

### *Arming America: Part III*

This is my third and final installment debunking Professor Michael Bellesiles's book *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*. *Arming America* makes false claims about the state of gun ownership in early America--not just errors of fact, but intentionally deceptive misquotation of sources.

As part of his effort to prove that there were few guns in America, Professor Bellesiles claims that guns were very hard to purchase, because America simply didn't have the capability to manufacture guns in large quantities. He discusses the Militia Act of 1792, and how it obligated every able-bodied free white male between 18 and 45 to enroll in the militia:

Further, "every citizen so enrolled, shall...be constantly provided with a good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonet and belt, two spare flints," and other accoutrements. Congress took upon itself the responsibility of providing those guns, and specified that within five years all muskets "shall be of bores sufficient for balls of the eighteenth part of a pound."<sup>1</sup>

When I read that quotation, I scratched my head a bit. While writing my second book, *For the Defense of Themselves and the State*, I had read the Militia Act of 1792 pretty carefully, and I remembered that it required that every member of the militia *to provide himself* with a gun.

The actual text of the Militia Act of 1792 is quite different from what Professor Bellesiles quotes. Here is the portion that Professor Bellesiles claims to have quoted, with the missing words in italics:

That every citizen so enrolled *and notified, shall within six months thereafter, provide himself* with a good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonet and belt, two spare flints, and a knapsack, a pouch with a box therein to contain not less than

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<sup>1</sup> Michael A. Bellesiles, *Arming America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2000), 230.

twenty-four cartridges, suited to the bore of his musket or firelock: or with a good rifle, knapsack, shot-pouch and powder-horn, twenty balls suited to the bore of his rifle, and a quarter of a pound of powder....<sup>2</sup>

Not only does Professor Bellesiles leave out the words “provide himself” that demonstrate that the individual militia man (not Congress) was required to arm himself, but he added the words “constantly provided” into the “quote.” Otherwise, the sentence would not have made much sense.

Now I was very confused. Professor Bellesiles’s notes claims that he was quoting *U.S. Statutes* 1:271-74. The title of the U.S. statute books is usually abbreviated by legal historians as *Statutes at Large*—not *U.S. Statutes*. Was there another book out there that had a different version of the Militia Act of 1792? Could Professor Bellesiles have been misled by looking up the Militia Act of 1792 in some other book? Since Bellesiles had several references to different federal laws in this book that he calls *U.S. Statutes*, I decided to see if this was perhaps a non-standard title for *Statutes at Large*. Sure enough, for every federal law that Bellesiles cited, the volume number and page number in *U.S. Statutes* exactly matches *Statutes at Large*.

This is not a trivial matter. Bellesiles was using this bogus quotation as evidence that Congress knew that there were so few guns in America that the citizens couldn’t purchase guns on their own, but needed the federal government to provide them. This is at the heart of Professor Bellesiles’s claims—a severe scarcity of guns in America, and he relied on a completely, utterly false quotation to make this claim.

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<sup>2</sup> *Statutes at Large*, 2nd Cong., sess. 1, Ch. 33 (1792), 1:271.

So I went to several of the professional historian email lists, and I let everyone know about it. This was as clear-cut as it gets—a rewriting of the text of a federal law that was grossly wrong, and that fit Bellesiles’s highly politicized and inaccurate claims.

Had Bellesiles read some book that had misquoted the Militia Act of 1792, he would have been mistaken, but not lying. But he didn’t claim that he read some other book. He claimed that he had quoted the official federal statute. I called it for what it was: a lie. Just to make it easy on other historians, I told them where to look up the Militia Act of 1792. The Library of Congress’s web site has a complete collection of *Statutes at Large* online, so it’s quick and easy to see if Bellesiles had quoted it accurately, or if I was right, and Bellesiles’s version was wrong.

Bellesiles’s reaction was to insist that I was quoting the Militia Act of 1792 while it was still being debated in Congress, and that I clearly didn’t understand the difference between a bill and the final law. Interestingly enough, the moderator of at least one of the professional mailing lists decided that the subject wasn’t very interesting, and after allowing Bellesiles to accuse me of being wrong and worse, an NRA member, wouldn’t allow me to point out that I was quoting from *Statutes at Large*—the definitive statement of federal law.

Karen Samples, a columnist for the *Cincinnati Enquirer* who had previously published a very positive article about *Arming America*, accepted Bellesiles’s claim that I didn’t know what I was talking about. I had provided her the details of how to read *Statutes at Large* at the Library of Congress’s web site, and she didn’t even try to verify that I was correct. Instead, she decided, “It would take a time traveler to conclude who is more

correct.”<sup>3</sup> Or someone prepared to spend two minutes on the Internet. Sad to say, journalists aren’t much better than history professors when it comes to seeing if someone is lying to them.

Now, Professor Bellesiles, for reasons that I do not even pretend to understand, has now admitted to the moderator of the firearms constitutional law professors list that, indeed, his quotation of the Militia Act of 1792 is incorrect, and claims that he had read a book that had the 1803 Militia Act, and apparently confused the two laws.

There is an 1803 Militia Act that says, “That every citizen duly enrolled in the militia, shall be constantly provided with arms, accoutrements, and ammunition...”<sup>4</sup> But this doesn’t match Bellesiles’s “quote” either; Bellesiles doesn’t cite the 1803 Militia Act, so at best, Bellesiles isn’t very careful in his copying of quotations. Even worse, the 1803 Militia Act doesn’t specify that *Congress* is to supply the arms; it seems to leave it a bit open as to who is obligated to keep the militiamen supplied.

I have given the long and gory history of the struggle to get Professor Bellesiles to admit that even one grossly wrong quotation was wrong—and *Arming America* is, as they say, a target-rich environment. I currently have about 90 pages of misrepresentations, false quotations, and what appear to be bogus citations in my rapidly growing report at <http://www.ggnra.org/cramer/ArmingAmericaLong.pdf>. *Arming America* is a mass of careless scholarship at best—and yet with the exception of a highly critical review by John

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Samples, “Scholars Squabble over Guns,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 2, 2000. [http://enquirer.com/editions/2000/11/02/loc\\_samples\\_scholars.html](http://enquirer.com/editions/2000/11/02/loc_samples_scholars.html)

<sup>4</sup> *Statutes at Large*, 7th Cong., sess. 2, Ch. 15 (1803), 2:207

Whiteclay Chambers II, who teaches history at Rutgers,<sup>5</sup> I have yet to see a historian in the academic community give *Arming America* anything less than a laudatory review.

I fear that the same illness that led President Clinton to argue during a deposition about the meaning of “is” has also infected much of the academic community as well. There seems to be a belief among a number of historians that if the goal (restrictive gun control) is good, then a few lies to reach that goal are perfectly acceptable.

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<sup>5</sup> John Whiteclay Chambers II, “Lock and Load,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2000, p. X02. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A31235-2000Oct28.html>