

The Hoffa Hit

What happened to Jimmy Hoffa? Now we know.

First, let me tell you what didn't happen to him. Dozens of people were murdered shortly before they were to testify at the House Select Committee on Assassinations. People who could and would have shed light on the JFK conspiracy. Members of that conspiracy weren't about to let that happen, so they made sure those people could never spill the beans. They just happened to be world-class experts at murder, and they were extremely talented in the art of making murder appear to be suicide, or an accident, or of natural causes (like cancer or heart attack). They also knew how to stage it so that the crime would leave everybody guessing and confused forever, not knowing who or what to believe. Hoffa knew a few things about the JFK murder, but that isn't what got him killed. He was already testifying before Congress, and if he had been inclined to shed any light on the JFK murder, he would have already done so. Hoffa and Bobby Kennedy matched wits and insults on live national TV, providing great entertainment but not much in the way of information.

In a very real and significant sense, it can be said that Jimmy Hoffa got Jimmy Hoffa killed. (And it is no less true that John F Kennedy got John F Kennedy killed. But that's another episode.)

Let's start at the beginning.

Hoffa got his career started by unloading trucks for 32 cents per hour. One hot sunny day a truck loaded with strawberries pulled up to be unloaded. But, Hoffa and all his work buddies decided to sit that one out,

leaving the strawberries to quickly rot. Management got the message, and a new union was born. Jimmy enjoyed that success so much that he set about trying to get more and more workers organized into unions. He loved a good brawl, and there were many of them, often leaving him with a cracked skull and more determination than ever. The workers were on his side, but the police were supportive of management. There were lots of arrests, but Hoffa would simply hire a magistrate to bail out his boys as fast as cops could bust them. On one occasion, his right-hand man was arrested on average more than once per hour over a 24-hour period, but he was quickly back on the street every time, picketing and brawling. Hoffa was known as a fearless and relentless fighter, and his men loved him for it. What he lacked in height, he more than made up for with a sharp tongue, which was likely to slice a man to pieces before he could even finish an unwelcomed sentence.

He continued his crusade for two decades, forming small unions, then consolidating them into stronger, more powerful regional labor organizations. Then he brought all those regional groups together under one giant national organization: the Teamsters Union. It represented truck drivers, warehouse workers, and others who kept the goods Americans needed and wanted flowing across the nation. It had over 2 million members all together, and they all had good wages and benefits. That gave Hoffa an enormous amount of power and notoriety. If it was delivered by truck, it was controlled by Hoffa. He could destroy a business if it proved uncooperative. He was more powerful than the President of the United States and more popular than the

Beatles. (Well, some people thought so, anyway. Jimmy Hoffa was one of them.)

One of those benefits which teamsters enjoyed was a generous pension to complement their Social Security benefits. The Teamsters' pension fund had at least a billion dollars in it. The guy who controlled that wealth was, of course, Jimmy Hoffa. How did he invest it? Any way he wanted to. And, often, he wanted to provide large loans to his mafia friends for the construction of expensive, huge casinos in Las Vegas in the 1950s and 60s. Jimmy was a friend of the mafia. That meant Jimmy was an enemy of Bobby Kennedy. Those two hated each other just about as much as it is possible for two men to hate each other. Why?

Before Bobby was installed as Attorney General, the FBI ignored organized crime. The mafia was free to enjoy conducting their business unmolested by any feds. Sure, they had local cops on their tail sometimes, but mobsters never met a local man they couldn't intimidate, buy, or kill. Local cops were just a small cost of doing business. Feds were a different matter, and suddenly the mafia had to start worrying about that when Bobby declared himself the new sheriff in town. He couldn't be intimidated or bought. He could be killed, but that wouldn't solve the problem, because John would come after them ten times as hard. So, the only answer seemed to be getting rid of JFK. Bobby would then lose his power and fade away quietly, with LBJ in control of the nation. LBJ had mob connections of his own, he also hated the Kennedy boys, and he had other very compelling, urgent reasons for needing JFK dead. LBJ would be no threat to the mafia. Problem solved. Theoretically.

That just left the small matter of actually doing it. As luck would have it, there was no shortage at all of eager participants, each with his own reasons for wanting JFK out of

the picture. For example, there was a large group of Cuban exiles in Florida who despised JFK for betraying them at the Bay of Pigs. There were a few key players at the top of the CIA who hated JFK because they believed he was soft on Communism and not tough enough with Cuba. They also knew JFK was determined to destroy the CIA for misleading him, bungling the Bay of Pigs, and embarrassing the hell out of the new president. There were others who, for various reasons, were quite willing to play along with the plot. Some had their own score to settle, their own axe to grind. Others were intimidated, coerced, bribed, or subjected to beguiling political propaganda. But a great many of the conspiracy participants had no idea they were part of the conspiracy. They were simply tricked into it with no knowledge of the overall plot or even the full meaning of their own small contribution to it. Only a small group knew how all the pieces fit together and how it would play out.

