



June 4, 2025

The Honorable Pamela J. Bondi
Attorney General of the United States
Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20530

Re: Department of Justice Plans to Merge the ATF with the DEA

Dear Attorney General Bondi,

We the undersigned signatories represent Gun Owners of America, Inc., Gun Owners Foundation, Gun Owners of California, Second Amendment Foundation, Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms, California Rifle & Pistol Association, and the Second Amendment Law Center. Together, these organizations represent millions of gun owners across the country, advocating for the protection and preservation of the enumerated right to keep and bear arms.

We write today on behalf of millions of gun owners across America who have grave concerns with the recent U.S. Department of Justice (“DOJ”) proposal to combine the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (“ATF”) with the Drug Enforcement Administration (“DEA”). Because this merger would seem to be counterproductive to the President’s agenda and, in fact, almost certainly harmful to law-abiding gun owners, we urge you to consider abandoning this proposal and continuing to operate ATF as a standalone agency of narrow purpose and limited resource – until such time as all unconstitutional federal gun laws are repealed and the ATF can be abolished.

In March of 2025, DOJ circulated a memorandum suggesting that ATF and DEA be merged into one law enforcement agency.¹ According to this proposal, such a merger would “achieve efficiencies in resources ... and regulatory efforts.”² But this merger is not in the interest of America’s gun owners, who do not benefit from ATF’s “efficiency” at its “regulatory efforts.” In reality, an ATF-DEA merger would create a super-entity of gun control enforcers,

¹ Deputy Attorney General, *Soliciting Feedback for Agency Reorganization Plan and RIF*, DOJ (Mar. 25, 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/yc3uranr>, at 3.

² *Id.*

and empower future administrations to target the Second Amendment community in unprecedented ways. That does not align with President Trump's policy agenda, and it certainly is not what the President was elected with the help of gun owners to accomplish.

The Trump Administration already appears to have acknowledged the dangers of an ATF armed with more resources than it knows how to handle. On May 2, 2025, the Administration published a budget request that would slash annual spending by \$163 billion. In it, the administration proposed "cutting funding for ATF offices that have criminalized law-abiding gun ownership through regulatory fiat."³

That is welcome news, because examples of ATF's regulatory fiat abound. Indeed, seeking a \$468 million ATF budget cut, the Trump Administration's budget proposal highlighted numerous Biden-era abuses like "requiring near-universal background checks; subjecting otherwise lawful gun owners to up to 10 years in prison for failing to register pistol braces that make it possible for disabled veterans to use firearms; the imposition of excessive restrictions on homemade firearms; and the revocation of Federal Firearms Licenses, which shut down small businesses across the Nation."⁴

But ATF should not be given back with one hand what was taken with another. If ATF were to benefit from DEA's significantly greater resources and staffing, one can only imagine what sort of gun control the next Democrat administration might dream up. But that is just one reason why ATF should never be allowed to merge resources with another agency – not DEA, not FBI, or another agency. Rather, there are numerous reasons why such a merger would only hurt gun owners in the long run. What follows are a dozen such reasons.

Twelve Reasons Why an ATF-DEA Merger Is a Trojan Horse for Gun Control

1. Conflating Gun Ownership with Drug Crimes Would Taint the Second Amendment with an Appearance of Criminality.

It would seem that those who proposed this ATF-DEA merger did not fully consider the optics it would create. The Second Amendment protects the natural right of self-defense by guaranteeing "the people" access to "arms." Unfortunately, ATF exists to regulate aspects of that enumerated right. Thus, ATF's very subject matter is a *constitutionally protected industry*.

Contrast ATF's regulation of a constitutional right with the mission of the DEA. The DEA exists to combat the spread of illegal drugs, which have no claim of constitutional protection and, in fact, are deemed contraband. Federal officials tasked with taking down violent drug cartels should not be enforcing the complex nuances of gun laws against American gun owners and Federal Firearms Licensees. Placing enforcement of "drugs and guns" within the same agency risks tainting the innocuous exercise of a constitutional right with the appearance of illegality in the popular mind.

³ April Rubin, *READ: Trump's Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request to Congress*, *Axios* (May 2, 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/yvdf7m9s>.

