Set Apart or Set Aside? Constructing Political Status from Veteran Identity

by

Laura Werle
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Knowing almost no veterans, having few personal connections to the material, and on track to graduate from a liberal institution that has little interest in military tradition, I arrived at my topic in a rather roundabout, process-of-elimination way. Going into the thesis program, I knew that my top priority was to find a way to learn and write about America, to find a topic that would let me access the deep tendrils of continuity and meaning in American history and politics.

Writing about veterans has given me that opportunity and more—America’s veterans and the state’s treatment of them represent some of our government’s best and worst qualities. I find that the more I learn about veterans and their relationship to the federal government, the more I become enthralled with America in all of its awe-inspiring and grisly peculiarity.
Introduction

On January 30, 2014, CNN News broke a story about 19 veterans dying while waiting for healthcare from the federal Veterans Administration. On April 23, CNN released another investigation, which revealed that 40 veterans had died while stuck on a secret waiting list at a single VA hospital in Phoenix, Arizona. The investigations forced the federal government into action, and on May 30, two months after the second CNN piece, Secretary of the Department of Veterans’ Affairs Eric Shinseki resigned. This was not the first time a director of the federal veterans’ agency left office in disgrace. Frank T. Hines, a reformer brought into the system in 1923, sent his resignation as Administrator to President Eisenhower in 1945 amid Congressional investigation of reported abuses in VA health care facilities. In 1974, VA Administrator Donald E. Johnson resigned to President Nixon at the behest of Congressional leaders and veterans’ organizations after Vietnam veterans protested sub-standard federally funded health care. President Reagan received VA

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Administrator Robert Nimmo’s resignation in 1982 as members of Congress and leading veterans’ organization advocated for his ouster. The current scandal in the VA is merely the most recent in a tradition of crises, each met with outrage in Congress and among major veterans’ groups. The VA oversees a national system with a wide portfolio of responsibilities, including managing the largest health care system in the country. While each scandal might appear to be a product of poor leadership or the nature of the most recent generation of veterans, the fundamental problems in the VA are endemic, perhaps even built into the tectonics of the system.

The 2014 Congressional investigation that confronted problems VA administrators, Congress, and veterans have been grappling with for decades. In response to this most recent scandal, Congress passed the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014, which gives veterans who are underserved by VA health options the choice to use non-VA health care. In February 2015, during hearings of the House Veterans Affairs Committee concerning the fiscal year 2016 budget, the Veterans Choice Act was a clear point of contention between members of Congress and representatives of the major veterans’ organization. Speaking in support of the law, committee chair Rep. Jeff Miller of Florida described any proposal to reallocate part of the $10 billion set aside for the program as a “nonstarter.”

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7 “Veterans Health Administration,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, accessed April 7, 2015 www.VA.gov/health
Panque, national legislative director for the American Legion, challenged the congressman:

We believe in the VA system. We believe the choice card is important because we have to get access to care for veterans, but we want to make sure the veteran still has access to [the VA] system…We can’t lose sight of the focus that it’s the VA that we want to be meeting [the demand].

The argument that veterans’ programs must be housed in the VA, though here referring to the Veterans Choice Act, has been an ongoing refrain since the passage of the GI Bill in 1944. In the 1940s, the American Legion fought vehemently to ensure that veterans and their dependents would be the only people eligible for benefits under the GI Bill and that all the Bill’s programs would be administered solely through the VA. Having won this bureaucratic argument, the Legion spent much of the mid-twentieth century fighting to maintain the rigid structure they had created. The American Legion’s objection in 2014 to ceding money and responsibility to non-VA health care facilities continues 70 years of legislative battles and aggressive lobbying in Washington.

Understanding how the VA system evolved as a separate entity within the American welfare state gives insight into current VA service problems as well as the long-term implications of the distinct veterans’ system established in 1944. This thesis attempts to reveal the veteran lobby's strenuous efforts to create a distinct political identity for “the veteran” and excavate the ideological and political underpinnings of this unique federal bureaucracy. Before the GI Bill, identifying as a veteran had no direct political implication, since only officers and disabled veterans
were eligible for federal benefits. After the GI Bill, which extended generous federal benefits to all veterans, veteran identity inherently implied elevated political status.

As other federal benefit systems expanded during the twentieth century, particularly under the Great Society programs in the 1960s, the generous benefits provided to veterans have become less unique. With these developments, the strict boundaries of the VA and the political separateness of veterans became more heavily guarded by the prominent veterans’ groups. Have the rigid boundaries of veteran identity maintained the group’s distinction and privilege above all other federal benefit recipients, or has it rendered veterans invisible, hidden by the bureaucracy of their special system? Tracking the development of veterans’ benefits, the implications of the GI Bill, and the evolution of the GI Bill system in the mid-twentieth century provides access to the deeper currents at play in modern veteran care debates.

The boundless particularities and peculiarities of American government could make nearly any related topic interesting and worthy of study. The case of veterans, however, has the double benefit of being ever-present in American history and currently relevant. There have always been veterans in American—at times, their demands dominated the national stage, but more frequently veterans’ needs and demands echo their benefits system: secluded by design. Often, veterans’ advocacy makes waves only within veteran circles and relevant legislative arenas. Veterans are simultaneously tied to the military yet operate within the civilian world, secluded yet ever-present, rewarded but chronically ill cared for. Perhaps understanding the evolution of veterans’ political status, as revealed in veterans’ benefits and the
machinations behind establishing those benefits, helps to clarify the paradoxes and current dilemmas veterans face as they continue to live under the GI Bill system.

Veterans have formed some of America’s most influential lobbying groups, starting with the Grand Army of the Republic after the Civil War and reaching greater power with the growth of the American Legion in the 1920s. They have also been eligible for some of the most generous and innovative federal benefits in American history. Throughout the nineteenth century, when few people were given access to direct assistance or pensions from the federal government, allotments for veterans continued to rise. Veteran identity opened paths to concentrated power and enhanced access to federal benefits, and yet, not all veterans received the same benefits: from the American Revolution through World War I, only a portion of the veteran population was eligible for federal benefits. For those veterans who did not have access, “entitlements’ qualifying criteria and their silences describe those who are not deserving.”

Until the passage of the GI Bill, service-connected disablement was the central criterion for receiving federal benefits. Those who suffered debilitating injury or illness during their military service became more worthy of benefits than their peers, veteran and civilian alike, revealing that receiving more from the federal government portrayed a heightened political status that was predicated on increased deservedness.

The demarcation of deservedness within the veteran population defines the long first period in the evolution of American veterans’ benefits. Laid out in chapter one, from the Revolution through World War I, eligibility for benefits was restricted

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9 Jensen, 35.
to certain veterans. While officers were generally well cared for, the enlisted faced more stringent requirements that were almost always rooted in changing perceptions of disability. Over the course of the nineteenth century, impoverishment and old age were included in the definition of disability and thus became grounds for federal pension. Veterans’ care, however, was not the only factor in writing benefits legislation. Until the Civil War and the rise of conscription, assuring potential enlisted soldiers and officers that they would be taken care of in the case of disability was crucial for maintaining the national military force.\footnote{E.H. Crowder, \textit{The Spirit of Selective Service} (New York: The Century Company, 1920), 63.} After the Civil War, veterans’ benefits became a powerful tool for the Grand Army of the Republic and the growing political patronage machines. World War I saw both a continuation of the disability-based benefits system and a liberalization of benefits beyond pensions. These programs were instituted to no avail, however, and the story of the American Expeditionary Force that went overseas in 1917 and ended with the Bonus March on Washington in 1932 became a national fiasco that haunted the federal government for decades to come.

The 150-year old tradition of partitioning the veteran population according to officer status and disability came to an end with the GI Bill’s passage in 1944. As chapter two explains, the GI Bill was the culmination of intense lobbying on the part of the American Legion, rapid political maneuvering in Congress, and attempts by the executive branch to steer the legislation. American Legion representatives advocated for several programs that departed from previous veteran’ legislation not only in content but in inclusivity, fighting so that nearly all veterans had access to the full slate of benefits and relying in part on promoting a shared identity common to all
veterans. In tearing down distinctions based on disability to make all wartime veterans eligible for benefits, the Legion elevated the entirety of the veteran population to a higher political status. Crucially, in 1944, only veterans enjoyed access to substantial government-provided welfare programs—no other segment of the population enjoyed subsidized education, health care, or reduced home and business loans. Certainly no other group had access to all of these benefits. It is critical to note, however, that some veterans were denied entry into the esteemed group: Gays and lesbians were deemed ineligible outright, while blacks veterans in the south had limited access to many promised benefits.

The Legion’s goal clashed with the Roosevelt Administration’s hope to extend federal benefits to larger portions of the general population. In the end, the Legion triumphed and the GI Bill created a new system of veterans’ benefits that served all veterans regardless of disability and that emphasized assistance programs over money payments. For the Legion, keeping others out of the veterans’ program or benefits system helped guarantee that veterans’ access to benefits was distinct compared to all other citizens, ensuring that their esteemed political status would remain unquestionable. The GI Bill was revolutionary not only because it contributed to the postwar rise of the American middle class, liberalized access to higher education, and helped 16 million veterans readjust to civilian life.\(^{12}\) It also represented a definitive break with the previous 150 years of veterans’ legislation and ushered in a new conception of the political implications of veteran status.

In the years after 1945, veterans enjoyed an exalted political status that no others could rival. As the nation settled into the post-war years, however, federal programs began to reach more segments of the population. In the mid-1960s, Congress passed legislation that provided access to higher education, opened entry into the health care system, and gave the general population the chance to make use of federal programs administered by many different agencies. Chapter three explains how the expansion of the welfare state under President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society implicitly undermined the Legion’s notion of veterans as separate, more deserving citizens. As many civilians became eligible for federal benefits, the sanctity of the exclusively veteran system was thrown into question. Starting in the late 1950s, veterans’ organizations’ ability to pass legislation, even updates to the GI Bill, was thrown into question as opponents could argue that the entirely separate VA system of benefits administration was redundant. Eventually, some recommended that parts of the VA’s programming, particularly the costly health care system, be integrated into larger benefit providers. Although the VA system survived intact, the criticism damaged the system’s formerly untouchable image. Although civilians did not have access to the VA system, there were civilian equivalents for nearly all VA programs that veterans could also access if they wished.

The rapid expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s was not the only force changing America’s relationship with its veterans. Chapter 4 argues that although social status and political status are independent issues, the concurrent decline of both during the 1960s and 1970s indelibly changed the place of veterans in America. The widely unpopular Vietnam War generated immense controversy and negativity at
home, profoundly affecting the readjustment experience of the cohort of veterans it created. The war had both real effects on the readjustment of veterans, through draft policies and separation procedures, and the media-based perception of veterans that made it difficult for the public and the government to understand the nature and the needs of Vietnam veterans. During and after the war, government bodies, scholars, and veterans themselves all tried to figured out “the Vietnam veteran” and his troubled readjustment. Vietnam veterans also struggled to fit into existing veterans’ organizations, declining to join the groups that failed to understand the unique plight of soldiers returning from Southeast Asia. The conservative organizations, with their older, World War II-era members, had to balance advocacy for all veterans with promotion of the particular needs of their aging members. It is unclear what direct causal links, if any, there are between the social implications of the Vietnam War and the generally negative experience and perception of it veterans, but the importance of the Vietnam War to the veteran experience is beyond question. In addition to affecting its own veterans, the Vietnam War lowered the high social status veterans enjoyed after World War II.

There are many notable works on veterans’ benefits already. In 1918, William Glasson published an exhaustive investigation into military pensions, starting with the Revolutionary War.\(^{13}\) Theda Skocpol’s work on the significance of liberal Civil War pensions for the growth of the American welfare state is critical reading.\(^{14}\) The GI Bill has received much scholarship. Perhaps the most definitive history of the bill’s


creation is David Ross’ *Waiting for Ulysses*. In her 2009 book, *The GI Bill*, Kathleen Frydl analyzes the birth of the bill using the idea of “veterans’ exceptionalism,” arguing that the GI Bill system was designed to set veterans above and apart from all other citizens. It is a convincing argument and heavily influenced this thesis. Vietnam veterans have also received substantial scholarly attention. Most scholarship on benefits in the Vietnam Era focuses either on the VA healthcare system, which suffered from rampant mistreatment scandals, or on the updated education benefits for mid-century veterans, which were less generous than those for their predecessors from other wars. Few works, however, analyze the political continuity of veterans’ benefits across these periods, especially the implications of changes in benefits legislation on veterans’ political prestige. By tying the present investigation to the expansion of welfare programs in the 1960s, this thesis grapples with the repercussions of rising access to benefits in the general population on the separate veterans’ system, creating an opportunity to embed current policy debates in historical context.

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**Divided Identities: Contingent Veterans’ Benefits from the Revolutionary War Through World War I**

Before the American welfare state took root and expanded in the twentieth century, veterans were among the select few who could make claims on the state for assistance. Traditionally paid for their time in the service, and often awarded additional pay upon discharge, veterans have received monetary benefits from the federal government since the Revolutionary War. The heart of aid to veterans, however, is in longer-term benefits, customarily pensions, that maintain a connection between the state and the individual for a veteran’s lifetime. For most of the history of veterans’ benefits in the United States, a history that is as old as the country itself, unique attributes like disability or an officer’s commission were necessary for entrance into the special group that had a right to receive continuous federal benefits like pensions. The combination of immediate assistance upon separation from the military—readjustment benefits—and long-term programs was designed to allow veterans to re-enter civilian life successfully and then give them lifelong assistance to compensate for any disabilities they incurred while serving.

For more than 160 years, benefits were limited to cash payment upon separation, pensions and, occasionally, land grants or access to old soldiers’ homes. This general tempo of military service changed fundamentally with the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, more commonly called the GI Bill of Rights, of 1944. Examining the relaxation of restrictions in the system of veterans’ benefits from the
Revolutionary War through World War I is critical to understanding how innovative the GI Bill was. Further, the veterans’ benefits tradition up to the GI Bill reveals the relationship between the federal government and its veterans: By marking some veterans as more deserving of benefits than others via firm eligibility criteria, the federal government expressed distinct levels of political status within the general veteran population.

Recurrent battles to define “deservedness,” who has earned the right to claim federal services and who has not, shaped the history of veterans’ benefits in the United States. These clashes forced legislators to firmly outline which groups of American had earned benefits and which were not deserving of them. From the Revolutionary War through World War I, veterans’ benefits were generally restricted to officers, who had spent years preparing for long tours of military service, and the disabled, who lost out on labor capacity in service to the state. These attributes marked their bearers as particularly deserving of assistance from the state. With the Social Security Act of 1935, often seen as the birth of the American welfare state, federal benefits began to reach a wider array groups—in the case of social security, the elderly. The mid-nineteenth century saw a slightly more inclusive redrawing of the boundaries of veterans’ benefits, but disability remained the key delineator.

This period also saw a change in the ability of veterans to advocate on their own behalf. Early efforts, in the Revolutionary Era, to control benefits policy

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coalesced into threats to either desert or, after the war’s end, refuse to disband.¹⁹ Early attempts by veterans to influence policy through political means were relatively ineffective and few veterans’ organizations formed. Until the Civil War, when conscription began in earnest, benefits were largely used to induce enlistment.²⁰ After the Civil War, the first broadly powerful veterans’ organization emerged: the Grand Army of the Republic. The GAR, open only to Union soldiers, gave veterans a joint political voice and, subsequently, significant political power on a national level.²¹ The GAR was the first of many deeply influential veterans’ organizations including the American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The influence of these organizations proved critical in the creation of the GI Bill and other policies concerning veterans in the twentieth century.

The task of apportioning federal monies among veterans required distinctions between veterans who had previously served side by side. Disability and commission were merely the most common, most demonstrative metrics used to divide cohorts of veterans. With each major military conflict in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, new distinctions were created and old ones reimagined. These politically generated boundaries cut through the masses of veterans, constantly creating new groups of the deserving and the undeserving. This process has produced new fault lines in every era, and the mainline partition of disability has frequently been crosscut with specifications of race, allegiance, and income. Combinations of political, economic,
and symbolic concerns drove the processes of deciding what qualified a veteran as deserving.

Each major war during the 160 years between the American Revolution and World War II inspired some form of a veterans’ program. The Revolution, the Civil War and World War I all prompted Congress to develop new laws, systems, and qualifications, creating three distinct systems that preceded today’s GI Bill system. After the Revolution, America’s founders grappled with how to care for veterans while managing the challenges of an untested government that generated only a meager income. Foundering attempts to pay veterans under the Articles of Confederation led to unrest among the troops and, eventually, a disabilities pension law. Signed 35 years after the Treaty of Paris, the law set the tone for much of the veterans’ provisions throughout the nineteenth century. Next, the Civil War gave rise to two critical legal efforts: the general law system of benefits and the Dependent Pensions Act of 1890. Both of these led to large expansions in pension size and eligibility—although they notably maintained disability and old age, which was regarded as disability, as the primary requirements. In the second half of the nineteenth century, military pension rolls constituted increasingly sizable portions of the annual federal budget and stimulated significant increases in federal bureaucracy while playing host to rampant graft and corruption. Finally, in reaction to the general law system, World War I legislators attempted to use Progressive Era self-help

ideologies to inspire veterans and reduce abuse of the system. The extensive use of national conscription, expanded industrialization, and ineffective legislation led World War I veterans to become examples of legislative clumsiness and executive blunders.25 Doubtlessly, this analysis leaves out many smaller but significant conflicts in early American history: the “Indian” Wars, the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, and the Spanish-American War. Some of these conflicts altered existing laws concerning veterans, but they failed to inspire substantial overhauls of the federal system of veterans’ benefits.

The benefits systems created during and immediately after the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War I share common themes, notably their cardinal use of disability. This century-and-a-half tradition ingrained a particular relationship between veterans and the state. Most veterans were paid a separation bonus as their term of service ended, but fewer continued to receive federal assistance, restricting the deserving group to a limited portion of the veteran population. Until the New Deal, few Americans had contact with the federal government through direct assistance programs. That veterans were potentially eligible for such programs marked them as special, and those who were enrolled in long-term benefits plans were part of an exclusive group set apart from the rest of the population through their relationship with the state.26 Exploring the continuities and policy breaks each of these three major wars engendered gives context to the powerful reimagining of veterans’ status and benefits in the twentieth century. The rise and decline in veterans’ special status during the mid-twentieth century, while far

26 Jensen, “Constructing and Entitling America’s Original Veterans,” 36.
removed from the eighteenth century, is informed by and more deeply understood in comparison to America’s early benefits programs.

**The American Revolution, Founders’ Fears, and a Bifurcated Fighting Force**

Federal responsibility for taking care of veterans began during the nation’s founding. Responsible for paying for the war but barred from levying taxes, the Continental Congress tried repeatedly to entice the states to finance some of the mounting costs, but all of these efforts failed.²⁷ Paying troops for time served, supplying discharge sums, and providing the limited pensions and disability payments offered at the time added to the war’s final price. Even after the war was won, the minimal power of the federal government under the famously decentralized Articles of Confederation prevented the state from paying the discharge sums and pensions promised to Continental Army soldiers and officers, making it difficult to manage the unruly, hastily arranged military.²⁸ The inability to pay for veterans’ benefits during the Revolution and after would pit the Founders against one of their biggest fears: a politically energized military.²⁹ In 1781, before the end of hostilities, George Washington and his political counterparts struggled to keep the Continental Army together for the duration of the war. Enlisted men threatened to desert if they were not paid immediately and promised post-war pensions.³⁰ By 1783, Washington had the opposite problem, with both officers and the enlisted troops threatening not to disband if their pension demands were not met. The Founders’ fears of a politicized

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²⁸ Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, 76.
²⁹ Ibid.
military out of civil control were surely blazing, but they lacked the funds to do more than promise acquiescence once the troops disbanded and went home.\footnote{ibid., 76-79.}

In one of the essential examples of dinner-party politics, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison reached a compromise on the debt issue while dining together in New York, then the nation’s capital.\footnote{Jon Meacham, Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power, (New York: Random House, 2012), 242-243. For an interesting alternative take on the Compromise of 1790, see Jacob E. Cook, “The Compromise of 1790,” The William and Mary Quarterly 27, no. 4 (1970): 523–545.} Under the Compromise of 1790, in return for accepting federal assumption of state war debts and increased federal taxes, government officials would relocate the capital to Washington, D.C., a swampy spot along the Potomac River close enough to comfort the Southern states who had lower debt levels to pay off.\footnote{Ratchford, American State Debts, 59.} The deal made way for federal responsibility for state wartime debts, including veterans’ pensions.\footnote{Levitan and Cleary, Old Wars Remain Unfinished, 7-8.}

Veterans’ benefits have been a federal issue ever since, which is a fundamentally important factor in their history. The reason veterans’ pensions were included in the debt deal as well as the root of federal accountability for veterans’ affairs is rooted in the bifurcated forces that fought the British in the eighteenth century.\footnote{Weigley, History of the United States Army, 87.} The military that fought the revolution was a two-part force. “Regular army” soldiers were called up by the Continental Congress while state militiamen, who were non-professional “citizen soldiers,” supplemented the regular force as needed.\footnote{E.H. Crowder, The Spirit of Selective Service (New York: The Century Company, 1920), 63.} The Continental Army, a relatively small group, could not have maintained full strength without reinforcements from the state militias.\footnote{Weigley, History of the United States Army, 41} Although the militiamen fought
much more locally, they were influential in the American victory and incredibly powerful in the cultural memory of the war as the militiamen were familiar civilians who had put personal needs aside to act upon duty and serve as staunch defenders against an invading foe. In reality, popular understanding of the Revolutionary Army, both at the time and since, is often mistaken in assuming that the volunteer force was assembled through such patriotic fervor and anti-British excitement.38

In his 1920 history of American military recruitment, Major General Enoch Crowder explains the importance of compensation and benefits to the Continental Army. Crowder documents that in 1776, the Continental Congress offered a bonus of four dollars to “encourage” service. By spring 1779, Virginia was offering potential recruits 750 dollars, a suit of clothes, and a parcel of land.39 These bonuses were promised in addition to regular payment. The need for extremely generous bonuses to induce service not only reorients the prevailing narrative of the Revolutionary Army, it also demonstrates the centrality of benefits in the relationship between the American state and its military service members—until conscription began during the Civil War, military benefits like the bonus defined service. Until the start of conscription, however, providing short-term payoffs to encourage enlistment was a critical issue in the realm of military benefits.

