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**The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944: The History, People, and
Effects on Minorities**

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War & Society: The U.S. and World War II

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American society has witnessed a long tradition of providing benefits to veterans. After the Civil War, for example, the single largest expenditure of the Federal budget was veteran's benefits. After WWI, this type monetary expenditure became a concern. Due to this concern, WWI veterans did not receive pensions like their predecessors. Instead, they received a return trip from Europe and a small mustering out pay. These veterans, over time, received reparations that were more substantial. This tradition of appreciation towards veterans was replayed after WWII. The form these benefits took is the law named The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944.

Known more popularly as the GI Bill of Rights or simply the GI Bill, this law provided returning veterans with educational opportunities, loan guarantees, employment services, unemployment benefits, and a few lesser-known benefits. Arguably, the educational benefit has become known as the most important impact of the G.I. Bill. In the 1940's and 1950's, much of the scholarly works pertaining to this law centered on how well the law was working and the benefits available to veterans. The vast majority of these works were gracious and touted the G.I. Bill.

In the 1970's, Keith Olson started a new discourse about the GI Bill benefits involving veterans and their college education. In his work, Olson explored the educational provision as an institution. He looked at student veterans and colleges as groups, rather than individuals and used one college as the example. Other historians since have repeated this pattern. More recently, a journalist named Michael Bennett added his work to this law's historiography. Bennett wrote his book to recount the importance of the law and to tell the story of the bill becoming a law. To this end, Bennett succeeds. However, his work lacks the real analysis that could have been possible with the research that he did. Both of these works are important. What

both of these books tend to overlook are the implications this bill had on some groups of veterans.

Throughout these works, and others, there exist a few trends. First, there is a question of how many men and women were WWII veterans. Bennett seems to have found the explanation of this misunderstanding. He explains that when the Japanese surrendered in 1945 there were 12 million men and women in the military. However, overall there had been 16 million veterans.¹ Second, there are some difficulties writing about just the first bill. This is in part due to the laws age, and the revivals of the G.I. Bill. With each new incarnation, the G.I. Bill changes. Add to that the general curiosity of how well the law has done to date. This combination spells some disaster to a researcher. Much of the available information contains compilations of the overall effect of the GI Bill as a whole on society. It is responsible to understand the original GI Bill and its good and bad effects. The importance is simply that the first G.I. Bill needs to be understood to place all of the laws that followed into perspective.

Lastly, typical works have nothing but praise for the GI Bill. Some newer works are starting to question this assessment. These new assessments are beginning a new dialog about this law, with the aid of some older works that question the overall effectiveness of the GI Bill. Howard Johnson wrote one of these older works in 1947. Johnson, a political scientist, wrote about the unequal treatment of African Americans under this law. He started the discussion of African Americans and their treatment by organizations associated with this law. Dr. Hector Garcia, an Army Major and medical doctor, in 1948 started an organization named the American GI Forum to help alleviate problems Latino veterans were having with their benefits. However,

¹ Michael J. Bennett, *When Dreams Came True: The G.I. Bill and the Making of Modern America*, (Washington: Brassey's, 1996), 4.

these early rumblings of dissent towards the GI Bill were forgotten in the wake of the overwhelming benefits the G.I. Bill provided.

There is resurgence of dissent towards the “greatness” of the G.I. Bill. Hilary Herbold, a doctoral candidate at Princeton, started this discussion in the 1990’s. She wrote that under this law there were separate standards, and that this fact needs further discussion. Sarah Turner and John Bound, professors in economics, continued this discussion. Their discussion followed African American’s colligate successes versus their white counterparts. Through these works, a dialogue is starting that will hopefully further explore the implications of race and the G.I. Bill.

There is the popular belief that the G.I. Bill treated all veterans equally. Unfortunately, this wide held belief does not seem wholly truthful. In this work, it is important to explain some of the provisions of the GI Bill that are not as well known. In addition, the process of the bill becoming law needs exploration. This process is necessary for multiple reasons, especially this works final point, the effects this law had on minorities. Bennett states, “The G.I. Bill was America’s first color-blind social legislation.”² However, as Johnson and others explain, this was not always the case. To this end, this works purpose is to explore whether this law really aided veterans as well as is popularly believed.

