Thompson supporter named Ruth Slowinski ran a write-in campaign for the office.<sup>171</sup> Among all of the races, the most important from a policy standpoint was radical city councilman Ned Vare's candidacy for county commissioner. While Vare was technically running as an Independent and his campaign shied away from the "Freak Power" rhetoric in favor of discussing specific issues, he became linked with Thompson in the eyes of the media and the public. Thompson initially thought that his candidacy would aid Vare by drawing attention away from the county commissioner's race, but the plan backfired after the publication of his article in *Rolling Stone* and the arrival of the national media. Numerous news outlets, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran stories on the race, lumping the candidacies of Thompson and Vare together. While Thompson later blamed the media outlets for ruining the "lightning-rod" strategy, his article in *Rolling Stone* likely did more damage to Vare's campaign by publicly linking the two campaigns and outlining their strategy for victory.<sup>172</sup>

Running as third-party challengers against the Democratic and Republican candidates, Thompson and Vare hoped that the establishment would split the vote, allowing the radicals to win with a lower percentage of votes than would otherwise be necessary. However, learning from Edwards's near-victory in the three-way race for mayor the previous fall, Thompson's opponents recognized the need to present a united

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<sup>170</sup> Thompson, *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 44.

<sup>171</sup> "Pitco voter harassment charged"; "Baxter, Whitmire and Williams Win," *The Aspen Times* 5 Nov. 1970: 1-A. *Aspen Times*, November 5, 1970, 1-A.

<sup>172</sup> Thompson, *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 13.

front against the radical candidates. Two groups, one called “R.I.D.—a coalition of Republicans, Independents, and Democrats” and another called the “Committee of Conservative Democrats” ran advertisements against Thompson in the *Aspen Times*, urging voters to split their tickets and reelect the Democratic sheriff and Republican commissioner over Thompson and Vare.<sup>173</sup> Additionally, Glen Ricks, the third candidate in the sheriff’s race, ran a bizarre advertisement in which he reaffirmed his commitment to staying in the race despite strong pressure from the establishment community.<sup>174</sup> He wrote that he had received “anonymous phone calls threatening my ruin if I did not withdraw” and had been promised “offers of glamorous positions” if he exited the race.<sup>175</sup> As a Thompson victory seemed more possible, the Democrats and the Republicans joined forces in order to keep him out of office. As the election drew near, the three-way races reverted back to a two-party model—the establishment on one side, and the “freaks” on the other.

As part of Thompson’s shift towards more moderate rhetoric, on October 22 he placed a full-page advertisement in the *Aspen Times* discussing the meaning of the phrase “Freak Power.”<sup>176</sup> He explained the “obvious irony” of the phrase, clarifying that he used the term in a “positive, sympathetic sense.”<sup>177</sup> The advertisement is a sign of the evolution of his campaign from a “wonderful fear-joke,” as he described his efforts before the race, to a serious attempt to reform law enforcement in the county.<sup>178</sup> In the piece, Thompson distanced his campaign from the rhetoric of “Freak Power,” writing, “In

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<sup>173</sup> “Is this the Aspen image you’ve worked for?” *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 13-C; “All about ‘splitting,’” *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 15-A.

<sup>174</sup> Glen Ricks, “Letter of Affirmation,” *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 1-C.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>176</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, “The Earth Belongs to the Living...Not to the Dead,” *The Aspen Times*, October 22, 1970, 12-C.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>178</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 298.

truth, that phrase was a crude but super-effective piece of political theater—which worked too well, so now is the time to bury it and move on to the serious action: the task of returning local government to the people who live in this valley.”<sup>179</sup> Thompson was obviously concerned about the backlash his candidacy was provoking, as evidenced by his statement that his assaults against the establishment “worked too well.”<sup>180</sup> The advertisement reveals Thompson’s growing concern about alienating voters with his aggressive rhetoric. The piece targeted Aspen’s establishment liberals—residents who were sympathetic to his ideas about law enforcement but did not appreciate his humor or understand the counterculture lexicon.<sup>181</sup> As the race neared Election Day, Thompson moved towards the middle, toning down his rhetoric and focusing on specific issues.

In juxtaposition with Thompson’s *Rolling Stone* article, the October 29 edition of the *Aspen Times* illustrates the evolution of his campaign. My thesis in this paper relies heavily on the articles and advertisements published in it for evidence. The paper—the final issue published before the election—was packed with articles about the races and last-minute advertisements from the candidates and their supporters. In this section, I examine Thompson’s ideas for reforming law enforcement in Pitkin County. In comparison with Thompson’s earlier writings and statements, these documents reveal a dramatic shift in the tone and orientation of the campaign, from a comedic assault on the Aspen power structure to a sincere desire to institute progressive reform.

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<sup>179</sup> Thompson, “The Earth Belongs to the Living...Not to the Dead.”

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> In the 1960s and 70s, the word “freak” was widely used amongst members of the counterculture to celebrate their deviation from the normal society.

In an advertisement titled “Hunter’s Real Platform,” Thompson outlined his ideas for reshaping the sheriff’s office.<sup>182</sup> He argued that traditional approaches to law enforcement “contribute to the causes of crimes and alienate the police from the community.”<sup>183</sup> In the platform, Thompson presented a new police mission: to work with the community in order to address the causes of crime in addition to investigating it after the fact. He pledged to bridge the gap between the sheriff’s office and the community by working with the youth to discourage serious crimes and heroin use, hiring educated and intelligent deputies from within the community, and changing the image of the deputies by disarming them and dressing them in “non-menacing attire.”<sup>184</sup> Additionally, Thompson promised to target perpetrators of violence, burglary, and theft rather than the victimless crimes of drunkenness, drug possession, gambling, and vagrancy. He argued that enforcing laws for victimless crimes fails to alter behavior, encourages the growth of organized crime, destroys the relationship between the police and the youth, and prevents officers from focusing on more serious crimes. Finally, Thompson ended his platform by pledging to enforce zoning and pollution regulations, arguing that the uninhibited growth of Pitkin County would lead to higher crime rates.

In a separate advertisement titled “The Drug Issue—Platform position on Aspen’s drug abuse problem,” Thompson argued that Aspen’s drug problem was an issue that requires the intervention of the entire community, not just the police. He proposed creating a “Drug Abuse Program” for the county, taking advantage of federal and state funds to train individuals as educators and counselors, open a “Drug Abuse Control

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<sup>182</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, “Hunter’s Real Platform,” The Aspen Times 29 Oct. 1970: 7-D.

<sup>183</sup> Thompson, “Hunter’s Real Platform.”

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

Center,” and work closely with schools to develop an education program.<sup>185</sup> At the same time, Thompson toned down his statements about his drug use, making a compromise that he would not take psychedelics while on duty.<sup>186</sup> Accordingly, he omitted the peyote button from his campaign symbol in his final advertisement—displaying his characteristic double-thumbed fist with an empty hole inside of it.<sup>187</sup>

The documents depict Thompson’s shift towards the middle, eschewing comedic rhetorical assaults in favor of pragmatic analyses. There were no references to “Fat City” or “land-rapers.”<sup>188</sup> “Hunter’s Real Platform” contained the word “greedhead” once, but in reference to hard-drug pushers, not wealthy landowners or developers.<sup>189</sup> In contrast with his earlier writings, Thompson’s second platform was direct and on-topic. For example, it began, “The Problem: Serious crimes in Aspen have increased dramatically recently and conventional methods of law enforcement are ineffective to stop it,” whereas Thompson’s first platform opened, “Sod the streets at once.”<sup>190</sup> There were still moments of comedy, as when he described the current deputies’ uniforms, writing, “Guns, gas canisters, metal cuffs, and sundry other implements of war are sticking out all over...a citizen can talk more rationally to, have more respect for, and collaborate easier with, someone who doesn’t look like a death machine.”<sup>191</sup> However, the vast majority of

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<sup>185</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, “The Drug Issue,” *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 3-D.

<sup>186</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* 491; There are many conflicting accounts of Thompson’s position regarding his use of mescaline. In some interviews and later writings, he claimed that he never compromised on the issue and promised to eat mescaline on slow nights at the Sheriff’s office. However, in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, he revealed that he made “one compromise” during the campaign—that he would not take mescaline while on duty. I am inclined to believe he made the compromise for two reasons. First, the peyote button disappeared from his campaign symbol in his final advertisements. Secondly, the story weakens Thompson’s “gonzo” image rather than reinforcing it. It is unlikely that he would invent a story that would undercut his famous, and lucrative, image.

<sup>187</sup> *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 8-D.

<sup>188</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 173.

<sup>189</sup> Thompson, “Hunter’s Real Platform.”

<sup>190</sup> *ibid*; Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 173.

<sup>191</sup> Thompson, “Hunter’s Real Platform.”

Thompson's prose in these later advertisements was formal and analytical. They are not as fun to read, and they do not easily fit into the narrative of "Hippies May Elect Sheriff"—a headline in the *Washington Post*.<sup>192</sup> Given the comparative lack of entertainment, it is not surprising that journalists and biographers overlooked these documents in their descriptions of the campaign.

Thompson's two platforms bookended his campaign, both framing its evolution and revealing its constituent parts. On one side, his first platform represents the politics of assault—a hyperbolic "screed" that advanced a particular life philosophy.<sup>193</sup> The document reveals Thompson at his most poetic, using the spotlight of a political candidacy to call attention to a perceived corruption of American government and society. On the other side, Thompson's "real platform" illustrates his embrace of the politics of reform—a sincere desire to implement realistic changes to law enforcement in the county. While I argue for a shift in his campaign's central focus, I believe that both elements—assault and reform—were present throughout his campaign. The evolution was more a shift in emphasis than a fundamental reorientation. While Thompson's first platform mainly functioned as a verbal assault on traditional power structures, he also thought that it could support reform by aiding the candidacy of Ned Vare. In the same way, Thompson's movement to a more rational and pragmatic platform in the second half of the campaign did not prevent him from continuing his verbal assaults.

Thompson's final statement in print to the electorate was a full-page advertisement in the October 29 edition of the *Aspen Times*. Appearing in the paper after his "real platform" and his discussion of "the drug issue," the advertisement featured a

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<sup>192</sup> Leroy Aarons, "Hippies May Elect Sheriff," *The Washington Post* 18 Oct. 1970: 21.

<sup>193</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 224.

large photo of Whitmire and his deputies posing on the courthouse steps holding shotguns. Beneath the photo was a quote from “Raoul Duke”—one of Thompson’s alter egos—saying, “In a democracy people usually get the kind of government they deserve, and deserve what they get.”<sup>194</sup> In the corner of the advertisement was Thompson’s campaign symbol without its characteristic peyote button—a perfect visual of the campaign at its finish. The double-thumbed fist and Thompson’s rhetoric were still aggressive, but eminently pragmatic. Thompson recognized his promotion of drugs was costing him votes and the potential to achieve meaningful reform, so he cut out the overt drug reference. At the end of his campaign, Thompson refocused his campaign in the interest of reform, toning down his assaults but not abandoning them.

In thinking about this paper, I have explored two potential objections to my thesis and its reliance on these later campaign documents. First, one could argue that, since the advertisements were purchased by Thompson’s campaign, Thompson may not have been involved in writing them. While this argument could apply to many political campaigns, especially on the state and national level, Thompson was a professional writer. I find it exceptionally difficult to believe that he would allow others to draft statements in his name. Also, he was running a small campaign. He did not have individuals working for him to draft statements in his name. The second objection targets my assertion that Thompson underwent a transformation and ended the campaign wanting to implement the ideas in his second platform. One could argue that Thompson shifted his rhetoric as a political maneuver, hoping to gain enough votes to win and then seize power to achieve more radical aims. However, despite the idealism of his writing, Thompson was essentially a pragmatist. Before the election, he studied the applicable Colorado laws,

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<sup>194</sup> The Aspen Times 29 Oct. 1970: 8-D.

and understood the limits of the sheriff's power.<sup>195</sup> He also knew that, if he won, his enemies would closely monitor him for illegal behavior. Most likely, once Thompson realized he had a chance of winning, he began working with others to devise a platform he could realistically implement as sheriff.

With the polls showing a possible victory for Thompson, questions abounded about whether he would serve as sheriff if he won. In response, he developed a plan to hire a professional as undersheriff who shared Thompson's philosophy about law enforcement to run the department. Thompson explained that he would nominally serve as sheriff, but that he would function as an unpaid ombudsman, a position that was never fully defined by his campaign. In one advertisement, he wrote that "the Undersheriff will be mainly responsible for the day-to-day operations while the Sheriff expands the machinery to cope with problems in the area of pollution, land-rape and consumer fraud."<sup>196</sup> Despite the idealistic language, it is difficult to imagine Thompson sustaining an interest in the job. In an interview, Ed Bastian, Thompson's close friend and neighbor, said, "I have a feeling that he might have done it for a while and gotten bored with it and moved on."<sup>197</sup> Thompson was perpetually worried about money; it is difficult to imagine him spending a large amount of time as an unpaid public servant, as taking on responsibility would hamper his ability to work as a writer.

As Thompson later acknowledged, victory would be risky, potentially making his life and career much more difficult. Thompson was likely divided about whether he wanted to win. On the outside, he was putting more energy into the campaign, drafting

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<sup>195</sup> Seymour and Wenner 168.

