Arming America v1.1.1

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

By now, you have probably heard about this "stunning"[1] or "brilliantly argued"[2] new book by Professor of History Michael A. Bellesiles of Emory University. *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* is receiving all sorts of positive attention from the usual suspects in the academic community and the media. For these reasons, it is really important to understand what Bellesiles claims, and why he isn't just wrong--he is intentionally deceptive.

Arming America is a startling book that demolishes many long-cherished myths of early America about violence, guns, and the effectiveness of the militia. It is a novel work, in both senses of the word "novel": much of it is certainly "new," and much of it is highly imaginative fiction. Bellesiles argues that the militia was, throughout American history, an ineffective force; that guns were very scarce in America before about 1840; and that few Americans hunted.

The first of these claims—that the militia was quite ineffective—is really the least controversial (at least to historians). 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.

---

[1] Alfred F. Young quoted on http://www.amazon.com.
[2] Peter S. Onuf quoted on http://www.amazon.com.

Bellesiles argues that the notion that armed citizens would be a useful alternative to standing armies, or a restraint on tyranny, was a romantic delusion of the Framers of our Constitution. Bellesiles's goal in blackening the reputation of the militia is to demonstrate that the Second Amendment was a fantasy from the very beginning.

Bellesiles is correct that militias were never as well trained as standing armies, and seldom very effective in fighting against regular troops. Similarly, there was really no realistic alternative to at least a small standing army, especially on the sparsely populated frontiers. But the ineffectiveness of the militia is really a sideshow in Bellesiles's book. The truly novel part is Bellesiles's claims that guns were scarce in America until nearly the Civil War.

Why were guns scarce? 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."[3] 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 of the fundamentally peaceful nature of early America[4] and that hunting was very rare here until the mid-1830s, when a small number of wealthy Americans chose to ape their upper class British counterparts.[5] Indeed, Professor Bellesiles would have us believe that by the 1830s, a pacifist

---

[3] Michael A. Bellesiles, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 295.
[4] Bellesiles, 314-15.
[5] Bellesiles, 320-23.

movement, fiercely hostile to not only gun ownership, but also a military, and hunting of any form, was becoming a major influence on American society.[6]

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 Mexican War was certainly intriguing. It might explain why so many of these laws regulating the carrying of deadly weapons (including handguns) appear at a time that Bellesiles claims America was changing from a peaceful, gentle land almost unarmed nation into a land of violent gun owning hunters.

As I researched my topic, it became apparent that Bellesiles was wrong–way wrong. The traditional view of early America, as a place where guns and hunting were common, appeared repeatedly in travel accounts, memoirs, and diaries. I at first assumed that Bellesiles was simply mistaken–that his choice of sources had been atypical, or that in his zeal to confirm a novel hypothesis, he had simply misread his sources. Unfortunately, novelty is, at times, of more value in the academic community than accuracy. Who wants to listen to a paper that confirms what is already conventional wisdom? The iconoclast is always more interesting!

Having now read Bellesiles's book-length treatment of his ideas, and checked his sources with great care, I am sorry to report that what is wrong here is a lot more serious than atypical sources, or even excessive zeal defending a mistaken hypothesis. Generally, the errors in *Arming America* can be divided into the following categories: out of context quotes; using

---

[6] Bellesiles, 300-1.

sources that confirm his thesis, while ignoring sources that contradict his thesis; and intentional deception.

I am not suggesting that Bellesiles simply missed sources that might have contradicted his claims of an America with few guns and little hunting. Indeed, most of the examples here of selective use of sources use Bellesiles's own citations–so I know that he read these documents. His use of the sources is so biased that one is hard pressed to take seriously any claim that he considered both sides of his argument.

As an example, Bellesiles quotes George Washington, concerning the 1756 emergency call-up of the Virginia militia:

> 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."[7]

But when you examine what Washington *actually* wrote in that letter, you find that Bellesiles has misquoted Washington. Bellesiles leads the reader to believe that Washington was complaining that this was the *general* state of the militia. Washington was 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 the militia arriving inadequately armed to be "odd behaviour," and worth mentioning. This suggests that other militia units were adequately armed, and brought ammunition. Washington sought to have the unarmed militiamen punished, which suggests that

their behavior--arriving inadequately armed, without ammunition--was exceptional, not typical.[8] And yet Bellesiles portrays this unusual situation among a "few" of Washington's militia units as normal behavior for the militia that Washington commanded.

Bellesiles also claims that, "Massachusetts conducted a very thorough census of arms, finding that there were 21,549 guns in the province of some 250,000 people." Bellesiles claims that this included all privately owned firearms.[9] Bellesiles's source for this claim is an inventory of "Warlike Stores in Massachusetts, 1774." But when I examined the inventory, dated April 14, 1775, I found that there is nothing there that tells what categories of firearms were counted. Certainly, it includes stockpiles owned by towns.[10] But does it include all privately owned arms as well? Bellesiles claims that it does.