The end of the First World War and the depression that followed were both factors in the inception of the G.I. Bill of Rights. After WWI, veterans who had been wounded were eligible for federal benefits. Those who had served, but were fortunate enough to remain unscathed by battle, were afforded little more than a return trip from Europe by Congress. In 1924, WWII veterans petitioned Congress to receive a bonus for their service, especially after seeing the prosperity of those who had remained in America for the duration of the war. The law that was

² Ibid., 26.

enacted to remedy this situation was named the Adjusted Compensation Act of 1924, or more simply the “Bonus”. This bonus was agreed upon, but not paid. Those eligible for this payment received a certificate eligible to be borrowed against starting in 1927. By 1930, this loan program was causing distress for the Veterans Bureau. In 1931, legislation was introduced to pay the certificates off, but was ultimately rejected.

The culminations of these actions were the two Bonus Expeditionary Force marches on Washington D.C. in 1932 and 1933.³ President Hoover squelched this initial incident with federal troops; this was to be the first time Federal troops were deployed against former troops in this nation.⁴ President Roosevelt himself helped to rectify the second march by eventually paying those eligible for the benefits. However, this bleak entry in history had already been written. There would have easily been an air of distaste inside the halls of Congress, not to be easily forgotten. In writing about the incidents of 1932, Willard Waller wrote in 1944 “Not to plan now, is to plan disaster.”⁵ Waller was referring to the fact that a “plan” needed to be formulated so the past would not be re-visited.

In the midst of veterans returning home after WWI, the state of Wisconsin created what easily could be termed a groundbreaking law. The law was entitled the Soldiers Educational Bonus. Under the guidance of this law, the opportunity was provided for WWI veterans to attend the University of Wisconsin full-time. This was an attempt to give Wisconsin WWI

³ Willard Waller, *The Veteran Comes Back*, (New York: Dryden, 1944), 240- 242. See also Moley, 198-201.

⁴ *The G.I Bill: The Law that Changed America* prod. and dir. Karen Thomas, 58 min, PBS Video, 1997, videocassette.

⁵ Waller, 247.

veterans the benefit of bettering themselves through education.⁶ Veterans were termed anyone whom had served “for three months prior to 1918.”⁷ This law set a precedent of educational benefits for able-bodied veterans in the United States. In addition, this law gave a definition to who was a veteran, and conversely, who was eligible for such benefits. Politicians of the 1940’s saw this Wisconsin law as an option on the national level. Here was the beginning of a “plan” that would avoid repeating the most recent mistakes of the past regarding American veterans.

The realization that there would be a new group of jobless veterans soon returning and needing to be dealt with came from the highest political position, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and in part his wife Eleanor Roosevelt. Eleanor actually stated in 1942, “veterans ‘could create a dangerous pressure group in our midst.’”⁸ The pressure that the President’s wife spoke of was the fact that millions of men and women serving in the military would become unemployed at the wars end. These millions of unemployed veterans would easily rival the unemployed masses of the depression that the country had recently passed through. The President took steps to combat this potential threat publicly in a fireside chat given on 28 June 1943. In this address to the American people, the President stated:

While concentrating on military victory, we are not neglecting the planning of things to come... Among many other things we are, today, laying plans for the return to civilian life of our gallant men and women in the armed services... We must, this time, have plans ready- instead of waiting to do a hasty, inefficient, and ill-considered job at the last moment.

I have assured our men in the armed forces that the American people would not let them down when the war is won.⁹

⁶Theodore R. Mosch, *The G.I. Bill: A Breakthrough in Educational and Social Policy in the United States*, (New York: Exposition, 1975), 95.

⁷ Bennett, 86.

⁸ Bennett, 129.

⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “On Progress of War and Plans for Peace,” 28 July 1943, Fireside Chat, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, available from <<http://www.mhric.org/fdr/chat25.html>> accessed on 13 March 2005.

President Roosevelt recognized that in the past this country did not have a real “plan” for returning veterans. Veterans of this current war would not return to an unprepared country.

