



Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture

By Michael A. Bellesiles

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How and when did Americans develop their obsession with guns? Is gun-related violence so deeply embedded in American historical experience as to be immutable? The accepted answers to these questions are "mythology," says Michael A. Bellesiles.

Basing his arguments on sound and prodigious research, Bellesiles makes it clear that gun ownership was the exception--even on the frontier--until the age of industrialization. In Colonial America the average citizen had virtually no access to or training in the use of firearms, and the few guns that did exist were kept under strict control. No guns were made in America until after the Revolution, and there were few gunsmiths to keep them in repair.

Bellesiles shows that the U.S. government, almost from its inception, worked to arm its citizens, but it met only public indifference and resistance until the 1850s, when technological advances--such as repeating revolvers with self-contained bullets--contributed to a surge in gun manufacturing. Finally, we see how the soaring gun production engendered by the Civil War, and the decision to allow soldiers to keep their weapons at the end of the conflict, transformed the gun from a seldom-needed tool to a perceived necessity--opposing ideas that are still at the center of the fight for and against gun control today.

Michael A. Bellesiles's research set off a chain of passionate reaction after its publication in the *Journal of American History* in 1996, and **Arming America** is certain to be one of the most controversial and widely read books on the subject.

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