The sources that Bellesiles lists for this claim, however, are largely silent as to what categories of firearms were counted. None of the pages that Bellesiles lsts tell us that all privately owned firearms were included in that inventory. The only information that I can find about this arms census is a note of February 13, 1775, that orders a committee to inquire "into the state of the militia, their numbers and equipments, and recommending to the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this province, to make return of their town and district stocks of ammunition and warlike stores to this Congress."[11] This seems to say that only military

---

[7] Bellesiles, 159.
[8] George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, June 27, 1757, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-44), 2:78-79, hereinafter *Writings of George Washington*.
[9] Bellesiles, 180.
[10] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, *The Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838), 756.
[11] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 98.

weapons possessed by enrolled militia members and publicly owned weapons were counted. There is nothing that indicates that all privately owned arms in Massachusetts were counted.

The evidence from Bellesiles's own sources suggests that firearms were plentiful, and that the inventory recorded only a small part of all firearms in the province. An entry for October 27, 1774 directs inhabitants of Massachusetts to be "properly and effectually armed and equipped" and that "if any of the inhabitants are not provided with arms and ammunition according to law" the town was to arm them.[12] If there were really only one gun for every eleven people, as Bellesiles claims, it seems a bit odd that the Provincial Congress was ordering every militia member to be armed, and the towns to provide arms to those who didn't have them. Why issue an order that was, according to Bellesiles, utterly impossible to achieve?

Other pages in this same book that Bellesiles lists as a source show quite clearly that firearms were *not* scarce. A committee appointed to examine the problem of soldiers who lacked firearms reported on May 9, 1775:

> Whereas, a few of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service, are destitute of fire arms, bayonets, and other accoutrements;
>
> *Resolved*, That the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this colony be, and hereby are, directed and empowered to examine into the state of the equipment of such inhabitants of their respective towns and districts as are, or may be, enlisted into the service of this colony, and where any are deficient in arms or accoutrements, as aforesaid, it is recommended to the selectmen to supply them out of the town stock, and in case of a deficiency there, to apply to such inhabitants of their respective towns and districts as, in their opinions, can best spare their arms or accoutrements, and to borrow or purchase the same for the use of said inhabitants so enlisted: and the selectmen are also directed to take a bill from such persons as shall sell their arms and accoutrements, in the name of this colony....[13]

---

[12] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 34.
[13] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 209-10.

Not "most of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service" are without firearms; not "many"; not "some" but "a few"–and it isn't clear whether the problem is firearms, bayonets, or "accoutrements" (for example, cartridge pouches). Certainly, it is possible that a person who used a musket primarily for hunting would lack a bayonet. Perhaps the Revolutionary government of Massachusetts didn't know how well its militia was armed--at least, not as well as Michael Bellesiles knows.

As the Revolutionary War continued, there are again discussions of the need to arm those soldiers "who are destitute of arms," but there is no indication that this was a problem of great concern.[14] If there were a serious shortage of firearms or ammunition for the militia, as Bellesiles claims, it seems strange that the Provincial Congress on June 17, 1775 (almost two months after Redcoats fired on Minutemen at Lexington) recommended to non-militia members "living on the sea coasts, or within twenty miles of them, that they carry their arms and ammunition with them to meeting on the [S]abbath, and other days when they meet for public worship."[15] Somehow, there was a shortage of guns and ammunition for the militiamen, but non-militia members still had enough arms and ammunition that they were encouraged to bring them to all public meetings.

Were guns rare in colonial Massachusetts, as Bellesiles claims? If so, you would expect the value of guns to be high, especially once the Revolutionary War started, and there was no way to import more guns from Europe. (Bellesiles claims that there were almost no guns made in the

---

[14] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 332.
[15] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 348-49.

colonies.)[16] The Provincial Congress of Massachusetts bought weapons from many private owners in the first few months of the war, sometimes purchasing as many as 100 weapons in a single transaction. Interestingly enough, they appear not to have seized these weapons, but repeatedly appealed to the patriotism of private gun owners.[17] The *Journals* that Bellesiles uses had records of at least 483 guns, "fire-arms," and "small arms" purchased from private parties by the Provincial Congress. The weapons were appraised; the values listed do not suggest that guns were rare.[18]

The average price of these weapons comes to just under £2. Perhaps some of these weapons contained in transactions labeled "small arms" were actually pikes or swords; let's give the benefit of the doubt to Bellesiles, and only look at transactions labeled "fire-arms" or "guns," and assume that *none* of the "small arms" are guns. Even the "fire-arms" and "guns" transactions (total of 89 weapons) show an average price of £2 5 *s*. 1 *d*.--not a trivial amount of money for the time, but about the same as a sergeant's monthly wages in the Massachusetts army.[19] If guns were scarce, it doesn't show up in their valuation.

If the Revolutionary government of Massachusetts were desperately short of arms for its soldiers, one would expect them to have used their power of eminent domain to obtain privately owned firearms. Instead, the private owners were told, "[I]t is strongly recommended to such inhabitants…, that they supply the colony with same."[20] A request of June 15, 1775 for individuals to sell their arms is phrased in terms that seem quite voluntary. *"Resolved*, that any

---

[16] Bellesiles, 188-91.
[17] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 210, 336-37.
[18] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 536-37, 584-93.
[19] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 413.

person or persons, who may have such to sell, shall receive so much for them, as the selectmen of the town or district in which or they may dwell, shall appraise such arms at…."[21]

Bellesiles also claims that guns and powder were in extremely short supply during the Revolution: "But, as the account of stores kept by Washington's new Continental army outside Boston confirms, the Americans had to rely on dozens of shipments of individual guns and half-barrels of powder for use by the army, including a small chest of powder from Ezra Ripley, 'Colledge Student.'"[22] Certainly, there were shortages of powder at times, and Washington often complains about it. But the size of the problems about which Washington often complains sound a bit different from the penny-ante difficulties that Bellesiles discusses.