President Roosevelt followed this passage with a six-point outline of what he felt should be included in terms of benefits for returning veterans. This list included a mustering-out pay, unemployment insurance, education benefits, an allowance credit (akin to time towards retirement), medical care for those disabled in the war, and pensions for disabled veterans.¹⁰ A list like this had been unseen in the United States up until this point in time. The list that the President set forth did not fully make it into the G.I. Bill of Rights, but those provisions that did were presented to the second session of the 78th Congress.

There were a number of different factions involved in the writing and passing of the G.I. Bill. The American Legion, obviously had veterans’ best interests at their forefront. This organization had been fighting for some sort of measure to insure that veterans would not be forgotten at the end of the war and left destitute as had been seen after WWI. By the fall of 1943, Congress had introduced 640 bills concerning veterans, and acted on not one of them. By November of 1943, the American Legion had formed a committee, headed by the former governor of Illinois, John Stelle, to draft a bill for the readjustment of WWII veterans. Missouri lawyer and past National Commander of the American Legion, Harry Colmery was a member of this committee. Colmery’s purpose in the committee was ensuring this bill met the proper legal standards. Because of this, Colmery is now known as the author of the G.I. Bill.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Raymond Moley Jr., *The American Legion Story* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1966), 271-274.

At the time this committee was working on their bill, the Senate had passed a bill to allocate \$500 to veterans in a mustering out pay. In the House, Representative Andrew Jackson May the Chair of the House Military Affairs Committee, had this bill under his direction. The importance of this bill was simply the fact that it providing money for veterans when they left the military. Before the House was able to pass the bill, May returned to his home state of Kentucky while the bill was held over for the second session.¹² This was once again another instance of inaction by Congress. This inaction would soon end, and the G.I. Bill of Rights would soon be introduced.

In the House of Representatives, Representative John Rankin of Mississippi, the Chair of the Committee on World War Veterans' Legislation, presented the G.I. Bill on 10 January 1944 in the form called the Servicemen's Aid Act of 1944. Senator Bennett Champ Clark, of Missouri and one of the founders of the American Legion, presented the companion bill to the Senate the next day.¹³ The promise of help for returning veterans that President Roosevelt had envisioned less than six months past, was being presented to Congress.

Both bills passed their respective chambers and had to go through a conference committee to standardize the two bills each House of Congress had passed. However, one Congress member was not present to vote on the finalized conference version. Representative John Gibson, who had returned home to Georgia, arranged for Rep. Rankin to vote his proxy for the bill the Senate passed with 52 weeks of unemployment, not the 26 weeks the House had passed. However, Rep. Rankin had headed the committee that reduced the unemployment benefits in the

¹² Ibid., 271-274. See also Bennett, 99-101.

¹³ Thomas A. Rumer, *The American Legion: An Official History, 1919-1989*, (New York: M. Evans, 1990), 246.

House. Subsequently Rep. Rankin refused to vote Rep. Gibson's proxy when the committee deadlocked at three votes for and against Senate's version of the bill. In jeopardy of dying in this committee, the bill was to be rescued by Rep. Gibson. Rep. Gibson landed at the Washington airport after a frantic trip. He did so with just over four hours before the committee members were to return to their respective chambers to declare the bill irreconcilable. Rep. Gibson's vote broke the stalemate and he suggested that unless the other members voted the same as he had, they would be known to have voted against veterans. On the morning of 9 June 1944, the bill passed the committee unanimously with the House and Senate following suit on 12 and 13 June 1944 respectively. President Roosevelt would sign the bill into law on 22 June 1944.¹⁴

Outside the halls of Congress, support for and against the G.I. Bill was occurring in a number of different arenas. The American Legion obviously supported the G.I. Bill, but the four other major veterans organizations initially opposed the G.I. Bill. These four veteran organizations included: The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW); Disabled American Veterans (DAV); the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH); and the Regular Veterans Association. These four dissenting organizations wrote an open letter to the members of Congress. The letter opposed this bill on the basis that benefits should be limited to those wounded in combat. Theodore Mosch stated, the organizations "believed the disabled were not sharing properly in the benefits."¹⁵ The VFW finally relented to accepting the bill after the promise of a \$500 million provision for the building of hospitals by the Veterans Administration (VA).¹⁶ There is no specific mention of the Regular Veterans Association's final stance towards the G.I. Bill.