Hoffa certainly knew some of what was going on, although he wasn't necessarily assigned a major role in the conspiracy or aware of all the details. He didn't need to do much himself, because there were plenty of conspirators to take care of all the details. Hoffa was too important to get too bogged down in the operational aspects of it. He was too visible. He had to be shielded, protected as much as possible. For Jimmy, it was pretty simple. Bobby Kennedy was determined to put him in prison. Hoffa was determined to prevent that. All he had to do was whisper a suggestion into the ears of Carlos Marcello and Santo Trafficante. *Do what needs to be done, guys. Let me know if you need money. I just happen to know where I can get my hands on a billion dollars.* Of course, the mafia had plenty of money of its own to invest in the project, and so did LBJ's uber-wealthy Big Oil

buddies, who were all in. Money was not a problem.

But, like I said, that isn't why Jimmy Hoffa suddenly found himself surprisingly dead. That all started when, eventually, the FBI managed to scrape together enough evidence to send Hoffa to prison for 13 years. He only served five years, though, because he was pardoned by . . . (drumroll) . . . Richard Nixon. Why? Money. In exchange for getting out of jail, a buttload of money managed to find its way into Nixon's Committee to Re-Elect the President. (CREEP. I'm guessing focus groups hadn't been invented yet.) More cash winged its way into the pockets of Attorney General, John Mitchell. Why? Hoffa had been barred from ever running for president of the Teamsters Union again. That was a problem for him, because he had an uncontrollable itch to run for president of the Teamsters Union again. Mitchell kicked that little legal hurdle off the race track for Jimmy. (It's heartwarming to see how government officials and private citizens can work together so harmoniously when they put their minds to it.)

When Jimmy took up residence behind bars, he installed his friend Frank Fitzimmons at the top of his union. Hoffa figured Frank wouldn't put up a fuss if Jimmy ever got out of prison and wanted to pick up where he left off. But Frank wasn't as cooperative as Jimmy had planned on. Meanwhile, the mafia liked Fitz. He was pretty easy to get along with, meaning he did as he was told. So the mafia was torn between Frank and Jimmy when Jimmy ran for president again. Jimmy was their friend, and he did build the Teamsters from the ground up with his own sweat and blood. On the other hand, Frank was doing a fine job, and mobsters weren't inclined to fix something that wasn't broken. Besides, Jimmy had been having problems keeping his mouth shut lately. Nothing worth getting

whacked over, but disturbing and annoying. Jimmy could be explosive, temperamental, unpredictable, and relentless. Fitz was a go-along-to-get-along kind of guy. Mobsters liked that.

Hoffa's go-to hitman was Frank Sheeran, who just happened to be one of the great hitmen of all time. They were good friends as well. Sheeran was also the guy who delivered guns to David Ferrie (on behalf of mafia kingpin Carlos Marcello, purportedly for use in the JFK hit.) Sheeran was part of the mafia's highest echelon; he was in their inner circle. Sheeran's boss was Russell Bufalino. He was head of the Bufalino Crime Family, which controlled northern Pennsylvania and upstate New York, but their operations also extended into New Jersey and Florida. Russ was a quiet guy, known to be wise and fair. He was very well respected, which allowed him to extend his considerable influence nationwide.

One day there was a meeting between Hoffa, Bufalino, and Sheeran. Russ turned toward both of them and said to Hoffa: **There are people higher up than me that feel you are demonstrating a failure to show appreciation for Dallas.** The last two words of that sentence were not said aloud, but Jimmy had no trouble reading his lips. Neither did Sheeran, who never forgot that meeting, and told about it years later. He also remembered telling Russ after Jimmy had left the meeting that Hoffa was so powerful that he might be untouchable. Bufalino quickly set Sheeran straight on that misguided notion. You're dreaming, my friend. If they could take out the President [of the United States], they could take out the president of the Teamsters.

That gets back to what I said earlier about Hoffa being responsible for his own death. If he had been smart, he would have taken Russ seriously. He would have known when to quit. He would have packed up, moved to

Vegas, and spent the rest of his life resting on his laurels and having fun in the sin capital of the world. He was already famous, respected, loved, legendary, and wealthy. That should have been enough for any man. Instead, Hoffa just kept pressing as hard as he could to get his old job back. Bufalino and his bosses made a decision, and Hoffa made it too easy for them.

Tony Provenzano (“Tony Pro”) represented the Teamsters faction opposing Hoffa. He and Hoffa decided to meet and try to work out a peaceful agreement. Anthony Giacalone (“Tony Jack”) was selected to make the arrangements, because both men trusted him (as mafia trust goes). The meet was to take place at 2:30, Wednesday afternoon, at the Red Fox restaurant outside Detroit. Tony Jack figured the lunch crowd would be gone by then, but there would still be enough people around for the contestants to feel safe in a public place. Jimmy arranged for Sheeran to be there with him 30 minutes before the meet. With Sheeran and Tony Jack both there, Hoffa felt he had nothing to worry about, and he was a very cautious, shrewd guy. He could smell trouble a mile away. But people who knew him also knew how to push his buttons and throw him off his game.