The political and philosophical space between the national and state governments during the Revolution made the national government both unwilling and unable to assume responsibility for the state militias. This initial divide between the regular army, which the national government paid for and commanded, and the state

39 Ibid.
militias, which state governments were responsible for raising and commanding, shaped the future of American military organization.\textsuperscript{40} Eventually, the militias formed the National Guard service that still exists today.\textsuperscript{41} The separation of the professionalized regular army and the militia meant that the valor and selflessness imputed to the citizen soldiers did not initially apply to the professional soldiers of the regular army; the professionals were seen as motivated by personal gain through pay and pensions, while the citizen militiamen were defending their homes and families. As Laura Jensen argues, for the regular army, “military service thus was linked with compensation, rather than defined as a (male) obligation of citizenship, until the conscription legislation of the Civil War and beyond.”\textsuperscript{42} The promise of compensation during service and after in the case of disability—not solely a sense of national duty—attracted regular army recruits. These benefits were split into two separate issues: discharge bonus payments at the end of the war and continuing pension payments to the disabled of the regular army.

During and in the years following the Revolution, the Founders had a general distrust of organized armies, but this fear was most immediate concerning the regular army.\textsuperscript{43} The militias were less organized than the regular army and under the purview of state governments, thus inspiring less urgent concerns for the national government. Samuel Adams, arguing against having a “European-style” standing army, explained that “soldiers are apt to consider themselves as a body distinct from the rest of the citizens,” giving voice to a fear concerning the military: the evolution of soldier and

\textsuperscript{40} Crowder, \textit{The Spirit of Selective Service}, 64.
\textsuperscript{42} Jensen, “Constructing and Entitling America’s Original Veterans,” 47.
veteran status into a definite, differentiating, political rallying point between military members and all other citizens.\textsuperscript{44} By anointing those worthy of special status with large bonuses and federal pensions, the Founders were able to head off the cohesion of veterans into a politically active group. Conflicts with the regular army substantiated some of the politicians’ reservations about its power. Military leaders faced troop attrition from lack of pay during the war\textsuperscript{45} and then a recalcitrant army that would not disband after fighting stopped.\textsuperscript{46} Negotiations concerning benefits, discharge payments, and pensions were the root cause of these standoffs.

Although hostilities largely ended in 1781, formal peace was not granted until 1783. The Congress then faced the issue of persuading the victorious army to disband. Threats and demands surfaced from enlisted men for discharge pay and assurances of future disability pensions. Politicians sought to solve the most immediate problem, persuading the soldiers to disband and return home, thereby defusing the threat of a recalcitrant military, through paying separation bonuses. In early 1784, after aggressive negotiations with military leaders, Congress, unable to levy taxes, proved unable to convince the states to contribute money to fund the discharge payments. Instead of cash, veterans received commutation certificates that the state could not afford to pay out immediately that were to appreciate over time.\textsuperscript{47} During the next few years, many enlisted soldiers sold off the still-worthless certificates to speculators. As the federal government gained power and financial


\textsuperscript{45} Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin, \textit{The GI Bill: The New Deal for Veterans} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14. Early, unsubstantiated promises for pensions made in 1776 served as an inducement to service to build the initial ranks of the Continental Army.

\textsuperscript{46} Weigley notes that for many, these fears were born out of the English experience with Oliver Cromwell a century earlier, 30.

\textsuperscript{47} Jensen, “Constructing and Entitling America’s Original Veterans,” 42
stability, the certificates improved in value, leaving veterans feeling cheated of one of the only benefits they had won.48

It was widely accept that the disabled and the war-widowed deserved pensions. Nearly all politicians and lobbyists involved in the post-Revolution negotiations agreed on that, but many saw pensions for the able-bodied as flying in the face of the revered citizen-soldier ethos that had come to color all military members in the public eye.49 Like discharge payments, pensions for the disabled were promised but not paid. The issue was not fully sorted out for 35 years, when the Pensions Act of 1818 provided regular army veterans who were disabled or impoverished with annual payments of 240 dollars for officers and 96 dollars for soldiers.50 The inclusion of poverty as a qualification for aid departed from the centrality that disability had held and represents an early change to the disabled-only tradition. As historian John Resch points out, however, the measure relied on a hybrid version of Elizabethan poor laws and was aimed at those “rendered incapable to procure subsistence by manual labor,”51 as were the disabled. The Pensions Act of 1818 established a precedent for the generous treatment of veterans, but only those who had earned it through national service and substantiated claims of indigence or disability. War of 1812 veterans were notably not included in the law, despite the latter war’s end previous to the bill’s signing. The law covered only those who were “living links” to the principles of the revolution.52

48 Levitan and Cleary, Old Wars Remain Unfinished, 7.
49 Jensen, “Constructing and Entitling America’s Original Veterans,” 42.
50 Resch, “Politics and Public Culture,” 151.
51 Ibid., 142-144. Quote is from a Senate version of the bill. The final bill maintained this basic aim.
52 Ibid. 151.
Perhaps most important, the Pensions Act of 1818 confirmed the
government’s ability to construct and reaffirm political status through benefits. Jensen
notes this powerful device in her analysis of early veterans’ benefits. The strict
distinctions drawn through the veteran population in the service of distributing
pensions made “the entitlements’ qualifying criteria and their silences describe those
who are not deserving.” The boundaries of eligibility for federal benefits
distinguished which groups were special, the disabled and officers, and which
deserved only the benefits given to all citizens. Jensen goes on,

In distinguishing both between and among particular groups of
military men as it entitled only some veterans to Federal pensions, the
1818 pension legislation sent messages about which “types” of citizens
and claims mattered, giving birth to new civic identities. Along with the traditions of a split federal-
state military and elevation of the disabled
above other veterans, the tradition of aligning deservedness with access to benefits
within the veteran system emerged as a legacy of the Revolutionary Era.

The Pensions Act is also, however, notable for the substantial difference in
allotment for officers and enlisted soldiers. The disparity in pension size reflects the
venerated place officers held in early American military politics. More highly
educated members of the regular army, the officers were career military men who
remained in the field for years. The officers’ education and connections allowed them
to became a political force as well. In 1783, they refused to disband until their
demands for post-war half-pay pensions, a benefit the Continental Congress

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53 See Jensen, “Constructing and Entitling America’s Original Veterans.”
54 Ibid., 35.
55 Ibid., 36.
56 Resch, “Politics and Public Culture,” 157. Officers were thought of as coming from “higher social
orders” and received several times more money under the Pensions Act than noncommissioned officers
and enlisted infantry.
originally proposed in 1776, were met. The government agreed to a negotiated pension plan, but, like pensions and discharge payments for the enlisted men, these benefits were never paid out. In May of 1783, officers formalized their political power via the Society of the Cincinnati, a hereditary organization of officers that provided a platform for discussion and political lobbying. The nation’s first veterans’ organization, limited to officers, the society was politically active, restricted in membership, and organized. The group did not achieve any major political victories, but its existence affirmed the cohesive nature of veteran status.

As the new nation settled into some routine in the early nineteenth century, it developed political traditions. The Pensions Act’s provision that pensioners had to be impoverished or unable to work reestablished disability as the fundamental feature of deservedness among veterans. The decision to give preferential treatment to disabled men was made for political and philosophical reasons, but economic factors were also influential. Compared to other federal programs at the time, the cost of the Pensions Act was unequaled. As the Revolution’s veterans aged and their numbers decreased, an 1832 law granted pensions to all Revolutionary veterans. By 1832, however, anybody who fought in 1776 would have been in his late 60s at the least. The Pensions Acts of 1818 and 1832 established that in the eyes of the state, the elderly and impoverished were included in the ranks of the disabled, another liberalization on earlier more stringent definitions of disability. The state had no

58 Weigley, History of the United States Army, 77.
59 Ibid.
60 Jensen, “Constructing and Entitling America’s Original Veterans,” 50.
61 Ibid., 42
62 Skocpol, “America’s First Social Security System,” 96.
responsibility to men who had served, returned fully able to perform manual labor, and built a life. Debilitating illness, rampant among the ill-fed soldiers; permanent disability, also common because of medical limitations of the period; old age; and poverty were grounds for military pensions, and the soldiers who were injured while serving had earned their pensions with blood, bone, and lost labor capacity.

The Civil War

Seventy years after the Revolution and nearly fifty after the War of 1812, the Civil War was an entirely new military experience. Unprecedented and unparalleled in its destructiveness to American property, soldiers, and civilians, the Civil War accounted for more American deaths than either World War. The mammoth death toll of the Civil War is matched only in the number of non-fatal casualties: amputees, shrapnel victims, the malnourished, the ill, the shell-shocked. The scale and ferocity of the Civil War left the smoldering nation with nearly 300,000 wounded Union veterans alone. Out of the ranks of the Union veterans would arise one of the most powerful political groups of the late nineteenth century: The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). Civil War veterans benefited from the experiences of earlier veterans and the political needs of the period. For the first time, Congress gave serious consideration to veterans’ care while the war continued. The general law system, passed in 1862, ensured disability pensions, death benefits, and homestead

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64 ibid.
65 ibid.
land preference to all Union recruits. The system would remain the basis for veterans’ benefits until World War I, when Progressive ideals inculcated Congress and military leaders. The general law system would also cover Spanish-American War veterans. Like under the Pensions Act of 1818, widows, military orphans, and dependents of the disabled were also covered. Throughout the decades following the Civil War, pensions were enlarged and other benefits initiated or increased. The Dependent Pensions Act of 1890, another key piece of legislation, expanded the general law system nearly 30 years after its inception.

The 1890 Dependent Pensions Act, which the Grand Army of the Republic lobbied for heavily, further liberalized the system to include any non-service connected disabilities—this meant that any veteran who injured himself after the war was still covered by virtue of his veteran status. Disability designation was not uniform, however, with veterans’ injuries scaled to different pension amounts based on the severity of the disability. The importance of the 1890 Pensions Act is easy to underestimate. It covered all post-service disability, allowing veterans who had injured themselves while working on their farms or playing with their children to receive benefits. Additionally, the assumption of age as a parameter of disability meant that the act “soon evolved into an old-age pension for all Union veterans.” Unlike general pension laws passed in 1832 and 1871, in 1890 many Civil War veterans were still active participants in the labor force. For the first time, a

68 Ibid., 2038.
69 Skocpol, “America’s First Social Security System,” 96-98.
substantial number of Americans could assume that in their old age they would not face poverty.

The Civil War’s timing, during significant shifts in technology and medicine, affected the number and type of disabled veterans that emerged from the battlefields. War, technology, and medicine frequently push each other forward, with terrible and innovative results, and Civil War veterans suffered from this relationship more than most. Battlefield injuries were responsible for only a portion of what killed and disabled Civil War soldiers. Disease spread quickly in the overcrowded camps and hospitals of the time. Infection was so destructive that “microbes killed far more soldiers than rifles or cannon” during the war. In the crowded, undersupplied hospitals of the North and South, however, doctors and nurses developed medical practices and theories that would fundamentally change medicine in America, but these advancements did little to limit the damage done to veterans. As happens in every war but particularly in the waxing years of American industrialization and medical research, new technologies influenced the types and needs of the resulting disabled. Going forward, the trench and chemical warfare in World War I, island warfare in the Pacific Theater of World War II, and jungle and environmental warfare in Vietnam would all profoundly influence the needs and reputations of the war’s veterans.

72 Michael R. Gilchrist, “Disease and Infection in the American Civil War,” The American Biology Teacher 60, no. 4 (1998, 261. Gilchrist reports “that 63% of Union fatalities were due to disease.” See page 258.
The post-war period of significant benefit expansion is key to Theda Skocpol’s analysis of the importance of Civil War pensions in laying the foundation for the American welfare state, the growth of which is key to understanding changing veterans’ status over time. Skocpol locates a strong precursor to the New Deal and its effect on federal power in liberal post-Civil War veterans’ pensions. In 1861, the federal government was paying 10,700 veterans and dependents from previous wars at a cost of $1,072,000.\(^74\) By 1866, there were 126,722 people on the pension rolls at a cost of 15 times as much.\(^75\) Three years after the Dependent Pension Act of 1890, 966,012 people were on military federal pensions rolls.\(^76\) In the general law system’s peak year, 1913, the federal government paid $174,000,000 in military pensions, which accounted for 18 percent of the year’s federal expenditures.\(^77\) Significantly, like earlier pension systems, this system was “tied directly to disabilities incurred in wartime service.”\(^78\) Throughout the post-Civil War period, the system continued to evolve into “an even more generous system of disability and old age benefits.”\(^79\) Between the original 1862 Act and 1871, several smaller pension acts were passed that “extended benefits…so as to include all possible claimants.”\(^80\) All War of 1812 veterans who remained loyal to the Union during the Civil War received pensions and

\(^{74}\) Glasson, *Federal Military Pensions in the United States*, 124. Interestingly, 63 of those pensioners were Revolutionary War veterans and 2,728 the widows of Revolutionary War veterans.

\(^{75}\) Skocpol, “America’s First Social Security System,” 94, citing Glasson. In 1862, the federal government paid around $1 million for military pensions. In 1866, it paid about $15.5 million. Between 1880 and 1910 more than a quarter of federal spending was directed towards military pensions.


\(^{78}\) Skocpol, “America’s First Social Security System,” 94.

\(^{79}\) ibid., 95.

dependents benefits.\textsuperscript{81} The 1871 law was the only major War of 1812-specific pension legislation, as “unpopular wars, alas, produce unpopular veterans.”\textsuperscript{82}

The “precocious” increase in spending that Civil War pensions accounted for was politically innovative, but it also had roots in less noble needs: The particular political culture of the post-Civil War period made patronage via military pensions a powerful tool for party politicians. The opportunistic political maneuvering of the late nineteenth century expanded the political and social scope of the federal government.\textsuperscript{83} More than a tactic to induce people into service, Civil War pension growth was an effect of political patronage, of GAR lobbying, and of the democratic power exerted by veterans as a voting group. Military pensions and veterans’ benefits were ease to politicize. Not only are the causes of war political rallying points, but also taking care of veterans is a popular political stance for national-level politicians. Veterans’ benefits in American history frequently swing between, or sometimes simultaneously embody, complaints of both shortage for struggling individual veterans and insatiable appetite from politicians and veterans’ groups for more spending. Civil War pensions’ impact on the growth of the welfare state was significant, but their influence in the history of veterans’ benefits in particular was profound. Although the meaning of disability stretched to include non-service connected disabilities, disability remained a harsh dividing line between those who had and had not earned benefits. The gush of political support for veterans’ benefits, which had roots in the nation’s evolving party structure, established veterans as an

\textsuperscript{81} Jensen, “Constructing and Entitling America’s Original Veterans,” 60. Note that like the Revolutionary War Pensions Law of 1832, the pensions law of 1871, while universal to all loyal veterans, would have covered men in the 70s and 80s.
\textsuperscript{82} Altschuler and Blumin, \textit{The GI Bill: The New Deal for Veterans}, 18.
\textsuperscript{83} Skocpol, “America’s First Social Security System,” 86-88.
important voting group and able, through groups like the GAR, to assemble an
effective political lobbying force on the national stage.

**Confederate Veterans**

The ability of the government to transmit symbols through benefits programs
is surely proved in the aftermath of the Civil War. As Union veterans returned home,
the victors of a bitter and difficult fight, Confederate veterans faced the pervasive
sense of defeat embodied by the ravages of total war, the social upset from war and
the freed slave population, and Reconstruction. Without federal support, the veterans
could look only to the disheveled state governments for assistance. The federal
government reinforced the diminished status of the Confederate veterans through
their ineligibility share in the right to government assistance. Confederate veterans, as
well as War of 1812 veterans who had not remained loyal to the Union, were
definitively labeled undeserving.

In response to the waves of veterans returning home, Southern states began to
piece together assistance programs of their own. Always substantially smaller than
the federal system, state pensions nevertheless expanded the role of the state
governments. In her essay “Protecting Confederate Soldiers and Mothers,” Elna
Green argues that Southern state-level Civil War veterans programs helped shape “the
South’s complex views on public provision and the welfare state in the twentieth
century.”84 Not only did the state pension programs provide much-needed support for
disabled veterans, they eventually “blossomed into an emotional defense of the war

84 Elna Green, “Protecting Confederate Soldiers and Mothers: Pensions, Gender, and the Welfare State
effort…the Confederacy, and the superiority of Southern civilization.” As the federal system imbued heightened worth into those it awarded benefits to, the Southern state systems bestowed official favor on the defenders of Southern white culture. As the Civil War passed into remembrance and the realm of symbolic significance, Southern attempts to keep the Confederate memory alive grew. The “Lost Cause” movement began to flourish in the 1880s, though it became a widespread social movement with the death of Jefferson Davis in December 1889.

A crucial component in the regrowth of Southern confidence and pride was the consolidation of the United Confederate Veterans Association on June 10, 1889. Founded in Louisiana, the UVC comprised nine local and state organizations that had issued calls to unify their advocacy efforts. Generally, the UVC lobbied in state legislatures to enhance pension provisions for the disabled, their dependents, the widowed, and the orphaned. Green argues that Southern benefits were pensions that had been “wrapped in the stars and bars” and “were clearly public poor relief for one group of indigents.” While the GAR had been operating in the North for decades, the state-by-state nature of southern pensions had not created the need for a broad organization to advocate on regional or national level. The resurging desire for Confederate glory and respect created cultural, social, and personal needs for a larger veteran community. The UVC was also able to help coordinate and publicize scattered efforts to assist the veterans. Eventually, many more of the smaller veterans

85 Green, “Protecting Confederate Soldiers and Mothers,” 1080.
87 Simpson 351.
89 Green, “Protecting Confederate Soldiers and Mothers,” 1082.
groups in the South joined the UVC, which reached a highpoint of 80,000 members in the late 1890s. Annual reunions served to reaffirm commitments to the symbols and memories of the Confederate soldier. They were raucous affairs that moved to a new city each year. At the 1911 convention in Little Rock, Arkansas, 106,000 members, family members, and supporters joined the revelry. At the UVC’s sixtieth reunion in 1950, one surviving veteran still managed to attend.

Beyond the annual meeting, news about the UVC was usually spread via the Confederate Veteran, an unaffiliated but highly sympathetic publication. Confederate Veteran served as an organizing and solidifying document for the decentralized efforts of the UVC. Although relatively insignificant in terms of their effect on the evolution of veterans’ benefits in the United States, the UVC, Confederate Veteran, and the GAR were precursors to an explosion of national veterans’ groups after World War I. Political, social, and geographical divisions that existed in the larger society divided the GAR and the UVC, but they maintained the practice of annual conferences for decades, a tradition later veterans’ organizations would also follow. The organizations acted as vessels for maintaining the pride and beliefs of both sides of the divided nation. In a highly symbolic and cathartic display of ameliorating wounds, the GAR and UVC organized a meeting at Gettysburg for the 50th anniversary of the battle. On July 1, 1913, more than 53,000 veterans from both armies gathered on their old battlefield, the oldest at 112 and the youngest at 61 years old. On July 3, the two sides re-enacted Pickett’s Charge, only this time with “eyes

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90 Hattaway, “Clio’s Southern Soldiers,” 214.
91 Ibid.
that dimmed fast and kindly faces behind the stone wall…At the end, in place of wounds or prison or death, were greetings and handshakes.”

**World War I Veterans, New Veterans’ Organizations, and the Bonus March**

Veterans’ affairs in the wake of World War I, the “war to end all wars” would become a decade-long national embarrassment and set the groundwork for wary negotiations during World War II. By 1914, it had been nearly 50 years since a major American War. Veterans of the Civil War were aging out of politically powerful positions and Spanish-American War veterans were a relatively small group. The drawn-out battle for payment and pensions on the part of World War I veterans mimics in many ways that of the Revolutionary Era cohort. Given unredeemable certificates, the veterans spent more than a decade fighting for payments and pensions as the national government prioritized other issues. Despite the generous pensions for Civil War veterans, the World War I veterans faced obstacles to receiving benefits that were grounded in a politically changed and realigning nation, new notions of federal aid, and eventually, the Great Depression. Despite America’s relatively short involvement, the nation underwent a major deployment of troops to the European continent, long the butt of isolationist entreaties against entangling foreign powers. These troops also faced newly mechanized methods of warfare and the infamous trenches, replete with vermin, shrapnel, and poisonous gas.

Corruption in the generous Civil War pensions pushed Congress away from the general laws system of benefits by the outbreak of World War I. 

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93 *Confederate Veteran Magazine*, XXI (1913), quoted in Simpson, 360.
benefits would take on their unique structure first with the War Risk Insurance Act, which “shifted the system away from a reward for military service and toward encouraging self-reliance.”

Under this system, involuntary government-backed insurance payments during service replaced disability pensions. After a soldier was discharged, he could choose to continue paying into the reduced-price insurance plan if he chose. Health care and vocational training for the disabled were also guaranteed.

According to William Henry Glasson, the author of a definitive survey of American military pensions from the colonial era through 1917, the law was “a radical departure from the existing pension system.” Whereas existing pensions for Civil War and Spanish-American War veterans were administered through the Commissioner of Pensions in the Department of the Interior, the new insurance program was run from the Treasury Department. This split administrative jurisdiction between executive agencies underscored later debates about the place of veterans’ benefits in the growing federal bureaucracy. The pensions for disabled World War I veterans were more generous than those under the general law system but maintained the practice of scaling disability payments to the severity of the disabling injury.

In a blow to well-intentioned government planning, most service members declined to continue their insurance payments once they were discharged. This meant that any emergent or future disabilities would go uncompensated. Other

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94 The growth in federal spending on pensions after the Civil War was truly in large part due to increased eligibility and larger numbers of veterans applying for aid, but the system was also rife with corruption and false claims. In a claim that would become routine in the twentieth century, opponents to the liberal pensions accused veterans and their organizations of misuse of federal money. The portrayal of veterans as money gobbling and manipulative largely started in this era.