<sup>196</sup> "A Veteran Law Officer Responds to Hunter Thompson's Platform," The Aspen Times 22 Oct. 1970: 5-C.

<sup>197</sup> Bastian

serious platforms and toning down his language in order to court more votes. However, internally he probably recognized the dangers of victory. In *To Aspen and Back*, Peggy Clifford examined the risks, writing, “He knew too that, if he won and served, whether he was a good sheriff or not, he might be diminished. And if he got bored and quit, he would be diminished in another way.”<sup>198</sup> While campaigning for sheriff on the “Freak Power” ticket could only help his writing career, winning would have likely hurt it. In the introduction to Clifford’s book, Thompson recalled, “I was hoping I wouldn’t win either. I was scared to death, and I couldn’t say that to anyone.”<sup>199</sup> Even though he was writing years later, there is probably some truth to this statement. Beyond the potential consequences to his career as a writer, Thompson feared for his life. The last two weeks of the campaign were defined not by jokes or issues, but by threats and paranoia.

The most bizarre story of the election was the arrival of an undercover Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms agent named Jim Bromley.<sup>200</sup> On Wednesday, October 21, Bromley showed up at Thompson’s house dressed like a Hell’s Angel, saying that Thompson would be killed and his house destroyed if he won the election. Thompson sent his wife and son to stay with a friend in town, but he continued campaigning. A few days later, Bromley showed up at Thompson’s campaign headquarters claiming to have changed his mind. He tried to sell the group weapons and suggested they use violent tactics in the campaign, offering to beat up their opponents and blow up bridges outside of town. One night, Thompson was tipped off by a sympathetic Aspen police officer that the police had found an illegal sawed-off shotgun in Bromley’s car after towing it away

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<sup>198</sup> Clifford 151.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid* xv.

<sup>200</sup> “Towed car reveals election scandal,” *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 11-A; While numerous accounts exist of the story of Jim Bromley with slight deviations between them, I have decided to only present the major events from the *Times* story.

from a no-parking zone. The officer told Thompson that when the police tried to arrest Bromley in his hotel room, he showed them his A.T.F. badge, claiming to be in town on official business. The next day, Sheriff Whitmire announced in a meeting with Thompson and his campaign advisors that he had hired Bromley to investigate bomb threats in the town, but he was unaware of the agent's provocative actions. The sheriff then held a press conference in order to explain his actions to the media.

As Thompson wrote in his memoir *Kingdom of Fear*, after futile attempts to persuade the Assistant D.A. to file charges against Bromley, the "frustrated crew of Left-bikers, Black Belts, White Panthers, and assorted local heavies" who supported Thompson decided to drive out to Bromley's hotel and "make a citizen's arrest."<sup>201</sup> According to Thompson, he warned the D.A.'s office about their plan, and Bromley promptly left town. The next day, Thompson hired a photo agency in Denver to get a shot of Bromley for the *Aspen Times* story on the events. Once the story ran in the paper, Thompson sent it to Bromley, who, according to Thompson, responded with a "threatening letter and another, very personal photo of himself."<sup>202</sup> The photo, which was published in the *Aspen Times* the following week, features Bromley surrounded by weapons, Nazi regalia, and a poster with the phrase, "God is dead."<sup>203</sup> Many questions emerged as a result of the Bromley scandal that were never answered. Despite a line in the *Aspen Times* story stating that the Colorado Bureau of Investigation was looking into the events, no report ever emerged and no charges were filed.

In *Kingdom of Fear*, Thompson opens the section on Freak Power with a description of the fear that gripped his camp late in the race. Less than a week before the

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<sup>201</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear* 75.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid 76.

<sup>203</sup> *The Aspen Times* 5 Nov. 1970, 1-B.

election, Thompson received a warning from the Colorado Bureau of Investigation that there was assassination plot against him. That night, Thompson and, in his words, “a whole house of wired-up freaks—all armed to the teeth,” hunkered down at his house in Woody Creek, taking turns patrolling the grounds in the freezing cold.<sup>204</sup> While Thompson’s account in *Kingdom of Fear* reflects his penchant for hyperbole, he and his top advisors believed the threat was real.<sup>205</sup> In an interview, Ed Bastian, who was at the meeting with the C.B.I. agent, remembered the impact the Bromley scandal had on the campaign’s leaders, comparing their situation to the murder of Black Panther leader Huey Newton.<sup>206</sup> However, Bob Braudis, who worked on the campaign and was later elected sheriff in Pitkin County, dismissed Thompson’s reaction in an interview as “chemical-fueled paranoia.”<sup>207</sup> Still, threats and rumors abounded in the weeks before the election. After Tom Benton, Thompson’s close friend, was cornered and threatened in a rural part of the county, he decided to buy an AR-15—a powerful assault rifle—to protect himself.<sup>208</sup> Additionally, a week before the election, a case of dynamite was stolen from Snowmass Resort. A note discovered at the scene warned, “This will only be used on Hunter Thompson if he is elected sheriff.”<sup>209</sup> With the humor of the campaign long gone, Thompson and his supporters awaited Election Day.

Thompson and his advisors worried that the campaign could erupt in violence before the election. A major threat to their movement was the prospect of Thompson supporters taking matters into their own hands and resorting to violence. After the

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<sup>204</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear* 85.

<sup>205</sup> Bastian

<sup>206</sup> Ibid

<sup>207</sup> Bob Braudis, Personal Interview, 3 Dec. 2010.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid; in one of the stranger legacies of the campaign, the gun was later used in a murder in Pitkin County after Benton sold it to a gun shop.

<sup>209</sup> “Editorial: a sheriff’s agent,” *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 2-A.

publication of Thompson's *Rolling Stone* article, radicals sympathetic to Thompson's cause began arriving in the town to help with the campaign, including Dave Meggyesy, a former professional football player, and Oscar Acosta, a Chicano lawyer who had received 110,000 votes in his campaign for sheriff of Los Angeles County on the "Brown Power" ticket.<sup>210</sup> In an interview, Ed Bastian recalled the influx of supporters and the problems that ensued, stating, "a whole weird assortment of people showed up in town, some bringing guns. There was one lawyer who was carrying around a .357 Magnum pistol, and a couple of us had to take his gun away because we were scared that any violence that might take place would destroy our campaign."<sup>211</sup> In *Kingdom of Fear*, Thompson described his memory of the end of the campaign, writing, "By the time Acosta arrived the Aspen political scene looked like some drug-addled Mafia-parody of a gang war scene from *The Godfather*."<sup>212</sup> Begun lightheartedly, the campaign ended on a dark note. In *To Aspen and Back*, Peggy Clifford wrote, "it was as mean and ugly a time as Aspen had ever known."<sup>213</sup>

In the context of the fear that gripped Thompson and his friends at the end of the campaign, I can identify another potential objection to my thesis. Perhaps, the argument goes, Thompson toned down his rhetoric and published a serious platform out of fear rather than a commitment to reform. Thus, Thompson's effort to make himself and his ideas more palatable to a wider swath of the population was an exercise in self-protection rather than civic engagement. I do not believe that this argument is valid for several reasons. First, Thompson began toning down his ideas well before Bromley arrived in

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<sup>210</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear* 91; Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 328.

<sup>211</sup> Bastian

<sup>212</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear* 88.

<sup>213</sup> Clifford 152.

town and the first death threats were reported.<sup>214</sup> Additionally, if Thompson was concerned enough about the threats to change his campaign, he would have dropped out of the race. The fact that he continued moving to the center and published a serious platform amid the threat of violence reveals, in my opinion, his strong commitment to winning and instituting progressive reforms in the sheriff's office. Finally, I believe that, instead of the threat of violence influencing the evolution of Thompson's campaign, both aspects of the race emerged from the same source—the realization on both sides that Thompson had a strong chance of winning. Thompson responded by running a more serious campaign and focusing on specific issues, while some of his opponents reacted by threatening his life and plotting to have him arrested.

On Election Day, Thompson took an early lead, but not by enough. Although he won the city of Aspen, Thompson lost badly in the rest of the county. The returns from the suburban and rural precincts delivered Whitmire a decisive victory. Mindful of the danger of splitting the vote, Democratic and Republican party leaders had decided to combine forces to prevent Thompson from winning, agreeing to split their tickets and support the Democratic sheriff and Republican county commissioner. In *Kingdom of Fear*, Thompson discusses the efforts of the establishment parties, telling the story of one Republican man who received eighteen phone calls the night before the election advising him to split his ticket.<sup>215</sup> While it is impossible to verify the truth of this story, the vote tallies reflect the coordination between the parties, as Glen Ricks, the Republican candidate in the sheriff's race, received 171 votes to Whitmire's 1,533, and Sam Caudill,

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<sup>214</sup> Thompson began distancing himself from his first platform during the debate with Whitmire on October 15, if not before. Bromley first showed up in town on October 20, and the Colorado Bureau of Investigation did not warn Thompson about the death threats until October 28.

<sup>215</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear* 94.

the Democratic candidate in the county commissioner's race, received 233 votes to the Republican incumbent's 1372.<sup>216</sup> In the end, Thompson tallied 1,068 votes—38.5 percent of the vote, which might have been enough to win if his opponents had remained divided, but it was insufficient in what was basically a two-way race. While Ned Vare's race was closer than Thompson's, the other independent candidates aligned with Thompson also suffered defeat. The exciting campaigns generated a high voter turnout, with 75 percent of registered voters making it to the polls—a large percentage for a midterm election.<sup>217</sup>

During the day, Aspen's Hotel Jerome—Thompson's unofficial campaign headquarters—was packed with supporters and journalists. Despite their early optimism, Thompson recalled in *Kingdom of Fear* that his camp recognized their impending defeat by the afternoon. While waiting for the official results, Thompson and his friends decided to have their last bit of fun with the campaign. He wrote, “somewhere around dusk we began loading up on mescaline, tequila, hash, beer, and whatever else we could get our hands on...and after that, it was only a matter of fucking with the national press and waiting for the axe to fall.”<sup>218</sup> After the official results arrived, Thompson faced the cameras and delivered his somber, but defiant concession speech. Referencing the original assignment that eventually led him into politics, a book about the death of the American Dream, Thompson began, “I think I unfortunately proved what I set out to prove...that the American Dream really is fucked.”<sup>219</sup> He concluded by announcing his retirement as a political candidate, stating, “This is my last trip in politics, or this kind of

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<sup>216</sup> Official election results for November 2, 1970, accessed at the Pitkin County Courthouse.

<sup>217</sup> It should be noted that Pitkin County has a history of high voter turnout. In 1966, the previous midterm election, 69 percent of registered voters cast ballots.

<sup>218</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear* 87.

<sup>219</sup> “High Noon in Aspen.”

politics.”<sup>220</sup> In an interview, Bob Braudis recalled the disappointment, stating, “It was like a balloon being burst when he lost, but being the realists that we were, we just went skiing.”<sup>221</sup> Life returned to normal in Pitkin County, but both sides recognized that the political conflict was not over.

Supporters of Thompson’s campaign have proposed different theories explaining the reason he lost. In *Kingdom of Fear*, Thompson blamed the local distribution of his *Rolling Stone* article for the loss, calling it a “disaster of the first magnitude.” He argued that the article hurt his campaign by terrifying his opponents and giving away his strategy to take advantage of the divided opposition.<sup>222</sup> I agree that the article likely provoked his detractors and generated an unnecessary backlash against him, but I find it hard to believe that his opponents would not have grasped the political realities of the three-way contest. In *Gonzo*, a posthumous biography of Thompson, his friend Paul Pascarella pointed to Thompson’s first platform as the reason for his downfall, saying, “I think what lost him the few hundred votes he needed was his idea of changing the name of Aspen to ‘Fat City.’ These old people got all upset.”<sup>223</sup> While it is likely that Thompson offended many residents with the language of his first platform, it is impossible to know how many people voted against him for that reason, or if he could have made up hundreds of votes by waging a different campaign.

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Braudis

<sup>222</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear* 92; It is impossible to know how many rank-and-file Aspen voters read the article or to what degree it was copied and circulated among members of the Aspen establishment, but a statement from the lawyer of the Aspen residents charged with voter intimidation reveals that at least some of Aspen’s older residents read the article. According to the March 18, 1971 edition of the *Aspen Times*, the defense attorney argued during preliminary hearings that the defendants “felt their lifestyle was threatened by an implied take-over in the article and acted in fear of such a take-over.” While it is impossible to prove, this statement suggests that Thompson’s *Rolling Stone* article was widely circulated in Aspen after its publication, and that it provoked strong emotional reactions in many Aspen residents.

<sup>223</sup> Seymour and Wenner 114.

