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## The ‘Social Warfare State’

### Americans’ Making of a Civic Generation

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#### **Introduction: An Historic Achievement**

The GI bill gave generations of veterans a chance to get an education, to build strong families and good lives, and to build the Nation’s strongest economy ever, to change the face of America, and with it, to enable us to change the face of the world. The GI bill helped to unleash a prosperity never before known.

—President William J. Clinton, 12 April 1995

On the 22 June 1944, just weeks after D-Day in France, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act (U.S. Senate 1944). Supported by a bi-partisan coalition, this package of benefits for soldiers returning from the Second World War was the most expansive social policy ever offered by the US federal government. Buoyed by both an economic boom and a sense of social solidarity, the American public was able and willing to expend resources on a group perceived as worthy and deserving. Veterans were offered training vouchers, family stipends, up to a year’s worth of transitional unemployment payments, and low-interest, federally guaranteed loans for homes, farms, and businesses. By the mid-1950s, nearly 8 million ex-servicemen and women would take advantage of at least one programme. GI Bill benefits became a part of the typical American household, and the policy would soon become a cherished and respected institution in American society. So powerful is the reputation of this programme, that to this day compensation to wartime veterans retains the same moniker as the law passed more than seventy years ago: the GI Bill.

Programmatically successful, the GI Bill, also known as the ‘New Deal for Veterans’, was not an accident, though political success of the policy exceeded expectations. Having learned from the administrative failings of veteran’s support following the Civil War and the political debacle of First World War benefit payments, policy-makers wanted to ensure that assistance to Second World War soldiers would be more successful. With the war still underway, elected lawmakers initially approached veterans’ compensation as a macro-economic policy. With the risk of

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post-war unemployment and economic depression in mind, many feared populist uprisings among dissatisfied discharged soldiers. Both sides of the aisle agreed that something must be done to help veterans readjust to civilian life, but Republicans and Democrats disagreed on the most appropriate policy instruments. While Democrats sought to integrate veteran's compensation into their broader progressive federal social policy agenda, Republicans sought to limit the scope of government and curtail federal interference in local affairs. In a compromise to forge bi-partisan support, it was decided that programme benefits would be paid out of federal funds directly to individual veterans, through state and local administrative apparatuses. One consequence of this political compromise—that payments go directly into the pockets of veterans and their families—was to make policy benefits clearly visible to millions of American households, thereby promoting the policy's political success. Another consequence of this compromise, however, was to allow racial and gender biases to subvert administrative procedures, especially in the Southern states. Although the federal law was written to be inclusive, with universal eligibility for all veterans, decentralized administration gave local public and private institutions the opportunity to discriminate (especially in education, see Herbold 1994; Dynarski 2002; Turner and Bound 2003; Mettler 2005b; Katznelson and Mettler 2008; Woods II 2013).

Now several decades after the bill was signed into law with benefit eligibility long ago expired, empirical evidence supports the policy's programmatic and political achievements and points to some procedural shortcomings. Not only was the GI Bill successful in its original aims—to ease the economic transition of veterans back into the labour force—it also boosted educational attainment and social mobility, expanded social rights, set precedent for federal voucher programmes, and spurred civic participation for a generation (Skocpol 1997 Mettler and Welch 2004; Mettler 2005b; Nesbit and Reingold 2011). Programme benefits were generous, administration was efficient (though not without problem), and political success was unprecedented. In this chapter, I unpack the social and political consequences of the GI Bill by tracing the chain of events leading to the final version of the law and the critical stages of implementation. I assess the 'success' of this policy in programmatic, process, and political terms across time and explore what factors may have played a pivotal role in producing the pattern of outcomes observed. Finally, I examine what lessons may be drawn from this case.

### **Prelude to the Bill**

The GI Bill followed nearly two centuries of ad hoc attempts to reward American soldiers for their service. Special compensation for war veterans dates back to the Revolutionary War (1775–83). Though support for disabled veterans enjoyed broad support in the Continental Congress, the regular service pensions

advocated by George Washington in 1781 were primarily an incentive to prevent mass desertion (Teipe 2002). The goal was to improve retention among the ranks. Officers were promised half-pay for life, an offer which was almost immediately recognized as an impossible promise. After a near-coup by officers who were convinced the government could not meet the obligation, a compromise was made to pay full wages for five years, in the form of a bond (Teipe 2002). Enlisted soldiers, however, had less success in negotiation. At the end of the war, non-officers faced challenges in simply claiming back-pay, which was due to them since the government had stopped paying wages in 1777. According to Teipe's (2002) account, Revolutionary War veterans constituted a very small portion of the population at the time and were unable to effectively organize a political coalition. It wasn't until the Civil War, nearly a century later, that widespread compensation for soldiers was effectively paid.

