



# ***When Good Leaders Lose Their Way***

The Mark Whitacre Story



## ***Just imagine for a minute....***

When you go to work today, imagine having a tape recorder attached to your chest, a second one in your briefcase and a third one in a special notebook, knowing that you will be secretly taping your supervisors, coworkers, and in some cases, your friends. Now imagine doing that every day for three years.

That is exactly what I did, from 1992 to 1995, when I was a mole for the FBI in the largest price-fixing scandal in U.S. history. I was an informant with the distinction of being the highest-level Fortune 500 executive ever to be a whistleblower.

## ***The American Dream***

I was informing on Archer Daniels Midland (ADM). They were, at that time, the 56<sup>th</sup> largest company on the Fortune 500 and one of the largest food additive companies in the world, with over \$70 billion in annual revenues and over 30,000 employees. ADM's ingredients are in the foods people eat and drink every day: Kellogg's cereals, Kraft Foods, Tyson Foods, Coca-Cola and Pepsi.

I started at ADM in 1989 when I was thirty-two, as president of the bio-products division, the youngest divisional president in the history of the company. Within three years I was promoted to corporate vice president and corporate officer. The industry analysts at *Fortune* Magazine stated I was likely to become the next COO & President of ADM when the, then, 70-year-old president retired.

There are tremendous perks for a top executive of one of the largest companies in America. With my base salary and stock options combined, my total compensation was seven figures. I also had free access to one of the many corporate jets. My beautiful wife, three children and I lived in a mansion, and our children went to the best private schools.

From the outside looking in, I had everything. I was living the American Dream—the best the world had to offer. People would drive by our home and say, “Mark Whitacre has it all!” What they did not know is that I had a void in my heart the size of the Grand Canyon.



*Photo by Anastase Maragos on Unsplash*

## ***To A Nightmare...***

My future at ADM was bright, so why did I turn on my own company to become an FBI informant?

The reason I turned against ADM is because of my wife, Ginger. We both grew up in small towns in Ohio. My parents still live in the home in which I grew up. I met Ginger in the school band when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. We became a couple in high school and we were the homecoming Queen and King in 1975, my senior year. We have always been inseparable and recently celebrated our forty-third wedding anniversary (June 16, 1979).



In 1992, Ginger noticed big changes in me. I was involved with price fixing for the past seven months; something the company was involved with over a decade before I even joined ADM. And my work consumed me. She could sense that I was not happy. I was greedy. No matter how much I earned, it was never enough. Although I was not there for Ginger, she had a strength to draw on – her faith. She had a personal relationship with Christ that has sustained her since she was thirteen. In contrast, I went to church, but I was just going through the motions. If someone had asked me in 1992 if I was a Christian I would have said, “Yes, I go to church almost every Sunday.”

On November 5, 1992, Ginger started digging much deeper into our conversations since she could feel that something was weighing heavily on my mind. She asked several direct questions: What was going on at work? Why was I so intense? Why did I seem so unhappy? I needed to talk about what was bothering me. So, I finally told her about the illegal activity at ADM. I explained how we were getting together with our competitors and fixing the prices of several key ingredients. We had basically formed an international cartel. We were stealing a billion dollars each year from our large food and beverage customers, and that increased cost was being passed on to consumers. Basically, we were stealing from everyone around the world who bought groceries. And now I was involved with a federal crime the past seven months. I was being taught by a seasoned mentor how to turn a bigger profit in the division that I was president of.

I want to emphasize that ADM was not a bad company and most of their 30,000 employees went to work each day doing the right thing morally and ethically. However, the very top executives at ADM in the early 1990s, including myself, were conducting illegal activity and we tainted both the company and the town of Decatur, Illinois with our greed.

Ginger did not like what she had heard and said I should turn myself into the FBI. I told her I could go to prison and that we would lose our home, our cars and our lifestyle. She retorted that she would rather be homeless than live in a home paid for by theft. She persisted, “Either turn yourself into the FBI, or I will do it for you.” And she meant it!

An hour later I was confessing to an FBI agent about my white-collar crime, but it was Ginger

who was the true whistleblower of the ADM case. If it was not for a 34-year old stay-at-home mom of three young children, the largest price-fixing scheme in U.S. history may never have been exposed.

***What would you have done in this situation?*** Would you have taken the path I was planning to take: look the other way and continue to move up the corporate ladder with all the perks and financial security? Or would have you taken the path that my wife demanded: confess my part in a serious crime and lose everything?

