

which erases the heartland American Dream of independence and self-sufficiency. Midwesterners can appreciate what Masciotra sees as the small-town paradox of “communitarian individualism” (p. 246).

All readers will enjoy Masciotra’s rich writing style, and learn from the impressive array of supporting material he brings to bear on the song lyrics. He references a wide variety of well-known artists and thinkers, including Freud, Vonnegut, Tocqueville, Kierkegaard, Cather, Anaïs Nin, Larry McMurtry, Jim Harrison, Greil Marcus, Christopher Lasch, and Neil Postman, as well as the less familiar Karl Ove Knausgaard, Lee Burke, Robert Putnam, and Benjamin Barber. All provide a useful context for understanding the songs

of John Mellencamp, American troubadour.

Readers of Masciotra’s previous book *Working on a Dream: The Progressive Political Vision of Bruce Springsteen* (2010) will note a matured vision here, as the author concedes that the Left is quite as inept at resolving national problems as the Right, given its “big government, self-interest, self-advancement, historical incompetency and inefficiency” (p. 251). That may be Masciotra’s biggest big-picture, “no bullshit” assertion: P.C. is O.P.D. R.I.P.

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## *The Second Amendment: A Biography*

By Michael Waldman

(New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014. Pp. 255. Note on sources, notes, index. Clothbound, \$25.00; paperbound, \$16.00.)

What to make of Michael Waldman’s *The Second Amendment: A Biography*? His claims about the meaning and history of the Second Amendment reiterate a slew of discredited theories, an instance, as Yogi Berra opined, of “*déjà vu* all over again.” Waldman is president of the Brennan Center for Justice, a supposedly nonpartisan policy institute, but he could hardly be more partisan, dismissing contrary evidence and ignoring William Kelleher Storey’s tenet that “real historical

writers probe factual uncertainties but they do not invent convenient facts and they do not ignore inconvenient facts. People are entitled to their own opinions, but not to their own facts” (*Writing History*, 1999).

After asking “What does the Second Amendment mean?” (p. 58), Waldman replies that it simply preserved state militia, rather than affirming a right of individuals to keep and bear arms. Chief Justice John Marshall explained that the

Constitution was written to be understood by the people; Waldman insists that, unlike himself, few Americans ever understood it. While his book is structured chronologically, he dismisses the value of history for understanding constitutional text, belittling lawyers arguing before the Supreme Court who “brandish obscure historical texts like graduate students defending a particularly opaque dissertation” “For 281 years,” he argues, “judges overwhelmingly concluded that the amendment authorized states to form militias, what we now call the National Guard” until, in 2008, the Supreme Court “upended two centuries of precedent” by finding an individual right to own a gun (p. xi). Waldman sees that upheaval as “the product of today’s debates and conditions,” which are themselves attributable in large part to a “radicalized” NRA. So much for historical evidence or the justices.

Had this book appeared thirty years ago it would have had more credibility, notwithstanding its stridently partisan approach. But the careful historical research on which the Supreme Court justices relied in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, addressing the core meaning of the Second Amendment for the first time, provided overwhelming evidence that the amendment guaranteed “the individual right to possess and carry weapons in case of confrontation.” The justices found that “the inherent right of self-defense . . .

central to the Second Amendment” was “strongly confirmed by [its] historical background.” In adopting the amendment, Congress had codified “a pre-existing right, rather than fashion a new one.” Two years later in *McDonald v. City of Chicago*, the Supreme Court incorporated the Second Amendment right for the people to keep and bear arms as “a fundamental principle of American liberty . . . so rooted in the traditions and conscience of our people as to be ranked as fundamental.”

Section 32 of the Indiana Constitution reads, “The people shall have a right to bear arms for the defense of themselves and the State.” Forty-three other state constitutions have similar guarantees. The actual history of the Second Amendment contradicts Waldman’s theses, with two clear Supreme Court opinions and the great majority of Americans vigorously affirming the right of individuals to be armed. Waldman’s book is an anachronism. The debate has moved on.

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