Washington wrote to the Continental Congress on February 18, 1776, complaining that the "Militia, contrary to an express requisition, are come, and coming in without ammunition; to supply them alone, with 24 Rounds, which is less by 3/5th than the Regulars are served with, will take between fifty and 60 Barrels of Powder; and to compleat the other Troops to the like quantity will take near as much more, and leave in store not more than about 60 Barrels, besides a few rounds of Cannon Cartridges ready filled for used." Washington had roughly 150 barrels of powder–and at the end of the letter, written somewhat later, he adds, "P.S. hearing of the arrival of a small parcel of Powder in Connecticut I have been able to obtain 3000 Weight of it, which is in addition to the 60 Barls before mentioned."[23] Another letter explains that the

---

[20] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 210.
[21] Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 336-37.
[22] Bellesiles, 184.
[23] George Washington to Continental Congress, February 18, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 4:337-38.

"small parcel" was 4217 pounds.[24] Washington's concern about his supplies was understandable; wars burn powder rapidly, and some of his frustration was that there were still large stockpiles of powder belonging to the town stocks.[25] But if more than two tons of powder is a "small parcel," it certainly raises some interesting questions as to whether the circumstances that Bellesiles writes about were typical.

On October 9, 1776, the Continental Congress directed the Board of War to send to the "Commissary of Stores at New York, 10 Tons Musket and Rifle powder, 20 Tons Buck shot…."[26] Somehow, this doesn't sound like the crisis of begging half-barrels of powder from college students that Bellesiles presents as typical.

Also interesting, if the militia was so poorly supplied with firearms, that their arrival would become an ammunition problem for Washington. Washington complained that they showed up without ammunition, and he had to provide it to them; clearly, many of the militia had guns, or he wouldn't need to supply them with ammunition.

Bellesiles spends several pages telling us that guns were in extraordinarily short supply during the Revolution, with example after example of the inability of militias and Continentals to find usable firearms.[27] Indeed, one can find letters that can be quoted to show a shortage of guns, such as Washington's letter of August 28, 1777 to John D. Thompson: "I wish it was in

---

[24] George Washington to Governor Jonathan Trumbull, February 19, 1776, *Writings of George Washington* 4:338.
[25] *Ibid*., 340.
[26] October 9, 1776, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 860.
[27] Bellesiles, 184-88.

my power to furnish every man with a firelock that is willing to use one, but that is so far from being the Case that I have scarcely sufficient for the Continental Troops."[28]

But later in the same letter, Washington presents a more complex picture, and one that suggests that Washington believed that there were some significant number of guns still at home that, while not well-suited to military use, were certainly functional: "It is to be wished, that every Man could bring a good Musket and Bayonet into the field, but in times like the present, we must make the best shift we can, and I wou'd therefore advise you to exhort every Man to bring the best he has. A good fowling Piece will do execution in the hands of a Marksman."[29]

What are we to make of William Grayson's letter to George Washington, on the eve of the Revolution? Grayson appears to have been encouraged by Washington to organize an "independant Company." If guns were in short supply, why did Grayson report "several of the soldiers had purchas'd muskets in the Country, and that some others had imploy'd our own gunsmiths to make them proper arms."[30]

What should we make of Bellesiles's claim that gunsmiths were in short supply, with only "thirteen smiths and armorers" in Massachusetts "capable of repairing firearms"?[31] What about Bellesiles's claim that "Domestic production of firearms remained almost non-existent" during

---

[28] George Washington to John D. Thompson, August 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 9:140-41; see also George Washington to Philip J. Schuyler, February 9, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 7:123.
[29] George Washington to John D. Thompson, August 28, 1777, *Writings of George Washington* 9:140-41.
[30] William Grayson to George Washington, December 27, 1774, *Letters to Washington and Accompanying Papers*, Stanislaus Murray Hamilton, ed. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1902), (hereinafter *Letters to Washington*) 5:78-79.
[31] Bellesiles, 189.

the Revolutionary War? Grayson makes clear that several members of his "independant Company" "imploy'd our own gunsmiths to make them proper arms."[32]

Perhaps Virginia was uniquely awash in gunsmiths. But Grayson's letter also "return their thanks" to Washington "for your kind offer, and will be much oblig'd to you, to write to Philada. for forty muskets with bayonets, Cartouch [cartridge] boxes, or Pouches, and slings, to be made in such a manner, as you shall think proper to direct;… I can venture to assure you, that the gunsmith who undertakes the business, will be paid on demand…."[33] If Bellesiles is right, Grayson and his friends were remarkable not only in having their "own gunsmiths," but they were under a serious delusion that they would be able to order muskets made to order in Philadelphia.

Many others were similarly "deluded" in early America. The Continental Congress ordered, "That all the Militia take proper care to acquire military skill, and be well prepared for defence by being each man provided with one pound of good gun powder, and four pounds of ball, fitted to his gun."[34] Perhaps they meant "to the gun issued to him by the government," but if, as Bellesiles claims, the majority of the guns in America were Brown Besses, why make a point of ordering that the militiamen own bullets "fitted to his gun"? Brown Besses were a standard caliber. Why order militiamen to supply their own ammunition, if they didn't own guns?

