

USA TODAY asked John Seigenthaler, administrative assistant to then-attorney general Robert Kennedy and former editorial director of USA TODAY, for his views on the movie 'Hoffa' and the real-life Teamster boss.

'Hoffa' a poor imitation

The movie 'does not scrape the surface of his crud-encrusted character,' says John Seigenthaler, or 'probe the depths of his vicious and violent nature.'

Oh, the magic of movies: E.T. calls home; Dr. Jekyll becomes Mr. Hyde; Rocky plays Rambo; Darth Vader turns out to be Luke Skywalker's daddy; and Jimmy Hoffa is a hero.

Art, says Seneca, imitates life. *Hoffa*, the movie starring Jack Nicholson, as art is a poor imitation of the life of a union leader who was as corrupt as the pus in a ripe boil. Corruption for Hoffa was a contagion. He surrounded himself with rich mobsters and cheap thugs as corrupt as he. Worse, he corrupted others who were enticed by his unbridled power or entranced by his rough-hewn charisma.

Wait, you say. You've seen the movie. It doesn't hype Hoffa as a candidate for sainthood. True.

And Jack Nicholson's portrayal is startling and stunning. You see him and you know how Jimmy Hoffa looked, how he talked, how he acted: the booming voice intonations and inflections; the stride that mixed strut and swagger; the demeanor of arrogance and angst.

But how Hoffa looked, talked and acted does not begin to tell you how he was, and the screenplay does not scrape the surface of his crud-encrusted character. Nor does it probe the depths of his vicious and violent nature. It fraudulently leaves the impression that Hoffa's life was committed to raising the standards of the working members of his union.

Yes, Hoffa negotiated contracts that raised the wages of union members. That's what he was paid to do. So did his predecessor, Dave Beck — who, like Hoffa, went to prison. So did Jackie Presser, who was a Hoffa successor and also a crook.

Obviously, I do not write as an ob-

jective critic of James Riddle Hoffa. I confess bias based on years of close observation of him as a reporter in the late '50s. I exposed his activities and covered the Senate committee that documented his misconduct. As an assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy in the early 1960s, I observed several grand juries amass a mountain of evidence of his criminality. Later, as a Tennessee editor, I watched as he sought to bribe two juries trying him. In the process, he wrecked the career of a bright young lawyer who, imprisoned, disbarred and disgraced, took his own life.

It is my judgment that the documentary of Hoffa directed by Danny DeVito is demonstrably flawed. The most graphic example is to be found in DeVito's role as a Hoffa associate named Bobby Ciaro. The character is key to the film. Bobby Ciaro is invented. He never existed in real life.

Viewers come away from *Hoffa* with two basic impressions: that he was dedicated to improving the plight of rank-and-file Teamsters and that Robert Kennedy, as counsel of a Senate committee, waged a one-man vendetta against Hoffa to elect John Kennedy president.

The film ignores:

► That many national leaders with no interest in John Kennedy's presidential ambition shared Robert Kennedy's view that Hoffa belonged in prison, not in the union's presidency. They included officials of the Eisenhower administration, leaders of the AFL/CIO who kicked Hoffa and the Teamsters out of their organization, and members of Congress, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives.

► That the Eisenhower Justice Department prosecuted Hoffa three times, alleging felonies in New York, Michigan and Washington, D.C.

► That William Rogers, the Eisenhower attorney general, failing to convict in those cases, indicted Hoffa again in a Florida land scam.

► That Robert Kennedy, upon becoming attorney general, dismissed



By John Seigenthaler, chairman of Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University.

of life

The real Jimmy Hoffa

THE MAN: Jimmy Hoffa was born on Feb. 14, 1913, in Brazil, Ind. His father was a coal miner. He had two sisters and a brother. Hoffa headed the Teamsters from 1957 to 1971.

THE PROBES: In January 1957, Sen. John McClellan, at Robert Kennedy's urging, formed the Select Committee on Improper Activities. Kennedy was chief counsel and wanted the committee to look at Hoffa, labor racketeering and mob infiltration of the Teamsters. In February, Hoffa and Bobby Kennedy met privately for first time. Their first impressions of each other, according to *The Kennedys: An American Drama* by Peter Collier and David Horowitz:

Kennedy on Hoffa: "When a grown man sat for an evening and talked continuously about his toughness, I could only conclude he was a bully hiding behind a facade."

Hoffa on Kennedy: "[Bobby] was a man who always made a big thing out of how strong and tough he was, how he had been a football player or something at Harvard."

THE QUOTES: Jimmy Hoffa on difficulties of recruiting union members in '30s from autobiography *The Trials of Jimmy Hoffa*: "We were hated and resisted by management, shadowed, hounded, and dispersed by the police, and viewed with suspicion as some variety of shakedown artists or confidence men by those we sought to bring into the fold. . . . Once we got the men lined up on our side, the real trouble would start. Managements didn't want us around . . . and the police, recognizing who the big taxpayers were and responding to orders of politicians who knew quite well where the big contributions came from, seemed not only willing but anxious to shove us around."

Clark Mollenhoff, then-Washington editor of *The Des Moines Register*, in his book *Tentacles of Power: The Story of Jimmy Hoffa*: Hoffa is the head of a "hoodlum empire," a man who "ruthlessly crushed small truckers, then pressured them to sell out to his wife . . . or his union associates," who "ousted honest members of the Teamsters union from office . . . and restored corrupt officials" and "who knew how to buy or coerce politicians and . . . had nothing but contempt for them."

THE LAW: In 1960, Kennedy became U.S. attorney general and stepped up his pursuit of Hoffa. In 1967, Hoffa lost control of the union when he was imprisoned for jury tampering and later for fraud and conspiracy in handling union funds. His sentence was commuted by President Richard Nixon in 1971.

THE MYSTERY: Hoffa vanished after leaving a restaurant near Detroit on July 30, 1975. His body has never been recovered.

Was Hoffa a hero to workers . . .



Twentieth Century Fox

IN THE MOVIE: Jack Nicholson portrays Hoffa as a man dedicated to 'raising the standards of members of his union.'

. . . or someone who sold them out?



LUPI file photo

IN REAL LIFE: Robert Kennedy believed Hoffa, at right with lawyer, was corrupt and 'belonged in prison,' not in the union presidency.

the Florida prosecution, deciding instead to seek indictments in Illinois and Tennessee, where separate juries convicted him.

► That all the cases by both administrations involved charges that

Hoffa sold out his union members, conspired with racketeers to rip off their pension fund and sought to bribe public officials and jurors.

Hoffa a hero? That's movie magic. Black magic.