



# Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture

*Michael Bellesiles*

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## **Our Review**

In the current debate over the role of guns in American life, there is one historical notion in particular that invigorates those who believe that an America stocked to the rafters with privately held firearms is the best and truest America.

I refer to the truism that our national identity has always been inextricably tied to our unparalleled intimacy with guns, that the pioneers who settled this country did so with musket ever at hand to provide food and self-defense; our Revolution was won by valorous citizen-soldiers taking up their trusty flintlocks in defense of hearth and home; and the Constitution's framers, mindful of this heritage, instituted an absolute freedom of individual gun ownership as a forever necessary safeguard against tyranny.

In *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*, Emory University historian Michael A. Bellesiles leaps to the forefront of a recent move by scholars toward reexamining this mythology of the gun. To every article of the legend, Bellesiles mounts a relentless and eye-opening barrage of counterevidence, gathered over ten years of research in probate records, censuses, government and military documents, and other primary sources.

Examining the growth of our national gun culture from colonial times to Reconstruction, Bellesiles finds that its progress was a slow and tortured one. From the first settlements up until the Civil War, ordinary Americans were not heavily armed and were generally neglectful of the guns they did own. Guns of the time were expensive, clumsy, unreliable, and hard to maintain. Opposing other historians' claims for nearly universal gun ownership among the settlers, Bellesiles finds that apparently "at no time prior to 1850 did more than a tenth of the people own guns."

During the Revolutionary War, the civilian militias were, again contrary to myth, ineffective on the whole as a fighting force. One basic reason: The great majority of their members had never bothered to arm themselves or attain proficiency in shooting. After the war was won by professionals, the government labored for the next 70 years to arm a surprisingly resistant citizenry.

The Civil War finally brought reality into line with the myth. Technological improvements, massive government investment, and the training in gun use of virtually every able American male brought firearms

into the mainstream at last -- with a chilling rise in civilian violence as its legacy.

The shattering implications of Bellesiles' argument for scholars, policy-makers, and ruminators upon the national character are clearly evident, but he leaves them unstated. We are left to draw our own conclusions, but this formidably researched, vigorously written book earns the power to ground our currently high-flown gun debate in solid historical earth.

--Edward Hutchinson

### **Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture Details**

Date : Published September 5th 2000 by Knopf (first published January 28th 2000)

ISBN : 9780375402104

Author : Michael Bellesiles

Format : Hardcover 624 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Literature, Banned Books, Politics

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## From Reader Review Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture for online ebook

### Robert Hund says

I could not get started with this book. Random reading failed to uncover anything interesting. However, I deduced the author, his employer (Emory University, Atlanta) and publisher are what my late friend, Jack Bruny, would sarcastically describe as part of a "pinko, red conspiracy" to discredit the National Rifle Association.

I don't take sides on this topic. I also don't want to waste my time reading political propaganda. I did spend several pleasant minutes remembering Jack, his dedication to the ceramic tile and terrazzo business as well as to hunting and fishing, his total recall of everything which had ever happened to him, and his desire to share all of it with his friends. I was fortunate to be his friend.

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### Harvey Keck says

I find no justification for reading this excuse for scholarship.

I recall Doctor Bellesiles' reaction to what I remember was Mr. Clayton Cramer's findings. Cramer recounted his experience in checking the citations in Bellesiles' "scholarly work":

"I sat down with a list of bizarre, amazing claims that Bellesiles had made, and started chasing down the citations at Sonoma State University's library. I found quotations out of context that completely reversed the author's original intent. I found dates changed. I found the text of statutes changed — and the changes completely reversed the meaning of the law. It took me twelve hours of hunting before I found a citation that was completely correct."

Bellesiles responded by looking down his Ph. D. nose at this non-academic, a mere M. A. who dared to challenge his lofty academic credentials.

Soon enough, Columbia University corrected their mistake and revoked the Bancroft Prize.

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### ? Kristina says

#### Banned Books 2004

Reasons: inaccurate, political viewpoint

#### Banned Books 2003

Reason: inaccuracy

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### Varmint says

If ever there were a case for book burning.

A friend handed me this book, thinking it would end one of our interminable arguments. The story broke a few days later. The "research" was entirely fabricated. Bellesiles drummed out of his university after being exposed.

It is a fraud from the first word. Even those sympathetic with the motive should be outraged at being so manipulated.

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### **Jim says**

Do not read. Apparently, Michael Bellesiles lost his Bancroft Prize (and his position at Emory Univ.) for academic dishonesty when it was proven that he invented the "research data".

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### **Kerri says**

I can't give this a rating, due to the controversy surrounding its veracity. I can say that it asked interesting and important questions, and its a shame the answers were thrown into disrepute. I hope that someone, some day, applies more stringent methods to asking these same important questions. Columbine. Aurora. Multiple other such events. Something's very wrong, and its not merely this author's methods.

