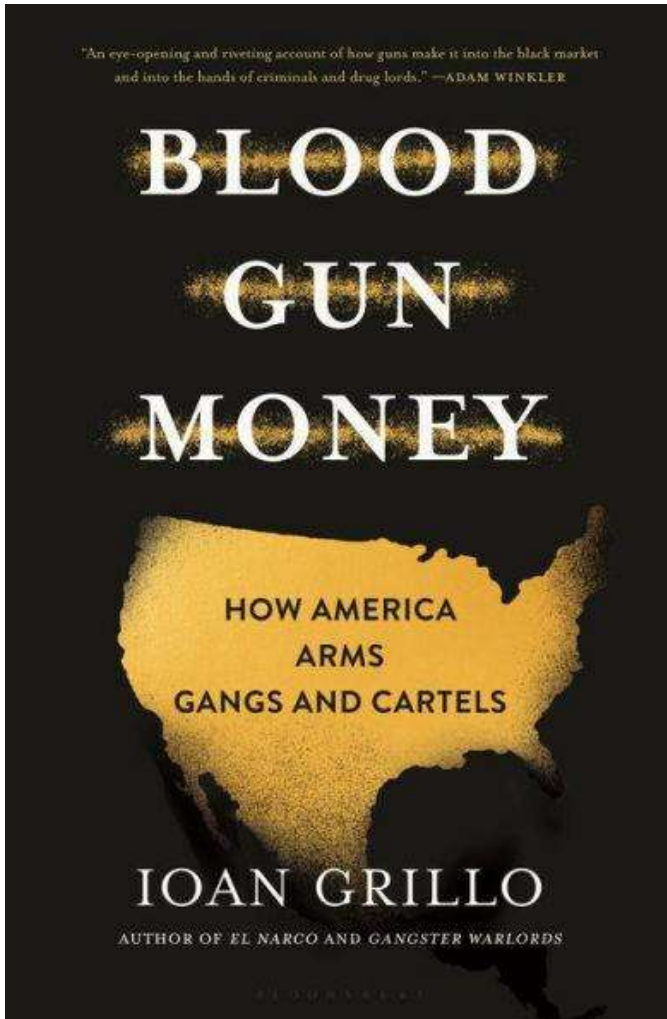


Grillo raises awareness of the illegal gun trade

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“Blood Gun Money: How America Arms Gangs and Cartels” by Ioan Grillo. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021. 400 pages, \$28 (hardcover).



“From 2007 to 2019, there were more than 277,000 murders in Mexico, according to the official count,” Ioan Grillo explains in “Blood Gun Money: How America Arms Gangs and Cartels,” his in-depth investigation of a reality most of us have only seen depicted on television and in movie theaters. “Two-thirds of those killings were done with firearms. This period coincides with Mexican President Felipe Calderón launching a crackdown on cartels, which was supported by the United States, with helicopters and wiretap gear – and gun sales. U.S. factories supply both sides of the Mexican Drug War.”

“And these are only the guns they have captured and traced,” he continues. “Far more trafficked firearms are still out there and being used in cartel terror. We can never know the true scale of this traffic. But one study estimates more than 200,000 guns are trafficked over the border every year. This led to Mexican law enforcement in 2020 estimating that 2.5 million guns had been smuggled over the border in a decade.”

The debate over guns has been a constant feature of the American conversation since the country was founded almost 250 years ago.

The dialog has ramped up in recent years with the significant increase in mass shootings we have experienced. But, as Grillo points out, the highly-publicized events that take over our media outlets with escalating regularity constitute only a miniscule fraction of the full story. Behind the calls for assault rifle bans and the inevitable pushback from Second Amendment advocates lies a much more complicated and sinister narrative.

“Blood Gun Money” is one of the more extensively-researched manuscripts I have had occasion to read in a while, with 17 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the 12 chapters that comprise the main text. Grillo also includes a 16-page photo album at the center of the book that helps bring some of the content (and some of the characters featured) to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. Fair warning: Some of the pictures are fairly graphic and definitely not intended for a younger audience.

I especially enjoyed the inclusion of a brief appendix explaining “The Ten Rules of Crime Gunonomics.” For example, did you know that when a gun is “burned,” or used in a murder, it is significantly devalued and will sell much cheaper? Or that if a buyer is “beefing,” meaning that

someone wants to hurt them, they are referred to as a “distressed buyer” and the price increases dramatically? I didn’t.

By the way, if you did know either of those little tidbits, maybe we need to keep an eye on you.”

Grillo based much of this harrowing yet inherently captivating exposé on interviews with gun manufacturers, owners of gun shops and those who frequent gun shows – as well as insights he gleaned from talking to FBI agents who infiltrated biker gangs, ATF agents who work at the gun tracing facility in West Virginia and gang members who hang out on street corners in Baltimore and other locations known for their involvement in gun trafficking. What emerges is a detailed portrait of a strongly-ingrained and self-perpetuating shadow industry that specializes in getting legal guns into the black market and ultimately into the hands of hardened criminals who use them to inflict violence both domestically and south of the border.

Indeed, it is the author’s firsthand account and perspective that gives much of the book such an unparalleled aura of credibility. The following anecdote from “Fast and Furious,” the eighth chapter, gives some sense of the front row seat you are provided to the subject matter at hand:

“In August 2009, a few months before Fast and Furious started, I visited the ATF offices in Phoenix and looked at their stash of seized guns. The agent Peter Forcelli took me down in the elevator to the vault. ... Forcelli would not be on the Fast and Furious team, and his testimony was critical of it. But he gave me good background information. He explained they had fewer than 20 agents looking at thousands of gun shops, and many didn’t get inspected for years. Their usual tactic was to get sellers like (Mike) Detty (a gun seller in Arizona) to report suspicious buyers. They would follow these buyers and try to bust them and the people they were delivering to. This added a lot of guns to the bulging piles in the vault. But Forcelli conceded they were stopping only a fraction of the guns going to Mexico. Facing this challenge, agents came up with Fast and Furious.”

A contributing writer at The New York Times, Grillo has also had his work featured in Time, Esquire, Reuters, CNN and the History Channel. His previous books include “El Narco: Inside Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency,” which was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Award, and “Gangster Warlords: Drug Dollars, Killing Fields, and the New Politics of Latin America,” a New York Times Book Review Editor’s Choice and a Guardian Book of the Year. He is based in Mexico City.

Oh, if you want a vision of one potential future, consider the following passage from “Ghosts,” the 11th chapter and one I found particularly unsettling:

“A man in his living room crouches over a 3D printer, feeding in plastics coded by funny arrangements of letters: PLA, ABS, PETG. He zaps a design into the printer from his computer. And boom. Out pops a gun. A verifiable killing machine. He is ready to go murder people. It’s all over. Everything we’ve talked about. The cartels, the corner crews, the mass shooters – everyone can print up all the firepower they want at home. The ATF may as well shut down. And the gun companies. And the gun smugglers are out of business. Guns will be everywhere. The dreams of a completely armed society will come true. For many that is a terrifying idea. For others it is liberating. But it is a fantasy. At least right now. Or is it?”

Reflect on that for a while.

In the final analysis, Grillo achieves his intended outcome: to raise public awareness of how the illegal gun trade works and how difficult it is going to be to appropriately tackle the myriad challenges that lie ahead. Honestly, I found this one to be a fascinating read, and I’m confident that it would appeal to anyone – on either side of the gun debate. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.