

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 21, 2024

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Gary R. Barksdale
Chief Postal Inspector
United States Postal Inspection Service

Dear Chief Postal Inspector Barksdale:

Project Thor was a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) led project started in 2018 with operational assistance from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Special Operations Division.¹ According to public reports and legally protected whistleblower disclosures provided to my office, Project Thor was a program that used a whole of government approach to “target U.S. based firearms trafficking networks supplying the cartels in order to shut them down, seize the real property associated and indict, extradite and prosecute the heads of those networks.”² The records provided to my office show that Project Thor partnered with over 16 executive branch agencies while it was operational, including the Department of Homeland Security Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI); U.S. Postal Inspection Service (USPIS); Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); U.S. Marshals Service (USMS); the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, DEA, and Justice Department attorneys.³ Public reports indicate Project Thor was praised for its success and the ATF presented its team with the agency’s Distinguished Service Medal award; however, ATF shutdown and defunded the operation in fiscal year 2022.⁴ I write to you today about your agency’s role in Project Thor and your efforts to support dismantling cartel firearm trafficking networks operating in the U.S and neighboring countries.

An ATF document in my possession shows that Project Thor was designed to limit the ability of Mexican cartels to wage their drug war through violence, terrorism, and intimidation by disrupting their access to U.S. sourced firearms and their financial networks to purchase them.⁵ According to the document, Project Thor used intelligence gained across the U.S. government to illuminate cartel firearms trafficking networks and connected seemingly unrelated law enforcement investigations across the country.⁶ Based on the document, Project Thor’s efforts revealed that cartel led networks across the U.S. are directing the trafficking of firearms to Mexico through networks of straw purchasers, middlemen, and couriers.⁷ The document also states that Project Thor was able to connect and provide support for investigations into cartel financial networks that allowed cartels to fund purchases of weapons in the U.S. and smuggle them to Mexico.⁸ Further, the document shows that Project Thor intended to move cartel by cartel to support the capture and extradition of their members for

¹ E.D. Cauchi, *Mexican Drug Cartels Pay Americans to Smuggle Weapons Across the Border, Intelligence Documents Show*, (Sept. 18, 2023), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mexican-drug-cartels-american-weapons-smuggled-across-border/>.

² *Id.*; Project Thor Briefing Presentation at 3 (on file with Committee staff).

³ *Id.* at 4 (on file with Committee staff).

⁴ Cauchi *supra* note 1.

⁵ Project Thor Briefing Presentation at 19.

⁶ *Id.* at 16.

⁷ *Id.* at 17.

⁸ *Id.* at 16.

prosecution, seizure of assets, and to shut down firearms trafficking pipelines.⁹ The document also shows that Project Thor supported 76 cartel trafficking cases from 2018-2020.¹⁰

Despite these efforts and the several federal agencies involved, CBS News reported on September 18, 2023, that senior Justice Department officials said they were “not familiar” with Project Thor.¹¹ This admission is surprising because email records from July 17, 2020, provided to my office state that ATF HQ asked U.S. officials in Mexico about briefing then U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Christopher Landau and the Deputy Chief of Mission on Project Thor.¹² The email says the briefing would be conducted by the ATF and the DOJ lead on Project Thor.¹³ Further, the email passed on a message from ATF HQ to Ambassador Landau which states they have “several [Jalisco New Generation Cartel] CJNG networks identified and almost all of the guns from the assassination attempt tie back to one of these networks” and it “is a strong indicator that Thor has identified most of the major CJNG weapons trafficking networks.”¹⁴

Legally protected whistleblower disclosures provided to my office identified the assassination attempt referenced in the email as the 2020 attempted assassination of Mexico City’s secretary of public security Omar García Harfuch where a 28 man CJNG hit squad opened fire on his SUV using .50 caliber weapons.¹⁵ The email also passes along ATF HQ’s thanks to Ambassador Landau and his team for their work in obtaining and sharing information uncovered in Mexico related to the assassination attempt.¹⁶ Moreover, email records from July 18, 2021, indicate that DOJ worked to schedule a briefing on Project Thor between September 13-17, 2021 with U.S. Embassy officials in Mexico.¹⁷ The timing of this briefing appears to coincide with the arrival of current U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar who was sworn into office on September 2, 2021.¹⁸

