

# Arming America' or Disarming Reality?

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Michael Bellesiles is a man with a monstrously large axe to grind. How else could one explain his opening a piece set in the 19th century with an attack on NRA's 21st century President Charlton Heston? In

*Arming America*, Prof. Bellesiles indicts our "gun culture" for America's "high level of personal violence," but he is really out to deny the existence of the "right of th people to keep and bear arms." In 600 pages, he finds no room to analyze those words, no room for the explanations of the men who wrote them.

As Bellesiles spins the tale, our Founders hated firearms, didn't own any, didn't know how to use them, and couldn't shoot straight. The myth of th "Armed Citizen" has been conjured up to justify today's "gun culture." He sets out to debunk the myth and to prove that the American tradition does not include an individual right to keep and bear arms. The propaganda evidently started with th settlers themselves. William Blathwayt wrote in 1691 (to brainwash 20th century Americans) that "Young Virginians...all Learn to keep and use a gun with Marvelous dexterity as soon as ever they have strength enough to lift it to their heads."

The thesis that few Americans owned firearms is based on Bellesiles' examination of probate records in selected New England and Pennsylvania towns for 1765-1790. Only 14 percent of deceased persons had a firearm in the inventories of their estates, and half of these inventories were listed as broken. Bellesiles assumes that fathers did not, before their deaths, give their firearms to their children. I checked the inventories of Thomas Jefferson's three estates, and not a single firearm was listed. It just happens that he owned dozens of guns during his life; a pair of his pocket pistols are on display at Monticello. His beloved pair of Turkish pistols was given as a gift to Dolly Madison's son in 1816. In the November 1969 issue, *American Rifleman* Editor Ashley Halsey, Jr. wrote extensively on Jefferson's guns, noting that "Jefferson owned and used dozens of firearms in his 83 years. His existing personal records of them... reveal that in a span of 27 years 1773-1800, he purchased at least three long guns and eight pistols... The rest of his collection was dispersed before his death in 1826... "Does the lack of firearms in his estate record prove Jefferson was not a firearms owner?" [Guncite note: From the same issue of the *Rifleman*, "[H]is collection apparently was dispersed before his death in 1826 or shortly afterward to satisfy debts against his estate." George Washington, based on evidence from diaries and contemporary accounts, was believed to have owned up to 50 firearms. The February 1968 *Rifleman* mentions "The inventory in Washington's estate lists 'in the iron chest' in his library, "four pistols, however "[u]nfortunately, the inventory contains no description whatsoever of the other pistols. Presumably they included those now at Mount Vernon and Albany, N.Y. On the other hand, Washington from time to time owned other pistols."]

Bellesiles also ridicules the marksmanship of the militiamen at Lexington and Concord because the 3,763 Americans shot only 273 Redcoats (yet British regulars hit just 95 Americans). Lt.

Frederick MacKenzie of the Royal Walsh Fusiliers, who was there, disagreed: "These fellows were generally good marksmen, and many of them used long arms made for Duck-shooting." By contrast, the Department of the Army estimates that U.S. forces in Vietnam expended 50,000 rounds to cause a single enemy casualty.

The Second Amendment declares that "a well regulated militia" is "necessary to the security of a free state." Bellesiles dedicates his book to proving that the militia as the song goes, "ain't no good for nutin." Curiously, Bellesiles, in an earlier work, *Revolutionary Outlaws: Ethan Allen and the Struggle for Independence*, describes how Allen organized the Green Mountain Boys as a voluntary militia and their triumph in seizing Ticonderoga from British regulars. The 1777 Battle of Bennington does not rate a mention in *Arming America*.

One of Bellesiles' sources in *Outlaws* is the *Autobiography* of Ira Allen, Ethan's brother, which is filled with accounts of the use of firearms which flatly contradict Bellesiles' recent revisionism. *Arming America* also asserts that hunters like Ethan Allen "relied on their traps, not their guns." There is not one reference to trapping in the tales by Ira Allen, who wrote that, while exploring land, "my brother Ethan Allen was... hunting and killing deer. He often invited me as I had been fortunate in killing two bucks in one day." Allen died in 1814 in Philadelphia with an estate valued at only \$70. Perhaps Bellesiles could examine the inventory to determine whether Allen was ever a gun owner.

Americans did not reinvent the "gun culture." Bellesiles reinvented history. Of course, it really does not matter how many Americans owned firearms during the periods of the Revolution and the Constitution's adoption, any more than it matters how many owned books. The "right" to keep and bear arms, like the "right" to a free press, bears no relation to how many people choose to exercise that right at a particular time.