Indeed, if gunsmiths were actually in short supply before and during the Revolution, there are some difficult to explain letters. Washington in 1778 complains "that there were 5000

---

[32] William Grayson to George Washington, December 27, 1774, *Letters to Washington* 5:78-79.
[33] William Grayson to George Washington, December 27, 1774, *Letters to Washington* 5:78-79.
[34] *Journals Continental Congress*, July 18, 1775, 188.

Muskets unfit for service in the Magazine at Albany. I most earnestly desire that you will use your utmost endeavours to have them put into repair by the opening of the next Campaign."[35] Why would Washington make a request to repair 5000 muskets "unfit for service," if gunsmiths were actually in such short supply?

Washington in December, 1776 warned the Pennsylvania Safety Council:

> I have not a Musket to furnish the Militia who are without Arms; this demand upon me makes it necessary to remind you, that it will be needless for those to come down who have no Arms, except they will consent to work upon the Fortifications instead of taking their Tour of Military Duty; if they will do that, they may be most usefully employed. I would recommend to you to call in as many Men as can be got, for the express purpose of Working for we shall most undoubtedly have occasion for every Man who can procure or bear a Musket.[36]

Why would Washington request that they call in men "who can procure or bear a Musket" if he had none to issue. Washington obviously thought that there was some realistic chance of men showing up with a musket of their own.

What is one to make of Washington's letter of April 29, 1778? He complains, as Bellesiles would have us believe, "I am as much at a loss as you can possibly be how to procure Arms for the Cavalry…" But the rest of the sentence tells the rest of the story: "there are 107 Carbines in Camp but no Swords or Pistols of any consequence. General Knox informs me, that the 1100 Carbines which came in to the Eastward and were said to be fit for Horsemen were only a lighter kind of Musket."[37]

---

[35] George Washington to Philip van Rensselaer, February 8, 1778, *Writings of Washington* 10:431.
[36] George Washington to Pennsylvania Safety Council, December 22, 1776, *Writings of Washington* 6:422.
[37] George Washington to Stephen Moylan, April 29, 1778, *Writings of Washington* 11:322-3.

Bellesiles tells us that Washington ordered his officers to start carrying half-pikes, and suggests that the motivation was partly to deal with the shortage of arms.[38] But as usual, a careful reading shows that what Washington ordered was not driven by a shortage of firearms, but the different needs that officers had for arms compared to the privates:

> As the proper arming of the officers would add considerable strength to the army, and the officers themselves derive great confidence from being armed in time of action, the General orders every one of them to provide himself with a half-pike or spear, as soon as possible; firearms when made use of with drawing their attention too much from the men; and to be without either, has a very aukward and unofficerlike appearance.[39]

There is nothing in Washington's statement that indicates that firearms weren't available for the officers; Washington's concern was that the time required to load and fire them was a distraction for officers from leading the soldiers.

Washington complained at various times that his forces had been well armed, but that various public arms had drifted away with the soldiers.[40] Unsurprisingly, he complained "The scandalous Loss, waste, and private appropriation of Public Arms, during the last Campaign is beyond all conception." He also asked the state governments to ask for an accounting of the public arms that had been issued to various regiments, but also made another request that shows that Washington believed that there were large numbers of privately owned firearms in America: "I beg you will not only do this, but purchase all, fit for the field, that can be procured from private persons, of which there must be a vast Number in the Government."[41]

Similarly, Washington's letter to the Continental Congress War Board of March 8, 1780, concerning two regiments of dragoons that were to be outfitted seems to indicate that pistols

---

[38] Find this in Bellesiles, 187.
[39] George Washington, December 22, 1777, General Orders, *Writings of George Washington* 10:190.
[40] George Washington to the New York Legislature, March 1, 1777, *Writings of Washington* 7:215-16.

were available for them: "There are pistols in the Magazine, but the Horsemens swords must be made, as there are none proper for the purpose on hand, that I know of."[42] It appears that firearms of the wrong sort were available; this is not an indication that firearms were scarce in America.

Bellesiles tells us "the frontier regions were worst hit by this scarcity of firearms."[43] Yet instructions from the Continental Congress and letters from Washington suggest that they were oblivious to these shortages. On June 16, 1778, the Continental Congress, observing "the reward offered in March last to such drafts as should bring firelocks &c with them into the field" because the government owned too few "arms and accountrements" increased the reward offered to the two new regiments "to be raised in Virginia and Pennsylvania, to induce them to come armed and accoutred…." If the soldier brought "a good serviceable rifle, with a powder horn, bullet pouch, and mould, eight dollars; for a good serviceable musket, with a bayonet and a powder horn, and bullet pouch, or a good cartouch box, six dollars; for a like musket and accoutrements, without a bayonet, five dollars; for a knapsack, two dollars; for a haversack, one dollar; for a blanket, eight dollars."[44] If guns were so seriously scarce on the frontier, why was a rifle with all the accessories worth only three times what a knapsack was—and the same as a blanket?