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### **Joanne G. says**

Author created and distorted resources. As a result, Mr. Bellesiles had to resign his tenured position from Emory University.

Since the book's publication, scholars who have checked the book's claims against its sources have uncovered an almost unprecedented number of discrepancies, errors, and omissions.

<http://www.yalelawjournal.org/review/...>

<https://fee.org/articles/no-gun-cultu...>

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### **Douglas says**

It is most unfortunate that Bellesiles compromised his scholarly integrity by fudging one stream of data (weapons passed along through probate in the eighteenth century). This opened the door to scrutiny of his research data by other scholars and ultimately the loss of his professorship and standing as a historian. That is as it should be.

But overall, this book contains an extraordinary bit of research and writing on the history of this country's obsession with guns. While the data on probate records represents a very small fraction of the total picture he assembles, he offers a fascinating analysis of historical records that show a picture of this country's history

quite different than the one put forth by gun enthusiasts. The fact is, probate record-fudging notwithstanding, this country's origins and expansion beginning from the early seventeenth century do not support the notion that our ancestors were knowledgeable about and competent with the use of firearms. Quite the contrary, it was not until the Civil War that guns were ubiquitous and users were adequately skilled in their use.

This is a big book, in both size and implications for dismantling the myth of gun ownership from our country's beginnings.

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## Brandt says

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

Above is the text of the second amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, which has been the justification of (white) gun nuts to be allowed to carry whatever weapons they want, shoot whoever they want without repercussions (Trayvon Martin anyone?) and to accuse you of being anti-American should you suggest that the country consider enacting limits on gun ownership or common sense gun rights legislation. These gun activists have been spurred on by the likes of the late Antonin Scalia, who argued that the contents of the Constitution have one specific meaning, which is idiotic, given just how fluid language can be, especially over a document that has existed for over two centuries ("I've done everything the Bible says Lord," says Ned Flanders, "even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff.") However, Bellesiles, in *Arming America* tries to address Scalia's interpretation of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights by giving the historical context in which that statement was written in 1791.

Bellesiles, who wrote a great book on the violence of the year 1877 (which lead me hear) presents us with a very thoroughly researched book about guns in the United States. If you are a gun enthusiast who uses Scalia's "literalist" readings of the Constitution to justify your position, Bellesiles disproves it. Historically speaking, most Americans didn't own guns in 1791, firearm technology was expensive and unreliable (bayonets were the weapons that won wars) and the concept of a militia was a joke--citizens avoided service and the militias at muster were mocked by those observing them. Eventually, Bellesiles tells us that volunteer militias came into existence, but that was more for men to play dress up and feel important (see Trump, Donald for the type.) Eventually, technology catches up just in time for the Civil War and when it is over, America is armed to the teeth, with entrepreneurs like Samuel Colt telling punters that they absolutely **need** a gun to feel safe (I don't know--it sounds like some dipshit telling us we need to build a wall to keep the dangerous brown people out.) Of course, selling to fear made Colt a rich man. And of course, gun culture wouldn't be complete without some bald racism, with militias basically existing to keep slaves in line and then after the Civil War, armaments helping para-military organizations like the KKK assert their dominance in the south.

The problem with *Arming America* is that Bellesiles, like most historians, doesn't know how to self edit. He proves the same points over and over again, making reading this book a real slog. And one could also argue that while his logic is sound, his attempt to make the argument is faulty. In the years since Bellesiles published this book, Sandy Hook, Parkland, the Pulse Night Club Shooting, Las Vegas, the Tree of Life, etc., etc. have all happened, as well as Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, etc., etc. The problem with a book like this is that when an asshole with a gun decides he wants to open fire saying "Look, old boy, your concept of American gun culture is totally grounded in incorrect mythology" is not going to disarm that asshole. The myth exists, and the dude with the gun believes it, as well as many other Americans. You just

have to hope they aren't aiming at you.

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### **Danica Midlil says**

Anyone interested in reading this book should first read this article:

<http://hnn.us/articles/1185.html>

The author lied all the way through the book and when the truth came out, the Bancroft Award was rescinded and he had to leave his job at Emory in shame.

This situation really made me think about how I choose books to read. I have never before researched the validity of a book before reading it more than reading friend's reviews on Good Reads or something similar. As a consumer of information, I expected the publisher and the world of historical scholars to check all that for me before the book was even published. I find it very disturbing that I was relying on a system that apparently doesn't exist.

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### **Mason Sykes says**

It disproves the NRA gun-filled-violent-west-we've-always-been-barbarians version of history to an astonishing degree. I like it!

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### **Alex says**

Arming America : The Origins of a National Gun Culture by Michael Bellesiles (2000)

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### **Manintheboat says**

So it's a fraud eh? Is that why it's on the Banned Book list?

This is a big book. I read like 100 pages because it is not a topic that interests me and this book did not make me interested in it.

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### **Edward Sullivan says**

The myth of America's gun culture exposed in this exceptionally scholarly work.

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