

The Battle of the Century:

THE BOBBY KENNEDY-

IN 1923 promoter Tex Rickard imported a huge, shaggy-haired Argentine named Luis Firpo to battle Jack Dempsey for the heavyweight title.

Canny Rickard billed the imbroglio, "The Battle of the Century," and the Polo Grounds in New York was jammed with the credulous who thought that the crude South American had a chance against the champion. The Battle of the Century was vicious enough, but it took only two rounds for Dempsey to render Firpo very unconscious indeed.

Ever since 1957, however, a fight has been going on between Robert F. Kennedy and James R. Hoffa which has a much better right to be called the Battle of the Century than the two-round affair promoted by Rickard.

It began when Bobby Kennedy, as chief counsel for the awkwardly named Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field, headed by Sen. John McClellan, submitted Hoffa to several grueling sessions before a tv audience estimated at 25 million people. (Only 82,000 saw the Dempsey-Firpo fight.)

Previously the Committee had gotten rid of Dave Beck as president of the Teamsters Union, and this, ironically enough, brought Hoffa to the presidency. To stretch a point, it might be said that indirectly the Committee placed Hoffa in the driver's seat. Then the Committee set out to get the aggressive head of 1,900,000 teamsters.

Hoffa spent 18 tough sessions before the Committee with counsel Kennedy doing most of the questioning. Unlike many of his associates, Hoffa did not seek sanctuary in the Fifth Amendment. He was questioned about some of his unsavory aids, about an alleged attempt to bribe a Committee investigator, about the allegation that he had tapped telephones of his subordinates.

On the stand Hoffa was unco-operative and slippery; time after time he resorted to the "I don't remember" technique. Kennedy kept after him relentlessly, but Hoffa, like a good boxer, deflected the verbal blows with evasive tactics. He was patronizing toward Kennedy. At one point he said, "But look, Bobby boy, you just don't understand these things." Kennedy went white with anger. There are those who say that it was that gibe which made Kennedy resolve to get Hoffa at all costs.

Hoffa emerged from the hearings battered and bruised but reasonably intact. Kennedy had proved beyond doubt that many of Hoffa's aids were gangsters, but there was no evidence that Hoffa himself had ever been a strong-arm man or that he had been derelict in dealing with the huge union funds virtually at his disposal.



And so the Senate Rackets Committee (as it generally was known) finished its hearings with 20,000 pages of written testimony, with the approval of the television public, and with an impetus that projected tenacious, tough-minded Bobby Kennedy into the office of Attorney General of the United States. The Washington correspondents who once called him Bob or Bobby now call him General, the traditional title accorded the head of the Department of Justice. On him the title looks good; his maturity is attested to by every Department of Justice lawyer I know (including a former member of the staff whom I once called "Whizzer" but who is now Mr. Justice Byron White of the Supreme Court).

Hoffa, too, has gained in experience and maturity. His grip on the enormous Teamsters Union seems stronger than ever, and a dozen times he has publicly defied the Attorney General and labeled his efforts as nothing but a "personal vendetta against Hoffa and his union." (Hoffa likes to refer to himself in the third person.) Hoffa sincerely believes that the Attorney General and his 1,700 lawyers will not be happy until he is not only removed from office but also helping to sew mailbags behind the unresponsive bars of a Federal penitentiary.

The Stakes Are High—for Both

Washington, D.C., is a city which has no industry; it doesn't produce food or first-division baseball teams—its only product is gossip. Drop into the sophisticated Jockey Club or visit the National Press Club or (if you're silly enough) attend the daily round of diplomatic, press, political, or social cocktail parties, and you'll hear a lot of gossip—a great deal of it concerning the feud between Kennedy and Hoffa.

It is generally agreed that this is a fight to the death. The stakes are high. If Hoffa loses, he will no longer be the most important union official in the country. If Kennedy loses, it could cost him the Presidency in 1968 (according to the betting in Washington, he is at present a shoo-in for the nomination).

The Attorney General has denied that this is a personal feud. He has not commented publicly on the Hoffa affair since he took office—nor would he discuss his feelings toward Hoffa when I talked to him recently. Not even off the record.

I saw Hoffa the same day in the imposing Teamsters Union building at 25 Louisiana Ave., just 1,900 feet from the Department of Justice building, and for once Hoffa had no arrows to shoot at Kennedy. In the past he has been quite free in attacking him, but during my visit he smilingly refrained from discussing personalities.

Few people in Washington seem to be neutral