In another theory, Tom Benton was quoted in *Gonzo* regretting that all Thompson needed was more time, stating, “If we’d had another two weeks, he’d have been sheriff.” Michael Solheim, Thompson’s campaign manager, argued in *Outlaw Journalist* that the campaign could have been successful, saying, “We would have won if we had taken the thing a drop more seriously.”<sup>224</sup> Dick Tuck, the Democratic political strategist and legendary prankster, had urged Thompson to broaden his focus and campaign in the trailer courts, but Thompson refused.<sup>225</sup> As far as I have been able to tell, Thompson mostly campaigned in Aspen, canvassing bars and holding question and answer sessions in local establishments. I have not found any evidence that suggests that Thompson campaigned in the suburbs or went door-to-door to connect with voters. Still, while Thompson may have gained more support by running a more serious campaign for a longer amount of time, 465 votes—the margin he lost by—is a considerable portion of the electorate. Despite a gradual revising upward of his percentage of the vote in the memories of Thompson and his friends (some estimates eventually reach 46 percent, when he actually received 38.5 percent), the race was not close.<sup>226</sup>

In my opinion, Bob Braudis presented the best analysis, arguing in an interview that the radicals and progressives did not have the numbers to win. He stated, “There was no way he could have won...the majority of voters then were people who feared Hunter Thompson and his ilk. They were not going to be outnumbered in 1970.”<sup>227</sup> While I agree with Braudis, I do not have strong evidence to support my view.<sup>228</sup> Thompson

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<sup>224</sup> McKeen 156.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ed Bastian, “An homage to a 35-year friendship,” *Aspen Times Weekly* 27 Feb. 2005: 27.

<sup>227</sup> Braudis.

<sup>228</sup> The best piece of evidence I could think of would be the sheriff’s election of 1974, when Whitmire won reelection against Dick Kienast, an Aspen police officer with an intellectual background who was widely rumored to have been Thompson’s choice to run the department had he won the 1970 election. In the 1974

likely lost due to a combination of many of the above reasons—angering older voters with his first platform, not taking the race more seriously early on, outlining his strategy in his article, and, ultimately, not having the numbers to win

Following the election, Thompson hoped to write about his experience for a second *Rolling Stone* article, using the material to complete his long-overdue book. According to biographer William McKeen, he wrote a great deal about the race, but neither the article nor the book was ever published.<sup>229</sup> While he hoped to keep the momentum of his race alive, his financial difficulties and new story assignments took precedence in his life in the subsequent months. The next two years witnessed a major shift in Thompson's life, as he became a cultural icon. The huge success of his 1971 book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and his widely acclaimed coverage of the 1972 Presidential campaign for *Rolling Stone* gained him legions of fans and imitators. The works cemented the link between his lifestyle and his craft. He became as famous for his excesses as his prose. With his rising stardom, Thompson began branding himself, cognizant of his lucrative image as the “gonzo” journalist. Along the way, his campaign for sheriff in 1970 became part of his legacy; the complexities of the race were overshadowed by its eccentricity. Since the defining aspects of the first half of the campaign—Thompson's outlandish rhetoric, his shaved head, his open drug use, and his first platform—bolstered Thompson's public persona, later accounts of the race largely

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race, Kienast ran on a platform similar to Thompson's second platform, emphasizing the protection of civil liberties, a looser enforcement of drug laws, and refocusing on environmental and land-use violations. Even though Kienast avoided Thompson's divisive rhetoric, he still lost the election, lending weight to the argument that Thompson could not have won in 1970 even if he had more time or had avoided publishing his *Rolling Stone* article. Of course, the races were more complicated than this analysis suggests, but the fact that Kienast lost in 1974—two years after the progressives took control of the city and county governments—makes it difficult to imagine any progressive candidate winning the Sheriff's race in 1970.<sup>229</sup> McKeen 156; The section in *Kingdom of Fear* recounting the election was culled from Thompson's drafts for the unpublished *Rolling Stone* article.

ignored the second half of the campaign. In the next chapter, I examine a number of these accounts, exploring the creation and the perpetuation of the myth of Hunter S. Thompson.

### Chapter 3 – “Freak Power:” A Retrospective

“It’s stories all the way down.”<sup>230</sup>

–Carl Belefeldt

When I think about the popular narrative of Thompson’s campaign, a memory from earlier in this project stands out in my mind. About a year ago, my advisor invited me to present my research to a small group of students. In explaining my argument, I decided to read passages from Thompson’s two platforms, starting with his over-the-top piece in *Rolling Stone*. As I read, energy surged through the room—excitement over Thompson’s wild rhetoric intensified by the threat of impropriety. Afterward, I quoted from Thompson’s “Real Platform,” asking the students to share their thoughts about the documents. To my surprise, the first student to respond questioned whether the Thompson campaign was involved in crafting the second platform, insinuating that, perhaps, someone else had placed the advertisement in the *Aspen Times* without Thompson knowing. While the idea is preposterous, it illuminates many of the biases that have led to an endemic mistreatment of the campaign in the literature on it. After reading Thompson’s earlier platform, reacting in one way or another to Thompson’s outrageous prose, the tendency is for individuals to overlook his second platform, either in ignorance or denial. The mind refuses to believe that the man who wrote, “These swine should be fucked, broken and driven across the land,” would so quickly transform into a champion of realistic progressive reform.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Carl Belefeldt is a Religious Studies professor at Stanford University. When giving a lecture at Kannon Do—a Soto Zen temple in Mountain View, California—Belefeldt referenced the common saying that the universe is “turtles all the way down,” arguing instead that it is comprised of stories.

<sup>231</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 173.

For most of this chapter, I examine different accounts of the campaign, deconstructing the narratives about the race that have formed over time. In analyzing a variety of sources, including national and local newspaper articles; biographies and documentaries of Thompson; and Thompson's discussion of the race in interviews, letters, and books, I explore the different motives of authors in deciding to write about the race and the biases and assumptions that operate in their narratives. In light of my argument in the previous chapter, I examine the popular conception of the campaign, arguing that the vast majority of analysts—including journalists, biographers, and Thompson himself—have distorted the race, often for reasons of personal gain. Along the way, I trace the role of the campaign in the creation of the myth of Hunter S. Thompson. Admittedly, my sample is incomplete, as I have not been able to find copies of many articles written about the campaign. Thus, my argument pertains more to the sample of narratives to which I have access, rather than all of the narratives ever written about it. However, since almost all of the observers I examine in this chapter overemphasized Thompson's first platform and ignored his second, I believe that it is safe to generalize about the treatment of the race in popular culture as a whole.

At the end of the chapter, I continue the stories of Aspen and Thompson, following the arc of each in the decades after the election. I argue that Thompson's campaign was a crucial step in the eventual triumph of progressive sheriffs and legislators in the county. Many of his close friends, including Joe Edwards and Dick Kienast, won important elections in the 1970's, instituting reforms that Thompson had promoted in his run for sheriff. In looking at Thompson's path, I identify his campaign for sheriff as a pivotal moment in his life—the height of his optimism for the future of

America and his passionate belief that the political system could be overhauled without destroying it. I explore the difficulties that Thompson experienced as a result of his superstardom and how his fame impacted his political life—both locally and nationally. Finally, I conclude by arguing that Thompson’s campaign deserves to be reassessed. The popular narrative should expand to include Thompson’s passionate defense of civil liberties and the democratic process in addition to documenting his eccentricities. Individuals interested in Thompson should look beyond his public persona—the drugs and the outbursts, the explosions and the aviator sunglasses—and recognize the importance of his campaign for sheriff: in his life, in the history of Pitkin County, and in American history as an example of nonviolent, nonconformist political activity amidst the left-radical violence of 1970.

### Contemporary Narratives

In examining the stories published in national newspapers on the campaign, it would be useful to begin by revisiting the reasons why the media were captivated by Thompson’s candidacy. National outlets most likely decided to cover the story due to the combination of Thompson’s absurd and incendiary platform, his connection to the counterculture, his potential for victory, and the fact that he campaigned in Aspen. By 1970, Aspen itself was a story of considerable national interest. While the town had not yet achieved the celebrity that it would in the 1980s, it was well known in the rest of the country, especially in the more affluent coastal markets of the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*—the three major newspapers that published

articles on Thompson's campaign.<sup>232</sup> Furthermore, in 1970, the political activities of frustrated radicals drew national attention; the Weatherman bombings were a major story at the time. Finally, and, I believe, most importantly, Thompson crafted his candidacy with an eye towards notoriety. Part of his interest in the campaign, especially in its early stages, was the opportunity for performance art and self-promotion. He presented the perfect story for eager national journalists—an articulate and eccentric writer who talked freely about his drug use running for sheriff of Aspen with a comically aggressive "Freak Power" platform. As a result, journalists were most likely interested in the story for its entertainment value, a predisposition that influenced their coverage of the campaign.

Thompson's article in *Rolling Stone* and his over-the-top first platform interested the newspapers in the story. Reporters began arriving the week after the article was published. All three articles—from the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*—mention his initial platform, but major differences exist between the newspapers. Anthony Ripley of *The New York Times*, who wrote the most straightforward and objective of the three articles, paraphrased Thompson's specific proposals at the end of the story, while the Leroy Aarons of *The Washington Post* highlighted Thompson's ideas at the beginning, quoting several entertaining phrases.<sup>233</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* reprinted a large portion of Thompson's platform after Jerry Cohen's article—selecting some of the most outrageous parts for publication.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Other newspapers at the time, including the *Village Voice* and the *National Observer*, published stories on Thompson's election, but I have been unable to locate copies of the articles. Additionally, according to Thompson, journalists from different magazines arrived in Aspen to write stories on his campaign, including correspondents from *Life*, *Look*, *Scanlan's*, *Suck*, and *Rat*. I have not been able to identify whether any of these outlets published stories on the election. If they did, I have not found them in the course of my research.

<sup>233</sup> Anthony Ripley, "'Freak Power' Candidate May Be the Next Sheriff in Placid Aspen, Colo." *The New York Times* 19 Oct. 1970: 44; Aarons B1.

<sup>234</sup> "Freak Party Platform," *Los Angeles Times* 7 Oct. 1970: 20.

An analysis of the newspapers' presentation of Thompson's platform reveals major differences in objectivity between the papers. Aarons, writing in the *Washington Post*, strategically presented his interpretation of Thompson's platform in order to portray Thompson as unstable and inconsistent. He wrote that Thompson would "punish dishonest dope dealers by putting them in public stocks on the courthouse lawn, but go easy on people who use dope; disarm law enforcement officers but employ 'massive retaliation' in the event of a riot." Aaron's subjectivity is to be expected, since his article appeared on the front page of the Sunday "Outlook" section alongside other opinions and editorials, but his story reads more like a news feature than an opinion piece. He buried his arguments in subtly judgmental language rather than direct attacks. Ripley, on the other hand, described Thompson's platform without judgment in his *New York Times* article, merely summarizing each of the six points. The writers' treatment of Thompson's platform is just one example of the major differences in conception and execution between the papers.

The *New York Times* was the only paper to mention the shift in Thompson's campaign. At the end of the article, Ripley wrote, "He promised to hire a competent undersheriff and defended his platform, though admitting that some of it was written with tongue in cheek before he was serious about the campaign."<sup>235</sup> Timing may explain Cohen's omission of Thompson's shift. The *Los Angeles Times* published his story on October 7, five days before the first evidence of Thompson publicly distancing himself from his first platform.<sup>236</sup> Still, after the election, the paper published a short article

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<sup>235</sup> Ripley.

<sup>236</sup> The first evidence I have found of Thompson downplaying his first platform is an *Aspen Times* story summarizing a debate on October 12. However, since the primary evidence from this stage of the

reporting the results without discussing the changes in the campaign.<sup>237</sup> Writing at the same time as Ripley, the *Washington Post*'s Leroy Aarons did not mention the campaign's evolution in his article. While he discussed Thompson's decision to "get serious," he did not describe how Thompson began to shift his focus in the middle of the campaign.<sup>238</sup>

Aarons and Cohen displayed an overt hostility towards Thompson and his supporters. In his article, Aarons posed a series of questions after describing Thompson's platform, asking, "What is this all about, you wonder? Who would vote for this man? Who is this freak?"<sup>239</sup> Cohen employed the same technique in his piece, quoting Thompson's aggressive rhetoric before he asked his audience, "Just who is this young man?"<sup>240</sup> In both cases, the writers aligned themselves with their readers, looking down on Thompson and his supporters with judgment. Writing with a condescending tone, Cohen dismissed Thompson as a "trippy idealist" and described how his supporters "scrounge" for votes among hard-drug users.<sup>241</sup> The writers were likely solid members of the establishment, simultaneously bemused and repulsed by the "Freak Power" campaign.<sup>242</sup>

In looking at the articles, it is difficult to gauge whether Ripley's article in the *New York Times* reflected his sympathy for Thompson's cause, or whether it only appeared that way in comparison to the other writers' obvious bias against the movement. While I have not found any overt language in Ripley's piece that indicated approval for

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campaign is so scarce, it is impossible to know when Thompson began distancing himself from his earlier ideas.

<sup>237</sup> "Aspen Puts Down 'Freak Power' Bid," *The Los Angeles Times* 4 Nov. 1970: A23.

<sup>238</sup> Aarons B1.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Cohen 21.

<sup>241</sup> Cohen 1.

<sup>242</sup> Cohen described Thompson at one point as having a "pretty blonde wife."