¹⁴ Bennett, 185-192.

¹⁵ Mosch, 41.

¹⁶ Moley, 276.

However, both the MOPH and the DAV never gave up on their opposition to the bill.¹⁷ The national representative of the MOPH stated to Rankin's committee that the "education title went too far because it 'would have a tendency' to kill 'the goose that laid the golden egg.' Otherwise, he explained, the Legion has a 'splendid bill.'"¹⁸ The DAV and the MOPH did not necessarily have a problem with the G.I. Bill. Their problem was a fear of a lack of funding for disabled veterans. Without this funding, this particular group of veterans would have nothing.

The G.I. Bill of Rights has a number of provisions, some of which are not as well known as the educational aspects. In fact, the final bill that was introduced to the House of Representatives had fifteen chapters; the "Education of Veterans" was chapter four.¹⁹ The other fourteen chapters deal with a number of different aspects of veteran's lives outside of the military and the procedures of the bill. These chapters include such provisions as the benefit of guaranteeing a portion of a loan to buy a farm, home, or business; employment services; unemployment services; amounts of allowances; disqualifications of benefits; money for hospitals; administration of the bill and a number of minor legal issues that any law requires.²⁰ One important passage of the bill is the definition of who qualifies as a veteran. That person would be

"Any person who served in the active military or naval service on or after September 16, 1940, and prior to the termination of the present war, who is discharged or released there from under honorable conditions...*Provided further*, That he served 90 days or more, or was discharged within such period by reason of an actual

¹⁷ Keith W. Olson, *The G.I. Bill, the Veterans, and the Colleges*, (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 21-22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹ House, *Federal Government Aid For The Readjustment In Civilian Life Of Returning World War No. 2 Veterans*, 78th Cong., 2nd Sess., S. 1767, *Congressional Record* 9, no. 3 (11 May 1944): 4333.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4332-4337.

service-incurred injury or disability; *And provided further*, That his education or training was impeded, delayed, interrupted, or interfered with by reason of entrance into such service.”²¹

The provision that a veteran had to have his education interrupted became a point of contention. Automatically, a veteran’s education was presumed interrupted if he entered the service before his 25th birthday.²² One problem that surfaced was the fact that veterans, who entered the service over the age of 25, were not necessarily eligible for educational benefits. As one veteran of the time wrote to the *Washington Post*, “Did we contribute any less to the war than the men under 25? Should we deserve less kindly treatment than those younger men? Why are we not permitted the same chance to help ourselves with an education?”²³ This one veteran was voicing his opinion, one that assuredly was not alone. This issue was expanded on in a published survey of one anonymous Midwestern town’s veteran population.

This survey compiled numbers on a number of different aspects of veteran’s lives before and after their time away in the war. One group was composed of veterans “of about thirty years of age” and included 48 veterans. Of that group of 48, only six participated in any type of schooling after the war. The study concluded that this group of veterans did not partake in higher education because many now had families to support and had been out of a school type environment for roughly twelve years. An interesting reason given for the lack of interest in higher education was the fact that the majority had not even graduated from high school, with the

²¹ Ibid., 4333.

²² Brig. Gen. Frank T. Hines, “Helping the Veteran to Find his Place in Post-War America,” *American City* 60, no.3 (1944), 75.

²³ S/SGT. John G. Holyoke, *Washington Post*, 14 September 1945, 16.

group's average level of education being the tenth grade.²⁴ This study did not expand upon the ages of these individuals, at the time of the survey, or when they joined the service. It would have been interesting to know the ages of these individuals. This information would be helpful in knowing if this group qualified for the automatic presumption or not. Like this survey, the G.I. Bill was far from perfect. There was no possible way that every veteran's dreams could ever be realized under this law.

Dr. George Zook, the President of the American Council of Education, weighed in on this matter. He stated to one subcommittee that the "The United States Government has grave responsibility to offer educational advantages to the members of the armed services after this war. This is the least we can do."²⁵ This statement cannot be taken lightly. Mr. Zook was not just a figurehead of a non-existent group. The American Council of Education represented twenty-one leading educational associations. At one time, this organization was being considered for the position of administrator for the educational component of the G.I. Bill. While Zook and his group endorsed the G.I. Bill, other academic leaders opposed the bill. James Conant, the President of Harvard, and Robert Hutchins, the President of the University of Chicago, both regarded the G.I. Bill as a threat to the excellence of higher education.

