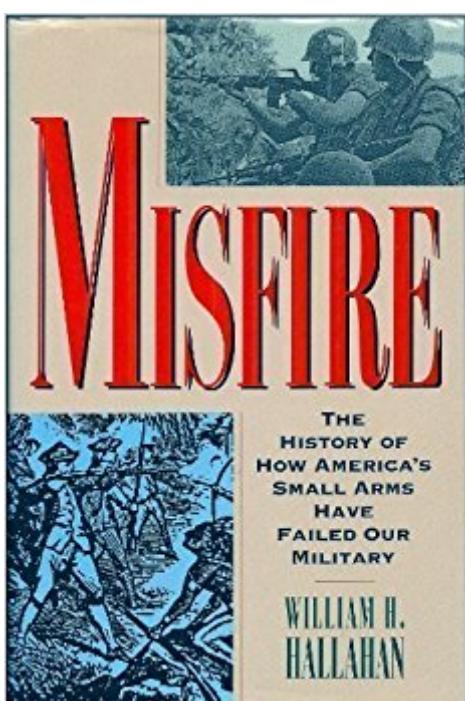


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# **Misfire: The Story Of How America's Small Arms Have Failed Our Military**



## **Synopsis**

Exposing the American military's appalling failures in the arming of its infantry, an examination of the U.S. Army Ordnance Corps traces its historical obsession with accurate, slow firepower and conservative use of ammunition--often at the cost of soldiers' lives.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Military historian Hallahan describes how, from the Revolutionary War to the present, the U.S. Army has resisted adopting appropriate and much-needed small arms. This unhappy situation is typified in his account of President Lincoln's struggle to introduce the breech-loading rifle into the Union Army despite the obstructionist tactics of his powerful chief of ordnance. The most interesting chapters deal with three armorers of genius and their campaigns to convince the Army to adopt their inventions: Hiram Maxim and his mechanically operated machine gun, John Browning and his gas-operated small arms and John Garand and his semiautomatic M1 rifle (which General Patton called the greatest battle implement ever devised). Hallahan reveals that on the eve of almost every U.S. war, the nation's armory has been so ill-prepared that no rifles were available to our troops, and he wonders if we will be caught once again in a major war with the wrong rifle, i.e., the M16A2. Arguing that superior firepower, not the best-aimed weapon, wins battles, he fears that the Army has double-crossed itself again by restricting the automatic fire of that weapon to a three-round burst. This authoritative history of Army Ordnance's bureaucratic self-sabotage should be of wide interest. Photos. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Hallahan offers an eloquent, polemical critique of what he describes as the U.S. Army's consistent failure to provide its infantry with state-of-the-art small arms. The army rejected a breechloading rifle in the 1830s. It fought the Civil War with muzzle-loading Springfields instead of readily available magazine rifles. The Lewis Gun, World War I's best light automatic, was ignored in the homeland of its inventor. The M1 A2, today's standard rifle, has no full-automatic capacity. Hallahan argues that professional soldiers suspect the ability of draftees and volunteers to use a rapid-firing weapon properly. More convincing is his denunciation of the "gravel-belly" mentality: a belief in long-range aimed fire, dating from the army's earliest history, despite the massive body of evidence that fire power is more effective on the modern battlefield than sharpshooting. This work suffers from overstatement but is a useful contribution to the subject of weapons procurement. D.E. Showalter, U.S. Air Force Acad., Colorado Springs Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I gotta admit I didn't read the whole book. The focus of my interest was the development of the M1 Garand (which I carried in the USMC), the M14, and M16 rifles and this book certainly did NOT disappoint. But be aware that this is one of those books that perfectly illustrate the truth of that old bit of folk wisdom about a statement that should and does cause consternation among those affected: "I'm from the government and I'm here to help." Army Ordinance made ssssoooo many foolish decisions, based on false assumptions and ego, that you just wanna grit your teeth and knock a few heads together. And, unforgivably, many fine young men died in Vietnam because of those foolish decisions.

Quick delivery. A bit high in prize, but any way...

Every leader in this industry needs to read this book. This history points out how the "Misfire" decisions of the past nearly doomed weapon development. Industry needs to understand that the men and women in the field (the "Boots in the Dirt") must have the final say as to how technology develops. The soldier stands in harms way while the bureaucrats sit safely behind the desk. Industry needs to listen and act to safeguard those who serve on the front.

At least in terms of the eras with which I am familiar (post-War Between the States to the book's present), it's an interesting read with some serious flaws. The book is riddled with factual and technical errors, going beyond simple typos - of which there are a disconcerting number considering it's from a major publishing house - to actually bring Hallahan's theses into doubt. It's fairly clear he

has no practical experience with some of the weapons he's writing about (e.g. the Lewis gun, the Benet-Mercie/Hotchkiss Portable, the Vickers MMG) and either praising or damning, as well as facts regarding the design, testing, and production of various rifles (e.g. the M1917 Enfield), or the field use of such arms. While I don't hold the author completely responsible for these issues, as some of them arise from more recent scholarship, it's still troubling to find multiple errors on a page with regularity. Get the book because it's an interesting story based on real events, but don't regard it as a documentary or serious scholarly work. The earlier review that said to keep some salt handy while reading is spot-on.