## ***Fast Track to the Top (Caught Up in the World)***

After finishing high school in 1975, I attended Ohio State University (OSU). During my second year at OSU, I was offered an honors combined program which had me starting my Master's Degree. In 1979, after finishing my M.S. degree at OSU with honors, I received a full scholarship to Cornell University, an Ivy League school that is very strong in the sciences. My major was nutritional biochemistry (with minors in biochemistry and international nutrition). I finished my Ph.D. in December 1982 and graduated in May 1983. But for me, a Cornell Ph.D. was not enough. I continued to pursue more education and eventually obtained multiple graduate degrees.

After finishing Cornell in my mid-20s, I told myself, "Boy, I am a really smart guy. I can make millions of dollars with this intellect." I became hyper-ambitious and could not wait to enter the ranks of corporate America.

I accepted a position at Ralston Purina in St. Louis, Missouri, and within two years was offered a position, "that I could not refuse," by a multi-billion-dollar company, Degussa Chemicals (now known as Evonik). Within two years, Degussa moved me to their world headquarters

near Frankfurt, Germany to obtain some international experience. In 1989, I was a division VP for Degussa working on a joint venture with ADM, during which I became friends with several top executives who eventually offered me a new position. Within a few years, I was positioned to take over as COO and president. That was the plan, until everything changed.



*Photo by Mackenzie Marco on Unsplash*



## Going Undercover

After confessing my role in this international price-fixing scheme, I agreed to work undercover for the FBI. Working undercover was an extremely stressful life—a life at odds with itself. For example, I acted like a loyal executive, building the company during the day, and tearing it down during the evenings. I would meet the FBI at 6 a.m. when they would shave my chest in order to tape mini microphones and check the batteries in the tape recorders that were in my brief case and a special FBI notebook. I would record my peers during the day, and then meet the FBI at various hotels from 6 p.m. to midnight in order to turn over the tapes and endure what seemed to be endless debriefings.

The price-fixing meetings were not held just in ADM's headquarters in Decatur, Illinois. These



*Image by David Mark from Pixabay*

meetings were conducted all around the world: Paris, Mexico City, Vancouver, Hong Kong, and Zurich to name a few places, and I recorded them all with three audio devices. But the federal prosecutors not only wanted the jury to hear what was going on; they wanted them to see the illegal scheme unfolding. Following us around the world was a special FBI lamp that looked like it was purchased at a yard sale. It made all of the

videotapes. I would let the FBI know where and when the meetings would be held, and agents would make sure the green lamp was placed strategically in the room prior to the meeting. It is a good thing all of the co-conspirators were men. A woman would have immediately noticed that this green lamp did not match the five-star décor of a Shangri-La Hotel in Singapore, nor the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Hong Kong, or the Four Seasons Hotel in Chicago. And a woman would have noticed that this peculiar green lamp was following us around the world. But greed will blind you. We had men stealing billions of dollars, and they did not notice what was going on only a few feet from them.

When we met in Tokyo, the FBI thought the Japanese government might try to protect Japanese companies, if they knew they were under investigation. Several of the co-conspirator companies were headquartered in Japan. Therefore, for this meeting I had a very small Radio Shack tape recorder that used 90-minute micro-cassette tapes. Our meetings lasted at least three hours, so I was constantly looking at my watch and running to the restroom every 45 minutes to turn the tape over. I was the only one running to the restroom like clockwork. No one noticed!

## ***Decisions Made in Isolation***



After two years of wearing the wire, I was spent. I did not know if I worked for the FBI or for ADM. I was totally confused and spiraling out of control, almost like a nervous breakdown. Once during a horrific thunderstorm, I took a leaf blower to our driveway at 3:00 a.m., trying to clear the leaves to keep up appearances. I was even in my shirt and tie. Ginger heard the noise from the bedroom window and came out to the driveway under an umbrella.

She yelled to me, “You need to come back into the house. You need to come back to your family. More than anything, you need to have God in your life.”

“Who needs God?” I retorted. “I am going to be the next president of the 56<sup>th</sup> largest company in America.”

She looked as angry as I have ever seen her. Like she has said on several TV interviews over the years, “Divorce was never an option, but murder was.”

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She said, “I am proud of what you are doing, the fact that you are working with the FBI, but you are not going to be president of ADM. You need to get that fact through your mind. You will not be able to stay at ADM after they learn you are the mole. You are bringing the top three executives above you down; they are likely to go to jail. You will be fired once they learn what you’ve done. You need to realize that fact.”

She left me in the driveway, and I knew she was right. I would not be able to stay at ADM. I could not imagine living without that position and income. It was as though I was addicted to success. I was obsessed with material things. I began to think how I was going to protect myself.

