

The Drug-Gun Cycle

The drug war in Mexico has been headlining the news as of late. Drug trafficking gangs have become so powerful that they threaten to destabilize the Mexican government. The violence has spilled over to the US. Those who promulgate anti-immigrant propaganda have exploited this drug war to their advantage, suggesting that illegal immigration is at the heart of the problem. Not only is this an inaccurate characterization of the root cause, it also focuses on only half the cycle; while drugs are going north, guns are going south. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) has reported that 90 percent of guns found in Mexico can be tracked back to the US.¹ This may finally be starting to change; the head of Homeland Security has met with her counterpart in Mexico to discuss this very issue.²

The Mexican drug traffickers are obtaining their firearms in the US, often illegally, and are smuggling them into Mexico. Because the guns are being obtained here, the US has jurisdiction to either improve enforcement of existing gun laws or create new laws to combat the transfer of weapons to Mexico. Mexico and the US also need to develop solid policies on dealing with gun trade.

Anti-immigration proponents are seizing the opportunity to demonize immigrants. They suggest that the problem will be solved for the United States by simply fortifying the border, isolating ourselves as much as possible from our third largest trading partner³. The governor of Texas is attempting border fortification with State Troops and has asked the President for additional troops to place along the border.⁴ Until recently there has been no indication that the governor has stepped up enforcement of gun control nor that he has acknowledged the role of American firearms in the equation.

In a recent discussion with reporter Andrea Mitchell about the increased dialog between the US and Mexico on the drug issue (and we hope the gun issue) conservative pundit Pat Buchanan quickly equated the challenges these problems are bringing both countries into a fight against the takeover of the US by Mexico.⁵ To her credit, two days later Ms. Mitchell challenged Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as to why the federal government was not taking up the ban on assault rifles in order to quell the trade and violence. Clinton admitted that she thought that assault

¹ Congressional Research Service Report to Congress, *The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF): Budget and Operations*, May 30, 2008, available at http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL34514_20080530.pdf

² Christian Science Monitor, *US targets gun flows into Mexico in bid to stem drug violence*, April 2, 2009. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0402/p06s04-woam.html>

³ US Census Bureau, February 2009, <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/top/dst/current/balance.html>

⁴ Press release, Office of Rick Perry, Governor of Texas, Perry Signs MOU to Authorize National Guard Troops on Border, June 2, 2009. <http://governor.state.tx.us/news/press-release/4908/>

⁵ He stated, "Mexico is the greatest foreign-policy crisis I think America faces in the next 20-30 years. Who is gonna care, Andrea, thirty years from now whether a Sunni or a Shi'a is in Baghdad, or who's ruling in Kabul? We're going to have 135 million Hispanics living in the United States by 2050, heavily concentrated in the Southwest. The question is whether we're going to survive as a country." Andrea Mitchell's interview on MSNBC, March 24, 2009.

weapons should not be allowed on anyone's streets.⁶ Unfortunately, she also said the administration would not take on the gun lobby while the economy is so much more the center of concern. It seems inconsistent to argue that gun control must wait for an improvement in the economy when Governor Perry is asking for an additional \$135 million⁷ to increase fortification of the Texas-Mexico border due to the Mexican drug war.

It is interesting to note the overlap between many of those who so staunchly assert their second amendment right and those who are anti-immigrant. They are also the same who insist that there is already a civil war in Mexico and that illegal immigrants will soon be overflowing the border. On February 23, 2009 Dan Patrick, State Senator from Texas, went on Fox News and said hundreds of thousands are coming any moment and Texas will be ready to stop them, even if the federal government isn't.

Yet if the laws are not upheld and stricter gun controls put in place this cycle will only continue. Using illegal immigration as a scapegoat in this situation distracts the press and the public from looking into gun control and also leads to isolationism in a time when cooperation between the US and Mexican authorities is more important than ever.

⁶ Andrea Mitchell's Interview on the Today Show, March 26, 2009.

⁷ Press release, Office of Rick Perry, Statement by Gov. Rick Perry on the Obama Administration's Plan to Combat Mexican Drug Cartels, March 24, 2009, <http://governor.state.tx.us/news/press-release/12119/>