⁴ *Id.*

Perhaps there is a reason why governments don't task the issuance of parade permits to the same agency that investigates domestic terrorism. Constitutional rights and criminal activity are best kept separate.

2. ATF Access to DEA Resources Would More than Triple the Gun-Control Budget.

A closer look at the agencies' comparative resources only underscores the recent Trump budget's concerns. At present, ATF has some 5,000 employees, and a \$1.5 billion budget.⁵ But the DEA has twice that, boasting some 10,000 employees, and a whopping \$3.3 billion budget.⁶ ATF has 25 field divisions and operates in 8 other countries.⁷ DEA has many times that, with "241 Domestic Offices in 23 Divisions throughout the U.S., and 91 Foreign Offices in 68 countries."⁸

Even if an ATF-DEA merger might achieve some measure of "efficiency," this temporary victory may come at the cost of future tyranny. Contrary to Democrat histrionics, President Trump is not the last President this country will have. It is all but certain that a Democrat will return to the White House in the future. And when one does, the foundation for unprecedented gun control will have been laid. Indeed, it is unlikely a future administration will share the same enforcement objectives as the current administration. What will happen when drug trafficking is declared no longer a priority, and shared resources *all* shift to tackling "gun violence"?

3. A Merger Would Militarize More Federal Agents Against Law-Abiding Americans.

In a rare example of modern bipartisan consensus, many on the political left and right agree that the militarization of law enforcement agencies poses a serious threat to liberty. But few have discussed what a combined ATF-DEA agency would look like. At present, ATF has 5 Special Response Teams, or "SRTs" – "elite tactical groups"⁹ with 114 total team members.¹⁰ But DEA has three times that, with 20 SRTs and 325 total team members.¹¹

In other words, DOJ's proposed ATF-DEA merger could effectively *triple* the size of ATF, *triple* the number of federal agents tasked with enforcing the nation's gun laws, *quadruple* the number of heavily armed militaristic SWAT teams ready to batter in the doors of America's gun owners, and cause an *unprecedented militarization* of domestic gun-control operatives.

⁵ *ATF by the Numbers*, ATF, <https://tinyurl.com/5er6cyaj> (Feb. 22, 2023).

⁶ *Staffing and Budget*, DEA, <https://tinyurl.com/nhh8yfi9> (last visited May 5, 2025).

⁷ See, e.g., *Locations*, ATF, <https://tinyurl.com/yey7zzw6> (Apr. 11, 2025).

⁸ *Domestic Divisions*, DEA, <https://tinyurl.com/ppfjv8sc> (last visited May 5, 2025).

⁹ *Special Response Teams*, ATF, <https://tinyurl.com/9np87pvp> (Nov. 18, 2024).

¹⁰ *Federal Tactical Teams*, GAO (Sept. 2020), <https://tinyurl.com/59z8ewyk>, at 7, 37.

¹¹ *Id.* at 39.

Indeed, DEA agents quite literally have been trained to engage in combat operations overseas, under the supervision of Navy SEALs. As one military reporter put it:

FAST [Foreign-Deployed Advisory and Support Team] teams are the enforcement arm of the DEA's Drug Flow Attack Strategy (DFAS)....

A typical FAST team comprises of 8 special agents, an intelligence specialist and a team leader. The FAST section is overseen by a former Navy SEAL, Richard Dobrich. Much of their equipment is supplied by the Pentagon. DEA agents wishing to join the FAST teams must undergo a rigorous selection process before being trained in close quarters combat and other small unit tactics.¹²

With this prospect of pseudo-military forces being joined with ATF and set loose on American gun owners, one must ask the question: Why? ATF's history of constitutional abuses is well documented – Ruby Ridge, Waco, Fast and Furious, the list goes on. *More weapons, more armor, and more special operations teams*¹³ would only encourage *more* abuses, not fewer. Recently, ATF agents were caught bragging online about their newly issued HUXWRX suppressors – pricy items costing taxpayers “from \$1,200 to \$1,300 a piece.”¹⁴ There is no need for ATF to enjoy even more such equipment after a DEA merger. An ever-present standing army was something the Founders fought a war to end.