President Conant released an annual report on 22 January 1945 urging a "revision of the 'GI Bill of Rights' to assure professional training at government expense for veterans of exceptional ability."²⁶ President Conant wanted only the best and brightest of American veterans to be afforded the opportunity to attend college. There was general concern that, as Conant

²⁴ Robert J. Havighurst, et al. *The American Veteran Back Home: A Study of Veteran Readjustment*. (New York: Longmans, 1951), 142-143.

²⁵ Moley, 275.

²⁶ "President Conant Urges a Revision of the 'GI Bill of Rights,'" *School and Society* 61, no. 1572 (1944): 86.

wrote, the G.I. Bill did not 'distinguish between those who can profit most by advanced education and those who cannot.'²⁷ He added that 'we may find the least capable among the war generation...flooding the facilities for advanced education.'²⁸ Conant thought higher education should be for elites. He knew this bill would change American colleges forever, and he tried to stop this change.

President Hutchins was even more vocal and harsh in his condemnation of the G.I. Bill. Hutchins penned an article titled "The Threat to American Education." Although he praised the notion that less wealth students could attend college, he also argued that this new system would induce colleges to admit substandard students in order to benefit economically from this program. Hutchins went so far as to say that the bill would 'demoralize education and defraud the veteran.'²⁹ This man wanted higher education to remain the bastion of the rich and powerful. This was not to be the case.

Top schools, to include Harvard, at wars end were charging \$400 a year. The G.I. Bill was offering veterans \$500 a year to attend school. This made money for college not an issue for veterans. It is of no surprise that 52 percent of all veterans attended private institutions. Harvard itself saw an increase from 2,750 students in February 1946 to 5,000 in September of the same year.³⁰ Through this enrollment explosion, President Conant was able to see these veterans' actions up close and personal. This influx of veteran students caused President Conant to reverse himself and state that veterans were 'the most mature and promising students that Harvard has

²⁷ Keith W. Olson, "The G.I. Bill and Higher Education: Success and Surprise," *American Quarterly* 25, no.5 (1973): 603-604.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 604.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 604.

³⁰ Bennett, 18-19.

ever had.³¹ Feats like this can only be attributed to the veteran students whom took it upon themselves to attack college as they undoubtedly had attacked their foes in the throes of war.

Veterans did not miss out on the opportunity to learn. They also did so at a rate that easily rivaled that of non-veteran students. Keith Olson points out in a 1973 article that in April of 1946 Columbia University had a veteran student population of 7,826. Not one of those veterans had any difficulties in their last “marking period” scholastically. In fact, at the University of Minnesota, only one-half of one percent of veteran students dismissal were due to academics. This was compared with their civilian counterparts whose dismissal rate for the same infraction was over ten percent.³² In the face of statistics like these, it is easy to understand President Conant’s reversal.

The Disabled American Veterans funded a study completed by the American Council of Education about disabled college veteran’s experiences under the G.I. Bill. Veterans without disabilities were included in this study as well. In this study, veterans were asked their opinion on present collegiate standards compared to before the war. Overwhelmingly, 43 percent said standards had risen, 26 percent said standards had stayed the same, and 7 percent said they did not know. Only 24 percent answered that standards had been lowered. The top two reasons for the lowering of standards according to those veterans who felt this way was that “classes were too crowded” and they received “Less individual attention.”³³ Therefore, even the veterans themselves had no real issues with their college educations. The real issues veterans had were with the increased student bodies being seen across the country. These groups of college officials

³¹ Ibid., 604.

³² Ibid., 604-605.

³³ Ralph J. Strom, *The Disabled College Veteran of World War II*, (Washington: American Council on Education, 1950), 12-13.

might have come to an uneven acceptance of the G.I. Bill and veteran students. However, this bill was now a law, and the time had come to find out how well it would work.

