

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 9, 2011

## Via Electronic Transmission

The Honorable Eric H. Holder, Jr.  
Attorney General  
U.S. Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Attorney General Holder:

During our meeting on January 31, I provided you with copies of my recent letters to Acting ATF Director Kenneth E. Melson. I had received serious allegations from ATF whistleblowers. ATF agents told my staff that the agency allowed the sale of assault rifles to known and suspected straw purchasers for an illegal trafficking ring near the southwest border. Authorities allegedly recovered two of those weapons at the scene of a fire near the southwest border on December 14, 2010. Customs and Border Protection Agent Brian Terry lost his life in that fire and may have been killed with one of those two rifles. That is why I requested nearly two weeks ago that the ATF brief my staff as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, the reaction to my request has, so far, been little more than delay and denial. I finally received a letter at close of business on Friday, February 4, in response to my request. It came not from the ATF, but from the Justice Department. In that letter, the Department categorically denied that the ATF “knowingly allowed the sale of assault weapons to a straw purchaser...” The Department said the ATF makes “every effort to interdict weapons that have been purchased illegally and prevent their transportation into Mexico.”

However, as I explained in my initial letter to Acting Director Melson, the allegations I received are supported by documentation. It is already public record that federal agents arrested Jaime Avila on December 15, 2010—the very same day that CBP Agent Terry died. The ATF had been tracking Avila’s firearms purchases because Avila was a suspected trafficker since at least November 2009.<sup>1</sup> According to the whistleblowers, at least one gun dealer wanted to stop participating in sales like those to Avila sometime around October 2009. However, the ATF allegedly encouraged the dealer to continue selling to suspected traffickers and asked the dealer to forward information about the sales to the Bureau.

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, “Multiple Sale Summary,” Nov 25, 2009 (Attachment 1).

The dealer who sold the weapons allegedly recovered at the scene of Agent Terry's death met with both ATF representatives and Assistant U.S. Attorneys as early as December 17, 2009 to "discuss his role as [a Federal Firearms Licensee] FFL during this investigation."<sup>2</sup> On January 9, 2010, Jaime Avila bought three more firearms at the same Glendale, Arizona gun dealer and his purchase was entered into an ATF database two days later.<sup>3</sup> By January 13, ATF added Avila to a suspect person database for the investigation.<sup>4</sup> On January 14, ATF entered the firearms Avila purchased five days earlier into the National Tracing Center's Suspect Gun Database.<sup>5</sup>

On January 16, 2010, Avila bought three AK-47 variant, Romanian WASR-10 assault rifles from the same dealer with the serial numbers 1983AH3977, 1979IS1530, and 1971CZ3775.<sup>6</sup> ATF entered these weapons into the National Tracing Center's Suspect Gun Database three days later.<sup>7</sup> Over the next several months, ATF continued to track Avila's multiple firearms purchases in near real-time, including two purchases of .50 caliber rifles in June 2010.<sup>8</sup>

After the shooting of CBP Agent Terry, law enforcement officials recovered from the scene two assault rifles.<sup>9</sup> On December 16, 2010, ATF's trace results confirmed that serial numbers 1983AH3977 and 1971CZ3755 match two of the three rifles purchased by Avila and tracked by the ATF nearly a year earlier.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these specific weapons, the indictment of Avila and others references approximately 769 firearms. Of those, the indictment refers to the recovery of only about 103 weapons. So, where are the other approximately 666 weapons referenced in the indictment? Why did the ATF not seize them?

The Justice Department's reply asked that Committee staff stop speaking to law enforcement personnel about these matters. However, if not for the bravery and patriotism of law enforcement personnel who were willing to put their careers on the line, this Committee would have been forced to rely on nothing more than rumors in the blogosphere and a Justice Department denial to resolve these allegations. We need more than that. To be an effective check on Executive Branch power, we need cold, hard facts. We will seek them from whatever source is necessary.

Unfortunately, the Justice Department's letter suggested that my attempts to seek information about these matters might be politically motivated. I understand the Department needs to "protect ... law enforcement personnel ... from inappropriate

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<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, "Management Log for Case: 785115-10-[redacted]," Dec 17, 2009 (Attachment 2).

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, "Multiple Sale Summary," Jan 11, 2010 (Attachment 3).

<sup>4</sup> E-mail from ATF Program Analyst to ATF Agents, Jan 13, 2010 (Attachment 4).

<sup>5</sup> Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, "Suspect Gun Summary," Jan 14, 2010 (Attachment 5).

<sup>6</sup> Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, "Suspect Gun Summary," Jan 19, 2010 (Attachment 6).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, "Suspect Gun Summary," Jun 8 and Jun 16, 2010 (Attachment 7).

