
From: Schmalzer, Tracy (SMO)
To: Attorney General Grindler, Gary (OAG); Phillips, Channing D. (OAG)
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Turned out well. Michele and Pat were really helpful.

Todd Jones joins an agency shaken by guns scandal

By Sari Horwitz, Thursday, September 1, 12:35 PM

He is a former Marine who has twice served as the first African American U.S. attorney in Minnesota. He's a movie buff who likes to show clips from films during meetings to explain a point. He's the father of five, a University of Minnesota law school graduate and a former military judge advocate.

B. (Byron) Todd Jones, 54, the man chosen to head the embattled Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, is also a seasoned prosecutor who chairs an advisory committee of U.S. attorneys across the country for Attorney General Eric Holder.

"Todd is a man of unquestionable integrity and ethical values," said St. Paul Police Chief Thomas Smith, who has known Jones for years. "To be a good leader, you've got to be a great listener. That's one of his main strengths.

Jones, along with Holder, is holding a town-hall meeting Thursday for ATF employees. He's stepping into an agency rocked by the scandal of the controversial Operation Fast and Furious gun trafficking operation. What began in Arizona as an ambitious plan to follow guns bought by illegal "straw-purchasers" into the hierarchy of the Sinaloa Mexican drug cartel resulted in a seven-months-long congressional investigation.

The fury over tactics, which allowed 2,000 firearms to hit the streets, led to the reassignment Tuesday of ATF acting director Kenneth Melson and the resignation of Arizona U.S. Attorney Dennis Burke, along with the reassignment of an Arizona prosecutor and several top ATF officials. The Justice Inspector General is probing the botched sting, as are Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) and Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), who has held several hearings into the year-long sting.

In an interview with The Washington Post, Jones acknowledged the damage to ATF, saying that the agency has "seen a rough period in the recent past." Jones said he is "excited" about getting to work to rebuild the agency's morale.

"Nobody does violent crime work like ATF," Jones said. "I'm prepared to stay as long as it takes to provide leadership and focus and get them back on their primary law enforcement mission. They're good at what they do and they need to hear that from somebody who's coming straight from the field."

Drug Enforcement Administration head Michele Leonhart said Jones is widely respected in the law enforcement community and praised him for his leadership and collaboration on cases they both worked involving Mexican drug trafficking to the Midwest.

Patrick J. Fitzgerald, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, who has worked closely with Jones, said that ATF agents and Congress will be impressed with Jones's leadership.

"Todd is a natural leader and a very straight shooter," Fitzgerald said. "It's in his bones. The agents will find someone who listens to their concerns, takes it all in, comes to a decision and moves forward."

Jones will commute between Washington and Minneapolis, where he remains the U.S. attorney. Appointed by President Obama in 2009, he also served in the same position under President Clinton.

This arrangement is not unprecedented. Then-acting ATF director Michael J. Sullivan, nominated by President George W. Bush, remained U.S. attorney in Boston and juggled both jobs.

But Sullivan, along with several other ATF nominees over the past six years, was never confirmed by Congress to head the agency. The ATF has been without a permanent director since 2006 when Congress required the position to be confirmed by the Senate. That allows the powerful gun lobby to block a director because one senator can hold up a nomination.

Jones is not Obama's nominee to head ATF; he moves into his new job as the interim acting director and does not face a confirmation battle. The president's nominee is Andrew Traver, a 24-year ATF veteran who oversees the bureau's Chicago office. His nomination has been stalled in the Senate since November because Traver raised the ire of the gun lobby with comments they have criticized as anti-firearms. The National Rifle Association has said Traver is linked to gun-control advocates and anti-gun activities.

An NRA spokesman Wednesday would not comment on Jones but said the NRA "continues to be outraged" by Fast and Furious.

"While the administration may think they are pulling a bait and switch with Congress by appeasing them by reassigning Melson and Burke, the simple fact is there were thousands of guns sold to a murderous drug cartel," said Andrew Arulanandam, director of public affairs for the NRA.

Issa also focused on the botched gun operation in a statement he released about Jones's appointment. "He certainly has a

challenge ahead of him healing ATF and rebuilding lost trust," Issa said.

For his part, Jones said he's "psyched" to get to work. And yes, movie buff that he is, he has a favorite film in mind: "Twelve O'Clock High," the 1949 picture starring Gregory Peck about a combat unit where the morale is low after the unit has gone through a rough patch.

"As we move forward, we face a more important challenge than what's been going on outside of ATF these last several months — what's going on inside ATF," Jones wrote in an e-mail to all ATF employees. "We have important work to do and that is what I want you to focus on — and what I will be focused on in the coming months."