Thompson's ideas, his choice of quotes and his discussion of Aspen's growth could have suggested his support for the cause.<sup>243</sup> For example, he described Aspen as "deeply worried about where it is going and why," commenting that Thompson "touched a public nerve with some fundamental questions of value and direction." He continued, "The trouble with Aspen is that it is such a tremendous success...Apartments and condominiums are springing up below the newly opened slopes and along their lower skiing areas. They are huge, repetitive buildings...."<sup>244</sup> While he avoided the obviously subjective language of Aarons and Cohen, his contextualization of the race—focusing on Aspen's problems with growth rather than Thompson's personality as the source of his popularity—raises questions about a potential bias in his article.<sup>245</sup> Additionally, his choice of quotes portrayed Thompson as eccentric but sincerely concerned, rather than as a hypocritical drug abuser. Ultimately, Ripley's piece highlights the difficulty in assessing the objectivity of journalists, and, perhaps, the impossibility of achieving it.<sup>246</sup>

The three articles bring to light a major issue in journalism, one that newspapers do not actively discuss: the lack of clarity around issues of subjectivity with regard to the differences between news, feature, and opinion. While all three articles were basically features—national newspapers do not report on local elections from across the country as news—Ripley used a more objective and straightforward tone than the other authors.

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<sup>243</sup> Writing to Tom Wolfe after the election, Thompson described the press as a "gang of cheap swine—even the ones who try to help and be friendly." It is possible that Ripley falls into this category, as Thompson discussed his approval of the article after the election. In a letter to his aunt, Thompson wrote, "The *New York Times* article comes as close as anything written during the campaign to explaining what it was all about."

<sup>244</sup> Ripley.

<sup>245</sup> When I first read Ripley's piece, I felt that it had achieved a sense of objectivity, at least in comparison with the articles by Aarons and Cohen. However, the more I read it, the more I realized that I found it to be "objective" because the article aligned with my interpretation of the campaign and, I felt, validated my support of Thompson.

<sup>246</sup> Thompson spoke about this once in an interview, stating, "Objective journalism is one of the main reasons American politics has been allowed to be so corrupt for so long. You can't be objective about Nixon."

When compared to the pieces of Aarons and Cohen, Ripley's article came the closest to straight news. All three men wrote with a relaxed and colloquial style, signaling the newspapers' motive of entertainment in publishing the pieces, but Ripley focused on the political issues involved rather than Thompson's drug use or the appearance of his supporters. Aarons and Cohen, on the other hand, repeatedly mentioned Thompson's appetite for illegal substances, with Aarons even using Thompson's description of one of his drug experiences for his lead.<sup>247</sup> Later in the article, he described Thompson as "downing Tequilas and chain-smoking Marlboros in the bar of the Hotel Jerome."<sup>248</sup> Cohen structured his article around Thompson's abnormal voting bloc, opening with a joke about how Thompson could have used the vote of a "bearded young man carrying a guitar" who tried to hijack the Goodyear blimp and fly to Aspen a year earlier.<sup>249</sup> As I mentioned before, the *Post* announced Aarons's subjectivity by publishing his article in their "Outlook" section, but the *Los Angeles Times* printed Cohen's article on the front page of the paper alongside other news articles. Thus, a reader of Cohen's article would have been more likely to approach it as news or at least news feature with more of an expectation of objectivity, even though he wrote with an obvious bias.

Still, the more overtly subjective approaches of Aarons and Cohen allow both writers to raise provocative and interesting questions about the campaign. Early in his article, Cohen attempted to discern Thompson's motives, writing, "It is difficult to distinguish put-on from dead-earnest. Or is the whole bit merely to publicize Thompson, the writer of provocative prose?"<sup>250</sup> In a standard news article, Cohen would have

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<sup>247</sup> Aarons B1.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid B4.

<sup>249</sup> Cohen 1.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

needed to couch his analysis by quoting one of Thompson's opponents voicing a similar question, but the feature format of his article provided him more room for interpretation. Aarons made an interesting point at the end of his article about Thompson's, at times, simplistic worldview, writing, "Thompson is given to a kind of paranoia, separating the town into the 'we's' and the 'they's' sometimes unjustly eliminating liberals and moderates who are just as concerned about preserving the town."<sup>251</sup> Both writers took advantage of the more casual style of their pieces in order to make critical judgments of Thompson's campaign—a more difficult practice in standard news articles.

In the articles, I get a sense that Thompson—a journalist by profession—had fun with the writers, using their interest and position as an opportunity for entertainment. However, his strategy backfired when Aarons and Cohen quoted him extensively in their articles, portraying him as an eccentric drug user with conflicting ideas about the nature of his bizarre candidacy—which is, I would guess, exactly the way he sold himself to them. After the campaign, Thompson attacked the journalists, writing in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* that "there was a certain heavy drug element in the campaign which the *Washington Post* was responsible for."<sup>252</sup> Astonishingly, Thompson blamed Aarons for highlighting the issue of his drug use, even though he spoke openly about it to the press and featured a peyote button in his campaign symbol.

After the campaign, Thompson criticized the media attention. In a letter to Tom Wolfe, Thompson wrote, "Now I understand that Agnew was Right about the press. They are a gang of cheap swine—even the ones who try to help and be friendly."<sup>253</sup> In an interview two years later, he complained that the press "swarmed" over him in a "beastly

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<sup>251</sup> Aarons B4.

<sup>252</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* 491.

<sup>253</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 338.

scene.”<sup>254</sup> Ironically, Thompson criticized the journalists for the same behavior that Thompson commonly engaged in as a free-lance writer. Covering a popular story, stressing details that the subject would prefer to gloss over, and highlighting inconsistencies are all techniques that Thompson commonly used—with more hostility—in his own writing. In the campaign, Thompson experienced journalism from the other side, discovering the unpleasantness of being a subject—or a target.

The *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* published short articles reporting the results of the election, but the *Washington Post* did not. Both recaps, like the earlier articles, mentioned Thompson’s ideas from his first platform without discussing the evolution of his campaign. Both articles included flawed analyses of the campaign. The *New York Times* piece stated that incumbent sheriff Carroll Whitmire was “appealing to the entire county”—an oblique reference to Thompson’s more narrow counterculture base.<sup>255</sup> However, the paper ignored Thompson’s shift to the middle during the second half of the campaign as he sought to attract more establishment votes. The *Los Angeles Times* article, like the earlier piece published in that paper, was overtly hostile, describing Thompson as a “drug-using hippie cultist.”<sup>256</sup> The article adopted the point of view of Aspen’s establishment, introducing the town as a “once-staid ski resort community” and describing Thompson’s voting bloc as a “permanent floating threat.”<sup>257</sup> Like Jerry Cohen’s earlier piece in the paper, the article displayed an obvious contempt for the counterculture.<sup>258</sup> Whereas the *New York Times* piece—bought from the *Associated*

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<sup>254</sup> Thompson, *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 13.

<sup>255</sup> “Aspen Rejects Bid of Hippie Candidate For Sheriff’s Office,” *The New York Times* 5 Nov. 1970: 32.

<sup>256</sup> “Aspen Puts Down ‘Freak Power’ Bid.”

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> No author is credited for the election recap, but since it describes Cohen as “a newspaperman here” it is unlikely that he wrote it.

*Press*—announced in the headline that “Aspen Rejects Bid of Hippie Candidate for Sheriff’s Office,” The *Los Angeles Times* ran its article under the headline “Aspen Puts Down Freak Power Bid,” evoking images of rabid animals and euthanasia.

In addition to the longer stories in the national newspapers, I have found two other contemporary pieces about the election published in *Time* magazine and the *Chicago Tribune*. The short write-ups, like the other articles, focused on Thompson’s first platform and his bizarre appearance, ignoring the shift in his campaign. Even though the *Tribune* published the piece on November 2, well after Thompson began to distance himself from his initial rhetoric and a few days after the publication of his “real platform,” the author, Bob Cromie, highlighted Thompson’s proposals to rename Aspen “Fat City” and punish dishonest drug dealers by putting them in stocks.<sup>259</sup> The blurb in *Time* magazine—which appeared in the magazine two weeks after the election—also presented Thompson’s ideas from his first platform while omitting his specific proposals related to law enforcement.<sup>260</sup> Both pieces drew attention Thompson’s rhetoric, quoting a few of his more outlandish phrases, including “land-rapists,” “head pig,” and “freak power.”<sup>261</sup>

*Time* and the *Chicago Tribune* published the write-ups as entertainment—short blurbs on a wacky local election in a famous place. Thus, they naturally emphasized the entertaining aspects of the campaign and ignore its complexities. As evidenced by this paper, it is impossible to explore the complexities of Thompson’s motives and the nuances of his campaign in an entertaining and pithy manner. Even if the authors knew more about the race, their articles’ function in the paper would have likely forced them to

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<sup>259</sup> Bob Cromie, “A Loser If You Ever Saw One,” *Chicago Tribune* 2 Nov. 1970: 26.

<sup>260</sup> “People,” *Time* 16 Nov. 1970.

<sup>261</sup> Cromie; “People.”

stick to a specific type of content. Additionally, while I cannot prove this point, the authors of the stories probably gleaned much of their information from secondary sources—Thompson’s piece in *Rolling Stone* and the articles published in national newspapers. It would have been much easier to get a copy of the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* in Chicago than the *Aspen Times*. This second wave of narratives—built upon earlier narratives that skewed the race for specific purposes—illustrates how the myth of the race solidified over time. Later analyses relied on earlier articles as authoritative sources for information without questioning the agendas of the authors or the accuracy of the interpretations.

Early in the campaign the BBC sent a team of cameramen to Aspen to cover the race. They stayed for several weeks, shooting hours of footage that they later culled into a half hour special on the election. The documentary, titled “High Noon in Aspen,” presented the campaign as a modern day Wild West showdown between the sheriff and the outlaw. The narrator introduced Thompson as the “baddie,” highlighting his unusual appearance and open drug use, while Whitmire was labeled the “goodie,” representative of the “old west” and “traditional values.”<sup>262</sup> The documentary omitted the fact that Whitmire was half-Cherokee—an ironic aspect of interpreting the race through the lens of the mythologized Wild West. Presenting a simplistic narrative—the “hippies” on one side and the “businesspeople” on the other—the producers walked a curious line between fact and fiction.<sup>263</sup> The special depicted real people and real events, but it forced them into a pre-existing interpretive framework. Throughout the piece, the producers blurred facts to strengthen their narrative. Traditional western stories depict a dualistic struggle

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<sup>262</sup> “High Noon in Aspen”

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

between civilization and barbarism—law and outlaw. Accordingly, watching the documentary, one would assume that the election only had two candidates. The third candidate, Glen Ricks, was never mentioned. One Whitmire supporter was interviewed who alluded to the three-way race, stating, “you couldn’t vote a Democratic or Republican ticket, because there were too many things at stake,” but without prior knowledge of the race or the collusion between the parties to defeat Thompson, a viewer would not understand the meaning of this statement.<sup>264</sup>

Interestingly, the documentary did not mention either of Thompson’s platforms, highlighting the distinctions between the two camps through images and generalized statements rather than written words and specific proposals. Thompson’s supporters were shown jumping naked into a creek, passing around a joint, and talking about the underlying values of the campaign, while Whitmire’s supporters were interviewed behind desks in traditional clothing, lamenting the presence of the hippies. The documentary did not explore the reasons behind the split in the community, ignoring Aspen’s rapid growth and previous clashes between the town’s establishment and the counterculture. The complexities of the campaign—Thompson’s multiple motives, the more importance race for county commissioner, Thompson’s shifting rhetoric and evolving ideas—were all absent from the documentary. The producers included a number of interviews with supporters of both sides, but, for the most part, the statements did not complicate the simplistic narrative. Like the national news articles but to a much greater extreme, the documentary was produced for entertainment purposes. While it depicted a real life event, it was closer to fiction than journalism.

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<sup>264</sup> “High Noon in Aspen.”

In analyzing the articles published in the *Aspen Times* on the election, it is difficult to gauge the paper's relationship to the Thompson campaign. While the *Times* ultimately endorsed Thompson, the journalists merely reported facts and statements from the candidates in their articles rather than analyzing the races.<sup>265</sup> It is possible that the reporters selected quotes in a biased manner, but it is impossible to know whether or not this is the case without more access to primary documents. I also cannot separate out my personal preference for Thompson's ideas. I read the articles and feel that Thompson came off as more intelligent and imaginative than Whitmire, but I could not argue that the reporter planned that. It is more likely that I just agree more with Thompson's statements.

The *Times* had a reputation in Aspen as a liberal paper. Over the years, the publisher, Bil Dunaway, railed against growth, pollution, and encroachments on civil liberties in editorials.<sup>266</sup> However, until the paper's final issue before the election when Dunaway gave Thompson a muted endorsement, it is impossible to find any pro-Thompson bias in the paper's coverage. As an establishment liberal whom Thompson criticized in his *Rolling Stone* article, Dunaway was probably not an early supporter of the campaign.<sup>267</sup> Thompson certainly did not count on any support from the *Times* in helping his campaign. He had already given up on the paper after the 1969 election, having launched the *Wallposter* in early 1970 out of frustration with Aspen's newspapers.<sup>268</sup> Even Peggy Clifford, Thompson's close friend and a major supporter of his campaign, refrained from using her column in the *Times* as a mouthpiece for the

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<sup>265</sup> "Editorial: new thinking needed," *The Aspen Times* 29 Oct. 1970: 2-A.

<sup>266</sup> While I do not have specific evidence that Dunaway wrote the editorials, including the one I discuss in this paragraph, as the editor and publisher I assume that he was closely involved in their publication.

<sup>267</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 168.

<sup>268</sup> Aspen's second newspaper, the *Aspen Illustrated News*, folded in early 1970.