From 1861 to 1865, 12 per cent of the Union (North) population served in the Civil War, which remains the deadliest war in American history, with roughly 13 per cent of Union service members returning home wounded (Department of Veterans Affairs 2017).<sup>1</sup> Disabled Union veterans were offered financial and medical assistance, and most service members were eligible for a general pension. The federal program, however, allowed broad local discretion in the distribution of payments. Funds were funnelled through local politicians for disbursement, leading to widespread corruption and patronage (Mettler 2005b). Additional pensions for surviving wives and mothers were offered by scattered state-level programs, and the federal Sheppard Towner program provided subsidies for some women's healthcare (Skocpol 1992).

Decades after the war ended, the federal government extended the existing pension programme for Civil War veterans with the Dependent Pension Act of 1890. In what would become a fundamental shift in American social policy, widows and the children of Union soldiers were made eligible beneficiaries (Skocpol 1992). Remarkably, as of 2017, a full 152 years after the end of the war, the last remaining dependant (daughter) of an American Civil War veteran continued to collect a monthly pension of \$73.13 from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (Department of Veterans Affairs 2017; the same case was also reported on by Frizell 2014). Though far more generous than any federal social policy ever before, eligibility for Civil War pensions and health services was not universal. First, administration through local politicians meant widespread discrimination and misuse of funds. Although African Americans and other religions or ethnic minorities were officially eligible for federal programmes, they found it difficult or impossible to gain access to the benefits (Skocpol 1992). Second, the programmes were only available to soldiers who had served for the North. All federal post-war programmes were limited to Union (Northern) veterans and excluded all Confederate (Southern) veterans. Each former Confederate (Southern) state was responsible for organizing and funding their own pension programmes.

Assistance to Civil War veterans and their dependants may have been imperfectly administered, but at the time it was by far the most generous and comprehensive provision of social assistance that had ever been offered to American wage-earners and families.

The next major turn in veterans' policy came with the end of the First World War. Motivated by fears of corrupt administration and the economic 'waste' of disabled or out-of-work (i.e. unproductive) veterans, Progressive Era reformers designed a very different package of veteran benefits than had been offered in the past (Linker 2011). The ideological emphasis of post-First World War policy-makers was on rehabilitating veterans and restoring their economic independence—the goal was a speedy return to productivity in the labour market (Linker 2011). Upon discharge, healthy veterans were welcomed back with a separation payment of \$60 and a train ticket home (Peeps 1984). Only disabled veterans were eligible for some (limited) reimbursement of tuition and costs for rehabilitative or vocational training. Later, in 1924, the Adjustment Compensation Act promised a deferred interest-bearing certificate payable in 1945 or, at death, to the veteran's beneficiaries (Ortiz 2012). Also keen to avoid past experiences of corrupt local administration, post-First World War policy-makers ensured heavy federal (centralized) control.

Compared to what Civil War veterans had received, First World War veterans' programmes were far less generous. The policy was scorned by veterans' organizations for offering too little too late, with discontent focused directly on Congress and the President. With the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s, dissatisfaction grew. Many veterans in dire economic need sought relief with early payment of their meagre pensions at a depreciated amount, or in taking loans against later pension payments. Supporting their cause, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) organized a nationwide campaign culminating in a march on Washington, DC, in May 1932 (Ortiz 2012). More than 20,000 veterans and their families marched into the city. This 'Bonus Army' settled into camps along the Anacostia river and remained there until 28 July, when they were forcefully removed by the Army. The violent eviction—tanks, cavalry, and torches were used to raze the encampments—coupled with the government's failure to produce legislation spelled the end of President Hoover's political legitimacy (Ortiz 2012). The bitter disappointment of the era spurred First World War veterans' organizations to professionalize lobbying efforts and expand membership (Ortiz 2009; Hindley 2014). The VFW and the American Legion have since become powerful institutions in American society and politics.

