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The Life and Times of Jimmy Hoffa

Abstract

In light of Martin Scorsese's popular movie "The Irishman," it is a good time to reassess Jimmy Hoffa. He's probably the most famous union leader in American history, but the only thing most people know of him is that he ran the Teamsters and was closely connected to the Mafia. He is often seen as nothing but a corrupt, evil, greedy sellout. The reality is a little different. In this article I discuss his record as a labor leader, the attacks on him by the McClellan Committee and Bobby Kennedy, and his ties to organized crime. I try to contextualize the Teamsters union of Hoffa's era, while at the same time providing a corrective to the public's overwhelmingly negative views of him.

Keywords

Jimmy Hoffa, Teamsters, unions, corruption

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Jimmy Hoffa used to say he'd be forgotten ten years after his death. This was an uncharacteristically unintelligent judgment. Forty-four years after his murder on July 30, 1975, Hoffa is still famous enough that one of the most celebrated movies of 2019 is about the man who probably killed him, Frank Sheeran. Called *The Irishman*, the film, directed by Martin Scorsese, stars Robert De Niro as Sheeran, Al Pacino as Hoffa, and Joe Pesci as Russell Bufalino, the Mob boss who approved the killing. For a labor leader, such a level of fame is not only extraordinary; it is unique.¹

Of course, the reasons for Hoffa's fame are not entirely to his credit. He is seen as the dictatorial and corrupt union leader who was close friends with gangsters and allied his union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), with the Mafia. Bobby Kennedy went after him for years, starting with the famous McClellan Committee hearings of 1957–59 (for which Kennedy was the chief counsel), and finally got him convicted in 1964 on charges of jury tampering and fraud, for improper use of the Teamsters' pension fund. His appeals having failed, Hoffa went to prison in 1967, but was released in 1971 when Richard Nixon commuted his sentence. As described in Charles Brandt's bestseller *I Heard You Paint Houses*, on which Scorsese's movie is based, Hoffa's subsequent campaign to regain the presidency of the Teamsters was sufficiently threatening to the Mafia that they had him killed.

The Irishman focuses on this seedier side of Hoffa's life, thus perpetuating the image of a wholly amoral and self-serving criminal with which the McClellan hearings made Hoffa's name synonymous. The truth, however, is more interesting than pop-cultural narratives. Jimmy Hoffa's Mob connections were hardly the defining feature of his life. Rather, he deserves to be known, in large part, as the preternaturally effective and hard-working—20-hour days six days a week—leader of what was then the largest union in American history, responsible for raising millions of truck drivers, warehousemen, laundry workers, retail clerks, and others into the middle class.

With the possible exception of John L. Lewis, no twentieth-century union leader was as beloved by the members as Hoffa. He made it a point to be approachable and endlessly responsive: in speeches, for example, he regularly gave out his office phone number and insisted that members call him at any hour of the day or night if they had problems. The contracts he secured were remarkably generous—and yet, ironically, even employers profoundly admired him, considering him a master negotiator, a “genius,” more knowledgeable about the trucking industry than anyone, all in all “a great statesman” who was scrupulously honest and realistic in bargaining.

¹ This article relies primarily on the following books: Thaddeus Russell, *Out of the Jungle: Jimmy Hoffa and the Remaking of the American Working Class* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); Arthur A. Sloane, *Hoffa* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991); Ralph C. James and Estelle Dinerstein James, *Hoffa and the Teamsters: A Study of Union Power* (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1965); James R. Hoffa, *The Trials of Jimmy Hoffa: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1970); Charles Brandt, *I Heard You Paint Houses: Frank “The Irishman” Sheeran and Closing the Case on Jimmy Hoffa* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 2004); Robert F. Kennedy, *The Enemy Within* (New York: Popular Library, 1960); and Dan La Botz, “The Tumultuous Teamsters of the 1970s,” in *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below in the Long 1970s*, eds. Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow (New York: Verso, 2010), 199–226.

Indeed, the fundamental reason for the perennial fascination with Jimmy Hoffa may be not so much his ties to the Mafia as his sheer power and success. No other industry was more critical to the nation's economy than trucking, and Hoffa did more than anyone to rationalize and stabilize conditions in this chaotic, competitive industry (a service for which employers were grateful). Bobby Kennedy may have exaggerated when he said Hoffa was the second most powerful man in the country, but he certainly did have a degree of power unimaginable for a union official in the twenty-first century. And that's what's so interesting about him: Hoffa symbolizes a political economy long gone, an era when a union leader could strike fear and loathing in the hearts of senators and presidents, when the old industrial working class, millions strong and capable of bringing the economy to its knees if it so desired, was still the foundation of the social order. Certain sectors of the working class were even defiantly independent of the corporate-liberal "consensus" of the Cold War establishment, having carved out their own self-policed political economy with the help of organized crime, informal deals, and a willingness to meet violence with violence. The Teamsters epitomized this independent working class, and Hoffa epitomized the Teamsters.

It was the *aesthetic*, so to speak, of the Teamsters and their form of unionism to which Bobby Kennedy and other "corporate liberals" objected (together with "socially responsible" unionists like Walter Reuther of the United Autoworkers). As historian Thaddeus Russell [argues](#), "the confrontation [between Kennedy and Hoffa] represented a cultural conflict between the rising, respectable professional class of the prosperous postwar years and the uncultured, unassimilated, and unruly industrial working class of the Depression." To have such an untamed and independent social force right at the heart of society—in the age of triumphant liberalism—was an embarrassment.

That working class is dead now. But in its heyday, it was one hell of a force to be reckoned with.

The Rise of Jimmy Hoffa

Years later, Hoffa formulated the moral philosophy he had imbibed from his early days in Indiana and Detroit:

Every day of the average individual is a matter of survival. If by chance he should go from home to work and have an accident, lose an arm or an eye, he's just like an animal wounded in the jungle. He's out. Life isn't easy. Life is a jungle... Ethics is a matter of individualism. What may be ethical to you may be unethical to someone else... But my ethics are very simple. Live and let live, and those who try to destroy you, make it your business to see that they don't and that they have problems.