The implementation of the G.I. Bill enabled many veterans to buy homes, attend school, and explore opportunities that would have been otherwise economically impossible. But the bill, although described as intended for all veterans, did not affect them equally. Women were not even seriously considered eligible for benefits. The VA was tasked with implementing this law. Unfortunately, in the VA's first 50 years, records pertaining to women were not kept.³⁴ Without this kind of information, there is no possible way to ascertain the true lack of women's ability to prosper under the G.I. Bill. However, what is known is that some women were at one time not eligible for veteran benefits. Add to that, the fact that women of this time were typically expected to be homemakers, and not much more. In a "First Air Force questionnaire on the postwar ambitions of WACS [Women Army Corps] 73 percent declared they wanted 'marriage and home-making.'"³⁵ So, it is of no real surprise that women and their educational ambitions under the G.I. Bill is not discussed very often.

Women served in the military with all of the different branches of service to include: the Women's Army Corps (WACS); Army Nurse Corps; WAVES; Navy Nurse Corps; Women's Marine Corps; and Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPS).³⁶ Most of these women veterans were afforded veteran status and had the ability to participate in the G.I. Bill as their male counterparts were, but not all. WASPS were not eligible for veteran status as some of their counterparts in other services. As a result, these women missed the opportunity to better

³⁴ Jean Ebbert and Marie-Beth Hall, *Crossed Currents : Navy Women in a Century of Change*, (Washington: Brassey, 1999), 340.

³⁵ Doria Higgins, "'After the Army-What?' Women in Uniform Ask," *Washington Post*, 19 August 1944, Section IV, 1

³⁶ Higgins, 1.

themselves through the veteran-only programs. WASPS were not granted veteran status until 1977. This status changed in an amendment attached to the G.I. Improvement Act signed into law on 23 November 1977 by President Carter.³⁷ These women could not participate in the original G.I. Bill, but a subsequent bill helped them garner veteran status. A powerful reminder of how important this law has become. An article noted that in 1940 the percentage of women as students in college was 40 percent. By 1947, that percentage dropped to 29 percent because the G.I. Bill typically benefited men, not women.³⁸ It is obvious that women were not finding their niche in colleges in the post WWII era. The true nature of how lopsided this law treated women may never truly be known. Women may have had hardships under this law, but they were not the only group that experienced some sort of bias.

Hispanics, as a group, realized the G.I. Bill and the VA were discriminating against them as well. A former Army Major and medical doctor named Hector P. García started an organization in 1948 called the American GI Forum. This organization was formed because “benefits were being denied in large part to Americans of Mexican decent and other Hispanics throughout the United States.”³⁹ One of the benefits this group obviously wanted to participate in was education. This can be surmised through the “Forum’s motto... ‘Education is Our Freedom and Freedom should be Everybody’s Business.’”⁴⁰ This organization exists into the present. In Henry Ramos’ history of the GI Forum, he remarked that WWII veterans and this

³⁷ Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 5 & 129 & 156.

³⁸ Julie Blair, “GI Bill Paved the Way for a Nation of Higher Learners,” *Education Week* 18, issue 20,(1999): 32.

³⁹ “About Us- The American GI Forum,” found at <<http://www.agif.us/aboutUs.htm>>, accessed on 7 April 2005.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

group contributed “to the nation’s political integrity and social progress.”⁴¹ Latino veterans have not been the subject of many works. What is known is this group of veterans had some difficulties under the G.I. Bill. Perhaps in the future, more research into this will be completed. There is one more group whose struggle has been better documented, and need discussion.

African American veterans experienced an unequal application of this law. Howard Johnson, in a 1947 journal article, stated that there were “1,154,000 Negro veterans returned from the war,” with “over 700,000 Negro veterans in Southern states.”⁴² Historians must be ever mindful that during the time that the G.I. Bill was passed into law, the military and the country were for all intensive purposes segregated. Rep. Rankin, the man who introduced the G.I. Bill to the House of Representatives, has been vilified at times for being a racist whom almost forced the G.I. Bill to die in committee because of his views. In Thomas’ movie, it was presented that Rep. Rankin stated there were 50,000 blacks from his home state of Mississippi who were in the military. Although this statement was not particularly substantiated, another Rep. Rankin statement followed. In the next statement, Rep. Rankin made it clear that he did not particularly like the provision that became known as the 52-20 club.⁴³ This 52-20 club was the nickname for the unemployment benefits that veterans were eligible for, \$20 a week for up to 52 weeks. However, on 4 May 1944 in the *Washington Post* Rankin stated that the G.I. Bill had finally reported out of committee after the “chief change” relating to the unemployment compensation.⁴⁴ The House committee had reduced the length of the unemployment benefits to 26 weeks. This change had been one of the reasons for the conference committee. There is no

