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APA 7th ed.

Batten, D. D. (2011). *The g.i. bill, higher education and american society*. Grove City College Journal of Law and Public Policy, 2(1), 13-30.

Chicago 17th ed.

Dayne D. Batten, "The G.I. Bill, Higher Education and American Society," *Grove City College Journal of Law and Public Policy* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 13-30

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MLA 9th ed.

Batten, Dayne D. "The G.I. Bill, Higher Education and American Society." *Grove City College Journal of Law and Public Policy*, vol. 2, no. 1, Spring 2011, pp. 13-30. HeinOnline.

OSCOLA 4th ed.

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THE G.I. BILL, HIGHER EDUCATION AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

*Dayne D. Batten**

ABSTRACT: This article examines the quantitative and qualitative effects of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the G.I. Bill, on the American higher education system and American society at large. Though there is much disagreement over just how large an effect the Bill had on the numbers of veterans entering the education system, the scholarly consensus seems to be that the legislation encouraged a significant number of veterans to pursue a college education. This influx of veterans into universities, in turn, transformed American perceptions about college, shifted the focus of post-secondary instruction from the liberal arts to vocational training and set a precedent for future government involvement in the American university system.

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INTRODUCTION

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the G.I. Bill, has proved itself a powerful force for social change in post-World War II America. In particular, Title II of the Bill, which created a program to pay for the continuing education of veterans returning from war, caused a massive spike in the numbers of Americans attending college. This increase led to a profound shift in American perceptions of higher education and government policy relating to those institutions. In light of this, many have credited the G.I. Bill with democratizing American higher education and creating the American middle class. Though such theories likely exaggerate the Bill's effects, a thorough examination of the legislation's history and a quantitative analysis of its aftermath show that the policy's implications for American society as a whole, and the higher education system in particular, are profound in terms of both scope and transformative power.

THE BILL

Though it is currently popular to celebrate the success of the G.I. Bill in transforming the socioeconomic structure of American society, those passing the Bill scarcely considered the potential ramifications of the Bill for American class structure. Though the Bill came on the heels of the New Deal which was, for its time, radically progressive social policy, Congress' interest in passing social legislation had largely waned by the time the

G.I. Bill was passed.¹ Instead, as its name suggests, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act was intended primarily to help integrate waves of returning veterans back into American society. Only a little more than a decade earlier, the "Bonus Army" of World War I veterans, who camped out in Washington D.C. to demand government benefits, had created a political nightmare for the Hoover Administration after the President rejected their plea and ordered the United States Army to forcibly disperse the group.² With the possibility for veteran unemployment high and the "Bonus Army" incident still fresh on politicians' minds, Washington was beginning to fear a potential revolution generated by millions of idle veterans.³ The primary purpose of the G.I. Bill, therefore, was to ensure that returning soldiers would have a smooth transition back into civilian life.

In particular, Title II of the legislation was intended not only to accomplish the broader goals of the Bill but also to reinvigorate the American economy which was suffering from a decline in its number of educated citizens. Studies conducted at the time estimated that 1,400,000 "man-years" of undergraduate training had been lost because of the war, due to the large number

1 Suzanne Mettler, *The Creation of the G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944: Melding Social and Participatory Citizenship Ideals*, 17 JOURNAL OF POLICY HISTORY 345 (2005) [hereinafter *The Creation of the G.I. Bill*].

2 *Id.* at 348.

3 Milton Greenburg, *How the GI Bill Changed Higher Education*, 50 CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, B9 (2004).

of young men unable to attend school.⁴ Moreover, the decade of economic depression that preceded the war created a generation of workers who were not only lacking in education but also in any meaningful work experience.⁵ Thus, Title II would “aid in replenishing the nation’s human capital” which had been ravaged by years of depression and war.⁶

In pursuit of these goals, the G.I. Bill contained sweeping provisions that allowed veterans to receive unemployment benefits or to get loans and other government financing to build a house, start a business, or attend high school, college or vocational training. Title II of the Bill offered any veteran with at least ninety days of service the opportunity to pursue one year of education at government expense, with up to four years available to those who had served longer.⁷ The government promised to pay a G.I.’s full tuition, up to \$500, with an additional stipend available to cover living expenses. These benefits were distributed directly to the veterans (as opposed to being distributed to the colleges and vocational schools themselves) regardless of factors such as race, leading one author to describe it as a “remarkably egalitarian policy.”⁸

4 Roger Shaw, *The G.I. Challenge to the Colleges*, 18 THE JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION 19 (1947).

