



Book review: 'The Infiltrator' an intriguing account of a US Customs undercover money laundering operation

Dec 07 2009 [Brett Wolf](#)

The book's concise title, "The Infiltrator", by Robert Mazur (2009: Little Brown & Company, New York, NY) conveys the nature of the story, but does not begin to express the significance of this thoughtful treatise, which examines in detail one of the most successful undercover money laundering undertakings of all time, code-named "Operation C-Chase". Bob Mazur was a federal agent for 27 years, first with US Customs (now part of the Department of Homeland Security's US Customs and Immigration Enforcement) and later with the Drug Enforcement Administration. During most of Bob's government career, he directed investigations of international drug money laundering organizations, and for five years he was a long-term undercover agent. In this capacity, he acted as a conduit between leaders of South American drug cartels and international banks, including the now-notorious Bank of Credit and Commerce International.

"The Infiltrator" focuses on a two-year stretch with Customs — September 1986 to October 1988 — during which Bob was involved in Operation C-Chase. During that effort, Bob relied on an alter ego he had created, "Bob Musella", a mobbed-up businessman with tentacles that reached into a variety of financial institutions. As Musella, Bob burrowed into the underworld, allowing each contact to endear him with others, continually increasing the number, and rank, of drug traffickers he "served". Based in Tampa, Florida, Bob also stumbled upon BCCI, which to his initial amazement proved more than happy to help him launder his clients' drug money, moving it around the globe and ultimately disguising it as loan proceeds.

Throughout the undercover operation, Bob climbed the ladder of both the Medellín Cartel and BCCI, sometimes traveling to Europe to meet with highly sophisticated drug traffickers and bankers eager to do business with him. His money laundering scheme also evolved, growing more efficient and less "detectable" as time passed thanks to some creative — and complicit — bankers and businessmen. One of these individuals was also responsible for helping former Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega hide cartel payoffs. The money laundering schemes outlined in the book are well worth digesting since they are just as relevant today as they were in the 1980s. "The Infiltrator" is about more than how drug traffickers wash their ill-gotten gains, however. It is a story of life in the undercover fast lane, late nights at high-end restaurants and clubs and countless hours of "business" meetings secretly taped thanks to recording devices hidden on his body and his high-tech briefcase.

It is also the story of betrayal: ironically, not so much on the part of his underworld contacts, but more on that of a few ambitious or outright dimwitted coworkers. Although Bob makes it clear that his success was down to a great many highly skilled agents and support personnel who had his back, some of whom worked undercover with him, he also offers many anecdotes of gaffes committed by others that could have easily led to his own demise. Even more fascinating, though, Bob notes that he "felt no joy" when the operation came to end after a faux wedding allowed a small army of agents to arrest a slew of underworld characters, bankers and businessmen. He makes clear that too many sacrifices were made along the way for him to be happy about it.

Bob dedicates "The Infiltrator" to his wife, Evelyn, and for good reason; for two years she was forced to run the household without help from him. His children barely saw him during that time; in fact, when the operation ended, they did not even recognize him when they passed him in the family's living room. Then there were the death threats, which were made more worrisome by inexcusable leaks to the media. The family was forced to abandon its home and assume a new identity.

Bob also subtly relates a lament that many innocent children, whose only crime was having been born to parents who were drug traffickers, also suffered as a result of the operation. This is not to say that he regretted his actions, only that he apparently was keenly aware of those who had been affected.

After reading Bob's account, one cannot avoid reaching the conclusion that long-term undercover operations are almost certainly the most effective tool law enforcers have at their disposal to root out sophisticated drug money laundering operations. However, by most accounts, precious little work of this ilk is being done at present.

This editor has of late corresponded with Bob, who is now a consultant running an investigative agency which, among other things, provides assistance to law firms and financial institutions with respect to enhanced due diligence. Despite his experience with BCCI and other financial institutions, Bob explained that he does *not* believe international bankers are by and large unscrupulous characters. Rather, he said his experience suggested that the "greatest majority of international bankers operate with integrity" and that a "small segment" were attracted to dirty money.

While drafting this review, this editor purposely left out many of the details and twists that make "The Infiltrator" a great read for anti-money laundering professionals; it would truly be a shame to spoil such a unique and well-written story for those who will choose to read it for themselves.

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