



American Rifle: A Biography

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George Washington insisted that his portrait be painted with one. Daniel Boone created a legend with one. Abraham Lincoln shot them on the White House lawn. And Teddy Roosevelt had his specially customized.

Now, in this first-of-its-kind book, historian Alexander Rose delivers a colorful, engrossing biography of an American icon: the rifle. Drawing on the words of soldiers, inventors, and presidents, based on extensive new research, and encompassing the Revolution to the present day, **American Rifle** is a balanced, wonderfully entertaining history of this most essential firearm and its place in American culture.

In the eighteenth century American soldiers discovered that they no longer had to fight in Europe's time-honored way. With the evolution of the famed "Kentucky" Rifle—a weapon slow to load but devastatingly accurate in the hands of a master—a new era of warfare dawned, heralding the birth of the American individualist in battle.

In this spirited narrative, Alexander Rose reveals the hidden connections between the rifle's development and our nation's history. We witness the high-stakes international competition to produce the most potent gunpowder . . . how the mysterious arts of metallurgy, gunsmithing, and mass production played vital roles in the creation of American economic supremacy . . . and the ways in which bitter infighting between rival arms makers shaped diplomacy and influenced the most momentous decisions in American history. And we learn why advances in rifle technology and ammunition triggered revolutions in military tactics, how ballistics tests—frequently bizarre—were secretly conducted, and which firearms determined the course of entire wars.

From physics to geopolitics, from frontiersmen to the birth of the National Rifle Association, from the battles of the Revolution to the war in Iraq, **American Rifle** is a must read for history buffs, gun collectors, soldiers—and anyone who seeks to understand the dynamic relationship between the rifle and this nation's history.

From the Hardcover edition.

American Rifle: A Biography Details

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From Reader Review American Rifle: A Biography for online ebook

Greg says

This was an interesting history of the American Rifle from before frontier days up to and including possible future developments, as well as, the various failed attempts past and present.

A lot of information was covered regarding the selection of rifles for the Army by the Ordnance Department including the personalities and agendas of the Ordnance staff and leadership. This was a bit boring but I suppose an important part of the American Rifle's development and adoption of various models and manufacturers.

Otherwise, I learned a lot and enjoyed the book. There were several very good illustrations as well.

Daniel Meschter says

A workmanlike, sometimes amusing history of American battle rifles.

Tripp says

Alexander Rose's American Rifle is subtitled A Biography. While this is a bit odd, it makes sense as he focuses on a centuries long tension in the development of the rifle in the United States. In it and the country's youth, the focus was on long range accuracy. The idea was that a single well trained marksman would be most effective against the hordes of, generally poorly trained, enemies the young nation would likely face.

As time and experience wore on, the idea of mass firepower, expressed in less accurate automatic fire came into conflict with this approach. Some, including the National Rifle Association thought the move towards shorter range, semi-automatic weapons was an attack on the individualistic ideal that the marksmen represented. This idea carried as far as World War 2 with the Marines who kept a nearly 50 year old rifle rather than adopt the less accurate M1 Garand that the Army was using. They changed this approach once they started fighting in jungles, where firepower was of much greater import than single shot sharpshooting.

That the debate was often focused on philosophy rather than purpose is not terribly surprising. As Antulio Echevarria argues here, American thinking on the use of force has tended to focus on capabilities rather than political/strategic outcomes. Debates about military power have tended to be disconnected from what we want to achieve from their use. Debates about Iraq still tend to avoid the basic question about the strategic gains and losses from continuing the war. American politicians have tended to be squeamish about this. In the past it was considered European and now the utilitarian viewpoint is associated with the Nixon-Kissinger approach to foreign policy, which doesn't have too many adherents.

Rose targets his story for the interested generalist. There a fair amount of technical detail about the development of rifling technology, but his focus is more on the personalities and forces that drove the technology. This is appropriate, as technology rarely drives itself, but is instead the result of a mix of political, social and economic factors. Rose does well in presenting this story.

