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Les Etats-Unis: Hyperpuissance militaire a l'aube du XXIe  
siecle (review)

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Michael Bellesiles published *Arming America*, a controversial book in which he toppled the Minuteman from his pedestal, propounding the near-heretical thesis that firearms were not widely owned in colonial and early national America and suggesting that they and their owners played at best a modest role in our history.

And now the sound and fury will continue. An academic historian publishing with an Ivy League press has produced a solidly documented and closely reasoned book that the National Rifle Association will no doubt greet with hosannas. Professor Malcolm offers this assessment of a century's legislative efforts at gun control in England: "Government created a hapless, passive citizenry, then took upon itself the impossible task of protecting it. Its failure could not have been more flagrant." In a chapter on "the American case," Professor Malcolm concludes: "the decline of violent crime in the United States and its rise in England serve to underline the fact that guns in and of themselves are not a cause of crime. Moreover, there is evidence that armed civilians, as thirty-three states believe, do reduce crime." Charlton Heston could not have said it better.

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*Les États-Unis: Hyperpuissance militaire à l'aube du XXIe siècle.* By Philippe Richardot. Paris: Economica, 2002. ISBN 2-2178-4451-1. Tables. Charts. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 292. €27.

*Les États-Unis: Hyperpuissance militaire* is part of a series published by France's Institute for Comparative Strategy to which the author, Philippe Richardot, is affiliated. Completed after the terrorist attacks of September 11, the book examines America's military establishment since the end of the Cold War. In it Richardot, a historian who specializes in defense issues, concentrates on the structure, organization, and technical capabilities of America's armed forces rather than the strategies or tactics that guide them.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one, which contains seven chapters, examines the structure of American forces; part two, which contains the final four chapters of the book, analyses the future of America's military forces, their doctrinal concepts, and their new arms. Intended as a general introduction to the subject, little of what appears in the book will surprise American military analysts. Unfortunately, the source base is exceedingly narrow. Although the book does not include footnotes, the bibliography indicates that it draws almost exclusively on *Jane's Defense Weekly* and *Aviation Week & Space Technology*. Moreover, while Richardot lists government publications and websites, he seemingly consulted few books in completing this study.

Despite his focus on the technical aspects of U.S. military might, the author manages to comment in the introduction and the conclusion on polit-

ical and strategic issues that confront the use of American power abroad. *Hyperpuissance* (“hyper power”) is the term coined by the former French foreign minister Hubert Védrine, who did not intend it as a compliment. Such attitudes are common in France, and Richardot is no exception. The French have long been skeptical of how America employs its power, and their concerns have heightened since the end of the Cold War. Lacking a common threat that muted Franco-American differences and coupled with the yawning gap that has opened between the military might of United States and the rest of the world, French governments have often adopted a relatively adversarial role.

In his introduction, Richardot’s criticisms of U.S. foreign policy have a hit-and-run quality to them. He makes strong assertions but does not develop them in detail or present alternate interpretations. In the conclusion, however, his criticisms display greater nuance and insight. Despite his critiques, Richardot lavishly praises the technical capabilities of America’s military establishment, rightly concluding that it is without peer. At times he seems in awe of America’s military prowess.

Although written and organized in a straightforward way, the book is a dry read. Description after description of weapons will interest few. Moreover, the author fails to include a list of acronyms though he employs many. Despite these drawbacks, the book should be read by a French audience that wishes to learn more about America’s military establishment and the weapons on which it relies. Such information should help the French public better understand the limits and capabilities of its most powerful and influential foreign ally. American readers might also wish to take note of Richardot’s analysis of U.S. foreign policy because it provides a rough, albeit limited, barometer of how the French view America’s relations with the world.

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