Months after the 'Bonus Army' debacle, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) was elected president. His successful bid was aided by the VFW's mobilization. Once in office, FDR's administration quickly set about enacting the Democrats' progressive 'New Deal' plan. Two years into the term, still in the midst of the Great Depression, Congress passed the first federal social policy available to all

Americans: the Social Security Act (SSA) (Derthick 1979; Weir et al. 1988). A public pension (Social Security), unemployment insurance, and medical care for the elderly and blind were the largest programmes in the bill. Whereas social assistance before had been limited to special groups (i.e. veterans), the SSA social insurance programmes covered any man or woman. Subject to contribution requirements or means-tested eligibility, these programmes were available to any citizen. Democrats advanced their policy of economic assistance further by growing federal employment. The Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration were created with this aim of boosting employment and economic security. This economic and social policy agenda was extremely popular, demonstrated by the fact that Roosevelt was re-elected three times (a record in US history, and the reason for the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, which now puts a two-term limit on the presidency).

Roosevelt continued to advocate a progressive and universal social policy agenda throughout his term(s) as president. FDR personally believed that no group should be eligible for benefits based on special status. True to this belief, FDR went so far as to issue an executive order scaling back veterans benefits in 1935 (Skocpol 1997), preferring instead legislation that would serve both veterans and non-veterans in economic need (Mettler 2005b). Yet, with the Second World War underway, it would become an important task of FDR's administration to work with Congress, government committees, and veterans' organizations to craft what is now known as the GI Bill.

### **Drafting and Negotiating the GI Bill**

Politics surrounding Second World War veterans' policies reflect lessons learned from previous post-war eras, as well as contemporary ideas about social programmes serving economic aims. Colouring debate about readjustment policy in both Congress and the administration was also an acute awareness of the political and economic threats posed by mass post-war unemployment. The end of the Second World War meant discharging 15 million soldiers into a 60-million-person labour force, in an economy adapting from wartime to peacetime production (Cogan 2017). Europe's experience following the First World War with public unrest driven by economic depression, which had opened the doors for dictatorial populism, weighed heavily on American policy-makers' minds when designing social policy during and after the Second World War. Neither had lawmakers forgotten the political failure of veterans' compensation at home, and the 'Bonus March' just a decade earlier. First and foremost, the Serviceman's Readjustment Act was meant as a tool to prevent economic depression and widespread unemployment among young men returning from war (Wynn 1996; Skocpol 1997; Cogan

2017). The altruistic goal of 'rewarding' soldiers for service or expanding social rights was secondary to these macro-economic concerns (Olson 1973). Ultimately, the legacy of Second World War veterans' policy would be the institutionalization of social policy principles in American society and a boom in civic participation. These outcomes may be heralded as successful legacies, but it is important to emphasize that these were the unintended consequences of political compromises in administrative design.

FDR's view was that veterans' compensation should be folded into existing (or new) universal social programmes. Under his plan, veterans and non-veterans alike would be provided labour-market assistance through universal programmes. Articulating this view, the President's Executive Conference on Post-War Readjustments of Civilian and Military Personnel proposed only a small package of higher education benefits for veterans, contingent on competitive exams and limited to studies deemed relevant to economic needs. An even more exclusive proposal was advocated by the fiscally conservative Armed Forces Committee on Postwar Educational Opportunities for Service Personnel. This plan offered only unusually talented veterans higher educational services for just one year (Mettler 2005b). Late in 1943, FDR's administration supported this plan with a bill in Congress, proposing only narrowly-targeted education benefits.

Despite holding a majority in both houses of Congress, however, FDR's New Deal Democrats could not rally the support needed to pass the bill. While five months passed with little legislative progress, the anti-statist conservative American Legion took action by drafting an omnibus bill it called the 'GI Bill of Rights'. Known in the post-First World War era as a veterans' organization promoting patriotism and community service, the American Legion had traditionally focused its efforts on local voluntary aid for ex-soldiers, eschewing federal assistance (Mettler 2005b; Ortiz 2009). In contrast to the VFW organization, the politically active and influential Legion had not fully endorsed the 'Bonus Army' movement in the 1930s (Ortiz 2009). And yet, in 1944 it was the American Legion which drafted and lobbied for a bill with unprecedentedly generous and broad benefits to veterans—both able-bodied and disabled (Skocpol 1997).

