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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Research & Publishing

From the issue dated November 8, 2002

Historian Resigns After Report Questions His Gun Research

By FLORENCE OLSEN

Michael A. Bellesiles, a history professor who became embroiled in controversy over his book on the origins of America's gun culture, announced last month that he would resign from Emory University's faculty.

The announcement coincided with Emory's release of an independent investigative report that concluded that Mr. Bellesiles's "carelessness in the gathering and presentation of archival records" and in his use of quantitative analysis raised serious questions about his "scholarly integrity."

The inquiry into Mr. Bellesiles's research for *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), which won the Bancroft Prize in American History, was headed by Stanley N. Katz, a professor of public and international affairs at Princeton University. The other two members of the investigative committee were Hanna H. Gray, a professor emerita of history at the University of Chicago, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, a professor of history at Harvard University.

A university official said committee members would answer no questions about the investigation or the 40-page report that it produced. Mr. Bellesiles and Emory agreed to release the report.

In a seven-page statement, released on the same day as the report, Mr. Bellesiles adamantly denied the committee's conclusion that he had knowingly evaded his responsibilities as a scholar or had misrepresented historical evidence in one of the book's tables. Mr. Bellesiles said he was resigning because he could not continue to teach in "a hostile environment." He could not be reached for comment.

In accepting Mr. Bellesiles's resignation, Robert A. Paul, interim dean of Emory's main undergraduate college, said the university considered the independent report to be "authoritative" and the investigation of allegations of research misconduct against Mr. Bellesiles to be "concluded and resolved."

Mr. Paul's statement, the committee's report, and Mr. Bellesiles's response are available online at Emory's Web site (<http://www.emory.edu/central/NEWS/Releases/bellesiles1035563546.html>).

The resignation becomes effective at the end of December. Mr. Bellesiles, who has taught at Emory for 14 years, is on paid leave.

Scholars who have been following Mr. Bellesiles's case were not surprised. "It was a resignation made under duress," Jerome Sternstein, professor emeritus of history at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, said. "Had he not resigned, I think they would have fired him."

Mr. Sternstein said it was unfortunate that Mr. Bellesiles's research did not undergo rigorous peer review in its early stages because apparently Mr. Bellesiles "concluded that he didn't really have to do the necessary research to establish his thesis."

'Careless and Disorganized'

Another scholar, Ronald Hoffman, said that he had not seen the committee's report, but that among scholars of early American history, Mr. Bellesiles's book was widely considered to be "marred by unusually careless and disorganized scholarship."

"To maintain high scholarly standards is a demanding undertaking, particularly when authors are rushed to publish," said Mr. Hoffman, a professor of history and director of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture at the College of William and Mary.

Mr. Bellesiles's research was attacked in 1999 by the National Rifle

Association, after his work was published in an article in the *Journal of American History* in 1996. Some scholars were not surprised by the NRA's attack because the research raised new questions about whether gun ownership in early America had been as widespread as previously believed.

When *Arming America* was released, prominent scholars writing in *The New York Review of Books* and *The New York Times Book Review* gave the book high marks. But criticism of the book continued in debates carried out on the Internet.

Those discussions were followed by attacks in *The Boston Globe* and the *National Review* on Mr. Bellesiles's scholarship. Much of the early criticism was initiated by James Lindgren, a Northwestern University law professor, who found fault with Mr. Bellesiles's use of early probate records.

Mr. Bellesiles maintains that he relied on many types of historical sources -- artistic, business, journalistic, legal, legislative, literary, musical, public, and private -- other than probate records for evidence that gun ownership became ingrained in American culture only after the Civil War, and not earlier, as many historians have argued.

Although Mr. Bellesiles has conceded that his method of sampling and interpreting early probate wills and inventories produced errors, he has insisted that he is correcting those errors for a second edition of *Arming America* for Vintage Books.

Prominent historians debated Mr. Bellesiles's scholarship in a forum published in *The William and Mary Quarterly* in February, and Emory officials appointed both an internal committee and an outside committee to investigate specific allegations of research misconduct.

The outside committee worked from May 5 to July 1, with help from a graduate research assistant, and issued its confidential report to the university on July 10.

The report refers to the difficulty of trying to verify certain archival records cited by Mr. Bellesiles either "because the source does not exist, because the citation is inaccurate, or because the citation, though correct, refers to a source that has been misplaced."

Over all, the report is critical of Mr. Bellesiles's "lack of skill with quantification" in using probate and militia records to argue that gun ownership was not pervasive during peacetime in colonial and early America.

The report suggests that Mr. Bellesiles "appears not to have been systematic in selecting repositories or collections of probate records for examination and his recording methods were at best primitive and altogether unsystematic."

The investigation found mainly "carelessness" rather than intentional distortion in Mr. Bellesiles's collection and use of evidence from probate and militia records. However, it seemed to the committee that one table, which was labeled "Percentage of Probate Inventories Listing Firearms," revealed "falsification" of historical evidence.

The report sharply criticizes Mr. Bellesiles, in instances, for "failing to carefully document his findings," "failing to make available to others his sources, evidence, and data," and "misrepresenting evidence or the sources of evidence."

James Melton, the chairman of Emory's history department, said in an e-mail message that while the controversy over the book had "been a painful episode," he found the report "careful and judicious."

"I received a good deal of nasty e-mail from both sides: pro-gun people demanding immediate dismissal, others calling us NRA-pawns for ever commissioning an investigation." The investigation, he said, "remained at all times focused on scholarly issues alone."

'Unfair' Conclusions?

In his written response, Mr. Bellesiles calls the investigative report "unfair" for not considering all of the evidence in his book as a whole, and he said the report "casts aspersion on my integrity as a scholar based on three

paragraphs and a table in a 600-page book."

Mr. Sternstein said that Mr. Bellesiles's assertion is "untrue," and that the probate records are "the principal evidence," apart from anecdotal citations, in support of the book's conclusions.

Mr. Bellesiles concludes his response to the report by stating that his intention in writing *Arming America* was "to prompt scholars to rethink one of the prized givens of American history: that American culture has always been permeated with firearms." And he writes that although he still stands by that thesis, he has been, contrary to what his critics say, "open to evidence that contradicts my hypothesis."

Mr. Bellesiles has defenders who continue to speak out. In an article appearing in the November 4 issue of *The Nation*, Jon Wiener, a professor of history at the University of California at Irvine, writes that "what started as a politically motivated effort by the gun lobby and its supporters has expanded to include several scholars and historians who have devoted weeks and months to checking Bellesiles's footnotes in the archives where he did his research -- a practice that is extremely unusual in historical scholarship."

Mr. Wiener writes that "the campaign against Bellesiles has demonstrated one indisputable fact: Historians whose work challenges powerful political interests like the NRA better make sure all their footnotes are correct before they go to press."

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