

## Armed in America: A History of Gun Rights from Colonial Militias to Concealed Carry

**Patrick J. Charles**

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*Armed in America is a valuable and singular primer on the Second Amendment and its role in American law.*

Mass shootings return attention to the United States' gun culture and the Second Amendment. *Armed in America* is a timely account by a respected legal historian that examines how perceptions of the Second Amendment have changed over time.

Charles is at his magisterial best in the first section of the book, which examines how the right to bear arms was understood by those who framed the Constitution. Through documents ranging from English legal history to speeches and correspondence, the book conclusively demonstrates that “a well-regulated militia” is an integral part of the amendment’s intended meaning and purpose.

The phrase was well understood in the late 1700s; it referred to an organized, disciplined local military unit, not to ad hoc individuals. Charles goes on to show that the early American republic limited the carriage of weapons by individuals, demonstrating that the Second Amendment did not convey an unlimited individual right to bear arms.

Subsequent chapters trace how the legal balance between gun rights and regulation changed in response to Reconstruction-era racial conflicts, presidential assassinations, urbanization, and other social changes, particularly the rise of the modern gun rights movement and its most prominent proponent, the National Rifle Association.

Though some trace the movement to the 1960s, Charles documents that it has much earlier antecedents, beginning with sportsmen’s response to laws such as New York’s 1911 Sullivan Act. Escalating conflicts with proponents of gun regulation fueled the NRA’s transformation from a mild-mannered provider of practical firearms training to a full-throated political powerhouse whose adherents insist that the Second Amendment conveys an almost unlimited personal right to own, carry, and use firearms without regulation or registration, a view shown to be a serious historical and legal error.

Charles’s research is exhaustive and well documented. No doubt anticipating a controversial response, he provides detailed source notes ranging from the 1600s to the present day that make up almost 40 percent of the book’s length.

*Armed in America* is a valuable and singular primer on the ongoing controversies around the Second Amendment and its role in American law.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (January/February 2018)

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