Composed mostly of First World War veterans, the Legion's policy position was motivated by their own memories of financial and social difficulties with readjusting to civilian life (Mettler 2005c). Whereas the President and many members of Congress emphasized economic goals, the Legion's position advocated society's obligation to servicemen. Harry W. Colmery—a First World War veteran and Legion member who personally drafted the GI Bill in longhand on hotel stationery—testified to Congress that veterans 'should be aided in reaching that place, position, or status which they had normally expected to achieve and probably would have achieved, had their war service not interrupted their careers' (as cited in Cogan 2017: 129). The organization's policy position had changed since the last war, while their political strength had grown. In breaking with the

tradition of creating new veterans' organizations following each war, the Legion had decided to expand their membership and mission to include Second World War veterans. This decision incorporated a new generation of veterans into an already organized and professional organization, thereby growing their strength in numbers and political influence. Not only did the Legion speedily draft the bill, it also lobbied intensely and it coordinated a persuasive media campaign with Hearst Newspapers (Cogan 2017). Other veterans' groups were more suspicious of the bill, however. The VFW and other veterans' organizations worried that such a large expansion of benefits might disadvantage disabled veterans in accessing the services they needed if resources were shared with able-bodied veterans (Hindley 2014). But in the end, the Legion's grass-roots organizational power prevailed—members across the country mobilized to contact their congressmen in support of the bill (Skocpol 1997).

Though it had popular momentum when proposed to Congress in early 1944, compromises were necessary to shore up the votes needed to pass the Legion's GI Bill of Rights. Conservative Republicans' negotiation was driven by several fears. There was first a concern that the Roosevelt administration and Democrats would use the legislation to advance a broader (New Deal) social policy agenda (Cogan 2017). To satisfy Republicans and prevent programme overreach, key administrative tasks were assigned to state and local institutions. Unemployment insurance eligibility rules were set by the federal government and capped at one year, but it was left to state workforce agencies to certify eligibility, issue checks, and provide job-finding services. Home, business, and farm loans would be guaranteed by the federal government, but only if a (local) bank approved the veterans' application.

There was also widespread Republican concern about growing executive power and federal interference with states' rights, especially in education administration (Skocpol 1997; Cogan 2017). Some Republican congressmen were distrustful of higher education, fearing it would spread a leftist ideology. The chair of the House Committee on World War Veterans' Legislation, John E. Rankin of Mississippi, said in a hearing in January 1944 that he 'would rather send [his] child to a red schoolhouse than to a red school teacher' (as quoted in Mettler 2005a: 22). So, it was negotiated that subsidies and benefits would be funnelled directly to individuals, who could then enrol in any education or training institution of their choosing. Importantly, it was ultimately up to the university, college, or technical school to evaluate applications for enrolment. Also, states retained control over certifying schools and training programmes, with no federal oversight of institutional qualifications or curricula. Applicants would file for benefits directly with the federal Veterans Administration, which had authority only to certify veterans' eligibility and to issue vouchers.

The final version of the GI Bill stipulated that upon discharge (including administrative discharges and excluding dishonourable discharges), all servicemen and servicewomen under the age of 25 (with some exceptions made) who had served at least ninety days would be eligible for programme benefits for a period of

nine years. Any veteran could attend college or vocational school tuition-free for four years (up to \$500, which was enough to cover tuition at elite colleges like Yale or Harvard at the time), while also receiving a cost of living stipend determined by family size. If veterans opted to re-enter the workforce, the bill included a \$20 weekly unemployment benefit for a maximum of one year, as well as job counselling and work placement services. Further, the government guaranteed (co-signed) loans for veterans approved to purchase a home, business, or farm, with no down payment. Finally, specialized medical care was provided and new hospitals under the management of the Veterans Administration were opened.

The bill's passage through the Senate was helped by Senator J. Bennet Clark, the chairman of the responsible committee. Senator Clark also happened to be one of the American Legion's founders (Cogan 2017: 129). Passage through the House was less smooth, with more debate, but it eventually passed with an overwhelming majority. Only in the final stage of reconciling the House and Senate versions of the bill was there any cause for concern. Congressman John Gibson had left Washington for his home in rural Georgia before the final bill was out of conference committee. When the reconciliation committee chairman refused to acknowledge Gibson's designated proxy, panic ensued. Being rural war-time Georgia, all attempts to reach Gibson by phone failed, so radio stations ran news alerts and state police were ordered to search for the congressman. Georgia police eventually found Gibson playing poker in a truckstop and immediately escorted him 150 miles to Jacksonville, Florida, to catch a commercial flight waiting on the tarmac to fly him to DC. It was only with the coordination of the American Legion that the 2 a.m. commercial flight was discovered and deliberately delayed for the senator—the pilot's supervisor was an active Legion member (Cogan 2017). After Gibson's dramatic final-hour vote, the bill easily passed the final votes and the Serviceman's Readjustment Act was signed by President Roosevelt on 22 June 1944, making the GI Bill law.