It was in Detroit in the Depression years that Hoffa learned the law of the jungle. As a dockloader at Kroger's warehouse, Hoffa led a strike against the sadistic foreman, which resulted in a temporary agreement with the company that improved conditions and pay. When he was fired a couple of years later, in 1935, for dropping a crate of vegetables on the loading dock, he was

immediately hired by a Teamsters official to be an organizer (or “business agent”) with Local 299. He was only 21, but with his boundless energy and intelligence he proved effective.

Across much of the country, the IBT was beginning a sustained offensive in these years. In 1934 its members played a decisive role in two successful general strikes: one in San Francisco, where its members joined the longshoremen’s union to shut down the city, and one in Minneapolis, where the Trotskyists in charge of Local 574 led a strike that elicited shocking violence from the police and thugs hired by employers. The Teamsters’ almost total victory in this strike, leading to the unionization of thousands of “unskilled” workers, began its transformation from a small conservative craft organization to a national industrial union encompassing over two million members.

The more politically conservative Detroit Teamsters were, in their own way, just as militant as the Trotskyists in Minneapolis. To organize the increasingly numerous—and abysmally paid—intercity freight drivers, Local 299’s organizers favored a strategy much simpler than signing up workers and petitioning for elections that would be overseen by the newly established National Labor Relations Board. Instead, they approached an employer: “either enroll your workers with the union or we’ll bomb your trucks.” If he refused, they bombed his trucks. And sometimes his home. In a violent, lawless city, this strategy worked well. (They had likely learned it, in fact, from having their own cars bombed by “hired thugs.”) Combined with frequent strikes and strike threats, such intimidation resulted in an influx of new members into the local and steadily rising wages.

Hoffa and his several union colleagues didn’t limit themselves to organizing drivers; anyone who worked on a loading platform was fair game too. “We’d go out,” Hoffa later recalled, “hit the docks, talk to drivers, put up picket lines, conduct strikes, hold meetings day and night, convince people to join the union.” It was treacherous work: “My scalp was laid open sufficiently wide to require stitches no less than six times during the first year I was business agent of Local 299. I was beaten up by cops or strikebreakers at least two dozen times that year.” During one strike he was jailed eighteen times within a 24-hour period, since he kept returning to the picket line after being released. In these years he also had a list of arrests “that’s maybe as long as your arm” for fighting with strikebreakers, hired thugs, and members of rival unions who were trying to organize the same workers the Teamsters were.

In 1938 two developments occurred that would later facilitate Hoffa’s centralized control over the entire union. First, Dave Beck, an organizer from Seattle (who went on to become president of the IBT in 1952), formed the Western Conference of Teamsters, an administrative body covering the eleven western states and British Columbia. Such a higher-level body was necessary for coordinating organizing and bargaining in a fragmented industry that had thousands of small employers and hundreds of local Teamster unions. That very year, two thousand employers in the eleven states signed an agreement to bring higher wages to intercity (“over-the-road”) drivers.

Around the same time, Farrell Dobbs was achieving a similar ambition in the Midwest. One of the Trotskyists who had led the 1934 Minneapolis strike, Dobbs realized it was inefficient and mutually damaging for locals to separately negotiate different wage scales for their own over-the-road drivers. So he and his comrades, with the cooperation of the IBT leadership, created the

Central States Drivers Council (CSDC) to bargain for all unionized over-the-road drivers in the twelve Midwestern states. To force reluctant—and widely scattered—employers to come to the bargaining table, Dobbs gave them the kind of ultimatum that Hoffa used to great effect in later years: all firms with lines ending or beginning in Chicago (which meant most firms in the Midwest) would have to negotiate an areawide contract or face a devastating strike. They quickly complied, and over two weeks they and the CSDC hammered out the most ambitious and important contract the IBT had ever negotiated. Establishing uniform minimum wages, maximum hours, seniority rights, safety guarantees, a grievance committee, and a closed shop (all drivers had to belong to the Teamsters), the contract covered 125,000 workers at 1,700 companies.

Hoffa worked with Dobbs in this historic campaign, specifically as a leader of Dobbs' effort to organize those long-distance Midwestern drivers who hadn't yet been recruited into the union. Whatever qualms he felt about Dobbs' Trotskyism, Hoffa was profoundly impressed by the man's strategic and organizational genius. "I was studying at the knee of a master," he reminisced later.

He also learned from Dobbs the usefulness of the secondary boycott. Some employers in Omaha and Sioux City had refused to accept the CSDC contract and locked out their unionized employees. Dobbs and other Teamster leaders studied the companies' routes and decided that the best way to force them to capitulate was to threaten a strike against employers in Kansas City, who made shipments for the Omaha and Sioux City operators, unless they suspended their dealings with the latter. This would cut off the holdouts in Nebraska and effectively force them to sign the contract. The plan worked—and Hoffa was made vividly aware of the power of the secondary boycott, a tactic he would never be afraid to use. (After the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 made such boycotts illegal, Hoffa found a legal loophole and defiantly continued to use them.)

This tactic also inspired a broader strategy that helped the Teamsters organize industries contiguous to trucking, thus increasing the IBT's membership considerably. Any company that depended on Teamsters for deliveries and pickups could be compelled to unionize its employees simply by being refused service and thereby shut down. "Warehouses, canneries, laundries, retail stores, bakeries, and breweries fell to this tactic," one historian writes, "which Hoffa used to make the Detroit Teamsters and ultimately the entire IBT into a boundless, multi-industry union."

Hoffa's triumphant future might have been quite different if not for a fateful decision Farrell Dobbs made in 1939: he resigned from the Teamsters to devote all his time to the Socialist Workers Party. Daniel Tobin, head of the IBT, pleaded with him to reconsider, to drop his Trotskyist politics and continue working with the union, even promising him the first available vice-presidency. Which could have been a stepping-stone to the presidency. But it was to no avail: Dobbs resigned his union positions, including negotiating chairman of the powerful CSDC. This is what made possible Hoffa's rise to national prominence, as he wrote later in his autobiography:

I was chosen to replace Dobbs as negotiating chairman. I didn't realize, when I accepted the job, along with a vice-presidency [of the CSDC, not the IBT] the following year, that it was the post that would project me into the national limelight as far as the International Brotherhood was concerned, but that job really paved

the way to the General Presidency. As a rung in the ladder of my career, it provided a giant step upward.

