

1/8/93
USA
Today

Movie magic muffs Hoffa and Kennedy

Hoffa is hot at theaters. But the moviemakers' make-believe misses the genuine Jimmy Hoffa. And the bona fide Bobby Kennedy.

I knew them both. Both played life's game to win. Hoffa often broke rules (or laws) to get results. Kennedy didn't break laws, but he bent them. Or rewrote them.

Hoffa was not the hero Jack Nicholson narrates in the movie. But he was heroic in what he won for his Teamsters. Kennedy was not just the whiny, vindictive rich kid the

movie portrays. He capitalized on those characteristics, generally for good.

Hoffa often crossed legal, moral or ethical lines. Kennedy didn't, but he sometimes wedged his way to the edge.

In 1962, when Hoffa ran the Teamsters in Detroit, I was a 38-year-old executive at the *Detroit Free Press*. He was a tough 47. His Teamsters struck the paper. We finally agreed to mediate the 29-day strike.

Hoffa won most of the points. Getting ready to publish again, we prepared a story listing the wage of each Teamster. Hoffa called me in a rage.

"You print that story, and you've had it. You let the wives of my men know how much money they're making, and I'll get your ass."

The story ran. He didn't get me. Somebody got him first. But Hoffa telegraphed how he took care of his men. Made possible their drinking and gambling and girlfriends, without wives missing any money.

I met Bobby Kennedy when he carpetbagged his way into the U.S. Senate race in New York in 1964. I was a 40-year-old executive of the Rochester newspapers. He was an ambitious 38-year-old from Massachusetts.

He took on our hometown boy, incumbent U.S. Sen. Ken Keating. Kennedy wooed us for support. And with not-so-thinly veiled threats of what might happen to upstate New York if he won without our help.

Kennedy beat Keating handily after a brilliant but brutal campaign. That was his launch pad for the presidency.

In short, the ledger on the two legendary leaders:
▶ Hoffa was a bad S.O.B., albeit he often helped his gang.
▶ Kennedy was a lovable S.O.B., who often end-ran or overran his enemy.

Long live their memories. Without movie mystique muffing them.

FEEDBACK

Other views on Hoffa and Kennedy

"Al, a lovable son of a gun, ought to know."
— Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy II, son of Robert F. Kennedy

"My father was a lot greater than the movie. He was not the foul-mouthed, monosyllabic type of person portrayed. His legacy was that all Teamsters now live better because of him. He established pension funds for them and made it possible for their kids to go to college. The members loved him."
— James P. Hoffa Jr., attorney

"Bobby Kennedy and Jimmy Hoffa got along so poorly because they were very similar guys. Both were charismatic, ruthless, feisty and had monumental tempers. Kennedy saw in Hoffa his own worst qualities. The movie falsely showed Hoffa as a one-dimensional person."
— Arthur Sloans, author of Hoffa



AL NEUHARTH
USA TODAY FOUNDER