Another example is Washington's letter of July 28, 1781 to Thomas Parr, asking him to recruit riflemen from Pennsylvania says, "I observe by the Recruiting instructions that the Men

---

[41] George Washington to the Massachusetts Council, February 28, 1777, *Writings of Washington* 7:209.
[42] George Washington to the Board of War, March 8, 1780, *Writings of Washington* 18:86.
[43] Bellesiles, 185-86.
[44] June 16, 1778, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 611-612.

are to be paid for the use of their Rifles if they bring them into the field; this leaves the matter optional, and if a considerable part of them should come unarmed we shall be put to very great difficulties on that account, as we have but few Rifles belonging to the Continent."[45] If rifles were really so incredibly scarce, this would not be "optional."

A somewhat similar letter to Joseph Reed the previous month requests his help in raising a unit of 300 riflemen in Pennsylvania. Their mission would be

> to fire into the embrazures and to drive the enemy from their parapets when our approaches are carried very near their Works…. General Lincoln informs me that the enemy made use of this mode at the Siege of Charlestown, and that his Batteries were in a manner silenced, untill he opposed the same kind of troops and made it as dangerous for the enemy to shew their Men as it had been before for him to expose his.[46]

So much for the poor quality of colonial American marksmanship!

Washington also expected these men to bring their own rifles: "One of the terms should be that they are to find their own Rifles, as we have none in Store. I shall be glad to hear as soon as possible what probability there will be of succeeding in this undertaking. The greater part of the Men, must be with the Army by the 1st. of Augt. or their services will be useless afterwards."[47] In a bit more than a month, Washington had a realistic hope that Reed would be able to raise perhaps 300 men with their own rifles—and have them with the Continental Army. If firearms were actually scarce on the frontier, someone seems to have not told Washington, who assumed that many could be persuaded to bring their rifles with them.

Finally, Bellesiles often contradicts himself. Describing the state of the American colonies at the start of the Revolution, Bellesiles claims, "Most of the guns in private and public hands came

---

[45] George Washington to Thomas Parr, July 28, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:427.
[46] George Washington to Joseph Reed, June 24, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:257.
[47] George Washington to Joseph Reed, June 24, 1781, *Writings of George Washington* 22:258.

from the twenty thousand Brown Besses supplied by the British government during the Seven Years' War."[48] Yet two pages earlier, Bellesiles tells us that Massachusetts found that at the outbreak of the war, "there 21,549 guns in the province…."[49] If "most of the guns" in America were from the 20,000 Brown Besses, then there could not have been more than 40,000 guns in all of America–and more than half were in Massachusetts!

Intentional deception is by far the most serious problem with *Arming America*. One can sympathize with the historian whose choice of sources is deficient, or whose sources are atypical of a period. One can even understand the historian who allows his biases concerning political controversies ancient or modern to influence how he reads the evidence. There comes a point, however, where the misreading of a source becomes so flagrant that the only explanations are gross stupidity (unlikely for a history professor) or dishonesty.

One category of sources that Bellesiles uses to prove that guns were in very short supply in the early Republic is arms censuses, which Bellesiles purports included not only publicly owned arms, but also privately owned arms. Bellesiles tells us that in 1803, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn conducted "a careful census of firearms in America, with the intention of demonstrating that the America militia owned sufficient firearms." After reporting that there were 235,831 guns, Bellesiles claims that, "Half of all these guns were in the hands of the federal government, with about one-quarter in state arsenals. The remainder were privately owned."[50]

---

[48] Bellesiles, 182.
[49] Bellesiles, 180.
[50] Bellesiles, 240.

But when you examine the sources that Bellesiles cites for this statement, there is nothing to support his claim that this census included all privately owned guns. The circular letter from Secretary of War Dearborn to the state and territorial governors is explicit, asking them to provide information "stating the military strength of each State, the actual situation of the arms, accoutrements, and ammunition of the several corps, with the same, and every other thing which may relate to their government, and the general advantage of good order and military discipline."[51] There is no division contained in the "Return of the Militia" tables that distinguish between those "in the hands of the federal government" and those in state arsenals, and nothing that indicates how many of the arms were privately owned, and how many arms there were other than those in the hands of the militia.

Indeed, it seems unlikely that any arms "in the hands of the federal government" would be listed in a "Return of the Militia," based on the language of the circular letter. The similar 1810 and 1811 Returns of the Militia,[52] by contradistinction with the 1811 inventory of federal military stores,[53] strongly implies that a "Return of the Militia" included no federal arms at all. Nor is there anything in the 1803, 1810, or 1811 "Return of the Militia" supporting circular letters, or explanatory notes that identifies or even suggests that tells how many of the arms so listed are privately owned.[54]

Had Bellesiles turned even three more pages, he would have found somewhat larger numbers of firearms in a "Return of the Militia" compiled less than two months later, after New

---

[51] United States Congress, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:159.
[52] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:258-62, 297-301.
[53] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:303-4.
[54] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:160-62, 258-62, 297-301.

Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky sent in their returns.[55] Of course, this increases the number of firearms a bit, but does nothing to support Bellesiles's claim that these are comprehensive censuses of firearms in the United States, or that they list all privately owned firearms.

Another interesting point is that the firearms listed in these censuses are "pairs of pistols," muskets, and rifles. From the categories, it would seem that this census was only of military arms, and could not have included all privately owned arms, many of which would have been inappropriate for militia use.

