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The King of the Rat Squad

For two decades, Campisi was in charge of the NYPD's 'cheese-eating rats'—the cops whose mission was to bust fellow officers gone rogue.



A New York Police Department graduation ceremony. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner Feb. 8, 2017 6:40 pm ET

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If the TV impresario Dick Wolf ever wants to spin off yet another hit show, all he has to do is option Charles Campisi's lively memoir, 'Blue on Blue.'

Now retired, Mr. Campisi was from 1996 to 2014 the leader of the New York Police Department's Internal Affairs Bureau and its 'cheese-eating rats'—hundreds of detectives, undercover operatives (called 'uncles'), lieutenants and captains whose mission was to bust their fellow officers gone rogue.

Corruption has been a scourge of police departments since the first real coppers began walking their beats in the mid-19th century. The petty stuff—free lunches, free car washes and the rest—isn't really the problem.

Mr. Campisi, a Brooklyn kid who had one of the longest careers in the NYPD's history, has seen it all, and he tells his cop stories with verve, intriguing detail and a generous heart.

Time and again, he vouches for the character and conduct of all but a tiny fraction of the NYPD's more than 50,000 employees.

Installed at the new IAB by Commissioner Ray Kelly in the midst of police scandals in 1993, Mr. Campisi became its chief three years later.

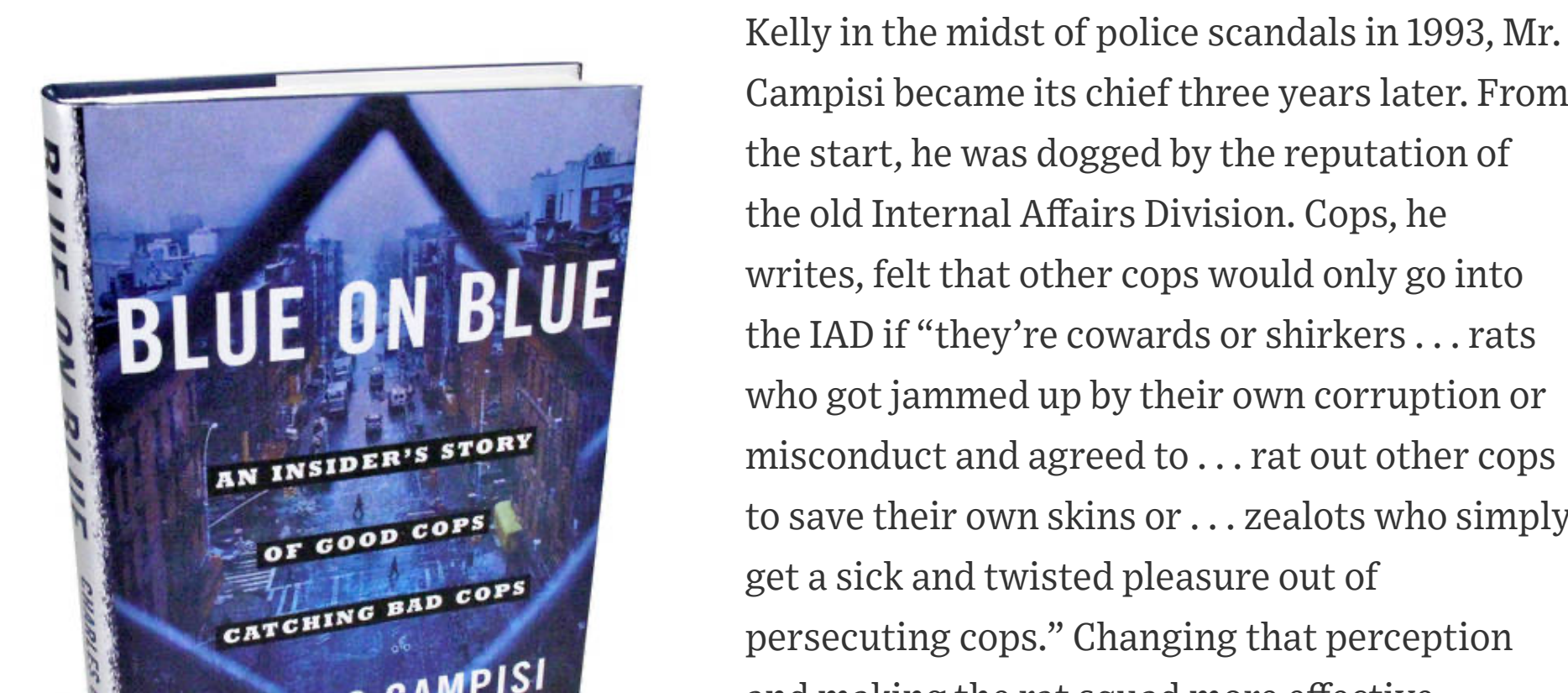


PHOTO: WSJ

BLUE ON BLUE By Charles Campisi Scribner, 348 pages, \$28

out of the department. Still, the best stories in the book are the unheralded ones that show the inventive ways in which IAB sleuths stalked, wire-tapped, tricked and ultimately bagged crooked cops and, occasionally, city workers who assist the police.

There is the tale of the Bronx sergeant suspected of ripping off drug dealers. The IAB created an elaborate scenario in which he was directed to an 'uncle' playing a dealer with \$1,100 in marked money in his back pocket.

Investigating complaints of money disappearing after paramedics respond to deaths in homes, the IAB fingers a mortuary worker whose job was to transfer the dead to the medical examiner's office.

Still, most of the IAB's success, Mr. Campisi writes, involved more diligent drudgery than high comedy or drama. Special secure phone lines had to be set up so that cops and civilians could call in tips without fear of exposure.

Mr. Campisi has a degree in criminal justice and did postgraduate work at Columbia and the Kennedy School at Harvard, but he is no bleeding heart.

No matter how effective the rat squad, police corruption can never be eradicated. Major scandals tend to erupt every 20 years or so, Mr. Campisi observes.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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