Thompson campaign beyond her endorsement. As with Dunaway, Clifford focused on the second half of Thompson's campaign in her endorsement, admiring his ideas for reforming law enforcement in the county. Unlike the articles in the national media, Clifford and Dunaway emphasized Thompson's second platform more than his first, recognizing the changes in the campaign. Dunaway wrote that he thought Thompson's campaign was a "bad joke" at first, stating that Thompson's rhetoric had "alienated" him, but he recognized over time that Thompson had become committed to instituting progressive reform.<sup>269</sup> While it is impossible to know how many residents who voted for Thompson supported him as a result of his more serious ideas, the endorsements of Dunaway and Clifford illustrate that Thompson successfully convinced some of Aspen's traditional liberals that he was sincere about reform.

Ultimately, despite publishing a more accurate history of the campaign, the *Aspen Times* has not helped to shape the popular conception of the race. While the articles, advertisements, and endorsements contained in the archives of the paper tell a more complete story of the race, the paper has had little influence outside of the Roaring Fork Valley. Thompson's original article in *Rolling Stone* and the skewed articles published in the national media reached a much larger audience, setting the tone for later inaccurate narratives.

### Biographies and Documentaries

Biographies of Thompson roughly fall into two camps. The first group contains the three unauthorized biographies that were published during the early 90's. Released

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<sup>269</sup> "Editorial: new thinking needed."

within two years of one another, the books were the first wave of biographies on Thompson. Since the authors lacked access to Thompson and many of his friends, the books told an incomplete story of his life, gleaning information from published sources and interviews with some of the people who were close to him. Rife with anecdotes about Thompson's wild behavior and copious drug use, the three unauthorized biographies capitalized on his famous persona, focusing on his myth more than the reality of his life. The books' titles reflected their skewed approach to Thompson's life: *Hunter: The Strange and Savage Life of Hunter S. Thompson* by E. Jean Carroll, *Fear and Loathing: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson* by Paul Perry, and *When the Going Gets Weird: The Twisted Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* by Peter O. Whitmer. These works briefly discussed Thompson's campaign for sheriff, highlighting its eccentric aspects and ignoring its evolution.

The second group contains biographies that were published in the years after Thompson's death in 2005, including *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* by William McKeen, and *Gonzo: The Life of Hunter S. Thompson* by Jann S. Wenner and Corey Seymour.<sup>270</sup> I also include in this group the only documentary about Thompson that discussed his campaign for sheriff, Alex Gibney's "Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson." While these works varied dramatically in style and presentation, they shared a common purpose of broadening the conversation on Thompson to areas other than his myth, hoping to establish his legacy as a writer and

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<sup>270</sup> *Outlaw Journalist* is the only authorized biography of Thompson. McKeen started working on it before Thompson's death, benefiting from numerous interviews with Thompson and access to his large archive of letters, tapes, and unpublished writing. McKeen also wrote a short book on Thompson titled *Hunter S. Thompson* that was published in 1991. The book is more of a literary analysis than a biography, which is the reason I am not including it in this paper. *Gonzo*, an "oral biography" that tells the story of Thompson's life through quotes, was put together by *Rolling Stone* editor and publisher Jann S. Wenner and Corey Seymour, a writer for the magazine who worked with Thompson during the 1990s.

thinker rather than a cartoon character.<sup>271</sup> As a result, Thompson's campaign for sheriff featured more prominently in the works. While the authors celebrated Thompson's outlandish first platform and incendiary rhetoric, they also emphasized Thompson's shift to running a more serious campaign. Still, despite telling a more complete story of the campaign than the earlier unauthorized biographies, the works failed to document the specifics of Thompson's changed campaign, ignoring his second platform and his ideas about law enforcement reform.

The first three biographies that were published on Thompson, *Hunter, Fear and Loathing*, and *When the Going Gets Weird*, all focused on the entertaining parts of Thompson's campaign.<sup>272</sup> The three books emphasized Thompson's eccentric first platform and his aggressive early rhetoric, quoting his more shocking phrases and ideas. The authors also highlighted Thompson's shaved head and his open drug use. Additionally, they discussed the paranoia and potential for violence that gripped the campaign closer to election day. Whitmer and Perry both tell the story of Jim Bromley, the undercover agent who attempted to infiltrate Thompson's campaign, devoting much of their discussion of the campaign to the drama.

The authors did not mention the shift in Thompson's campaign, presenting his candidacy as static and unserious. Curiously, in *Fear and Loathing*, Perry alluded to Thompson's changed campaign, writing that Thompson was "beaten by a three to one margin—not bad for a campaign that began as a warning to 'greedheads' and 'a joke,' as

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<sup>271</sup> Thompson was featured in Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury* as the drug-using, explosion-loving character Uncle Duke.

<sup>272</sup> In *Hunter*, E. Jean Carroll tells the story of Thompson's life through others' quotes, moving between sections of biography and a fictional narrative of violence and debauchery at Thompson's residence. She relies on newspaper articles and Michael Solheim, Thompson's campaign manager, to recount the story of the campaign. Even though Carroll presents her biographical sections without analysis, she manages to include a jab at Solheim, whom she introduces as "currently in Aspen real estate."

*The New York Times* called it.”<sup>273</sup> Perry introduced the idea that Thompson’s campaign began as a joke and evolved into something else, but he never discussed how it changed. Of the three, Perry was the only writer to mention Thompson’s plan to function as an ombudsman if he won the election, but he used Thompson’s promise as evidence of his fear of winning rather than his sincerity.<sup>274</sup> None of the biographers mentioned Thompson’s changed rhetoric or his specific ideas about reforming law enforcement.

Interestingly, both Carroll and Whitmer used old editions of the *Aspen Times* in their works, but only selectively. Carroll quoted the paper directly in *Hunter*, and Whitmer paraphrased the newspaper’s story about Jim Bromley in *When the Going Gets Weird*, reprinting some of the quotes that were attributed to Bromley in the *Times* story.<sup>275</sup> Even though the authors looked through the old newspapers in the course of their research, they ignored the difficult documents contained in the paper, including “Hunter’s Real Platform.”<sup>276</sup> It is possible that the writers accidentally overlooked the documents, or that somebody else who did the research for them omitted the advertisements. However, the authors most likely left out the documents on purpose because they would be too difficult to fit into their narrative. Much more space would have needed to be devoted to Thompson’s campaign to explain the meaning of his “real platform,” an exercise that would detract from the entertainment value of the books. Additionally, an exploration of the serious side of the campaign would have undermined

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<sup>273</sup> Paul Perry, *Fear and Loathing: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1992) 153.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid* 144.

<sup>275</sup> E. Jean Carroll, *Hunter: The Strange and Savage Life of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Dutton Adult) 128; Whitmer 173; it is possible that Perry also looked through old editions of the *Aspen Times* in researching his book, but there is no direct evidence.

<sup>276</sup> Thompson, “Hunter’s Real Platform.”

the central purpose of the biographies—describing Thompson as “twisted,” “strange,” and “savage.”<sup>277</sup>

The writers disagreed on Thompson’s motive for running for sheriff. Carroll quoted Michael Solheim, Thompson’s campaign manager, saying that Thompson entered the election to detract attention away from Ned Vare’s campaign for county commissioner, acting as a “lightning rod.”<sup>278</sup> Without any contextualization or analysis, Carroll presented Solheim as an authoritative source on the election. No other potential motives were discussed in her section on the election. Whitmer mentioned the possibility that Thompson sought publicity through his campaign, writing that “many people observing the ‘Thompson for Sheriff’ campaign from a distance” could have pegged Thompson as having “a lust for getting his name in the news for unusual behavior.”<sup>279</sup> However, Whitmer dismissed that motive, writing, “Curiously, his actual intention in running for sheriff was to play the role of smoke and mirrors, to deflect interest away from Ned Vair [sic].”<sup>280</sup> Perry, on the other hand, never mentioned the idea that Thompson campaigned in order to help Ned Vare. He discussed Thompson’s “theatrical streak” and his “outrage” as motives, seeming to agree with a quote from Thompson that he campaigned in order to “zap the greedheads.”<sup>281</sup> However, Thompson said different things at different times. As I demonstrated in the last chapter, there were numerous potential motives for his decision to run for sheriff, all of which have evidence to support them. The authors latched onto one of them and reprinted it as his “actual intention,”

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<sup>277</sup> These are three of the words that appear in the titles of the biographies.

<sup>278</sup> Carroll 127.

<sup>279</sup> Whitmer 172.

<sup>280</sup> Whitmer 174; Interestingly, Anthony Ripley of the *New York Times* misspells Ned Vare’s name in the same way in his October 1970 article. Whitmer likely used the article in writing his biography, illustrating how narratives build on one another, perpetuating errors.

<sup>281</sup> Perry 144.

failing to explore the other possibilities in their over-simplified narratives of the campaign.

An individual reading one of the unofficial biographies would have emerged with a dramatically different conception of Thompson's political involvement in Pitkin County than someone else reading a different biography. Each book contained unique errors. Perry was the only writer to mention Joe Edwards's campaign for mayor in 1969—a pivotal moment in Thompson's life.<sup>282</sup> Still, he presented a confused chronology of Thompson's campaign. After discussing the Bromley scandal, which happened toward the end of October, Perry wrote, "In September, in the midst of all this, Hunter was called away on assignment."<sup>283</sup> Whitmer never mentioned that there were three candidates for sheriff, presenting the campaign as a contest between Thompson and Whitmire.<sup>284</sup> Additionally, he devoted a full page—out of three pages total on the campaign—to retelling the story of Jim Bromley, while Carroll omitted the scandal entirely.

Ultimately, the biographies illustrate the vast differences in objectivity and accountability between popular biographies and academic papers. The authors had the freedom to reprint quotes without contextualization, and they eschewed critical analysis in favor of exciting storytelling. Like the BBC Documentary "High Noon in Aspen," the biographies' section on Thompson's campaign was closer to fiction than journalism. The works were colloquial and stylized, with the authors selecting the most entertaining aspects of the campaign to include in their narratives and ignoring the rest. As with many of the other narratives, the books' purpose—to make money and to attract attention to the authors—influenced their content, as the writers overlooked the more complex and

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<sup>282</sup> Perry 131-134.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid 146.

<sup>284</sup> Whitmer 174.

serious elements of the campaign in favor of its eccentricities. The writers and publishers of the biographies sought to capitalize on Thompson's lucrative image. As a result, all three of the books played into his myth, presenting their readers with what they would expect to find.

The second group of biographies and documentaries differed from the first group in two fundamental ways: access and purpose. William McKeen, author of *Outlaw Journalist*; Jann Wenner and Corey Seymour, editors of *Gonzo*; and Alex Gibney, writer and director of "Gonzo" benefited from access to Thompson's archive, individuals who were close to him, and, in McKeen's case, to Thompson himself. All of the works came out after Thompson died. Thus, many individuals who had refused to speak to earlier biographers out of loyalty to Thompson agreed to be interviewed for the second wave of biographies. As a result, the works provided a more complete account of Thompson's life. Additionally, the three posthumous biographies were written, in part, with the intention of broadening the discourse beyond his myth. While still entertaining, the works focused more on Thompson's writing and the complexity of his character than his excesses. Still, the works were not hagiographies. Thompson's contradictions and the suffering he caused others were openly discussed. These two important characteristics—more access and a broader purpose—resulted in a more accurate treatment of Thompson's campaign.

Thompson's motives were not clearly presented in the works—a technique that, I believe, gets closer to the truth than reporting one potential motive as fact. In *Gonzo*, Joe Edwards was quoted talking about Thompson's decision to run, stating, "He originally

did it, I think, as a lark, not really having any serious thought that he might win.”<sup>285</sup> The inclusion of Edwards’s uncertainty revealed the fact that observers will never fully understand Thompson’s exact motives. Later in the chapter, Ed Bastian stated, “Yes, he was a writer whose career was just taking off, but he was also a ringleader...He saw himself as carrying the vision, carrying the mission, making a big statement, and changing the culture of this town.”<sup>286</sup> Wenner and Seymour illustrated the complexity of Thompson’s motives by including quotes that convey uncertainty rather than authority. In *Outlaw Journalist*, McKeen discussed several potential reasons why Thompson entered the race, including infuriating his political opponents, detracting attention away from the candidacy of Ned Vare, seeing the campaign as a comedic “prank,” and seriously wanting to affect positive change.<sup>287</sup> “Gonzo” also revealed the ambiguity of Thompson’s reasons for running, quoting Bob Braudis that while the original purpose of the campaign was to “get a message out,” over time, Thompson became more serious about winning and influencing policy.<sup>288</sup>

All three of the writers depicted an evolving campaign, describing how Thompson became more serious as the race progressed. Unlike earlier biographers who portrayed Thompson’s campaign as static and unserious, the later writers illustrated the shift in Thompson’s efforts halfway through the campaign. In “Gonzo,” Bob Braudis stated, “The serious component of Hunter’s campaign snowballed, and as the movement gained momentum, I think Hunter believed he had a chance.”<sup>289</sup> The medium of video also helped to convey Thompson’s sincerity. Watching Thompson’s impassioned concession

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<sup>285</sup> Seymour and Wenner 105.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid 113.

<sup>287</sup> McKeen 153-155.

