

Did U.S. agency smuggle guns to Mexico to justify its budget? Jeff Knox wonders if death of border agent could spell end of ATF

By Jeff Knox WorldNetDaily 1 22 2011
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The death of a U.S. Border Patrol agent north of Nogales, Ariz., on December 14, 2010 might turn out to be the death knell for the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, or ATF.

Allegations have surfaced suggesting that one of the guns used by Mexican bandits during the firefight in which Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry was killed might have been smuggled into Mexico with the knowing assistance of ATF officials. If these allegations prove to be true, it is quite possible that the long troubled agency could be dismantled. Even if there proves to be no connection with Agent Terry's death, the scrutiny generated by an investigation could crash the agency.

There are actually four separate but connected accusations against ATF officials: First, that they intentionally arranged to have hundreds of firearms "walked" across the U.S. border into Mexico. Second, that they instructed U.S. gun dealers to proceed with questionable and illegal sales of firearms to suspected gunrunners. Third, that they intentionally withheld information about U.S.-sanctioned gun smuggling from the Mexican government. Fourth, that one of the guns ATF allowed or helped to be smuggled into Mexico was involved in the death of Agent Terry.

The accusations first arose on an ATF insider Internet forum called www.CleanUpATF.org, where suggestions of these possible misdeeds were characterized as rumors, speculation and "word on the street."

The forum is a gathering place for disgruntled ATF employees frustrated with ATF management and aimed at rooting out waste, fraud, abuse and managerial malfeasance.

After the initial rumors were picked up by Internet blogger Mike Vanderboegh of SipseystreetIrregulars.blogspot.com and David Codrea of WaronGuns.blogspot.com and Examiner news, more information began trickling out, and Codrea and Vanderboegh began receiving independent and credible corroboration of the rumors.

At this point the two claim that there are government employees prepared to step forward with personal knowledge and documentation to prove some or all of the accusations, but that the whistleblowers fear reprisals and are seeking official protection from someone in Congress before turning over their information. So far members of Congress are running in the opposite direction.

The ATF has a long history of abuse, overreaching, show-boating and deception. Repeated examples of botched raids, raids on wrong addresses, bad shootings and wrongful prosecutions were brought out in congressional testimony in the late 1970s, garnering the agency rebukes and budget cuts from outraged members of Congress.

Accusations of individual agent abusiveness and managerial incompetence continued through the '80s and '90s. In 1992 ATF initiated the tragedy at Ruby Ridge in which Randy Weaver's wife Vicki and 14-year old son Sammy were killed by federal agents and Weaver and his friend Kevin Harris were both seriously wounded. A Federal Marshall was also killed – all over an ATF accusation that Weaver had sold an informant two shotguns with barrels a quarter-inch shorter than the law allows.

It was also ATF that instigated the assault on the Branch Davidian Church outside Waco, Texas, in 1993, which resulted in the deaths of 4 ATF agents and some 82 men, women and children. These two incidents were later identified as the primary impetus for the 1995 terrorist bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

In recent years ATF has engaged in high-profile, expensive and notably fruitless sting operations against the Hell's Angels and other "outlaw" motorcycle clubs; and most recently they have been in the spotlight as federal officials including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Attorney General Eric Holder and President Barack Obama have claimed that over 90 percent of Mexican crime guns were illegally trafficked into Mexico from the U.S. That over-inflated hyperbole led to the creation of Project Gunrunner, an ATF-led initiative that was supposed to reduce arms trafficking across the border.

Last year the Justice Department Inspector General's office issued a scathing report declaring Project Gunrunner a dismal failure. ATF responded by requesting more money and manpower to beef up the project and backed up the requests with new, better-supported statistics.

Speculation abounds that the alleged funneling of guns into Mexico by ATF (dubbed "Project Gunwalker") was done to bolster trace numbers specifically to justify bigger budgets for Project Gunrunner and/or to lend credibility to informants attempting to infiltrate gun smuggling operations.

Whatever the objectives, if the allegations prove to be true, ATF is not likely to survive. The agency has been without a confirmed director for over 6 years. Their explosives operations are already being absorbed by the FBI, and there have been other takeover rumbles from the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The charges of concealing the smuggling operation from Mexican officials extend up to the highest levels of ATF leaving no place for officials to hide.

At this point everything hinges on whether some member of Congress will step up and offer protection to the whistleblowers so the facts can be brought out into the open.