⁴¹ Henry A.J. Ramos, *American GI Forum*, (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1998), 142.

⁴² Howard Johnson, “The Negro Veteran Fights for Freedom,” *Political Affairs* 26, no.5 (1947), 429 & 431.

⁴³ Thomas.

⁴⁴ “House Gets a \$20 a Week G.I. Measure,” *Washington Post*, 4 May 1944, 1.

real way to know if the House committee reworked the bill due to racism or if they had felt the bill in its previous form had just been too generous. Proof of this concern over generosity came on 1 April 1944. Rep. Rankin stated that “We will not be stampeded; we are going to take our time and go through the bill carefully and try to bring to the floor of the House a measure that we can all support and defend.”⁴⁵ Rep. Rankin might have earnestly wanted to make sure that this bill made it to the floor with the utmost care so that it would be successful. However, his racist antics would cloud anyone’s judgment of him. In the face of such debate in the American Congress, African American veterans returned to America and attempted to participate in the G.I. Bill.

Hilary Herbold, a doctoral candidate in English at Princeton, wrote an interesting article full of the inequalities suffered by African Americans at the hands of the VA. She recounted that in 1947 in an unnamed southern state, the VA employed 1,700 veterans, and only seven were African American. This was in spite of the fact that one third of all southern veterans were African Americans.⁴⁶ An organization was formed to assist African American veterans called the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America (UNAVA). In 1946, UNAVA failed to receive accreditation from the VA, which made it hard for them to be a viable resource for African Americans. Added to this issue was the fact that “separate but equal” applied to VA hospitals. As typical with other services that followed this application, these hospitals were substandard at best.⁴⁷ It would seem that the VA helped cause the inequality African Americans

⁴⁵ House, *Legislation In Behalf Of Veterans G.I. Bill*, 78th Cong., 2nd sess., S1767, *Congressional Record* 9, no.3, (1 April 1944): 3396.

⁴⁶ Hilary Herbold, “Never a Level Playing Field; Blacks and the GI Bill,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* no.6, (Winter 1994-1995), 105.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 106.

felt when trying to receive benefits under the G.I. Bill. However, leaving all of the blame at the feet of the VA would be a mistake as well.

Some colleges teamed up with the VA to funnel candidates eligible to attend elite schools, to schools with less prestige. This funneling came with the express threat, one that proved to be not hollow, of denial of benefits if the VA's prescribed course of action was not adhered to. With issues like this, there can be little wonder that by 1946 only "one fifth of the 100,000 blacks who had applied for educational benefits had been registered in college."⁴⁸ Part of the reason for the turning away of these veterans from colleges had nothing to do with the color of their skin per say, but rather with the institutions where they tried to use their benefits. One military historian estimated that 95 percent of African American veterans used their educational benefits in the South. The historically "Negro" colleges saw a 50 percent increase of students in 1947 alone. These colleges, in 1940 had enrollments of 43,003, which in ten years time topped 76,600. This final number clearly was a "breaking point" that resulted in an estimated 200,000 veterans being turned away.⁴⁹ This number is further compounded when you realize that in one survey it was found that historically black colleges had to turn away 55 percent of the veterans who applied to college for a lack of space compared to white college who turned away 28 percent for the same issue.⁵⁰

Education could easily be termed one of the key wants of those exiting the military after WWII. A study conducted by the Information and Education Division of the Army in 1944 found that prior to the announcement of the G.I. Bill only seven percent of the enlisted men had

⁴⁸ Ibid, 107.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 108.