Dwain says

A very interesting book if you are interested enough in guns that you want to read about the politics behind military rifle development, the reasons that Armalite sold the rights to the M-16/M-4 family of rifles, and how firearms technology has developed from matchlocks to assault rifles. It wasn't a very quick read, but each chapter I found interesting. The book covers, as already hinted at, politics, technology, culture, military campaigns, and personalities...all revolving around the role that rifles have played in America. I found it interesting. Gun nuts probably would agree, but other than that I suspect only the most dedicated historians would slog through it.

JP says

As much as this is a history of the development of military small arms, it's also a history of the debate between individual and collective, on the battle field, in government procurement, and in manufacturing research. I expected a sometimes dry history of the evolution of rifle technology. Instead, Alexander Rose provides an always interesting series of stories oriented around the men who developed and used the rifle. The advent of rifling and its use on the American frontier resulted in a new class of soldier. Unlike the traditional use of masses of soldiers with muskets firing together in formation, the riflemen were more effective at longer range through well-placed individual shots. Since then, the dominant strategy has shifted back and forth between accuracy and awe. Proponents of the former recognize the importance of individualism, character, and economy. Proponents of the latter cite the effectiveness and sometimes necessity of overwhelming firepower, but many hold an underlying belief that it is the job of most men to be led rather than to think.[return][return]American Rifle is well-written, informative, and insightful. It's a thoughtful analysis of much more than the Kentucky rifle or the M1 Carbine.

Ted says

Fairly well written look at a fascinating subject. History, politics, war, technology, psychology, bureaucracy, procurement, public relations, lobbying and more figure into the story of the American rifle from pre-revolutionary Colonial times into the first decade of the 21st century.

And I'm now enduring the desperate need to know what's happened in the past 10 years and what will happen in the next 300.

Well worth the time.

John says

This was an interesting read of the *politics* of the history of the development of American rifle development from the colonial period to the modern era looking mainly at the main issue rifles of the American military. As someone who owns and is interested in firearms I found the history of their development very interesting, although I can see how someone who is only a shooter and not into the political history of guns could find this book shallow. The most interesting theme of the book was the differences between the political factions arguing for accuracy (the rifle school) vs massed fire (the musketry school). This left me longing for my

college days when I almost got a PhD in Science Studies with a focus on the influence of military procurement on scientific inquiry.

Luke says

"American Rifle" is a fascinating biography of an authentic American artifact: the American rifle. Although Rose is quick to point out that the 'American' rifle has multicultural influences (the process of *rifling* a gun barrel to increase a musketball's spin and accuracy was established by the German gunsmiths of Pennsylvania), he does a wonderful job of describing how the history of the United States steered the development of the American rifle.

I found "American Rifle" to be a detailed, articulate biography about a subject that I admittedly knew very little about. The author has a good grasp on the technical aspects of rifle-making but is careful not to overwhelm the novice with overly technical discussions. The biography does a wonderful job of detailing the path of the rifle world-wide with a particular emphasis on American rifles. From the American Revolution to Operation Iraqi Freedom, "American Rifle" describes the rifles that have been used to fight on foreign or American soil. Most interesting was the negotiating and positioning that happened in-between conflicts, in my opinion. Rose does a great job, describing the politics and behind-the-scenes machinations of aspiring gun-smiths hoping to get their new invention tested by the Department of Ordnance and adopted as the next US Army Service rifle. Also fascinating was the conflict between the "diehard contingent" (who preferred mass firepower) and the "progressive contingent" (who preferred sterile, precise accuracy). Rose does a wonderful job of tracing this conflict from the American Revolution to the current day, in its many incarnations.

I enjoyed this book very much and more importantly, I feel like I learned a lot in the reading. Thank you for taking the time to read my review of "American Rifle". I hope that you will enjoy this book.