<sup>288</sup> *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*, dir. Alex Gibney, DVD, BBC Storeyville, 2008.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

speech, one would have found it hard to believe that he did not want to win. McKeen, Wenner, and Seymour also conveyed Thompson's seriousness, but *Gonzo* was the only work that discussed Thompson's plan to function as an ombudsman and hire a competent undersheriff to run the department. Additionally, Wenner and Seymour, through their inclusion of quotes from Tom Benton and Joe Edwards, acknowledged the movement's eventual success in Pitkin County. Benton stated that Thompson's choice to run the department would have been Dick Kienast, and Edwards described how Kienast, upon his election, changed the culture of law enforcement in the county. Edwards credited Thompson with helping to start this process, stating, "Hunter changed the culture of this whole area. He was the catalyst that got the whole thing going."<sup>290</sup> While I believe that the truth is more complex than that, the idea that Thompson's campaign eventually helped to reform law enforcement in the county—a central component of my thesis—is an important aspect of the race, one that was not mentioned in any other biographies or documentaries.

Even though the biographers documented Thompson's decision to run a more serious campaign, they failed to explain the specific ways in which he altered his ideas and his rhetoric. None of the writers mentioned Thompson's second platform or the fact that he distanced himself from his initial proposals. Instead, Thompson's first platform and other bizarre aspects of his candidacy featured prominently in the works. McKeen stressed Thompson's dramatic presentation of his candidacy, writing in *Outlaw Journalist*, "As if his shaved and gleaming skull and teardrop aviator shades hadn't been enough to frighten Aspen taxpayers, Hunter's political platform rattled them to their

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<sup>290</sup> Seymour and Wenner 115.

gonads and kept them tossing in sweaty sheets at night.”<sup>291</sup> Wenner and Seymour included quotes from individuals that discussed Thompson’s open drug use and his shocking appearance. They also quoted the most absurd and comedic parts of Thompson’s first platform.<sup>292</sup> In “Gonzo,” Alex Gibney introduced Thompson’s first platform with an over-the-top visual accompaniment. In the documentary, Johnny Depp sat at a bar and held a gun in the air while reciting the most entertaining portions of Thompson’s platform from the back of an Aspen *Wallposter*, the front of which depicted Thompson’s campaign symbol—a double thumbed fist holding a peyote button.<sup>293</sup> All of the writers emphasized Thompson’s “tentative platform”, but they ignored his “real platform,” fundamentally misunderstanding the campaign.<sup>294</sup>

Without documenting the specific ways in which Thompson’s ideas and rhetoric changed, the writers’ discussion of Thompson’s decision to run a more serious race distorted the truth. All of the works stressed the importance of Thompson’s first platform before describing the shift in his campaign, but they only mentioned one facet of the evolution of Thompson’s campaign—his desire to win. The writers did not include his decision to abandon his first platform and craft a “real” one. They also ignored the ways in which his rhetoric changed over the course of the campaign. As a result, a reader or viewer would have misunderstood the reasons why Thompson was serious about winning. The works insinuated that Thompson wanted to take power in order to implement his radical platform when he actually sought to institute progressive reform. While the writers’ description of Thompson’s sincerity revealed more aspects of the

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<sup>291</sup> McKeen 153.

<sup>292</sup> Seymour and Wenner 111-112.

<sup>293</sup> Gibney

<sup>294</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 173.

campaign than earlier biographies, their omission of the evolution of his ideas encouraged popular misconceptions of the race.

### Thompson's narratives

In his career as a writer and public icon in the decades following the election, Thompson focused on the radical counter-cultural nature of his campaign. With few exceptions, Thompson ignored his shift to the middle, highlighting instead his outlandish first platform, his honesty about his drug use, his bizarre appearance, and his aggressive rhetoric. In letters following the election, Thompson wrote excitedly about the race and its meaning. Writing to his book editor, Jim Silberman, Thompson marveled that his movement “could actually overcome the multi-onus of a candidate who was not only insanely ugly, stone bald, and advocating ‘Freak Power’ with casual references to ‘pigfuckers’ and ‘shitheads’ and ‘greedy scum’...but who also admitted to committing felonies as a way of life.”<sup>295</sup> In another letter to Carey McWilliams, editor of *The Nation*, Thompson wrote, “we ran straight at the bastards with an out-front Mescaline platform...and we still won the city.”<sup>296</sup> In these letters, Thompson began shaping his narrative of the race, one that he would repeat for the rest of his life. Ignoring the second half of his campaign, Thompson linked his performance at the polls with the campaign’s earlier, more bizarre, aspects.

Thompson spoke about the entirety of his campaign, including its transformation, on rare occasions. In August 1972, Thompson was interviewed by Jerry Williams of

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<sup>295</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 334.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid* 336.

WBZ 1030 AM—a prominent Boston radio station. During the course of the conversation, Thompson gave the most honest account of the campaign I have found, stating,

I put out two platforms. When I first began to run for sheriff, when I first announced it, I said I was doing it as a lightning rod, a sort of bogus candidate. I put out a platform deliberately to scare the hell out of the populace... Then when I realized I was going to win the city, I realized it was going to be a serious campaign. We had to go back over it and come up with what still amounts to a very progressive sheriff campaign.<sup>297</sup>

This interview is the only place I have ever seen Thompson's second platform referenced in print. While many reasons could explain his deviation from his usual narrative about the race, I believe that the context of the conversation—a discussion about national politics on a news talk show—revealed a different side of Thompson than he promoted elsewhere in interviews that focused on his personality and his writing.

Around the same time of his interview with Williams, Thompson wrote about his campaign for sheriff in his *Rolling Stone* articles on the Presidential campaign, bragging that he ran on “a platform embracing the use and frequent enjoyment of Mescaline by the Sheriff and all his Deputies.”<sup>298</sup> At the end of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*—the compilation of Thompson's *Rolling Stone* articles from that year—Thompson highlighted the outlandish aspects of his sheriff's campaign, ignoring the shift in his campaign and his second platform.<sup>299</sup> In a stark contrast to his statement in the interview with Williams, Thompson mentioned the set of stocks for dishonest drug

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<sup>297</sup> Thompson, *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 21.

<sup>298</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* 202.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid* 496.

dealers, his desire to harass real estate developers, and his shaved head.<sup>300</sup> The difference in context between the statements—a talk news program versus a counterculture magazine—partially explains the inconsistency of Thompson’s statements. In his writing, Thompson stressed particular facets of the campaign that strengthened his public image, omitting the parts that undermined his “freak” credentials. This trend continued for the rest of Thompson’s life. As far as I have been able to determine, he never publicly mentioned his second platform again, but he continued to tout the campaign’s more bizarre elements.<sup>301</sup>

Comparing two interviews of Thompson where he was asked about his campaign, one with Jerry Williams of WBZ 1030 AM radio in August 1972 and another with Craig Vetter of *Playboy* in 1974, reveals Thompson’s evolving motives in his characterization of the campaign. As with his *Rolling Stone* articles, the context of each interview helped to determine his response. In 1972, Thompson worked hard to establish a reputation as a serious, if offbeat, political journalist. His interview with Williams reflects this period of his life, as he spends more time analyzing national politics than promoting himself. Interestingly, Thompson launched into his statement about his changed campaign himself, referencing his experience in Aspen in order to make a point about Democratic Presidential Candidate George McGovern’s campaign. Two years later, Vetter brought up the issue, asking, “You changed the pitch toward the end, toned it down, didn’t you?”<sup>302</sup> In response, Thompson merely stated that he “became a creature of [his] own campaign.” After Vetter asked, “What did your platform finally evolve into?” Thompson mentioned his plan to function as ombudsman and hire a competent undersheriff to run the

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<sup>300</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* 496.

<sup>301</sup> Thompson, *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 125, 169.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid* 44.

department, but he did not discuss his more straightforward rhetoric or his second platform.

The context of Thompson's interview with Vetter explains many of the discrepancies between his statements on the election. Vetter conducted his interview with Thompson over the course of months, and they edited it together.<sup>303</sup> While I do not have evidence to support this assertion, it is likely that these facts allowed Thompson to project a particular image through his description of the campaign. His interview with Williams was in the middle of 1972, a short time before Thompson became an iconic figure in popular culture. Thus, Williams caught Thompson before the writer felt burdened by the expectations surrounding his mystique. While he reinforced his persona in his letters and his writing, at this point in his career, he was still free to deviate from his "gonzo" script. By 1974, Thompson's persona—his drug crazed alter ego Raoul Duke—was famous. Thompson's notoriety presented him with easy opportunities to make money, from writing sub-par articles to giving lectures on college campuses. In the *Playboy* interview, Thompson reinforced his image by stressing the bizarre elements of his campaign.

At the core of most of Thompson's recollections of his campaign for sheriff was the construction and maintenance of his myth. Over the course of 1972, Thompson transformed himself from an offbeat journalist to a cultural icon due to the success of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and his Presidential campaign coverage in *Rolling Stone*. He worked hard to strengthen his image, blurring the line between fact and fiction in his works and hyping his excessive drug use. While Thompson had established this style years earlier, his newfound celebrity for his particular (and peculiar) lifestyle provided

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<sup>303</sup> McKeen 218.

him with economic and personal incentives to promote a certain side of himself. Thus, his campaign for sheriff became a tool with which he could further strengthen his “gonzo” persona, earning him money and fame.<sup>304</sup> Thompson’s sincerity to oversee progressive reform in Pitkin County faded into posterity, overshadowed by his first platform, his open drug use, and his comedic language. This trend benefited all of the parties involved in retelling the story. Journalists and biographers emerged with a more entertaining product—one that Thompson’s fans would recognize—and Thompson strengthened his lucrative image.

Over time, Thompson and his close friends inflated the percentage of the vote he won, making the race appear much closer than it was. In letters immediately following the campaign, Thompson reported fairly accurate numbers, estimating the vote as a “40/60 split” when he actually received 38.5 percent according to the official results.<sup>305</sup> Over time, the estimates began to edge upward. In his memoir, *Kingdom of Fear*, Thompson claimed to have received 44 percent of the vote.<sup>306</sup> While the book was published in 2003, Thompson culled the section that discusses the sheriff’s race from an unpublished essay that he had written in the months after the election. In a letter written in early 1971 to Jann Wenner and at the end of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, Thompson estimated his portion of the vote at 45 percent.<sup>307</sup> A few years later, Thompson claimed in an interview that he lost by “four percentage points.”<sup>308</sup> After Thompson’s death in 2005, Ed Bastian, Thompson’s close friend who managed logistics

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<sup>304</sup> Thompson’s style of writing became known as “Gonzo” journalism. Over time, the word became synonymous with Thompson himself—the “King of Gonzo.”

<sup>305</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 333.

<sup>306</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear* 92.

<sup>307</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 364; Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* 496.

<sup>308</sup> Thompson, *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 73.

for his sheriff's campaign, asserted in an article that the campaign received "about 46 percent of the vote".<sup>309</sup> In another bizarrely precise-yet-inaccurate figure, Joe Edwards stated in *Gonzo*, "Hunter wound up losing by, I think, 274 votes out of 2,000 or 3,000. It was pretty damn close."<sup>310</sup> The actual figure was 465 votes out of 2772 cast—not an especially close margin.<sup>311</sup> Interestingly, the numbers only increased over time, as Thompson and his friends remembered the campaign as more successful than it was.

The narrative of the campaign that Thompson promoted in the vast majority of his statements after the election distorted its history in two ways. First, he overemphasized the entertaining and outlandish aspects of the campaign, ignoring his shift in focus halfway through the race. Secondly, he misremembered the outcome of the race, arguing that his performance was stronger than it actually was. Jessie Jarnow, a writer for *Relix* magazine, probably unknowingly illustrated how these narratives have come to dominate the public perception of Thompson's campaign. In the introduction to his 2003 interview with Thompson, Jarnow wrote, "For his part, Thompson ran for sheriff of Aspen in 1970, waging a ridiculous (and widely documented) campaign on the Freak Power ticket, whose promises included renaming Aspen 'Fat City' (to discourage tourism) and very nearly won."<sup>312</sup> The combination of these two narratives strengthened the myth of Hunter S. Thompson—the drug-crazed "gonzo" journalist who was almost elected sheriff of Aspen on a "Freak Power" platform.

In addition to self-promotion, Thompson had other motives for stressing these two narratives about the campaign, especially in the first few years after the election.

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<sup>309</sup> Bastian, "An homage to a 35-year friendship."

<sup>310</sup> Seymour and Wenner 114.

<sup>311</sup> Official Pitkin County election results

<sup>312</sup> Thompson, Ancient Gonzo Wisdom 198.

Throughout his political writing in the early 1970's, Thompson argued that the counterculture could take power by following his example. In his letters following the election Thompson promoted this idea, writing to his book agent, "Maybe a presidential candidate in 1972 could actually *gain* votes by admitting that he smokes marijuana and laughing about it on network TV."<sup>313</sup> In a letter to Senator (and future Vice-President) Walter Mondale, Thompson wrote, "that's about it for now...except maybe to urge you to *think* about the weird implications of this Aspen/Freak Power thing."<sup>314</sup> He concluded his letter to Mondale by noting that Senator George McGovern could potentially "tap the national equivalent of Freak Power" in his campaign for President.<sup>315</sup> In these letters, Thompson revealed an earnest commitment to changing the country by energizing the country's radical youth. His skewed memory of his campaign—that his ideas were weirder than they were and that he performed better than he did—strengthened his argument for trying his strategy on a national scale.