The public reports and records provided to my office indicate Project Thor’s reported success was due in part to a whole of government information sharing strategy with a direct focus on connecting straw purchasers in the U.S. with cartel leadership in Mexico who directed the purchase of firearms in the U.S. and trafficking to Mexico. Reports have described the Biden administration’s U.S. strategy to stop firearms trafficking to Mexico as ineffective and questions have been raised about law enforcement, intelligence, and diplomatic agencies’ commitment to dismantling cartel gunrunning networks operating across the U.S and in neighboring countries.¹⁹

The American people deserve to know more about the Biden administration’s strategy, efforts to share information, and inter-agency collaborations to target cartel firearms networks in the U.S., cut off

⁹ *Id.* at 19

¹⁰ *Id.* at 18.

¹¹ Cauchi *supra* note 1.

¹² Email to Ambassador Christopher Landau and John Creamer, *Project Thor Update*, (July 17, 2020) (on file with Committee staff)

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Kevin Sieff, *Mexico City’s top security official injured in apparent assassination attempt*, Wash. Post (Jun. 26, 2020) https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/omar-garcia-harfuch-mexico-city-attack/2020/06/26/de2e8900-b7bb-11ea-9a1d-d3db1cbe07ce_story.html; BBC World News, *Mexico Launches Raids after Assassination Attempt of Police Chief*, The BBC (Jun. 27, 2020) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-53207372>.

¹⁶ Email to Ambassador Christopher Landau and John Creamer *supra* note 12.

¹⁷ Email to Joshua Rusk, Ned Dixon, and Will Panoke, *Sept 13-17 Thor Briefing*, (Jul. 8, 2021) (on file with Committee staff)

¹⁸ U.S. Mission to Mexico, *U.S. Ambassador to Mexico – Ken Salazar*, Press Release (Jan. 26, 2022) <https://mx.usembassy.gov/u-s-ambassador-to-mexico-ken-salazar/>.

¹⁹ Cauchi *supra* note 1.

their money and seize their assets, and hold all those involved, from straw purchasers to cartel members and leadership, accountable and brought to justice. So that Congress may conduct independent oversight concerning your agency's role in Project Thor and this administration's whole of government strategy and efforts to disrupt and dismantle cartel networks trafficking firearms in the U.S. and neighboring countries, please provide answers to the following no later than April 4, 2024.

1. Provide all records relating to your agencies' role in Project Thor. In addition, please provide a description of that role.
2. How many employees from your agency provided direct support to Project Thor? Provide their position, rank, and title.
3. Provide all records relating to your agency's current role in targeting cartel firearms trafficking networks operating in the U.S and neighboring countries. In addition, please provide a description of that role.
4. How many employees from your agency provide direct support to efforts to disrupt and dismantle cartel firearms trafficking networks operating in the U.S. and neighboring countries? Provide their position, rank, and title.
5. Provide all records relating to your agency's role in ATF's Operation Southbound. In addition, provide a description of that role and participation in the Firearms Trafficking Task Forces.
6. How many employees from your agency provide direct support to ATF's Operation Southbound? Provide their position, rank, and title.

In keeping with Executive Order 13526, please segregate all unclassified materials within the classified documents, and provide all unclassified information directly to the committee, and provide a classified addendum to the Office of Senate Security. Although the committee complies with all laws and regulations governing the handling of classified information, it is not bound, absent its prior agreement, by any handling restrictions.

Thank you for your prompt review and responses. If you have any questions, please contact my committee staff at (202) 224-0642.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley
Ranking Member
Committee on the Budget

Enclosures



PROJECT THOR





Presentation Overview

- What is Project Thor
- Why it's important
- Objectives / Framework
- Trafficking Networks
Uncovered Examples
- Summary / Ultimate goal



PROJECT THOR

- Started July 25, 2018
- An ATF led SOD Project
- Whole of Government approach
- Target U.S. based firearms trafficking networks supplying the cartels in order to shut them down, seize the real property associated and indict, extradite and prosecute the heads of those networks.