So where does Bellesiles get these numbers from? A report in 1806 that Bellesiles cites as evidence of the scarcity of guns in private hands is quite explicit: After explaining that the laws of the United States required every "citizen enrolled in the militia" to "provide himself with a good musket or rifle," the report explains, "From the best estimates which the committee has been able to form, there is upwards of 250,000 fire arms and rifles in the hands of the militia, which have, a few instances excepted, been provided by, and are the property of, the individuals who hold them."[56] This is explicitly a statement that were *at least* 250,000 privately owned guns in the hands of the militia, and this was clearly *not* a complete inventory of all guns in America.

Yet Bellesiles claims, based on this report, that "a congressional committee estimated that there were 250,000 guns in America."[57] At a minimum, the 120,000 fire arms and rifles "fit for

---

[55] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:165, 168-72.
[56] *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:198.
[57] Bellesiles, 240 n. 123.

use" and 12,000 "which need repairs" in the magazines of the United States would need to be added, along with guns in the hands of non-militia members. Depending on how would interprets the congressional committees report, it is possible that there were also large numbers of firearms owned by militia members that were not considered to be military weapons, and thus not included in this estimate of "upwards of 250,000 fire arms and rifles…."

"One can examine the records kept by any public official associated with the militia in the early nineteenth century and find similar complaints of the lack of firearms and the general failure of the system."[58] Bellesiles points to W.C.C. Claiborne, governor of Mississippi Territory 1801-1803, and of Orleans Territory starting in 1812, as an example of such a public official. Bellesiles quotes Claiborne that his efforts to organize the Mississippi militia had met "many obstacles…the greatest of which are the want of arms and the means of obtaining a supply."[59] Indeed, Claiborne did write that to Secretary of State Madison.[60]

Yet, within a few months, Claiborne wrote to the Secretary of War, "The prospect of organizing the militia is flattering: the different Counties are laid off into regiments, battalions and company Districts: the officers are all appointed, and the men enrolled: a great degree of rivalry exists between the different corps: and I flatter myself that in a little time I shall have a well-armed and well disciplined militia."[61] Later in the week, Claiborne finishes his letter, "In the course of this week, I have reviewed the militia of Jefferson and Adams Counties; and can

---

[58] Bellesiles, 248.
[59] Bellesiles, 248.
[60] William C. Claiborne, Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne* (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1917), 1:39.
[61] Claiborne, 1:152.

assure you that the prospect of having a well-armed militia, exceeds my most sanguine expectations."[62]

Were guns in short supply? Bellesiles tells us that, in response to Governor Claiborne's need for arms, "The government helped by sending 163 rifles and one hundred muskets to be stored for the militia's use, increasing the number of guns in the territory by 47 percent to 820, enough for 31.7 percent of the registered militia."[63] Yet, by reading what Claiborne *actually* wrote, we find a considerably different situation.

There is nothing in the sources that Bellesiles cites that indicates that the guns listed on the Return of the Militia were the only firearms in the territory–certainly, nothing to justify Bellesiles's claim of increasing the number of guns in the territory "by 47 percent to 820." The shortage of guns that Governor Claiborne complained about at the start of his militia organizing effort seems to have been a short-lived problem, and not the chronic difficulty that Bellesiles would have us believe: "You will discover that many of the privates are yet unarmed, but I flatter myself, this Inconvenience will soon be remedied–the Rifles (which were sent to me) are in high Estimation among the Militia, and the probability is, they will all be sold, upon the conditions, I have prescribed…."

Those conditions included a certificate from the captain that "Every Citizen applying for a Rifle" "is regularly inrolled on his Company, and in want of Arms," and that the applicant must pay $14 for it–a sizable sum of money for most Americans in 1802. "Upon those conditions I suppose the Rifles will speedily be disposed of to the Militia…. As to the Muskets, they are in

---

[62] Claiborne, 1:155.

no demand among the Citizen Soldiers, and I cannot persuade them of their utility…." Instead, Governor Claiborne planned to store the muskets in a warehouse, apparently because demand was so low for them.[64] So much for the shortage of firearms!

Governor Claiborne also reported, "I received, the other day, sixty stands of muskets from Fort Adams. They have been heretofore used, and are not in good order: I propose therefore to sell them at the moderate sum of eight dollars apiece. At this reduced price I expect the militia will speedily purchase them. But I find the people here are much prejudiced against muskets, and are unwilling to depend on any other arms but rifles."[65] How interesting that Bellesiles neglects to mention this fact! If the militia was insufficiently armed, this was apparently a temporary condition, and reflective not of a shortage of firearms, but a desire by the militia for rifles, not muskets.

Bellesiles would have us believe that Claiborne, like most public officials, complained about "the general failure of the system."[66] But this is not an accurate statement of Claiborne's beliefs. According to even the pages that Bellesiles cites, Claiborne's concern was not a "general failure" of the militia system, but defects in the militia law of Mississippi Territory: "The exertions of the Officers to organize and discipline the Militia, have been accompanied with great success, and authorize a hope that *this best resource*, of a free people, will shortly become an efficient means of defence. Experience, however, has proven, that our militia laws are still defective." [emphasis in original] Claiborne asked the Mississippi Territorial Legislature to correct the

---

[63] Bellesiles, 248.
[64] Claiborne, 1:182-83.
[65] Claiborne, 1:152.
[66] Bellesiles, 248.

territory's militia laws;[67] his speech to the legislators shows that he did not see the militia system as a "general failure."