The next year, just weeks before VE Day, FDR passed away and the monumental task of managing mass discharge and administering the Serviceman's Readjustment Act fell to his successor, former vice-president Harry Truman. Nevertheless, the GI Bill, as well as the SSA, would become centrepieces of FDR's presidential legacy. In offering a range of educational and financial services, the GI Bill fundamentally changed the US government's approach to veterans' support and, in doing so, reflected lessons learned from the past. First, learning from the First World War, the GI Bill was intended as an economic instrument. Policy-makers feared discontent among veterans struggling to reintegrate with civilian life, and therefore promised every veteran the education, training, unemployment or job assistance necessary for gainful employment. Secured loans for homes, businesses, or farms further ensured economic health. This approach was a clear departure from the history of wartime veterans' legislation and benefits as a recruitment tool or means to compensate insured or killed servicemen (Cogan 2017). Second, the memory of post-Civil War patronage and



corruption from local politicians' distribution of benefits was reflected in the distribution of benefits directly to soldiers. Veterans would be free to pick and choose the services they needed or wanted and could choose any institution of higher education or training anywhere in the country. This was novel for American veterans' policy, but it also meant that the GI Bill was the first large-scale federal voucher programme (Cogan 2017). Design of the policy also reflected political compromises. Although benefits would be disbursed by the federal government, state and local institutions retained some administrative responsibility.

### Delivering the Policy

The original objective of Second World War veterans' readjustment programmes was to stave off widespread unemployment and economic depression. In remarks delivered to the 1944 Annual Convention of the American Legion, the Head of the Veteran's Administration (VA) said of the recently passed GI Bill that 'our present high level of employment and national income, and the maintenance of a sound economy, should be our goal' (Frank 1944). In the process of implementation, as millions of soldiers (80 per cent of Second World War veterans) and their families took advantage of the array of programmes available in the following decade, that focus shifted from macro-economy to the household-economy. By 1956, according to President Eisenhower's Commission on Veterans' Pensions, the objective of compensation 'should be to return veterans as nearly as possible to the status they would have achieved had they not been in military service', with priority given to disabled soldiers (Bradley et al. 1956: 4). The same Commission concluded that a fundamental change had transpired since the initial passing of the 'New Deal for Veterans': 'These programs have . . . become an important factor not to just a small minority, but to our society as a whole. Veterans' benefits are now a significant force in our economy' (Bradley et al. 1956: 24). The policy had become a significant influence in millions of ordinary households. Veterans who took advantage of the programmes overwhelmingly viewed the educational or guaranteed loan programmes as a turning-point, changing the course of their lives for the better (Mettler 2005b). To understand how this happened, how and to what degree veterans were helped, how household well-being was improved, and why *this* policy, above all previous veterans' assistance programmes, came to be so revered, it is important to evaluate its programmatic, process, and political impacts.

### Assessing the GI Bill

Each of the GI Bill's key programmes largely achieved their aims—the policy was a programmatic success. In her analysis of both archival primary sources and

hundreds of in-depth interviews with surviving veterans, Suzanne Mettler (2005a) distinguishes between the first- and second-order policy impacts. The first-order programmatic successes of the bill have been greater higher education (college) enrolment and attainment among programme recipients (Bound and Turner 1989, 2002), better jobs among beneficiaries (Mettler 2005b), and greater economic security (Bradley et al. 1956; Angrist 1993; Gabriel 2017). Overall, veterans who took advantage of the education and vocational training programmes found themselves in positions of better employment and income (Bradley et al. 1956; Nam 1964; Olson 1973; Bound and Turner 1989, 2002; Stanley 2003; Gabriel 2017). Some have even argued that the influx of veterans into higher education, which doubled enrolment at some universities, had a lasting impact on American academic culture by normalizing non-traditional student life (i.e. part-time students and students with families). University officials were initially concerned about the aptitude of veterans and their ability to keep up in the classroom (McDonagh 1947; Olson 1973; Clark 1998). However, opinions among academics and administrators changed, with evidence suggesting that veterans were more focused and diligent students than nonveterans (Carpenter and Glick 1946; Olson 1973; Peeps 1984; Clark 1998; Mettler 2005b).

