

### **Bellesiles's *Arming America*: Worse Than Wrong**

Michael A. Bellesiles, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 578 pp. \$30.

Professor of History Michael Bellesiles of Emory University has written a startling new book that demolishes many long-cherished beliefs of early America about violence, guns, and the militia. It is a novel work, in both senses: much of it is certainly “new,” and much of it is highly imaginative fiction.

You will see *Arming America* used repeatedly over the next few years to prove that the Second Amendment isn't just obsolete today, but the idea on which it was based--that an armed population is a restraint on tyranny--was a delusion of the elite of American politics, even when it was ratified in 1791. Unfortunately, because *Arming America* is the basis for a fierce attack on private ownership of guns, many of the usual suspects in the academic community and news media are gushing about what a marvelous piece of “research” Bellesiles has performed. By the end of this column, you will see that the correct word isn't “research,” but a word a bit more crude than I use.

First, and least controversial (at least to historians), is Bellesiles's portrayal of the ineffectiveness of the militia in American history. Many Americans have grown up with a vision of Minutemen, running out the door, Kentucky long rifle in hand to take on them “Redcoats.” Historians have recognized for at least 40 years that for every success of the “citizen soldier” in defending home and nation, there were far more examples of militias turning tail in battle, or simply leaving for home, because harvest time had come. But the ineffectiveness of the militia is really a sideshow in Bellesiles's book. The truly novel

aspect of *Arming America* is Bellesiles's claims that guns and hunting were actually *rare* in America until the 1840s.

Why were guns scarce, according to Bellesiles? Because not only were guns expensive, but also because, "the majority of American men did not care about guns. They were indifferent to owning guns, and they had no apparent interest in learning how to use them."<sup>1</sup> Bellesiles claims that marksmanship was extraordinarily poor, and large numbers of adult men had no idea how to load a gun, or how to fire one.

To hear Bellesiles tell it, this lack of both interest and knowledge was because America before 1840 was a fundamentally peaceful place.<sup>2</sup> Whites almost never hurt each other, though they spent an awful lot of time killing and mistreating Indians and blacks. Hunting was almost unknown among Americans until the mid-1830s, when a small number of wealthy Americans decided that hunting made them more like their manly, upper class British counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Professor Bellesiles claims that by the 1830s, a pacifist movement that was fiercely hostile to not only gun ownership, but also a military, and hunting of any form, was becoming a major influence on American society.<sup>4</sup> It was then that the nasty government stepped in and *finally* persuaded Americans that they really wanted guns!

When Bellesiles first presented these ideas in a *Journal of American History* article in 1996, I was starting research on a related question: why did eight slave states take the lead in the development of concealed weapon regulation in the period 1813-1840? Bellesiles's claim that guns had been rare in America until the 1840s was certainly an intriguing

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<sup>1</sup> Michael A. Bellesiles, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 295.

<sup>2</sup> Bellesiles, 314-15.

<sup>3</sup> Bellesiles, 320-23.

<sup>4</sup> Bellesiles, 300-1.

concept. It might explain why so many of these laws regulating the carrying of deadly weapons (including handguns) appeared when they did. If Bellesiles was right, by the time these laws were being passed in the late 1830s, America was changing from a peaceful, gentle land where only a few percent of the population owned guns, into a nation of violent, gun owning hunters.

As I researched my topic, it became apparent that Bellesiles was wrong--way wrong. As I read travel accounts, memoirs, and diaries of the period, it was obvious that America was a place where guns and hunting were common throughout the period that Bellesiles portrays as gun-free and hunting-free. While some parts of America were indeed, very peaceful in the years 1800 to 1840, other regions were brutal places where men gouged out eyes, bit off noses and lips, and ripped out guts with Bowie knives--and often these horrible acts were done out of sheer boredom.<sup>5</sup>

At first, I assumed that Bellesiles was simply mistaken--that he had read unusual accounts of early America. I also thought that in his desire to confirm his strange pre-conceived ideas, Bellesiles had simply misread his sources. This is a common problem among ideologues, and I can point you to occasional examples of pro-gun historians doing the same thing.

Having now read Bellesiles's *Arming America*, and checked some of his sources with great care, I am sorry to report that the problem is more serious than I thought--*Arming America* contains intentional deception. Let me be very clear on this point. I am *not* saying that Bellesiles simply missed sources that showed that guns and hunting were common in early America. I am *not* saying that Bellesiles just misread documents that

could be read several different ways. I am saying that in many cases, he read documents that directly contradicted his claims, and ignored the evidence. I know that Bellesiles read these documents, because I found most of the evidence by looking up Bellesiles's footnotes. His misuse of these documents is so biased and consistent that no one can seriously argue that Bellesiles accurately described what he found.

As an example, Bellesiles quotes George Washington, concerning the 1756 emergency call-up of the Virginia militia during the French & Indian Wars:

Colonel Washington reported on the militia to Governor Dinwiddie: "Many of them [are] unarmed, and *all* without ammunition or provision." In one company of more than seventy men, he reported, only twenty-five had any sort of firearms. Washington found such militia "incapacitated to defend themselves, much less to annoy the enemy."<sup>6</sup>

But when you examine what Washington actually wrote in that letter, you find that Bellesiles has misquoted Washington in a way that suggests that this was the *general* state of the militia. Washington is clearly referring to only *some* militia units:

I think myself under the necessity of informing your Honor, of the odd behaviour of the few Militia that were marched hither from Fairfax, Culpeper, and Prince William counties. Many of them unarmed, and *all* without ammunition or provision. Those of Culpeper behaved particularly ill: Out of the hundred that were draughted, seventy-odd arrived here; of which only twenty-five were tolerably armed.

Washington considered these "few Militia" arriving inadequately armed to be "odd behaviour," and worthy of note. The implication is thus that militia arriving from other counties were adequately armed, and brought ammunition with them. Washington's request to the governor of Virginia?

As such a conduct is not only a flagrant breach of the law, and a total contempt of Orders, but will be such a precedent (shou'd it pass with impunity) as may be

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<sup>5</sup> Generally, see Clayton E. Cramer, *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic: Dueling, Southern Violence, and Moral Reform* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Bellesiles, 159.

productive of the most dreadful consequences. I therefore flatter myself, your Honor will take proper notice of these men. I have written to their County Lieutenant on this subject.<sup>7</sup>

Washington sought to have these men punished, strongly suggesting that their behavior--arriving inadequately armed, without ammunition--was exceptional, not typical. And yet Bellesiles portrays this unusual situation among *some* of Washington's militia as normal behavior for the militia that Washington commanded.

Next column: Bellesiles claims that there were almost no privately owned guns in America at the start of the Revolution, partly because they were so expensive; however, his own sources show otherwise.

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<sup>7</sup> George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, June 27, 1757, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., 2:78-79.