5 Greenburg, *supra* note 3.

6 Robert Serow, *Policy as Symbol: Title II of the 1944 G.I. Bill*, 27 REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION 481, 483 (2004).

7 SUZANNE METTLER, *SOLDIERS TO CITIZENS* 7 (2005) [hereinafter *SOLDIERS TO CITIZENS*].

8 Serow, *supra* note 6, at 490.

Veterans took advantage of these benefits in overwhelming numbers, with over 2.2 million pursuing higher education and 5.6 million more attending high school or vocational school.⁹ All told, during the post-war period, veterans accounted for as many as 49 percent of enrolled students at colleges and universities, and a total of 51 percent of veterans took advantage of the education benefits in some form.¹⁰ These numbers greatly exceeded the Federal Government's projections, which had been calculated using survey data that showed that only 8 to 12 percent of veterans would want to pursue full-time education after the war.¹¹

NUMERICAL EFFECTS

Despite the high number of veterans flooding colleges and universities around the nation, a number of factors make the results of the G.I. Bill itself (as opposed to the natural effects of returning veterans who may have gone to college anyway) difficult to discern. To start with, military recruitment offices were required to administer tests of literacy and intelligence to those seeking to enter the armed forces and to deny those who did not meet minimum requirements. Because of this policy, the average soldier under the age of twenty-five entered the military with 1.1 years of education more than the general population average.¹²

9 SOLDIERS TO CITIZENS, *supra* note 7, at 42.

10 *Id.*

11 *Id.* at 41.

12 Charles Nam, *Impact of the 'GI Bills' on the Educational Level of the Male Population*, 43 SOCIAL FORCES 26, 27-28 (1964).

Veterans were not only uniquely intelligent (and therefore more likely to be able to handle collegiate work), but also more likely to have the educational background necessary to immediately begin a college career upon returning. Thus, it seems logical that they would have contributed significantly to a spike in enrollment rates even without the G.I. Bill.

Also contributing to the difficulty of studying the Bill's outcomes, a large portion of those who served in the military were precisely those who would have been in college had they not been called away to serve their country. As mentioned earlier, the federal government estimated that more than a million "man-years" of years of college training had been lost by young men who were called away to fight. Moreover, many soldiers had already enrolled in college before going into the service (about fourteen percent in the Army and six percent in the Navy).¹³ Ultimately, any discussion of the impacts of the G.I. Bill will have to account for the "independent negative impact of WWII on education."¹⁴

Finally, the G.I. Bill came at a time when there was already a "sharply rising trend in the formal education composition of the male population" in America.¹⁵ In fact, estimates from the National Center for Education Statistics show that the portion of the American population which had completed at least

13 Elizabeth Edmondson, *Without Comment or Controversy: The G.I. Bill and Catholic Colleges*. 71 CHURCH HISTORY 820, 826 (2002).

14 Marcus Stanley, *College Education and the Midcentury GI Bills*, 118 THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ECONOMICS 673 (2003).

15 Nam, *supra* note 12, at 32.

four years of college education climbed from 2.7 percent in 1910 to 4.6 percent in 1940.¹⁶ It is highly probable that even if World War II had never been fought and the G.I. Bill had never passed, American higher education would have continued to see increased enrollments from already existing social trends.

Due to the difficulties in assessing the extent of the effects of the G.I. Bill, the issue has become a source of ongoing debate and scholarship. As seen earlier, the percentage of veterans who pursued higher education under the Bill when they returned was significantly higher than the percentage who stated that they were considering pursuing college full time after the war. Yet, a controversial survey of veterans in higher education administered by the Educational Testing Service at sixteen colleges from 1946 to 1947 concluded that eighty percent of enrolled veterans would have pursued higher education even without the encouragement of G.I. Bill.¹⁷ The wide gap in these figures has remained a point of fierce contention.

