

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL BELLESILES ON EMORY UNIVERSITY'S INQUIRY
INTO ARMING AMERICA**

Emory's special committee of inquiry into the charges against Arming America devoted a great deal of time and energy to their task. I would like to thank those who participated in this difficult and often confusing endeavor. While I disagree with their conclusions, I realize that the committee had been placed in the extraordinary position of reviewing what I believe is actually a scholarly disagreement. The committee was charged with investigating four charges of "intentional fabrication or falsification" and one of "serious deviations from accepted practices." The committee concludes, "we cannot speak of intentional fabrication or falsification." But in response to the fourth question, the committee, while unable to demonstrate an intention to mislead the reader, felt that the methods employed in the construction of Table 1 did move into an "area of fabrication." I will respond to all of these findings, starting with what the committee found most serious--my decision to not include the years 1774 and 1775 on Table 1 in the appendix to Arming America. However, it is first important to place the committee's work and this controversy in context.

1. Procedures. With all due respect for those who ordered and conducted this investigation, I must dissent from the procedures employed. I remain convinced that the standard workings of academic discourse remain the best way of correcting errors and increasing our knowledge. With time, the development of probate record databases would clarify the extent of firearm ownership reflected in this source. It is not evident that launching a sharply focused investigation of one small part of a scholar's work brings us closer to the truth on the subject of that research. Rather, it is my opinion that this debate has actually obscured a much more important consideration of the main issues raised by Arming America. Scholarship must be open to new directions, allowing scholars to build on their own earlier research, to qualify previous generalizations they have made, to correct errors in their work, and even to change their minds in the face of more compelling evidence. Many scholars have admitted and corrected errors in their own research, enriching our knowledge in the process. I believe that if we begin investigating every scholar who challenges received truth, it will not be long before no challenging scholarly books are published.

A. The context. The report casts aspersion on my integrity as a scholar based on three paragraphs and a table in a six hundred-page book. It seems to me that raising uncertainties that question the credibility of an entire book without considering the book as a whole is just plain unfair. In this regard, I feel that the original charge to the committee was deeply flawed. Historians have repeatedly observed that Arming America relies on a large body of well-documented sources, with probate records constituting only five of 1347 footnotes. I examined legal, legislative, military, business, literary, journalistic, artistic, musical, private, and public records in pursuit of a subject that had been little studied in American history. The evidence from the probate records could be eliminated entirely and the thesis of the book would still stand. As Robert Gross noted in the introduction to the William and Mary Quarterly forum on Arming America earlier this year:

Like other ambitious works of scholarship, Arming America musters a variety of specialized studies to fashion its argument. And it deserves to be assessed in the same terms as comparable books;

for its care and deftness in using primary sources, its accuracy and insight in drawing on secondary scholarships, and its originality and persuasiveness in developing an interpretive synthesis.

B. Correction of errors. I have acknowledged errors of transcription in the past and have corrected them in the upcoming second edition of *Arming America*. I supplied the committee with a list of these corrections, a few of which they mention in the report, though without noting that I had already acknowledged the initial error (for instance, in misstating the number of wills in the Providence, Rhode Island). Additionally, I have made a substantial effort to recreate the lost probate records. When *Arming America* appeared in September 2000 I informed several historical list-serves that the notes to the probate material had been destroyed in the Bowden Hall flood at Emory University, stating that I would start the long process of replicating and adding to that material, and welcoming comments and the findings of others. The planned second edition of *Arming America* replaces the three paragraphs in question as well as Table 1 with new text based on current research, to which I am constantly adding. So far as I know, *Arming America* has been subjected to the most thorough scrutiny of any work of history, and, putting aside the probate records, only a single misquote has been found, and only the most minor errors discovered (the committee's research assistant appears to have found a computation error which I will verify). The other disagreements are matters of interpretation, which are generally understood as standard among scholars.

Ultimately I can only affirm what I have said repeatedly over the past two years: that I deeply regret the destruction of these notes and that I will do everything I can to recreate that material in hopes of providing something of value for scholars. I cannot imagine what else can reasonably be expected of me.