Thompson was attached to the idea that his style of campaigning, not his success or failure, was the most important aspect of the race. In a letter to Jann Wenner in early 1971, he wrote,

"we ran the public line between the necessity for winning and the weird possibility of *winning on our terms*...our idea was that maybe the means could *be* the end...The Concept *is* the solution. If the idea had been to simply unseat a stupid backwoods sheriff, I sure as hell wouldn't have shaved my head & flooded the town with posters showing a double-thumbed red fist clutching a peyote button...The fact is that we ran what the *NY Times* called 'the most bizarre political campaign on the American scene today' and, despite all our mistakes, disasters & panic trips, we wound up winning the city of Aspen and only losing the county by a 45/55 or so split."<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 333.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid* 357.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid* 364.

Thompson wanted to believe that his honesty—his uncensored rhetoric and lifestyle—was the source of his success, causing him to remember the campaign in a manner that confirmed his beliefs. As a result, he focused on the campaign’s bizarre aspects and overestimated his percentage of the vote.

In his memoir, *Kingdom of Fear*, Thompson devoted twenty pages to his campaign for sheriff. In his assessment, he repeated his traditional narrative of the race, emphasizing his aggressive rhetoric and his eccentric behavior in addition to misrepresenting his percentage of the vote. He wrote, “Pitkin County, Colorado, was about to elect the nation’s first Mescaline sheriff...a foul-mouthed bald-headed freak who refused to compromise on anything at all, even his taste for wild drugs.”<sup>317</sup> However, most of Thompson’s treatment of the campaign in his memoir focused on the potential for violence. He wrote extensively about Jim Bromley—the undercover federal agent who threatened him and tried to infiltrate his campaign—and the death threats made against him, dramatizing his campaign’s paranoia in the week before the election. In his past interviews and letters, Thompson did not emphasize this part of the campaign. By the time he put together *Kingdom of Fear*, Thompson’s drug-fueled paranoia was at an all-time high. The book was a collection of Thompson’s writing from different stages of his life, strung together by paranoid ramblings about George W. Bush’s administration. According to biographer William McKeen, Thompson wrote 160 pages about his campaign for sheriff in the months after the 1970 election.<sup>318</sup> His choice of which

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<sup>317</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear* 85-86.

<sup>318</sup> McKeen 157.

sections to include in his memoir reveals more about his mental and emotional state in 2003 than his 1970 campaign.

### Popular Narratives

While Wikipedia is not a reliable source for accurate historical information, it serves a useful function in research as evidence of prevailing popular opinions.<sup>319</sup> The Wikipedia article on Thompson's campaign for sheriff emphasizes his first platform without noting the existence of a second. The page follows the standard treatment of the race in magazine or newspaper articles, noting Thompson's desire to legalize drugs, the more outlandish aspects of his first platform, and his decision to shave his head in order to call the incumbent sheriff his "long haired opponent."<sup>320</sup> Searching Google for sites that discuss Thompson's campaign reveals similar results. After decades of misleading stories published in newspapers, magazines, and biographies, the fact that contemporary commentators on the internet have a skewed perception of the race is not surprising. If a national polling firm asked individuals familiar with Thompson's candidacy to discuss their knowledge of it, I am confident that the entertaining and outlandish aspects of the race would be overwhelmingly identified, with the idea that it evolved into a serious campaign to institute progressive law enforcement receiving little to no acknowledgement.

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<sup>319</sup> I read an article recently by Timothy Messer-Kruse, a professor in the School of Cultural and Critical Studies at Bowling Green State University. He wrote about his attempts to edit the Wikipedia article on the Chicago Haymarket Bombings, a subject that he has written two books about. After rejecting his revisions, one of the site's custodians explained to Messer-Kruse that "Wikipedia is not 'truth,' Wikipedia is 'verifiability' of reliable sources. Hence, if most secondary sources which are taken as reliable happen to repeat a flawed account or description of something, Wikipedia will echo that."

<sup>320</sup> "The Battle of Aspen," *Wikipedia*, 20 Aug. 2012, 7 Apr. 2012  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Battle\\_of\\_Aspen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Battle_of_Aspen)>

## Aspen after 1970

Even though Thompson's 1970 campaign for sheriff marked the end of his time as an active participant in local politics, the anti-development group that coalesced around him took power in the 1970s. In 1972, Joe Edwards and Dwight Shellman, the two lawyers who in 1968 filed a civil-rights suit against Aspen in response to the city's crackdown on hippies, were elected county commissioners on a platform that emphasized strict controls on development. The men, along with Michael Kinsley, who was elected as the third county commissioner in 1975, downzoned the rural areas of the county and enacted growth controls.<sup>321</sup> They also established a public transportation system, funded the creation of hiking trails throughout the county, and oversaw the construction of an employee-housing program.<sup>322</sup> Additionally, the commissioners established ordinances to improve Aspen's aesthetics, banning certain types of signs and helping to create a downtown mall.<sup>323</sup> The politicians generated an enormous amount of controversy in Aspen, but all three men survived a recall attempt in 1976.

Ultimately, however, Edwards regretted many of the group's policies, as the public improvements lured second-home buyers to the area.<sup>324</sup> The combination of increased demand and strict growth controls caused real estate prices to soar, pricing out many of the area's residents. Additionally, according to Edwards, the booming land market encouraged many homeowners to sell their properties to second-home buyers and

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<sup>321</sup> "Dwight Killian Shellman Jr.," *The Aspen Times*, 27 Mar. 2012, 15 Apr. 2012  
<<http://www.aspentimes.com/article/20120327/OBITUARIES/120329874&parentprofile=search>>

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>323</sup> Joe Edwards, "The Battle of Aspen."

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*

move downvalley, resulting in more commuting traffic and air pollution.<sup>325</sup> Years later, Edwards mused that they could have stopped this trend by rezoning parts of the city to exclude absentee owners, but the dramatic effect on land prices in those areas would have made the idea politically impossible.<sup>326</sup> Looking back on his time in office, Edwards remembers one resident, Raymond Auger, who argued against civic improvements, claiming that a more beautiful and better functioning town would only increase demand from second-home buyers. Edwards writes, “In hindsight, I think Raymond was right and we unintentionally hastened the demise of the town we loved and sought to preserve.”<sup>327</sup> While the “freaks” eventually took control of local government, their efforts to preserve the town backfired.

Thompson’s political allies also took power over law enforcement in the county. Dick Kienast—the former Aspen police officer who was heavily rumored to be Thompson’s choice to run the department had he won in 1970—was elected sheriff in 1976. Kienast had challenged Whitmire in 1974, but he lost, complicating the common narrative that connects Thompson’s campaign in 1970, the elections of Edwards and Shellman in 1972, and the election of Kienast in 1976. In *Gonzo*, Joe Edwards illustrates the triumphant storyline, stating that after Thompson’s defeat, “In between that election and the next one, the district court ordered the undersheriff removed from office, so Whitmire had further embarrassment. And the next time there was an election for sheriff, Dick Kienast won and became sheriff for eight years.”<sup>328</sup> However, Edwards is wrong. The next sheriff’s election in 1974 was a battle between two dramatically different

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<sup>325</sup> Edwards, “The Battle of Aspen.”

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> Seymour and Wenner 115.

philosophies of law enforcement—Kienast’s progressive ideas versus Whitmire’s traditional approach—and Kienast lost. Ultimately, after Whitmire resigned after coming under investigation for corruption, Kienast triumphed in 1976.<sup>329</sup> Out of seven candidates, he captured 51% of the vote, receiving a strong mandate for his platform.<sup>330</sup>

During his two terms in office, Kienast reformed law enforcement in Pitkin County along more progressive lines, a legacy that continues to this day. He announced that the sheriff’s office would no longer use undercover tactics in investigations, refusing to cooperate with undercover federal agents in the War on Drugs.<sup>331</sup> Kienast’s stance infuriated the DEA and gained him national attention, including an article in *People* magazine and a segment on “60 Minutes.”<sup>332</sup> A staunch defender of civil liberties, he is quoted in *People* saying, “It’s more important to respect someone’s rights than to arrest him.”<sup>333</sup> To discourage a macho attitude among his deputies, Kienast changed the department’s uniforms to appear less militaristic. Additionally, Kienast began hiring well-educated deputies from within the community, often individuals with no previous experience in law enforcement.<sup>334</sup> One deputy hired by Kienast was Bob Braudis, a former ski-bum who went on to serve as Pitkin County’s sheriff for twenty-four years, continuing Kienast’s style of tolerant, community-oriented policing.

Kienast had an unusual background for a western sheriff. He received a Master’s degree from Notre Dame in Philosophy and Theology, and he briefly taught those

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<sup>329</sup> “Citing ‘pressures,’ Whitmire resigns,” *The Aspen Times* 12 Aug. 1976: 3-A.

<sup>330</sup> Official Pitkin County election results

<sup>331</sup> Karen G. Jackovich, “Aspen Sheriff Richard Kienast’s Hip Town Backs Him, but Federal Narcs Claim He’s a Bust,” *People*, 23 Jun. 1980, 15 Apr. 2012

<<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20076784,00.html>>

<sup>332</sup> Jeff Kass, Aspen Magazine, “Drugs and Culture—Aspen’s Storied History”

<http://www.aspenmagazine.com/article/flashback>

<sup>333</sup> Jackovich

<sup>334</sup> Kass

subjects at the college level.<sup>335</sup> Braudis describes Kienast's approach as "humanistic" and "New Agey," recalling that Kienast wanted his deputies to function as "peace officers" in the community rather than law enforcement officers.<sup>336</sup> Kienast tried to give inmates time off for good behavior, a move that angered some judges, and he substituted herbal tea for coffee in the jail.<sup>337</sup> The new atmosphere of the sheriff's department earned them the nickname "Dick Dove and the Deputies of Love."<sup>338</sup> An anecdote from *The Kitchen Readings*, a collection of stories about Thompson's life written by Bob Braudis and Michael Cleverly, highlights the shift in the sheriff's department upon Kienast's election.<sup>339</sup> One winter night at the Jerome Bar in Aspen, Thompson and his friend Tex started to argue about who was a better driver. Even though both men were on LSD, and they had been drinking steadily throughout the evening, they decided to conduct a backwards race down Main Street through a foot of unplowed snow, with the winner parallel parking in front of the bar. The judges were Michael Solheim, the manager of the bar, and Dick Kienast, the sheriff.<sup>340</sup>

It is difficult to determine how influential Thompson's activities in 1969 and 1970 were for the eventual triumph of anti-development politicians and progressive sheriffs. His allies certainly remembered his efforts. In honor of his role in the movement, the county commissioners swore Thompson in as honorary sheriff for five minutes after Kienast's election. Billy Noonan, the "Freak Power" candidate for coroner, was also

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<sup>335</sup> "Dick Kienast," *The Aspen Times*, 30 Mar. 2004, 15 Apr. 2012,

<<http://www.aspentimes.com/article/20040330/OBITS/103300010&parentprofile=search>>

<sup>336</sup> Scott Condon, "'Dick Dove' leaves legacy on local law enforcement," *The Aspen Times*, 20 Mar. 2004, 15 Apr. 2012 <<http://www.aspentimes.com/article/20040330/NEWS/103300011&parentprofile=search>>

<sup>337</sup> Jackovich

<sup>338</sup> Kass

<sup>339</sup> Bob Braudis and Michael Cleverly, *The Kitchen Readings* (New York: Harper Perennial 2008) 22-25.

<sup>340</sup> Tex won the race, hitting the spot perfectly, while Thompson ended up crashing through a neighboring church's fence; Braudis and Cleverly, 25

sworn in as an honorary coroner. Additionally, Kienast placed Thompson on the “sheriff’s advisory committee,” a panel of residents that interviewed potential deputies.<sup>341</sup> The two actions reveal the elected officials’ respect for Thompson and highlight their belief in the importance of his sheriff’s campaign in setting the stage for later successes.

However, it is impossible to know whether Thompson’s political involvement was necessary for the group’s success. Advancing a narrative that oversimplifies the truth, Edwards credits Thompson with starting the movement to reform law enforcement, stating, “Hunter changed the culture of this whole area. He was the catalyst that got the whole thing going.”<sup>342</sup> In an article in the *Washington Post* about the fallout of Aspen’s strict growth policies, Ivan Goldman writes, “These commissioners, councilpeople and others probably think their stand against growth adheres to the wishes of their constituents. To understand this, you must go back to 1969, when gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson ran for sheriff here on the Freakpower ticket.”<sup>343</sup> Edwards and Goldman credit Thompson with starting the progressive law enforcement and the anti-growth movements in Aspen, assertions that do not stand up to the facts. Since the time of Walter Paepcke—who turned down an offer to host the 1952 Olympics—Aspen had debated its growth. Additionally, I believe that Edwards sells himself short, as he played a major role during the 1968 crackdown on hippies, a pivotal time in Aspen’s reassessment of law enforcement. All of the topics—land use, development, civil liberties, and the enforcement of drug laws—were major issues in the town before Thompson became politically active.

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<sup>341</sup> Braudis, Personal interview; In Braudis’s own interview with the sheriff’s advisory committee, which Thompson did not attend, Braudis remembers Tom Benton asking separate questions about marijuana and stealing before Benton said, “Good, now don’t let anybody steal my pot.”

