

## **Fraud in Michael Bellesiles's *Arming America***

Professor of History Michael A. Bellesiles's *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* 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.

A detailed examination (90 pages or more) of the many errors contained in *Arming America* can be found at <http://www.ggnra.org/cramer/ArmingAmericaLong.pdf>. This paper focuses on a particular class of problems with *Arming America*—intentional fraud by Professor Bellesiles. The examples contained herein involve cases of misquoting of documents so as to misrepresent what they say, and in some cases, quotes which are complete fabrication—at least if they are from the source that Bellesiles cites.

Bellesiles 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."

He cites this as *U.S. Statutes* 1:271-74. But that isn't what the Militia Act of 1792 says.

The actual text is:

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 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>1</sup> [missing text emphasized]

Not only does he leave out the words “provide himself” that demonstrate that Congress did *not* take “upon itself the responsibility of providing those guns,” but he added the words “constantly provided” to cover that he had changed the tense of the verb.

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>2</sup> But this doesn't match Bellesiles's “quote” either; Bellesiles doesn't cite the 1803 Militia Act. Nor would it do Bellesiles any good to cite it, since the quote isn't correct from that statute either.

Bellesiles devotes enormous energy into blackening the reputation of the militia, as distinguished from professional soldiers. 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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:

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<sup>1</sup> *Statutes at Large* 2nd Cong., sess. 1, Ch. 33 (1792), 1:271-74. *Statutes at Large* is identical to *U.S. Statutes*. You can look this statute up on the web: go to <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=001/llsl001.db&recNum=2>, enter page 271 in the box next to “Turn to image”, and click the “Turn to image” button.

<sup>2</sup> *Statutes at Large* 7th Cong., sess. 2, Ch. 15 (1803), 1:207.

<sup>3</sup> Bellesiles, 159.

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.<sup>4</sup> And yet Bellesiles portrays this unusual situation among a “few” of Washington’s militia units as normal behavior for the militia that Washington commanded.

Much of Bellesiles’s argument for gun scarcity is derived from official records and readily available documents. Examination of these records demonstrates that he is, at best, reading these records and documents to fit his thesis without any evidence to back up his claim. In some cases, he is *clearly* misrepresenting his sources.

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.”<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup> 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*.

<sup>5</sup> Bellesiles, 240.

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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. There is nothing in the militia return that indicates how many of the arms were privately owned. There is nothing that indicates how many arms there were in the United States, 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,<sup>7</sup> by contradistinction with the 1811 inventory of federal military stores,<sup>8</sup> 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 how many of the arms so listed are privately owned.<sup>9</sup>

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? Bellesiles claims that “a congressional committee estimated that there were 250,000 guns in America.”<sup>10</sup> In the context of his discussion, he clearly means that this includes all guns in America, both

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<sup>6</sup> United States Congress, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:159.

<sup>7</sup> *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:258-62, 297-301.

<sup>8</sup> *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:303-4.

<sup>9</sup> *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:160-62, 258-62, 297-301.

<sup>10</sup> Bellesiles, 240 n. 123.

privately and publicly owned. But that report that Bellesiles cites 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.”<sup>11</sup> This is explicitly a statement that there were *at least* 250,000 privately owned guns in the hands of the militia alone. The following paragraph, on the same page (where Bellesiles could not have missed it) gives a count of the number of guns in the federal magazines, which totals 132,000.

To actually determine how many guns there were in America, the 120,000 “fire arms and rifles” “fit for use” and 12,000 “which need repairs” in the magazines of the United States would need to be added. The guns in the state magazines would have to be added—and the report is explicit that these were not counted. If there were a count of guns in the hands of non-militia members (which there is not in this report), this would also need to be added. Depending on how one interprets the congressional committee 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....” Bellesiles’s mischaracterization of this report is fraud.

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.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Bellesiles tells us that hunting until the

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<sup>11</sup> *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:198.

<sup>12</sup> Bellesiles, 304.

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.<sup>13</sup>

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 40 years of the nineteenth 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.

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,

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<sup>13</sup> Bellesiles, 320-23.

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.<sup>14</sup>

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.”<sup>15</sup>

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. I have already said that in America a good rifle costs from fifteen to twenty dollars.”<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup> Having spent great energy in promoting the idea that hunting was a rare activity, done only by

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Newport Royall, *Letters from Alabama, 1817-1822* (University of Alabama Press, 1969), 181-189, 203.

<sup>15</sup> Bellesiles, 339.

<sup>16</sup> Ole Rynning, ed. and trans. Theodore C. Blegen, *Ole Rynning’s True Account of America* (1926; Freeport, N.Y., 1971), 99.

<sup>17</sup> Bellesiles, 309.

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."<sup>18</sup>

Bellesiles read Murray, Rynning, and Royall; 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."

*Arming America* is full of errors induced by Bellesiles's ideological zeal to find an America where there were few guns, few hunters, and almost no violence. But it is an America that did not exist. Bellesiles has lied to create that America.

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America* (London, 1839, reprinted New York, 1974), 118-119.



## **About the Author**

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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>.

Mr. Cramer works a software engineer, for the obvious reasons.