'A New Deal for Veterans'
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The original, Post-World War II GI Bill has been both idealized as evidence of America as land of opportunity, and criticized for primarily benefiting white men while perpetuating racial and gender discrimination. So write Glenn C. Altschuler, a professor of American studies and dean of the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions at Cornell University, and Stuart M. Blumin, professor emeritus of American history at Cornell, in their new book, *The GI Bill: A New Deal For Veterans* (Oxford). Altschuler and Blumin argue, instead, for a need to "gain a more dispassionate understanding of the bill's role in the shaping of postwar America" -- even up to the present day, as then-President Bush cited the legacy of the original GI Bill in the 2008 signing of a new, Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Q. The Post-9/11 GI Bill, which goes into effect in August, is often described as being in the spirit of the original, World War II GI Bill. What are the merits of the analogy, and where, if anywhere, does it fall short?

A. The 2008 GI Bill is based on one part of the original bill passed in 1944, and was impelled by the same sense that veterans both needed and deserved a much better deal from the federal government. But the differences outweigh these similarities. The original GI Bill was drafted as a temporary measure to ease the transition to civilian life of millions of World War II veterans, many of whom had been conscripts, and to help the American economy make the transition from total war to peace without slipping back into the depression that preceded the war. The new bill is an ongoing adjustment to the package of benefits made available to much smaller numbers of veterans of our current professional military, and was enacted with little if any reference to the state of the American economy (note that it became law before last fall’s financial meltdown). The details of the two bills are also very different. The 1944 bill was far more comprehensive, providing veterans with programs of support for higher education and sub-college training, a year’s worth of unemployment and self-employment benefits, job counseling and placement, and government guarantees for loans for the purchase of homes, businesses, and farms. The 2008 bill focuses only on higher education, and provides benefits that are far less generous than those in the original bill. It pays college tuitions, but only to the level of the most expensive public university in a veteran’s state. The 1944 GI Bill paid full tuitions at every public and private institution in the land.

Q. You note that the original GI Bill is too readily idealized and argue, instead, “that the GI Bill should not simply ... be admired in splendid isolation from either the circumstances of its passage – the institutions, the ideological and partisan conflicts, the hopes and fears of the late war years – or the critical criteria we normally bring to bear on other events in our nation’s past.” Are there any popular misconceptions or oversimplifications out there you’d like to correct, or better situate in their historical contexts?

A. Yes. In one or two important ways, the effects of the GI Bill have been exaggerated by authors and others who are perhaps too eager to celebrate the bill’s contributions to post-war American life. It has been claimed, for example, that the VA mortgage, created by Title III of the GI Bill, was primarily if not wholly responsible for the vast expansion of suburbs after the war, and for a dramatic shift towards home ownership among American families. In reality, the VA mortgage financed only about one in six housing starts in the decade following the war, and the largest part of the shift toward home ownership occurred during the war, before the GI Bill was passed. The VA mortgage was very significant, but it did not create either the suburbs or a society of home owners. The GI Bill’s boost to college attendance was also quite significant, but the sudden swelling of enrollments owed a good deal to the postponement of college attendance for two, three, or four years by millions of young men and women who first had a war to win. Many of the veteran applicants who showed up after the war -- indeed, probably a majority -- would have attended college even if there had been no GI Bill. And apart from the effects of these important programs, Americans have been a little too quick to
celebrate the bipartisan, non-ideological Congressional consensus that produced so wise a measure. The GI Bill was passed unanimously in both the Senate and the House, but this was mainly because conservatives and liberals saw the bill very differently. Conservatives hoped that this temporary measure, confined entirely to veterans, would help foreclose any return to more general New Deal-like domestic programs. Liberals hoped it would be just the opposite, a foot in the door for domestic policy expansion.

Q. The original GI Bill, you write, “In fact if not in form privileged men,” and the preference of veterans in admissions “helped sustain the supremacy of men in professions with the highest status and compensation.” How so?

A. With the passage of the bill, the outlook for women in higher education grew dimmer. GI Janes constituted only about 2 percent of World War II military personnel. Specific provisions of the bill, moreover, put women at a disadvantage. Unlike men, women veterans did not receive a living allowance for a dependent spouse while they were in school. And the nine-year limitation on benefits fell disproportionately on women, who tended to delay their own plans in deference to those of their husbands – or to have kids. It is also the case that “the ideology of domestic containment,” which included occupational segregation, wage differentials, glass ceilings, and hiring restrictions for high status jobs, meant that the higher education benefit had a less significant socio-economic impact on women than men.

Q. At the same time, you note that while many black veterans used the educational benefits to propel themselves into the middle class, by and large the GI Bill did not reduce racial disparities. Again, can you explain?

A. African-Americans were underrepresented in the armed forces. Since many had not graduated from high school, moreover, a smaller percentage of them were eligible for the higher education benefit. Only 12 percent of black GI Bill users attended an institution of higher education. And often it was a segregated school in the South, inferior in resources and qualified faculty to colleges and universities in the North. Two structural features of the GI Bill perpetuated existing patterns of racial preference. The legislation gave private institutions exclusive authority over admissions, thus allowing racial quotas in the North and segregation in the South (in the late '40s black enrollment in colleges and universities in the North did not exceed 5,000). And the bill prohibited any federal agency or department from exercising supervision or control over any state educational agency.

Q. You dedicate a chapter to the “forgotten beneficiaries” of the GI Bill – including those who pursued sub-college vocational training, which took place largely at for-profit institutions. How would you characterize the legacy of these institutions, and the education or training they provided?

A. It is a mixed legacy. Some of the sub-college training institutions were founded only to cash in on a generous government program while providing veterans with little more than an opportunity to get a monthly stipend. They were responsible for a good deal of criticism from journalists and public officials, and contributed to the more sullen mood of the congressmen who fashioned the less generous provisions of the Korean-era GI Bill. But thousands of these institutions provided valuable training for a vast array of both white-collar and blue-collar occupations, from bookkeepers and secretaries to pastry chefs and TV repairmen. They made a real contribution to veterans’ lives and to the nation’s transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy. Some of these schools survive today, and a few have raised their stature to become degree-granting institutions, although most went out of business once the flood of World War II veterans had subsided. The disappearance of so many sub-college training institutions probably contributes to the relative obscurity of this part of the GI Bill educational program. In this context we should point out that the 5.6 million former GIs who received some form of sub-college training under the GI bill were 2.5 times more numerous than the 2.2 million who used the bill to attend colleges and universities.

Q. In what ways did the GI Bill most profoundly shape the landscape of higher education today?

A. The bill played an incredibly important symbolic and substantive role in higher education. It replenished the human capital in the United States, training a workforce to help the nation enter the postindustrial age. It accelerated, albeit modestly, the expansion of higher education, by stimulating the development of statewide systems of public colleges and universities. Even more importantly, it spread the perception that higher education was the preferred path to economic mobility – and served as a rallying point for reformers interested in increasing access to college. Designed as a temporary expedient, it legitimized the notion that a college degree should be and actually was within reach for millions of Americans.

— Elizabeth Redden

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