2. Excluded years. The committee faults the method used in the construction of Table 1, "Percentage of probate inventories listing firearms," in the appendix, which is based on counties in four geographic regions over six specific time periods. They base this reading on my decision to not include the years 1774 and 1775 in the database and my failure to fully document the sources used. I cannot agree with the committee's reading of Table 1 as regards the former charge. They correctly note that I decided to exclude the years 1774 to 1775 from my compilation for Table 1, but fail to give my reason for doing so. As this is the only point in *Arming America* where they perceive a possible descent into an "area of fabrication," it is important to be very clear on my intentions. Excluding the years 1774 and 1775 was a methodological decision made for the soundest of reasons, not an effort to deceive the reader. Because the colonial governments were passing out firearms to the members of their militia, rapidly purchasing whatever firearms they could on the local market and in Europe, all in preparation for the expected confrontation with Great Britain, I thought to avoid these two years as giving an inaccurate portrait of peacetime gun ownership. In using a sample set approach, the scholar must by definition bypass many years. My error was in not appending a long footnote specifying which years I used in each of the counties during the period from 1765 to 1790. It seemed reasonable to me at that time, and still does, to not include the two years in which guns were being widely dispersed by governments, though, again, I should have written that reasoning into the book rather than anticipating doing so in an article I intended to write on the use of probate records. For the same reason, 1861 struck me as a poor

year to study in order to arrive at private gun ownership, the point of my examination of probate records. I did not record each and every set of sample years between 1765 and 1790 because they were so scattered as a result of gaps in the records (for instance, 1765 to 1773 in Bute County, North Carolina, and 1783 to 1785 in Charleston, South Carolina). Yet one can see that every other sample set on Table 1 is for a period of peace. Every researcher makes choices of what to include in a study and what to exclude. Thus I counted every inventory (a listing of all property belonging to a deceased person's estate) in the years I selected. The committee disagreed with this decision on my part, calling for the rejection of probate inventories that do not include much property as inappropriate for determining "the presence or absence of guns." Such an approach excludes the inventories of the very poor, which accentuates the already pronounced bias of probate records toward property owners. I know of no standard that establishes how much material an inventory contains before it can be used in an historical study, and the committee does not provide such. Yet I certainly understand the committee's general concern in this regard and regret having not devoted more space to a closer explanation of my methodology.

3. **Flaws in the documentation of probate data.** The committee also felt that I did not adequately document the sources I uses in preparing Table 1. I concur with this criticism. Much fuller documentation could and should have been supplied for Table 1. As an aspect of documentation, the report faults my failure to craft and present my study of probate materials as they would have done. The authors of this inquiry felt that I should have taken down the name of every probate file I examined and contextualized my findings within larger social networks and historiographical debates. This is a critique of methodology and does not support a conclusion of falsification. Nonetheless, the committee is right that I erred in not taking down the name of every probate file I examined and entering them onto a computer database program. My goal in using the probate records was only to determine what percentage contained firearms, which may have led to some errors. My recreation of this data corrects for this mistake, as is evident on my web page.

4. **Other questions.** The committee raises a number of other questions about my research, many of which I read for the first time in their report and to which I had not been given the occasion to respond. I therefore welcome the opportunity to address them here.

A. **Microfilms.** The committee looked into the accusation that I did not read the probate records of seven counties on microfilms. I may not correctly recall how I acquired the microfilm numbers for these few rolls-and after all, I did visit scores of archives with many different bibliographic resources-but the committee did acquire solid evidence that I read these materials, though through some oversight they fail to mention that evidence in their final report. The committee communicated with five former Emory graduate students, all of whom testified that they saw me reading probate materials on microfilm, that I often discussed these sources with them, that they used these same sources in both microfilm and document form, and in two cases that I first introduced these students to records which proved of value to their own research. Though it seems a minor point, I would like to mention that I did thank my anonymous source for these microfilms in my acknowledgements, contrary to what the committee writes. Also I did in fact buy some probate microfilm, which were in my office during the committee's inquiry, though they came directly from the archive rather than from the Mormon church. Finally, I have always said the same thing about reading these microfilms: that I took them with me to the National Archives Record Center

in East Point, Georgia. Unfortunately, Emory's microfilm readers were of the worst sort; I simply found the National Archives readers easier to use. I also read these films at the Georgia Archives and on a microfilm reader in Professor Dan Carter's office. At no point have I claimed that these probate microfilms were stored at either of those locations.