95 Encyclopedia of Congress, 2038.


97 Ibid.

98 Ibid., 285.

shortfalls also plagued the new benefits system. The vocational rehabilitation programs were inconvenient and largely unsuccessful, forcing disabled veterans to work their way through multiple federal offices before receiving training that was often irrelevant or insufficient for employment.100 The vocational program echoed failed land grant programs after the Revolution and the Civil War—it seemed that as hard as the government tried to give veterans new professions, no program could do so successfully. Other than a $60 discharge payment, mostly used for train fare to get home, World War I veterans were left with little real assistance beyond a newly liberalized healthcare system.101

The War Risk Insurance Act was just one part of the failed World War I veterans care program. On the home front, highly industrialized war production had increased wages significantly during the late 1910s. The wartime boom affected many industries, and wages for industrial workers grew as the government mobilized. Feeling slighted, returning soldiers demanded adjusted compensation for lost potential income.102 Adding to the calls for wage compensation was the fact that the majority of World War I veterans was conscripted into service and had missed the higher earning opportunities through compulsory service. This demand solidified in the form of demands for a “bonus.” Although paid at least in part upon separation from the military, the bonus represented a wider demand than discharge payments. Instead of a lump sum to aid in immediate readjustment, the bonus compensated veterans for lost wages due to conscription. With few federal benefits to call on,

100 Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 30.
101 Ibid.
World War I veterans saw their military service as detrimental to their future careers. In World War II and after, the military and the federal government worked to ensure that military service at least appeared to bestow advantages for post-service employment. In the late 1910s, such an advantage was nearly unimaginable.

The bonus presented the government with a hurdle. In the early 1920s, paying off World War I costs diverted federal spending as pivotal labor strikes in Seattle and the steel industry shook the economy.\(^\text{103}\) The flow of returning veterans, many of whom were disabled, stressed both the nation’s capacity to reach satisfactory levels of employment and the government’s ability to provide for the veterans. World War I veterans shipping back from London and Paris faced bleak employment prospects. By 1922, although industry boomed, farmers were already experiencing harsh times that were only a preview of the desolation to come during the Great Depression, and veterans struggled to find employment and readjust to civilian life.\(^\text{104}\)

Adding to the disarray, there was no centralized federal agency for adjudicating disability claims, overseeing medical care, and interacting with veterans curious about what their service and injury had earned them.\(^\text{105}\) In 1921, the Veterans Bureau was created to streamline the process, but at first, the Bureau hardly helped. Its leader, Charles Forbes, led a corrupt and unreliable agency that did little to help veterans and promoted negative images of veteran programs. By some reports, in one year a quarter of all funds given to the Veterans Bureau was stolen or wasted.\(^\text{106}\) In 1923, the avuncular Forbes was replaced with the staid Brigadier General Frank T.


\(^{104}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{105}\) Encyclopedia of Congress, 2038.

Hines. Forbes was eventually sent to prison after being convicted of attempts to defraud the government.\textsuperscript{107} Under Hines, who remained in the post until 1946 when a scandal over atrocious health care in VA hospitals forced him out, the Veterans Bureau was brought to order. Its powers expanded further when it became the Veterans Administration in 1930. Hines, a relatively cautious and conservative man, removed himself and his agency from most political arguments, preferring to answer questions with expert detachment.\textsuperscript{108} For veterans’ organizations, especially the newly formed American Legion, “unification of functions…established a precedent that [they] elevated into a principle.”\textsuperscript{109} Keeping all veteran-related administration within the VA would become both a practical and ideological necessity for the Legion and other veteran lobbying groups.

Throughout the 1920s, veterans’ organizations, Congress and, in turn, Presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover fought over the bonus. In 1922, Harding vetoed the first bonus bill. In 1924, Coolidge’s veto of an augmented bill was overridden and the War Veterans Act of 1924 took effect.\textsuperscript{110} Also in 1924, advocacy from veterans’ organizations and legislative need inspired the creation of the House Committee on World War Veterans Legislation.\textsuperscript{111} The act gave each soldier who met a length of service requirement of 60 days an additional $1 per day for domestic work and $1.25 for service abroad. Soldiers receiving less than $50 were able to get immediate cash payments. For larger amounts, veterans were granted certificates that

\textsuperscript{108} Ross, \textit{Preparing for Ulysses} 31.
\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Ibid.}, 30.
\textsuperscript{110} Altschuler and Blumin, \textit{The GI Bill: The New Deal for Veterans}, 27.
they could cash in either in 1945 or upon death. The prosperity of the mid-1920s made for peaceful veterans relations. Then, in 1929, World War I veterans joined the rest of the nation in horrified marvel at the precipitous stock market crash and resulting financial panic. Short on cash, veterans began to demand immediate payment on the 1924 bonus certificates; the request clashed with tightening federal spending policy, and battle lines about the issue were swiftly reaffirmed. Congressional support again won out over a presidential veto, this time from Hoover, and a more generous loan provision was given to veterans holding certificates, allowing them to take out as much as 50 percent of the value of the bonus certificate in a loan. Veterans were hardly appeased, and as the financial collapse deepened into depression in 1930 and 1931, demands for a full cash payment resurfaced.

The full scale of the failure of the World War I program did not come into focus until 1932. In May 1932, 20,000 destitute World War I veterans accompanied by an additional 20,000 family members and advocates marched on Washington, D.C. to demand an immediate payout of their bonus checks. The troops built a shantytown on the Anacostia Flats from which they could go to the heart of the city to demonstrate. After the Senate voted 62 to 18 against a bill that would pay the rest of the promised bonuses, President Hoover decided to evict the self-titled Bonus Expeditionary Force. The Army Chief of Staff, General Douglas McArthur, led 300 infantrymen, 200 mounted cavalry and 5 tanks against the veterans, who sang *My

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113 Ibid., 28.
115 William Pyrle Dillingham, *Federal Aid to Veterans, 1917-1941* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1952), 165. --do not have this book with me, will check and add a few facts when I get back to school.
McArthur pushed the so-called Bonus Army all the way back to the Anacostia shanties, which through either deliberate action or accident, began to burn.

Amid this confusion, fear, and lack of direction, the nation elected former New York Governor Frances Delano Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932. The Bonus March fiasco became another in a series of blunders through which Hoover stumbled during his term in office, a national embarrassment that underscored the dire financial situation of the whole country. If veterans, even the disabled, one of the oldest protected groups, could not rely on the federal government for substantive assistance, it seemed unlikely that anybody else could. In 1933, marchers reappeared in Washington to demand the bonus. Although Roosevelt treated them with respect, he did not give the veterans the cash they desired. In 1935, bonus legislation passed with the support of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, was sent to Roosevelt; he vetoed it. Breaking with tradition, Roosevelt personally took his veto message to a joint session of Congress. Reading aloud to the House, Roosevelt argued that bonuses for specific groups would only encourage other groups to ask, saying an “able-bodied citizen should be accorded no treatment different from that accorded to other citizens who did not wear a uniform during the World War,” adding, “there is before this Congress legislation providing old-age benefits and a greater measure of security for all workers…In all of this the veteran shares.”

116 Taylor and Wright Taylor, Homeward Bound, 91.
117 Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 18-19.
The bonus issue threw the American Legion and the New Dealers into direct conflict ten years before the introduction of the GI Bill of Rights inspired a convoluted legislative battle. Eventually, in 1936, Roosevelt became the third president to have his veto of a bonus bill overridden as Congress pushed through a bonus payment bill that allowed veterans to exchange their certificates for savings bonds, most of which were cashed immediately.\textsuperscript{119} Somewhat ironically, the bonus bill, along with WPA and PWA spending, was responsible for a considerable portion of the federal spending increases that poured into the economy under the New Deal in the mid-1930s.\textsuperscript{120}

The World War I pension system was the shortest lived of any of the watershed military pension programs in United States history. The Revolutionary pensions program, such as it was, remained intact from 1818 to 1862. The general law system was maintained from 1862 to 1917, when the World War I War Risk Insurance Act was passed. The pension and benefits program instituted under the GI Bill has lasted the longest, from 1944 until the present day. As with each previous iteration of veterans-readjustment legislation, the GI Bill writers acted within the context of the preceding system, reacting to both failures and successes. Ineffective vocational programs, insufficient funds, political controversy and gridlock, and bureaucratic messiness all hampered the World War I program. The World War II program would have to address these issues and prevent a return to depression while dealing with several times as many returning soldiers.

\textsuperscript{119} Altschuler and Blumin, \textit{The GI Bill: The New Deal for Veterans}, 29.
\textsuperscript{120} Kennedy, \textit{Freedom From Fear}, 355.
Veterans Organizations

America’s tradition of veterans’ organizations, which began in 1783 with the Society of the Cincinnati and expanded after the Civil War with the Grand Army of the Republic and the United Confederate Veterans, grew significantly during and after World War I. Many of the most prominent veterans’ organizations throughout the twentieth century were founded in the first twenty years of the century. The Veterans of Foreign Wars organization, founded in 1899 for veterans of the Spanish-American War who wanted an organization separate from the GAR, lobbied for veterans not covered by Civil War pensions. The membership base for the organization was restricted, however, to veterans who had served abroad. In 1915, it had a membership of only 5,000 individuals.\textsuperscript{121} In contrast, the GAR had nearly 500,000 members in 1890, almost 30 years after the Civil War ended.\textsuperscript{122} The relatively small force dispatched for the Spanish-American War limited the lobbying efficacy of the VFW for many years. Unlike the GAR, however, the VFW was not specific to a single war. As the American Expeditionary Force returned from Europe in 1919, the VFW welcomed the new veterans into its ranks. World War I stimulated the creation of the other two major veterans’ organizations of the twentieth century. In 1919, the American Legion held its first meetings in Paris, organized while its members were still in uniform.\textsuperscript{123} In 1920, the Disabled American Veterans was

\begin{footnotes}
\item[121] “About Us,” Veterans of Foreign Wars, accessed April 5, 2015, \texttt{http://www.vfw.org/Common/About-Us/}.
\end{footnotes}
founded. As the Civil War had seen catastrophic wounds specific to the weaponry of the time, World War I military doctors faced patients blinded from mustard gas and mangled by barbed wire. The ranks of the disabled, long seen as the most deserving subgroup of veterans, organized to make demands specifically their own. The DAV organized as an advocacy agency for the disabled, and throughout major veterans’ benefits negotiations, it would be a stalwart supporter of giving disabled veterans a different class of care from other veterans.

The bonus debates of the 1920s and early 1930s became a proving ground for the veterans’ groups. After 1924 the Legion pulled out most of its support for the cash bonus payments while the VFW maintained calls for cash disbursement. Between 1929 and 1932, the VFW “rose out of relative obscurity to become a prominent vehicle for veteran political activism.” The VFW would remain one of the three most influential veterans’ organizations into the twenty-first century. The bonus episode was a precursor to the competition between the three groups during World War II. Not only did they back competing and often-contradictory legislative agendas, they also jockeyed for members. All three operated under similar organizational and membership models. Mirroring federal and state governments, the organizations had centralized national leadership networks and local posts or clubs. Some, like the American Legion, also developed regional governance structures as well. This effective two-tiered structure was common among fraternal organizations

125 Ortiz, “Rethinking the Bonus March,” 276.
of the period, like the Elks, the Moose, and the Knights of Columbus.\textsuperscript{126} Another key feature of the groups was their emphasis on membership and dues. When lobbying in Washington, the size of the dues-paying membership could act as a powerful cudgel for legislative influence.\textsuperscript{127}

While the DAV and VFW had specific criteria for entry, the American Legion supported a more inclusive policy. The American Legion was, of all the veterans’ organizations, the most deeply involved in the process of writing the GI Bill. During the interwar years the Legion developed a strict political orientation that was nominally nonpartisan but vehemently anti-Bolshevik, pro-American, and anti-labor. Deft use of its federalized structure allowed the Legion’s national leaders to leave local posts to attend to community matters. Meanwhile, the national organization developed platforms and campaigns. The Legion was able to develop such an extensive organization that “few American communities did not have a local Legion post by 1941.”\textsuperscript{128} The two-level system’s strict hierarchy of power meant that local posts were barred from commenting on national issues, a stipulation which gave the national office complete agenda-setting control.

The Legion gained more centralized power from its associations with powerful people. Not only were many high-up political actors Legion members, the Legion had working relationships with several senators, congressmen, and even William Randolph Hearst. Many of the Legion’s founders went on to hold influential political office: Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. became, like his father, Assistant Secretary

\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Ibid.}, 74-127.
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Ibid}. 10.
of the Navy, and Bennett “Champ” Clark became a prominent Democratic senator from Missouri who was involved in many of the GI Bill negotiations. Tight organization and far-reaching power on both the community and national level put the Legion in a powerful position to generate and pass legislation. Under the annually elected National Commander, the national-level organization lobbied Congress, issued statements, and set policy for the year.

The conception of veterans as distinct certainly existed in the Revolutionary Era and grew throughout the nineteenth century. This idea of “specialness” or “exclusivity” operated on two levels. Socially, veterans were accorded respect, gratitude, and cultural reverence. For decades after the Revolutionary War ended, even to today, the image of brave minutemen fending off redcoats using the family hunting rifle has inspired national admiration. Politically, distinctiveness was embodied in veteran-specific benefits and pensions. These pensions, however, were strictly linked to disability. The widely held idea of a minimal American state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries fails, in many ways, to reflect the relationship between state, military, and veterans at the time. And yet, the scope of federal responsibility remained relatively narrow. Veterans had to have gone through extensive education and training to become officers or to have become disabled to earn benefits. Even the vast expansion of veterans’ pensions after the Civil War did not overcome divisions of veterans by disability status. In that time, however, veterans became a significant political lobby, establishing far-reaching organizations as the mode of political power with the ascensions of the GAR. Although the aftermath of World War I left veterans in camps and on street corners before the
Great Depression even hit, the fight for veterans’ benefits helped elevate the veterans’ organizations that would prove indispensable in passing the most comprehensive, generous package of veterans’ benefits in American history, the GI Bill of Rights.
The GI Bill and the Establishment of the Independent Veterans’ Benefits System

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 fundamentally reshaped the relationship between the American federal government and military veterans. After its passage, veterans were at the peak of their political and social status. The program set up short-term benefits focused on readjustment to civilian life and long-term benefits like health care, housing and business loans, and pensions that supported lifelong needs. Unlike previous veterans’ benefits programs, the so-called GI Bill\(^{129}\) had incredibly low eligibility requirements—an other-than-dishonorable discharge and 90 days of service. This unprecedented program of benefits designated nearly all veterans as members of a unique political group on the basis of their veteran identity, and refashioned veterans into a widely but strictly defined group set apart from all other citizens. The federal services that were unavailable to any other social or political group strengthened veterans’ claims to higher demands of the federal government and solidified veterans’ enhanced deservedness in the eyes of the state.\(^{130}\)

The GI Bill was not the only legislation that affected World War II veterans, and before the GI Bill passed, there were three major pieces of legislation relevant to

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veterans’ lives. The first was the Social Security Act of 1935. Although not specific to veterans, the Social Security Act changed the expectations of citizens for their government, laid the groundwork for the expansive programs contained within the GI Bill, and is often pointed at as the founding of the American welfare state. The second was the very law that forced men into military service, the Selective Training and Service Act. In including a provision for re-employment rights for veterans returning to their old jobs, the Selective Service Act grappled with measuring the entitlements and rights of veterans against those of citizens who had not served. The third law was a vocational rehabilitation law passed in 1943 generally referred to simply as Public Law 16. Although Public Law 16 echoed World War I legislation, albeit in a way that tried to solve its predecessor’s glaring problems, the political fights over the bill reveal the dueling priorities of the New Deal-inspired executive branch and the coalition between veterans organizations and conservatives in Congress. The GI Bill broke new ground in demolishing distinctions between able and disabled veterans, but Public Law 16 is a critical component of the story of veterans’ benefits because of what it almost did. In contending with strengthening versus tearing down divisions between citizens who had served militarily and those who had not, the debates over Public Law 115 typify the struggle between the Roosevelt Administration and the veterans lobby. In attempting to make Public Law 16 applicable to both war industry workers and military personnel injured in the war effort, executives from the Roosevelt Administration took a strong stance on combining systems for the treatment of veterans and civilians.

131 There were many laws passed concerning veterans throughout the early 1940s, but here I am restricting my discussion to the major veterans bills of the period.
The goals and legacy of the New Deal proved to be crucial in the creation of the GI Bill. The reinterpretation of the political implications of veterans’ status that the fight over the GI Bill produced would have been impossible without the deep changes the New Deal inspired. The New Deal created a different relationship between the federal government and individuals, and its programs led to a new set of federal responsibilities, namely, for the government to provide assistance to broad social and economic strata of society. Programs focusing on jobs, pensions, and infrastructure pierced through 150 years of American tradition to create routine interaction between individuals and the state, causing people throughout the nation to connect to the federal bureaucracy in newly intimate ways.

Unlike the federal military pensions of the Civil War, which led to unprecedented spending and bureaucratic growth, New Deal programs did significantly more than met out pensions. New Deal programs attempted to provide relief and opportunity through jobs and organizations to groups that had not earned their assistance through service or disability; rather they deserved assistance by virtue of citizenship and identity. The federal government of the mid-1930s and after tried to simultaneously increase the security of average American citizens, restart the stagnant American economy, and redefine the role of the federal government in routine life. At the 1933 America Legion national conference, echoing Samuel Adams, Roosevelt articulated his belief that “the fact of wearing a uniform does not mean that [a person] can demand and receive from his Government a benefit which no other citizen

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The struggle to define whether or not veterans deserved enhanced claims on federal assistance defined the evolution of World War II veterans’ legislation. Such legislation, including the GI Bill, was not written solely by New Deal advocates. While many “New Dealers” held crucial roles in the bill’s creation, several other groups were powerful forces in the process. Politically, veterans laws were created through the interactions of executive bureaucrats, many but not all of them New Dealers; members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, especially several committee chairs in each chamber; and political lobbyists from veteran advocacy groups, most significantly the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Throughout the battle over veterans’ legislation from 1940 through 1944, relations became increasingly stormy between Roosevelt’s executive branch and Congress, which moved in a dramatically more conservative direction following the 1942 elections. By 1943, “greatly enlarged Republican minorities, especially in the House, [could] join with anti-New Deal [Southern] Democrats to assume working control against the Administration.”

These political divisions fail to capture, however, the crosscutting philosophical and ideological links among the players in the veterans’ benefits field. Belief in the New Deal mission of aiding American citizens linked many executive representatives and the legislative advocates who had originally pushed landmark New Deal programs through Congress. Meanwhile, conservative Republicans and

134 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “Address to the American Legion Convention, Chicago, Illinois, 1933” accessed January 2015 http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14521. That Roosevelt gave this speech at an American Legion national conference meant that all parts of the national organization heard his sentiment. Because of a tightly controlled hierarchical national structure, the annual national conference oriented and laid out the Legion’s agenda for the rest of the year.

135 Kennedy, Freedom From Fear, 782.

Southern Democrats in Congress were growing more closely aligned in a conservative coalition that wanted to retain power in the states and limit federal influence. Some executive agency leaders, specifically the Veterans Administration Administrator Frank T. Hines, aligned more closely with this conservative view, while administrators of agencies founded during the New Deal tended to be more liberal. Although they desired the money and benefit services the federal government could offer, veteran advocates shared many philosophical beliefs with conservative members of Congress. Overall, a combination of political opportunism and ideological imperatives drove these groups into conflict and created unique policy opportunities in the pursuit of a post-war veterans’ program.

The particularities of the GI Bill, born from a changing conception of the deservedness of veterans, laid the foundation for modern veterans’ care, conditioning military recruitment practices and veteran-related politics throughout the Cold War and into the twenty-first century. The GI Bill allowed a shift in the recruitment rhetoric of the military. Veterans’ benefits evolved being restitutive—preparing the disabled for a return to civilian employment—to opening a path for military service to lead to significantly improved chances in life. The use of joining up to gain benefits like free college education or healthcare coverage changed the basic presumptions of military service. Despite the depth of the radical change to veterans’ political status during the 1940s, the immediate post-war years represent an unparalleled height of veterans’ political recognition. This political distinctiveness combined with the enhanced social standing veterans of the “greatest generation” received at home produced a golden age of veteran status.
The GI Bill and its legislative accompaniments formed the pinnacle of veterans’ political status. The GI Bill was the first veteran program to serve veterans regardless of ability or injury, and to make veteran status itself a sufficient credential for access to a distinct group of benefit-earning citizens—anybody who served at least 90 days and been other than dishonorably discharged had earned the right to federal benefits. In an already expanding economy, the GI Bill pushed millions of World War II veterans into the middle class, turning them into a force for post-war economic growth and evidence of America’s promise of social mobility. The so-called “greatest generation” was born largely from the GI Bill, giving veterans unprecedented political and social status.  

The bill’s lack of any single ideological progenitor or legislative creator is also a source of its renowned place in American legislative history. The bill remains a powerful icon in both Democratic and Republican rhetoric: it is simultaneous one of the crowning achievements of the welfare state and a “hand up” to those who deserve it. It reimagined veteran identity in America, made World War II veterans a shining example of successful federal programming, and launched the nation into a new era of veterans’ relations by establishing a uniquely self-contained benefits system.

The New Deal and Social Security

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In 1943, the New Deal was more than ten years old and, by most accounts, legislatively over.\textsuperscript{140} The Congressional coalition of conservative Southern Democrats and Northern Republicans who shared a distrust of the federal government and a desire to limit its size and spending had chipped away at the New Deal, defunding or outright abolishing many of its core executive agencies.\textsuperscript{141} The Great Depression cast a dense pall of apprehension over all planning for the post-war world. Fear that the Depression would return when government-fueled war industries closed made economic planning a grave issue—any veteran readjustment bill had to aid veterans and prevent a flood of young men into the job market. The New Deal and the fear of a return to depression provided political and financial legitimacy to, in the words of GI Bill historian Kathleen Frydl, the “stunning departure from previous policy” the GI Bill represented.\textsuperscript{142} At the same time, rejecting New Deal values in favor of a more traditional role for the federal government was a potent conviction among conservatives who supported the bill. The amount of spending and bureaucracy the GI Bill created would have been impossible without New Deal programs blazing a path, but, in the end, the bill failed to follow the New Deal-hope of bringing as many people as possible into federal programs. Instead, in accordance with veterans’ organizations’ lobbying, the bill cleaved off the entire population of veterans, endowed them with an unprecedented range of benefits, and pushed the whole package through a single, veteran-specific agency, the VA.