Very good book. Contains many interesting facts that show up nowhere else to my knowledge. The chapters on the M14 and M16 are particularly interesting.

Historian Barbara Tuchman is quoted in the book *Misfire* on page 253 with this gem: "[W]isdom, which may be defined as the exercise of judgment acting on experience, common sense and available information, is less operative and more frustrated than it should be. Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests? Why does intelligent mental process seem so often not to function?" As author Hallahan demonstrates in this book, the answer is people with no credible or proven experience in a subject too often seek to voice their opinion on it. William H. Hallahan is an author of fiction and history books. If he has any marksmanship background neither Google nor his personal website bother to mention it. Despite authoring a telling history of US small arms procurement, his lack of experience and available information leads to several flawed conclusions. Is there such a thing as an efficient bureaucracy, especially within the military? Finding flaws in something as large and old as the US Army Ordnance department should probably be expected, however, when the US military replaced small arms in the past there was an obvious improvement associated with the new device. The Trapdoor Springfield used breech-loaded metallic cartridges and supplanted a muzzle loader; the Krag repeater replaced single shot rifles; Springfields and Enfields were much faster to reload and fired a more powerful cartridge than the .30-40 Krag; the Garand gave us semi-auto capability and the M14 more than doubled capacity and the last change we made to the AR15/M16 increased capacity again with a serious reduction in weight. Despite flaws and mistakes made within the bureaucracies of the US military, an interesting history that Hallahan details here with perfect 20/20 hindsight, US small arms technology has mostly kept pace with the rest of the world. The "gravel belly" shooter Hallahan ignorantly denigrates literally invented marksmanship training and kept pace with equipment

developments. The National Match Course was modified to accommodate and train the capability of every new service rifle. These same shooters ushered in improvements to the AR-15/M16 making it a capable performer to 600 yards, double its intended effective range, while at the same time created practical shooting courses pressing this same platform into close range, high speed scenarios. Good shooters realize this. Hallahan and similar low skilled, non-shooters do not, choosing to follow the mistaken belief that mere volume of fire yields greater downrange impact. Actual timed tests pitting "spray and pray" shooters with huge ammo capacity and full or semiautomatic fire against a "gravel belly" shooter consistently find the "gravel belly" winning. Increasing volume of fire is great but only an advantage if properly directed. Surprisingly, Hallahan includes an important component of machine gun gunnery skill: Traversing the gun, sometimes referred to as the "two-inch tap." On page 311 John Keegan, author of "The Face of Battle", records, "By constant practice the machine gunner leaned to hit the side of the breech with the palm of his hand just hard enough to move the muzzle exactly two inches against the resistance of the traversing screw. A succession of "two inch taps" first on one side of the breech until the stop was reached, then on the other, would keep the air with a stream of bullets so dense that no one could walk upright across the front of the gunner's position without being hit." In training today it is the "gravel belly" shooters that espouse this gunnery technique and low skilled shooters would abandon the tripod and T&E that make such a procedure possible, preferring to always "walk in" unaimed fire. By actual test, "gravel belly" riflemen beat machine gunners of the Hallahan school. The instructor cadre I worked for staged numerous demonstrations pitting a Camp Perry-type "gravel belly" armed with an M16A4 with a 30 round magazine against a Hallahan-type believing volume of fire always wins armed with a belt fed machine gun, bipod or tripod mounted (gunner's choice) and 154 rounds. Shooting on an Army machine gun qualification range the "gravel belly" rifleman either wins or ties, usually with ammo to spare. This does NOT mean machine guns are ineffective! The problem is Hallahan-types refuse to learn from "gravel belly" shooters, zero ineffectively, fail to understand gunnery or marksmanship and are hampered by the myth that volume of fire will make up for skill deficiencies. It can not and won't. If Hallahan had ever been on a range with skilled shooters, including some "gravel belly" types, he would realize this.

After 17 years and counting of Army service, some of which was spent as an enlisted infantryman, and others as an Ordnance officer, I agree with Hallahan's premise that bureaucracy and personal agendas have often hampered the selection and implementation of effective small arms. I also agree with his assessment that the "gravel belly" concept is largely outdated. His synopsis of the

histories of our different small arms over the years is very telling in that regard. Like other reviewers, however, I am a bit dismayed at the number of typographical errors in the book, especially since the publisher is a major (and respected) one. In addition, Hallahan seems to be unfamiliar with some basic firearms terminology, often using "clip" and "magazine" interchangeably -- which they are NOT. Overall, I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in firearms or military history, but as others have said, keep your salt nearby.

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