<sup>9</sup> Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, "Significant Information Report," Dec 16, 2010 (Attachment 8).

<sup>10</sup> Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, "Firearms Trace Summaries," Dec 16, 2010 (Attachment 9).

political influence.”<sup>11</sup> However, there is a difference between inappropriate political influence and appropriately holding officials accountable to the American people. I try to conduct non-partisan oversight of the Executive Branch. Regardless of which party controls the White House or the Congress, I do my best to ask tough questions. If you have any evidence that there is anything “inappropriate” about my motives in this matter, please let me know. Otherwise, I respectfully request that the Department avoid such implications in the future.

Finally, I want to share with you a portion of an e-mail from Carolyn Terry, Agent Terry’s stepmother. She wrote yesterday:

It’s hard to accept that our son was shot and murdered with a gun that was bought in the U.S. We have not had any contact from the Border Patrol or any other agents since returning home on the 22nd of [January]. Our calls are not returned. I truly feel that our son’s death is a cover-up and they hope that we will go away. That will not happen. We want to know who allowed the sale of that gun that murdered our son. Any help will [be] appreciated. We are the victims of this case and we want some answers.<sup>12</sup>

The Terry family deserves answers. The whistleblowers have expressed a desire to honor Agent Terry’s memory by disclosing this information. The Justice Department should work to do the same. The best way to honor his memory is to come clean.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley  
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable Patrick Leahy  
Chairman  
United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

The Honorable Robert S. Mueller, III  
Director  
Federal Bureau of Investigation

Kenneth E. Melson  
Acting Director  
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives

The Honorable Alan D. Bersin  
Commissioner  
United States Customs and Border Protection

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<sup>11</sup> Letter from the Justice Department to Senator Charles E. Grassley, Jan 31, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> E-mail from Carolyn Terry, Feb 8, 2011.

# ATTACHMENT 1

**ATF**

# ATTACHMENT 2

Management Log for Case: 785115-10

Case Title

Date: 01/04/2010

User:

<u>Log Date</u>	<u>Log Type</u>	<u>Mgmt Log Text</u>
12/14/2009	INTER AGENCY CONTACT	
12/15/2009	INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY	
12/15/2009	ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIVITY	
12/15/2009	MEETING/CONTACT (SE	
12/16/2009	INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY	
12/16/2009	INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY	
12/16/2009	INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY	
12/17/2009	STATE/LOCAL OVERTURE	
12/17/2009	AUSA/DA CONTACT	
12/17/2009	INTER AGENCY CONTACT	
12/17/2009	INTER AGENCY CONTACT	
12/21/2009	INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY	
12/23/2009	INTER AGENCY CONTACT	
12/23/2009	INTER AGENCY CONTACT	
12/24/2009	AUSA/DA CONTACT	
12/24/2009	FIELD SUPPORT - GENERAL	
12/24/2009	FIELD SUPPORT - GENERAL	
12/24/2009	INTER AGENCY CONTACT	
12/29/2009	INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY	

**ATF**

# ATTACHMENT 3



**ATF**

# ATTACHMENT 4

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# ATF

Please be advised that the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2009, Public L. 111-8, which became effective on March 12, 2009, restricts the disclosure of any part of the contents of the Firearms Tracing System or any information required to be kept by Federal Firearms Licensees pursuant to 18 USC 923(g), or required to be reported pursuant to 18 USC 923(g)(3) and 923(g)(7).

The information, which is being provided per your request, is for official law enforcement use only and may only be disseminated by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to a Federal, State, local, tribal, or foreign law enforcement agency, or a Federal, State, or local prosecutor, solely in connection with and for use in a criminal investigation or prosecution; or a Federal agency for a national security or intelligence purpose. This disclosure restriction shall not be construed to prevent the sharing or exchange of such information among and between Federal, State, local, or foreign law enforcement agencies, Federal, State, or local prosecutors, and Federal national security, intelligence, or counterterrorism officials; or the publication of statistical aggregate data regarding firearms traffickers and trafficking channels, firearms misuse, felons, and trafficking investigations. If you have questions regarding these restrictions please contact ATF legal counsel prior to disclosing any of the information provided in this correspondence outside of ATF.

Please complete the attached OSII Customer Satisfaction Survey form. Click on the "Mail" box located at the bottom of the form and then click on "Send".

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]  
Program Analyst  
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives  
Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information  
Violent Crime Intelligence Division  
Violent Crime Analysis Branch  
Main Office #: (304) [REDACTED]  
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# ATTACHMENT 5

**ATF**

# ATTACHMENT 6

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# ATTACHMENT 7

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# ATTACHMENT 8

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# ATTACHMENT 9

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