The second-order success of the bill concerns its impact on civic participation and volunteering among GI Bill beneficiaries. Statistical analyses reveal that holding income, education, occupation, age, gender, and many other observable characteristics constant, veterans who used the education benefits of the GI Bill reported greater participation in civic and political activities over the course of their lifetimes compared to both veterans who did not use programme benefits and to non-veterans (Mettler 2005b; Nesbit and Reingold 2011). Improved economic security provides the resources needed to participate in politics and civic organization, but the effect documented by Mettler suggests something stronger than this. Upon return from war, veterans received help from the federal government through administrative procedures largely seen as fair and respectful. The message sent to veterans through the process of applying for and receiving GI Bill assistance was that they were not only compensated for their service, but that they were valued and respected by their government and country, and they felt more a part of their communities and politics as a result (Mettler 2005b). The visibility of education benefits especially contributed to this feedback effect. Social policies like the GI Bill have this 'interpretive effect' by shaping attitudes and behaviours (Pierson 1993). Policies which distribute benefits while including participants in administrative processes can leave beneficiaries feeling incorporated into the political system, which promotes civic norms and increases political and civic involvement (Pierson 1993; Campbell 2002, 2012; Mettler 2002, 2005b; Mettler and Soss 2004; Mettler and Welch 2004). There is overwhelming evidence that the GI Bill had this effect on the Second World War generation.

While the programmatic aims of the policy—to help veterans readjust to civilian society—were successfully met, the programmes suffered from procedural shortcomings. In short, administrative procedures failed to ensure equal treatment of all eligible veterans. These problems were largely due to state and local institutions' discretion, which introduced prejudice into the implementation process. This was especially true in the South, where a combination of racial discrimination and poor (local) administration prevented many black Second World War veterans from using GI Bill programme benefits to improve their socio-economic status (Onkst 1998; Mettler 2005b).

First, local offices of state-level agencies had authority to decide individuals' eligibility for unemployment benefits and re-employment services. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many black and minority veterans faced discrimination and were denied fair treatment by their local workforce agency offices. Accounts retell how these veterans were routinely wrongfully deemed ineligible for benefits, or were directed only to low-status employment despite having valuable technical skills gained during service (Mettler 2005b). Related to this problem was the experience of prejudice in the home, business, and farm loan guarantee programme. The policy relied on local and private banks to approve veterans' applications, which meant that even with a guarantee by the federal government, black veterans found it nearly impossible to obtain loans (Woods II 2013).

Next, state governments were responsible for certifying institutions of higher education and vocational training. Most states did not require site-visits or documentation for technical schools to be certified to receive veterans' vouchers. As a result, opportunistic businesses exploited the system. These 'fly-by-night' institutions would admit students, accept tuition vouchers, and offer little or no value in skill or education in return (Mettler 2005b). In short, many veterans who enrolled in vocational programmes received little of value for their tuition vouchers. This problem was exacerbated in Southern states, where institutionalized segregation in higher education prevented black veterans from enrolling in most universities (Olson 1973; Onkst 1998; Mettler 2005a).

Two other problems have been cited with administration of the policy. First, only a small fraction of veteran women applied for GI Bill benefits. Many eligible women opted not to take advantage of the programmes because doing so would interfere with the typical family life at the time (Skocpol 1997; Mettler 2005b). It was inconvenient or less acceptable for women with families and children to take advantage of higher education, especially if their husbands were going to school as well. But also, some women were not informed of their eligibility for veterans' benefits when discharged from service (Mettler 2005b). As a consequence, men had greater access to education vouchers and they enrolled at higher rates than women. In the decade following the war, women were underrepresented in higher education, though ratios returned to near parity as the cohort aged out (Larsen et al. 2015). Although the absolute number of women enrolled in college

did not decline, it was the relative representation that diminished (Olson 1973; Skocpol 1997).

The last concern with administration of the GI Bill was raised in a government report published in 1956 by a presidential commission, known as the Bradley Report (Bradley et al. 1956). This report highlighted rehabilitation challenges unique to disabled veterans, which continued even a decade after returning home. It was argued specifically that healthcare provided by the Veterans Administration was insufficient in quality and efficiency to rehabilitate disabled veterans. To resolve these and other problems within the Veterans Administration, the report recommended greater resources be put towards 'more adequate facilities for research, planning, and program analysis, so that the needs of veterans and the effectiveness of veterans' programs will be analysed on a continuing basis' (Bradley et al. 1956: 5). Despite these procedural problems across all levels of administration—state, local, and federal—the GI bill is remembered as an historic success.