4. ATF Would Gain Unprecedented Intelligence and Surveillance Capabilities.

If ATF and DEA were to merge, many of ATF's existing resources simply would be “dialed up to ten.”¹⁵ For example, what ATF does not have, but no doubt wishes it did, is DEA's Intelligence Program, boasting an office with nearly 700 “Intelligence Analysts,” tasked with collecting and processing intel on enforcement targets.¹⁶

The prospect of ATF access to a fully staffed “intelligence” division inspires little

¹² *Foreign-Deployed Advisory & Support Team*, *Am. Special Ops*, <https://tinyurl.com/bdfzez8h> (last visited May 5, 2025).

¹³ See Phil Helsel, *Arkansas Airport Executive Killed in Shootout Was Under Investigation for Weapons Sales*, *NBC News* (Mar. 21, 2024), <https://tinyurl.com/4uskvsxw>.

¹⁴ Lee Williams, *ATF Agents Discussed New Suppressors on Site They Thought Was Private*, *Truth About Guns* (May 7, 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/mt9yehwu>.

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axXrs55X9kE>.

¹⁶ *Intelligence*, *DEA*, <https://tinyurl.com/4bbcrnjf> (last visited May 5, 2025).

confidence in an agency recently caught red-handed spying on gun owners' firearm purchases¹⁷ and social media posts.¹⁸ ATF already has demonstrated precisely how it could weaponize the DEA's vast resources. There is no reason to believe it wouldn't again, if given the chance.

5. Merging ATF with DEA Was Al Gore's Idea.

The sort of merger DOJ is now proposing is nothing new. In fact, it is precisely what Democrats have attempted in the past. In 1993, big-government control freak and Vice President Al Gore proposed merging ATF, DEA, and FBI into a single agency, which the then-DEA chief Robert Bonner opposed as a "serious mistake."¹⁹ Then-AG Janet Reno similarly declined to support the initiative, even though she would have been tapped to head the super-agency.²⁰

The Trump Administration should seriously question whether giving these sorts of Democrats what they originally wanted is in gun owners' best interests. If a man is judged by the company he keeps, the answer should be clear.

6. An ATF Merger Has Been on the Anti-Gun Activists' Wish List for Years.

Talk of an anti-gun agency merger persisted well into subsequent administrations. In 2015, gun control activists Arkadi Gerney and Chelsea Parsons argued to expand ATF using other federal resources:

The FBI has much of what ATF lacks: political clout, sufficient resources, and a strong law enforcement structure capable of developing and successfully managing complex criminal enforcement operations. ... [A merger] would finally give the nearly 2,500 ATF agents ... the leadership, resources and support they need to truly be effective and make an impact....²¹

Indeed, these activists lamented that, "[a]s a result of pressure by the gun lobby, ATF's budget

¹⁷ John Crump, *FOIA Shows the Extent of ATF Monitoring Americans Through FBI's NICS System*, AmmoLand (Dec. 10, 2024), <https://tinyurl.com/bdzbbhw6b>.

¹⁸ Lisa Greene, *GOA Uncovers ATF's Secret Social Media Monitoring – Are Your Posts Being Watched?*, MSN (Mar. 4, 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/mstwyw3>; Gun Owners of America, *FOIA Reveals ATF Surveillance on Social Media*, YouTube (Mar. 3, 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/3stnwde5>.

¹⁹ Ronald J. Ostrow & James Risen, *Gore's FBI-DEA Merger Idea Draws Fire: Bureaucracy: Outgoing Chief of Anti-Drug Agency Says Move Would Disrupt War on Narcotics. House Staffers Attack Plan to Shift Meat Inspections to FDA.*, L.A. Times (Sept. 9, 1993), <https://tinyurl.com/ye226zdw>.

²⁰ 3 *Federal Agencies May Be Combined: Proposal Would Merge FBI, DEA, ATF*, Roanoke Times (Aug. 12, 1993), <https://tinyurl.com/4jppyfyc>.