There are other fascinating glimpses into the private market for firearms in America, of which the government's surplus orders are probably just a keyhole look. On May 2, 1787, the Continental Congress ordered public auction of an interesting collection of military odds and ends: "413 old militia Arms… 365 old militia gun barrels… 985 old gun locks… 2000 damaged muskets… 700 pistols… 1194 damaged muskets… 1066 damaged carbines… 4446 damaged musket barrels…" and a bit more than thirteen tons of damaged powder.[68] A single day's surplus sale included 4200 damaged firearms, 700 apparently functional pistols, and large numbers of gun parts. Perhaps the government was deluding itself, thinking that there would be a market for all these firearms and parts in America.

Another example of what makes *Arming America*–and the author–not simply wrong, but intentionally deceptive, is the claim, "an examination of eighty travel accounts written in America from 1750 to 1860 indicate that the travelers did not notice that they were surrounded by guns and violence."[69] Similarly, Bellesiles tells us that hunting until the 1840s was done almost entirely by a small number of professional market hunters, or by Indians. Most Americans, even on the frontier, did not hunt.[70]

Bellesiles's romantic, nearly gunless America where few non-Indians hunted (and then, almost entirely with knives), is intriguing. But as I started to read travel accounts from the first

---

[67] "Address to Mississippi Legislature," December 9, 1802, Claiborne, 1:237.
[68] May 2, 1787, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 244-246.
[69] Bellesiles, 304.
[70] Bellesiles, 320-23.

40 years of the 19th century, I came to the realization that if Bellesiles is right about this rarity of guns and hunting, not only will a lot of our textbooks have to be rewritten, but dozens of books written by people who lived in the period 1800-1840 will have to be rewritten as well, to bring them into conformity with Bellesiles's highly selective, often grossly misquoted "scholarship."

Let us be very clear on this: I am not saying that Bellesiles simply hasn't read the same sources that I have. It is very easy, with the enormous supply of books, diaries, and government reports from that time, to find two different historians coming to very different conclusions by reading different sources. One can be led astray by focusing entirely on one region of the country, and assuming that this region typifies America. Indeed, if Bellesiles had read only sources associated with the North, or perhaps even the coastal lowlands of the South, I could accept the possibility that he simply over generalized from the relatively peaceful nature of those regions.

Had Bellesiles read a *completely* different set of travel accounts, I could wonder about the odds of his travelers not noticing that they "were surrounded by guns and violence," while so many other travelers noticed and wrote about it at length. But there are enough sources that Bellesiles has read (or claims to have read) that I have read as well–and that make it very clear that before 1840, guns, murder, mayhem, and hunting were widespread on the frontier, and not unknown or even startling in the settled and urban East.

What can one say when Bellesiles reads Baynard Rush Hall's memoir of frontier Indiana life immediately after statehood (1816)–and misses Hall's detailed description of how hunting was a common part of life for most settlers, done partly for sport, and partly because it supplied fresh

meat at very little expense.[71] Not surrounded by guns? Hall devotes an entire chapter to the joy of target shooting with rifles, opening the chapter with:

> Reader, were ever you *fired* with the love of rifle shooting? If so, the confidence now reposed in your honour will not be abused, when told my love for that noble art is unabated….[72]

Hall also describes target shooting matches as common, and takes pride in participating in a match that he happened upon where the prize was a half-barrel of whiskey. As the president of the local temperance society, his goal was to win the prize and pour the whiskey out on the ground.[73] (See also the account of Richard Flower describing the 1820-21 Illinois Territory– one of many that Bellesiles didn't read. At the frontier village of Albion, Sunday amusements included that "the backwoodsmen shot at *marks*, their favourite sport….")[74])

The rifle was so common an implement, and target shooting so common a sport, that when Hall went out evangelizing in a sparsely settled part of Indiana, one of his fellow preachers switched in mid-sermon to a metaphor involving rifle matches to sway the audience. They were becoming restless with analogies that meant nothing to them—but rifle matches they understood.[75] Hall also describes the use of rifles both by settlers pursuing criminals, and by criminals trying to avoid arrest.[76]

---

[71] Robert Carleton [Baynard Rush Hall], *The New Purchase, or Early Years in the Far West*, 2nd ed. (New Albany, Ind., 1855), 66, 82, 139-49, 153, 160-3, 375, 448-51.
[72] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 100-113.
[73] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 104.
[74] Richard Flower, *Letters from the Illinois, 1820-1821: Containing An Account of the English Settlement at Albion and Its Vicinity…* (London, 1822), 14.
[75] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 228-30.
[76] [Hall], *The New Purchase*, 189-90.

Hunting and target shooting were common enough that Hall describes non-lethal hunting and target shooting accidents.[77] Hall also makes occasional references to pistols with no indication that they were either rare or regarded with any particular concern.[78] Yet Hall's references to pistols are far exceeded by mentions of rifles and shotguns. Hall's discussions of hunting, use and misuse of guns, and target shooting take up 41 pages of Hall's book– all of which Bellesiles seems to have either missed, or disregarded.