B. Contra Costa records. The committee questions where I read a dozen probate files that I mistook to be from San Francisco County. In 1993 and 1994 I conducted research in California. I visited many archives and courthouses during those two trips, including some in the East Bay area in 1994. Unfortunately, I misunderstood the provenance of a dozen probate records that I read in a single day as being from San Francisco rather than Contra Costa County. I hope that this error is understandable, since many documents are labeled as being from the San Francisco Probate district. More to the point, no one has disputed my counting of these records as having a high percentage of firearms. The committee writes that I had an "initial reluctance" to go to San Francisco. I do not understand this statement at all. I learned of this matter in November 2001 and went west the first opportunity I had, during the Christmas break. I am never reluctant to go to San Francisco, as my sisters live there. That a friend told me that he had seen probate materials headed "San Francisco Probate Court" simplified my search but hardly seems cause for concern. The committee also questions my failure to recall reading these documents in the Contra Costa Historical Society in Martinez; but then that society moved to Martinez just two years ago, whereas I had read these records eight years ago. I informed the committee in both writing and in person what I told several journalists, that I remembered reading what I mistook as the San Francisco probate records in a courthouse storage area and could only assume that my memory was faulty. Yet the committee discovered that my memory was accurate, as these probate records had been in the Contra Costa Country Courthouse storeroom until recently.

C. Massachusetts probate records. Table 1 includes a category of probate data on the graph labeled "Northern Urban." Unfortunately, on the table that category has been mislabeled "Northern Coast," and then broken down into urban and rural. The word "Coast" should not appear and has led to some misunderstanding. As I told the committee, I understood "urban" in an economic sense, and moved some counties into that category from rural as they became part of an urban economic network. Again, I erred in waiting to write an article on probate materials before I fully explained my methodology for this one table, but I had no way of knowing that my notes would be destroyed in a flood. The committee's research assistant recreated some part of this data for a Massachusetts county, though the committee seems disturbed that the results for one county did not match the aggregate I found for that period. But then a part of a larger total is likely to fall above or below the average. The committee also sought to learn precisely where I read the various probate records in Massachusetts, but again the loss of my notes made that difficult to precisely reconstruct. I have been visiting archives in New England and New York every year but one (when I taught in Germany) since 1982, and it is not always easy to recall precisely where one reads a variety of documents. Nonetheless, I sent the committee at the start of their investigations a list of more than seventy archives that I visited for my research on Arming America, and that list included the Massachusetts State Archives, where their research assistant examined the probate records for that state. On the other hand, the committee found it "remarkable" that I did more probate research than appears on Table 1 of Arming America, seemingly assuming that all research must be included in a publication.

D. Massachusetts National Guard. It is unfortunate that the committee's research assistant could not find the material for the Massachusetts gun census at the new National Guard Archive in Worcester (I did research at their old location in Natick). Items often go astray or are misfiled when archives move. However, I am gratified that the graduate assistant did find research by another scholar, George D. Moller, who quoted the same document from the same source in the same way, which indicates some accuracy on my part. I am also glad that the site's archivist recalls my visits in the past.

E. Conflating wills and inventories. The committee appears to have been under the impression that I used Lucy Gump's valuable original research in the construction of Table 1. That is not correct. I came upon Ms. Gump's findings after the publication of *Arming America* and posted them on my web site. This material is not mentioned anywhere in *Arming America*.

F. Benedict Arnold in New Haven. The report asserts that I lump "together guns and ammunition in his discussion of Benedict Arnold's march on the powderhouse in 1776." In fact it was the armory (a storehouse for arms and ammunition) and the year was 1775. The province of Connecticut stored arms remaining in their charge at the end of the Seven Years' War in the armory. This charge repeats a widely circulated accusation that I "made up" this story about Benedict Arnold. I supplied the committee with evidence that this story appears in every biography of Benedict Arnold. As I pointed out to the committee, though they do not mention it, mine is not a unique reading of the event, matching very closely that of the most recent and meticulous of Arnold's biographers, James Kirby Martin, who also finds Arnold issuing guns to his troops from the New Haven arsenal (*Benedict Arnold: Revolutionary Hero* [New York, 1997], 62-63).

