

When Johnny Came Marching Home

The GI Bill: A New Deal for Veterans

by Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin

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Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin have written a political history of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the GI Bill of Rights or just GI Bill. The book is a volume in Oxford's series on *Pivotal Moments in American History*, and the bill is analyzed in its role as a transformative piece of veterans' legislation. The bill is remembered today largely for the educational benefits provided to veterans of World War II, which transformed the lives of the veterans who took advantage of them—and American higher education. The impact of the bill was profound. Of the 15.7 million veterans who returned to civilian life by 1955, "12.4 million, about 78 percent, benefited directly from the GI Bill" (page ix).

While the GI Bill is most remembered for its impact on higher education (and is reviewed in this journal for that reason), the authors do a good job placing the bill in the larger context of veterans' legislation and analyzing the range of programs included in the bill. A short history of veterans' legislation from the American Revolution onwards culminates with an examination of the post World War I legislation, which provided the immediate political context for creation of the more far-reaching 1944 bill. After World War I, Congress had promised vet-

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erans a cash bonus but one that would not be paid to them until 1945. With the onset of the Great Depression, veterans campaigned for an early payment, culminating in the Bonus March on Washington in 1932, which ended in bloodshed and a political disaster for President Hoover. The unspoken imperative for politicians after WW II was to avoid that kind of outcome.

In acknowledging earlier histories of their subject, which tended to be adulatory, Altschuler and Blumin note that they are building on Suzanne Mettler's *The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* and that they will focus "on the crafting of this new veterans' policy, on the shape and utilization of the programs created by the bill..., and on the significant effects of these programs" (5).

During the legislative drafting, the cost of unemployment benefits became one of the larger controversies because legislators were operating under the assumption that after the war the economy would go into recession. There was widespread fear that returning veterans would not find jobs, and the resulting unemployment costs would overwhelm the treasury. The conservative coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats that had just succeeded in killing the National Resources Planning Board was not about to allow this proposal to become the American version of Britain's Beveridge Report. One of the reasons the GI Bill drafters included educational benefits was to keep veterans out of what was expected to be a poor job market. Ultimately, the economy did not go into recession at the end of the war, and unemployment fears proved unfounded.

Altschuler and Blumin downplay some of the claims made in regard to the GI Bill's contribution to the building of the postwar suburban landscape. They conclude that VA loans authorized by the bill played a significant role for returning veterans, but that the growth of suburban developments such as Levittown had larger causes.

They also examine the racial and gender impact of the bill. While the bill did not discriminate in terms of race, gender, or class, neither did it overturn established local practices. The authors credit John Rankin, a congressman from Mississippi and chairman of the Veterans' Committee in the House, with "a reputation for white supremacist, anti-Semitic, anti-Communist, xenophobic, and union-busting bombast." (62), with managing to decentralize enforcement procedures so that local officials administered programs. In 1947, *Ebony* magazine found that of "3,229 loans guaranteed that summer in Mississippi, only two went to blacks" (198).

But it is for the impact on education that the GI Bill is remembered, and the impact was truly staggering. While the educational benefits were not the main focus of debate in Congress, they did draw partisan attention and controversy. Samuel Rosenman, a speechwriter for President Roosevelt, suggested "that federal financing of education for GIs would be an 'entering wedge' that would garner wider acceptance of federal aid to education of all sorts and for all Americans" (44). From the other side of the political spectrum, Republican Senator Alexander Wiley of Wisconsin warned that "the Federal Government

was liable to use this as an opportunity to open up the whole scope of Federal jurisdiction” (63).

In the end, Senator Ernest McFarland from Arizona offered the amendment that made “education and training benefits available to virtually all returning veterans who had not been dishonorably discharged and had served for at least six months” (68). After some wrangling with Rankin, both houses of Congress passed the bill unanimously. Not only did large numbers of veterans take advantage of the educational benefits to attend college, the promise of their attendance prompted states and institutions to invest in infrastructure on campuses around the country. This, in turn, made possible the huge increases in college and university attendance in the 1960s and beyond, as the baby boom generation (another aspect of veterans returning from the war) made its way through the system.

The authors make clear that, although the bill represented a convergence of different interests and intentions, the ultimate effect was an immense increase in public benefits, truly an extension of New Deal domestic programs, that found political support across the spectrum. Robert Michel, former Republican Minority Leader in the House, contributed a jacket blurb for the Altschuler-Blumin book praising the GI Bill as “a pivotal piece of legislation, among the finest our government has ever produced.”

A 1988 study by the Joint Economic Committee found that for every dollar spent by the GI Bill, the Department of the Treasury received between \$5.50 and \$12.00 in direct return. These findings do not examine the more intangible returns through quality of life, growth of knowledge, and transformation of American life. In the end the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 was in fact one of the most successful examples of public policy in American history, fully justifying Peter Drucker’s observation that the bill was “the most important event of the 20th century” in that its provisions for government subsidized college education for World War II veterans “signaled the shift to the knowledge society” (3).

Would that we had the political will today to commit to national programs that provide such widespread benefit to society. As members of the higher education community it would be nice to return to such a public policy approach to our enterprise, rather than lament that those were the days. 