Lp says

It took me quite a while to read this book, but I finally finished it, whew! Sooo much information, especially considering the fact that I had such little prior knowledge on the subject. The book was well researched & written and was quite fascinating. I have gained much respect for the power this little machine wields, esp when it is used for good, such as acquiring food and fighting the evil & the dark forces that be. It's too bad that so many nut jobs love them too, cause otherwise they are pretty cool (: I'm bein a lil bit facetious, btw :). Anyways, if you want to learn about rifles, and if you love history, esp American history, then I highly recommend this book. XO

Judy Scheibach says

I can't stay awake while reading this book. I think I'm now programmed that whenever I see the phrase "ordnance department", I fall asleep immediately.

Dan says

Easy to read with a wealth of background information. Unfortunately, I caught a few problems that make me reluctant to recommend this book to others.

A few technical mistakes:

- The Mauser Commission Rifle was not a Mauser system rifle.
- Clips and magazines aren't the same thing.
- Grant was not up for reelection in 1876 (that was the end of his second term) as implied in the chapter "The Army of Marksmen and the Soldier's Faith".

Given the amount of research the author did, I would expect him to get these things right.

The author cites on Bellesiles's *Arming America* in passages covering times leading up to the Civil War and the Civil War. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arming_A... for some criticisms of Bellesiles's work).

I also wouldn't call the AK-47 a junk weapon.

The author gets some things right. His description of tactics used by the Americans in the American Revolution is correct. He paints a much more realistic view of Sgt. York, unlike hagiographies one sometimes sees.

Andy says

Firearms and warfare, an obvious complement to the Emily Dickinson biography I finished earlier this month.

I am convinced. It is impossible to write a book about firearms without outraging either the peaceniks or the "gun enthusiasts" and I'll admit right up-front that my sympathies lie with the doves. I approached *American Rifle* with serious reservations, further compounded by the book's dubious subtitle: *A Biography*. Clearly, this book is not a biography, a history of a person's life. This is the history of an object explicitly designed to extinguish life.

With the title, I sensed that there was an agenda afoot, and that was confirmed by the contents of the book. Throughout, Rose focusses on the guns. He treads very lightly on the subject of the human cost of the rifle, which includes the horrible gore of the Civil War (due in part to the introduction of the Minie ball), the decimation of Native American culture in the West (directly through conflict and indirectly through the extermination of the buffalo), along with much, much else. The rifle is not such an innocuous invention as, say, the television and its history should not be presented as such.

Much of the research contained here is drawn from military and ballistics sources, and in assessing the impact of rifle design changes on the battlefield, Rose often retreats to similarly impassive language and numbing statistics. At points, the narrative even appears to revel in the gore, as when Rose describes the tendency of an early prototype of the M16 to inflict massive, gaping wounds when it was first tested in Vietnam.

At the very least, this is a conflicted work, attempting to appeal to the general populace while not offending the gun enthusiasts, who no doubt eagerly devour histories like Rose's. Incidentally, the National Rifle Association—which has traditionally supported the marksmanship school of rifle design over automatic and

semiautomatic models—actually comes out looking like a very progressive organization. (Surely, after publishing this book, Rose will never again have to pay membership dues.)

Now don't get me wrong, with all of its faults, this book is still worth reading. In their long history, firearms have redefined warfare and shaped the development of modern civilization. A modern rifle is the embodiment of over 700 years of invention and refinement, and as this book illustrates, the rifle's evolutionary path in America—from Revolutionary War-era muskets to today's M16—has not been a straight-forward one. There have been numerous starts, stops, and dead-ends in the design process, unholy technical compromises expedited by external politicking, and no end to the debate about design philosophy. One of the key questions is, should a rifle be designed for accuracy and marksmanship or should it be designed to overwhelm enemies with a flurry of bullets? This debate continues today with the development of the successor (possibly, successors) to the forty-five-year-old M16.

Containing detailed discussion of advances in firing mechanisms, barrel design, caliber, propellants, cartridges—really a huge variety of topics—the history presented here is technical, but I found it very readable and actually quite engaging. *American Rifle* is clearly not for everyone, but if like me you're willing to hold your judgment about presentation and authorly agenda in reserve, you might find that you actually enjoy this history. For me, this book fits squarely in the category of "Know Thy Enemy".