²¹ Arkadi Gerney & Chelsea Parsons, *Merge ATF into FBI*, Hill (May 20, 2015), <https://tinyurl.com/7w2vwk7d>.

has stagnated.”²² This Administration should not serve up on a silver platter what gun controllers have long asked for.

7. Past ATF-DEA Cooperation Resulted in Colossal Failure. Does “Fast and Furious” Ring a Bell?

If what’s past is prologue, then yet another ATF-DEA partnership does not bode well for gun owners. As one article recently reported, “[d]uring the ATF’s ‘Operation Fast and Furious’ gunrunning escapade in Mexico, it coordinated – badly – with the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).”²³ Of course, the federal government’s bright ideas in “Fast and Furious” led to the deaths of Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry and ICE Agent Jaime Zapata (not to mention countless Mexicans), at the hands of newly armed criminals. That is hardly a gold star on either agency’s record, and it certainly is no reason to reward either agency with *even more* resources to conspire in the future.

8. Blurring the Lines Between ATF and More Popular Agencies Would Insulate ATF from Criticism.

In addition to tainting a constitutional right with a perception of criminality, an ATF-DEA merger would also force conservatives to adopt inconsistent and frankly schizophrenic political messaging. For example, conservatives generally desire zero-tolerance policies and strong enforcement against illegal drugs. But they favor an opposite approach with respect to firearms, and seek an ATF that is friendly to broad gun ownership by law-abiding citizens and does not exist to target “simple possession” types of nonviolent gun crimes.

Placing an agency that conservatives largely view negatively within an agency whose mission many conservatives view favorably would blur the lines between good and bad, serving to insulate ATF and its gun control from future criticism. And it would justify all manner of infringements – not in the name of combatting “gun violence” or individual gun ownership, but now under the veneer of combatting the ‘tools of drug trafficking.’ Indeed, a merger likely would make it more difficult for future Congresses to rein in ATF’s funding without being seen as undermining the DEA’s mission to combat illegal drugs.

9. An ATF-DEA Merger Would Undermine Government Accountability.

Although ATF certainly should be abolished (not absorbed), its current form of existence has some benefits that would disappear the moment it merged with DEA. At present, gun owners know *who* the anti-gunners are. ATF is readily identifiable, the public follows its activities closely, and the agency’s bad actors are sniffed out. The Trump Administration’s firing of several bad actors at ATF is evidence of the effectiveness of this oversight. When it was discovered that former ATF Chief Counsel Pamela Hicks, Marvin

²² *Id.*

²³ J.D. Tuccille, *Will Absorbing the ATF into the FBI Rein in Each Agency’s Abuses?*, AOL (Feb. 26, 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/j93hczw6>.

Richardson, and others at ATF “were targeting gun owners,” the Trump Administration took swift action to remove them.²⁴ But with an ATF-DEA merger, it would be much more difficult to pinpoint bad actors when the agency is cloaked with DEA’s broader law enforcement objective.

In fact, President Trump’s first nominee to fill the DEA director position, Chad Chronister, would have been horrible for gun owners if the agency were merged with ATF. In 2019, Chronister voiced support for “red flag” gun confiscation orders which deprive gun owners of their 2nd, 4th, 5th, and 14th Amendment rights.²⁵ He also advocated for “enhanced mental health screening” as an unconstitutional, government-imposed barrier to gun ownership.²⁶ And perhaps most telling of all, Chronister advocated for universal background registration checks, which the Biden administration enacted by weaponizing the ATF rulemaking process and without the passage of a new law.²⁷

Consider also the Senate confirmation hearing of David Chipman, Biden’s former nominee for ATF Director. Chipman’s candidacy floundered when Senators exposed him as an anti-gun activist masquerading as a law enforcement officer. But one can only imagine what may slip through the cracks when confirmation hearings begin to distract with platitudes of stopping the trafficking of fentanyl. Gone will be the near-singular focus on firearms as the subject matter of questioning.

10. An ATF-DEA Merger Would Dilute the Political Power of Gun Owners, Subordinating Their Interests to Those of “Big Pharma.”

