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The Final Chapter of *Arming America*?

Regular readers of my column know that one of my projects for the last year and a half has been finding “problems” with Professor Michael A. Bellesiles’s book *Arming America*. It appears that my efforts are beginning to make a difference.

Published in 2000, *Arming America* was the winner of Columbia University’s Bancroft Prize in 2001, naming it as one of the best American history books of the year. *Arming America* made astonishing claims: guns were not widely owned in America before the Civil War; most Americans, even on the frontier did not hunt; Americans, if they held an opinion about guns at all, disliked them; and colonial governments severely restricted the ownership of guns. Unsurprisingly, the antigun establishment embraced it. Even historians with no history of supporting gun control lavished praise on it. Most dangerously of all for gun owners, a few courts started to cite some of Bellesiles’s claims. Bellesiles’s claims have not done any damage to our rights...yet.

Arming America is a fraud—false quotes, misrepresentations, quotes out of context—on a massive scale. There are more falsehoods in single paragraphs than I have found in dozens of other antigun scholarly works *combined*. (This says something about how antigun historians—other than Bellesiles—have played by the rule that you don’t lie.)

For a number of months, my efforts to raise awareness in the academic community of what a fraud *Arming America* was, made very little impact. When historians and journalists were given the choice of believing a history professor at a prestigious research university like Emory, or me, they found it easy to dismiss my very serious charges.

I will confess that I sometimes wasn't terribly polite about how I presented the evidence to the academic community. Being direct and calling someone a fraud just isn't done in academic circles, even when you have hundreds of examples of misrepresentations. There is a proper way to do this in the ivory tower that doesn't get everyone's nose out of joint. You are supposed to suggest that a historian has "misread" his sources, hundreds of times, and always in the same direction. (Directness is not part of how academics do things.)

In the last four months, *Armed America* has come under a withering fire in the mainstream media, with both the book and its author now under serious question because of two significant changes. The first change was that since historians were unwilling to take me seriously when I said that Bellesiles had misrepresented historical documents—looking up citations is very time-consuming—I started scanning those documents and putting them on my web page. People on the professional historian email lists were now only a mouseclick away from seeing the documents that Bellesiles was misrepresenting. (Sadly, only one of the professional historian email lists would allow discussion of the subject—moderators of the others simply would not allow me to raise the issue.)

The second change was probably more important: Professor James Lindgren of Northwestern University School of Law started looking carefully at *Arming America*'s claims. While I examined a wide range of historical documents that Bellesiles had "misread," Professor Lindgren, a specialist in early American probate records, looked at how *Arming America* misused those records to conclude that guns were rare in early America.

Professor Lindgren noticed that Bellesiles's statistics seemed mathematically impossible. When he asked Professor Bellesiles for a copy of his probate record database, Bellesiles first delayed then explained that he hadn't used a computer. Bellesiles claimed that he had recorded all his data as check marks on yellow legal pads, and a flood had destroyed them all. So Lindgren asked Bellesiles for the data from which the graphs in the back of *Arming America* came, which must have been on a computer somewhere—and the silence was deafening.

Professor Lindgren was already skeptical that Bellesiles's numbers could be correct. Bellesiles had not identified very precisely the location of most of the probate records that he had used. For those that Bellesiles had given enough information, Lindgren went and checked them. Bellesiles transcribed one set of these Vermont probate records onto his web site—a serious mistake. Lindgren found that Bellesiles's transcripts of those records didn't match the documents—and the errors were curious. As an example, Bellesiles claimed that Cotton Fletcher's probate records showed that Fletcher had left a "broken gun," but the actual record only said, "a gun." The records said, "Isaac Cushman, old gun" according to Bellesiles, but the actual wording listed "one gun barrel and stock."

The Vermont records weren't the only problems. Lindgren found a number of other serious problems with Bellesiles's representations of probate records from other locations. The Providence, Rhode Island probate records that Bellesiles claimed to have examined didn't match Bellesiles's description of them either. Bellesiles claimed that the estates all belonged to men, and that few had functioning guns. Lindgren found that a number of the estates belonged to women. The number of guns described as old or

broken was far less than Bellesiles claimed. Even the women's estates had more guns that Bellesiles claimed were present in the men's estates.

A lot of reporters, when told about these discrepancies, might have covered it as a "Bellesiles said, Lindgren said" dispute. David Mehegan of the *Boston Globe* wasn't content with such an easy approach. Instead, he went and checked the records himself, and found that Bellesiles's claims were wrong, and Lindgren's claims were right.¹

Others now entered the fray. Professor Randy Roth, an expert in Vermont history, offered to check the Vermont probate records that Bellesiles claimed to have used. After all, if another history professor independently verified Bellesiles's numbers, there wouldn't be much of a dispute, would there? When Roth made the offer, however, Bellesiles's response was, "thanks-but-no-thanks...." Roth went ahead and checked the records anyway—and found that instead of guns in 14 percent of the probate records as Bellesiles claimed, they were present in 40 percent.²

Most people, at this point, would have come up with some plausible excuse for these serious discrepancies. Instead, the November 2001 newsletter of the Organization of American Historians (once upon a time, a reputable professional association) published an article by Bellesiles in which he misrepresented the problems that Lindgren had found with the Vermont probate records (and that Mehegan had confirmed).

¹ David Mehegan, "New doubts about gun historian," *Boston Globe*, September 11, 2001, also at <http://www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2001nov/bellesiles.html> . See Lindgren and Heather's first work on this problem at <http://plague.law.umkc.edu/cphl/host/Guns.PDF>.

² Ron Grossman, "Wormy apples from the groves of Academe," *Chicago Tribune*, January 23, 2002.