G. Sample sets. The committee states that I developed doubts about the sample set method (taking a few years as representative of a larger period) before the publication of my article in the *Journal of American History* in 1996. This statement is incorrect. I told the committee that I developed doubts about the reliability of probate records before the publication of that article, which is why I devote little space to them in *Arming America*. As I have often said over the past two years, and as stated on my web site, the debate over probate records that developed after the publication of *Arming America* persuaded me that greater accuracy is attained in the extended study of probate materials over time (ten to twenty years), as correcting for anomalies and gaps in the records. Nonetheless, many scholars, including my most rigorous critics, approve of the sample set approach, and the use of it does not negate their scholarship. The fact that I initially used sample sets does not indicate an effort to deceive the reader just because some of the counties studied have gaps in their records. Most historians are aware that there are rarely complete runs for any form of documentation in the century prior to the Civil War, and *Arming America* was written for an audience of historians. Nowhere in this book do I assert that every one of the forty-one counties studied cover the entire period of research; after all, many of the counties did not even exist prior to 1800.

H. Replication of data. It is true that the whole scope of my probate research has not been replicated; but since I conducted that research over twelve years, it should not be too surprising that the same has not been accomplished in the last two. However, other scholars have replicated my findings in specific counties, finding that their data falls within a general

range of my aggregate numbers. I supplied the committee with the names of seven scholars who reached similar results in their research, though the committee does not note this research except in observing that those who have criticized my numbers for the Vermont probate figures often used different records. I find it difficult to understand the report's attitude toward my efforts to recreate this data. On the one hand, the committee wonders why I have started putting the Westmoreland probate material on my web site since those notes were destroyed in the Bowden Hall flood, failing to observe that I began work replicating the probate data in Fall 2000, as I informed them. On the other hand, the report criticizes me for not doing more to recreate this lost material. I have devoted all my available time to returning to the probate archives, and I believe that what I have found generally supports the findings of my original efforts. That research, to give just a few examples, finds firearms in 14.4% of the 312 Vermont probate records between 1770 and 1790, and 23% of the 435 Charleston, South Carolina probate files for 1783 through 1785. Of the 138 Chatham County, Georgia, probate records for the years 1783 to 1790, 22.5% contain guns, increasing to 31.8% in the years 1808 to 1811, while Jefferson County, Indiana increased from 0% in the latter years to 24% in the years from 1819 to 1821, as Somerset County, Maine, increased from 0% to 22.2% in these same two periods. My web page lists the name attached to each and every inventory examined, allowing anyone who desires to pursue the supportive material for these three paragraphs, with more material being added regularly.

5. **Conclusion.** Arming America aimed to prompt scholars to rethink one of the prized givens of American history: that American culture has always been permeated with firearms. For several decades writers have stated without any effort at validation that gun ownership was nearly universal in early America. At the very least, I hoped that historians would seek out the evidence for this assertion, since I felt that the sources indicated that gun ownership was not widespread, that there was little popular interest in firearms, and that most American men were largely unfamiliar with the use of guns until the Civil War. Arming America has succeeded in shifting the attention of scholars, as well as many members of the general public, to this issue. The overwhelming bulk of the evidence in support of this book's thesis remains unchallenged, despite the most rigorous examination (my web page will soon have a consideration of every supposed error of which I am currently aware as well as a list of corrections). All that remains in question are the few paragraphs and table on probate materials. On those paragraphs, Emory's committee of inquiry found no evidence of fabrication, though they do charge evasion.

With all due respect to the committee, I adamantly deny both charges. I have never fabricated evidence of any kind nor knowingly evaded my responsibilities as a scholar. I have been open to evidence that contradicts my hypothesis. I have never consciously misrepresented any data or evidence. I have spent twenty years conducting research in archives scattered throughout this country and in Europe. I have corrected every error possible and continue to work to replace the lost probate data.

The controversy surrounding Arming America has made it impossible for me to continue both my scholarly research and my teaching. My students, who are after all the reason for the University's existence, deserve a teacher who can devote the time and energy necessary to a challenging academic experience. I treasure my fourteen years at Emory University. Being able to work with so many fine colleagues and to teach such energetic and engaged students has been a honor. In the past, Emory has been most supportive of the

efforts of many people seeking to enhance the quality of that education. Former Provost Billy Frye's support for the interdisciplinary Violence Studies Program, of which I was the founding director, stands forth as a model of creative leadership. Former Dean Steve Sanderson and former Provost Rebecca Chopp boldly defended academic freedom when Professor Deborah Lipstadt and I were attacked by extremists. I will miss my many friends—staff members, professors, and students. But the persistence of this controversy does not serve the best interest of Emory's students, or of my family, or of scholarship. I will continue to research and report on the probate materials while also working on my next book, but cannot continue to teach in what I feel is a hostile environment. I am therefore resigning from the Emory faculty effective at the end of the year.

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