



How the GI Bill Built the Middle Class and Enhanced Democracy

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Following World War II, the “Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944” – better known as the G.I. Bill – helped returning veterans earn college degrees, train for vocations, support young families, and purchase homes, farms and businesses. Beneficiaries also become more engaged citizens. Compared to veterans who did not use education and training benefits, recipients reported involvements in 50 percent more civic associations and became significantly more politically active. Some joined the Civil Rights movement to expand citizenship for future generations. The G.I. Bill helped make U.S. democracy more vibrant in the middle of the twentieth century.

The Benefits Provided

Help for veterans of U.S. wars started after the Revolution and became very generous for northerners following the Civil War. In such early eras, pensions for the old and disabled predominated. But as World War II came to a close, the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt looked for ways to invest in the nation’s economic future. A nationwide voluntary association, the American Legion, proposed what became the G.I. Bill, and Legion posts pressed Democrats and Republicans in Congress to enact it into law.

Education and training benefits were the most popular parts of the G.I. Bill, claimed by 51 percent of veterans. Some 2.2 million attended college or graduate school, and 5.6 million prepared for vocations in fields such as auto mechanics, electrical wiring, and construction. Veterans could attend any institution that admitted them, using benefits that covered even the costliest tuition and helped support spouses and children. Nearly three of every ten veterans used low-interest mortgages to buy homes, farms or businesses. The economic impact was huge. In 1955, for example, the Veterans Administration backed close to a third of housing starts.

Expanded Opportunity for a Strong Middle Class

Four out of five men born in the United States during the 1920s served in the military, and about half of them used the G.I. Bill for education and training (either right after World War II or after the Korean War, when comparably generous benefits were provided). Prior to 1940, colleges were mostly for the privileged, but the G.I. Bill opened doors to many who were Catholic and Jewish, including rural people, first-generation immigrant offspring, and veterans from working and middle class backgrounds. An example is Richard Colosimo, a son of Italian immigrants who grew up very poor. “My father always told me,” he explained, “Dick, I don’t know how I can ever help you, but get an education: that’s the most important thing.” Thanks to the “magnanimous” GI Bill, he earned college and graduate degrees for a successful career.

Vocational training also led to jobs with middle class incomes and benefits. Sam Marchesi, for instance, left home at age 14 after his father died and went out west to work as a cowhand, sending his earnings back home to his mother to support the family. After the war, he used the vocational and training benefits of the G.I. bill to become a custom builder, declaring “Thank God, the government had the doors open for us.”

National Leaders – and Linchpins of Local Communities

Among those helped by the G.I. Bill are many famous people, including major figures in public life such as Presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush; Supreme Court Justices William Rehnquist, John Paul Stevens and Byron White; U.S Senators Bob Dole, John Glenn, George Mitchell, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan; and U.S. Representatives Alan Simpson, Ronald Dellums, and Charles Rangel. Civil Rights activists Medgar Evers and Hosea Williams also used the G.I. Bill, as did legendary entertainers Harry Belafonte, Johnny Cash, Clint Eastwood, Paul Newman, and Walter Matthau.

But for every renowned beneficiary, there were tens of thousands of avid joiners and community linchpins. A good example is Luke LaPorta, who never would have attended college without what he called “a hell of a gift,

an opportunity, and I've never thought of it any other way." He gave back to society by creating Little League baseball teams all over central New York. Another telling case is Henry Hervey, a black Tuskegee Airman, used benefits to go to college in Chicago, and later joined the Civil Rights movement to "take on City Hall" to fight discrimination.

Lessons for Today

As young adults, members of America's "greatest generation" saw government make a difference in their lives. Millions used generous, dignified benefits to seize opportunities and becoming more actively engaged citizens. To revitalize U.S. democracy for the twenty-first century, we need to create that same sense of reciprocal obligation between citizens and government. All citizens should be called to do their civic duty – and in return they should enjoy visible, dignified benefits that expand opportunity and enable active citizenship.

Read more in Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

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