I concluded I could steal what would have been my severance pay, \$9.5 million. But what would happen if ADM learned of my plot to steal this money? If they accused me, I thought that I had the perfect answer. How can you prosecute me for stealing millions when you are stealing billions? And you are forcing me to be a part of this illegal price-fixing scheme! Therefore, I felt immune, and I decided to submit several bogus invoices to ADM from companies that I owned, until they paid me \$9.5 million. Of course, I consulted no one, not even Ginger. I felt protected, but I was actually isolated and wounded. “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end...” In retrospect, I should have talked to someone.

## ***Whistleblower Exposed***

In return for wearing a wire, I had received full immunity from any criminal case as long as I did not break any other laws that the FBI was not already aware of. As soon as ADM learned that I was the informant in June 1995, they immediately contacted the FBI and the media and notified them that I was no white knight. I had stolen \$9.5 million. The gig was up. I lost the immunity agreement.

The agents with whom I worked for almost three years had every reason to reject me, but amazingly, they still supported me. They helped me obtain an excellent lawyer. They worked behind the scenes to help me get a plea deal, arguing the following with the prosecutors:

- Mark Whitacre is the highest-ranked executive in U.S. history to become a whistleblower. If we prosecute him, how will the FBI ever get another whistleblower to come forward?
- Mark made some very poor decisions, but he made those decisions when he was mentally unstable.
- When FBI agents go undercover, they are trained for years to do that kind of work and they also get the full benefit of having mental health counseling to help them deal with the double life. Mark received absolutely no training or counseling.

After the prosecutors heard from the agents and my lawyer, they agreed to a three-year plea deal, but there was more. The deal included a sentencing hearing where the agents would make the same arguments to the judge that were presented to the prosecutors. In the end, my lawyer felt that I would get a six-month prison sentence. He called Ginger and me to his Chicago office to review the details of “the deal of a lifetime.” There, I proved I was still my own worst enemy. I rejected the deal and fired my attorney. I hired new attorneys and started preparing for trial. One year later, I received a 10½ year sentence instead.

I could have taken my Chicago attorney’s counsel in humility. I should have been broken at that point. The decisions that I made—isolated in my own mind—were coming back to haunt me. How would I survive a decade in prison? How would my family survive? I was losing all hope.

## ***Lost All Hope***

There is no parole in the federal system. Defendants may receive a 15% reduction from their sentence for good behavior, but parole was removed in the mid-1980’s. That meant I was going to spend eight years and eight months in federal prison.

My biggest fear was the impact on my family. How would they go on without me? Would they go on without me? I had already



*Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay*

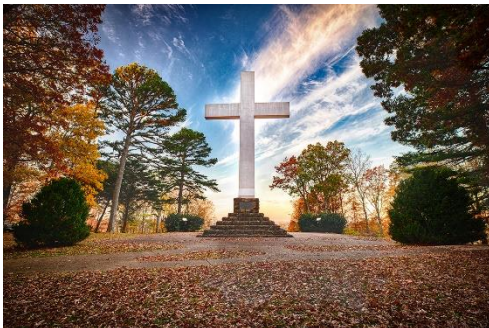
missed so much of their lives. I was going to prison at age 41 and would be released at 49. When I was undercover, I had the early morning and late night routine combined with working all day at ADM. I rarely saw my children. Alex was twelve when I went to prison. Tanya was a freshman in college, and Bill was only four months from high school graduation. My selfishness and pride had robbed my family of the stability and security a father should provide.

99% of those incarcerated five years or more were divorced. There was no way my marriage would survive this ordeal. What would they do to support themselves? Ginger had not worked for over a decade, and we had lost everything in the ADM case: the house, the cars, the stock, and our savings. I wondered if I would ever be employed as a convicted felon. And on top of these family concerns, I wondered if those four FBI agents would ever forgive me for deceiving them?

In the months before entering prison, I was emotionally and spiritually bankrupt. I did not want to live and doubted that I deserved to. I knew my life insurance policy would grant a death benefit if I took my own life, so believing there was no other solution, I attempted suicide twice which landed me in the hospital, spiraling deeper into depression to the point that I was diagnosed and treated for bipolar disorder.

## ***An Ambassador for Christ Shows Up***

I was living in Chapel Hill, N.C., at the time, working as the CEO of another biotech company, not



*Jamie Gilliam - BandboxCreative.*

ADM. A man named Ian Howes, who worked as a CFO in the same industry, had read about my case and my suicide attempts. He was part of a business men's group called Christian Business Men's Connection (CBMC). In September of 1997, Ian reached out to me and became a friend. He showed genuine interest in me as a person and listened to my story without condemning. There was something different about this man, which I had not seen in other friendships.

