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Step into the Underworld with this Undercover Agent

Drug Enforcement Agent Robert Mazur spent five years as a deep undercover agent for US, UK, French and other government law enforcement, infiltrating Pablo Escobar's Medellin drug cartel. He has earned global acclaim as one of the world's leading experts on the financial escapades of the underworld. Here, we take a look at Mazur's latest book, 'The Betrayal.'

By **Molly Miller, Chief Content Officer, ALM** | March 15, 2022



Drug Enforcement Agent Robert Mazur spent five years as a deep undercover agent for US, UK, French and other government law enforcement, infiltrating Pablo Escobar's Medellin drug cartel by pretending to be Robert Musella, a money laundering, mob-connected businessman from New York. He has earned global acclaim as one of the world's leading experts on the financial escapades of the underworld. There is no one with more first-hand knowledge about how international black money markets launder nearly \$2 trillion in criminal proceeds annually. The only undercover agent in the world to have infiltrated so deeply into the inner circle of financial crime, his experience is unique. He's seen how the system works from the inside, and the insights he holds are so valuable that the criminal world offered \$1/2 million for his death.

Mazur spoke at the 2021 Global Leaders in Law Members Forum where he inspired the GC audience with his strong sense of vision and purpose and shared how to outthink adversaries through planning and thought. Below, Molly Miller reviews Mazur's latest book, 'The Betrayal.'

Books about espionage, counterintelligence, and covert operations generally fall into three categories. There is the James-Bond-type popcorn fantasy that has nothing to do with these subjects. There are the exceptional novels of John le Carre, where the realities of tradecraft and the unraveling of human emotion bind the reader to the characters.

There are the compelling non-fiction incisions into what is known as the nether world of espionage as seen in David C. Martin, *The Wilderness of Mirrors*, where the intelligence community is viewed as enmeshed in a two-front war, one against the enemy and the other against the mendacity of its own bureaucracy and the larger political structure.

For comparisons of non-fiction works, *The Wilderness of Mirrors*, is arguably the gold standard. Its portrayal of the dark world of intelligence—as influenced by its own norms and the culture of its adversaries—is to many the sine qua non of what writing about intelligence should look like.

Measured against this standard, Robert Mazur's, *The Betrayal*, has earned a place on the same bookshelf. Not only does Mazur undertake the same type of in-depth research as Martin, giving us a poignant understanding of the culture of this world, but he also adds to it all the psychological depth and human insight to be found in a le Carre novel.

From an intellectual perspective, it is a tour de force. For those who like their intellectual interests seasoned with the popcorn fantasy of a fast-paced, page-turner, James Bond has nothing on Robert Mazur. In Mazur's work, the situations that balance life and death are not going to be resolved with some fictional device or director yelling, cut. They are real, and in the moment, it is possible for them to pivot into tragedy.

Mazur burst into the popular media by bringing down the infamous Pakistani Bank of Commerce and Credit International, which had with alacrity sought to launder Mazur's undercover drug money from the Medellín Cartel. BCCI was the seventh largest private bank in the world, and the first to run up against new American legislation making money laundering illegal.

Mazur, then, a Customs Agent, confronted what he describes as an "inexplicable effort by the front office to derail the operation." He further goes on to describe a bureaucratic culture that did not want to develop cases against very powerful people. For blowing the whistle on Customs, the organization went after Mazur to blame him for its malfeasance, but a Senate Committee exonerated him with flying colors.

We meet Mazur in *The Betrayal* as he starts as a rookie in a position with the Drug Enforcement Administration. He unveils the difficulty of establishing the bonafides of an undercover agent, and then we learn that all that work plus being vulnerable to criminal cartels can be undermined in the blink of an eye by a corrupt local police officer.

Using skills honed at Customs, Mazur establishes a series of legal bonafides to solidify his illegal credentials as a money launderer. He is a long-distance runner, in for the big payoff at the end, but he is part of a bureaucracy that salivates over the short-term victory and the big publicity splash.

It is all too reminiscent of the conflict in the early days of the Cold War between J. Edgar Hoover's FBI and the CIA. Hoover wanted to make arrests and get front-page coverage. The CIA wanted no such thing. They wanted to turn spies and make them American assets. Publicity was the last thing they wanted, and the ephemeral euphoria of a front-page arrest paled in comparison to the value of having an asset with access to the enemy's inner chamber, feeding it false information and revealing its most cherished secrets.

Mazur thought like an intelligence operative, but too many of his colleagues lacked that sophistication and made an already difficult existence even more so. He wanted not the individual courier but the network.

As intrinsic as these items are to the narrative, the real story is about actual betrayal not only by vulnerable police, but more importantly by a system that has incorporated money laundering into its financial structure to the point where bankers as individuals and banks as institutions see it as a common business practice. This practice corrupts governments and provides financial resources for terrorist groups.

There is also the narco-terrorist dimension that enables the existence of non-state actors to fund death and destruction through the dope trade and compliant international financial institutions willing to launder money for anyone because the banking culture tolerates it. And so too do governments, given that banks are fined, and few bankers ever see the inside of a prison. One wonders as to the extent the fines come close to exhausting the enormous profits made from the illegal activity.

To his credit, Mazur does not end his book with its page-turning narrative. Rather, reflective of his experience and understanding of the narcotics problem, he provides options for solutions. These are not platitudes but thoughtful recommendations about how we, as a society, can deal more effectively with the narcotics problem in terms of its political, legal, financial, and sociological dimensions.

Will he be listened to? The humanitarian in me hopes that is the case. Robert Mazur points the way. Let us hope that our institutions can follow him.

Molly Miller is Chief Content Officer at ALM and an avid student of espionage fiction and non-fiction.

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