PROJECT THOR

Over 16 U.S. GOV Partners



- ATF
- Special Operations Division
- Main DOJ
- CBP NTC Counter Network Division
- DEA
- USPIS
- FBI
- OCEDTF Fusion Center
- OCDETF
- HSI
- USMS
- USSS
- IRS
- SOCOM
- DoD



PROJECT THOR

Why?



- Over 19,000 weapons were *recovered* and *traced* in Mexico in 2019



PROJECT THOR

Why?



- Between 106,700 and 426,729 trafficked (2010-2012)*
- Cost: \$53.7 - \$214.6 million annually*
- Thor estimates between 200,000 and 1 million weapons trafficked annually.
- Cost \$100.6 - \$503 million annually

*Source: 2013 study conducted by University of San Diego Trans-border Institute.



PROJECT THOR

Why?



- Over 34,000 killed in 2018 as a result of the drug war.

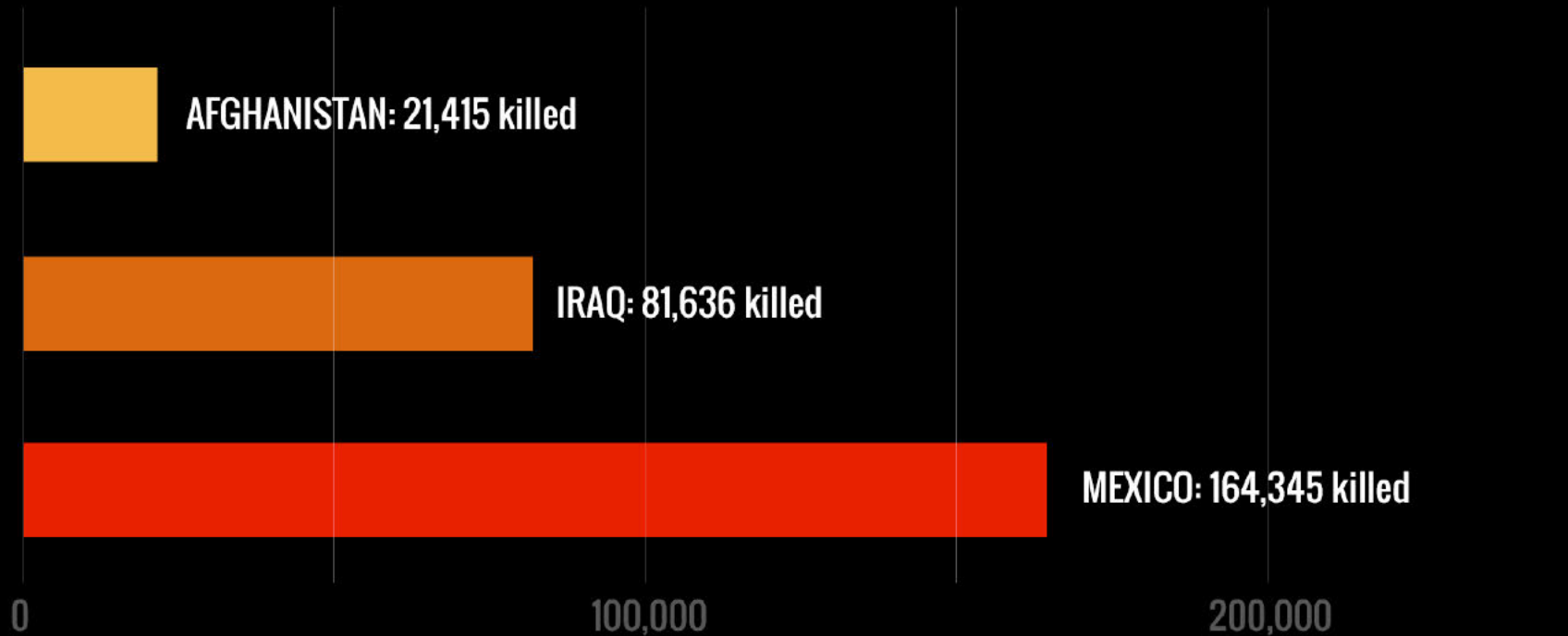


PROJECT THOR

Why?