\textsuperscript{140} Brinkley, \textit{The End of Reform}, 3


\textsuperscript{142} Frydl, \textit{The GI Bill}, 2.
Beyond the economic, the New Deal angled toward fostering “social citizenship.”\textsuperscript{143} Roosevelt’s 1941 State of the Union address, in which he proclaimed the “four essential human freedoms,”\textsuperscript{144} pushed this idea of social citizenship to the forefront of his agenda.\textsuperscript{145} Roosevelt was able to place the achievement of freedom of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear in direct opposition to the fascist regimes growing in Europe. In the speech, he outlined goals like expanded unemployment insurance and medical care that would buttress “the inner and abiding strength of our economic and political systems.”\textsuperscript{146} In pursuing benefits for veterans, Roosevelt would attempt to stretch legislation to cover a wider group of citizens, not just those who had served militarily.

The New Deal served as significantly more than a way to pull the United States economy out of the muck of economic crisis. As historian Alan Brinkley argues, the New Deal was a package of social, political, and economic reforms that transcended the immediate needs of the Great Depression:

The search for a way to end the Depression was, of course the most immediate and compelling challenge facing the administration in its first four years. But the desire for economic recovery led New Dealers in many different directions…New Dealers worked as well to create government-sponsored social welfare and social insurance programs.\textsuperscript{147} New Deal programs attempted to rebuild a stagnating American economy as well as reformulate the relationship between the individual and the state. Propelled forward in

\textsuperscript{144} These four freedoms are: freedom of speech and expressions, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear.
\textsuperscript{145} Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “State of the Union, 1941 (Four Freedoms),” The Miller Center, accessed May 16, 2014.
\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{147} Brinkley, \textit{The End of Reform}, 6.
the mid-1930s by an alliance of executive bureaucrats and Congressional liberals, the New Deal produced an array of new laws and a stable of executive agencies, which were often polarizing in their size, activity, and unprecedented projects. By 1944, however, when the GI Bill was brought to Congress, the New Deal as a legislative movement had died, and Congressional defunding of New Deal agencies had sloughed away avenues for executive action. In particular, the discontinuance of appropriations for the National Resources Planning Board in 1943 dealt a significant blow to New Deal-inspired lawmakers. Reading Roosevelt’s New Deal through this lens, as a highly innovative package of reforms that went beyond economic issues, creates a fundamental philosophical tension between the legacy of the New Deal and the goals of veterans’ advocates in Congress and the American Legion. Examining the actions and accomplishments of these clashing ideals reveals the political friction that bristles through veterans’ politics in post-GI Bill America between benefit programs that draw no distinction in eligibility between citizens and programs that bestow benefits only on limited groups.

Undeniably one of the most enduring pieces of New Deal legislation, the Social Security Act of 1935, passed in Roosevelt’s first term, marks in the eyes of many the definitive birth of the American welfare state. The Social Security Act essentially changed American politics as well as the demographic and economic makeup of the nation. Traditionally, among laborers, farmers, miners, and other low-income groups, old age was often been a sentence to destitution. This situation grew more dire during the Depression, when families could no longer support their older

148 Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 141.
members. Social security allowed the elderly, who had worked when younger, to live with dignity and a modicum of comfort. The controversy that proposing social security ignited raised calls of liberalism run amuck and accusations of socialist intrusions into the American principle of individualism, but the framers of social security were deliberate in their planning. The social security system was decidedly not a “handout.” In principle, the elderly who received payments from the system had worked, contributing via taxes to their eventual old-age insurance.

The 1935 act rejected the idea of unearned benefits meted out by a systematic, comprehensive welfare system of benefits. Instead, the “bifurcation” of social security and welfare “was in the original Social Security Act and was deliberately emphasized by the administrators of the act after 1935.” The distinction between social security and welfare, earned benefits and handouts, is part of what has made social security both a sacrosanct legislative act and an assumed American right. The payments that transformed the elderly from a poverty-ridden, politically feeble group into a healthier, politically motivated voting bloc were earned through employment during youth. The Social Security Act achieved an interleaving of individualism and state-sponsored care. Like with the GI Bill, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, still defend the idea of social security and hold it nearly, yet not always, beyond reproach. Like social security, the GI Bill defined a specific group that had, through concerted action, earned federal assistance.

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152 *ibid.*, 340.
Mobilizing for War, Executive Agencies, and the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940

Fearful of repeating the blunders of World War I, wary legislators passed World War II-specific legislation concerning returning veterans before America’s military involvement started. Planning simultaneously for mobilization and demobilization posed a difficult challenge, but the two were inextricably linked as mobilization laid the groundwork for the entire war effort, which would have to include plans for reintegrating veterans into the economy. As preparation for the impending war began to eclipse other areas of national attention, the federal response included a growth of agencies and legislation to support the war effort. The agencies created for the war, however, became another example of new executive agencies become mired in inefficiency and redundancy and incited conservative backlash.153 The United States had been unprepared materially for the demands of World War I and the Bonus March in 1932 had been disastrously embarrassing for the Hoover Administration, prompting calls for preparation in industry and government. Roosevelt’s team wanted to avoid anything resembling the conflict. Two major veterans’ bills—the Selective Service Act of 1940 and Public Law 16 in 1943, a vocational rehabilitation program for the disabled—were passed before the GI Bill. Already, the nation had prepared a more adequate receiving and readjustment system than it had in World War I.

The United States began to mobilize manpower on a significant scale with the initiation of its first-ever peacetime draft in September 1940 via the Selective

153 Brinkley, The End of Reform, 177.
Training and Service Act.\textsuperscript{154} The reinstatement of conscription in 1940 began a thirty-year-long continuous draft that lasted until the end of the draft itself in 1973. The rise of conscription in 1940 influenced the place of veterans’ benefits in the politics of war. When the military relied on volunteers, like during the Revolution, the assurance that injury would be compensated with post-service benefits served to draw recruits into the armed forces. During conscription, however, when recruitment quotas became less important, the political focus of benefits shifted away from compensation or recruitments and towards motivating the conscripted troops and serving as a tool to garner political support from the veterans—as happened during the Civil War. The thirty-three years between the start of World War II and the end of the draft saw revolutionary changes in veterans’ benefits and, with a steady stream of newly separated veterans emerging from the military, intense political maneuvering on behalf of the powerful veterans’ lobby.

World War II forced the Roosevelt Administration to grapple with organizing an unprecedented military buildup and a transition to a war economy focused on producing war materiel. Historian David Kennedy points out that “somewhat paradoxically” the Great Depression served as an advantage in the war effort since it left millions of men out of work and ready to mobilize into either military service or industrial employment.\textsuperscript{155} But although American war manufacturing during World War II would become a legend of industry and job-creation, the initial mobilization effort was a strained slog through isolationist backlash and economic disarray from the Depression. Throughout the early 1940s, the Roosevelt Administration

\textsuperscript{155} Kennedy, \textit{Freedom From Fear}, 617.
established and reorganized federal agencies to direct the national mobilizations of military and industry personnel: the National War Labor Board dealt with labor relations, the War Manpower Commission apportioned workers between military and civilian services, and the War Production Board established the military needs to be met by producers.\textsuperscript{156} Along with addressing manpower distribution, the agencies also had to refurbish the military and produce everything from technologically contemporary guns to uniforms and blankets to new battleships. In a 1939 article for \textit{The American Legion Magazine}, future Legion National Commander Warren G. Atherton, who would become known as “the Father of the GI Bill” for shepherding the bill through the Legion and Congress, argued that insufficient appropriations for the National Defense Act of 1920 had left America sorely underprepared for military service in terms of troops and materiel.\textsuperscript{157} The Legion was a loud voice for military preparedness even before the crises leading up to World War II took shape.

The sudden buildup of agencies in the early 1940s, sometimes compared to the bloom of New Deal agencies in the mid-1930s, meant redundancies and difficult administrative tensions.\textsuperscript{158} Accompanying the bureaucratic buildup was a demand for legislation to support the new needs and problems a nation in transition faced, and part of the legislative effort was establishing a way to make the most use out of every citizen. These concerns prompted a movement towards the coordination of federal agencies under the leadership of Paul McNutt. A World War I veteran, McNutt was a former national commander of the American Legion, a former governor of Indiana,
and a key member of Roosevelt’s New Deal bureaucracy. As head of the Federal Security Agency (FSA), McNutt was responsible for overseeing public health services, which meant that the Civilian Conservation Corps, Office of Education, and Social Security Board all reported to him. The FSA was founded in 1939 as part of reorganization bill that was originally proposed by the Roosevelt Administration in 1937 to organize the unwieldy field of New Deal agencies. Congress refused to pass the reorganization bill until 1939, when Roosevelt had lost legislative momentum and suffered some political missteps. The diluted 1939 version denied the President most of what he desired, but it gave him the National Resource Planning Board (NRPB), the FSA, and a “grant of power to the president to shuffle agencies.” While the bill was helpful for dealing with federal bureaucracy from the executive side, the increasing number of agencies, and the divide between pre-existing and New Deal-inspired agencies, shaped the federal administration of veterans’ benefits after the war.

In his attempts to corral agency directors and organize their efforts, McNutt proposed a plan for central coordination of a wide range of agencies. This plan particularly disgruntled one agency, the Veterans Administration. Unlike many of the younger federal agencies, the VA had already built “a formidable institutional apparatus,” based on state-by-state administration of policy, that the more recent agencies could not match. This state-oriented organizational setup opened the VA to working closely with Congressmen, using its administrative structure to further

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160 Ibid., 558.
161 Frydl, *The GI Bill* 64-65.
162 Ibid., 78.
political goals. The state-based structure of the VA was also responsible for one of the great peculiarities of veterans politics: the simultaneous states’ rights orthodoxy of Congressional conservatives and the American Legion and the same groups’ unshakeable allegiance to the federal VA. In this arrangement, the states maintained the bulk of administrative power while veterans could receive enhanced federal attention that was organizationally separate from federal programs for other groups. Directing as much veteran policy as possible through the VA created political and symbolic separateness between veterans and non-veterans, as veteran organizations and Congressional allies continued to fashion the VA as the sole transmitter of benefits to veterans. For New Dealers, the VA system meant that any legislation that increased benefits for veterans through the VA would actualize as federal money sent to state-level administrators.

As McNutt and other executive administrators were arguing over administrative territory and responsibility, a long-awaited conscription bill worked its way through congress and into law. The Selective Service Act was another way to ease the wartime transition and organize for expected manpower shortages. The bill was the culmination of decades of argument over the burden of military service, national preparedness to respond to war, and a way to plan for returning veterans. In Building an Army, a 1941 volume from the Military Publishing Company, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Johnston justified the push for early planning, citing that “the most critical period…actually precedes the emergency.”163 For members of the military and veterans’ organizations, early planning meant a smoother transition to war with

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more political and logistical support for soldiers’ training and care. Despite the turbulence already shaking Europe in early 1940, the U.S. military had a mere 190,000 members before conscription was reinstated.\(^\text{164}\) The Depression and isolationism had dampened the political and social will to maintain or build a larger, better equipped regular army in the 1930s.\(^\text{165}\)

In order to build the military, which had not yet been formally broken down into the four branches we are familiar with today, the army had to figure out which kind of men to take out of the workforce, what materials to train them with, and how quickly they could effectively be trained. In addition, some of the 190,000 members of the standing regular army had to be retrained alongside their new civilian-soldier peers, relearning drills and procedures they had never been forced to use.\(^\text{166}\) Although some World War I-tested veterans were able to return to the service, many were too old for infantry duty and even the entire two million-strong expeditionary force that had landed in France by the 1919 armistice would have hardly covered the initial needs of the American armed forces in 1940. By the end of World War II, a total of sixteen million men and women had been mobilized to serve in the military effort.

The Selective Service Act of 1940 was actually a revival of the original Selective Service Act of 1917, passed during the mobilization phase of World War I.\(^\text{167}\) Under the 1940 Act, all men ages 21-35 were required to register, after which local draft boards would decide which potential draftees were best suited to military


\(^{166}\) Cohen, *Citizens and Soldiers*, 80.

service.\textsuperscript{168} As the war progressed, reasons for deferment decreased and the range of ages of potential inductees expanded.\textsuperscript{169} For many, the presence of a draft served as an inducement to serve, in which case they could exert slightly more influence over their future military career path. The selective service system was effective at filling empty posts, but “contradicted and rejected utterly a virtue that men generally, and military men above all, [held] precious, namely voluntarism.”\textsuperscript{170} Voluntarism, however, was not practicable in modern wars that required both military and industrial mobilization to meet the increasingly technological conduct of fighting. Major General Enoch Crowder, the architect of World War I selective service and author a definitive history on the system up to 1917, argued that “volunteering does not work for an industrial war…[since] it envisioned war as a struggle of arms, not as a struggle of whole nations.”\textsuperscript{171} In the era of large-scale, industrial wars that World War I started, new approaches to manpower allocation were necessary.

Section 5A of the National Defense Act of 1920 separated responsibility for peacetime planning for wartime industries, putting it under the Assistant Secretary of War, and plans for military manpower mobilization, which went to the Army General Staff.\textsuperscript{172} In the early 1920s, in a nation recently escaped from war, the task of planning for unknowable future conflict was unpopular. The American Legion, newly formed and raring to elevate the profile of military service, became a surprising ally to the peacetime war-planning project. In the early 1920s the Legion was still fighting

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\item \textsuperscript{168} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{169} Kennedy, \textit{Freedom From Fear}, 634.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Cohen, \textit{Citizens and Soldiers} 83.
\item \textsuperscript{171} Crowder, quoted in Cohen, 83.
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battles over bonus pay for World War I soldiers, but throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Legion fought for a policy of universal conscription for military service to remedy that inequality. The Legion spent “from 1921 until 1931 [focusing] its attention on securing a legislative guarantee of equality of sacrifice in future wars by means of a universal draft.”  

The Selective Service Act of 1940 was informed by more than a decade’s worth of argumentation over not only universal military conscription, but also the ability to conscript industrial capital and labor during wartime. The moderate acceptance of the role of the government in assigning people to military service was not extended to managing labor distribution in industry. For years after World War I, lawmakers struggled to develop plans for mobilization that coped with the new reality of industrial wars while maintaining the liberty of business and labor. Aggressively anti-Bolshevik and hostile to labor, the Legion developed severe antagonisms with the AFL and, upon its founding in the 1935, the CIO, during the vociferant debates on industrial conscription. Despite its growing political influence, the Legion was not strong enough to push through the controversial idea of the “conscription of all capital and labor in time of war.”  

The Legion’s contradictory stances of anti-unionism, states’ rights, and federal control of capital during war illuminate the case-by-case basis for Legion stances. Throughout its existence, the Legion has maintained partisan flexibility, siding with either party, despite its deep-running conservatism. While after 1940 military service was again under the purview of government coordination, industrial production was reliant on the “struggle of whole nations”  

173 Ibid., 381.  
174 Ibid.
ethos of communal effort that was inspiring victory gardens and aluminum rationing, bond buying, and voluntary enlistment.

The Selective Service Act, which had roots in World War I and was so influenced by inter-war debates on labor and military service, was also the first piece of post-war planning for World War II veterans. In attempts to ward off another mass of unemployed, underpaid veterans after the growing, although not yet blooming, conflict, Congress wrote provisions for post-war veteran employment into the conscription bill itself. Even after the Bonus Army had receded, the growing trope of a homeless World War I veteran selling apples on a street corner became a calamitous symbol for the government and a rallying point for veterans’ groups. Section 8 of the Selective Service Act provided reemployment rights to returning veterans that ensured any “qualifying veterans” could return to the job they had held before serving in the military. Senator Elbert Thomas, a Democrat from Utah and a longtime New Deal supporter, was responsible for the section. The bill’s intention was to ease military personnel into civilian life by providing them with their pre-service job and, importantly, no lack of seniority because of their time away. While Section 8 of the Selective Service Act did allow many veterans to reclaim previous jobs, it was also a controversial measure that had implications for employers, unions, and private pension and healthcare policies.

Folding post-war employment plans into the conscription bill was, seemingly, a hasty move by a Congress “under pressure for legislation [that] apparently paid

176 Ross, Waiting for Ulysses, 36.
minimal attention to the mechanics of reemployment rights.\textsuperscript{177} In his 1946 book *The Veterans’ Program*, an instructional guide for veterans on how to deal with the many new laws governing their return to civilian life, Charles Hurd, the veterans’ intelligence editor at *The New York Times*, opined on the “many volumes printed and thousands of papers delivered in an effort to solve the meaning of the reemployment provision of the Selective Service Act.”\textsuperscript{178} The multifarious exceptions and allocations in the law for business that had shrunk, changed, moved, or closed complicated the fairly straightforward goal, and the stipulation that time in the service should count as a leave of absence further complicated matters of pensioning and seniority. That veteran planning, even something as clumsy as Section 8 of the Selective Service Act, started before hostilities were fully declared showed the lessons many had learned from the World War I experience. Pre-war planning, which started as early as 1920 with the National Defense Act, also set up some of the political antagonisms that would define the GI Bill’s path. Perhaps most notably, however, Section 8 gave disabled and able veterans the same rights to reemployment, foreshadowing the united veteran identity the GI Bill promoted.

**Preparing for Veterans, Vocational Rehabilitation and Public Law 16**

The year 1943 brought the manpower challenges the nation had been preparing for since World War I. The military and industry were soaking up the last of the traditional male labor force and the nation began to face a manpower shortage, prompting Congress and Roosevelt to mobilize the last untapped worker population:

\textsuperscript{177} Tandle, “Military Service and Private Pension Plan Benefits,” 172.

If disabled workers could be taught to work in war industries, more able-bodied men would be available for military service. Even disabled veterans could continue contributing to the war effort by holding production jobs after they returned and retrained at the home front. The increasing tempo of war production was also causing debilitating injuries across the nation, with one 1944 magazine issue reporting that 350,000 civilian workers were injured in the first two years of World War II. Additionally, federally sponsored rehabilitation was a goal that fit into Roosevelt’s broader social platform. McNutt; Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor; Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior; and other New Deal stalwarts saw a vocational rehabilitation program as an opportunity to expand the scope of federal benefits to a broad group of citizens. The need for a rehabilitation program meant stronger political cover for the social and political goals of the executive representatives.

In the end, Roosevelt’s team was not able to pass the bill they wanted, and veteran rehabilitation arrived in the form of the competing Rankin-Clark bill, generally referred to as Public Law 16. Originally conceived of within the Roosevelt Administration as part of a larger joint civilian-veteran rehabilitation bill, vocational rehabilitation was forced to take shape as a veteran-specific law covering only the disabled. Because of this, Public Law 16 cleaved to the tradition of enumerating a support system specifically for disabled veterans. Public Law 16 provides an interesting analytical mid-point between previous veterans programs, like the general laws system after the Civil War and the War Risk Insurance Act of 1917, and the GI Bill system established a year later in 1944. Unlike nineteenth century plans, the 1943

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179 Ross, Waiting for Ulysses, 39.
180 Commonwealth magazine, quoted in Frydl, The GI Bill, 1 81.
law did not provide pensions to the disabled in lieu of lost potential wages. Instead, the law called on a World War I-era idea of vocational rehabilitation that would retrain disabled veterans for industries where they could effectively maintain a wage-paying job.\textsuperscript{181}

The predecessor to Public Law 16, the Sears-Smith Act of 1918, provided veterans with rehabilitative training for “a return to civilian employment.”\textsuperscript{182} This act was followed with the 1920 Smith-Fess Vocational Rehabilitation Act that extended similar training to civilians.\textsuperscript{183} In contemporary analyses, both bills have been faulted for their pathologization of disability and disregard for the mentally handicapped, as the notion of restoring a citizen to health by making them able to work, or curing the negative outcome of their disability, discounted mental illness or handicap as incurable. At the time, they were imaginative approaches to giving the disabled livelihoods and decreasing the need for local and state care. The 1918 and 1920 laws provided the foundation for a similar pair of 1943 laws. One of the 1943 laws became Public Law 16, which also covered only veterans. The other 1943 law had jurisdiction over injured civilians. Unlike the original World War I legislation, however, the 1943 laws were originally conceived of as a united bill that would cover civilians and veterans.

Tethering civilian rehabilitation to a veteran readjustment bill was a highly deliberate strategy for Roosevelt, McNutt, and the federal administrators. With

\textsuperscript{181} Veterans Administration, \textit{Annual Report of the Administrator of Veterans’ Affairs} (Washington, DC: GPO, 1941), 18.
\textsuperscript{183} Drimmer, “Cripples, Overcomers, and Civil Rights,” 1364
combined legislation, the benefits of the bill would be administered under a single agency, and “the president knew the importance of unifying the service under one agency—if veterans remained separate, the social policy components of rehabilitation would lose out to the more traditional care provided disabled veterans.”\(^{184}\) To accomplish this, the Roosevelt Administration had to find Congressional allies who were aligned with federal agencies other than the VA. McNutt, whose administrative scope had expanded to include the Selective Service System in 1942 and the War Manpower Commission, was set to find a bureaucratic home for the bill. He failed to give Roosevelt a strong plan.\(^ {185}\) Meanwhile, American Legion allies in Congress, hearing about the brewing rehabilitation bill, were developing an exclusively veteran bill, administered through the VA of course, that would be impossible for Roosevelt to veto if it was sent to him before the joint veteran-civilian bill.

The Administration’s bill, written by representatives from the FSA and the Bureau of the Budget, would have housed the program in an expanded United States Office of Education (USOE).\(^ {186}\) Congressman Graham Barden from North Carolina and Senator Robert M. La Follette, Jr. from Wisconsin, both associated with education legislation, brought the bill to Congress. To amplify his earnest support, Roosevelt sent a special message to Congress requesting a joint bill.\(^ {187}\) That Roosevelt made a specific request to have civilians and veterans covered under the same bill typifies the New Deal notion of extending coverage to as many people as possible. The request also clearly rejected the traditional segregation of veteran and

\(^{184}\) Ibid., 87.
\(^{185}\) Ibid., 85.
\(^{186}\) Ibid., 87.
civilian legislation, a convention that had grown in authority since veterans’ groups rise in social and political prominence in the 1920s. With a combined civilian-veteran bill, Roosevelt and the administrators of executive agencies would be able to achieve several goals: increase the pool of available workers and military recruits, limit duplication of bureaucratic efforts, and extend federal benefits to several distinct groups in one New Deal-style act.