Several studies completed years after the law's passage have attempted to discern what, if anything, was the effect of the Title II provisions under the G.I. Bill. Several econometric studies have attempted to estimate the causal effects of the Bill by drawing comparisons between postwar data and studies of the Veterans Adjustment Act of 1952, which provided similar educational

16 *Digest of Education Statistics 2001*, 17 National Center for Education Statistics (2001), available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pbs2002/2002130.pdf>.

17 SOLDIERS TO CITIZENS, *supra* note 7, at 43.

benefits to veterans of the Korean War. One study, conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research, found that the G.I. Bill likely increased college completion rates for veterans by somewhere between 4 percent and 10 percent, determining that veterans completed between .15 and .52 more years of schooling than they otherwise would have.¹⁸ Given the low rates of college completion at the time, the study concluded that, because of the G.I. Bill, “war service increased college completion rates by close to 50%.”¹⁹ A similar study found that 7.5 percent of men who completed their first year of college during the years when G.I. benefits were available did so as a direct result of the G.I. Bill.²⁰ The World War II Veterans Survey of 1998 also asked questions related to the impact of the G.I. Bill on veterans’ post-war career plans. That study eventually surmised that 54 percent of veterans who took advantage of the higher-education benefits believed that Title II provisions were what made college financially accessible to them.²¹ Though academia may never agree on the exact numerical consequences of the G.I. Bill for colleges and universities, the Bill clearly led to increases in college attendance and completion.

18 Sarah Turner & John Bound, *Going to War and Going to College* 20 JOURNAL OF LABOR ECONOMICS 784, 806-807 (2002) [hereinafter *Going to War and Going to College*].

19 *Id.* at 786.

20 Nam, *supra* note 12, at 31.

21 SOLDIERS TO CITIZENS, *supra* note 7, at 45.

SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

Unavoidably, this kind of shift in the educational attainment of American males naturally had a significant impact on society at large. The G.I. Bill radically adjusted the American University system and social perceptions regarding college and government accordingly. The estimation of the Bill's social consequences should be tempered by two important factors. First, the massive flood of veterans returning from war would likely have created a large spike in college attendance with or without the G.I. Bill. Therefore, in most cases, the Bill had an effect of escalating rather than creating certain social phenomena. Second, the creation of the middle class and other social changes commonly attributed to the G.I. Bill were almost certainly a product of numerous cultural factors and should not be ascribed to a single piece of legislation.

The shift in Americans' perceptions about who should go to college was perhaps the largest and most obvious consequence of the massive influx of veterans into the educational system. Before the war, American colleges were "characteristically rural, private, small, elitist, white, and Protestant"²² and, as such, were seen as catering to the upper crust, with little to offer the average American citizen.²³ G.I. Joe, on the other hand, was the quintessential hardworking American citizen, called away to serve his

22 Greenburg, *supra* note 1, at 3.

23 Daniel Clark, *The Two Joes Meet--Joe College, Joe Veteran*, 98 HISTORY OF EDUCATION QUARTERLY 165, 169-172 (1998).

country in time of war. Even if most of the veterans who took advantage of Title II benefits would have attended college regardless, the massive influx of seemingly regular Americans into the ivory towers of American universities created the perception that college might prove useful to more than just the cultural elite.²⁴ Moreover, the egalitarian structure of the G.I. Bill began to challenge the traditional racial and ethnic divides of higher education. Though their access was certainly not equal to those of Protestant whites by any means, Blacks and Jews began to make greater inroads into colleges and universities.²⁵ Even Catholic colleges began admitting a wider variety of students to help accommodate the massive influx of veterans into the college system.²⁶ Because of these realities, Americans began to view college as the domain of “regular people,” more than they ever had before.

As Americans began to see college as an institution with something to offer regular citizens, they also began to see themselves as members of the college class. One study examining the cultural depictions of college and college students both before and after the war commented specifically on this trend:

24 *Id.* at 174.

