

The Downsides of the 1911 Pistol

By [David Tong](#)



Illustration courtesy of Colt's Mfg. Co., Inc.

As any reader of my little missives may have noticed, I am one of the proponents of the Browning/Colt 1911 pistol design. I believe its combination of ergonomic control layout, single action trigger, low bore axis and .45 ACP cartridge make it a viable choice in today's self-defense pistol market. This is demonstrated by the sheer number of manufacturers that build versions of the piece. However, there are some issues related to its age, design and production that should be addressed.

The 1911 was designed by John Browning in a time when all firearms were manufactured from machined steel parts. There was simply no such thing as firearms produced from investment casting, metal injection moulding, or stampings in the first decade of the 20th Century. The traditional machined from steel forgings manufacturing techniques required both time and lots of material wastage and neither are conducive to economical and rapid mass production.

Unless the manufacturer of a new 1911 pistol has access to original blueprints and the design dimensions of all the parts, each is going to have slight variations in tolerances. This may negatively affect the overall reliability of the pistol.

The time needed to machine small parts, such as the slide stop, spring steel extractor, ejector, thumb safety, grip safety and mainspring housing mean that most modern production 1911 pistols use either MIM or investment casting. Both processes can produce quality parts and the cost of making parts the original way is prohibitive.

Even Colt, the original maker of the 1911 pistol, now lists only the receiver, slide and slide stop as machined forgings, while using MIM for the sear, disconnecter and hammer. Other minor parts are investment castings. In this day of moulded-plastic receivers and stamped sheet metal internal parts, this is a substantial cost issue when producing, marketing and selling pistols to law enforcement agencies or the civilian market.

Boutique makers, such as Wilson Combat, Les Baer and Vickers Tactical can use original production methods for small parts and continue machining the receiver and slide from forgings or stock. Of course, these makers have to charge a premium price for their products that relatively few can afford or are willing to pay.

The 1911's dual feed-ramp design and relatively low magazine-to-cartridge release height can cause feeding malfunctions. In my experience, it pays to use aftermarket magazines, such as Wilson 47D, McCormick Power Mags and Novak. It is important that cartridges have a nose-up release angle

that raises the bullet nose strike on the frame's feed ramp. This directs the bullet onto the barrel's ramp as directly as possible to ensure maximum reliability. Most newer pistols utilize a single ramp that extends down from the chamber, which improves reliability.

Another potential problem area is the spring-steel extractor. The 1911 is a controlled-feed design and the extractor hook slips over the case rim as the case slides up into the standing breech of the slide. The problem is that the extractor can lose tension or break if the owner simply drops a round into the chamber and slams the slide home, so it is best to always feed rounds from the magazine.

A careful and knowledgeable 1911 owner will check the proper amount of extractor tension by stripping the slide and sliding a loaded hardball round under the extractor hook. The round should just barely be held in place by the extractor. The tension can be (carefully) adjusted by clamping the extractor into a smooth-jawed machinist vise and gently tapping it with a small rawhide mallet.

The extractor's lower hook area should be gently radiused to help the case rim slide smoothly under the hook after the tension adjustment. This can be done by very fine four-square Swiss file or stoning, followed by polishing.

Two manufacturers, Para-Ordnance and Smith & Wesson, have incorporated newer extractor designs into their 1911 pattern pistols. Para uses what they call a Power Extractor, which has the same outside dimensions as the original, but has a coil-sprung and pivoting front section with the potential for better durability than the original spring steel version.

Smith & Wesson has gone a tad more modern by using an external extractor that pivots on a coil-sprung pin, much like most modern pistols. These are produced by MIM, though the production-custom S&W Performance Center pistols have these machined from bar stock. My experience with the S&W design has been positive, in that no other pivoting extractor on a 1911 pistol has worked correctly.

The dual feed ramp and spring steel extractor are the root cause of most 1911 malfunctions, although only minor work is required to achieve reliable operation. However, this costs money, time and perhaps a sensitive owner to accomplish.

While many, including yours truly, appreciate the ergonomics and relatively slender grip of the 1911 pistol, we must also address the fact that this is accomplished by means of a single-stack magazine of relatively limited capacity, at least by modern standards. The 1911 was originally designed to carry seven rounds in its flush-fitting magazine. Latter day ten-rounders will protrude from the bottom of the grip by 1.5 inches or so, making them both unsightly and less than desirable for carry.

When comparing this limited capacity to the 13-16 round magazines of modern, double stack .45 ACP pistols, most people understand that having more rounds is an advantage in law enforcement or military contexts. While I think that the average civilian will probably not engage multiple adversaries in a defensive situation and can be well served with a 1911, it is hard to argue the point.

The 1911's annular locking lug system with its matching accepting grooves in the slide, its barrel hood fit in the standing breech of the slide, separate barrel bushing and swinging link and lugs all can contribute to poor accuracy if precise tolerances are not maintained during production. *(They also make a 1911 much more hassle to field strip for cleaning. -Editor.)* Modern CNC equipment has rectified a lot of the sloppy tolerance issues, but there can be no denying that it still takes more time and precision to produce than pistols that use a block-shaped rear barrel that abuts the ejection port, an oblong hole in the front of the slide to allow for barrel tilt on recoil and a fixed / angled lug that unlocks said barrel using a frame-mounted cam.

These features were all seen together in the SiG-Sauer design of the 1970s. This set the pattern for modern service pistols, because it is far easier to produce and maintain accuracy, while reducing production time and cost.

The 1911 is no longer size and weight competitive, compared to more modern designs. While I believe there is some inherent tensile-strength and ultimate durability advantages to the 1911's all heat-treated steel construction, despite the 1911's slim design it is a heavy beast. Some of the new-fangled plastic or aluminum alloy pistols weigh less fully loaded than a 1911 does empty and sans magazine.

For comfortable carrying and stability on the waist, an all steel 1911 requires a high-quality, double-thickness gun belt of at least 1.5 inch width and a quality holster. Such rigs are not inexpensive.

However, as a tool of classic proportions, the 1911 still strikes me as something to cherish, as some cherish Luger pistols, classic revolvers and walnut/blued steel rifles. These are products of a bygone age where inherent quality, longevity and appearance still hold sway in the hands of its owner.