Executive hopes for the Barden-La Follette bill were disappointed, however, because “the ink had hardly dried on the printed document when the veterans’ lobby deleted the provisions for the war disabled.” With Congressional conservatives wanting to keep such a high profile bill out of New Deal agencies and the American Legion’s support for a VA-only plan, backlash against the Barden-La Follette bill was strong. Congressman John Rankin, chairman of the World War Veterans Committee in the House and a primary player in GI Bill negotiations, introduced his own veteran-only rehabilitation bill. Senator Bennett Champ Clark, a founder of the American Legion, brought a similar bill to the Senate, supporting “special treatment” for veterans. Frank Hines, the long-time director of the VA, who was generally non-political and preferred to implement what policies were given to him, broke character and aligned himself with the Legion-backed bill. Hines’ support, which was made more impressive by his leadership of the older VA, helped

188 While a joint veteran-civilian bill would reduce redundancy, the potential for fighting amongst the agencies for influence and responsibility under a comprehensive bill was daunting.
189 The bill that the administration proposed in the end of negotiations between McNutt’s FSA and agency leaders from the Office of Education and others was less rigid in its insistence on a single agency than the original.
190 Farrell, The Story of Blindness, 168.
191 Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 49.
192 Ibid., 91.
push the Rankin-Clark bill through Congress and onto Roosevelt’s desk before the Barden-La Follette alternative could arrive.

With no choice but to sign what was in front of him, Roosevelt signed the Rankin-Clark bill into Public Law 16. Although Public Law 16 would be eclipsed by the far more inclusive GI Bill a year later, the law’s strict divisions between civilians and veterans further cemented the dichotomy into federal veterans relations. The VA’s bureaucratic isolation and state-centered approach also meant that other federal agencies were frozen out of administering the bill, depriving them the chance to build their own administrative networks. Because of its previously developed nationwide system, the VA’s implementation of Public Law 16 was noticeably convenient and successful, and it became an influential precondition of the GI Bill debate.¹⁹³

**Roosevelt and the Executive Branch Plan for the Veterans’ Return**

As World War II escalated, Washington, D.C. opened up to international policy issues, an arena that had been minimized significantly Roosevelt’s presidency previously. The change inspired Roosevelt’s famous shift from “Dr. New Deal” to “Dr. Win-the-War,” exemplified in a December 1943 press conference in which he told reporters, “the remedies that the old Dr. New Deal used were for internal troubles...the overwhelming first emphasis should be on winning the war. In other words, we are suffering from the bad accident, not from an internal disease.”¹⁹⁴ Throughout 1943, Roosevelt fought to keep the nation’s attention on the war.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Frydl, *The GI Bill*, 95.
¹⁹⁵ Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, 783.
During his 25th “fireside chat” on July 28, 1943, the President cautioned those at home against growing “complacent or indifferent,” emphasizing “the all-important thing now is to get on with the war—and to win it.”\(^\text{196}\) The one area for which he was willing to contemplate the post-war experience was veteran care. Conscription continued to pull men into service, and Roosevelt wanting to reassure the country that the soldiers would not face the fate of veterans of the previous war, pledged,

> While concentrating on military victory, we are not neglecting the planning of the 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…I have assured our men in the armed forces that the American people would not let them down when the war is won.\(^\text{197}\)

In order to plan for the return of the gallant men and women, Roosevelt called on his network of executive agencies to develop a strategy for reintegrating millions of service members into a drastically changed country. Roosevelt wanted to take control of post-war planning to carrying out the promise he made in 1933 to the American Legion: that veterans deserve care, but so do other citizens and so the two groups should both receive federal assistance. In 1941, before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt approached the National Resource Planning Board (NRPB) about planning for a post-war demobilization and readjustment program. Roosevelt was strict, however, in deciding “this is no time for a public interest or discussion of post-war problems.”\(^\text{198}\) Frederic Delano, Roosevelt’s uncle, ran the NRPB, which was a locus of anti-New Deal ire, and oversaw the post-war planning process. In July 1942,

\(^{197}\) Ibid.
\(^{198}\) Roosevelt to Delano, quoted in Ross, *Preparing for Ulysses*, 53.
a few months before the NRPB released a series of long post-war planning reports, Roosevelt and Delano set up the Conference on Post-War Readjustments of Civilian and Military Personnel, usually called the Post-War Manpower Conference (PMC). In the same year, during the signing of the 1942 Selective Service Act (which lowered the draft age to 18), Roosevelt created the Armed Forces Committee on Postwar Educational Opportunities for Service Personnel.\textsuperscript{199} Housed in the War Department, the committee was generally called the Osborn Committee, after its chairman Brigadier General Frederick Osborn. The two committees, charged with the same general goal of planning for American lives in a post-war world, were decidedly different.

The PMC was administered under the NRPB and to conservative factions in Congress reeked of New Deal sentiment. The Osborn Committee, meanwhile, was a committee within a military administrative niche working towards a plan for military personnel and was thus more protected from Congressional backlash.\textsuperscript{200} The full names of each committee reveal the gap between their premises despite the overlap in their goals and outcomes. The PMC sought to find solutions for “Civilian and Military Personnel” while the Osborn Committee worked for the futures of “Service Personnel,” giving definitively different hues to each group’s work. Despite their different homes, the committees responded to Roosevelt—the PMC in November 1942 and the Osborn Committee in June 1943. The two groups had been able to collaborate on education policy, as that was the scope of the Osborn Committee’s

\textsuperscript{200} Ross, \textit{Preparing for Ulysses}, 92.
work, and offered similar suggestions.\(^{201}\) Both groups recommended benefits that were far more generous than veterans’ legislation had ever been, including endorsements for one year of education for each demobilizing service member, with a possibility to extend the period for the “extraordinarily able.”\(^{202}\) Indeed, the proposal was outstandingly generous compared to most federal programs. The PMC report relied on several executive agencies including the Bureau of the Budget, USOE, United States Employment Service (USES) and the VA.\(^{203}\) As David Ross, scholar of the GI Bill, wrote, the proposal also fit into “Roosevelt’s own resistance to treating veterans as a separate class of citizens.”\(^{204}\) The plans achieved this by casting the program as an additional reemployment measure for demobilizing forces to offset the assumed post-war reduction in industrial production. By couching the reports in economics, the PMC and Osborn plans could serve as an “entering wedge”\(^{205}\) for expanding federal education subsidies.

In December 1942, a month after the PMC report came out, the NRPB released the first of its post-war planning reports. Called Post-War Plan and Program, the report “fit well with Roosevelt’s long-held views toward veterans as ordinary citizens” because it addressed veterans generally through references to the need for full employment.\(^{206}\) Three months after that, the NRPB’s largest report came out: Security, Work, and Relief Policies. Generally ignored during policy debates,\(^{207}\)

\(^{201}\) Altschuler and Blumin, The GI Bill, 43.  
\(^{202}\) Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 61.  
\(^{203}\) Ibid., 62.  
\(^{204}\) Altschuler and Blumin, The GI Bill, 44.  
\(^{205}\) Samuel Rosenmen, quoted in Altschuler and Blumin 44. He wrote a memoir Working With Roosevelt about his time as a speechwriter and special councilor to Roosevelt.  
\(^{206}\) Altschuler and Blumin, The GI Bill, 41.  
the report became known as the “American Beveridge Report,” in reference to the newly proposed cradle-to-grave government welfare plan proposed in England by Lord William Beveridge. The report pushed Congressional conservatives to action, including Congressman Rankin who was a member of “a wrecking team in Congress that hoped to demolish the remaining vestiges of the New Deal.” That summer the coalition defunded the entire NRPB in a pushback against one of the prime examples of a New Deal agency. The years 1942 and 1943 also saw the demise of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration, and the National Youth Administration.

After Congress refused to approve appropriations for the NRPB, Roosevelt lost a powerful bureaucratic tool as well as legitimate use of the PMC planning report—using recommendations from a defunct agency would add little support to an argument and citing the NRPB only reigned outrage. Not to be deterred by Congressional backlash, however, the Administration was able to salvage a research-backed proposal for a bill from the Osborn Committee’s report and remnants of the PMC. Citing recommendations from the still-respected Osborn Committee, Senator Robert Wagner, a Democrat from New York and a longtime and vocal proponent of the New Deal, led the introduction of the Wagner-Murray-Dingell Bill into the Senate on June 3, 1943. Although the bill diverged from the NRPB reports, it contained similarly hopeful provisions for social welfare programs like federalizing unemployment insurance and creating disability insurance and even health insurance

209 Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 43.
210 Frydl, The GI Bill, 68.
211 Ibid., 107.
The Wagner-Murray-Dingell Bill, while popular with organized labor, farmers groups, women’s groups and welfare proponents, failed to make headway in the Senate.\textsuperscript{213}

Although never formally endorsed by Roosevelt, the Wagner-Murray-Dingell Bill progressed several of the Administration’s goals concerning social welfare and “entitlement anchored in citizenship.”\textsuperscript{214} As part of its ambitious agenda, the Wagner-Murray-Dingell Act contained some provisions for veterans, including a credit towards social security (i.e. old-age insurance) for the time they had served.

Following the Osborn and PMC precedent, benefits in the bill were split among executive agencies, giving federal control of unemployment insurance to the USES and running education programs through the USOE.\textsuperscript{215} The Senator’s attempt at comprehensive post-war social security legislation never left committee, but the Administration and its Congressional supporters were able to tease out individual issues to resubmit as freestanding bills. Among the proposals that rose out of the ashes of the Wagner-Murray-Dingell dream was an education bill from Senator Elbert Thomas, who had been responsible for Section 8 of the Selective Service Act.

The Thomas education bill instigated an inter-agency, inter-branch, intra-party tangle of proposals and rejections. The most daunting controversy facing the bill was the question of which executive agency would administer it. Although the Administration was pulled toward the USOE, as it had been for Public Law 16, and a

\textsuperscript{212} Edwin Witte, “1944-1945 Programs for Postwar Social Security and Medical Care,” \textit{The Review of Economics and Statistics} 27, no. 4 (1945), 172.

\textsuperscript{213} Witte, 172. In 1939, Wagner unsuccessfully introduced a national health insurance plan that failed largely due to opposition from the American Medical Associations, Frydl, \textit{The GI Bill}, 107.

\textsuperscript{214} Frydl, \textit{The GI Bill}, 107.

\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., 108.
wide range of education groups testified their support for the New Deal agency, writing that into the bill would have been to “wave a fed flag before an easily enraged bull.”

Hines, who chaired a committee set up to comb through the complexities of the emerging bill, made a convincing case for the VA. As several other veterans’ services had already been placed there over other agencies, it would make the process easier for veterans trying to take advantage of the bill to only go through one agency. As interest groups, veterans, educators, executive bureaucrats, and legislators added to the confusion, it seemed “as if the story of vocational rehabilitation legislation would be repeated.”

While mainstays of New Deal legislation Senators Wagner and Thomas tried to push legislation through the Senate, the House saw arguments over a mustering-out pay bill. The controversy in the House, which pitted a mustering-out bill against a World War I-style bonus bill, led to a brief alliance between American Legion representatives, who wanted more than a bonus, and New Deal-supporting Congressmen. The alliance proved strong enough to overcome support from the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Disabled American Veterans and the mustering-out bill was passed in February 1944. Despite that progress, the winter of 1943–1944 saw two controversies that exposed the antagonistic legislative-executive relationship and further split the Democratic Party.

The first, the “soldier vote” issue, brought states rights into the foreground and with that increased the tensions between New Deal Democrats who believed in

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216 Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 95.
217 Ibid., 97.
federal power and Southern Democrats, who were anxious to protect states’ rights.\textsuperscript{219} Congressman Rankin, a democrat from Mississippi, opposed a measure to create a federal ballot for soldiers overseas to use in the 1944 elections.\textsuperscript{220} Rankin was a well-known anti-New Deal segregationist who wanted to keep the power over soldiers’ votes in the states. Though the Senate voted down the bill in December 1943 and soothed Rankin and other states rights advocates, the controversy further raised the hackles of all involved. A couple of months later, in February 1944, a tax bill passed the House and Senate only to receive a presidential veto. In response to the veto, the Senate majority leader, a Democrat, resigned in protest (only to be immediately re-elected to the post).\textsuperscript{221} The House overrode the veto 299 to 95 and the Senate by 72 to 14, making it the ninth time in Roosevelt’s presidency that his veto was overridden.\textsuperscript{222} These legislative tussles, while not influential in terms of veteran policy, set a tense tone for all veteran-related negotiations.

**Creating the GI Bill**

As the Roosevelt Administration and Congress were arguing through the dozens of veteran bills that came to the markedly conservative 78th Congress, the American Legion began to work on its own veteran readjustment and future care bill. In November 1943, Warren Atherton, elected National Commander of the American Legion for the 1943–1944 term, put together a Legion committee led by former

\textsuperscript{220} Ross, *Preparing for Ulysses*, 90.
\textsuperscript{221} *Ibid.*, 91.
\textsuperscript{222} *Ibid.*, 74.
Governor of Illinois John Stelle, a Democrat, to develop their own post-war plan.\footnote{Ibid., 99.} That month, in *The American Legion Magazine*, Atherton published a one-page article about maintaining the war effort—“every pound of material, every ounce of strength, every heartbeat in our bodies”—and planning for the men coming home. He mandated that veterans “must have their chance for education, for training, for jobs, for independence, for homes, and for useful contribution to the nation.”\footnote{Warren Atherton, “United…Unconquerable,” *The American Legion Magazine* 35, no. 5 (November 1943), 7.}

The power that the Legion brought to post-war planning for veterans was imbued with more than political or even philosophical imperatives. Comprised of World War I veterans, the American Legion wanted to prevent what had happened to their cohort a decade before from happening again. The twenty-year gap between the military mobilizations of the two World Wars was, until that point, a novel experience for the nation. By World War II, World War I veterans were reaching the peaks of their power, having had enough time to reach places of prominence in government and business.\footnote{Altshuler and Blumin, *The GI Bill*, 37.} The social, political, and cultural power the veterans’ organizations amassed in the interwar years underscored the Legionnaires in the battle over how to conceptualize and implement an innovative veterans’ policy. No other major wars were fought by the United States in such close proximity and “veterans’ policy had never before been subjected to so strong an influence from the veterans of a previous war.”\footnote{Ibid.} During the early 1940s, veterans’ organizations, already large, became a social constant, with American Legion posts in “every city, town, village, and whistle-stop in the country.” By 1945, the Legion had 30,000

\footnote{\textit{Note here.}}
service officers.\textsuperscript{227} Legion and other organization posts offered community programming, assistance to local veterans and their families, and often served as gathering places for social events.

Trying to capitalize on the Legion’s significant power, Stelle and the committee prepared for a policymaking sprint. Starting in late November, the Legionnaires put together a single omnibus bill that would exclusively cover veterans and provide all readjustment aids and benefits they thought veterans required and had earned the right to collect. The Legion’s single-minded pursuit of veterans’ benefits once again transcended political or partisan affiliation. The committee members lifted large portions of their policy recommendations from the Post-War Manpower Conference (PMC) and Osborn reports that had informed the original Wagner-Murray-Dingell bill, and “nothing in [the Legion version]—with the exception of the loan feature—departed from ideas and plans already formulated by the Roosevelt Administration.”\textsuperscript{228} But ideas and plans are different from hard policy or laws. The Legion extrapolated from the Administration’s plans, making them more generous and inclusive of all veterans. The Legion plan, true to tradition, made greater use of the VA, streaming all administration through the single agency. The Legion greatly expanded the scope of the bill, especially the education section. All of the previous bills from the Roosevelt Administration had required at least one year of service to qualify for the single allotted year of subsidized education. The Legion lowered the service requirement to merely 90 days, increased the baseline amount of time in

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\textsuperscript{228} Ross, \textit{Preparing for Ulysses}, 102.
\end{flushright}
school, and offered up to four years of education. Finally, the Legion gave the lowest possible barrier to make veterans eligible for the range of benefits offered in the plans six titles, requiring only an other-than-dishonorable discharge.

On January 8, 1944, the Legion’s bill was introduced into the Senate by Bennett Clark and the House by John Rankin, the two legislators responsible for Public Law 16. The bill’s six—soon to become five with the passage of the mustering-out pay bill—titles included: hospitalization and healthcare, education and training, home and farm loans, employment assistance, and unemployment compensation. Also at this time, the Legion and the VFW came together in a several-pronged campaign to pass House Resolution 29, which would ensure that the GI Bill would go through Rankin’s friendly World War Veterans’ Legislation Committee in the House. The campaign included letter writing, strong-arming other Congressional contacts, and using local connections to galvanize constituents.

The Legion wrote and submitted the bill with haste, wanting to get the omnibus measure through before any recovered fragments of the Wagner-Murray-Dingell Act could pass and derail the bulky bill. The Legion’s haste meant that other veterans’ organization were cut out of the writing and legislative process. The backlash against the Legion was fierce. The VFW, DAV, Military Order of the Purple Circle, and the American Legion effectively fought for its own version of the GI Bill.

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229 Mettler, Soldiers to Citizens, 21.
231 While the House had the World War Veterans’ Legislation Committee, chaired by Rankin, the Senate did not have a dedicated committee for passing veteran legislation. Instead, the bill was brought to the Finance Committee’s Subcommittee on World War Veterans’ Legislation, which Clark chaired. Veterans’ bills brought to the Senate could end up in a wide array of committee depending on what services the bill provided.
232 Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 75-76.
Heart, and the Regular Veterans Association jointly signed a letter of protest.\textsuperscript{233} Addressed to Clark and Rankin, the February 16 letter warned, “everything that glitters is not necessarily gold!”\textsuperscript{234} The letter presented two major issues with the bill. First, that the education provision is “so broad in scope and potential cost” that it would prevent future legislation for veterans or “provoke another Economy Act.” Second, the groups rejected the inclusive nature of the bill, wanting to limit its scope to the disabled only, citing the nation’s “first responsibility…to those who have suffered physical and/or mental handicap by reason of military or naval service.”\textsuperscript{235}

Of all the innovative policies encapsulated in the GI Bill, the idea to extend such generous benefits to all veterans, able and disabled, was without doubt the largest leap. The Legion’s bill combined decidedly New Deal programs and traditional veterans-first policymaking with its own innovations to create the most generous, wide reaching veterans’ benefits bill in American history.

**Passing the GI Bill**

The newly minted GI Bill of Rights passed through the Senate with relatively few disputes. Senator Clark’s subcommittee on Veterans’ Legislation expanded the education title substantially but kept everything within VA control as the Legion wished. Struggles over Thomas’s education bill that gave authority to the Office of Education and a bill from Senator Wagner that housed veterans’ unemployment assistant in the USES required the bill to be rewritten and submitted again but the

\textsuperscript{233} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{234} Letter to Senator Clark, reproduced in Altschuler and Blumin, *The GI Bill*, 64.
\textsuperscript{235} ibid.
disputes were short lived and the bill passed. The major change made in the Senate concerned Title II, the education title, and came from Senator Ernest McFarland, a World War I veteran, a progressive Democrat, and an American Legion member. McFarland, arguing that the education provisions were too restrictive, introduced an amendment to the bill that would give “virtually all returning veterans” access to free education. The amendment, which the Legion endorsed, was adopted and made McFarland one of the many with the title “Father of the GI Bill.”

The bill’s journey through the House was a very different one. Rankin introduced the bill to his World War Veterans’ Legislation Committee at the same time as several other veterans’ legislation bills were coming to the fore. Congressman Barden, who had brought the Administration’s vocational rehabilitation bill to the House in 1943, chaired the Education Committee and was shepherding an alternate education bill. The Barden alternative to Title II of the Legion bill was, ironically, differentiated on the grounds of states’ rights. Instead of administering education benefits and approvals of educational institutions through the VA, which was itself decentralized, Barden’s bill kept control in state-level education agencies. The Barden bill also limited Title II to veterans who could prove that their service had “interrupted” their schooling.

The Barden bill appealed to and angered several groups. In championing state agencies, the bill drew in states’ rights legislators. The bill was also attractive to

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236 Frydl, The G.I. Bill, 126.
237 Altschuler and Blumin, The GI Bill, 68.
educators because it removed a stipulation the Senate had put into the Legion bill that the VA administrator had approval and veto power over which educational institutions the agency recognized as valid.\textsuperscript{240} Although the bill upset the DAV and disabled veterans’ supporters because it maintained a blanket approach to veterans that disregarded disability, the Barden bill also fulfilled the popular idea that wounded or not, veterans deserve the best services.\textsuperscript{241} Congressman Rankin also had issues with the bill. A ferocious racist, Rankin feared that any federal control in the education provision would interfere with segregationist Southern states’ powers.\textsuperscript{242} Eventually, out of fear that the Barden bill would erode too much support from his Legion proposal and that other changes would be integrated into his bill, Rankin introduced a new amendment to the original Legion bill that used many of the changes laid out in the Barden Bill but kept control in the VA.\textsuperscript{243} Rankin also cut unemployment payments from 52 to 26 weeks. The House also argued over the Legion bill’s employment and loan provisions. In the end, however, a version fairly close to the Legion original passed.

The final hurdle the GI Bill had to get past was the conference committee that would work out the differences between the bills produced by the Senate and the House. An ever-present force in veterans’ legislation, Congressman Rankin sat on the conference committee. While Title II had been the biggest sticking point for the bill in the House, Rankin now exerted his force to maintain his changes to Title V, which dealt with unemployment readjustment allowances. Although Title V had inspired

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{240} Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 113.
  \item \textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 114.
  \item \textsuperscript{242} Mettler, “The Creation of the G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944,” 366.
\end{itemize}
debate in the House, Rankin’s treatment of it in the conference committee forced the
Legion to use the full extent of its power to get the bill through intact. Rankin’s
dislike of Title V stemmed from his desire for the preservation of the segregationist
practices of the Southern states. In the Senate bill, Title V provided 52 weeks of
unemployment insurance to all veterans. Rankin claimed that, “we have 50,000
Negroes in the service from our State, and in my opinion, if the bill should pass in its
present form, a vast majority of them would remain unemployed for at least a
year.”