He was there when all of my other friends had deserted me. As we got together, we read the Bible and used a remarkable study called *Operation Timothy*. He caused me to consider the claims of Christ. Who He was? What did He do? What difference does it make? Ian also caused me to consider my purpose in life, and he gave me my first glimmer of hope in that desperate time. He spent time with me each week planting seeds of the Gospel that would ultimately lead me to Christ.

During my time that I was learning from Ian in 1997, I also researched extensively what other



scientists had to say about God; scientists whom I had great respect. Since I am a Ph.D. scientist, it was important to me to learn the opinions of other scientists. It impacted me when I learned that Albert Einstein concluded that God created the universe and man, and that Einstein thought the big bang theory was impossible. The same held true for Sir Isaac Newton. Isaac Newton was another scientist whom I had great respect. Newton saw God as the master creator whose existence could not be denied in the face of the grandeur of all creation.

On March 4, 1998, I entered federal prison in Springfield, Missouri as inmate number 07543-424. Shortly thereafter, I was transferred to the prison in Yazoo, Mississippi. Chuck Colson, President Nixon's "hatchet man" and founder of Prison Fellowship, reached out to me and came to visit me. Chuck became one of my mentors along with Ian Howes, sharing the same truths from the Bible that Ian had taught me. He said God loved me and no matter what mistakes I had made, God could forgive me. At first, I had thought that the damage I had done and mistakes that I had made were too huge for God to forgive. In the Bible, it says, *"But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness"* (1 John 1: 9 NLT). They both told me how God sent His only Son, Jesus, to live on the earth and die on the Cross in order to pay the penalty for my sins so I might be made right with God. For all of my sins, not just those I committed at ADM. For the first time I realized from the Bible that I could go to heaven and have eternal life by putting my faith in what Jesus accomplished on the cross and believing He had been raised from the dead. In John 3:16 it says, *"For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life"* (NLT).

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about going to church every Sunday or what I did or didn't do, it was about a relationship with God. In June 1998 in a prison cell, I got on my knees and admitted to God that I am a sinner, and I asked God to forgive me. I told God that I fully understand that His son, Jesus, came to earth to die on a cross for my sins. That day, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1998, for the first time in my life, I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ. At last, I had peace.

Although I was only three months into a decade-long sentence, for the first time in my life, I was content. My life's void, which I had tried to fill with money, mansions, cars and business success, was now satisfied. Before entering prison, I thought prison would be the end of my life, only to find that it was the beginning of my life. I placed my burdens on God's shoulders, trusting that He was going to take care of things. Unlike the first forty-one years of my life, from that day forward I would strive to know Him, love Him and serve Him in making all decisions with prayer and His guidance.

## ***Miracles Indeed Happen***

I gave my life to Christ Jesus and started an amazing journey. Obviously, I was still suffering the consequences of my actions, but right away God took away the depression and thoughts of suicide and replaced it with peace, contentment, and hope. He followed that with miracles.

**First, God preserved my marriage.** You will recall that 99% of those incarcerated five years or longer get divorced. I was incarcerated almost double that time, and not only did my marriage survive, it thrived. Over the course of my sentence, I was relocated 3 times, and each time my wife and children moved near the prison and visited me every week. The visiting hours in federal prison camps are from 5 pm to 8 pm on Friday evenings and 8 am to 3 pm on Saturday and Sundays. Basically 17 hours per weekend. My family came every Friday, Saturday, Sunday and holiday for nine years. Ginger never missed. Another author who wrote a book about my case calculated the days Ginger spent visiting me: three years and eight months! Because of her faith in Jesus Christ, her love for me never wavered. Ginger has put a whole new meaning to “Stand by your man.” No one can tell me it is not a miracle that I am still married.



**Second, God provided for my family while I was in prison.** In August of 1998, Ken Adams, an attorney from a prestigious law firm in Washington, D.C., contacted Ginger to inform her that companies such as Tyson Foods, Pepsi, Coca-Cola and Kraft, who had won hundreds of millions of dollars in class action suits against ADM, wanted to assist our family while I was in prison. They set up a trust fund that allowed Ginger to go back to college to finish her degree. She became an elementary school teacher and was teacher of the year in 2007 in Pensacola, Florida. The trust fund also assisted with our children’s college education, house payments and other bills. So the victims of a fraud case assisted the perpetrator’s family.

