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FARAGO: Was CIA behind Operation Fast and Furious?

New and troubling motive for Team Obama's illegal gunrunning scheme

By Robert Farago and Ralph Dixon

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 Illustration: Fast and Furious by Alexander Hunter for The Washington Times

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Why did the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) let criminals buy firearms, smuggle them across the Mexican border and deliver them into the hands of vicious drug cartels? The ATF claims it launched its now-disgraced Operation Fast and Furious in 2009 to catch the "big fish." Fast and Furious was designed to stem the "Iron River" flowing from American gun stores into the cartels' arsenals. The bureau says it allowed gun smuggling so it could track the firearms and arrest the cartel members downstream. Not true.

During the course of Operation Fast and Furious, about 2,000 weapons moved from U.S. gun stores to Mexican drug cartels - exactly as intended.

In congressional testimony, William Newell, former ATF special agent in charge of the Phoenix Field Division, testified that the Internal Revenue Service, Drug Enforcement Administration and Immigration and Customs Enforcement were "full partners" in Operation Fast and Furious. Mr. Newell's list left out the most important player: the CIA. According to a CIA insider, the agency had a strong hand in creating, orchestrating and exploiting Operation Fast and Furious.

The CIA's motive is clear enough: The U.S. government is afraid the Los Zetas drug cartel will mount a successful coup d'etat against the government of Felipe Calderon.

Founded by ex-Mexican special forces, the Zetas already control huge swaths of Mexican territory. They have the organization, arms and money needed to take over the entire country.

Former CIA pilot Robert Plumlee and former CIA operative and DEA Director Phil Jordan recently said the brutally efficient Mexican drug cartel has stockpiled thousands of weapons to disrupt and influence Mexico's national elections in 2012. There's a very real chance the Zetas cartel could subvert the political process completely, as it has throughout the regions it controls.

In an effort to prevent a Los Zetas takeover, Uncle Sam has gotten into bed with the rival Sinaloa cartel, which has close ties to the Mexican military. Recent court filings by former Sinaloa cartel member Jesus Vicente Zambada Niebla, currently in U.S. custody, reveal that the United States allowed the Sinaloas to fly a 747 cargo plane packed with cocaine into American airspace - unmolested.

The CIA made sure the trade wasn't one-way. It persuaded the ATF to create Operation Fast and Furious - a "no strings attached" variation of the agency's previous firearms sting. By design, the ATF operation armed the Mexican government's preferred cartel on the street level near the American border, where the Zetas are most active.

Operation Fast and Furious may not have been the only way the CIA helped put lethal weapons into the hands of the Sinaloa cartel and its allies, but it certainly was an effective strategy. If drug thugs hadn't murdered Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry with an ATF- provided weapon, who knows how many thousands more guns would have crossed the U.S. border?

To be sure, Operation Fast and Furious suited the ATF's needs. It was all too willing to let guns walk to increase its power, prestige and budget in Washington. It actively recruited so-called straw purchasers and happily used American gun dealers as pawns. And it was only one agency in a mosaic of federal agencies helping the CIA actualize its covert plans.

The fact that Operation Fast and Furious was part of the CIA's black-bag job in Mexico does not excuse the ATF for violating the very federal laws it was created to enforce; for contributing to the deaths of hundreds of innocent citizens, including a Border Patrol agent trying to live up to his oath; or for being unrepentant, uncooperative and unresponsive to the wishes of the American people for honesty, integrity and loyalty to the U.S. Constitution.

Nor should the FBI get a free pass for subverting the criminal-background-check system designed to prevent illegal firearms purchases. The Drug Enforcement Administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Internal Revenue Service, the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department - all major players in the CIA's grand schemes - should not escape scrutiny, either. In fact, we should not shrug off the activities of any of our federal agencies that broke the law on the Sinaloa's - and thus the Mexican government's - behalf.

The Obama administration clearly thinks the entire federal government should help keep the profoundly corrupt Calderon government in power - no matter what. If that means sending lawyers, guns and money to unconscionable criminals, so be it. In this, Obama officials are wrong.

By choosing sides in a brutal war between opposing criminal syndicates rather than sealing our southern border, the Obama administration is fueling brutality and carnage and killing any hope of Mexican democracy. All that aside, either we are a nation of laws or we are not. If we live by our principles, Congress must appoint a special prosecutor to investigate the people in the Obama administration who enabled this reckless gun scheme.

Robert Farago is managing editor of thetruthaboutguns.com, where Ralph Dixon is a contributing writer.

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