Left-wing anti-gun activists often decry the “gun lobby” as having “powerful influence” in political lobbying.²⁸ But whatever influence pro-Second Amendment organizations may have, it pales in comparison to that of the *pharmaceutical industry*. By some estimates, the “constellation of groups” supporting the Second Amendment *collectively* spent only \$8 million annually for lobbying efforts between 1998 and 2020.²⁹ Contrast that with the pharmaceutical industry’s *annual* lobbying spend in the same timeframe, which grew from

²⁴ Gun Owners of America, X, “WATCH: Pam Bondi chastises ATF and celebrates the firing of former Chief Counsel Pamela Hicks. ‘These people were targeting gun owners. Not going to happen under this administration,’ the Attorney General says.”, <https://x.com/GunOwners/status/1893393695480643780>.

²⁵ Gutowski, *Trump’s DEA Pick Backed Stricter Gun Laws*, *The Reload*, (Dec. 3, 2024), <https://thereload.com/trumps-dea-pick-backed-stricter-gun-laws/>.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Gun Owners of America, X, “Biden said he wanted to force Universal Registration Checks ‘without additional legislation.’ Then ATF invented a rule that presumed you GUILTY until you proved your innocence. That is tyrannical, but today freedom prevailed thanks to our lawsuit victory!”, <https://x.com/GunOwners/status/1792584577619280170>.

²⁸ Megan Sanders, *The NRA and Gun Lobbyists*, *Univ. of Chi. Harris Sch. of Pub. Pol’y*, <https://tinyurl.com/298ectfa> (last visited May 23, 2025).

²⁹ Joseph Stepansky, *What Is the United States ‘Gun Lobby’ and How Powerful Is It?*, *Al Jazeera* (May 25, 2022), <https://tinyurl.com/4yjs6dac>.

\$69.5 million in 1998 to a staggering \$319 million in 2020,³⁰ not to mention its nearly \$14 billion annual budget for TV commercials.³¹

As the oft-repeated political maxim goes, “*Cui bono?*” – that is, “Who benefits?” If ATF and DEA were to merge, the answer is clear. Gone will be the days when gun owners have a direct say in who runs the agency tasked with the regulation of their enumerated constitutional rights. Instead, future gun owners will have to compete with the lobbying infrastructure of multi-*billion*-dollar pharmaceutical companies interested in just *who* runs the agency tasked with the regulation of *their* industry.

DEA “enforce[s] the controlled substances laws and regulations of the United States” and determines the scheduling of all controlled substances, including a great many of the pharmaceutical industry’s medications.³² And it is well-documented that pharmaceutical companies have nearly bottomless war chests for exerting their political influence.³³ For example:

In April 2016, at the height of the deadliest drug epidemic in U.S. history, Congress effectively stripped the Drug Enforcement Administration of its most potent weapon against large drug companies suspected of spilling prescription narcotics onto the nation’s streets. ... Overall, the drug industry spent \$102 million lobbying Congress on the bill and other legislation between 2014 and 2016, according to lobbying reports.³⁴

If ATF and DEA merge, these sorts of high-dollar lobbying efforts will take center stage. Gun owners and their advocacy groups will be unable to compete, and their interests will fall to the wayside. And it is highly unlikely that the pharmaceutical industry’s preferred DEA Administrator will have gun owners’ best interests in mind.

11. A Merger Would Waste Precious Time that Would Be Better Spent Implementing the President’s Agenda.

Naturally, the combination of two agencies will require the expenditure of significant time and resources on logistical and administrative issues. But President Trump’s time in office is limited, and the identity of his successor is unclear. Rather than spending the next three years designing new logos and printing new business cards, ATF’s time would be better

³⁰ *Industry Profile: Pharmaceuticals/Health Products*, OpenSecrets (2020), <https://tinyurl.com/4vnew9y7>.

³¹ Alivia Kaylor, *Big Pharma’s \$13.8B DTC Ad Spend Drives Drug Costs*, TechTarget (Mar. 19, 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/5n8tucw9>.

³² *Drug Enforcement Administration*, DOJ, <https://tinyurl.com/5958j8se> (last visited May 20, 2025).

³³ Timothy Esteves, *Drug Companies Versus the DEA*, Am. Addiction Ctrs., <https://tinyurl.com/4zewf3nv> (Oct. 8, 2024).