<sup>342</sup> Seymour and Wenner 115.

<sup>343</sup> Ivan Goldman, “...Cramped Dropout Haven,” *The Washington Post* 25 Jan. 1976: E1.

Still, Thompson's candidacy likely did act as a "catalyst" for change, as Edwards claimed. He first encouraged Joe Edwards to run for mayor in 1969, and he brought like-minded people together, including Dick Kienast, to discuss law enforcement reform in 1970. Kienast adopted many of the ideas in Thompson's "real platform" during his time as sheriff, including the cessation of undercover activities, hiring deputies from within the community, and reframing the role of police officers in the community. While it is impossible to know Thompson's role in crafting his "real platform," as Kienast may have been responsible for those ideas in the first place, the fact that Thompson argued passionately for them during his campaign likely helped the movement. Even though he turned off many people with his rhetoric, Thompson was articulate and unafraid to speak his truth. He drew frustrated radicals and apolitical ski-bums into the political process, helping to establish a voter base that elected Edwards, Shellman, and Kienast in the 1970s. However, I do not have strong proof for this claim, beyond quotes from his supporters and the fact that he was named honorary sheriff by the county in 1976. It is possible that Thompson's over-the-top campaign hurt the movement, preventing a more moderate candidate from winning in 1970 and offending establishment voters, causing them to disapprove of later "freak" candidates for their association with Thompson. While this may have happened in some cases, I believe that Thompson's campaign ultimately helped to establish progressive law enforcement in Pitkin County.

Hunter S. Thompson after 1970

Even though he lost his campaign for sheriff, Thompson remained optimistic about the future for “Freak Power.” He tried to maintain his group’s political momentum in Aspen, but events in his life took him away from active involvement in local politics—from free-lance assignments to an opportunity to move to Washington D.C. and cover the 1972 Presidential Election for *Rolling Stone*. In his articles, he argued that his counterculture-embracing style of campaigning could work on a state or national level. Thompson flirted with the idea of future campaigns, joking in a letter to Jim Silberman, his book editor, after his loss in 1970 that his “advisors” were attempting to draft him to run for president, but that he would refuse to run unless they offer him “the Democratic nomination and about 100 million dollars to blow on a brutal, mind-bending campaign that would stagger the National Consciousness.”<sup>344</sup> According to Thompson, he seriously contemplated running for one of Colorado’s Senate seats in 1974, but he abandoned the idea after learning that Gary Hart, George McGovern’s campaign manager in 1972 whom Thompson had befriended, was entering the race.

In the years after his campaign for sheriff, Thompson became a celebrity. His next two books, 1971’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and 1973’s *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, earned him national attention. While critics praised his writing, Thompson gained fame more for his public persona than for his writing as stories of his wild behavior circulated. He fed the image in his writing and his public performances, eventually becoming a captive of his own myth. The fame hindered his ability to report on stories. As Thompson recalled in a 1978 interview with the BBC, “It’s hard to work on a story now. I’ve become part of the story. The first time I went to a press conference with Jimmy Carter, I had to sign more autographs than Carter did.

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<sup>344</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 335.

And the Secret Service had no idea who I was. They thought I was an astronaut.”<sup>345</sup> As a result of his celebrity, Thompson refrained from publicly engaging in local politics, fearful of the news coverage that would result. According to Bob Braudis, Thompson “didn’t want to foul his own nest.”<sup>346</sup> He stayed active, but he worked behind the scenes, helping to start the Woody Creek Caucus, a regular meeting of his friends and neighbors when they discussed local issues.<sup>347</sup> Occasionally, Thompson’s passion about an issue prompted him to speak out publicly. He took a strong stance against plans to develop lands near his house that were protected for elk migration, and, along with Bob Braudis, he waged a successful campaign to defeat a 1995 proposal to expand the Aspen airport.

However, Thompson’s story is, ultimately, a tragedy. After achieving international superstardom, he gradually descended into addiction, pessimism and paranoia. Simultaneously plagued and enriched by his public persona that he continued to strengthen with his erratic behavior, the quality and quantity of Thompson’s writing dropped off. He produced some quality pieces, but the majority of his writing from his later years was uninspired and repetitive. His fame presented him with easy opportunities to make money, from giving public lectures on college campuses to selling autographed copies of books or posters. He continued to defend his values in print, penning diatribes against what he perceived to be the modern police state, but he recognized that he was past his prime. According to McKeen, Thompson’s friends would sometimes find him crying in his kitchen, distraught over the direction his life had taken.<sup>348</sup> As his physical health deteriorated in the last years of his life, Thompson fell into a deep depression.

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<sup>345</sup> McKeen 251.

<sup>346</sup> Braudis, Personal Interview

<sup>347</sup> Bastian, “An homage to a 35-year friendship.”

<sup>348</sup> McKeen 349.

Ultimately, he decided to end his own life rather than continue to suffer, dying on February 25, 2005 at age 67 of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

In Thompson's introduction to Peggy Clifford's 1978 memoir, *To Aspen and Back*, he lamented Aspen's evolution during the 1970s. Despite the triumph of anti-development politicians in Pitkin County, Thompson claimed that the movement had failed. He wrote, "We won all the battles, but we lost the war."<sup>349</sup> Describing Aspen as a "monument to the relentless masochism of the idle rich," Thompson exudes a dark pessimism in the piece. Upheaval in his personal life explains much of his anger. He wrote the introduction at a time when his marriage was falling apart and his addictions had taken precedence over his writing career. Still, there is an aspect of his statement that his movement had "lost the war" that I would like to explore.

While this paper argues that Thompson's campaign evolved into a sincere attempt to reform law enforcement in the county, I believe that Thompson also argued for vaster and more personal changes, encouraging individuals to question the underlying values of their capitalistic society. In his 1970 *Rolling Stone* article before his campaign, he wrote that his goal in local political action was to "create a town where people could live like human beings, instead of slaves to some bogus sense of Progress that is driving us all mad."<sup>350</sup> Through political activism and oration, Thompson sought to promote individuals' adoption of anticapitalistic counterculture values in addition to controlling the power structures to affect change. Thus, "the war" was as much about personal values as land use. While his group stopped Aspen's rampant growth, the community still operated within the traditional values of capitalism, leading to booming real estate

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<sup>349</sup> Clifford xiv.

<sup>350</sup> Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* 160.

and, in Thompson's eyes, Aspen's demise. In an article on the history of Aspen's drug culture in *Aspen Magazine*, writer Jeff Kass asserts that many of Aspen's "original hippie invaders" went on to "lucrative careers in real estate."<sup>351</sup> While I do not have evidence to back up this claim, Kass is likely right. As Aspen's youth settled down and started families, some of them probably took advantage of Aspen's boom. Thompson lamented the prevailing capitalistic values, leading him to comment that his movement had "won all the battles," but they "lost the war."

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<sup>351</sup> Kass

## Conclusion

“Hunter Thompson’s disease is that he feels America can be as easily led to beauty as to ugliness, to truth as to public relations, and to joy as to bitterness.”<sup>352</sup>

—Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

In the final years of Thompson’s life and in the years following his death, individuals close to him have made a concerted effort to establish his legacy in popular culture as a great writer and an important thinker rather than an eccentric drug addict. In 1996, the Modern Library published a hardcover edition of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.<sup>353</sup> In the following years and with the help of historian Douglas Brinkley, Thompson published the first two volumes of his letters, *The Proud Highway* and *Fear and Loathing in America*, to critical acclaim.<sup>354</sup> After his death, many of Thompson’s close friends and colleagues spoke with biographers and published essays and books on him, hoping to broaden the public perception of Thompson’s character.

This paper is part of that larger revisionist project, specifically focusing on Thompson’s political involvement in 1969 and 1970. However, regarding Thompson’s campaign for sheriff, this paper goes beyond the revisionism of Thompson’s friends and admirers. Among all the observers, I stand alone in highlighting the existence and importance of Thompson’s second platform. Even Brinkley, who read through Thompson’s entire lifetime of letters and was close to the author, misunderstood the campaign. In the introduction to *Fear and Loathing in America*, Brinkley wrote,

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<sup>352</sup> Thompson, *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* 74.

<sup>353</sup> McKeen 332.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid* 335.

With his head shaved clean, a bright-red fist with two thumbs clasping a peyote button as his campaign power, jazz artist Herbie Mann's spirited 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' as his anthem, and a party platform that included changing Aspen's name to 'Fat City' to slow down development, Thompson's savage campaign attracted considerable national attention....Astonishingly, Thompson lost by only four hundred-odd votes of more than twenty-five hundred cast."<sup>355</sup>

Brinkley misrepresents the campaign in familiar ways, highlighting the entertaining aspects of the campaign and distorting the results of the race. I believe that by acknowledging Thompson's sincerity for implementing progressive reform, individuals can examine the content of his messages rather than their presentation. In the process, readers can move beyond his eccentric behavior and his incendiary rhetoric and focus instead on his arguments about happiness, progress, and American cultural values.

I believe that Thompson's campaign for sheriff represents the peak of his optimism about individuals' ability to affect positive change through the democratic process. Before Joe Edwards's 1969 mayoral campaign, Thompson avoided political involvement. He was more anarchistic than apathetic; he passionately believed in counterculture values, but he shied away from organized political action. In the course of his research on "The Death of the American Dream," Thompson decided that the system he abhorred was amenable to change. He realized that the government held within it the tools for reform—the promise of democracy. Thompson's political involvement paralleled an increase in violence from segments of the antiwar movement—from the protests at Richard Nixon's inauguration to the Weatherman bombings. Through his support of the democratic process, Thompson upheld nonviolent principles. He encouraged apathetic and disheartened radicals to enter back into the system rather than

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<sup>355</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* xviii.

destroy it, arguing that they did not need to change their lifestyles or sacrifice their values in order to participate. While at a certain point in his campaign Thompson began to downplay his aggressive rhetoric and his promotion of drugs, he still celebrated his lifestyle choices, demonstrating that radicals did not need to go “Clean for Gene” to affect change. I believe that his support for nonviolent and nonconformist political engagement deserves recognition more than his outlandish ideas and aggressive rhetoric.

Thompson’s first wife, Sandy Conklin, spoke about Thompson’s campaign in “Gonzo,” a documentary of Thompson’s life. She applauded his efforts, saying,

I think that was one of Hunter’s greatest times myself. He had the passion to move people and change people’s thinking and make them act and bring them out. Not just defy authority and take as many drugs as you want, but to make a real difference trying to change the system and make the system work and make the system good. He had that in him.<sup>356</sup>

I agree with Conklin’s assessment. While in the years after his campaign Thompson continued to promote his values in print and to encourage individuals to vote, he did not display the same optimism and passion for reform. His life revolved more around his drug use and the maintenance of his myth than political involvement. It is in his 1970 campaign for sheriff that I find his most inspiring faith in the potential for change and his most eloquent defenses of civil liberties, environmentalism, and the happiness of simplicity.

I believe that the lessons of Thompson’s campaign are as relevant today as they were in 1970. Greed, environmental degradation, and encroachment on civil liberties are all issues that Thompson spoke passionately about during his campaign. Now, in a time of rising inequality, massive public bailouts of corrupt banking systems, potentially

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<sup>356</sup> Gibney

catastrophic climate change, widespread species extinction, and a “War on Terror” that has eroded longstanding protections of civil liberties and due process, we would do well to revisit Thompson’s words on the subjects. As his campaign for sheriff demonstrates, at times in his life he held out hope for the deliverance of America from the forces of greed and hatred. Still, Thompson’s passion mainly manifested in the form of anger and pessimism, writing in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72*, “we really are just a nation of 220 million used car salesmen with all the money we need to buy guns, and no qualms at all about killing anybody else in the world who tries to make us uncomfortable.”<sup>357</sup> He continued, “what a fantastic monument to all the best instincts of the human race this county could have been.”<sup>358</sup> I believe that in this time of crisis we can learn from Thompson’s example, reflecting on his arguments in addition to ways in which he made them.

Ultimately, despite my support for Thompson’s politics, I believe that his aggressive rhetoric did more harm than good. I believe that he was fighting for good causes in an unhelpful way, fueled by anger and righteousness. He railed against greed in his articles, but he failed to see the ways in which his own megalomania and addictions harmed his friends and family members. He lived a life of excess and waste while criticizing the wealthy for those same characteristics. His story is didactic in more ways than he intended, illustrating the consequences of greed and hatred. The *Dhammapada*, a classic Buddhist text, states, “Hatred never ceases by hatred; But love alone is healed. This is an ancient and eternal law.”<sup>359</sup> I believe that individuals can harness the energy of

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<sup>357</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72* 413.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid* 414.

<sup>359</sup> “Prayers and Stories,” *The Foundation for A Healing Among Nations* 1999-2005, 20 Apr. 2012 <[http://www.healingamongnations.org/prayers\\_stories.htm](http://www.healingamongnations.org/prayers_stories.htm)>

Thompson's statements, working towards many of the same ideals—of peace, tolerance, self-expression, honesty, and happiness—without succumbing to his pessimism or anger. Thompson's rhetoric and example illustrates that how people act and speak is often more important than the messages they convey. It is important to take a stand for one's values and engage with the democratic process, but it is also crucial to recognize that we have the capacity to live our values and create the world anew in each moment. May we all live with intention and courage, living our aspirations and holding the world with love and compassion.