Killings in Mexico v. Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan & Iraq Since '07



PBS 2015

Sources: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía, e Informática (Mexico); Iraq Body Count; United Nations.

FRONTLINE



PROJECT THOR

Why?



- Until Thor, no one was focusing on the problem.



PROJECT THOR

FIREARMS



PROJECT THOR FIREARMS



- M249's and other belt feds



- M2's and Barrett .50 rifles





PROJECT THOR FIREARMS



■ Accessories



■ Miniguns





Common Misconceptions

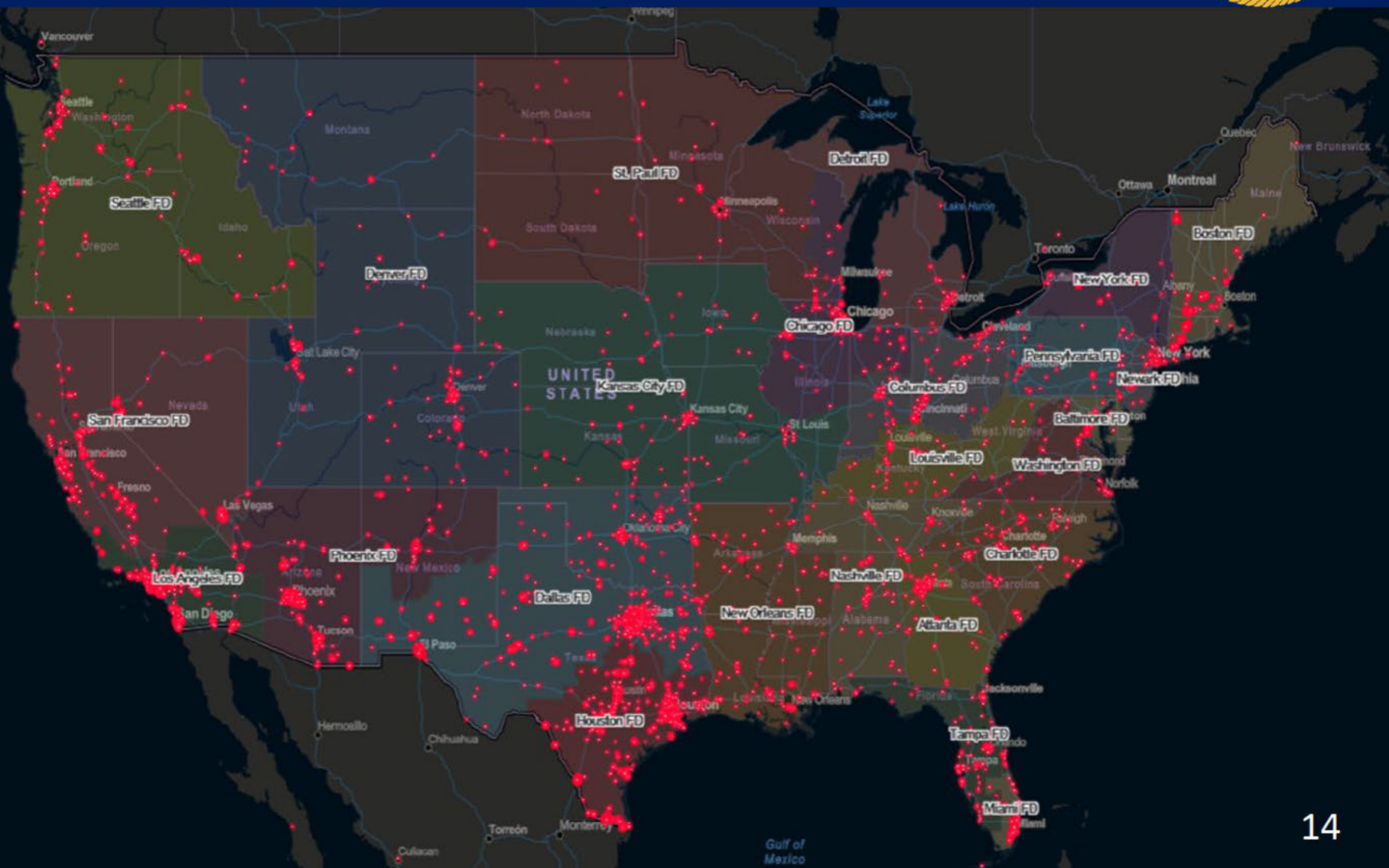
- Over 70% of weapons submitted for tracing by Mexico are sourced from U.S.
- Conversion kits purchased in U.S.
- No limit on weapons
- No “system of records” on purchases allowed by U.S. law
- No regulation of ammunition industry or limits on purchases
- No Firearms trafficking statutes in U.S. law
- Extremely limited southbound inspection capability (U.S.)