Hoffa's star was rising on other fronts too. He had been de facto leader of Local 299 since 1936—overseeing its financial stabilization (after near-bankruptcy) and recruitment of several thousand new members—and was gradually becoming de facto leader of the Joint Council of all Detroit locals. In 1942 he was elected to the board of directors of the Wayne County Federation of Labor, but more importantly, he established the Michigan Conference of Teamsters to centralize in his hands bargaining for all locals in the state. Weaker locals regularly negotiated subpar contracts for their intracity members, which exerted downward pressure on wages across the state. With Hoffa negotiating a uniform statewide contract, the wages of thousands of workers were raised, and increasingly many members became familiar with him and intensely loyal to him.

But it was his achievements with the CSDC that ultimately made him wildly popular across the country. During World War II Hoffa's ambitions were confined within the straitjacket imposed by the National War Labor Board, but starting in 1945 he was able to negotiate contracts that contained wage increases as high as 20 percent or even 50 percent. He brought tens of thousands more drivers into the Midwestern agreement and established a Central States health and welfare program funded entirely by employer contributions. And he did what the CIO failed to do with its postwar Operation Dixie: he organized the South. Using the secondary boycott, it wasn't particularly challenging (at least in principle). He ordered warehousemen and dockworkers to boycott Southern trucking companies crossing into the Midwest unless they hired union members, which after a few years forced the large majority of Southern employers to sign with the union. And then, by the mid-1950s, he forced them to raise wages and improve working conditions to the level of the CSDC.

At the same time, the CSDC (renamed the Central States Conference) had undertaken two gargantuan projects: to negotiate uniform contracts for *local* workers—as opposed to over-the-road drivers—in the 22 states the Conference now covered, and to complete the unionization of all trucking companies in these states. By 1957, these goals were achieved.

Hoffa's meteoric rise in the IBT was cemented at the 1952 convention, when he was unanimously elected a vice-president of the union, the youngest ever (at 39). He quite possibly could have been elected president, but he preferred to engineer Dave Beck's election in return for Beck's promise not to interfere in his activities. Aside from the president, Hoffa was the most powerful union officer at the time, controlling the Southern and Central Conferences, and by the middle of Beck's brief reign (ending in 1957) he was certainly the dominant force in the entire IBT.

How did Hoffa rise so high so fast? Part of the answer, which will be explored below, is that he allied himself with a lot of useful people. But much of his success was due simply to his personality and intelligence. According to people who knew him, he had an “almost hypnotic” charisma, was a “master psychologist,” “the smartest guy I know,” “like an elephant with his memory—it's beyond belief,” and expert in the minutiae of labor law. In the 1960s he would often give talks at universities or business executive lunches, discoursing perceptively on the history of labor legislation or jousting with economists and lawyers, leaving initially hostile audiences so

impressed they would give him a standing ovation (as on one occasion at the Harvard Law School Forum). He was supremely confident and supremely competent.

In addition to all this, of course, he was infinitely ambitious.

He wanted the union to be millions strong. It's almost as if he shared the old IWW dream of One Big Union for the entire working class—even as he rejected the concept of social-movement unionism associated with both the political left and, in a diluted way, liberals like Walter Reuther. Just before Hoffa was elected president in 1957, he wrote a “policy statement” that included earmarking at least 25 percent of the IBT's income to organizing. This was at a time when the AFL-CIO, to which the Teamsters belonged, was (myopically) devoting about 5 percent of its revenue to organizing. A year later, even as the McClellan hearings—broadcast on televisions around the country—were making his name synonymous with corruption and criminality, Hoffa announced a plan to bring every policeman in the U.S. into the IBT. “It is a piece of unmitigated gall,” one political official responded, speaking for multitudes. Hoffa also planned to establish a “Conference on Transportation Unity,” under his leadership, that would bring together the IBT, the International Longshoremen's Association, the National Maritime Union, railroad brotherhoods, airline unions, in total more than fifty organizations in the transportation sector. Both of these projects had to be scuttled because of public opposition. But they indicate the scope of Hoffa's dreams, which the union continued to pursue by organizing everyone from egg farmers to airline flight attendants.

The other ingredient of Hoffa's personality that was crucial to his success was the one that also led to his downfall: his contempt for bourgeois respectability, bourgeois hypocrisy, and liberal pieties.

Hoffa vs. Kennedy

Jimmy Hoffa was a contradictory man, but one quality, at least, was foundational to his character: brutal realism. He saw the world in terms of power relations; he rejected all ideological illusions and mystifications (as he saw them), from communism to liberalism to his wife Josephine's Christianity. This is how he could both support Republican politicians and frequently sound like a Marxist. It was all in the name of realism, whatever was necessary to get ahead and help certain others get ahead.

His attitude towards the legal system was characteristic. As a couple of academic observers who knew him well [wrote](#), “To Hoffa law is not something to respect, but rather a set of principles designed to perpetuate those already in power, and something for others to ‘get around.’ Thus, Hoffa feels clear of conscience about his expertise in devising legal loopholes and practicing legal brinksmanship.” In effect, he thought the state was a capitalist state; therefore, he had little respect for the idealistic liberal corporatism of a Reuther or the Kennedy brothers. While he recognized the value and necessity of having a welfare state, at bottom he thought the working class had to take care of itself, do whatever was necessary to survive, and constantly fight against a hostile world.