³⁴ Scott Higham & Lenny Bernstein, *The Drug Industry’s Triumph over the DEA*, Wash. Post (Oct. 15, 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/25vxz4zy>.

spent accomplishing a serious reduction in force, refocusing enforcement efforts on closing down cartels and punishing violent criminals, and rolling back misguided Biden and Obama-era regulations. This protection of gun owners is paramount.

12. Any Subsequent Claim that ATF Has Been “Abolished” Through Merger Would Give RINOs an Excuse to Do Nothing.

Finally, it seems that some Republicans only have the political appetite for one pro-gun victory per decade – if that. The Trump Administration should not use what political capital may be available for the most superficial of victories – the purported abolishment of ATF via simple merger. This sort of proposal would give do-nothing Republicans the short-term victory they need to tell their constituents that they did *something* (“We got rid of ATF!”), before retreating back to their favorite position – total inaction on reclaiming lost Second Amendment ground. An ATF-DEA merger would only decrease political momentum and appetite for actual, substantive change.

At bottom, there is no reason to believe ATF access to DEA’s far superior resources would promote “efficiency” – only set the stage for greater tyranny. Indeed, for a future Democratic administration that is soft on drugs and hard on guns, anti-gun politicians could use the opportunity to shift virtually *all* resources – in a combined DEA and ATF – to gun control alone.

The Best Path Forward

The undersigned organizations are vocal supporters of abolishing the ATF altogether. But folding ATF into a much larger and more capable agency is hardly an abolishment. For this reason, until Congress eliminates the National Firearms Act and Gun Control Act entirely, ATF should remain precisely where and what it currently is – its own agency, with anemic funding, anemic resources, anemic staffing, and isolated from other law enforcement agencies that largely view ATF as a disfavored stepchild. Other agencies reportedly have called ATF the “pond scum of the federal law enforcement community.” That status should not be changed. Until underlying gun control laws are repealed, ATF should remain a standalone agency, as lean and isolated as possible, to ensure its abuses of the past never happen again.

Moreover, as a legal and practical matter, DOJ cannot merge ATF and DEA without an act of Congress. Although a provision of federal law appears to authorize the Attorney General to direct “any officer, employee, or agency of the Department of Justice” to perform those functions originally transferred to ATF,³⁵ an annual congressional budget rider provides that “no funds made available by this or any other Act may be used to transfer the functions, missions, or activities of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to other agencies or Departments.”³⁶

³⁵ 28 U.S.C. § 599A(a)(4); *see also id.* § (b) (emphasis added) (“Subject to the direction of the Attorney General, the Bureau shall be responsible for investigating” enumerated offenses.).

³⁶ *See* Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-328, 136 Stat. 4459, 4527.

If DOJ is to consider recommending any ATF shakeups, perhaps alcohol and tobacco (both drugs) enforcement properly belong within DEA's purview. That would leave firearms and explosives as ATF's limited subject matter. And taking away half of the agency's letters – from ATFE to FE – would justify even further reductions in spending and staffing. Rather than folding ATF into another agency, these sorts of mission and budget cuts would be a far better place to start.

We appreciate the significant steps that you and your department have taken to protect the rights of gun owners thus far – from rolling back Biden-era attacks on the Second Amendment, to restoring the rights of nonviolent individuals to defend themselves, gun owners are beginning to see DOJ as a newfound champion of a long-disfavored right. We look forward to continued opportunities to engage with your office and with DOJ about the best strategies to protect America's gun owners and defend Second Amendment rights.

In Liberty,

Tim Macy
President
Gun Owners of America, Inc.
Gun Owners Foundation

Erich Pratt
Senior Vice President
Gun Owners of America, Inc.
Gun Owners Foundation

Sam Paredes
Executive Director
Gun Owners of California

Adam Kraut
Executive Director
Second Amendment Foundation

Alan Gottlieb
Chairman
Citizens Committee for the
Right to Keep and Bear Arms

Chuck D. Michel
President
California Rifle & Pistol Association

Chuck D. Michel
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Second Amendment Law Center