### An Enduring Commitment and Its Legacy

In July 1956, *The New York Times* ran an article titled 'GI Bill, Expiring After Twelve Years, Has Been, It Is Agreed, an Outstanding Success'. At that point, the total cost of the bill to the US government had exceeded 14 billion dollars (just shy of 130 trillion dollars in today's currency) (Fine 1956). One half of the American public was a serviceman, veteran, or a related family member, according to the Bradley report (Bradley et al. 1956). This means that roughly half of the US population was likely affected by one or more federal educational, mortgage, unemployment, disability, or veterans' health programme. Implementation of the GI Bill made federal social programmes an ordinary part of working-age Americans' lives, without stigma.

A unique constellation of players and incentives led lawmakers in 1944 to pass an anti-depression economic policy in the form of direct payments and vouchers to service members. The lasting impact of this decision on veterans' policy in the United States was twofold. First, the perception became ingrained that government should assist *individual* service members with a range of social programmes. Second, this assistance should be made available *immediately* upon return home to transition into normal life. This differed from the past policy of offering deferred pensions to veterans. A broader impact on politics was to solidify a coalition of veteran beneficiaries (and their families), a politically influential group which cross-cut class and race. It was not only families who came to value the bill, however. Service providers who benefited from the bill's provisions gained a vested financial interest in the programme (universities received tuition and increased enrolment, bankers benefited from secured insured loans, etc.)

(Cogan 2017). Direct in-kind benefits on this scale had never before been offered by the government. The GI Bill was a new kind of entitlement from the federal government, and it set an historically significant precedent for subsequent veterans' legislation, and social welfare policy more broadly. A lasting impact of the bill on policymaking more broadly was to normalize and destigmatize social assistance.

Following the Second World War, Congress has renewed or revised the GI Bill several times to incorporate new veteran cohorts. Without a permanent authorization, each version/revision of the GI Bill has been subject to political debate. At the heart of these debates, especially in the 1960s, was the deservingness of veterans to receive benefits. A particular point of contention is whether servicemen during peacetime had 'earned the right for benefits' (Ortiz 2012: 256). Despite these debates, however, subsequent bills have maintained the same approach to securing veterans' economic stability through individual and direct assistance, though benefits have become less diverse and more narrowly targeted at education (Mattila 1978; Skocpol 1997). The instrumental logic and choice of policy tools have changed little over the years, though the enduring emphasis on education vouchers for veterans suggests this instrument of the policy has been the most politically successful. Although the instrumental logic behind compensation for veterans has stayed much the same, the principal aim of the policy has evolved since the debate between FDR and Congress in the early 1940s. Insured home loans and education vouchers for veterans have evolved from economic instruments into in-kind reparation. Macro-economic stability has been replaced as the central goal of veteran's policy; today the central aim is to compensate service members' sacrifice by enabling individuals with education and economic assistance.

Why the policy was such a political success is in part due to the bill's programmatic success—it did what it was intended to do. But also, political success is explained by popular perceptions of the Second World War relative to military conflicts since. The Second World War was (and still is) heralded as a legitimate war and prided for evidencing the superiority of American military strength and foreign policy (Wynn 1996), and veterans from this era were awarded a level of respect unique in modern history. Later wars are not viewed in the same way, a fact reflected in debates about later veterans' deservingness of benefits (Ortiz 2012). The Korean War has largely escaped America's collective memory and the Vietnam War is haunted by the stigma of disastrous foreign policy, defeat, shocking casualties, and domestic discord (Wynn 1996). More recent military conflicts including the first and second Gulf wars and the war in Afghanistan are similarly tainted by domestic disagreement and the absence of decisive wins. Members of the armed services in these wars experienced less of the popular reverence for the victories of the Second World War that was associated with those veterans. Support for public assistance programmes is closely associated with the perceived worthiness and deservingness of the recipient group (Appelbaum 2001; Barrilleaux and Bernick 2003; van Oorschot 2006). The

deservingness of the targeted population confers legitimacy on public policy, and there is perhaps no group collectively viewed as more deserving of assistance in the United States than Second World War veterans (Mettler 2005b). The political success of the GI Bill was shaped by the perceived legitimacy of the war itself, and the associated deservingness of its veterans. The contribution of programmatic success to political success may be a lesson for future policy, but the translation of reverence for Second World War veterans into political success of the GI Bill may lead one to 'a pessimistic conclusion about the possibilities for recapitulating its best features' (Skocpol 1997: 114).

