

Hoffa Freed

It would be nice, but naive, to believe that the spirit of Christmas and James R. Hoffa's unblemished record as a prisoner were the only factors that influenced yesterday's decision by President Nixon to let the former leader of the Teamsters Union out of jail.

However, the evidence has been mounting in recent months that Hoffa's release has been a pivotal element in the strange love affair between the Administration and the two-million-member truck union, ousted from the rest of the labor movement in 1957 for racketeer domination.

Frank E. Fitzsimmons, Hoffa's successor in the union presidency, is unquestionably the closest thing to an admirer Mr. Nixon has among the heads of the country's principal unions. Mr. Fitzsimmons owes his own election at the Teamster convention last July to a written commitment by his predecessor to quit all his union posts. Without that commitment, made amid widespread reports of a political deal to "free Jimmy," the convention would unquestionably have re-elected Hoffa. His convictions for attempted jury-fixing and pension fraud had left undiminished his vast popularity with the union membership.

The same convention that elected Mr. Fitzsimmons the handpicked caretaker Hoffa left in charge when he went to prison a little less than five years ago, gave the new president virtually unlimited authority to draw on the Teamsters' huge treasury for lobbying and political activities.

The Administration showered attention on Mr. Fitzsimmons at the July convention, and the Teamster leader has reciprocated by giving a more affirmative response to most Administration domestic and foreign initiatives than other union chiefs. However, that cordiality may be strained now that industry members of the Pay Board have served notice that they will challenge above-ceiling wage increases truck drivers are scheduled to get on New Year's Day.

The terms of the Hoffa commutation bar him from engaging in the "direct or indirect management" of the Teamsters or any other union until March, 1980. But, even if that restriction is rigorously enforced, it is a bit difficult to avoid the suspicion that imminence of the 1972 election was a factor in Mr. Nixon's decision to release him—only five months after the United States Parole Board had refused for the third time to let Hoffa out.