His public statements at the time of the McClellan Committee reflected this perspective. “The working man is being shortchanged every day in America.” “Twenty years ago [i.e., in 1939] the employers had all the hoodlums working for them as strikebreakers. Now we’ve got a few, and everybody’s screaming.” Speaking to a television audience:

Now, when you talk about the question of hoodlums and gangsters, the first people that hire hoodlums and gangsters are employers. If there are any illegal forces in the community, he’ll use them, strong-arm and otherwise. And so if you’re going to stay in the business of organizing the unorganized, maintaining the union you have, then you better have a resistance.

In short, Hoffa was working-class through-and-through, the very symbol (at least to the public) of anti-establishmentarian defiance in a relatively conformist age, closer to the rank and file than probably any other major labor leader. “As he walks down the street,” one observer wrote in 1964, “he often halts passing trucks for a moment’s discussion with a couple of members. When away from Washington, D.C., he takes time out to tour the local trucking terminals, where he jokes, wrestles, and swears with the workers.” Nothing was more apt to provoke his legendary temper than an aspersion cast on the dignity of the truck driver’s occupation.

Hoffa’s connections to the criminal world dated back to the 1930s and were a natural product of operating in a violent, cutthroat environment. If Local 299 and others hadn’t made alliances with unsavory people, they likely would have been gobbled up by employers and/or rival unions. In the late 1930s, for instance, a jurisdictional war erupted between the Detroit Teamsters and the United Brewery Workers, both of which unions claimed the right to represent the city’s beer drivers. Vicious street battles broke out while higher-level administrative bodies and even federal courts tried to mediate the dispute. The Teamsters developed a network of allies from local saloons to the Michigan statehouse, including members of the East Side Sicilian Mob and other criminals. With their help, and by bribing or intimidating some bar owners into only accepting beer delivered by Teamsters, the latter managed to keep their foot in the brewery industry.

More broadly, David Witwer points out in [*Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union*](#) that the IBT had both been victimized by and benefited from criminal associations for decades, but especially starting in the 1930s. Chicago and New York were the great hubs of extra-legal activity. The sociologist Daniel Bell explained long ago why trucking was particularly susceptible to crime: “racketeers were able to enter only into small, unit-sized industries where chaotic competition prevailed,” meaning that “the greatest potential for racketeering is in the Teamsters union.”

It isn’t known for sure when the Detroit Teamsters first made really durable and extensive connections with organized crime. Some writers, such as [Dan Moldea](#), argue it was in the early 1940s, when Hoffa’s union was facing an existential threat from well-funded CIO unions that were raiding the (AFL-affiliated) IBT’s turf to steal its members. Supposedly Hoffa was compelled to turn to the Mob for manpower and political influence in his many battles against the CIO.

Thaddeus Russell, on the other hand, argues the decisive events weren’t until later in that decade, in connection with Hoffa’s attempts to control the local liquor industry (made up of

breweries, bars, groceries, liquor stores, and the state Liquor Control Commission) and to defend it from CIO incursions. By 1946 the Teamsters had organized nearly all of the industry's workers, except for those in a group of businesses owned by the Mafia. The president of the largest Mob-owned company, Bilvin Distributing Company, was William Bufalino, who was a close associate of (among others) Russell Bufalino, underboss of one of the most powerful crime families in the northeast. To break the resistance of the Detroit Mob to unionization, Hoffa hired William as president of Local 985, which covered jukebox workers. This created the first *institutional* alliance between the Detroit Teamsters and the Mafia, who now accepted unionization and in fact engaged in a violent campaign against scores of bar owners who didn't sign with the gangster-owned, Teamster-organized firms.

William Bufalino went on to become one of Hoffa's most important attorneys in his later legal battles. And these new (or not-so-new) connections to organized crime in Detroit facilitated IBT connections to Mob figures all over the country. In 1951, for example, Hoffa placed the Central States health and welfare fund with the Union Casualty Life Insurance Agency of Chicago, which was owned by Allen Dorfman. Allen was the son of Paul Dorfman, who was a useful ally to have in Chicago: he was friends with the city's political bosses, President Truman, leaders of the Chicago Federation of Labor, and AFL president George Meany. He was also connected to organized crime in both New York and Chicago.

In general, one of the key reasons for Hoffa's alliances with gangsters is one of the reasons politicians' later attacks on him tended to be hypocritical: the Mafia was politically influential (in addition to being inextricably intertwined with the "legitimate" business community). "The mobsters have always been wedded to the political system," one criminologist observed decades ago. "That's how they survive. Without that wedding, they'd be terrorists—and we'd get rid of them."² As Thomas Reppetto [has written](#), "in both politics and business [the Mafia] managed to link the underworld to the upper world," becoming immensely powerful in the process. In the 1940s and '50s, if businessmen, politicians, and corrupt law enforcement were all linked to organized crime, it would have been odd for an ambitious union leader operating in a viciously competitive environment not to reach out for protection and advantage to those same powerful "underworld" figures.

In an ABC News interview in the early 1970s Hoffa justified his relationships with alleged criminals and ex-convicts in terms that were, while self-serving, not wholly implausible: "these [organized crime figures] are the people you should know if you're going to avoid having anyone interfere with your strike. And that's what we know them for... Know who your potential enemies are and neutralize 'em." To another reporter he insisted, "I'm no different than the banks, no different than insurance companies, no different than the politicians. You're a damned fool not to be informed what makes a city run when you're tryin' to do business in the city." On the other hand, a majority of politicians could have justly pointed out they had no ties to the Mafia. Whether they had no ties to *any* corrupt individuals or businesses, or even themselves weren't morally and legally compromised in numerous ways, is another question entirely.

² Arthur Sloane uses this quotation in *Hoffa*, but he doesn't cite the source and I haven't been able to locate it.

