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## U.S. Gun Laws: Mexico's Favorite Scapegoat For Drug Violence

Posted by **Ted Galen Carpenter** May 28th 2011 at 5:23 am in **Border Security, Featured Story, Justice/Legal, Obama** | **Comments (23)**

The body count in Mexico's drug wars keeps rising, now approaching 40,000 since President Felipe Calderón took office in late 2006. Growing public anger about that horrific situation leads Mexican officials to look for scapegoats, and a favorite candidate has clearly emerged: supposedly lax U.S. gun laws. Again and again, the Mexican government contends that 90 percent of the weapons seized from the drug cartels "originate" in the United States.



Calderón's first attorney general, Eduardo Medina Mora, typified the view that U.S. firearms laws are responsible for the drug-related violence in his country. He **fumed** that "American laws are absurd," because "they make it very easy for citizens to acquire guns." During his May 2010 visit to the United States, which included a summit meeting with President Obama, Calderón himself **asserted**: "If you look carefully, you will notice that the violence in Mexico started to grow a couple of years before I took office in 2006. This coincides, at least, with the lifting of the assault weapons ban in 2004."

U.S. advocates of strict gun control measures echo the Mexican government's arguments. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton epitomized that approach during a trip to Mexico in March 2009. On her arrival in Mexico City she **said**: "Our inability to prevent weapons from being illegally smuggled across the border to arm these criminals causes the deaths of police officers, soldiers, and civilians." During a subsequent trip to Mexico in January 2011, Clinton emphasized that the U.S. government was committed to cracking down on weapons smuggling, and she pledged \$60 million in the forthcoming fiscal year for new measures.

Although some of the more destructive weapons the drug cartels use do originate in the United States, that does not mean that they come from purchases at unethical sporting goods stores or gun shows. Many of those weapons, including an increasing cartel favorite—grenades—typically **come from** military depots that the United States government helped fill for friendly Central American regimes during the Cold War. Washington was so concerned about Soviet penetration of that region during the 1980s that it sent shipment after shipment of high-powered weapons to the governments of such countries as El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to use against left-wing insurgents. Records indicate, for example, that at least 300,000 grenades were sent to the region during the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

When the Cold War ended, unused grenades remained in the armories of those countries. But now more and more of them are finding their way into the hands of Mexican drug trafficking organizations. Such weapons typically sell for \$100 to \$500 apiece on a vigorous black market. And they are being used with greater and greater frequency. Mexican authorities seized more than 5,800 grenades from 2007 to mid 2010, but they concede that number is a tiny fraction of the total at the disposal of the cartels. **More than 90 percent of them are at least 20 years old**, meaning that they were manufactured during the Cold War period. Although most originated in the United States, some came from the Soviet bloc, probably part of Moscow's military aid programs to the Marxist regimes in Cuba and Nicaragua.

Even if gun laws in the United States were dramatically tightened, Mexican drug gangs would have little trouble obtaining all the guns—and far more powerful armaments—they desire from black market sources in Mexico and elsewhere. After all, drug traffickers are individuals who make their fortunes operating in a black market involving another product, and they have vast financial resources to purchase whatever they need to conduct their business.

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Enterprising analysts in the United States have even [debunked](#) the Mexican government's assertion that 90 percent of the cartels' weapons originate in the United States. There are credible reasons for skepticism. While the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives continues to say that many guns the cartels use are bought in the United States, primarily in Texas and Arizona, it no longer releases estimates of how many. The reason for the Bureau's reticence? Officials contend that the numbers have become "too politicized." But bureaucracies are rarely shy about presenting data if they're confident that the data support their argument. That unwillingness suggests that the available evidence cannot sustain the figures previously put forth by both the Mexican and U.S. governments, implying that the vast majority of cartel weapons come from sales in the United States.

Even the statistics that the Bureau is willing to release cast serious doubt on the Calderón government's "90

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