Bellesiles read Anne Newport Royall's description of 1818 Alabama, and missed her discussion of the use of guns for self-defense and hunting as completely ordinary events, incidental to the events and people that she depicts. Royall also refers to bear hunting in her native Virginia as an ordinary part of life, with no indication that it was anymore unusual than an American today driving a car. [79]

Even when Bellesiles admits that there is a mention of guns in one of these travel accounts, he distorts what it says to fit his novel claims. As an example, "Similarly, Ole Rynning advised his Norwegian readers to bring 'good rifles with percussion locks,' as such good guns are far too expensive in America and can be sold there for a good profit. Guns thus had an economic value, but if thought requisite for self-protection, it remained an unstated assumption."[80]

But unlike the vast majority of those who will read Bellesiles, and accept the accuracy of Bellesiles's statement, I had already read Rynning's book, and knew what it *actually* said there. Rynning said to bring "good rifles with percussion locks, partly for personal use, partly for sale.

---

[77] [Hall], *The New Purchase,* 262-3.
[78] [Hall], *The New Purchase,* 449, 452.
[79] Anne Newport Royall, *Letters from Alabama, 1817-1822* (University of Alabama Press, 1969), 181-189, 203.

I have already said that in America a good rifle costs from fifteen to twenty dollars."[81] Bellesiles didn't actually lie, and say that the *only* possible value of a gun for a Norwegian immigrant was to sell it here; instead, he misleads, by giving the impression that the value of bringing a good gun to America was to sell it, not to use it yourself. Rynning is clear that one should bring guns both to sell, and because you would need them here.

Bellesiles is really a master of this sort of careful mischaracterization of sources that doesn't quite cross the line into lying. Another example is Charles Augustus Murray's description of his hunting trip from Britain to America in the late 1830s. Bellesiles tells us that, "Hunting in America disappointed Murray. He had expected more gentlemen hunters, but only army officers on frontier posts seemed to fit that description."[82] Having spent great energy in promoting the idea that hunting was a rare activity, done only by professional market hunters and Indians, the reader not familiar with Murray's book will slide right past that sentence and conclude that there weren't many hunters in America. But Murray met *lots* of hunters–they just weren't "gentlemen" hunters. Murray shows his understanding of how common both firearms ownership and sport hunting were in rural Virginia–and these were ordinary farmers, not "gentlemen" of the sort that Bellesiles claims were overwhelmingly the sport hunters of that time:

> I lodged the first night at the house of a farmer, about seven miles from the village, who joined the habits of a hunter to those of an agriculturalist, as is indeed the case with all the country people in this district; nearly every man has a rifle, and spends part of his time in the chase. My double rifle, of London manufacture, excited much surprise among them; but the concluding remark of almost every inspector was, "I guess I could beat you to a mark."[83]

---

[80] Bellesiles, 339.
[81] Ole Rynning, ed. and trans. Theodore C. Blegen, *Ole Rynning's True Account of America* (1926; Freeport, N.Y., 1971), 99.
[82] Bellesiles, 309.
[83] Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America* (London, 1839, reprinted New York, 1974), 118-119.

Bellesiles read Murray, Rynning, Royall, and Hall; he quotes selectively and out of context from some, and mischaracterizes others, when he tells us that the travel accounts generally show no evidence that the travelers were "surrounded by guns."

I could belabor the point, and point to the dozens of other travel accounts that Bellesiles seems to have missed–including common works such as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Journey to America*. A young Alabama lawyer that Alexis de Tocqueville spoke with in 1831 asserted, "There is no one here but carries arms under his clothes. At the slightest quarrel, knife or pistol comes to hand. These things happen continually; it is a semi-barbarous state of society."[84] While it is possible that most of these concealed weapons were knives, it requires a strained reading of Tocqueville's text to hold that handguns were scarce–or that America was the peaceful, almost pacifist nation that Bellesiles describes.

Tocqueville also presents evidence that widespread gun ownership was not peculiar to Alabama; he quotes a Tennessee farmer in 1831 that

> [T]he dweller in this country is generally lazy. He regards work as an evil. Provided he has food enough and a house which gives half shelter, he is happy and thinks only of smoking and hunting.... There is not a farmer but passes some of his time hunting and owns a good gun.[85]

Tocqueville also describes a usual "peasant's cabin" in Kentucky or Tennessee: "There one finds a fairly clean bed, some chairs, a good gun, often some books and almost always a

---

[84] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New Haven, 1960), 103.
[85] Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 95.

newspaper…."[86] Guns and hunting were not unusual in Kentucky or Tennessee, according to Tocqueville; they were typical.

Perhaps Bellesiles is right, and dozens of eyewitnesses of the time are wrong. But when an historian repeatedly mischaracterizes, quotes out of context, or simply ignores sources because they do not fit his claims–well, let's just say that it's bit early to start revising textbooks to fit the new wisdom from *Arming America*.

Clayton E. Cramer (http://www.ggnra.org/cramer) received his M.A. in History from Sonoma State University in 1998. His fifth book, *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic: Dueling, Southern Violence, and Moral Reform* was published by Praeger Press in 1999. A more detailed critique of the Bellesiles's claims, including other diaries, travel accounts, and statistical evidence, can be found at http://www.ggnra.org/cramer/GunScarcity.pdf.

---

[86] Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, 281.