Hoffa was certainly unusual, though, in his willingness to thumb his nose at propriety. Being convinced of the moral turpitude of the entire political-economic system, he saw no reason to take seriously the self-serving outrage—directed at unions (not corporations or politicians)—of its guardians. So he dug himself deeper, so to speak, even flaunting his relationships with notorious people. The Central and Southern States Pension Fund (CSPF), for example, which he browbeat employers into creating and funding in 1955, got him into trouble some years later. With millions of dollars flowing into it every month, retired union members received some of the most generous pensions in the country. (Teamsters were also, by now, receiving some of the most generous wages: there were stories of professors at elite universities quitting their jobs to become long-distance truck drivers because they could double their pay.) But all this money, hundreds of millions of dollars, had to be invested, and Hoffa was in charge of the investment decisions, as he was in charge of almost everything. The Fund gave out countless loans to a bewildering variety of people and institutions, but some were given to mobsters such as Russell Bufalino, Carlos Marcello, Santo Trafficante, Johnny Dioguardi, and Morris Dalitz, one of the Mafia figures who used CSPF money to build Las Vegas casinos. While these loans may have been legal, in the context of the McClellan hearings they were provocative.

Meanwhile, since at least the 1940s Hoffa had found it expedient to bribe public officials, including in law-enforcement and regulatory agencies, prosecutors' offices, and state legislatures. "Every man has his price," he was wont to say. No doubt he thought bribery, a well-established practice among businesses and (less so) unions through the entire industrial age (up to at least the 1960s), was necessary to secure the cooperation of typically anti-labor governments. But its widespread practice by unions contributed to the stench of corruption that had, in the public mind, settled on organized labor by the early 1950s.

The history of the public revulsion against ostensibly corrupt "Big Labor," crystallized in the award-winning 1954 film *On the Waterfront*, is too well known to need retelling here. Grand jury investigations, congressional hearings as early as Senator Estes Kefauver's Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce in 1950–51, and negative media coverage hounded some of the nation's largest unions for years. This was the era, after all, when big business was conducting a colossal political, legal, and public-relations campaign to beat back the left-liberalism spawned by the popular movements of the 1930s. As Elizabeth Fones-Wolf argues in [*Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60*](#), there was a "unity of purpose within much of the business community on...the necessity of halting the advance of the welfare state and of undermining the legitimacy and power of organized labor." The more that unions could be tarred and feathered for connections to organized crime (as if business itself lacked such connections, or were selflessly devoted to the common weal and knew nothing of legal infractions!), the better it would be for the corporate offensive against labor.

Needless to say, the personal motive of self-designated crusaders against organized crime and union corruption was not necessarily to do the bidding of big business. Bobby Kennedy, for instance, who emerged as the most ferocious enemy of both the Mafia and Jimmy Hoffa, was a highly religious man who seems to have considered it his Catholic duty to cleanse organized labor of racketeers. Unions, he thought, should be sacred institutions, a movement of the oppressed—hence his embrace of Cesar Chavez in the 1960s. According to Arthur Schlesinger, this millionaire son of a successful businessman, brother of a senator and president, "came to identify himself with

workers who were expelled, beaten, murdered.” The point, however, is that whatever Bobby’s motives were, his long obsession with crushing Hoffa and other despised union officials fit neatly into the political agenda that had been set by business. This fact, doubtless, is why he was given all the resources he needed to pursue his obsession.

In retrospect, the Kennedy–Hoffa war from 1957 to 1964 has symbolic, sociological significance. It was a clash of two opposite types, two personifications of diametrically opposed philosophies and social strata. On one side was the liberal “do-gooder,” the idealist, the educated, elite professional who thinks society should be run by idealistic educated professionals who are noble and objective enough to have the public interest at heart. He may be inclined to think in terms of moral absolutes—“as Mr. Hoffa operates it,” Bobby wrote, “[the Teamsters union] is a conspiracy of evil”—and is certain he is on the side of Good. This idealist is motivated by whatever lofty ideas he chooses, but his actual role in the political economy is typically to be a smooth-talking technocrat who enforces the rule of the capitalist class. Objectively, so to speak, he is on the side of business.

On the other side is the working-class materialist, the realist, the person whose training in the art of survival has taught him that what matters above all is the struggle for resources. He may share Hoffa’s lack of interest in broad social reform, as well as his belief that a union is in essence just a business to sell its members’ labor at the highest price. He may, therefore, somewhat accommodate himself to society as it is. But the reality of this person’s existence is a kind of class struggle, a struggle to wrest what he can however he can. Doubtless the liberal professional finds him—and his class—vulgar, uneducated, crassly materialistic, and potentially threatening. As Kennedy found Hoffa. But the working-class realist doesn’t have the luxury (nor the liberal hypocrisy) to sneer at “materialism.”

These two types tend to loathe each other.

Incidentally, there is an irony here: in some respects, Hoffa had a “purer” character than Kennedy. He never drank or smoked—didn’t even want people to drink in his presence—and would never have dreamed of cheating on his beloved wife, contrary to the perennially philandering Kennedy brothers (whose sexual addictions, including White House orgies, revolted him). At a San Francisco nightclub once, he was so embarrassed by a stripper’s performance he turned his chair away so as not to see her. While he cursed incessantly—except around his family, where he was the paragon of a doting, gentle father and husband—he hated off-color jokes. Far from using the union as a means to enrich himself, Hoffa lived modestly, rarely even upgrading his (somewhat shabby) wardrobe, and constantly gave away large sums of money to anyone who asked for it. “He was probably the most generous, open-handed guy I’ve ever met,” an associate recalled, being a “sucker for any sad song or hard-luck guy.”

As for the Kennedys, their aversion to the Mafia didn’t prevent them from hiring its members to kill Fidel Castro, as part of the secret terrorist program called Operation Mongoose. Seymour Hersh even [reports](#) in *The Dark Side of Camelot* that the Mafia, rather stupidly, got John F. Kennedy elected president by manipulating the vote in Illinois. Their reward was that Attorney General Bobby Kennedy devoted unprecedented resources to destroying them.

In effect, what Kennedy and his fellow liberals who administered the Cold War corporatist state wanted was a fully assimilated, “civilized,” obedient population that wouldn’t have any shadowy groups opaque to the state. Communists were illegitimate and had to be persecuted, as they were from the late 1940s on; unions that forged their own way, not consenting to political assimilation, were also illegitimate. Hoffa’s Teamsters, the most powerful union of all and the most “independent”—it even supported Republicans!—was first on the list of offenders.