Authorized for public release by Ranking Member Grassley

PROJECT THOR

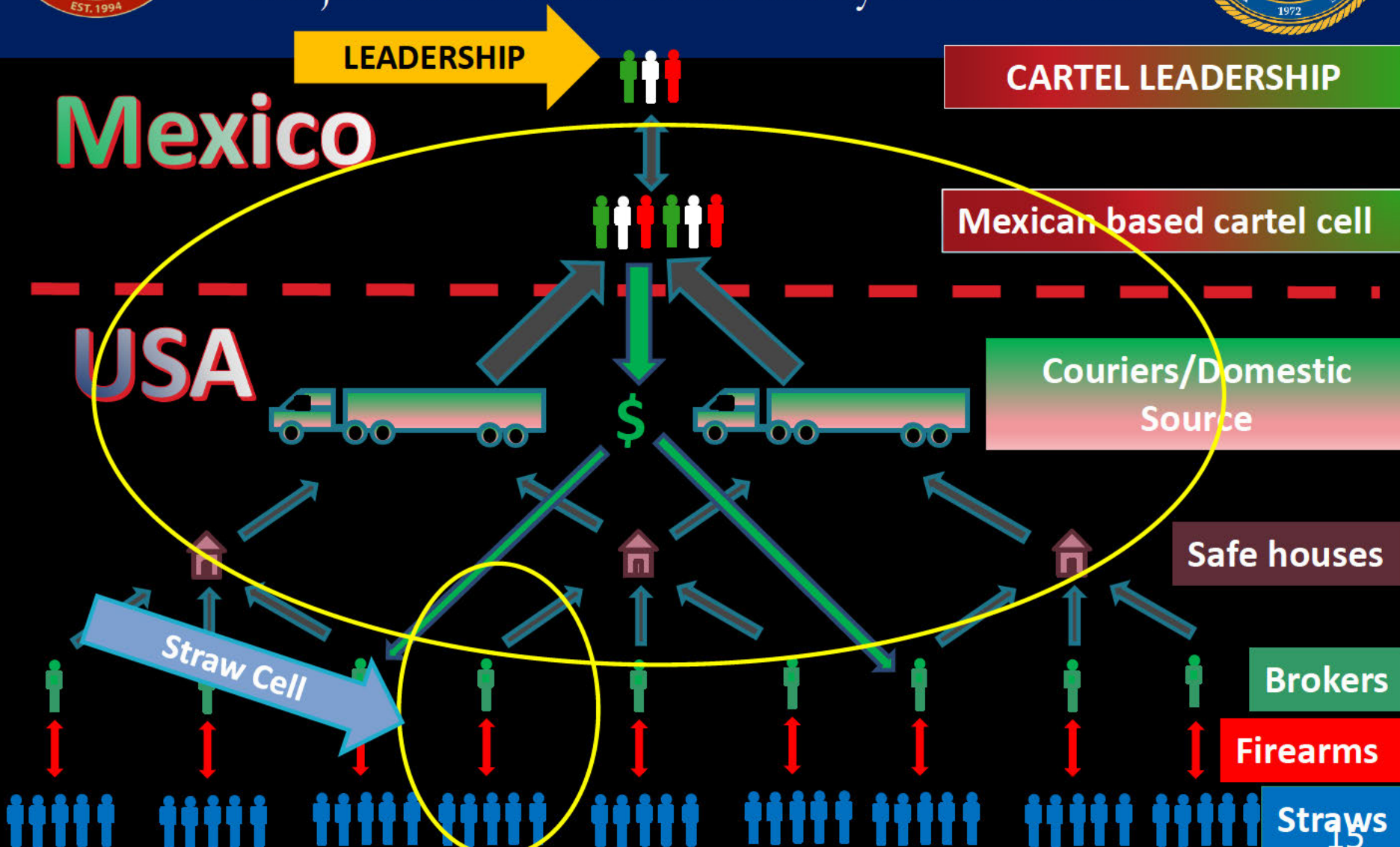
2018 Firearms Recovered & Traced





Project THOR

Projected enforcement ability under Thor





PROJECT THOR

Framework



- Utilize intelligence from our Thor team across the U.S. GOV to illuminate the networks, coordinating and connecting investigations across federal Law Enforcement.
- Target those networks and their leaders utilizing SOD, OFC, CBP-NTC, USPIS, ATF and other U.S. GOV resources.
- Track down and investigate financial networks, seizing and dismantling.
- Coordinate with ATF, DEA, FBI , CBP, USPIS, USMS, HSI and other U.S. GOV entities when and where applicable.
- Work with main DOJ to prosecute those responsible utilizing novel prosecutorial approaches etc.



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Trafficking Networks

Actual examples





PROJECT THOR

Cases



- Over 400 Cartel trafficking cases 2019 for ATF
- Thor supported 76 cases to from 2018-2020



PROJECT THOR

Summary



- Target cartel firearm trafficking networks
- Identify infrastructure and leadership
- Capture and extradite cartel members, seizing assets and shutting down pipelines, cartel-by-cartel
- Limit cartels ability to promulgate drug war through violence, terrorism and intimidation



PROJECT THOR

Questions?



From: [REDACTED]
To: [Landau, Christopher \(Mexico City\)](#); [Creamer, John S \(Mexico City\)](#)
Subject: Project Thor Update
Date: Friday, July 17, 2020 8:56:00 AM

Sir,