**Thirdly, God gave me another job.** Even with a Ph.D. in biochemistry, I would be coming out of prison a convicted felon and forty-nine years old. At 8 a.m. on December 21, 2006, I was released from prison. On the following day, I was hired by Paul Willis, CEO of Cypress Systems, Inc. Paul Willis is a Christian CEO on the Advisory Board of the Fresno CBMC, and Cypress is a biotech company dedicated to cancer research. For me to be hired back into this industry so quickly (and to be hired into a company with a Christian CEO) was indeed another one of God’s miracles. During the past few years, I have also become very active in CBMC (Christian Business Mens Connection), as a Marketplace Ambassador, presenting my testimony at Annual Mayor’s Prayer Breakfast events around the country. In addition, I present my story of redemption and second chances at other business events around the country.

**Fourthly, how would those four FBI agents ever forgive me?** Although I betrayed FBI agents



and stole \$9.5 million while under the immunity agreement, the government was able to successfully prosecute their case against the top executives of ADM. Shortly after I entered prison, some of the FBI agents contacted me and some even visited me in prison. They have become some of my strongest supporters. Today, all four of these FBI agents and a former prosecutor have written letters to the White House in support of a full presidential pardon. Over the past few years, I have often conducted training sessions for the FBI on going undercover, and in 2011 was the guest speaker at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. And during the past couple years, the FBI agents have conducted numerous TV and other media interviews including a 2010 Discovery Channel documentary where they “tout Mark Whitacre publicly as a national hero for his substantial assistance with one of the most important white-collar cases in history.” These FBI interviews are archived on website: [www.markwhitacre.com](http://www.markwhitacre.com). I am certainly no hero, but I appreciate the FBI’s support and count it a miracle.

Of course, a presidential pardon would be welcome. I have paid my debt to society for my crimes at ADM: the 9-year sentence for my family and me, the humiliation, the loss of all our material wealth, comfort and financial security. But those nine years did not pay for sins, for my rebellion against God. In other words, the punishment given to me by the U.S. Government did not deal with the fact that I am a sinner who needs God’s forgiveness. The Bible says, “*It’s your sins that have cut you off from God*” (Isaiah 5:2a NLT). Because of God’s grace and the price that Christ paid for my sins, I have been eternally pardoned. A signed pardon by a U.S. President would pale in comparison.

God has handled my burdens. He has changed my life. I was once obsessed with climbing the corporate ladder and possessed by greed, and now I find great joy in serving others. While in prison, I taught inmates how to read, conducted GED classes and helped several inmates write letters to their family members. I was also able to mentor numerous men using CBMC’s *Operation Timothy*. I can truly say that I was happier in prison making \$20 per month helping others, than in the corporate world earning 7-figures for myself. But, understand that I live each day with the collateral consequences of my crimes – especially knowing that I put my family through nine years of hell.



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Although you may not have deceived the FBI or stolen millions, you are a sinner and your sins separate you from God just as my sins separated me from Him. “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). Good works, money, philosophy, or religion will not make you good enough to have a relationship with God or go to heaven. God is perfect, and we have to be perfect or without sin to get into heaven.

Let me give you an analogy from the biotech industry of how we can never achieve perfection. At ADM, one of the main products in our division was lysine. Lysine is an amino acid used as a food and feed additive. Our competitors' lysine had 99% purity. We had an advantage of 99.5% purity and enjoyed the reputation of having the best lysine in the industry. We tried for even higher purity, but no matter what we did, it was impossible to reach 100% purity. In the same way, it is impossible for us to attain the perfection that God requires.

But God provided the solution. Jesus Christ bridged the separation between mankind and God when He died on the cross and was raised from the dead. "God is on one side and all the people on the other side, and Jesus Christ, Himself man, is between them to bring them together" (1 Timothy 2:5 TLB). Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father [God], except through me" (John 14:6).

I was living the best life this world has to offer, and I now know that it was not life. On that day in 1998 in my prison cell when I asked for forgiveness and accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord, I experienced redemption and started living. It says in 1 John 5:11-12 (NLT), "And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life."

Have you experienced real life, true redemption? If not, the decision is yours. Invite Jesus Christ into your life by this simple prayer:

*Dear God,  
I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness.  
I believe that you sent Jesus, who died on the cross and rose from the dead, to pay the penalty for my sins.  
I now invite Jesus Christ to come into my heart and life as my personal Savior. I ask You to forgive me for my sins, and I receive Your gift of eternal life.  
It is in Jesus' name that I accept this gift. Amen*



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