Dave Beck, sybarite extraordinaire, was the first big fish to be caught in the net cast by Senator McClellan’s Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor and Management Field. But right around the same time he was exposed as corrupt, in early 1957, Hoffa was caught allegedly bribing a lawyer involved with Bobby Kennedy’s investigation. And then began Hoffa’s streak of good luck: to Kennedy’s shock, a jury found him not guilty. So later that year he went on to be overwhelmingly elected General President of the IBT. Kennedy was certain the election had been rigged, and publicly said so; it turned out he was wrong. Hoffa was incredibly popular with the members, and grew more so the more he was vilified in the press. “When the government came after him,” a union member said years later, “a lot of us wanted to take our trucks and run ’em over certain people... Everyone I knew thought Hoffa was a great man.”

His election did result in the Teamsters being expelled from the AFL-CIO. But legally his troubles were overcome one after the other, infuriating Bobby, “the only member of our family who doesn’t forgive,” his father said. A trial on Hoffa’s alleged wiretapping of union offices ended in acquittal. An indictment for perjury before the McClellan Committee had to be dropped when the Supreme Court ruled that wiretap evidence obtained by state officials couldn’t be used in federal court. Over three years, the committee subpoenaed hundreds of Teamster officials and mobsters, filled fifty-odd volumes with witness testimony, interrogated Hoffa many times, charged him with more than eighty improper activities, but in the end, remarkably, proved nothing (as regards Hoffa, that is—other targets weren’t so lucky). Organized labor’s national reputation had been damaged, but legally, Hoffa had weathered the greatest congressional onslaught against a single individual in history.

The committee’s activities did stimulate the passage, in 1959, of the Landrum-Griffin Act, officially known as the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act. Consistent with the committee’s almost exclusive focus on union corruption and blithe disregard of management corruption, this act largely ignored management and instead regulated the internal affairs of unions. For instance, people convicted of robbery, bribery, extortion, aggravated assault, or embezzlement were barred from holding a union office for five years after conviction. The act also outlawed the principal means by which Hoffa had built the Teamsters since the 1930s: picketing to force employers to recognize a union; certain forms of secondary boycotting that the Taft-Hartley Act had left legal; and “hot cargo” arrangements whereby employers would agree not to deal with another employer involved in a labor dispute. This law thus revealed what, on the broadest scale, was really at stake in the McClellan hearings, namely the business class’s desire to control, hobble, and discredit unions.³

³ During the hearings, for example, the National Association of Manufacturers and the United States Chamber of Commerce “initiated a ferocious anti-union drive,” Thaddeus Russell writes, “and used as one of its selling points the issue of union corruption.” See David Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), chapter nine.

The Teamsters membership seemed to understand this fact, judging by delegates' behavior at the IBT convention in 1961. Russell describes Hoffa's reception:

On the day the convention opened, an airplane trailing a banner with the message "Re-Elect Hoffa" circled overhead as more than 2,000 delegates, nearly all wearing Hoffa hats and saucer-sized buttons, flooded into the Deauville Hotel in Miami Beach. After Hoffa was nominated by John English, who called the incumbent "the man with the most guts in America," the delegates responded with a fifteen-minute ovation and a continuous chant of "Hoffa, Hoffa, Hoffa." ... The delegates then mocked the government's attempts to impose Spartan living on their leaders by passing with roaring unanimity a resolution raising Hoffa's salary to \$75,000—the highest of any American union official at the time...

As for Bobby Kennedy, he "had long been the target of the members' insults as a 'pantywaist' and 'hatchet man' bent on taking away the comforts they had gained from the union." Except for some dissidents scattered around the country, Hoffa acquired nearly mythic status among members as he continued to grow the union and systematically raise wages in the 1960s, even as he was facing his greatest legal threats yet.

Bobby hadn't forgiven him for escaping his clutches earlier, so as soon as he became Attorney General in 1961 he formed the Get Hoffa Squad (as it was known), consisting of sixteen attorneys and thirty FBI agents. By any means necessary, including methods of questionable legality (such as wiretapping, bugging, and planting spies), they were going to destroy their target. They empaneled fifteen grand juries to investigate Hoffa. In 1962 he went on trial in Nashville, Tennessee for accepting payments from an employer in violation of the Taft-Hartley Act. The government meticulously prepared its case, and yet, once again, Hoffa bested Kennedy: the trial resulted in a hung jury.

Six months later, however, he was indicted yet again, this time for jury-tampering in the Nashville case. The Justice Department had uncovered evidence that he had attempted to buy some of the jurors' votes. The trial took place in early 1964, and this time, at last, Bobby got his revenge: Hoffa was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in prison. But just a few weeks later he went to trial once more, on charges of defrauding the CSPF in an alleged scheme that was so complex and technical it took him some time even to understand what he was being charged with. In this case, too, he was convicted, on one count of conspiracy and three counts of mail and wire fraud. His sentence was five years in prison, to run consecutively after the other eight years. Five days after the verdict, his great obsession finally consummated, Kennedy resigned as Attorney General to run for the Senate.

Thus, the Cold War state had won a major battle against a union that had stepped out of line and gotten too powerful for its own good. "The International Brotherhood of Teamsters," Senator McClellan had written in 1962 for the *Reader's Digest*, "is now powerful enough by itself to put a stranglehold on our nation's economy... If they called a nationwide strike, you could not get ambulances to take sick people to the hospital, nor hearses to carry the dead. Farmers could not get produce to urban areas; food manufacturers could not send in canned goods..." McClellan

exaggerated Hoffa's power, but his fear was shared by many people and did reflect, however hyperbolically, the very real power of the IBT. Corruption and outright lawlessness existed all over society, not least within the federal government itself.⁴ It is hardly a coincidence that officials empowered to hunt down corruption attacked, first and foremost, the largest union in the country.

