

Former federal agent, now Tampa Bay consultant, warns anew U.S. too lax on money laundering



Former federal agent Robert Mazur worked undercover to try and dismantle Colombian drug cartels. That's Mazur on the job years ago, using an alias, under the beard on the right. (Photo: Special to the Tampa Bay Times.) Mazur's still fighting for more federal muscle against money laundering.

Wake up and good morning. A former federal undercover agent who penetrated Mexican drug cartels and now consults in the Tampa Bay area warns that the U.S. government's gentle slap on the wrists of big banks that tolerate money laundering in their branches remains one of the weakest links in the fight against global drug cartels *and* terrorists.

"The only way to stop the flow of this dirty money is to get tough on the bankers who help mask and transfer it around the world. Banks themselves don't launder money, after all," states former federal agent **Robert Mazur** in this Jan. 2 [New York Times opinion piece](#). "People do." Mazur's solution? Put those bankers who help wash drug money in jail. Sounds obvious enough. But it rarely happens.

This is a recurring theme of Mazur in recent years -- for good reason. The number of big banks "punished" for money laundering seems to be accelerating but the banks tend to be fined and bankers themselves typically face little other threats from the judicial system. Why? Credit big banks and their

powerful law firms for lobbying their way out of more severe crackdowns by the feds. And some of the blame goes to an overwhelmed federal bureaucracy facing massive budget cuts.

I first met Mazur four years ago when he published a book about his experiences as a undercover federal agent trying to put a dent in Latin American drug cartels. I interviewed Mazur, spent time in his University of Tampa lectures about his time as an undercover agent, and [reviewed his book](#) -- *The Infiltrator: My Life Inside the Dirty Banks Behind Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel*.

There is a Don Quixote style to Mazur, who clearly feels like the U.S. and other major governments not only have lost the will but also the expertise to fight drug cartels. He penned a related *New York Times* opinion piece in 2010 [detailed in the Venture blog](#).

Writes Mazur, now head of the Tampa investigative firm **Chase and Associates**: "As long as drug traffickers can wash the stain from 99 percent of their ill-gotten gains, as long as terrorists can move their cash freely around the world, we'll have no chance to halt their deadly trades."

Most recently, the U.K. global banking giant **HSBC** was fined \$1.9 billion in December after acknowledging it ignored possible money laundering. Read more from the [Wall Street Journal](#). New York's **Citibank** also was nailed for money laundering in 2012. [Read more here](#). And in 2010, **Wachovia Bank** (now **Wells Fargo**) was caught and fined for money laundering Mexican drug cartel funds. [Read more here](#).

Those are just the tip of the iceberg.

-- Robert Trigaux, Business Columnist, *Tampa Bay Times*