



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
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LETTER TO THE EDITOR:
THE 90% MYTH

BY

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OCTOBER 14, 2009

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Letter to the Editor: The 90% Myth

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To the Editor,

An AP article carried in The Houston Chronicle Oct. 1 (“Officials: ATF Effort Help Fights Gun Trafficking”) cited an often quoted, but misleading, statistic in the debate on the magnitude and significance of the role of U.S. weapons in Mexican violence. Specifically, the percentage of weapons recovered in Mexico that originate in the United States is not 90%, but in the neighborhood of 20% to 25%. The 90% figure was primarily derived from congressional testimony of William Neville in April 2009. At the time he stated that of the weapons submitted by Mexico for tracing, which were successfully traced, 90% came from the United States.

Looking at the statistics more closely, they paint a different picture. The statistics required to calculate a figure must be derived from a variety of sources, not all of which correlate precisely, but do correlate approximately. The 2008 CENAPI (Centro Nacional de Planeación, Análisis e Información para el Combate a la Delincuencia, the government of Mexico’s Planning, Analysis and Information Center for Combating Crime) data indicates seizures of 29,824 firearms in Mexico in 2008. Other reports indicate 27,000 to 29,000 weapon seizures. According to the U. S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), in FY 2008, 7,743 firearms were submitted for tracing, and approximately 6,700, or 87%, traced to the United States. Of those successfully traced, two-thirds were U.S.-manufactured and one-third had been imported into the U.S. and trafficked across the border.

While it is clear the United States plays a part, the portion of the responsibility should not be overstated. The figure appears to be closer to 20% to 25%. Other weapons are believed to come from Asia, Europe, South America and the Soviet bloc states.

Increasingly the weapons arriving in Mexico from other source countries are of military grade, as the cartel arms race rages. These military grade weapons are not for sale to individuals in the

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United States; however, to the extent U.S. military weapons have been found, they have most likely been sold to or provided by the U.S. government to the another government and subsequently diverted.

What is the result of the 90% myth? Significant resources are being dedicated to the weapons trafficking along the U.S.-Mexico border, but anecdotal evidence suggests the searches have resulted in more cash than weapons. The increased searches clearly have a valuable deterrent effect, but the more significant weapon issue is that of military grade weapons arriving in Mexico on its shores and from Central American neighbors.

V/r,

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