Campisi's 'Blue on Blue': Good cops and bad, from one who knows

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Charles Campisi, author of "Blue on Blue"

by Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer

Blue on Blue
An Insider’s Story of Good Cops Catching Bad Cops

By Charles Campisi, with Gordon Dillow

Scribner. $28.

Reviewed by

Glenn C. Altschuler

In his 41 years in the New York Police Department, half with the Internal Affairs Bureau (which he led from 1996 to 2014), Charles Campisi has seen it all. Good cops who rush into burning buildings, take down drug dealers, murderers, and rapists, and refuse to accept free coffee from luncheonette owners on their beat. And bad cops who pocket cash during drug busts and shoot unarmed suspects.

In Blue on Blue, Campisi provides a fascinating behind-the-scenes account of the NYPD. A gifted storyteller with a keen eye for the apt anecdote, a sardonic sense of humor, and a capacity for outrage, he illuminates the day-to-day lives of cops and the inner workings of the Internal Affairs Bureau. His book is important - and timely.

There are bad cops out there. Blue on Blue is filled with people like Detective Julio Vasquez, a 17-year veteran attached to the elite Firearms Investigation Unit in Harlem, who stashed in a locker in Brooklyn $774,370 he took from drug busts; Gilberto Valle, a six-year veteran accused of plotting on the internet to kidnap, cook, and eat women; and Jose Ramos, the silent owner of two barbershops (from which marijuana was sold), who conspired (along with many other
elected delegates of the Police Benevolent Association) to fix parking tickets.

But Campisi bristles at allegations that most, or even a substantial majority, of police are racists, thieves, or thugs. Of 530 random integrity tests the bureau conducted in 2012, he points out, six were criminal failures.

When a cop leaves the NYPD, the NYPD doesn’t leave the cop. Although New York is far safer than it was when he donned his badge in 1973, Campisi worries for - and about - his city and department. He is not a fan of civilian “watchdog agencies,” especially when they contribute to what he believes is a dangerous and destructive “war on cops.” He predicts the “drastic reduction in the use of ‘stop, question, and possibly frisk’ tactics” and less-aggressive enforcement of low-level, quality-of-life crimes (subway turnstile jumping, public urination, aggressive panhandling) are going to lead to “more illegal weapons being carried by criminals and thus [to] higher crime rates.” Controversial, of course - but coming from a man Police Commissioner Ray Kelly called “the best internal investigator” in the country, these views deserve a serious second look.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

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