

US House votes contempt citation for attorney general

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The Republican-controlled House of Representatives voted to find Democratic Attorney General Eric Holder in contempt of Congress Thursday, the first time in US history that such a sanction has been applied to the top US law enforcement official.

The vote came on a near-party-line vote of 255 to 67, with 108 Democrats abstaining. The majority of Democrats walked out of the Capitol during the voting in order to make a show of outrage over the contempt citation. The action is not expected to have any practical effect, since the House of Representatives will now request the US Attorney for Washington DC, who is Holder's subordinate, to bring charges against his own boss, and he is likely to refuse.

The contempt citation is purportedly the outcome of a protracted congressional investigation into "Fast and Furious," an abortive effort by the Phoenix office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms whose ostensible purpose was to gather intelligence on Mexican drug cartels. The ATF allowed gang representatives to buy weapons at American gun shops and then bring them across the Rio Grande into Mexico.

The operation was initiated under the Bush administration, under the codename "Wide Receiver," but was shut down in 2007. It was revived under its new name after Obama and Holder took office, although it is not clear whether the White House or senior Justice Department officials were aware of it.

In December 2010, Border Patrol agent Brian Terry was shot to death in a gun battle in which several "Fast and Furious" weapons were involved. The program was abruptly shut down, and top Justice Department officials initially denied its existence in a February 4, 2011 letter to Congress that was later retracted.

The House Governmental Operations Committee,

headed by California Republican Darrell Issa, has focused its investigation not on the "Fast and Furious" program itself, but on efforts to prove that top Justice Department officials lied about the program in the course of a series of responses to the committee in 2011.

Each request from Issa's committee for documents has been followed by further requests for internal emails about the Justice Department's response to the previous document requests, in an evident effort to construct and trigger a perjury trap that would implicate either Holder or one of his top subordinates in a purported cover-up.

"Fast and Furious" does involve serious issues relating to the secret operations of the federal government. The program of "gunwalking," as the tactic of permitting known buyers for the Mexican gangs to purchase weapons and take them to Mexico, was part of a murky but undoubtedly reactionary effort by the US government to develop relations with the drug cartels, some of which deposited huge sums in American banks, to the benefit of Wall Street. It is likely for this reason that even some Republican senators have sought to distance themselves from Issa's campaign. This is not the sort of program that is supposed to see the light of day.

The House Republicans, in fact, are uninterested in exposing either the US manipulation of the drug gangs or the criminal activities of Wall Street. The Justice Department has supplied the committee with the documents related to the origins and functioning of the "Fast and Furious" program. The subpoena rejected by Holder, which triggered a claim of executive privilege by Obama, involves 1,500 pages of internal emails between top Justice Department officials written only after "Fast and Furious" had been shut down.

A driving force in the campaign over the “Fast and Furious” is the National Rifle Association, the ultra-right pro-gun group NRA officials claim that top Obama administration officials devised “Fast and Furious” in order to produce a series of bloody incidents along the border involving guns purchased at US gun shops. The purpose of this alleged conspiracy was to generate political propaganda for sweeping restrictions on gun ownership that the Obama administration supposedly plans to introduce in its second term.

Some 17 House Democrats decided to follow the dictates of the NRA and vote for the contempt citation against Holder in an effort to win the backing of the right-wing group in the upcoming congressional elections. Only two Republicans voted against the contempt citation.

What is remarkable in the conflict is that there are ample reasons for indicting Attorney General Holder for criminal actions against the democratic rights of the American people, but these are of no interest to the ultra-right groups spearheading the campaign over “Fast and Furious.”

Holder has been one of the most aggressive spokesmen for the claims of the Obama administration of presidential power to order the assassination of American citizens or detain them indefinitely without charge or judicial review, in the name of the “war on terror.” The Justice Department has spearheaded a series of prosecutions of whistleblowers who have leaked information on anti-democratic operations of the military-intelligence apparatus within the United States.

The author recommends:

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