Indeed, in the very year that Hoffa was convicted, the IBT was attaining new heights of power. In January of 1964, Hoffa achieved the dream both he and his mentor Farrell Dobbs had cherished since the 1930s: a National Master Freight Agreement that covered hundreds of thousands of intercity and local truck drivers. It wasn't entirely complete, not being wholly uniform and not covering all the trucking-relevant occupations of the IBT membership. But it was a magnificent achievement nonetheless, 25 years in the making.

In the years when Bobby Kennedy and his colleagues were almost single-mindedly focused on, in effect, disciplining and defaming organized labor (however they personally interpreted their actions), Hoffa was patiently laying the foundations for realizing his dream. Year by year he was consolidating his power over the two regions he didn't yet control, the East and West. Bargaining was highly fragmented in the East, wage diversity prevailing everywhere. Both employers and local union leaders, fearful, as Hoffa said, that "they would no longer be kings of their individual little isolated area," resisted standardization. But through threats and cajolery, strikes and other kinds of leverage, Hoffa gradually imposed uniformity on West Virginia and Pittsburgh, upper New York state and New England, then Philadelphia, Delaware, and southern New Jersey, finally the troublesome New York–New Jersey metropolitan area. All these places saw conditions begin to approximate the privileged Central States area for which Hoffa had long been bargaining.

It was a similar story in the West, although in a sense his task was easier there because bargaining was less fragmented. By 1961 he had achieved near-uniformity, in the process greatly raising wages in some areas, including Los Angeles.

Having engineered a common expiration for contracts from coast to coast in 1964, Hoffa was able to bargain with employers across the country at the same time. The 47-page contract, "the most complicated one ever worked out between a union and employers" (in Hoffa's opinion), covered 450,000 drivers. For most, the generous fringe benefits and across-the-board increases of 28 cents per hour over three years and three-quarters of a cent per mile were a significant improvement over their previous contracts. In just a few decades, then, the trucking industry had gone from being completely decentralized, low-paying, and characterized by utterly inhumane working conditions to being highly centralized, high-paying, and relatively humane.

For the next couple of years Hoffa worked towards achieving the same goal of relative uniformity for other occupations in his union, such as warehousemen. But by early 1967 his appeals of his convictions had run out, and it was time for him to report to federal prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. "The last couple of weeks before he went to jail were hellish," said a staffer who was with him during this time. "He was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He would lie on the floor and yell, 'I'm not gonna go!'" But in early March, he went.

⁴ For examples, see William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2004).

The End

It's easy to imagine that for a man with the energy of Jimmy Hoffa, prison would not be easy. In fact, one of his favorite expressions became "Prison is hell on earth, only hell couldn't be this bad." When he was released, after 58 months in an overcrowded, rape-plagued, drug-infested, violent penitentiary, his description of the experience didn't mince words: "I can tell you this on a stack of Bibles: prisons are archaic, brutal, unregenerative, overcrowded hell holes where the inmates are treated like animals with absolutely not one humane thought given to what they are going to do once they are released. You're an animal in a cage and you're treated like one."

During his confinement he constantly suffered little indignities, such as having his anus inspected for drugs after returning from the visiting room, having to wear shoes and pants that didn't fit, and getting nosebleeds from his job assignment of unstuffing and restuffing old mattresses forty hours a week.

But even in prison, the labor leader found opportunities to organize. He became quite popular with the prisoners, for whom he formed and headed a committee that brought grievances to the attention of the warden. Since officially he remained president of the IBT until just before he was released, he was able to find jobs for many parolees, as well as sending money every year to his former Teamster assistants so they could buy Christmas cards for the families of his fellow prisoners. Guards and prisoners of all racial, religious, and educational backgrounds were, by all accounts, very fond of him.

Meanwhile, his power in the IBT was waning. He had appointed the rather dull but loyal Frank Fitzsimmons as acting president in the belief that he would willingly step aside when Hoffa was released (hopefully early, on parole). But Fitzsimmons gradually began to show signs of developing an independent identity and wanting to remain in power. Not that his leadership was beneficial for the union. He was too weak to impose his will on the vast bureaucracy, so he restored decentralization to local and regional officials. Since this allowed them to build their own structures of power—not always to the benefit of the rank and file—they found Fitzsimmons' presidency quite congenial to their taste. They also began to increase their involvement with the Mafia, which, in addition, was finding it easier to get loans from the pension fund than under Hoffa.

In contract negotiations Fitzsimmons had skills, but they weren't on the level of Hoffa's. The renewals of the National Master Freight Agreement (NMFA) in 1967 and 1970 disappointed thousands of workers, who went on strike in cities across the country. Considerable violence broke out as governors mobilized the National Guard, employers sent hired goons to attack pickets, and the union sent its own officials for the same purpose. Employers were finding it easier to coordinate resistance to employee demands, in part because the NMFA had, ironically, forced unity on them, but also because the IBT's leadership was increasingly ineffectual and corrupt. Wage growth slowed at the very moment when inflation was rising (as it continued to do through the 1970s). By the early '70s, rebel rank-and-file groups were springing up in almost every major city.

In fairness to the Fitzsimmons regime, in the long run even Hoffa could hardly have been up to the challenges. The political economy that had allowed a Hoffa to seize the reins and dominate an entire industry was already coming to an end. Facilitated by technological change, employers were embarking on a productivity push that threatened Teamsters' traditions of workplace control, as Dan La Botz argues. More companies were using pallets and forklifts; truck trailer lengths were growing longer; radio dispatch increasingly directed drivers; mechanized systems of conveyor belts distributed packages. The organization of work was changing. Teamsters "worked harder and under worse conditions as new equipment and new management techniques eliminated jobs while forcing those still employed to pick up the slack."

Hoffa had foreseen the inevitability of technological change and done what he could to ease the transition for suffering workers, forcing employers, e.g., to pay for new job training and the costs of workers' relocation. But just as he left the picture, change was accelerating. His departure from the scene, however adventitious, was symbolic.

