

## A Long Night With Hunter Thompson Terry Irving



The [Last Word](#) -- Worst TV Show EVER

Long ago and far away (or at least in [Florida](#)), I was a field [producer](#) for the Worst Program on Television. Many programs have vied for this title and, yes, there are quite a number that come pretty close, but [ABC's](#) The Last Word was the hands-down Winner. They had to retire the [Morton Downey](#) Cup [youtube [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sw0cbBQrnDk?feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sw0cbBQrnDk?feature=player_embedded)] after that year and replace it with the [Jerry Springer](#) & Dr. Phil Dual Memorial Ball-Gag.

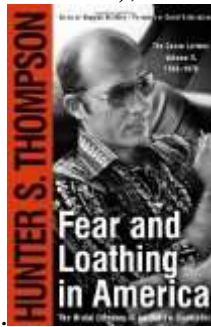


Irving & Shaplen: Covering the Nation

I said I was "a" field producer for The Last Word. In fact, I was the only field producer [East of the Mississippi](#). Peter Shaplen, with his suave good looks and smooth Continental manner, covered everything from the [Pacific](#) to [Chicago](#). The reason that there were only two of us to produce material for five shows per week was the result of the same complete failure of planning or, arguably, an absence of any indications of rational thought, on the part of the crack production team who had created the program.

You see, this was in the "good old days" of television known as the "Feudal Period" or the Daimyo Dynasty. All television programs and all television producers had been divided into

fiefdoms run by a small group of powerful men (there might have been a woman or two later but I was never in their entourage). As a mid-level samurai seeking new quests after the 1980 presidential campaign and the usual complete emotional breakdown that followed, I was a loyal member of the Family L (all names have been replaced by easily-recognizable letters to protect...well, to protect ME.). That meant that L would seek to protect and keep me employed and, in turn, I would work 18 hours a day for him and periodically permit him to exercise *droit de seigneur* with new interns. Without this protective relationship, I would have had to become a *ronin* (masterless samurai or freelancer), wandering the television wastes without meaning,



regular pay, or health benefits.



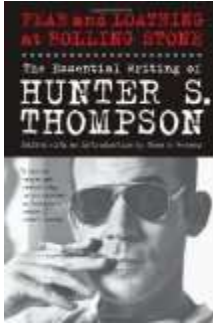
Usually, this was a exquisitely functional relationship. Of course, my fortune rose fell along with L's as he fought for power against Clan G, the Protectorate of W, and His Royal Doofus, Lord K. This was in the period before the rise of the Gray Eminence of The Desk, Lady MM, and the destruction of the feudal system and all it's lords and their vassals.

Yes, you may well ask the purpose of this digression into the politics of Television. Rest assured that it was central to the ineffable Awfulness of The Last Word. Originally, the Sun God --whose red and shiny visage had brought Light and Heat (and Ratings), had assigned L to produce a program to follow Nightline. High Protector W rose in wrath and strode to the Head Office and demanded that the glory of a new program was rightfully his. His petition was heard by the Sun King. It was a bit odd how well L bowed to the inevitable and handed over the reins of Executive Production to the usurper.

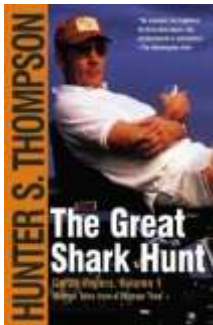
(Jeez, I can't write like this much longer. Hang in there.)

So The Last Word was given to W who immediately realized why it had come to him so easily. It was a dog.

W instantly took on a new tactic: wandering the halls of 47 West with his eyes on the sky. If asked about The Last Word, he would usually respond with a vague, "Huh?" and then quickly



change the subject to how well Barbara Walters was looking today. I believe his plan was to be so distant from the program that he could successfully pass it off as the product of another corporate division and, possibly, another network.



