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Crusading Against Hoffa

By A. H. RASKIN

THE FALL AND RISE OF JIMMY HOFFA. By Walter Sheridan. 554 pages. Saturday Review Press. \$10.95.

Every man, and particularly every politician, can be bought. That creed helped carry a tough little kid named James Riddle Hoffa from the loading dock of a Detroit grocery warehouse to the presidency of the country's biggest and strongest union. It also carried him to a long term in jail for jury fixing and pension fraud, a Presidential commutation after the parole board had turned him down for the third time and now a prospective battle for dominance against the caretaker he left to warm his white leather throne in the palatial headquarters of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters at the foot of Capitol Hill.

A depressingly large measure of support for Hoffa's bleak view of conventional morality is provided in this chilling book by the head of the "get Hoffa" squad that pursued him with obsessive intensity through the Attorney Generalship of Robert F. Kennedy. For Walter Sheridan that pursuit turned into an all-consuming life mission, one in which this former special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Security Agency has cast himself in the role of avenging angel determined to stamp out the sleazy alliance between big-time mobsters and the men of power in government, from the cop on the beat to the makers and shakers in Congress and the White House. After 15 years of the chase, his own verdict on the society is as dreary as Hoffa's own: "The coffers of the corrupters continue to grow and the victims increase in numbers and in their feeling of hopelessness."

Conspiratorial Web Seen

By way of evidence Mr. Sheridan throws into his rogue's gallery the names of dozens of bigwigs, Democrats and Republicans alike, who sprang into action at all the most convenient times to get Hoffa off the hook and to defame his detractors if they could not be flagged down through bribes or strong-arm tactics. Musclemen, dope peddlers, shakedown artists, prostitutes, Mafia godfathers and hoodlums of every description are tucked in with Senators, Governors, Presidential aides and multimillionaire industrialists—all partners in the conspiratorial web Mr. Sheridan sees protecting the hard-fisted teamster boss, the man whose defiant boast always has been: "No one abuses Hoffa; Hoffa can take care of himself."

Mr. Sheridan's writing style is a compound of meat-ax and vacuum cleaner. He ticks off horror stories with such machine-gun rapidity and so little attempt at differentiation that the whole lurid account begins to have the dullness of a ledger cataloging hog carcasses or metal castings. Worse still, his addiction to the police-blotter form of rigid chronology jumbles

For all that, the Sheridan account affords a dismaying and, in considerable measure, convincing insight into the machinations that transformed this most powerful of unions into a dictatorial instrument of plunder and intrigue, a happy hunting ground for freebooters and fixers. Mr. Sheridan picks up where Bobby Kennedy left off in his 1960 book, "The Enemy Within," in which the soon-to-be Attorney General warned melodramatically that the test for America was whether democracy survived or Hoffa survived, nothing less.

It is precisely because Mr. Sheridan so obviously shared—and still holds—this somewhat hysterical view that not only his book but also the whole case against Hoffa emerges flawed. No one familiar with the 20,432 pages of testimony on union racketeering gathered by the McClellan Committee when Mr. Kennedy was its chief counsel is likely to underestimate the villainy of which the teamsters' little Mister Big was capable. And that record is made more noisome still by the persuasive detail Mr. Sheridan supplies on the Hoffa-initiated intrigue that surrounded his court trials and the successful efforts to get him out of Lewisburg Penitentiary a little more than a third of the way through his 13-year term.

A Dissent Unmentioned

But when true believer Sheridan devotes scores of pages to lampooning the notion that he or Mr. Kennedy was ever engaged in a vendetta against Hoffa, it is a bit hard to understand why he cannot spare a single line to mention the acid dissent filed by Chief Justice Earl Warren when the Supreme Court upheld Hoffa's conviction for jury tampering six years ago. He called the whole case an "affront to the quality and fairness of Federal law-enforcement" because the Government's pivotal witness, a minor teamster official, had been plucked out of a Louisiana jail where he was awaiting trial on charges of kidnapping and embezzling union funds and planted inside Hoffa's hotel suite as a kind of walking "bug" to tell the prosecution everything he heard. The blackout of the Warren rebuke is inexcusable since Mr. Sheridan spends fully half the book extolling the impugned witness as one of nature's noblemen, gallantly resisting fabulous payoffs to recant his testimony.

The saddest part of the Hoffa saga is how little reform inside the giant truck union has come out of all the investigations, all the court trials, all the jail sentences. Mr. Sheridan draws up an impressive roll of betrayers and gangsters still in positions of influence. The Central States Teamster Pension Fund, milked by the mob for millions in "finder's fees," still has a billion dollars in assets. No union enjoys loftier status in the labor front than President Nixon is building as a mainstay of his "New Majority." None gets more conspicuous tokens of Presidential esteem.

Indeed, the only cloud on the teamster horizon is a growing likelihood that Hoffa, the man the President let out of jail, and Frank E. Fitzsimmons, the erstwhile caretaker whom the President now calls "my kind of labor leader," may soon be slugging it out for permanent possession of the driver's wheel. Whichever way that contest comes out, the crusade that Bobby Kennedy and Walter Sheridan started will stay stalled in the truck terminal.

dozens of court cases, the endless hearings of the McClellan Committee, the shenanigans that killed two earlier Congressional inquiries into teamster hanky-panky, the chartering of "paper locals" to sell sweetheart contracts to conscienceless employers and the systematic victimization of the rank and file into such a mishmash of interlocking paragraphs that the reader wishes he had a scorecard to keep track of who is doing what to whom.