In reality, Rankin wanted to preserve the supply of low-wage black labor
available in the South. Rankin wanted to preserve his cut of unemployment benefits,
return the veteran employment placement service to the VA and, not to leave any
loose ends, return the USES to state control.

The conference committee reached a standstill. A majority of the seven
representatives from the House had to vote for a bill for it to be agreeable, and the
House delegates were at am impasse. Representative John Gibson from Georgia had
travelled home and given Rankin control over his vote. Two days later, Gibson
telegrammed Rankin to inform him that he preferred the Senate unemployment
benefits and that if it came to a vote, Rankin should cast Gibson’s for the Senate
version. Refusing to do so, Rankin held up the House committee, which was at a
three-three gridlock on the issue. The Legion, afraid that its bill would die so close to
the finish line, called on all of its contact along the Eastern seaboard to find Gibson
and get him to Washington before the 10 am vote a few days later. Granted priority

244 Rankin, quoted in Mettler, “The Creation of the G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944,” 366.
245 Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 111. The Senate had adopted Wagner’s proposal to put the
employment placement services in the USES, with some modifications to allow for more VA
involvement.
246 Altschuler and Blumin, The GI Bill, 70.
on the telephone lines during wartime, the Hearst newspaper network, a longtime ally of the Legion, was able to contact Gibson’s usual haunts as well as several local Georgia radio stations, each of which broadcast a call for Gibson every fifteen minutes. After finding him, the Legion sent him a driver to bring him at racing speed, through a storm, to Jacksonville, Florida, to secure the nearest flight in the region to Washington. Arriving just before seven am the morning of the vote, Gibson was brought to the committee and broke the stalemate. Rankin and the other two holdouts made the vote unanimous. With that, the G.I. Bill was passed.

After the GI Bill

With the GI Bill came a significant expansion of the American welfare state. The novel territory the legislation tread led to expanding administrative dockets for the federal and state-level governments. The new law encountered some initial issues, with relatively few veterans making use of the GI Bill in 1945 and 1946. In response Congress amended some of the bureaucratic procedures and increased awareness campaigns. Eventually, the GI Bill was widely utilized. Half of all World War II veterans, 7.8 million people, made use of the education and training benefits in the bill. Within ten years of the war’s end, 2.2 million veterans had attended college and 5.6 million took advantage of training and vocational programs. Further, 4.3 million veterans bought homes with low interest rates. Despite these successes, critiques of the GI Bill emerged both at the time and in retrospect. Issues of bureaucratic nuisance and lack of awareness have given way to more scholarly analyses of the bill’s

247 Frydl, The G.I. Bill, 143.
248 Altschuler and Blumin, The GI Bill, 71.
249 Mettler, Soldiers to Citizens, 6–7.
implementation and effectiveness. Many modern assessments of the bill confront the struggles beneficiaries and policymakers faced, and class, race, disability, and sexuality have all served as bases for critique. These post hoc appraisals of the bill reveal deliberate, institutionalized bias as well as unintended problems.

Although the GI Bill demolished boundaries that had long divided the veteran community, it gave rise to new methods of demarcation. Racialized implementation of the bill and availability of benefits has been the most consistent critique of the GI Bill. The bill’s stipulation for state-controlled unemployment and housing benefits as well as the exclusive use of the highly decentralized VA had grave implications in Southern states, especially in the Deep South. Rankin’s chairmanship of the House and conference committees contributed to this states-centric implementation plan. States in the Deep South were motivated both by entrenched racial ideas and the desire to maintain the cheap black labor supply they had enjoyed before the war. Although manpower shortages during the war had forced industry to hire blacks in non-menial jobs, the return of white veterans pushed blacks back into unskilled labor positions. Frequently, in cases where black veterans refused to take jobs with below-subsistence wages, local VA offices refused the unemployment payments to which they were entitled. The VA’s refusal to grant black veterans home loans precluded the rise of a home-owning black middle class like the GI Bill had created for white

252 Ibid., 105.
The effects of state-by-state implementation were demonstrated by Sarah Turner and John Bound, who showed that although the GI Bill had a “substantial and positive impact on the educational attainment of white men and black men born outside the South,” southern black veterans benefited little from the education provisions of the GI Bill.\textsuperscript{254}

Unable to access unemployment or loan assistance through the VA, black veterans were also barred from using the Legion as a point of advocacy. Despite the substantial number of black soldiers, especially from the South, “from the beginning, the Legion did not know what to do with black veterans.”\textsuperscript{255} In keeping with its general politics, the Legion chose a states’ rights approach and allowed each state office to choose whether or not to allow black veterans into state and local posts. Some states chose “separate but equal” approaches but the black posts, unsurprisingly, lacked power in the national organization.\textsuperscript{256} In response, the NAACP set up a “Veterans Affairs Department” to advise and advocate for black veterans, especially in the South. For southern black veterans, veteran status begat little federal assistance and no advocacy on the basis of military service. The GI Bill’s nominal claim to cover all veterans failed to truly demolish the tradition of bestowing deservedness on only selected groups.

\textsuperscript{256} \textit{Ibid.}, 69. Black veterans were also not welcome in the VFW. Their acceptance into the DAV was less of an issue because black service members generally held non-combat support jobs so they were more rarely injured.
Beyond race, the GI Bill has been analyzed through feminist, queer, and disability studies. While the issues raised in these analyses in some ways reflect the tremendously dominant assumptions of the post-war time period, they also illuminate tensions the emerging welfare state engendered. The American military has traditionally, for example, punished non-heterosexuality. In 1945, however, the VA made the GI Bill package of benefits the “first federal policy that explicitly excluded gays and lesbians from the economic benefits of the welfare state.” The long-standing, assumed rejection of homosexuality was specifically enumerated during the implementation of the GI Bill.

The new demands of the welfare state led beneficiaries into situations that had never been open to them before. While in some instances, like enabling southern blacks to go to college, the confrontations produced were violent rejections of the new, in others the conflict was of a less aggressive nature. Disabled veterans who chose to use the college tuition benefit of the GI Bill over the vocational rehabilitation program under Public Law 16 faced the problems of confronting a world built overwhelmingly for the able-bodied. The advent of antibiotics and trauma-care breakthroughs “dramatically altered survival rates among people...80 percent of World War II veterans with spinal-cord injuries survived.” Universities were often unwilling to make structural accommodations for those who could not walk, as

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257 Until 2011, homosexuality and bisexuality were grounds for other than honorable discharge, which denied veterans access to GI Bill benefits.
stigma against the disabled alienated administrators and potential students. Historian Sarah Rose tells the story of disabled veterans in the University of Illinois system that had to fight university policy for the now-federally granted right to education. The process succeeded, with significant help from local Legion posts, and enabled other disabled veterans to join the program. The expanding welfare state unearthed new conflict that had hidden in the exclusivity of higher education until the 1940s.

One area in which the GI Bill was noticeably tolerant was in its inclusion of women. Although women were not allowed in general combat infantry or many positions within the military, there were several women’s units that were part of the World War II military effort. The Woman’s Army Corps (WACs, formerly the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps) and reserve units for the Marines (MCWR), the Coast Guard (SPARs), and the Navy (WAVES) all received GI Bill benefits. The Air Force, which was officially founded in 1947, women’s reserve (WASPs) did not receive benefits until they were given military status in the 1970s.261 Despite the relatively inclusive approach taken in the Bill, women utilized the GI Bill benefits at lower rates than their male counterparts.262

Conclusion

The GI Bill’s legacy in popular culture and politics is immutably positive. The bill sent millions to college, helped veterans contribute to the post-war boom, fostered social mobility, and added millions of families to the growing American middleclass. The bill helped establish home-ownership as a hallmark of American success and

261 Mettler, Soldiers to Citizens, 145.
262 Ibid. For education benefits under Title II, 51 percent of male veterans made use of them while only 40 percent of women veterans did.
gave future generations of American soldiers a chance to use their military service as a steppingstone to better circumstances. These impressions, while accurate for many beneficiaries of the GI Bill, fail to capture the ways in which the GI Bill deeply transformed the political place of veterans, the changing conception of veteran identity, and the interaction of the bill’s legacy with the growing welfare state. The GI Bill broke down boundaries that had long separated cohorts of veterans into those recognized as deserving of enhanced attention from the state and those who were not. After the GI Bill, all eligible (i.e. straight and white or black living in the North) veterans continued to have the option to interact intimately with the federal government via any one of the GI Bill’s five titles. Regardless of their disability status, veterans had access to an unprecedented range of benefits. These new implications of veteran identity were reinforced in the VA-only administration of the benefits. The American Legion’s unshakeable insistence for the VA system gave the veterans’ political status physical and bureaucratic form while also providing a single pathway for future lobbying and advocacy efforts.

The GI Bill increased the chances for veterans to coalesce around their shared identity for political ends. In post-GI Bill politics, the American Legion, which had grown in strength throughout the inter-war years, could advocate on behalf of all veterans for more generous benefits. Instead of fighting to have the able-bodied recognized, the Legion could push for expansions of the GI Bill that would affect all of its membership, not just the disabled. The growing association between military service and benefits from the government also changed the nature of the armed forces. While the Selective Service Act’s reemployment provision tried to guarantee
no loss in employment or wealth through military service and Public Law 16 and
others assured potential soldiers that any loss from disability would be restituted, the
GI Bill promised an increase in prospects via the benefits commensurate with military
service. Education could lead to better jobs and higher pay, loan guarantees and low
interest rates allowed for more home ownership and new businesses, VA healthcare
ensured medical coverage. The GI Bill made military service a means of achieving
higher ends, and as GI Bill benefits became a part of the calculus of military service,
conscription and the draft took on different meanings. With these changes came a
need to re-evaluate the relationship between citizenship and military service, between
duty and employment.

In the post-war years, the American welfare state began to branch out and
grow. Federal programs providing subsidized education, job training and placement,
reduced-cost housing, and health care all expanded to cover larger portions of the
population. While the GI Bill provided many of the same benefits, it stands in stark
contrast to later welfare programs. For many federal assistance programs, criteria for
eligibility, like income or age, create porous boundaries that an individual can enter in
and out of. The GI Bill’s benefits were available to a strictly defined group: veterans
who had served for at least 90 days and had been discharged other than dishonorably.
Further, the rigid group marked out by military service had all earned the right to
receive GI Bill benefits. Whether or not they were disabled, veterans shared in their
access to federal assistance because they had given their time and safety to the nation.
Under the GI Bill, whether viewed as a duty of citizenship or as a fulfillment of draft
regulations, service in the military furnished veterans with a higher claim on the federal government.

The system of benefits that veterans have operated under since 1944 is rooted in the provisions of the GI Bill and heavily influenced by laws like the Selective Service Act of 1940 and Public Law 16. As American citizens, however, veterans are also subjects to general social safety net laws like social security and, later, Medicare and Medicaid. The growth of these programs duplicated the efforts of the VA-based benefits system already in place, but the veterans system has stayed decidedly separate. The next two chapters will explore how the expansion of American welfare after World War II reflected on the veteran-specific system, lowering the exceptional status of veterans as the only citizens to receive such benefits. The political battles of the 1930s and early 1940s established the administrative and ideological groundwork for the rest of the century’s veterans’ relations. The American Legion’s vehement veterans-first stance, the growing influence of conservatism, Roosevelt’s legacy, and the GI Bill-system all set up the foundation for the battles over veterans’ political status during the mid-century period.
Citizens First: The American Veterans Committee

Throughout the early twentieth century, veterans’ organizations like the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) gained political influence and social relevance throughout America. The national scope and federated structure of the veterans’ organizations allowed them to influence both policymakers in Washington, DC and state capitals as well as local voters, who frequently gathered for community events at community posts. These large groups, along with the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), shared many of the same basic political agendas and organizing tactics, but frequently diverged from each other on particular issues. At times, the desire for a certain outcome or political decision forced the groups into head-on confrontation, as was evidenced during the Bonus March fight of the 1920s and passage of the GI Bill in 1943 and 1944. Frequently, the groups were ready to lobby directly against each other when at ideological odds or in political disputes.263 Despite the inflammatory nature of their interactions in the media and behind closed doors, the three groups had broadly similar platforms that promoted the veteran above all other citizens, lobbied for ever-expanding veteran benefits, encouraged patriotism and national service, and supported states’ rights. Overall, the veterans’ organizations were socially and politically conservative forces that, although broadly nonpartisan, presented returning veterans with politically homogenous choices.

Like earlier veterans, as World War II soldiers returned home they founded new organizations that would speak to their unique needs and concerns. Among the most distinctive of these groups was the American Veterans Committee (AVC). Founded in February 1944 by Gilbert Harrison and Charles Bolté, both editors at their college newspapers, the AVC tried to created a venue for “progressive” servicemen. Bolté, Harrison, and other returning soldiers used the allure of a broad-minded platform that tackled topics beyond veterans’ benefits to organize a politically influential group consisting of fellow veterans.264 As the AVC developed bylaws and an overarching point of view to shape the small but growing number of chapters, deep differences between it and the other veteran organizations emerged. The AVC adopted a political platform that took stances on civil rights, the atomic bomb, and the developing politics of the Cold War. It was also exclusive to World War II veterans.265 Finally, the AVC’s motto was a distant cry from the Legion’s “For God and Country.” To advertise their basic principle, the AVC adopted the words “Citizens First, Veterans Second.”

Soon established as a liberal-minded alternative to the conservative traditional veterans groups, the AVC grew quickly in its first few years. Starting with just 800 members in 1944, the AVC grew to 5,500 in 1945, 18,000 in 1946, and had 100,000 members by 1947.266 With chapters in most states and even some abroad among still-deployed troops, the AVC was not as large as its primary ideological competitor, the American Legion, but it was becoming a growing political threat. Adding to both its

265 Robert Francis Saxe, “‘Citizens First, Veterans Second’: The American Veterans Committee and the Challenges of Postwar ‘Independent Progressives,’” War and Society 22, no. 2 (2004), 75.
266 Ibid., 79.
deeply divergent nature and its appeal to socially liberal service members, the AVC required its chapters to be integrated. Despite the vast difference in membership and political clout, the Legion began to see the AVC as a threat.

The AVC welcomed the challenge. In response to the Legion’s belief in the exceptional nature of the American veteran, the AVC charged, in the words of historian Robert Francis Saxe, “the Legion was too focused on gaining privileges for veterans at the expense of their fellow citizens.”267 Appealing to young veterans, the AVC was adopted most readily on college campuses where servicemen, often using their GI Bill education benefits, found the Legion an unsatisfying conduit for their activism and organizational energies. Indeed, the group was able to position itself as more in touch with young veterans’ needs than any of the other extant groups. As Bill Mauldin, a popular military cartoonist and prominent AVC member, wrote in an Atlantic Monthly essay, “youth has no voice in the Legion.”268 Attracting veterans “who still believed in New Deal reforms,” the growing organization promoted government action on behalf of all people, not only veterans.

The AVC’s “Citizens First, Veterans Second” stance led to some tension within the group’s platform. While intent on lobbying for veteran-specific legislation, the AVC also disdained the veteran-first legislative mentalities of the other organizations. And while aggressively supportive of increases in monthly aid payments to veterans in school, the AVC also pushed back against Representative John Rankin’s bill that called for a cash bonus to veterans, seeing such benefits as excessive. Finally, although supportive of veterans receiving assistance from the

267 Ibid., 77.
nation they served, the AVC’s broad platform and inclusive politics tried to smooth the divisions between veteran and civilian that the Legion and others were trying so desperately to carve. In a November 4, 1945 article published in *The New York Times Magazine*, Bolté, then chairman, wrote about “the most dangerous division in America” being the citizen versus soldier divide. The AVC, in attempting to bridge the fissure between veterans and civilians and by advocating on behalf of both, was rejecting the most fundamental premises of the established veterans’ lobby.

As veterans went to universities and were exposed to the array of politically left and radical ideas, dissatisfaction with existing veterans organizations and a desire to reinvigorate New Deal welfare policies brought more veterans into the AVC. One highly active AVC chapter at the University of Indiana in Bloomington exemplified this trend. Along with faculty advisor Charles Leonard Lundin, a history professor, veterans organized a chapter “focused largely on issues in the local community” that had national ramifications such as allocations for subsistence federal aid, and housing availability. A scrapbook of clippings assembled by the chapter to document the school years from 1946 through 1949 gives insight into the dissatisfaction and hope the AVC represented.

The scrapbook includes everything from reports of the AVC haircut committee on local barber prices to notices for coming speakers like Alfred Kinsey to correspondence with the national organization about monthly aid checks. News clippings from local papers document the group’s support for the NAACP and

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activism against the federal bonus. One release from the chapter records the election results for the 1946-1947 school year, which included a woman, Barbara Alden, as vice president. Within the first few pages of the book are typed out resolutions adopted by the Bloomington chapter for the fall semester of 1946-1947. The first resolution, emblematic of the organization’s larger goals, was that “as progressive citizens we pledge our active support to any reforms which in our opinion broaden the benefits and security of all people.” In echoing New Deal calls for security and explicitly including all people, not only veterans, in the group to receive benefits, the Bloomington chapter typifies the central difference between the AVC and other veterans’ organizations of the time. At the bottom of the typed page is pasted a banner with bold red lettering bearing the group’s name and motto, a reminder that they are “Citizens First”.

The AVC, however, was short-lived. Present from the founding of the group, factionalism within the organization led to its swift decline after only a few years. Divisions between liberals and radicals created difficulty inside the AVC and suspicion from without. In 1946, at their first national convention, AVC delegates were already forced to deal with “the Communist Problem.” Although the liberals represented a comfortable majority and won the election for chairman, the presence of a radical wing incited harsh critique from outsiders, who decried the growing power Communists held in the group. These criticisms, fueled by worsening relations with the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, soon forced the AVC to engage in hardline infighting. In 1947, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr., a prominent member of the AVC,

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271 Scrapbook, AVC Bloomington, Indiana Chapter. Emphasis added.
gave a speech lamenting the infiltration of “Commies” into the group.\textsuperscript{273} By spring 1948, the AVC began to “purge” itself of its Communist members. At that year’s national convention in Cleveland, the AVC adopted an anti-communist clause, making the schism official. As large portions of the organization were sloughed off, continuing external accusation of communist sympathies further decreased the group’s legitimacy. Internally, the group suffered from reduced numbers and a membership fatigued from the divisive purging campaign. Although the organization existed nominally into the 2000s, its early national recognition and political influence were spent after only a few years. The AVC’s goal of using veteran status to advocate on behalf of all Americans was lost.

\textsuperscript{273} \textit{Ibid.}, 428.
Rigid Boundaries Versus Expanding Benefits: Mid-Century Threats to the Veterans-Only System

For 20 years after the signing of the original bill in 1944, the GI Bill system coasted relatively unchanged. During the Korean War, it was re-established with only a few logistical and administrative changes. After the Korean War ended in 1953, conflict over the eligibility of post-Korea veterans to take advantage of GI Bill programs was recurring issue in Congress. The fight to give these “peacetime” veterans GI Bill benefits failed to gain enough traction to become law until 1966, two years after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. In the years between 1944 and the mid-1960s, little changed in either the political or social status of veterans. World War II veterans helped fuel the post-war boom and veterans’ organizations enjoyed a strong presence throughout the nation. During this time, however, there were significant social and political changes for several other segments of society.

Two decades after the passage of Social Security in 1935, the aged were becoming an increasingly influential group. The founding of the American Association of Retired Persons, now known simply as AARP, in 1958 gave the elderly a more unified and strengthened voice in national politics. The growth of the Civil Rights Movement in black communities forced political changes at both the local and national levels, and obliged politicians to recognize blacks and other minority communities as potentially powerful influence groups. After the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1945, Harry Truman took office, vowing to continue Roosevelt’s New Deal work. Under Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John F.
Kennedy, Roosevelt’s project of ensuring the security of Americans continued at a slow pace. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson’s landslide election in 1964 ushered in a brief but tumultuous presidency that oversaw an explosive expansion of federal programs that brought increasing numbers of people into the embrace of federal aid and assistance. Johnson’s Great Society reinvigorated and reimagined the New Deal and expanded the purview of the American welfare state. In 1965 alone, the Voting Rights Act, amendments to Social Security that established Medicare and Medicaid, and the Higher Education Act brought federal power to bear on the interests of blacks, the elderly, the poor, and the young.

The growth in federal programming was not welcome by all. Starting in the late 1950s and continuing through the 1970s, the expansion of the welfare state through programs like Medicare, Medicaid, and federal higher education funding came into direct tension with the goals of prominent veterans’ advocates and organization. In the words of economist Harry Malisoff, when the original GI Bill was passed in 1944, “social security for the American population as a whole was not even in the dream stage.” As federal programs grew to tread the same ground as the GI Bill system in the post-war period, conflict over the sanctity of veterans-only programs grew. Disputes over exclusive veterans’ programs inspired repeated attempts to limit the growth of the veterans-specific system and especially calls for

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the assimilation of veterans programs into the general federal welfare effort.

Supporters of a strong welfare state, like the Johnson Administration, pushed back against veterans’ organizations’ calls for increased coverage of veterans who served during peacetime, citing the availability of alternate routes to the same services. Veterans’ organizations vehemently resisted any allegations that the VA system was becoming redundant. This conflict arose with many of the major welfare and veteran care reform efforts. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a diverse set of interests insisted that a bifurcated welfare system was superfluous after the successful implementation of Great Society programs. Veterans’ groups denied such claims.

Despite repeated attacks, the GI Bill system, with its insistence on administration through only the VA, continued to stand. However, the two systems—the VA for veterans and a network of agencies for all other groups—could not coexist peacefully. Veterans’ organizations fought to keep the VA untouched, even as their claims to the exceptional status of veterans became increasingly hollow as Great Society programs provided more non-military citizens opportunities once reserved only for veterans. This encroachment became an onslaught with the publishing of a National Association of Scientists (NAS) study in 1977 that advocated strongly for the dismantling of the VA healthcare system, a fundamental pillar of exclusive veteran benefits. Although the VA healthcare system survived, attacks like the NAS study and others diminished the lofty separateness veterans had enjoyed. Though the GI Bill reflected the specialness of veterans apart from all other citizens in 1944, the Great Society elevated by bestowing them with the same access, opportunities, and rights in the growing welfare state. The clash between general and veteran-specific
programs were expressed in three controversies surrounding veterans benefits from
the mid-twentieth century: the passage of a Cold War GI Bill, executive attempts to
close VA facilities, and the 1977 NAS study. Each of these instances articulates the
dueling and mutually exclusive goals of welfare advocates and traditional veterans’
organizations and their supporters.