The end result was that this small program was graced with 4 Senior Producers (two appointed by L and two by W), a Director who was also a Senior Producer (which meant that he wouldn't listen to any of the others, one anchor in New York (a correspondent who had recovered from Woodstock after 5 days despite desperate efforts by his staff to ensure he stayed there--even if it meant extending the concert) and one anchor in Chicago (who came with his



own Senior Producer and an adamant determination to do nothing except his daytime program with different colors on the set).

It would have worked out much better if the Senior Producers had followed the time-hallowed CBS method of "Sharks in the Tank" and destroyed each other in true Highlander fashion. At the point when There Was Only One, the show might have had a central focus. It would have been enough if you could have described it as anything but "The 30 Minutes that Follows Nightline." Sadly, the Seniors (all of whom were best friends of mine) were insufficiently vicious and agreed to take turns--producing one program a week. A typical week under this arrangement went like this:

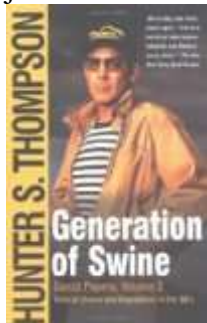


- A Nightline knockoff (without an anchor with Ted's ability to pay the slightest attention to research)
- A left-wing investigation of an outrage.
- A Hollywood Tonight interview of a B-list celebrity--the A-list's agents had standing orders to refuse all calls from us.
- A News of the Weird program that was always defined by someone's statement in a meeting that began with "Wouldn't it be cool if..." (Programs that begin this way are NEVER cool)
- A Friday night mashup of the previous four programs.



Of course, the Guy in Chicago would spend the second half of the each hour walking around his studio audience. I think he went to the effort to ask them to wear ties for an evening program but the subjects never changed.

With so many Senior Producers, there was no money left in the budget to pay for Field Producers so Peter and I picked up a whole bunch of blenders and stereos (this was what you got in the days before Mileage Awards) flying back and forth across the country doing stories on The Meaning of Dreams, Women Who Killed Their Boyfriends, Henry Kissinger and the Crisis in Eastern Europe, The Subjugation of the Working Class, etc. None of the Senior Producers dared to leave New York for fear that the music would stop and they'd be without a chair and all the junior staff had been chosen from the ranks of those suggested by their previous programs --



you know, the people you can't quite fire but sure don't want to have around.

To make a short story even longer, it all came tumbling down after a year of torture and the careers of all the Seniors (who were all really good) were effectively over at ABC. There were a couple of lovely moments at the end. The NY anchor walked in with a substitute program that he'd developed at an outside studio--and which meant all the staff would have been canned. and W simply disappeared. I'm still waiting for him to tell me that I might want to look for another position. Finally, one of the brighter young producers called me in panic the last day the show was being aired and asked what he should do? I said, well, tomorrow go into the office, walk down to the guy who runs the Assignment Desk, sit in his office and say, "OK Boss, that's over.

What do I do now?" Of course, the Desk Boss had had nothing to do with hiring or employing this guy before but, as I figured, he didn't want to seem ignorant of who was on his staff and kept this kid busy all over the world for several years.



A Young Man At The Peak Of His Career (Before Last Word)



Oh, when I was young, I was able to play the Great Game of Office Politics. Too bad, I've lost the skill.

Returning to Hunter Thompson.

We had decided in our dysfunctional and Sybil-esque manner to do a show on the Pulitzer Trial in Palm Beach Florida. This was one of those smarmy divorce affairs that involved multiple affairs (of course), an heiress, someone related to the Kleenex fortune ( I think) and allegations of extracurricular relations with the family Dobermans.

Seriously.

Hunter Thompson, just back from several months in Hawaii writing four pages of a book with Ralph Steadman, had been persuaded by the every-hopeful Jann Wenner to write something, anything, and had chosen this particular Circus of the Damned. I have no idea how I knew this but I did and--even more surprising--was able to track the Gonzo Journalist down to a seedy motel (or as seedy as motel can be in Palm Beach). '

I flew to Miami, ritually kissed the ring of El Jefe of the Miami Bureau and set up a live interview set in a local bar. This was because W had ordered that we do the interviews in more

interesting and natural locations. As soon as I called in the news that we'd procured a popular disco for the night, he ordered, "OK, but don't make it look like a bar."



