

BOOK REVIEW

THE INFILTRATOR

By Robert Mazur

Review by Juan E. Albornoz- Book Editor

Once in a long while a book appears in the literature of law enforcement that astounds you with the complexities of the criminal enterprise it describes, while it focuses on the greed and skill of the people who manage it, and the risks and efforts that the agents make trying to bring the guilty parties to justice. This book will become more singular, more shocking, if you will, when it allows you an inside look at law enforcement at the top, where the interests and concerns at times differ drastically from those working in the shadows.

Robert Mazur's outstanding and frank book, *THE INFILTRATOR* (Little, Brown and Co.), gives the reader rich insights and information, making it a book that is uncommon in the library of law enforcement. Generally, books published by retired officers or agents entertain, tell a good story, but offer little else. What we can call "cop lit" is rather limited in depth; it seldom leaves the familiar framework of describing a career, cases, bad guys put away, and the memories the past highlights today.

Robert Mazur's *INFILTRATOR* is different. Its subtitle ("My Secret Life Inside the Dirty Banks Behind Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel") frames the central real life plot that occupied Mazur and other agents' lives for approximately five years. His book hit the bookstores at the end of July and, believe me, you are in for a treat.

Mazur breaks the traditional pattern in a number of ways. First, as a commercial reviewer might put it, the book *spills the beans* about the drama and the tensions and the fears that take place behind a long and complex undercover operation where a few agents put their lives, their families, their careers, and psyches at risk. Mazur's fellow agents, receive due recognition for their remarkable efforts

Methodically, we see how the plot gets complicated and how – when the final takedown is imminent – the case evolves into a media event fed to TV producers. Yes, those valuable few minutes in front of the TV cameras will make or enhance Washington careers.

Today most people are familiar with some of the main issues of the narcotics trade; however, as this book shows, the incredible profits generated by the cocaine trade in this country and Europe are simply staggering. Its physical volume (millions of dollar bills) has been for years a truly serious problem for the cartels: how do they launder and deliver the profits, in this case, in Colombia? Some government estimates of the cocaine trade reach figures as high as 500 billion a year.

Enter a most willing bank: **BCCI**. One of its young executives someone who had managed the fortunes of the founder of the United Arab Emirates, then principal shareholder of the

same bank – is told that the bank will expand into the western world.

"Identify the underground sectors from which we can grab deposits," he is ordered.

And he does it well. BCCI expands into Latin America; quickly and aggressively, the bank establishes itself as a reliable financial house that will deliver you "clean" money securely and at a relatively low cost. Bilgrami, the bank official, we are told, "came to see South America as a reservoir holding at least \$1 00 billion in flight capital—that is, money seeking secrecy."

But some banks are coarser and more expeditious. Bilgrami in his debriefing describes the operation of one Swiss bank:

One Swiss bank routinely flew large shipments of gold bars into Colombia on a private jet, then sold the gold to the Colombian traffickers for 15 percent above market price by exchanging it for truckloads of U. S. dollars that the cartel had smuggled back to Colombia. To cover their trail, the Swiss flew back the cash out of Colombia, quietly depositing it in accounts in branches in Panama and Switzerland.

BCCI, the enterprising bank, becomes another central target for Bob Mazur, a/k/a "Bob Musella," and US Customs agents in his team for several years.

But what gives this book a significant value is not only the energetic description of the chain of events that culminates, as we know from newspaper and TV reports, with the take down and eventual dissolution of the bank. Its singular value emerges when the reader comes to the unavoidable conclusion that the so called "war on drugs" has been if not a farce, a war fed to the media and us a teaspoon at a time. Yes, many of yesterday's bad guys are in jail, many organized groups have been dismantled, but the cancer survives and even grows, unaffected, year after year.

This is Bob Mazur's accomplishment, to have skillfully drawn the outline of an international financial machinery operating *sub rosa* in the background, protected by governments, treaties, and banking institutions. Behind the drug shipments, the killings, the threats, and the tremendous profits are banks, attorneys, and even the governments and politicians. All the actors make their moves attentively, following disciplined strategies and constantly aware that agents, cops or competitors may spring a surprise. And no, they do not roll over and play dead when caught. They fight back physically and through the courts. Witness the thousands of hours organizing evidence, the transcription of thousands of tapes, and other burdens like months of testifying. *

So, where do we place this book? I believe we can place it on the top shelf. next to that 1986 classic, *The Underground*

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Empire by James Hill, perhaps the first book that chronicles the complexity and threatening nature that drug traffic and traffickers presented to our society. But more importantly, I believe that no government official, law enforcement manager or political appointee may perform at an optimal level without reading **The Infiltrator**, as a case study. It is not an exaggeration to suggest

that Justice should buy a copy for everyone involved in our government's anti drug efforts.

** [For those agents who now or In the future will struggle through demanding hours of testimonials involving volumes of tapes and witnesses, I recommend that you review Mazur's indexing (cross-referenced database) system design to assist the agent identify the proper information during questioning by a defense attorney (See pages 318 and 319). It may help.]*