The Cold War GI Bill

Just eight years after its initial passage, the GI Bill was reintroduced for
Korean War veterans. The Veterans’ Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952, generally
called the “Korea GI Bill,” extended the entire package of benefits to veterans of the
new war. The bill was “to a large extent, a carbon copy of the first [GI Bill], though it
embodied some changes based on what had been learned in administering the first
one.”277 Changes made to the original bill were prompted by logistical failures and
fraud uncovered in the late 1940s. In the 1950s and early 1960s, issues and alterations
in the GI Bill system usually regarded such inefficiencies in the administration of
benefits, which was modified as needed through small maintenance bills. The Korea
GI Bill, for example, switched educational payments from a split system of direct
payments to schools and separate payments to veterans to a lump-sum system that
allowed GIs to split the money themselves. This change was made to limit tuition
increases aimed at taking advantage of the GI Bill program. Until the escalation of the
Vietnam War in 1964, most legislative activity regarding veterans’ benefits was
similarly procedural. A small handful of laws extended segments of the GI Bill to all
veterans, including provisions for unemployment insurance under the Ex-

Servicemen’s Unemployment Compensation Act of 1958 and vocational rehabilitation through the Act of 15 October 1962. While these programs were administered by the VA, they did little to further the cause of elevating veteran’s exceptional status since they did not touch the most expensive and revolutionary portions of the original GI Bill: education, home and business loans, and healthcare.

As World War I and II veterans made use of more VA programs, advocates and federal budgeters engaged in the perpetual struggle to keep services and monthly direct payments on par with changing markets and needs. While maintaining the GI Bill system during this period left little room for exciting legislation, the time between World War II and Vietnam saw other important changes. During the Korean War, GI Bill benefits began to enter into the metrics of military service, working as both an enticement to enlisted men and a reward for the drafted. The new system of benefits became routine, and veterans began to expect their military service to lead to increased prospects in their post-service lives because of GI Bill programs. Although soldiers serving between Korea and Vietnam would not become eligible for the entire set of benefits until the Cold War GI Bill passed in 1966, they could take advantage of services including unemployment insurance, vocational training, dependents’ pensions, and, crucially, health care. Finally, after thirty-five years, the memory of the Bonus March had been rectified and the specter of homeless veterans selling apples seemed to be laid to rest.

The escalation of the Cold War throughout the 1950s broke new ground in American political and military history and brought veterans’ affairs legislators,  

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279 Ibid., 2042.
administrators, and advocates new challenges to face. The unprecedented nature of the Cold War permeated veteran-related politics in Washington and the military through the draft, which was renewed without fail from the Korean War through the Vietnam Era to feed the Cold War military. This peacetime draft created a current that pulled at all decisions relating to the military and veterans. Draft exceptions became easier to acquire and the post-war economic boom attracted many men to lucrative civilian employment, making military service a less attractive career option. In response, the military engaged in publicity and recruitment campaigns that focused on the applicability of military skills to civilian life, paying especially close attention to the rising technological nature of military conflict. Advertisement of veterans’ benefits, even the limited offerings available before the 1966 law, featured prominently in these efforts, and contributed to the alignment of military service with special benefits.

Arguments over the readjustment needs of veterans who did not see combat dominated veterans’ benefits policy, with many insisting that peacetime veterans did not require assistance returning to civilian life. From 1955 through 1965, the debate over Cold War veterans’ benefits had to grapple with the unprecedented circumstances of the Cold War and a draft that did not serve any specific military conflict. This debate was underscored by larger conversations about citizenship, duty, and the responsibilities of the federal government. In particular, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations fought against the extension of benefits to Cold War veterans, rejecting such benefits on the grounds that increased access to welfare programs was supplanting any need the peacetime draftees and enlisted men would
present. This tension between expanding welfare programs and the rights of veterans under a peacetime draft contributed to the stasis of veterans’ benefits.

The recurring debate over Cold War veterans’ benefits did not take place in the abstract. Cold War GI Bills were proposed in the Senate several times, forcing the issue onto Congressional and Executive dockets. In 1959, the Senate passed a Cold War GI Bill, which was rebuffed by the Eisenhower Administration, and failed to move forward in the House.280 During the 87th Congress the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee proposed a Cold War GI Bill, S. 349, which did not gain traction on the Senate floor and failed to achieve what a substantively similar bill had only a few years earlier. In 1963, the 88th Congress proposed S. 5, another Cold War GI Bill. A familiar company of senators sponsored or vocally supported all the bills, including Democratic Senators Jennings Randolph of West Virginia, Frank Moss of Utah, Lee Metcalf of Montana, and Daniel Inouye of Hawaii.281 Each effort to get a bill passed was stymied by a combination of competition from other veterans’ benefits proposals, disagreement among lobbying groups, and disapproval from the President.

Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson each had to face at least one comprehensive veterans bill that attempted to give Cold War veterans the gamut of GI Bill benefits. In 1965, the Labor and Public Welfare Committee held hearings on S.9, yet another bill attempting to bring GI Bill benefits to post-Korea veterans. The proposed bill made all post-Korea veterans who had served 180 days or more—or shorter if discharged because of disability—eligible for educational benefits and reduced home,

farm, and business loans. These hearings, conducted in early 1965, show the political maneuvering the unique political time prompted. The rhetoric and concerns of those involved in the hearings also reveal the continuity of issues in veterans’ policy across the twentieth and twenty-first century.

The Labor and Welfare’s Subcommittee on Veterans’ Affairs conducted the hearings. Until the passage of a legislative reorganization act in 1970, the Senate did not have a committee devoted to veterans, so before the reorganization veterans’ affairs were handled in subcommittees of either the Labor and Public Welfare or Finance Committees.282 The subcommittee conducted hearings in February and March 1965, calling on a diverse cast of lawmakers, policymakers, bureaucrats and representatives from veterans’ groups. Like its predecessors, the bill inspired contentious debate, pitting former allies against each other and creating strange bedfellows of formerly acrimonious rivals. Representatives of several veterans’ organizations testified to support the bill while the VA Administrator and a Department of Defense representative spoke out against it. The bill raised controversy for a variety of reasons, with detractors and proponents focusing on different issues: senators talked about the value the first two GI Bills brought to their states, veterans’ representatives fought against the “myth of peacetime service,” and the Department of Defense general counsel warned of reduced re-enlistment with increased readjustment benefits.

On the second day of hearings, February 18, 1965, Frank E.G. Weil, a national board member of the AVC, gave his testimony. Although the AVC had

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maintained a track record of fighting against bonuses and other veteran-specific benefits throughout the Cold War period, Weil came out in support of S.9. In his testimony, which included both a prepared statement and direct questions and answers, he acknowledged that the AVC was “in general, opposed to any extension of veterans benefits.”\(^{283}\) He went on to report, however, that,

The achievement of economic security for veterans through sound economic planning for all citizens rather than through special grants of favors for veterans is basic AVC policy…We oppose bonuses and general pensions as…tending to set veterans apart from their fellow citizens.\(^{284}\)

This about-face was inspired by the AVC’s belief that for non-disabled veterans, the standard for judging veterans’ benefits was whether they would “enable the veteran to readjust from military service to civilian life with minimal economic loss.”\(^{285}\) In judging that peacetime service created enough of a disruption to require special dispensation for veterans, the AVC took a strong stand that while philosophically justifiable, countered their previous actions.

The AVC’s advocacy on behalf of S.9 was made more unusual with the statement of William J. Flaherty, the assistant national director of legislation for the DAV. During the fight for the original GI Bill in 1943, the DAV, along with the VFW, had fought against the Legion’s bill, instead preferring a bonus bill. In the late 1940s, for the AVC and the DAV to end up on the same side of a veterans’ benefit issue would have been inconceivable, but by 1965 the unthinkable had come to pass.

That the two groups coalesced around the Cold War GI Bill shows how the circumstances of veterans had changed in the interim. The new nature of peacetime

\(^{283}\) U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, S.9 84.
\(^{284}\) Ibid., 85
\(^{285}\) Ibid.
warfare left blurred lines compared to the overt, moralistic battles of World War II and even the Korean War. Adding to the menagerie of unlikely allies was the AFL-CIO, which had a history with the American Legion of antagonism punctuated by strategic détente. 286 The AFL-CIO supported the bill because the advent of “compulsory peacetime military service was itself a radical departure,” adding that “the so-called GI bill of rights was ... a radical departure.” 287 Change went beyond the transition from outright to cold warfare. The place of veterans in federal government had changed. In their statements, Weil and Flaherty both referenced the failure of the VA to stand up for veterans, arguing that either peacetime service was disruptive enough to deserve readjustment assistance or that “peacetime” was a misnomer that did not capture the hostile nature of modern military service. 288

In the hearings, William J. Driver represented the VA. New to the job, he took office January 2, 1965. 289 In the report he submitted to the subcommittee, Driver argued, “service under current conditions does not present on a widespread basis the same rigors and hazards as does wartime service.” 290 To support this claim, the VA report focused on the nature of the selective service system after Korea. The system provided fixed lengths of service that would allow draftees to accurately plan for the future. It also worked to “promote a reasonable integration of schooling or training

287 U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, S.9. 133. The AFL-CIO statement is arguing against the assertion that the Cold War GI Bill was a “radical departure” from the tradition of supplying wartime veterans with readjustment benefits.
288 See ibid., 85 and 175. Flaherty argues that “If there is doubt in anyone’s mind about our servicemen being exposed to hazardous duty, he need only scan the news dispatches giving amounts of the dead and dying in Vietnam.”
290 U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, S.9, 64.
plans with military service.”

Despite the built-in advantages of the new selective service protocols, Driver recognized “the need for appropriate Federal legislation to improve the availability of education.” In doing so, Driver corroborated the current and previous presidential administrations’ efforts to argue for general programs available to all. In addition to discussing new proposals from President Johnson, Driver explained why the GI Bill was necessary for previous cohorts of veterans but not for the current Cold War group,

[Johnson’s program] when combined with other federally supported programs such as the National Defense Education Act of 1958 will provide a broad base of educational assistance for all qualified young people, including veterans, which was not available to veterans of World War II or the Korean conflict.

The National Defense Education Act had also provided Eisenhower coverage to oppose the GI Bill. In his annual budget message to Congress for fiscal year 1961 (the message was delivered in January 1960), Eisenhower wrote “in the future these general programs will provide with increasing adequacy for the economic security needs of our elderly population, of which veterans and their widows will constitute a large and increasing proportion for several decades.” From January 1960 to February 1965, the argument that general services could replace VA-administered veterans’ benefits only grew stronger.

Driver’s statement goes on to cite a special message Johnson sent to Congress in January 1965, a month before the GI Bill hearings. Driver reported that the

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291 Ibid.
292 Ibid.
293 Ibid., 65, emphasis added.
proposals Johnson put forward “would inure to the benefit of all—veterans and nonveterans alike.”

In a special message to Congress concerning education, Johnson sought to promote his pupil-centered approach to education reform, in which federal efforts shifted focus from facilities and personnel to services and funds for poor students. Johnson, speaking to a comfortable liberal Democrat majority, insisted,

Nothing matters more to the future of our country: not our military preparedness—for armed might is worthless if we lack the brain power to build a world of peace; not our productive economy—for we cannot sustain growth without trained manpower; not our democratic system of government—for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant.

In his speech, Johnson highlighted the 300,000 college students who benefited from the National Defense Education Act, but he insisted that it was still not enough. A month before the GI Bill hearings, Johnson announced an ambitious plan to expand education access, which was one of the two primary programs the Cold War GI Bill could provide to veterans, to all needy Americans. The clash of general welfare and veteran-specific programs was reaching a fever pitch.

The Cold War GI Bill came close to passing in 1965. Making it through the Senate, the bill was brought to the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee. In the House committee, the bill was briefly considered, with much of the same testimony and reasoning presented as at the Senate hearing, but it was not voted on and never saw

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295 U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, S.9, 64.
298 Ibid.
the House floor.299 By the time the bill was brought up in the House in the fall of 1965, still more general welfare laws had been or were on the way to being passed. In 1965, the 89th Congress passed the Housing Act and the Higher Education Act. Combined, they addressed many of the benefit areas the Cold War GI Bill would have provided, except in the case of the Housing and Education Acts, the benefits were not administered through the exclusive veterans’ system. The Housing Act actually went beyond offering veterans federal service via a general route that non-veterans could access. The Act included a veteran-specific loan plan that was administered through the Federal Housing Administration. Veterans that met the eligibility qualification had at least 90 days of service, an honorable discharge, and had never used the federal housing assistance offered through the VA.300 The loan was very generous, requiring “virtually no initial equity,”301 and dealt a direct blow to the VA-only system by offering a veteran-specific program through another agency, and one founded during the New Deal no less.302

The year 1966 brought significant change to the Cold War GI Bill fight. The VA, which had refused support a year earlier, gave tentative approval of a bill for “veterans of recent service” as the number of returning and future Vietnam veterans grew.303 The GI Bill system cemented its first major and lasting change in 1966 with the Veterans’ Readjustment Benefits Act. The Cold War GI Bill was the culmination of years of attempts on the part of veterans’ organizations and friendly legislators to

301 Ibid.
302 The Federal Housing Administration was founded in 1934.
make all military service, not just wartime service, grounds for eligibility for the full slate of benefits. Grounded in the changing understandings of “war-“ and “peacetime” wrought by the Cold War, the new law was a major victory in the push to elevate veteran status through special reserved rights. In removing wartime service from the already short list of qualifications, Congress and veterans advocates broadened the idea of veterans’ exceptional status. After the bill’s passage, the Legion hailed it as “a milestone of the act."

No longer did a veteran have to endure the privations and terrors of combat or wartime service to deserve enhanced aid and opportunities from the federal government. The bill added to the purview and administrative power of the VA-based, exclusively veteran-oriented benefit system set up in 1944. Under the 1966 law, any veteran serving from January 31, 1955, the end of the Korean GI Bill’s eligibility period, through July 1, 1967, the expiration of the current draft renewal, was eligible for GI Bill benefits.

**VA Closings Scandal**

By 1965, the federal government was fielding the needs of veterans from as many as six wars, ranging from the Spanish-American War, which had 7,000 remaining survivors, to the Vietnam War’s veterans with crisp discharge papers in their hands. As assured in the 1944 GI Bill, the suite of benefits many of these veterans were entitled to was administered through the Veterans Administration, a sprawling bureaucracy that had grown swiftly after World War II. The combination

305 U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee, S.9.
of a larger total number of veterans, aging World War I veterans, increasing healthcare costs, and liberalizing benefits made the VA one of the federal government’s largest executive agencies. According to the VA annual report for fiscal year 1965, the VA spent a total of $7.139 billion, which amounted to six percent of total federal budget expenditures. Only the Departments of Defense and Transportation received larger shares of the federal budget. Cash payments made up nearly seventy-seven percent of these expenditures while medical and hospital services consumed twenty percent of the budget. Before Medicare and Medicaid passed in 1965, VA health expenditures accounted for twenty three percent of federal health spending. Five years later, in 1970, the VA system accounted for nine percent of federal spending on health care, with total federal health expenditures rising 252 percent in those years.

Already large before 1965, the VA healthcare system was growing. Lenient eligibility requirements for veterans to use healthcare services and facilities allowed the system to swell with the needs of the huge veteran population, totaling roughly 21,834,000 in 1965. Initially, the mandate of the healthcare system was to provide services for veterans injured while on duty, but starting after World War I the system

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310 Ibid., 171
had used a “hierarchy of eligibility”\footnote{Lasker, “Veterans’ Medical Care,” 375.} to triage the huge veteran caseload. Despite the VA system’s primary goal of providing care to veterans with service-connected disabilities, changes to the healthcare system and the veteran population in the 1950s and 1960s had led to shifts in the composition of veterans under VA healthcare. During that time, Congress made it easier for veterans with non-service connected disabilities to access VA healthcare, stretching the veterans-only system to include as many veterans as possible. The hierarchy of eligibility ranked veterans with service-connected disabilities highest, and they were “unconditionally eligible” but in 1965 they made up just 28 percent of the patient population.\footnote{Ibid.} Veterans with service-connected disabilities who were being treated for non-service connected issues filled 10.3 percent of the beds and were eligible if beds were going unused. The bulk of the system, comprising 60.8 percent of beds, was devoted to the care of veterans without service-connected disabilities. These veterans had two eligibility criteria: available bed space in VA facilities and the signing of an affidavit confirming “their inability to defray the cost of hospitalization.”\footnote{ibid.}

Soon after World War II, the VA switched to a “big medicine” policy, which focused on providing care in population centers, from a post-World War I model that built a far-reaching system of smaller hospitals. The transition “guaranteed an eventual conflict.”\footnote{John Walsh, “Veterans’ Medicine: Imbroglio over Closing of VA Facilities is Partly Clash of Old and New,” \textit{Science} 147, no. 3664 (1965), 1426.} In addition, the VA also began partnering with medical schools to facilitate research and staffing. The initiative became official in 1958 but had
commanded a strong voice in VA hospital construction and placement.\textsuperscript{317} As the VA system expanded, the demographics of the nation and its veteran population changed, and by 1965 the VA estimated that more than 51 percent of veterans lived in just eight states.\textsuperscript{318} At the end of the 1964 fiscal year, the VA system boasted 168 hospitals, 214 outpatient clinics, and 18 domiciliaries.\textsuperscript{319} It was the largest healthcare system in the country. This changing system, and a drive to cut the spending of executive agencies, brought the VA, backed by the Johnson Administration and the Bureau of the Budget, to call for the closings of 11 hospitals, 4 domiciliaries, and 16 regional offices around the nation. This was a blow to members of Congress with VA facilities in their districts and an affront to veteran lobby’s goals of expanding services. The dispute that erupted would force Johnson to back down in the face of Congressional outrage and aggressive campaigning from veterans’ organizations.

At the mention of closing hospitals, and therefore reducing beds in the VA system, veterans’ advocates exploded. With a cap of 125,000 beds in the system—the Eisenhower Administration put the limit in place in 1959—the VA and Congress struggled to allocate beds, manage costs, maintain care, and satisfy political ends. Whether the Johnson Administration’s plans would consolidate services or permanently shrink them, the service cuts would have ramifications for legislators and veterans. Veterans without service-connected disabilities were put in any extra beds if they required inpatient care, but the VA could not help with outpatient needs. Closing a facility not only threatened important economic networks, job-creation

\textsuperscript{318} Veterans Administration, \textit{Annual Report of the Administrator of Veterans’ Affairs}, 1.
engines, and health providers, it cut down the number of veterans with non-service-connected disabilities who could make use of the VA healthcare system. The hospital closings would particularly impact rural and small-town veterans, who were less likely to have access to other medical providers.  

Along with housing and education policy, Johnson was set on expanding the healthcare services of the federal government, setting up yet another clash with the veterans’ lobby. Along with Congressional allies and support groups, the Johnson Administration passed the Social Security Amendments of 1965, creating Medicare, healthcare for the elderly, and Medicaid, healthcare for the poor. As the Great Society legislative agenda grew closer to realization, previously existing systems began to protect their administrative terrain and expected slice of the federal budget. In the case of the VA closings, the expectation of a territorial agency administrator failed to materialize. Rather, it was the still-unconfirmed acting administrator of the VA, Dr. William J. Driver, a World War II and Korean War veteran, who proposed the closings and veterans’ organization representatives and members of Congress who fought against it. Driver actually became a non-fatal casualty of the fight when his confirmation as VA Administrator was briefly derailed.

The threat of reduction or consolidation of VA care fired up both the Legion’s lobbying and grassroots organizing. In a series of personal statements published in The American Legion Magazine, National Commander Donald Johnson warned of “the assault on adequate veterans’ medical and counseling services launched by the Veterans Administration.”  

but in the wake of both internal and external backlash Congress mandated that any closings be delayed until there was further study of the issue. Commander Johnson called on the Legion to totally mobilize in opposition; a demand that local post leaders took up with vigor, organizing nation-wide protest of the closings. In his April statement on the first page of the magazine, Commander Johnson continued to fuel those efforts, writing,

The real target of the January 13 order is not the facilities marked for closing. It is the special status and recognition historically accorded America’s veterans—the bottom stone of the entire veterans’ benefit program. The current attack, master-minded by the Bureau of the Budget, is designed to…remove the Veterans Administration as the Federal agency serving veterans and to parcel out its responsibilities to other agencies under a social-welfare scheme.322

For the veterans’ organizations—particularly the Legion, which was still the most powerful of them—the threat of the VA closings was the culmination of years of assault from welfare policy’s rising tide.

Commander Johnson and Legion representatives around the country made use of the plight of veterans, both present and historical, crushed beneath the emotionless weight of federal policy. In the same statement published in the August 1965 issue of The American Legion Magazine, Johnson energized the anti-closings fight by explicating “the Alice-in-Wonderland world” the Legion faced, in which the government would continue to increase draft calls while cutting benefits for veterans.323 For President Johnson and his administration, the returning soldiers had hitherto unparalleled access to welfare and federal services. For Commander Johnson and his Legionnaires, veterans were faced with slashed options for care and the

322 Ibid.
323 Ibid., 7.
depreciating value of veterans’ special status in America. In the same essay, Commander Johnson warned “if the voice of sanity is not heard in this situation we have the making of a national tragedy…in the precise pattern that followed WWI.”

The phantom of the Bonus March was resurrected, and with it the dire portents of a nation’s veterans being run out of town by federal forces. In the end, Congress reached a compromise with the Johnson Administration that resulted in closings of 6 hospitals, 2 domiciliaries, and 9 regional benefit offices.

**National Academy of Sciences Study**

In 1973, Congress passed the Veterans Health Care Expansion Act. Along with updating VA personnel policies, facilitating staff retention, and liberalizing outpatient policies, the bill included a mandate to undertake “extensive review and appraisal” of VA facilities and staff “to determine a basis for the optimum numbers and categories of such personnel and other resources needed.”

The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) was tapped to conduct the review. Four years after receiving the task, the NAS published its study, *Study of Health Care for American Veterans*. The expansive study engaged in the analysis of existing data, significant data collection, assessment of facilities and quality of care, and evaluation of care provided through the VA healthcare system. Finally, the 300-page study made recommendations regarding all of these topics as well as the system as a whole.