25 Greenburg, *supra* note 3.

26 Edmondson, *supra* note 13, at 822.

The same media images and messages which celebrated the common, veteran-everyman and his influence in changing ‘aristocratic’ institutions could also be interpreted in the reverse direction, however. They also communicated, either directly or indirectly, how the veteran-everyman partook of and became identified with a higher social class.²⁷

This likely gave rise to the perception that college was a vehicle for working class Americans to improve their social standing and pursue a level of economic comfort that would otherwise have been unavailable. This perceived potential for upward mobility strengthened the idea that college was an institution that could benefit more than just the elite and likely contributed to the drastic rise seen in college attendance between World War II and the present day. Indeed, it is these effects of the legislation, coupled with the results of its home loan program, which led one author to conclude that the G.I. Bill “transformed the nation from a steeply hierarchical society divided by wealth and class to one in which citizens aspired to and achieved middle class status.”²⁸

While veterans’ increased college attendance transformed America’s view of higher education, their very presence also caused a shift in the nature of the courses these institutions offered.

27 Clark, *supra* note 23, at 177.

28 Melissa Murray, *When War Is Work: The G.I. Bill, Citizenship, and the Civic Generation*, 98 CAL. L. REV. 967, 978 (2008).

A survey of soldiers at the end of the war found that eighty-two percent of them sought college courses with a high degree of practical applicability.²⁹ Recent scholarship has confirmed that colleges responded to this call for practical training by creating programs designed specifically to cater to the veterans' wishes. In summation, it seems that the G.I. Bill had a "profound effect" on the numbers of students taking specialized or commercial courses.³⁰

The impact of the Bill on the perception of higher education was not limited only to American society at large, however. Recent scholarship has asserted that the G.I. Bill had a significant impact on the way veterans of World War II interacted with the government. Suzanne Mettler, alumni professor of political science at Syracuse University and an instrumental figure in the World War II Veterans Survey of 1998, argues that the G.I. Bill ultimately helped to foster a strong civic society by creating the perception among veterans that the government was both willing and able to take care of them.

Through the program's inclusive design, its fair manner of implementation, and its transformative socioeconomic effects, it communicated to beneficiaries that government was for and about people like them, and thus it incorporated them more fully as citizens. Beneficiaries responded by embracing the duties and

29 Shaw, *supra* note 4, at 18.

30 Nam, *supra* note 12, at 32.

obligations of active citizenship.³¹

Mettler argues that these perceptual influences caused veterans, who took advantage of Title II benefits, to participate in civic and political life at a far higher rate. In fact, her study found that those who used education benefits participated in fifty percent more civic organizations (such as fraternal organizations, parent-teacher associations, etc.) and engaged in thirty percent more political activity.³² These findings even held when factors that traditionally influenced citizen engagement were controlled.

It is likely that many of these perceptual influences spilled over to the broader society as well. According to a survey conducted at the time, as much as ninety percent of the American population supported the extension of education benefits to veterans.³³ The widespread popularity of the law can be attributed, in part, to the egalitarian nature of the benefits extended.³⁴ By providing similar benefits to veterans regardless of socioeconomic standing, the bill was able to avoid the traditional critiques of redistributive social policies.³⁵ This, in turn, likely contributed to a broader perception of the effectiveness and responsiveness of government which would have increased the civic and political participation of the “greatest generation” even further.

Though the G.I. Bill was popular for its seemingly egalitarian

31 SOLDIERS TO CITIZENS, *supra* note 7, at 106.

32 *Id.* at 107.

33 *The Creation of the G.I. Bill*, *supra* note 1, at 356.