Bellesiles even insisted that his convenient misquotation of the Militia Act of 1792 (which he had previously acknowledged was in error) was completely correct!³ The Militia Act of 1792 required militiamen (at that time, all white men ages 18-45) to provide *themselves* with guns. Bellesiles changed it so that now *Congress* was required to arm the militia. As Sir Walter Scott observed, “Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive!”

More serious than Bellesiles’s misrepresentation of documents that are easy to find was his use of documents that apparently do not even exist. Bellesiles claimed that he used probate records from Gold Rush-era San Francisco. There’s a problem with that: all those records were apparently destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire. Both David Mehegan of the *Boston Globe* and Melissa Seckora of the *National Review* asked at the San Francisco Superior Court, where Bellesiles claimed to have seen “hundreds” of these records. Both reporters were told, by many different officials, that those records were not there, and almost certainly no longer exist. When questioned about it, Bellesiles reeled off a list of other places that he must have seen them—and none of those places had them, either.⁴

Professor Bellesiles seems to have taken lessons from a former president, I fear, because his response when these stories appeared was to insist that the records did exist, and that he would find them. After Bellesiles attended the American Historical Association conference in San Francisco in January 2002, he triumphantly announced to

³ Michael A. Bellesiles, “Disarming the Critics,” *OAH Newsletter*, November, 2001. See Michael A. Bellesiles to Professor Eugene Volokh, November 10, 2000, distributed on firearmsconlawprof@listserv.ucla.edu, November 13, 2000, for Bellesiles’s acknowledgment of error.

friends, colleagues, and journalists, that he had found the missing San Francisco probate records at the “California History Center” in Martinez, California. He faxed copies of 26 pages to journalists to prove that he didn’t imagine them.

There was a problem. Actually, there were many problems. These pages weren’t San Francisco County probate records, but Contra Costa County probate records. They weren’t “hundreds” of records as he had first claimed (casting serious doubt about the statistics supposedly created from them). Bellesiles had the wrong name for the archive—it is the Contra Costa County Historical Society. To the best knowledge of the Society’s staff, Bellesiles had never visited them before his arrival in January of this year. It would therefore have been difficult for Bellesiles to have used probate records from their collection to write a book published two years ago.⁵

My greatest joy in what has been a very depressing sequence of events has been seeing journalists who had been supporters of Bellesiles, change sides, or at least admit that there are serious integrity questions regarding *Arming America*. The first positive reviewer of *Arming America* to acknowledge that he had been deceived (along with a lot of nationally known experts in American history) was John Wilson, the editor of *Books and Culture*.⁶ Next, Karen Samples of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, who had given a glowing

⁴ Melissa Seckora, “Disarming America,” *National Review*, October 15, 2001, also at <http://www.nationalreview.com/15oct01/seckora101501.shtml> ; David Mehegan, “New doubts about gun historian,” *Boston Globe*, September 11, 2001.

⁵ Melissa Seckora, “Disarming America, Part III,” http://www.nationalreview.com/nr_comment/nr_comment012902.shtml, January 29, 2002. Also see the Contra Costa County Historical Society’s devastating response to Bellesiles’s claims on their website at <http://www.cocohistory.com/frm-news.html> .

⁶ John Wilson, “Stranger in a Strange Land: The Scandal of Arming America,” *Books & Culture*, January/February, 2002, also at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2002/001/17.4.html>.

review of *Arming America* last year, acknowledged that there was a serious set of questions about not just the accuracy but also the integrity of Bellesiles's work.⁷

A number of historians have also switched sides, some quite publicly, as the evidence became clear. Professor Don Hickey of Wayne State University, Nebraska, was one of those who had read and approved for publication an earlier version of Bellesiles's claims for the *Journal of American History*. Hickey told the *Chicago Tribune* that *Arming America* was "genuine, bona fide academic fraud." While there are those still prepared to defend the book as correct, even if based on fraudulent statistics, such as Professor Paul Finkleman of the University of Tulsa Law School,⁸ this seems to be a declining fraction of the academic community.

Emory University, which received a warning more than a year and a half ago that *Arming America* involved fraud—and responded that they weren't interested in the subject until the accusations were published in a respected historical journal—has now opened a formal investigation into academic misconduct by Professor Bellesiles.⁹

It would be nice to think that Emory has decided to get to the bottom of this scandal because of their concern for high academic standards—or even because of concern about their reputation. It is troubling to see, however, that the dean who announced the investigation described this as, "most of the attention surrounding Bellesiles was 'hear-

⁷ Karen Samples, "Book's validity questioned," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 12, 2002, also at http://enquirer.com/editions/2002/01/12/loc_samples_books.html.

⁸ Ron Grossman, "Wormy apples from the groves of Academe," *Chicago Tribune*, January 23, 2002.

⁹ "Probe aims at claim of gun-use author," *Washington Times*, February 8, 2002, <http://www.washtimes.com/national/20020208-90052858.htm>.

say' and 'gossip.'"¹⁰ To describe the accusations of fraud by a number of different journalists as "gossip" strains the meaning of that word.

William & Mary Quarterly, the most prestigious journal of colonial American history, has just published three very critical essays that, according to those who have seen it, says, politely, that *Arming America* has repeated accuracy problems that raise serious questions about the integrity of how the research was conducted.¹¹

It has taken a little while for the academic community and mainstream journalists to start looking seriously at the problem of *Arming America*. I am gratified to report that the hard work has begin to bear fruit.

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¹⁰ Andrew Ackerman, "University begins inquiry into validity of prof's research," *Emory Wheel*, February 8, 2002.

¹¹ David Mehegan, "Historians Criticize Author's Gun Research," *Boston Globe*, January 29, 2002.