There was to be a wedding in the Bufalino family on Friday, August 1, 1975. Mafia families from all over the country would be gathering in Detroit for the occasion, so it seemed perfectly logical for both Russ Bufalino and Tony Pro to be in the Motor City on Wednesday. That was part of the elaborate plan. Another part was Tony Pro demanding a million dollar pension to bow out of the race. That was something they would have to negotiate at the meet, and it was good enough to lure Hoffa into the ruse. Another part of the scheme was to make Jimmy wait. He hated that. He got to the Red Fox at 2:00, expecting Sheeran to be there at that time also. He wasn't. Jimmy

was fuming, but he was stuck. There wasn't enough time to leave and come back. He made a few calls using the phone booth outside the restaurant.

Then a maroon Mercury drove up to the curb. He had seen the car before; it belonged to Tony Jack's son. He knew the driver, too. It was his foster son, Chuckie O'Brien, who still called Jimmy *Dad*. In the passenger seat was Sheeran, and in the back seat was Sally Buggs, Tony Pro's right-hand man. All three men knew they would have to be very convincing actors to keep Hoffa from bolting.

Frank Sheeran explained to Jimmy that McGee (a common nickname for Russ Bufalino) had changed the plans. The Old Man (another common nickname for Russ) had decided to broker the meeting himself because it was important for the warring factions to settle their differences for the greater good. Well, it was a drastic change in the arrangements, but Frank's reason did make a lot of sense. Russ was in town for the wedding, brokering an agreement is certainly something he would be interested in doing, and capable of doing probably better than anybody else. And Russ wasn't the kind of guy who would agree to meet at some restaurant he wasn't familiar with. And The Old Man was the boss, after all. Jimmy pictured Russ sitting at a table at a nearby house, waiting to explain everything to Jimmy and then help heal the fractured Teamsters Union. That was the new plan, and Hoffa bought it, even though Sally Buggs' presence must have been a red flag.

Hoffa got into the car, and Chuckie O'Brien drove away. It pulled into the driveway of a typical house in a nice neighborhood. Frank's car (a Ford) was already in the driveway, along with a brown Buick – just the kind of car Russ would drive. No red flags there. Hoffa walked into the house with his trusted friend Frank watching his back,

and he expected to see Russ and Tony Pro ready to take care of business. Instead, he saw an empty house. That's when the light went on, but it was too late. He turned around and saw Frank with his gun in his hand, which Jimmy figured was because Frank was going to protect him. He tried to get past Frank and back out the door, but Frank shot him twice in the back of the head. Right behind the right ear, in fact, so his friend wouldn't suffer. And not at point-blank range, because that would cause too much messy blood spatter.

Not that the bloody mess was anything Frank had to worry about. There were cleaners there for that. When the mafia said someone was a *cleaner*, they meant it literally. In the intelligence community, a cleaner is an assassin. In the mob, a cleaner gets rid of the body and the gun and evidence at the crime scene. Tony Pro had sent his cleaners, the Andretta brothers, who had prepared for the event by placing linoleum down – easy to clean. The Ford which supposedly belonged to Frank was really just a stolen car. The brown Buick belonged to the Andretta boys. Tony Pro and Russ Bufalino had never intended to be at the house. Chuckie O'Brien's role had been to help put Jimmy at ease with a familiar, trusted face. The only reason Sally Buggs was there was to make sure Frank got the job done and didn't try to alert his friend of the danger ahead. Why did Frank do it? Russ had made him an offer he couldn't refuse. If he didn't kill Hoffa, somebody else would have, and they would have killed Sheeran, too. Frank Sheeran's life was spared out of respect for Russ Bufalino. The hit was sanctioned by the Detroit Outfit and the Chicago Crime Family. The New York mafia did not sanction the hit, but they didn't try to stop it, either. The cleaners removed Hoffa's jewelry and placed him in a body bag, which was placed

in the back seat of the Buick. The body was cremated by mafia operatives.

How do we know all this? From Sheeran's deathbed confession. True, a mafia hitman is not the most credible witness. Several considerations. At that critical point in Frank's life, he, like most people about to die, probably felt he no longer had any reason to lie or conceal the truth, and he probably felt he had a very compelling reason for clearing his conscience before meeting that great Godfather in the sky. More importantly, nationally known and respected forensic expert Michael Baden examined the evidence and came to this conclusion: **Sheeran's confession that he killed Hoffa in the manner described in the book is supported by the forensic evidence, is entirely credible, and solves the Hoffa mystery.** What book was he talking about? *I Heard You Paint Houses: Frank "The Irishman" Sheeran and the Inside Story of the Mafia, the Teamsters and the last Ride of Jimmy Hoffa*, by Charles Brandt, published in 2005.

Also, see *Bound by Honor: A Mafioso's Story*, by Bill Bonanno; *Richard Nixon's Greatest Cover-Up: His Ties to the Assassination of President Kennedy*, by Don Fulsom, published at CrimeMagazine.com; and *Hit List*, by Richard Belzer and David Wayne.)