⁵⁰ 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," *The Journal of Economics History* 63, no.1 (2003), 153.

any inclination to further their education. After the G.I. Bill announcement, 29 percent of white men and 43 percent of African American men from the enlisted ranks stated that they planned to further their education.⁵¹ Numbers, like those presented, unmistakably show that the G.I. Bill did not hold the same promise for every member.

The VA obviously had some issues with race. However, they were not the only veterans group to that struggled with this issue. The VFW “has never had a national policy of segregation” and is a “grass roots organization that reflects the local community it serves.”⁵² This statement was presented to this author when a VFW representative was asked if this organization ever had any sort of racial issues in the past, especially in the 1940’s. The problem with such a statement is that both the country and the military were segregated at the time. Johnson in 1947 stated, “The [American] Legion and VFW endorse and encourage segregation and discrimination against Negro veterans.”⁵³ Although, at this time the VFW does not admit that there might have been any racial issues in their organization, the American Legion does not make any such claim. When Kevin Flannigan, a History Librarian for the American Legion, was contacted he stated, “Local posts have always determined their membership.”⁵⁴ He went on to state that many towns had local posts only open to people of a certain job field. For example, Chicago had a post for advertising, and in many towns, posts were only open to members belonging to particular units. Typically, towns had two separate posts, one for blacks and one for whites. This practice was legal, but not sanctioned by the national organization. In the

⁵¹ Ibid, 151.

⁵² VFW Public Relations Officer, Personal interview with the author, 7 April 2005.

⁵³ Johnson, 433.

⁵⁴ Kevin Flannigan, Personal interview with the author, 4 April 2005.

1950's the national organization changed its laws to include the provision that membership could no longer be based off race, religion, gender.⁵⁵

The issue of race became a source of contention for an honor society inside the American Legion called the Forty and Eight. This organization was about having fun, but also performing good works. This included giving over \$2.7 million to needy children in the early 1940's.⁵⁶ The issue became the fact that they had a long-standing rule of "excluding Coloreds and Oriental races from its membership."⁵⁷ In 1959, the national organization realized that this did not fit with their organizational ideals of inclusion. When the Forty and Eight did not conform to the wishes of the American Legion, they were severed from it in 1960. The American Legion felt this action was necessary since it was inappropriate to be associated with this racist group.⁵⁸ It is somewhat ironic that Moley would write about this obvious misstep in the American Legions history in 1966. By 1989, when Thomas Rumer wrote his history of the Legion, there is no mention of the Forty and Eight at all. The Forty and Eight was obviously an organization that succeed in doing good works, they just happened to have missed out on the fact that racism, while a part of this countries collective past, was not to be tolerated any longer. The American Legion participated in writing a law that tried to be color-blind, and in the midst of this, they too realized that they needed to be a color-blind organization.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 is an important piece of legislation, as well as an important part of American culture. This law made it possible for a multitude of American veterans to receive an education that might not have been possible to them. 7.8 million veterans

⁵⁵ Ibid. Also, see Moley, 148.

⁵⁶ Moley, 259 & 264.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 148.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 322-323.

received some form of education under this provision of the G.I. Bill in a number of different fields at a cost of \$14.5 billion.⁵⁹ As with a number of events from the past, there is a tendency to romanticize true accomplishments. As one veteran of WWII stated, “The G.I. Bill was the way America said ‘Thank You.’”⁶⁰ Former Senator Paul Simon once wrote, “The true leaders of our nation have always valued education.”⁶¹ In the 1940’s the leaders of America proved how much they valued education for veterans. The G.I. Bill has been revived three times since the end of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 in 1956. Each of these successive laws has been individuals that stayed true to the original ideals.⁶² In its fourth and present incarnation, the G.I. Bill is more color-blind than its predecessors were. The true purpose of the original bill has become the reality. For some the G.I. Bill enabled them to pursue what they regarded as the “American Dream;” for others that dream was deferred.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 280-281.

⁶⁰ Thomas.

⁶¹ Paul Simon, “A GI Bill for Today,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 50, vol.10, (2003): 16.

⁶² Veterans Administration, “The GI Bill From Roosevelt to Montgomery,” available from <http://www.gibill.va.gov/education/GI_Bill.htm>, accessed on 26 April 2005.

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