Little has changed in veterans' policy since 1944. The central features of the original GI Bill remain intact. On 16 August 2017, President Trump signed the most recent update to the law: the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act. Colmery was the American Legion commander who originally drafted the 1944 bill. The 2017 law, commonly called the 'Forever GI Bill', had the support of both parties, as well as the VFW and the American Legion. Although the Forever GI Bill was the most substantial amendment to veterans' policy in a decade, the underlying aims and choice of instruments are unchanged. In the terminology of Howlett and Cashore (2009), the 2017 legislation merely calibrates benefit and eligibility criteria of existing programmes to increase generosity, but does not reflect fundamental change in aims or tools. Education benefits were expanded by, among other things, permanently extending breadth and duration of eligibility. The window for enrolment is increased up to fifteen years for all veterans, including previously excluded groups like the National Guard. Other programmatic changes make it easier for Purple Heart recipients to qualify for benefits, allow benefits to be transferred to dependants in the case of death, and grant surviving family members greater financial assistance. Living stipends during education, however, were decreased. On the procedural side, all school officials responsible for verifying veteran enrolment are required to undergo training. Overall, relatively minor adjustments were made to existing benefits, and it is a testament to the political success of the GI bill that current legislation, passed in 2017, honours the original author of the 1944 proposal.

## Conclusion

Politically, the GI Bill was a spectacular success. In programmatic terms, the policy is also a sound success. Procedurally, it is now recognized that there were deficiencies, as racial biases and historical legacies limited the benefits available to some (black and women) veterans. Administrative procedures could have overcome these limitations to ensure greater equity.

*Programmatic success* was advantaged by the economic boom of the war and post-war era, spurred by public spending. Economic growth made funding of a

generous social policy feasible and enabled veterans to use the benefits—to buy houses and land, for example. As discussed above, many of the programmes funded by the federal policy had a significant impact on the targeted outcome. Education, training, and income support all promoted social mobility and economic security. The programmes were successful not only in their economic goals, but also exceeded policy-makers' aims by promoting civic and political participation.

*Process success* of the policy was more limited because administrative rules and procedures produced inequities in the availability of GI Bill benefits to veterans. State and local authorities were responsible for key administrative decisions. Consequently, especially in Southern states, biased (racist) de facto implementation denied many black and minority veterans the benefits and services to which they were entitled. Also, insufficient oversight of vocational institutions meant that veterans opting for job training instead of higher education often found themselves wasting their vouchers on tuition to exploitive enterprises. Despite these administrative shortcomings, the GI Bill has endured as an historic *political success*. This is in part due to the policy's programmatic success—the policy did what it was meant to do, and more. The historical political success of this, however, is also due to perceptions of the legitimacy of the war itself.

History will surely (continue to) remember public policies supporting Second World War veterans as a landmark policy achievement. In 1995, President Clinton claimed Roosevelt's 'most enduring legacy' was a post-Second World War 'generation prepared to meet the future, a vision most clearly embodied in the G.I. Bill' (Clinton 1995). This reputation is likely to endure, since the legislation itself is long expired and all first-order outcomes were realized long ago and yet current policy is still named to honour the original 1944 bill author. Opportunities to build solidarity with social policy were unusually large in the post-Second World War era, uniquely advantaging the GI Bill in generating social capital. This should not detract from the programmatic performance of the policy, but it makes replicating the broader social outcomes a challenge.

### **Additional version of this case**

The case study outlined in this chapter is accompanied by a corresponding case study from the Centre for Public Impact's (CPI) Public Impact Observatory—an international repository of public policies assessed for their impact using CPI's Public Impact Fundamentals framework. CPI's framework provides a way for those who work in or with government to assess public policies, to understand why they were successful, so key lessons can be drawn out for future policy work. The case can be easily located in the CPI repository at [www.centreforpublicimpact.org/observatory](http://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/observatory).

## Note

1. The rate of surviving wounded soldiers in the Confederate (Southern) army is unknown (Department of Veterans Affairs 2017).

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