

The GI Bill: Missing in Action in today's American History Textbooks

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For high school history students, the period immediately following World War II is filled with lessons about the Marshall Plan, communism, and the Truman presidency. Returning soldiers are discussed with regard to their contribution to the baby boom, and their return to the workplace in a strengthened economy. But the transition of soldiers from the battlefield to the university classroom gets only brief mention. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill of Rights, had a greater impact on American life in the post-war period than is ordinarily presented to Americans studying 20th century history. To be sure the GI Bill is in every US History textbook, but its considerable legacy is virtually ignored.

The textbook used in the Plymouth Public Schools, *The Americans* published by McDougal Littell, mentions of the GI Bill twice. The first notation is in the section of the text titled "Homefront" and provides a definition and brief description of the Bill's provisions:

"In 1944, to help ease the transition of returning servicemen to civilian life, Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the GI Bill of Rights. This bill provided education and training for veterans, paid for by the federal government. Just over half the returning soldiers, or about 7.8 million veterans, attended colleges and technical schools under the GI Bill. The act also provided federal loan guarantees to veterans buying homes or farms or starting new businesses."¹

Later, in a section titled "Postwar America," the provisions are restated but no new information is given:

¹ Gerald A. Danzer, *The Americans* (Evanston: Holt McDougal, 2003), 798.

“To help ease veterans’ return to civilian life, Congress passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, or the GI Bill of Rights, in 1944. In addition to encouraging veterans to get an education by paying part of their tuition, the GI Bill guaranteed them a year’s worth of unemployment benefits while job hunting. It also offered low interest, federally guaranteed loans. Millions of young families used these benefits to buy homes and farms or to establish businesses.”²

The implication is that the GI Bill had an immediate effect on soldiers returning from overseas, and possibly a longer term effect on individuals and their families but there is no indication that the nation as a whole may have been impacted.

Educational benefits for veterans have been a part of the American landscape for so long now that they are accepted as reality, almost as though they had always been there. Our students begin weighing those opportunities around the same time that our curriculum reaches World War II so some of them are in tune to the benefits of the Bill, because they may be considering choosing the military as a career path. So in those students’ minds, the effects of the GI Bill leapfrog from being relevant in the late 1940s, to being relevant now. However, it is worth showing our military bound students, as well as the college and workplace bound students, how a nation of educated veterans has achieved as highly as we have.

Using hindsight, Tom Brokaw was able to say that the GI Bill “was a brilliant and enduring commitment to the nation’s future.”³ From here we can begin to investigate what was brilliant about it and why it was enduring. There were many people involved

² Danzer, *The Americans*, 841.

³ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), xx.

in the development of the GI Bill, and many who were determined to see America's veterans recognized and rewarded for their sacrifices. Given the content limitations of this paper, it is necessary to choose just a few to mention. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt comes to mind because, as we want our students to do, he listened to the lessons of history in forming a post-war plan. Roosevelt was concerned with the impact that so many soldiers returning home without a plan would have on the recovering economy. He knew that veterans expect some sort of pension, though none was promised, because he still had the memory of the Bonus Army fresh in his mind. The Bonus Army is one of the reasons FDR got elected the first time, so he was right to remember the debacle that helped put him in office. But Roosevelt, and many others, also knew that the returning soldiers *deserved* some sort of compensation over and above their pay.⁴ It took him a while to get there – Roosevelt had always seen military service as a responsibility of citizenship deserving no more or less recognition than any other.⁵ While the American Legion was drafting the text of what would eventually become the GI Bill, Roosevelt and the rest of the Congress were beginning to clarify a vision for post-war America and how veterans would be included in that vision.

In the end, the GI Bill was passed as *The Americans* describes so briefly. From here, the story doesn't end. As the textbook continues, we see that there was a booming

⁴ Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *The GI Bill: A New Deal for Veterans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 48

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41

post-war economy, that the shadows of the depression were disappearing, and that new challenges faced the nation. What the textbook fails to do is give any credit to the GI Bill for the economic growth or the nation's ability to meet the new challenges. 16 million soldiers served during WWII and when they returned, they had to determine what they should do next.⁶ They had come of age in a climate of economic hardship, put their own futures on hold, and spent their military years worried about their next day, not their next year or next decade. The Bill recognizes the interruption in educational and occupational opportunities that military service requires, and therefore strives to make up for it.

What is so stunning about the bill is how many soldiers took advantage of its benefits, without "taking advantage." Many opponents of the bill saw it as a handout that would induce laziness. Others feared that as soldiers, unaccustomed to academic challenges, flooded colleges there would be a reduction in academic rigor. However, the contrary proved to be true. Young men and women who never saw themselves as college material leapt to the challenge and exceeded expectations. Bob Dole asserts that veterans did not use the GI Bill as a handout. On the contrary, it encouraged GIs to work hard and be proud of their accomplishments.⁷ Academic rigor was met by GIs. Given all they faced during the war college was not insurmountable.

⁶ Edward Humes, *Over Here*, (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 2006), p 6

⁷ Milton Greenberg, *The Gi Bill: The Law that Changed America*, (NY: Lickle Publishing, 1997), 40

As result of the GI Bill, America had a populace far more educated than anytime previously. Of GI Bill beneficiaries, there became 14 Nobel Prize winners, 3 Supreme Court Justices, and 3 Presidents.⁸ Cold warrior-scientists, captains of industry, and small town doctors, lawyers, business owners are products of the GI Bill. Economic growth can be attributed not only to an educated populace, but a home-owning one. The nation went from building one house for every 1000 Americans in 1944, to twelve per 1000 in 1950.⁹ The growth of suburbia is well-documented in the textbooks, and the housing boom is attributed to the vast number of GIs who could now afford them, but the connection is not made to the GI Bill's role in enabling young families to reach the goal of homeownership.

As our high school students learn about the post-war economy, they should be encouraged to analyze the GI Bill's role. It enabled the American Dream: a good job and a home in which to raise a family. For some, the bill enables the achievement of the Jeffersonian ideal of educated, self-employed individuals.¹⁰ GIs who lived through the depression and the war were appreciative of what they had and were loathe to lose it. GI Bill benefits proved that hard work and determination would prevent having to raise children in the same economic climate in which they were raised. The soldiers who returned from war built not only the post-war economic boom, but also our 21st century

⁸ Humes, 6

⁹ Ibid, 99

¹⁰ Michael J. Bennet, *When Dreams Come True* (London: Brassey's, 1996), 3

world. Our standard of living, technological and scientific advancements, and the social environment in which so many of us live, can be traced to our parents and grandparents who were able to provide us with all that we have, materially and otherwise, because they benefited from the GI Bill. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 built a foundation upon which our current high school students will be able to build their own American Dream.

Bibliography

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