

Guns R Us? Myths of a gun-toting people

by [Walter Wink](#) in the [March 21, 2001](#) issue

*Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* by Michael A. Bellesilles

In no other industrialized nation in the world are there so many gun deaths as in the United States. In Canada, a country otherwise so similar to the U.S., there were only 68 handgun deaths in 1990 and 128 in '92. In 1994 the U.S. had 15,456 such deaths. More Americans are killed with guns in a typical week than in all of Western Europe in a year. To account for this enormous disparity, the myth was created that gun-toting was an early American tradition.

Michael A. Bellesilles debunks that myth. He argues that “gun ownership was exceptional in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, even on the frontier, and that guns became a common commodity only with the industrialization of the mid-nineteenth century” and the militarization of America during the Civil War.

Before this time, neither state nor national governments had been able adequately to arm either militias or volunteer units with guns. In 1644 there was only one musket for every four men in the Virginia colony—the highest percentage it would attain until the Civil War. Soldiers routinely entered combat armed with swords, pikes or even hoes. Muskets were notoriously unreliable. Because they were made of iron rather than blue steel, they quickly rusted out. There were scarcely any gunsmiths during the entire colonial and postcolonial periods. A broken part meant the loss of a weapon, since parts were not interchangeable.

A musket cost around two month's wages, placing it beyond the reach of most people, and it was very inefficient compared to a bow and arrow. A bow could release 12 arrows in the time it took to reload a musket, and had far greater range and accuracy. Arrows were not only inexpensive, but they could be used repeatedly in practice. Muskets often exploded, could not be fired in the rain without ruining the gunpowder and were so erratic that they were not even aimed. Their chief purpose was to create a cloud of smoke under cover of which a bayonet, sword, ax or pike charge could be mounted. Guns had a range of eight to ten yards, whereas a bow

could fire its shafts 200 or 300 yards. One wonders, with Ben Franklin, why the bow and arrow were ever abandoned!

In the vast expanse of time from 1607 to 1775, peace was the norm. Entire generations passed without knowing war. Between 1663 and 1740 there were, on average, only two murders a year in North Carolina. In 46 years, Plymouth Colony had not a single homicide. "The image of the armed settler appears a grand mythology intended to formulate a portrait of Americans as many would like to see them: people not to be trifled with, not willing to put up with ill treatment, and very violent. . . . One searches in vain through the colonial period for evidence of Americans armed with guns rising in great numbers to defend their liberties, whether in organized militias or unorganized crowds." Because the militias were so averse to fighting, British officials relied primarily on Indian allies to fight hostile tribes for them.

Nor was the use of guns for hunting significant. Hunting is a time-consuming and inefficient way of putting food on the table. People seeking game usually trapped it. Those who joined wagon trains going west who were misled into believing that they could acquire food by hunting would, in nine cases out of ten, starve to death, according to one guide who knew. Hunting was an upper-class leisure activity. The 95 percent of European-Americans who were farmers found it infinitely easier to chop off the head of a chicken or slaughter a hog than to hunt wild game.

"Many historians have blithely declared that the British colonies were, in an oft repeated phrase, 'the most heavily armed society in the world,'" Bellesiles states, an assertion that he crushingly refutes. Carefully itemizing mercantile bills of sale, inventories of militia and volunteer detachments, the evidence that there was a lack of gunsmiths, records of importation of guns from Europe, the incidence of duels (three in the entire South in the 1760s, none fatal), children's books and toys, comments by eyewitnesses about the abysmal shooting ability of settlers (lacking both the weapons and the gunpowder to practice), court records, and a wide variety of other historiographical resources, the author assembles an overwhelming mass of data to show that military prowess was not, in fact, characteristic of early Americans. They were consistently outshot in marksmanship competitions by Britons. Eastern target shooters also outshot men from the west. General Andrew Jackson's overwhelming victory in the Battle of New Orleans was not due to guns, most of which arrived after the battle was over. Only one out of three men in the Kentucky militia had a gun. Jackson's victory was won by cannon fire, into which the

British cooperatively marched.

This is not to argue that Americans of every stripe were nonviolent—only that their tools for violence were rarely guns. Their violence was committed with swords, knives, clubs and tools. But all that changed in a single generation. Beginning with the invention of interchangeable parts, and spurred on by the desperate need for weapons to fight the Civil War, guns suddenly became abundant. Many veterans took their weapons home after the war—durable weapons now made of steel.

Among the myths Bellesiles shatters is that of the anarchistic gun-culture of the West. Saloons and shoot-em-ups, good guys and bad, the West of films like *Shane* and *High Noon* are all debunked as pure fiction. Eastern and European cities were more violent than the comparatively law-abiding cities of the American West. Education is what mattered most in the West, with the schools teaching the classical curriculum, including Greek and Latin.

With a population of 500, Lexington, Kentucky, had six book dealers—but no gunsmiths. Within a few more years it boasted three academies, a university, a theater, a natural history museum, a magazine, a painting school and, in 1817, the first performance of a Beethoven symphony in the U.S. One book dealer catered to the miners of the California gold rush by stocking the works of Shakespeare, Byron, Milton and other distinguished poets. “Virginia City, Nevada, one of the more notorious western towns in America’s collective imagination, claimed by its second year schools for one thousand children, three theaters, and a two-thousand-seat opera house where Italian operas were favored.”