Randy says

American history told from the POV of the "rifle" (from the German *riffeln*—to cut or groove). The rifle differs from the musket because grooves were cut into the inside of the barrel causing the emerging projectile to spin like a football spiral which increased accuracy immensely.

German gunsmiths settled in Pennsylvania and developed what became known as the Kentucky Rifle. From the Kentucky Rifle we get the cult of marksmanship and an argument that has continued from our earliest history to the present time. That argument revolves the issue of accuracy vs firepower. Is it better to have well-trained marksmen shooting with accuracy at a distance or masses of weapons laying down a heavy field of fire?

One might think this book boring except to a gun nut. But, it isn't. The author gives us a well-researched recounting of our history and makes a strong argument that the rifle has been an important mover of events. He goes into great detail on the technological developments that led to improvements in ammunition and firing mechanisms. The politics and in-fighting as new weapons were adopted is involved. Great personalities promoted their favorites. Inventors enter and leave the stage. The repeating rifle appears. The buffalo disappears. The Indians are marginalized. The pioneers move West, all carrying rifles.

It's not hard to see how a gun culture developed in this county though "gun culture" is not a part of the author's study here. From the earliest days of our nation's history nearly everyone owned and used a gun.

In the evolution of the rifle nothing is more significant than being able to shoot multiple rounds before reloading. With the handgun, the revolver was the big idea and is still in use today. The cover of *American Rifle* features a very fancy lever action repeating rifle, another weapon one can afford to own. And, although, through time the magazine fed automatic and semi-automatic weapons gained in popularity the revolver and level action rifle are still very popular.

If one were to Google “cowboy action shooting” you would learn that there is a niche within the gun community who, like reenactors, dress up in period gear and, in timed competition, fire weapons that were popular in the nineteenth century. They will use two single action revolvers that have had their trigger and hammer mechanisms “slicked” (think “hair trigger), a lever action rifle (also slicked) shooting a .38 caliber round (the same as the revolvers) and a double-barreled shot gun. Actually, a pretty good choice as an arsenal particularly for people not that familiar with guns or who don’t or won’t be able to practice regularly.

The first half of the book is the interesting and readable. In the twentieth century the convoluted politics of gun development and promotion seem as complicated as the space program as companies, countries and individuals vied to build the guns that the government would adopt. A lot of familiar faces appear.

It’s a very good and very educational read.

Sarah Sammis says

I've been having bad luck with some of the review copies I've been sent recently. First there were the scrambled pages in Emily Waits for Her Family and now there is the toner bomb in the first third of American Rifle. Both were books I had been looking forward to reading. Unfortunately in the early history of the rifle, about one page in every eight was nearly completely black.

Despite the black pages, I enjoyed Alexander Rose's history of America as seen through the development of the rifle. Rose approaches the rifle with detachment, focusing on the technology and the cultural shifts that caused and were caused by the rifle. The book goes beyond just listing facts and dates and connects the dots in ways that made me rethink my country's history.

Pamela Pickering says

I should clarify something: this book was read but not by me. From the beginning it was clear that this book was going to be much more technical regarding the rifle than I had expected. I was looking for more of a cultural piece myself, and I knew from the first 20 pages or so that I wouldn't be able to get into it. Still, I felt since it was an Advanced Reader's Copy given by Goodreads I should follow up with the agreement to review it so I decided to lend it to a friend (who is a non-fiction nut!)and get his valued opinion. Wally is a retired USAF veteran and his review follows:

"Although it is very much detailed and highly technical, this is a well written book from the standpoint of anyone who is a weapons familiar individual. I greatly enjoyed reading it as it is of great informative value. The one area that I found lacking and was a disappointment to me was that the author failed to mention and write about what many military persons will tell you was the best combat small arms weapon ever used -- the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle). Except for that, this was a very good read. Thanks for letting me read this book."

Based on Wally's review I believe both my brother (Army) and father (hunter) will greatly enjoy this book and will recommend it to them.
