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The Nightmare of Frank Peroff

Reviewed by

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The reviewer is a Washington-based journalist.

Peroff is the man who knew too much, or so the title of this book would have us believe. But it is nearly 200 pages before we find out exactly what he knew. Until then we must make do with an account of how Frank Peroff—"con artist, scam expert, bank swindler, wheeler-dealer, manipulator, gold smuggler, money-washer, pilot for mob figures"—became an informant for the now-defunct Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD).

But at last the stakes are raised. In July of 1973 Peroff tape records a phone conversation in which a Canadian mobster tells him that the financial backer for a \$300-million heroin deal is none other than Robert Vesco, who at that very moment is in Costa Rica fighting U.S. efforts to make him stand trial with John Mitchell and Maurice Stans in connection with an illegal \$250,000 contribution to CREEP. An understandably excited Peroff relays this information to BNDD, the Justice Department and even the White House, only to see the case blow up in his face, landing him in jail and exposing him to the threat of mob retaliation.

Who done it? Or, as L. H. Whittemore puts it, "To suppress the largest narcotics case in history, the orders had to come from very high up in the government. The White House itself? The President? Why would Richard Nixon, the law-and-order politician, have any such motive?" Quick, please, the envelope. "Vesco, if extradited to the States [on a charge of drug smuggling], could unload all kinds of in-

formation about corruption within the Nixon Administration in exchange for immunity from prosecution."

Although that answer would fit the pattern of what we've come to expect from the Nixon White House, there is no evidence, other than circumstantial, to support it. The circumstances surrounding the sudden and inexplicable collapse of the drug case have been exhaustively investigated by Sen. Henry Jackson's Permanent Investigations subcommittee and published in eye-glazing detail earlier this year by the Government Printing Office.

Both Jackson and Whittemore obviously thought they were on to something that could "make Watergate look like a picnic." "Did the U.S. government wish to keep Vesco out of this country for some reason?" Jackson would publicly wonder while his staff privately pursued the case.

But in the end the facts weren't there, or at least refused to surface. "The staff cannot support Peroff's primary allegation of government cover-up. Nor is there corroborative information supporting the allegation... that Vesco and [Vesco associate] LeBlanc actually intended to finance the heroin transaction." The worst that could be said is that "some federal officials and agents conducted themselves in a highly unprofessional manner once the names of Vesco and LeBlanc came into the picture."

Whittemore very clearly wants us to believe with him that Peroff was the victim of one more Nixon conspiracy. "How else explain the personal nightmare of Frank Peroff?" he asks at the book's end. It is an unfortunate final line because it leaves us pondering the merits of the conspiracy the-

Book World

PEROFF: The Man Who Knew Too Much.

By L. H. Whittemore.

(Morrow, 315 pp. \$8.95.)

STAFF STUDY OF THE FRANK PEROFF CASE.
By the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, United States Senate.

(Government Printing Office, 237 pp. \$2.35.)

ory at the expense of Whittemore's valuable case history of the way the government uses undercover informants, and vice versa.

Writing in dialogue that rings as true as that of George V. Higgins (I can personally vouch for the accuracy of the idiom attributed to Peroff), Whittemore tells how Peroff's scheme to betray a Canadian mobster backfires, leaving him at the mercy of federal drug agents who manipulate him as dishonestly and as callously as he had sought to manipulate them. The agents act at times as if allowing the heroin to reach the streets would be preferable to letting some other law enforcement agency make the bust.

The interagency rivalries, plus the agents' intense distrust of Peroff ("I got 32 years of law enforcement and in my career he was about the toughest source of information I have ever dealt with, and that is putting it mildly, sir" one agent told Jackson's staff), plus an almost comic ineptitude (at one point Peroff arrives at the Montreal airport on an undercover mission to find a U.S. Customs agent standing at the gate in full uniform asking various male passen-

gers in a loud voice, "Are you Frank Peroff?") provide as good an explanation as any conspiracy theory for the events which unfold once Vesco's name is mentioned. Add to this the fact that the various agencies combating narcotics were then being consolidated into a new agency (The Drug Enforcement Administration), and it does not take a Nixon apologist to conclude that things just "fell through the cracks," as the President's men used to say.

Bureaucratic foul-up or White House cover-up? We may never know. Certainly Whittemore has provided us with no new information that could help us decide. At one point, he is rather lamely forced to declare that "If a cover-up had taken place, it had worked." If that is, in fact, the case, then a justice of sorts has been done—Nixon and DEA head John Bartels both forced to resign, albeit for unrelated reasons, while Peroff survives and flourishes in a variety of legitimate occupations, although forced to do so under an assumed name.