

Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture

By Michael A. Bellesiles

Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2000. 444 pages, \$30.00.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL COBLENZ

There are a number of pervasive and pernicious myths in American history. Perhaps the best known is the story, invented by “Parson” Mason Weems, about a young George Washington admitting to cutting down a cherry tree because he “could not tell a lie.” The story first appeared in the fifth edition of Weems’ *The Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington*, published in 1806; it was notably absent from the first four editions. This story is pernicious because it diminishes every occupant of the White House, as they, unlike Weems’ mythical Washington, are human and do in fact tell lies.

Now, historian Michael Bellesiles suggests that the story of the hearty Colonial pioneer forging into the untamed wilderness with his trusty flintlock over his shoulder is also a myth. This myth is pernicious because the story of widespread gun ownership forms the foundation of the popular understanding of the Second Amendment. Many supporters of an unlimited right to own weapons suggest that the Second Amendment merely embodied the supposed reality that virtually every Colonial individual owned a firearm. And this contributes to the devastating effect of weapons in our society.

Bellesiles begins by noting his surprise in finding mention of few guns while studying Colonial probate records. Firearms were transferred in only about 15 percent of the cases he studied. When he first published these results he was widely criticized by gun rights advocates; they suggested that guns would be passed from father to son before death, and therefore would not show up in probate records. Both stung by, and spurred on by, this criticism, Bellesiles began a detailed search for firearms in Colonial America, and this book contains his results.

Bellesiles notes that, prior to the industrial revolution, guns were made by hand, which caused them to be ex-

tremely expensive, costing on average a few months’ wages. They were also generally made of iron, which required constant maintenance or the weapon would rust beyond usability in a few months. And even with proper maintenance, a handmade weapon would wear beyond usability in about five years, and would require either extensive repairs or replacement. The British Army, which scrupulously cared for its weapons, replaced the Brown Bess, the standard musket, every two years. As a consequence, very few Colonials could afford to own firearms. According to Bellesiles’ estimate, fewer than 20 percent of eligible citizens — generally restricted to landowning white males — owned guns during the Colonial period.

Flintlocks were also difficult to use. Prior to the development of the minié ball in 1849, a gun had to be loaded by pouring in powder, tamping down wadding, and finally loading the bullet. This made the weapon of marginal use in battle and highly impractical for hunting. It also made firearms extremely touchy. If the powder was wet, the weapon wouldn’t fire. If the wadding wasn’t properly tamped down, the shot would leave the weapon without sufficient force to harm enemy or game. And if too much powder was used, and not sufficiently packed, the weapon would blow up.

Standard muskets also lacked a sight, which made them extremely inaccurate. Bellesiles describes a militia shooting competition in which few were able to hit the target: a barn door. In fact, some Colonial legislatures banned reporting on militia drilling, lest the public lose faith in the soldiers’ abilities. Given these deficiencies, the musket was a poor tool for hunting.

Not only were guns lacking both before and during the War of Independence, so were the necessary resources to use them. The first gunpowder mill began operation in the Colonies in 1675, but shut down in 1750. Its product was of notoriously poor quality. And imported powder, though more reliable, was considerably more expensive. Given the high cost and the low likelihood of success in the use of a gun, it makes sense that few Colonials would bother to own and maintain one.

After failing to find evidence of

widespread production of guns in the Colonies, Bellesiles looked at the end users of weapons: the militia. He found that the most common complaint among officers in the state militias was a serious lack of weapons among soldiers. Before the Revolution, the colonies constantly begged the Crown for weapons and were constantly disappointed.

When the Revolution began, the militias were dangerously under-armed. The Continental Army fared slightly better but was still poorly armed. Bellesiles documents the lack of weapons throughout the war. It was not until the Continental Army captured thousands of weapons from the British at Yorktown in 1781 that the soldiers were even adequately armed. And it was not until the French began supplying the Continental forces with weapons that they became fully armed. Units of the Continental Army reported that they were fully armed in October 1783 — ironically, one month after the Treaty of Paris had granted independence to the Colonies.

Guns were not widely owned in this country until they were affordable. Gun ownership increased dramatically in the 1840s as mass production increased supply and reliability, and decreased price. It was the Civil War that taught most men to use weapons, and at the end of the war, soldiers in the North and South alike were allowed to keep their weapons.

Guns were widely owned and used in this nation’s westward expansion after the Civil War. Westward expansion was widely justified by the precedent of the nation’s earlier expansion from the seaboard colonies into the frontier. And there the myth of the gun was born, as firearms were anachronistically placed in the hands of both sets of pioneers.

Through voluminous supporting data, Bellesiles’ book shatters the myth of the gun and adds an important historical dimension to the debate over gun rights. Now if we could only do something about Parson Weems. **TFL**

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