34 Serow, *supra* note 6, at 494.

35 *Id.* at 488.

tarian principles, it was often less egalitarian in its application, particularly the distribution of benefits to black veterans. Before the bill's passage, Mississippi congressman John Rankin worked to ensure that the actual distribution and application of G.I. Bill funds would be handled by individual states. He argued that the implementation of the bill was a states' rights issue.³⁶ Because *Plessy v. Ferguson* was still in effect during the G.I. Bill's implementation, these provisions allowed southern states to deny African American veterans access to the standard university system and to instead funnel them into supposedly "separate but equal" institutions of higher learning.³⁷ Unsurprisingly, these institutions were hardly equal in the opportunities they afforded to black veterans. To make matters worse, state governments were reluctant to increase their funding to accommodate more students. As a result, black institutions of higher learning often turned away as many as 55 percent of applicants, while white schools were expanding rapidly to satisfy the spike in demand.³⁸ Since the vast majority of African American veterans (over 75 percent³⁹) were natives of southern states, only 12 percent of them were able to pursue a college education, as opposed to 28 percent of whites.⁴⁰

The poor distribution of Title II benefits to black veter-

36 Edward Humes, *How the GI Bill Shunted Blacks into Vocational Training*, 53 THE JOURNAL OF BLACKS IN HIGHER EDUCATION 92, 95 (2006).

37 *Id.* at 97.

38 *How the GI Bill Widened the Racial Higher Education Gap*, 41 The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 36, 36 (Fall 2003).

39 *Id.* 36-37.

40 Humes, *supra* note 36, at 94.

ans likely resulted in two important yet seemingly contradictory social effects. First, the unequal distribution of educational benefits exacerbated the socioeconomic differences between whites and blacks in the South.⁴¹ Yet, for those few African Americans who were actually able to take advantage of the Bill, it may have had the same consequences for their confidence in government and civic participation as it did for Whites. In fact, black veterans who took advantage of Title II benefits were even more likely to participate in civic and political life than their white counterparts and were especially likely to join or support groups fighting for racial equality.⁴² In light of this, Mettler maintains that black soldiers' experiences with the G.I. Bill may have actually contributed to the mobilization of support for the Civil Rights movement.⁴³

In addition to the numerous immediate consequences of the G.I. Bill on American society, the bill also left an enduring legacy of government involvement in the American higher education system. For instance, though scholarships existed before World War II, they were largely merit-based and financed without federal involvement.⁴⁴ Title II benefits set a precedent for federal funding of higher educational initiatives and transformed a system of merit-based aid into one that focused more on need-based assis-

41 Sarah Turner and John Bound, *Closing the Gap or Widening the Divide: The Effects of the G.I. Bill and World War II on the Educational Outcomes of Black Americans*, 63 JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC HISTORY 145, 172 (2003).

42 SOLDIERS TO CITIZENS, *supra* note 7, at 37.

43 *Id.* at 136-143.

44 Jackson Toby, *How Scholarships Morphed into Financial Aid*, 23. ACADEMIC QUESTIONS (2010).

tance—a system that ultimately became a precursor to today’s federal Pell grants and other initiatives.⁴⁵ Moreover, the distribution of G.I. Bill funds to Catholic and other religious schools set a precedent for the future application of federal funds to both secular and religious institutions.⁴⁶ Though entire volumes could be written on the G.I. Bill’s legacy in the policy of the United States Federal Government and the social effects thereof, suffice it to say that Title II benefits opened the floodgate of government involvement in higher education.

CONCLUSION

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 is notable, first and foremost, for accomplishing its goal of assisting veterans with their return to civilian life—no “Bonus Army” marches or record unemployment numbers followed the end of the Second World War. Though the precise consequences of the Bill on college attendance are a subject of debate, the Bill certainly contributed to the numbers of veterans—and therefore citizens—attending college. In turn, it also contributed to the social ramifications of the influx of hundreds of thousands of Americans into the higher education system. Therefore, though allegations that the G.I. Bill “created the middle class” are almost certainly exaggerated, the bill left an ongoing perception that college was both accessible to the average American and a useful tool for career advancement.

45 *Id.*

46 Edmondson, *supra* note 13, at 844.

Finally, the G.I. Bill set an ongoing precedent for future government involvement in higher education. In light of this, it seems clear that, just as Title II provisions made a significant difference in the lives of thousands of World War II veterans, they have ultimately left an enduring mark on the character of American society.