As economic and political crisis gripped the country in the 1970s, the transition to a neoliberal economy began. Neither strike waves in industry after industry nor the formation of union reform movements such as the important Teamsters for a Democratic Union (founded in 1976) could prevent the economic transition, though they could, at least, discipline and even eliminate corrupt leadership that was often in league with employers. With profit-rates under attack from heightened international competition, the overriding business agenda to cut costs, no matter the consequences for workers and communities, soon became the national political agenda. Industries began to be deregulated, a trend that has continued, with interruptions, up to the present. Trucking was deregulated when Jimmy Carter signed the Motor Carrier Act in 1980. Dan La Botz summarizes the consequences:

As intended, new non-union trucking firms swarmed into the industry, union firms went bankrupt en masse, and a series of buyouts and mergers pushed the industry toward oligopoly. Part and parcel of the same processes, the IBT lost tens and eventually hundreds of thousands of unionized truck drivers and dockworkers, and within a decade the Teamsters Union had been obliged to cede its long-standing position as the dominant force in American over-the-road truck operations. Since the freight industry had been the heart of the union and freight workers the most political and active union members, the cost to the union as a fighting organization went far beyond mere numbers...

The stage was set for the Reagan years, so disastrous to the labor movement.

Hoffa was released from prison late in 1971, but Nixon had imposed a restriction on his parole, probably at the request of Fitzsimmons: he couldn't engage in union activity until 1980. He hadn't known about the restriction when agreeing to be released, and was quite bitter when a reporter told him of it. "Jimmy, do you want to be president of the Teamsters again?" he was asked. "Jack, do you like to breathe?" Hoffa replied. But, not wanting to violate the terms of his parole, for a couple of years he laid low and gave the impression of accepting the terms of his freedom.

Instead, he pursued a new passion: prison reform. He went on television shows, talked to journalists, testified before Congress, gave speeches, and did whatever he could on behalf of a new organization called the National Association for Justice, dedicated to reforming prisons. Using his negotiating skills, he was instrumental in averting several prison riots and improving conditions in an Ohio penitentiary. Meanwhile, he was deluged with letters and physical greetings from well-wishers, thousands of drivers who treated him “like the Messiah,” according to one observer. All this can only have whetted his appetite to return to power.

Which opens the curtain on the final act of his life: his legal battle to get Nixon’s parole restriction overturned, together with his public campaign to take back the presidency into which Fitzsimmons had been elected at the 1971 IBT convention (while Hoffa was still in prison). Ever the fighter, reckless to a fault, in 1974 Hoffa began publicly attacking both Fitzsimmons and the Mafia. The terms in which he did so certainly opened him to the charge of hypocrisy: he accused Fitzsimmons of “selling out to mobsters and letting known racketeers into the Teamsters.” “I charge him with permitting underworld establishment of a union insurance scheme,” he declared. “There will be more and more developments as time goes on and I get my hands on additional information.” Such statements could hardly have pleased his Mob associates.

Nor did these associates want a change of administration in any case. The union was more corrupt than ever, and they were perfectly fine with that. It was starting to look like Hoffa intended to kick them out of the union’s affairs, to clean things up and get revenge on everyone he thought had betrayed him. “I’m going to take care of the people who’ve been fucking me,” he told Russell Bufalino, according to Frank Sheeran. “Everybody wants Hoffa to back down. They’re all afraid of what I know.”

And so, in the end, Hoffa was done in by one of the deepest traits of his character: reckless defiance. His union career had ended because of his defiance of the law—the law of a government he didn’t respect—and now his life ended because of his defiance of the Mafia. On July 30, 1975 he stood waiting in a restaurant parking lot just outside Detroit. A car pulled up; inside were his foster son Charles O’Brien, his hitman friend Frank Sheeran, and Salvatore Briguglio, an associate of the vicious mobster Anthony Provenzano. The friendly faces of O’Brien and Sheeran reassured him, so he got into the car, which O’Brien—not knowing what was in store—drove to a small suburban house nearby. The meeting to “make peace” was, as far as Hoffa knew, to take place in this house. Hoffa and Sheeran got out and walked up to it as the car drove away. Once inside, Sheeran put two bullets in the back of Hoffa’s head, after which two men waiting in the house brought the body to a local Mob-connected funeral parlor, where it was cremated.

At least, that’s how Frank Sheeran tells the story. And a lot of knowledgeable people (Arthur Sloane, Joe Pistone, Bryan Burrough, William D’Elia, and others) find it credible.

So, in such an anticlimactic way did the remarkable life of a remarkable person come to an end, a life lived at the very center of the most dramatic events of the age.

Hoffa’s disappearance did have one positive result: it jolted the federal government into systematic action against organized crime, action not just in the context of a battle against a single individual and his unacceptably powerful union but as the beginning of a decades-long war of

attrition. In the following years, the FBI hunted down the men it knew were involved in the murder and imprisoned them all on one charge or another (except for those who were themselves killed). The Mafia continued to infest the Teamsters until the late 1980s and even 1990s, but federal prosecution, assisted by Teamsters for a Democratic Union and a reformist president in the 1990s (Ron Carey), finally succeeded in almost completely ridding the IBT of its ancient ties to racketeers. Today, the Teamsters isn't the awe-inspiring force it used to be, but it is still one of the largest unions in the United States, with 1.4 million members.

As for its greatest leader, Jimmy Hoffa, he'll always be something of an enigma. On the one hand, he was no saint, nor was he a hero. He sometimes acted in amoral, brutal ways. While his biographer Arthur Sloane is right that the more lurid accusations (that he ordered murders, for instance, or even the assassination of JFK) have never been proven, and also that he was more independent of the Mafia than is generally supposed, Hoffa was not the kind of man or labor leader who should be copied in every particular. What he was was a concentrated, brilliant reflection of his environment, differing from other ruthless power players of his age and ours chiefly in that the side he chose was that of the working class, not the business class. He helped create the postwar middle class, in the process becoming arguably the most popular and the most reviled labor leader in U.S. history.

But perhaps his greatest legacy can be summed up in the inscription on a plaque he displayed on his desk: *Illegitimi non carborundum*. Don't let the bastards grind you down.