

“The Constitution Says People May Bear Arms” :
Statement to the Press in Salt Lake City
(May 11, 1897)

Eugene V. Debs was seen at his room in the Grand Pacific Hotel yesterday afternoon [May 11, 1897], and asked for an expression on President Boyce’s inflammatory address,¹ counseling workmen to arm themselves.

I am heartily in accord with Boyce’s sentiments. The speech has no special significance. The constitution says people may bear arms, so there is nothing unlawful about it. We see inoculated in every limb of the social make-up this idea of bearing arms. Every university and college has its military organizations in some form. Even Sunday schools resort to military drills. So I repeat that everywhere and all about us is being fostered a tendency towards militarism. Why should not the workmen have their organizations, their rifle clubs?

Experience has taught us lately that on every occasion when force of arms has been invoked it has been to suppress labor. When appeals to arms have been made to the authorities it has been at the behests of corporate capital and always for the one purpose of overcoming the workingman. If no provocation exists, then it is a rank injustice.

Corporations do not hesitate to instigate lawlessness for the purpose of calling out the militia. Recalling the Cripple Creek strikes, we remember that 100 deputies were called out to shoot down the miners without provocation, and the Governor of the state² took cognizance of this fact and at once ordered out the militia to suppress the deputies. Who suffered? Not the deputies, but the poor workingmen.

You must bear in mind labor has practically no rights when compared with capital. The latter controls everything. Why should not the working classes improve their condition in every way?

I see nothing in Mr. Boyce’s attitude or in that of the organization he represents, in the event of his recommendations being carried out, that is not in perfect harmony with the constitution of our country. These men are all American citizens, animated by patriotic motives, and in taking this position the purpose is not to resist lawful authority, but to maintain it.

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¹ Edward Boyce (1862-1941) was President of the Western Federation of Miners. Debs was called to Leadville by Boyce in January 1897 and the pair toured the West together during the first quarter of 1897, sharing the stage at public meetings and smaller sessions of organized workers. On May 10 Boyce — still traveling with Debs — delivered a speech in Salt Lake City which included a call for the WFM to “devise ways and means to provide every member with the latest improved rifles” with a view to arming 25,000 men within two years, which brought about the request for this statement.

² Governor of Colorado during the bitter Cripple Creek miners’ strike of 1894 was Davis H. Waite (1825-1901), a Populist. The five month strike was led by the Western Federation of Miners.