I contacted ATF HQ regarding THOR and I was asked to gauge your interest (Ambo and DCM) in having a WebEx briefing conducted by ATF and Rebecca McCormack, our DOJ Trial Attorney and DOJ lead? We could provide the latest updates to include the DOJ aspects?

From HQ

I can tell you we have several CJNG networks identified and almost all of the guns from the assassination attempt tie back to one of these networks. Huge thank you to your guys for getting and pushing out that information! This (along with some other intel indicators) is a strong indicator that Thor has identified most of the major CJNG weapons trafficking networks.

[REDACTED]
[Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives](#)

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] (U.S./EUA)
[REDACTED] (México)

From: [REDACTED]
To: [Rusk, Joshua M.](#)
Cc: [Dixon, Ned F. \(CID\)\(ATF\)](#); [Panoke, Will](#)
Subject: Re: Sept 13-17 Thor briefing
Date: Thursday, July 8, 2021 2:09:12 PM

I will meet with DOJ

[REDACTED]

On Jul 8, 2021, at 12:37 PM, Rusk, Joshua M. [REDACTED]@atf.gov> wrote:

Gents

I spoke to [REDACTED]. He advised DOJ in Mexico was coordinating the meeting in Sept. for the Thor briefing. As far as he knew, the briefing that week is still a go. I think Fidel should be included to speak to/answer questions relative to the Op Southbound part of the equation.

[REDACTED]...can you confirm on your end that DOJ has coordinated with the right embassy personnel to attend and get us a list of who is expected to attend, schedule, etc? I am going to go ahead book my travel due to the current budget issues.

Respectfully,

Josh Rusk, Chief

ATF International Affairs Division

Office: [REDACTED]

Cell: [REDACTED]