OK.

I drove up to Palm Beach and located Hunter. He'd completely forgotten that he'd agreed to do the interview (and, to be honest, I'm not entirely sure he ever understood what I was asking when he agreed to do it in the first place.) However, with incredibly bad grace, he prepared for the three hour trip to Miami with a 12-pack of Heinekens on ice, a bottle of Pinch, a reasonable number of doobies, and a somewhat small amount of Peruvian Marching Powder.

The process of choosing the proper chemicals for the trip and ensuring that they were of the proper temperature took a long time--so much that I was staring the deadline of a live program right in the eyes by the time we pulled out of Palm Beach. Being young and stupid at that point, I headed for Miami at speeds well over triple-digits.

I'll admit I'm an innocent. The only time I was ever offered cocaine was on my birthday and I exhaled instead of inhaling and had people picking small crumbs off my sweater the rest of



the night. So when Hunter began to snort lines off the dashboard, I was a bit concerned. I think I even slowed to 90 mph for a while. However, airtime was everything to me back then and I soon picked the speed back up.

Sadly, the blow didn't have a salubrious effect on Mr. Thompson. He began to insist that I had promised him more cocaine in return for his doing the interview and grew increasingly annoyed as I insisted that I had no clue where to get any. His feeling was that the primary job of a producer was to come up with an ounce of the required product. In fact, that was the primary job of many producers in New York (and resulted in an unnaturally large percentage of staffers in Narcotics Anonymous in later years) but it had never been one of my duties on either the Ted Kennedy or Ronald Reagan campaigns.



Well, I got to hear the phrases, "lying weasel" and "vicious swine" many times as well as many of Hunter's other well-known aspersions. I have to admit that it felt good to be part of a long and proud literary tradition of abuse and invective.

I finally slid into Miami about 10 minutes to air to find the El Jefe had put together a wonderful interview position in a bar and lit it so that it did not look like a bar. Two rounds of free drinks got the customers to agree to shut up when we went to air. As Hunter was sitting down and being made up, he was still insisting that I would have his product ready when he finished.

I called a limo company and had them bring a car and driver--transferred the sad remnants of the beer, booze and whatever to the limo and told the driver to take Mr. Thompson wherever he wanted. Then I changed hotels, just in case.



I guess I knew the interview wasn't going to work out so well when both the Director and the Executive Producer announced they had no idea who Hunter Thompson was. Luckily the Woodstock Correspondent had met him in a former life and was able to convince them to put him on the air. As I remember, Hunter's part of the conversation lasted exactly two questions--on the first, he said that the trial was the "bill coming due for the excesses of the previous decades" (which was a brilliant summing up of the story--the guy still had a couple of brain cells working in there.).

It was when he answered the second question with "Well, Greg, I'm really interested in the bestiality aspect." (remember the Dobermans?), that things went to pieces. I could hear W screaming in the control room that they were never to go to Miami again.

So, I made my escape before Hunter got out of the chair. I stayed overnight in m anonymous hotel room and spent 30 minutes checking out the passenger side of the rental car before I turned it in ("Um. Mr. Irving? When we were cleaning your Ford Taurus--and I do hope you enjoyed the car--we found a strange substance tucked deep under the carpet. I have Sergeant Garcia from Miami PD here and...")

I later found out that, after searching for me in a blizzard of curses and then drinking for most of the night at the Bar That Was Not To Look Like A Bar, he had taken the limo to Atlanta--in pursuit of his ounce, no doubt. Perhaps it was lucky that the program tanked only weeks later and I was able to grab onto the Nightline lifeboat.

I remember Hunter fondly, if with a certain amount of healthy fear. Working with him turned out to be great practice for working with Don Imus but that's a story for another day.