It was Samuel Colt’s entrepreneurial genius to recognize that a gun-culture would have to be created when the Civil War ended. He did all he could to link his revolver with an image of the heroic frontier and to find a market for his guns among the migrants heading west. He fostered the idea that the Great Plains were filled with “hordes of aborigines” who launched massive suicidal attacks against innocent travelers. Against these savages the “enterprising pioneer” stood alone, only his expertise with a gun standing between his family and death.

It was, Bellesiles remarks, a masterfully created mythology that has enraptured generations of moviemakers, novelists and historians. How a revolver was supposed to protect against Indians on horseback with repeating rifles, Colt didn’t say. But it was revolvers he needed to unload, and people fell for the hoax. The militarization of

the West was also furthered by the creation of gunslinger heroes like Buffalo Bill Cody, Annie Oakley and Lewis Wetzel. The latter, a wholly fictional character, had the miraculous ability to reload while running, in only 15 seconds. And he never missed (shades of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, Gene Autry or Matt Dillon). Bellesiles writes, "During the twenty years before the Civil War, Americans began constructing an image of themselves as a violent people and to act on that self-perception . . . the 1840s and 1850s marked a shift toward ever-accelerating passion and violence."

Until 1857, New York City police found truncheons sufficient. Between 1845 and 1854 there was not a single shooting incident. The arming of America changed all that. By the end of the Civil War, nearly every adult male in the country had been trained in the use of guns. What I call the "myth of redemptive violence" kicked in with a vengeance. The Civil War, Horace Greeley rhapsodized, would save a soft civilization from greed. The nation would rise above materialism through violence.

Even pacifists like Frederick Douglass and Julia Ward Howe were gripped by the militaristic fervor, the latter celebrating northern rectitude by her "Battle Hymn of the Republic." They failed to realize that it was capitalist materialism, as expressed in the massive manufacturing capacity of the North, that made the North's victory possible.

The repeating rifle was the most significant development in firearms during the war. At its beginning generals, as usual, were still fighting the last war. It took the personal intervention of President Lincoln to get the ordnance department to start buying repeaters. Southern generals continued to march into northern repeater rifle fire as if they were still fighting against muskets. The new rifles were not only able to continue firing after the opening salvo, but were deadly accurate as well.

The 20 years after the Civil War saw an explosion of homicides. Domestic spats increasingly were settled with guns, and suicides became infinitely easier and more certain. But neither Bellesiles nor anyone else really has been able to account for the excessive gun violence in the U.S. After all, European soldiers also learned to kill, especially during World War I and II. Some took their weapons home. But this did not lead to the kind of violence that plagues the U.S.

Bellesiles's case has some weaknesses. In his attempt to limit himself strictly to the history of guns, he slights the violence done to both African and Native Americans. Runaway black slaves were hunted down like deer, but they were seldom shot, since

the point was to recover valuable slaves who would be of no value dead. During Reconstruction, however, black people were the victims of sheer terrorism. They were skinned alive, lynched, beset by wild animals. On one occasion, the good white citizens even played kickball with the head of a decapitated African-American. Many openly supported the Ku Klux Klan as a necessary way to control blacks. Courts established precedents that legitimated a reign of terror that lasted more than 100 years.

The author's neglect of the gun culture of Native Americans is harder to understand, since he acknowledges that prior to the 1840s Indians had more guns than whites did. They fought for the French, the British and white Americans. The "final solution" of conquering them and crowding them into concentration camps euphemistically called "reservations" may have taken place after the period covered by this book, but the pattern of broken treaties, treachery and extermination was the policy of the European settlers from the start.

Given Bellesiles's insistence on Americans' near total ineptitude with guns, one wonders how they ever managed to defeat the Indians, the British and finally each other. Perhaps I am in the continuing grip of the myth of the American warrior, but it does seem that he slights the long rifle and its role in developing good marksmen. Critics from the National Rifle Association have challenged Bellesiles's account of the Battle of New Orleans, citing the ability of the long rifle to strike targets well before British muskets could get within firing range.

This book is no easy read, due in large part to its repetitiveness. Bellesiles understandably wants to make his case irrefutable. In a tongue-in-cheek review of the book, Joseph R. Stromberg suggests that the first "several chapters could have been replaced with 10,000 repetitions of 'There Were No Guns,'" saving the editors and typists much work. For variety, the phrase "They Were All Rusty and Neglected" could have been thrown in every tenth line.

Nevertheless, the book is an historiographical tour de force. Bellesiles's painstaking and compendious research exposes the myths that have elevated the gun to its unique place in American life—and death. Colt claimed that his guns were the "great equalizers." In fact, they created a horrendous inequality, since the person who has the drop on another has a huge advantage. Historians have uncritically accepted the idea that the early colonies, the young states and the "wild West" were awash with guns. In fact, there was a perpetual shortage of guns on all the frontiers until the

mid-19th century. The National Rifle Association insists that people are unsafe without the protection of guns. In fact, the arming of America ushered in an avalanche of violent crimes.

If America's love affair with guns has been the creation of the military-industrial complex, hunting clubs, criminals and machismo, then we are not fated to be armed to the teeth. But turning aside from our enthrallment with guns will require a spirituality of nonviolence, a willingness to turn in our guns, and the activism of groups like Handgun Control, the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence and the Parents Television Council. If we do our work well, perhaps Bellesiles's future book can be titled *Disarming America*.