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324 Ibid.
The study had an immediate and incendiary impact. An impressive accumulation and production of data aside, the outrage focused on the last ten pages of the report, “Recommendations.” The section begins with an admission that the recommendations “are additional to and in some respects different from those implied by the legislative history of Public Law 93-82.” The original scope of the study was to investigate resource allocation and usage in the healthcare system and make recommendations pursuant to that issue. Instead, the NAS committee made wholesale recommendations about the nature of VA healthcare, suggesting that the VA integrate its services with community and regional health systems and, the most radical idea, that the VA system should be “phased in to the general delivery of health service in communities across the country.” Unlike welfare expansion or attempts at redistribution of resources, the NAS study was attempting to penetrate the armor of the VA and blur the lines between civilian and veteran care. Although not suggesting that the VA system take on non-veteran patients, the study’s recommendations would reduce the VA’s autonomy, make it responsible for regional planning and administration, and allow veterans to leak out of the VA system and into general healthcare networks. Whereas Medicare and Medicaid provided an alternate route, the NAS proposed building thruways between the two systems of VA and non-VA medical care.

The House held hearings regarding the study in less than a month. Unsurprisingly, the study created backlash among the veterans’ organizations and rebuttal from the VA. The American Legion, DAV, VFW, and AMVETS, among

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327 Ibid., 278.
328 Ibid., 279.
others, all registered their intense “disappointment and disagreement” with the study. Putting aside inter-group ire and competition, the representative presented a united front against the recommendations of the NAS. Testimony from veterans’ organizations’ representatives and opinions expressed by House committee members generally focused on the same areas of discontent. As an order of business, the veterans’ groups deeply questioned the range of the study. Citing the language of the original 1973 law and the final product of the NAS, including its admission that it had gone beyond the scope of its initial mandate, representatives dismissed the study as overreaching, clumsy, and largely dismissible. The debate about the legitimacy of the study, however, could not mask the content of the study itself.

Forced to reckon with the study’s content, the organization representatives took a more measured view. In his review of the Legion’s legislative recommendations for the coming year during a hearing in September 1977, National Commander Robert Charles Smith acquiesced that “where an evaluation of factual data leads to recommendations that would, in fact, improve the operation of the system, and result in improved health care for veterans, we naturally will support such recommendations.”329 When discussing the “phase-in” recommendation, and other supporting that view, Smith and the Legion were obdurate.

The American Legion does not intend to stand idly by while sources, from whatever level of expertise in the field of health care, move toward dismantling the VA medical care program…The American Legion [will] exert every effort and all resources as will assure that the Veterans’ Administration shall continue to be the sole independent establishment in the Executive Branch, responsible for the

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administration and execution of benefit programs and services provided by law for veterans.\textsuperscript{330}

Perhaps the harshest testimony came from the VFW representative Donald Schwab. Going beyond anger over the NAS study in particular, Schwab’s statement contended with the veteran lobby’s general frustrations with the rise of other welfare programs in light of the suggestion that veterans join the bloated general welfare apparatus,

The anti-veteran forces and social welfare planners who constantly attack veterans’ benefits cite their cost to us taxpayers…Yet these same people push the social welfare programs administered by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare…this Department has become so crass and lost touch with reality to the extent that, unbeknownst to most, they even furnish nearly instant welfare and food stamps to aliens, those who have done nothing for this Nation nor even paid the first penny in taxes.\textsuperscript{331}

Schwab’s anger with the welfare system, and Smith’s insistence that the VA remain untouched, typify the decades-old, and still continuing, campaign of veterans’ organizations to preserve the 1944 system.

While the Legion and the VFW could rail against the study with impunity, the VA had to use a more deliberate approach to stave off the administrative incursion it was facing. Programmatically going through the 37 recommendations included in the study, the VA representative Dr. John D. Chase stated the VA’s stance and reason for concurring or rejecting each item. Accepting many of the data-driven and observational recommendations, Chase was absolute in the VA’s repudiation of the “phase in” approach. One of the key issues the NAS study grappled with was use of VA facilities by veterans with non-service-connected disabilities. The VA’s “hierarchy of eligibility” for giving patients beds ranked people with service-

\textsuperscript{330} Ibid., 5.  
\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., 43.
connected disabilities highest, even if their condition was less severe than another veteran’s. At the time the study was conducted, more than 80 percent of all VA medical care provided was for non-service-connected disabilities.332

In the end, the 1977 NAS study did not inspire the wholesale change its members sought. Whether it had ever carried enough weight to shift the paradigm of veterans’ benefits is questionable, and yet even the mention of a reduction, infringement, or blurring of the rigid lines separating veteran and non-veteran benefit programs was enough to bring the full might of the veterans’ lobby to bear.

Conclusion

Through the long Cold War GI Bill fight, the tussle over VA closings in 1965, and the frontal assault of the NAS study, the VA-based veterans system maintained its boundaries. From the point of view of traditional veteran supporters in Congress and organizations like the American Legion, the peacetime draftees were entitled to the benefits their veterans’ status granted them and the VA healthcare system, so crucial to the integrity of the benefits structure, was able to fend off attacks and remain whole. Despite these victories, the exceptional political status of veterans had declined. The GI Bill system, created at a time when few if any groups had access to such emphatic, lifelong benefits, was able to continue serving veterans throughout the mid-twentieth century. It was not able, however, to maintain its monolithic status as the only route open to veterans for federal assistance. The demand of veterans’ organizations and Congressional advocates that the VA remain untouched, its boundaries sharp, was met, but external threats to these from other welfare programs

332 U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Study of Health Care for American Veterans, 4.
blurred the formerly rigid path veterans had to follow to federal aid and services. Starting with the Social Security Act of 1935, welfare legislation opened up general channels of passage that veterans and non-veterans could use.

In the face of these changes, the traditional argument for veterans’ exceptional status was diminishing. The ability of the VA system to sustain itself and its singular position was widely supported from veterans, representatives, and senators across rural, urban, partisan, age, and ability-based lines. The VA’s survival, however, was also due to the massive administrative and bureaucratic inertia it embodied. Predating the New Deal agencies, the VA had grown over decades. Founded in the wake of World War I and given substantial new purpose during World War II through the GI Bill, the VA maintained its importance as more than ten million service members came home, and it grew in stature as veterans of previous wars aged and used more services. With the largest healthcare system in the country, connections to state and federal bureaucracy in every state, and relevance across demographic and political lines, the VA contained an administrative mass potentially unrivaled among non-military executive agencies.

Inertia, however, entails more than mass; it involves velocity, momentum, and acceleration. For the VA to perpetuate its staid authority, the administrative bulk had to be powered by a political idea. Unshakeable in 1944, by the 1970s the idea that emanated from veterans’ organizations and sustained the VA—that veterans deserved a separate system to reflect their special status—had lost energy. Affronts to the VA’s sovereignty emerged from outside veterans’ politics; they were not aiming to erode the VA but could do so merely through implication. As laws passed that provided
Medicare and Medicaid, housing assistance, and higher education and training assistance, the organizing principle behind the post-1944 VA began to degrade. Veteran status was no longer the only way to qualify for such programs. With only their citizenship to qualify them, veterans and nonveterans could make use of a quilted patchwork of welfare and assistance services open to any other citizen as well.
The Unresolved Readjustment of Vietnam Veterans

Alongside their political status, veterans occupy a singular social status in America. Beginning with the glorification of the Minutemen at Lexington and Concord, stretching through adulation of the greatest generation, and into the yellow ribbon campaigns of the Gulf and Iraq Wars, veterans are traditionally regarded as embodiments of citizenship and honorable conduct. Although unpopular wars existed, the War of 1812 and World War I were poorly remembered, the Vietnam War’s singular unpopularity and divisiveness had profound social effects on its veterans. The story of the evolution of American veterans’ benefits and veteran status remains incomplete without taking into account the social influence of the Vietnam War. Unlike after previous wars, American society responded to Vietnam veterans with deep uncertainty, but with no cohesive narrative about the war’s veterans, people were left with a social void. Traditional conduits between veterans and the civilian population like homecoming parades and the large veterans organizations were unable or failed to transmit the story of the Vietnam generation. In the absence of information, the protest and negative media coverage surrounding the war filled in the gap. In addition to the social dislocation of the Vietnam cohort, their readjustment was a lurching process that continued to cause controversy for decades. The success that the public had begun to expect from veterans under the previous GI Bills was not made visible, furthering confusion about the mystifying veterans. Although it is unclear what, if any, influence these issues had on veterans’ policy during the
Vietnam Era, the social response and readjustment issues of Vietnam veterans undoubtedly altered the popular understanding of veterans in America.

Outside of Congressional hearing rooms and the reach of American Legion rhetoric, America struggled to make sense of its returning young veterans. The war pervaded American politics and society, intertwining foreign policy, social movements, veterans’ policy, and veterans’ experiences. Vietnam veterans presented politicians, policymakers, and advocates with new challenges—the solutions that had been so radically effective after World War II and the Korean War appeared to do little as Vietnam veterans slid into disrepute. In the American public eye, World War II veterans had established a standard for returning soldiers that Korean War veterans then solidified: make use of GI Bill provisions for education and loans and contribute to the growing American middle class. Regardless of the actual results of readjustment, the Vietnam veterans seemed to fail to do this, bewildering the American public. Further, Vietnam veterans did not act like the triumphant World War II veterans to whom they were so frequently compared. In 1967, Vietnam veterans formed the first veterans’ group in American history to protest against the war they had fought in while it was still in progress.\(^{333}\) They also clashed with established veterans’ organizations, the traditional intermediaries between veterans and American politics and society. For politicians and the public, Vietnam veterans and the Vietnam War presented singular challenges and peculiarities, especially when compared with the increasingly sanctified World War II generation.

Academics, policy makers, and veterans during the Vietnam Era and since had struggled to determine the genesis of the confused experience and legacy of Vietnam veterans. Blame has been placed at the feet of Congress, veterans’ organizations, the Veterans Administration, the media, and veterans themselves. Regardless of fault, wrongdoing, or negligence, the contemporaneous social turbulence surrounding Vietnam veterans and decline in political distinctiveness for veterans at the federal level acted to change the nature of veteran status in America. The political fights of the 1960s and 1970s battered veterans’ political status but allowed the exclusivity of veterans’ benefits and the VA to stay mostly in tact. The social tension and readjustment issues that shrouded Vietnam veterans are integral to the evolution of veterans’ status in the late twentieth century. After the acute turmoil of Vietnam faded in the 1980s, veterans’ political and social status remained battered, depressed.

Instead of showing causality from the unpopularity of the war and the social struggles of the veterans to mid-century veterans’ policy, it is more important to reckon with the deep influence unpopularity and controversy had on the Vietnam veteran experience and the relationship between America and its veterans.

The readjustment of “the Vietnam veteran” is still hotly contested. Popular narratives from the period and after suggest that Vietnam veterans failed to achieve what previous cohorts of veterans had: education, employment, stable homes, dignity. More recent analyses, however, have argued that Vietnam veterans adjusted to their return to civilian life with relative ease, facing the normal challenges of any returning soldiers.334 Research on the post-Vietnam readjustment remains ongoing and

inconclusive. Whether mid-century veterans’ benefits were sufficient, especially in
terms of their education benefits, remains unclear as well. Inadequacies and treatment
scandals in the VA health care system also influenced both readjustment and
perception of Vietnam veterans. As with most generalizations, these competing
narratives offer truths and oversimplifications. No matter the outcomes of studies
twenty years on, however, the experiences of Vietnam veterans at the time with the
VA system, with the established veterans organizations, and in transitioning into
civilian life were fraught with challenges and myriad difficulties. While the search for
clarity about the actual experiences, successes, and failures of Vietnam veterans
continues, the significance of the social standing of Vietnam veterans is more easily
understood. The negativity surrounding the Vietnam War itself, the culture and
priorities of the large veterans’ organizations, and the media portrayal of veteran
readjustment all acted together to tarnish the social status of the Vietnam veteran
generation as a whole.

The role of popular culture in the Vietnam Era was profound. In the late
1960s, particularly after 1968,335 Vietnam veterans emerged as a group distinct not
for valor or moral righteousness, as World War II veterans had been, but for
dishonorable conduct, atrocities, and drug use.336 According to the newspaper articles
and portrayals that dominated the media, Vietnam veterans struggled to find jobs,
were unable to make use of VA educational programs, and lapsed easily into drug
addiction. Vietnam is famously known as the “first televised war,” but the growing

335 David E. Benoir, Steven M. Champlin, and Timothy S. Kolly, The Vietnam Veteran: A History of
Studies 26, no. 1 (1992), 61.
influence of TV was wider than nightly images of dead Americans and burned Vietnamese villages. As media focus shifted from the war abroad to diplomatic and political issues surrounding the war at home, coverage of struggling veterans increased. Historian Patrick Hagopian argues that stories about Vietnam veterans became intertwined with the national climate at large and the veterans “carried the stains of defeat and disgrace,” eventually becoming “living embodiments of the war [as] their difficult readjustment to civilian life became a metaphor for the nation’s problems.”

The poor reputation and alignment of Vietnam veterans with general disillusionment about the war was not contained to TV news. In movies and serialized TV shows, the Vietnam veteran quickly became a go-to character trope since he required almost no backstory to justify violent acts or psychological issues that moved the plot forward. The content and quantity of fictional programming about Vietnam veterans contrasted sharply with movies about World War II veterans. While Vietnam veterans provided convenient villains and metaphors in the 1970s, in the aftermath of World War II, “films about veterans gave occasion for reflecting upon the healing values of our domestic and civic institutions.”

Veterans were also symbols of the reviled draft system. From 1965 through 1968, a rapid increase in the size of the military led to expanded draft calls and the end of many types of deferments, which brewed resentment and increasing protest against the war. Despite the growing resentment, the major veterans organizations

support federal draft policy through the draft’s end in 1973. The influence of the Vietnam draft on war experience, short-term, and long-term readjustment has also remained a disputed topic that grapples with race and socioeconomic status. The racially and socially charged debate about the draft during the Vietnam War stoked tensions. One factor that has emerged as a critical determinant of readjustment success, however, is exposure to “heavy combat” versus support positions, which sparked more incendiary debate because of the higher likelihood of draftees to face such situations. The end of the draft in 1973 did little to alleviate the resentment and social outrage that had grown until the point.

The troubled readjustment that many Vietnam veterans faced was not simply a symptom of social stigmatization. After the generally positive experiences of the cohorts of veterans that separated after the initial 1944 GI Bill, veterans seemed to have become one of the success stories of the modern American state. The painful and socially disruptive readjustment process after World War I seemed part of a bygone time, an issue that the GI Bill had solved, in the process becoming one of the most widely acclaimed pieces of legislation in American history. The social trauma of the Vietnam War ruined this triumphant and largely unperturbed history. Apart from stigma and backlash, Vietnam veterans ran into large-scale problems with the health care and education provisions of the benefits package. Issues with the education benefits were both internal—not enough funding for most college tuitions—and external—the changing norms surrounding education had made bachelors degrees

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342 Ibid., 185.
much more common by the 1960s. The veterans’ health care system faced a slew of
issues concerning care and provision of services, though many like understaffing,
long waits, and bureaucratic minutia, pre-dated the Vietnam Era. There were,
however, some challenges specific to the Vietnam generation that profoundly affected
their post-service experience.

When Vietnam veterans began to use VA hospitals in the mid-1960s, the
system had already existed for more than 40 years. As the 1977 National Academy of
Sciences outlined, the vast majority, as much as 80 percent, of VA hospital beds were
filled with older veterans who did not have service-connected disabilities and
required extended care. Young Vietnam veterans entered the system as unwieldy
outliers. Their youth and acute wounds set them apart from the other patients and the
staff, who were sometimes unsure how to accommodate the recently returned
veterans. Medical advanced had also made the “wounded-to-killed ratio” much more
weighted in favor of severe wounds and amputations rather than deaths. The
availability of helicopter airlifts and better field care options meant that veterans
entered the VA system with more extensive and care-intensive wounds. Drug and
alcohol addiction and psychological issues also harried veterans as the VA system
that had been set up and vehemently protected to treat them failed to achieve its goals.
In 1973, Ralph Nader helped fund and publicize a wide-ranging study of the Vietnam
veterans. Eventually published as a book, The Discarded Army tackled many of the
grievances those plugged into the Vietnam veteran community could see. In a section
on the VA health care system, the report argues that the VA health care system’s
“unique structure has created a variety of profound and disturbing problems.”

The long-term focus of the system and the lack of psychiatric resources put the needs of Vietnam veterans at a particular disadvantage.

Despite less generous education benefits, a larger portion of Vietnam veteran participated in educational and training benefits than did World War II veterans, with 28.6 percent of World War II and 60.1 percent of Vietnam era veterans attending college under the GI Bill. However, college was no longer the unqualified leg-up it had been in the 1940s and 1950s. That veterans “no longer enjoyed a GI Bill that made access to higher education a substantial benefit of service,” and social norms surrounding higher education had made college attendance much more routine meant that the traditional military route into the middle class had been compromised.

Increased access to higher education for non-veterans allowed more people to reach the college level. Despite the huge increase in the portion of the veteran population attending college between World War II and the Vietnam era, Vietnam veterans made up a smaller percentage of the overall college student population than the earlier veterans. Unlike the original GI Bill, which had provided dedicated tuition funds, the Vietnam GI Bill provided students with a lump-sum stipend to cover costs while they attended school. As the price of college education rose, the meager assistance the VA provided left more veterans without coverage. For the veterans who did arrive

345 Ibid., 73.
346 Ibid., 240.
349 Ibid., 241.
on campus, many found it challenging to fit in with other students who were younger and less experienced and frequently protested the war the veterans had just left.

Comparisons were inevitably drawn between the World War II and Korea veterans, who had helped drive the post-war economic boom (in large part due to the GI Bills), and the foundering Vietnam generation. Vietnam veterans were unlike either of the two groups that had come back from service with access to GI Bill benefits. One of the most conspicuous differences, and one that is frequently cited, was the immediate return experience of the Vietnam veteran. Unlike the troops of nearly all American wars, Vietnam veterans did not travel back to America on ships and then go home in parades. Instead, they arrived on commercial airliners one by one and tried to slip back into the American lifestyle. Frequently, a veteran could transition from jungle to American suburbia in less than 24 hours. Such differences created a gap not only between Vietnam veterans and the general public, but also between Vietnam veterans and veterans from other wars. World War I, World War II, and Korean War veterans had a hard time understanding the long-haired Vietnam veterans who protested the war and hid their veteran status from others. The negative image of Vietnam veterans did not overtly limit their access to expected veterans’ benefits like health care and education, but instead of conferring special status and respect, military service gave many Vietnam veterans little more than wounds and social dislocation.

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The distance between established veterans’ organizations and Vietnam veterans was only one issue plaguing the veterans’ lobby. Starting in the 1970s, the organizations held significantly less sway than they had during the original GI Bill fight or in the 1950s. Although the Legion and the other groups still held the tools that had made them strong earlier in the century—powerful connections in Congress, representation of the majority of veterans’ voices, and local posts throughout the country—they were stricken with an ailment effecting many large, membership-based organizations. In *Diminished Democracy*, her work on American civil society, Theda Skocpol tries to diagnose the causes of the blight and its effects.352 By the 1970s, the Legion’s World War I-era founders had left most public offices and veterans of World War II-era politics were beginning to age out as well. Fewer senators and congressmen were members of the American Legion, which cut off a major artery of political influence.353 Frequently in the 1940s, more than half of the House committee hearing arguments about proposed legislation were Legionnaires, their wives were in the Women’s Auxiliary,354 and they knew the Legion representative personally. In the 1970s, Legion membership had ceased to be the political boon it had once been and fewer politicians made courting the Legion’s support a priority.355

The Legion was also suffering from internal discord. Existing Legionnaires, predominantly World War II veterans, were utterly unable to connect with the returning Vietnam veterans. In general, members of the three big veterans

352 Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 153
354 Except for Edith Nourse Rodgers, who was the ranking Republican on the House committee that passed the 1944 GI Bill, the sole woman on the committee, and the first person to receive a pen from Roosevelt during the signing of the original GI Bill.
355 Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 191.
organizations failed to identify with the new Vietnam veterans, a trend reflected in the rolls of dues-paying members. After World War II, two million (out of twelve million) veterans joined at least one of the three, swelling their ranks and coffers. In the years after Vietnam, through the 1970s, less than 100,000 of the nine million Vietnam era veterans became members. World War II veterans in leadership positions in the organizations were decades older than the few Vietnam veterans who joined, and the older veterans had their own interests and federal benefits to protect. With such a majority of older, conservative members, leader in the Legion and other groups had to find a way to faithfully represent the members’ desires and satisfy their dictate to protect the interests of American veterans in general.

Despite the elevated distinctiveness promised them by politics and the rhetoric of traditional veterans’ organizations, Vietnam veterans occupied a sacred space in neither society nor the veterans’ organizations themselves. The near-absence of Vietnam veterans from the big three organizations meant that they held little power in creating the national platforms that representatives of the Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars would fight for in Congress and lobby for at the VA. In fact, by the 1970s, the aging memberships and political conservatism of these organizations were redirecting the groups’ legislative priorities. Traditionally conservative, the veterans’ organizations had to manage a fine boundary between securing thorough benefits and limiting lavish federal spending. While ideological gymnastics had long ago settled how to make peace between these conflicting needs, steeply rising costs at the VA for health care and

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education were straining the decades-old truce. Frequently, the organizations had to choose between potential programs in their legislative agendas. Aging memberships and the unappealing nature of young Vietnam veterans pushed veterans’ organizations to support post-readjustment benefits like pensions, burial benefits, and long-term health care. At the time, lobbyists appeared to show “greater interest in burial benefits than in educational programs.” The conflict between readjustment benefits such as acute health care services and later-life needs grew as costs for Vietnam veterans rose, World War II veterans aged, and the groups’ influence waned.

The veterans’ groups, particularly the Legion, had traditionally been the liaison between veterans and the public, translating the needs and demands of their charges into imperatives the other could understand. Within a few years of the war’s end, ninety-two World War II veterans held seats in Congress, many bringing with them priorities of and connections to the Legion. In comparison, a mere eleven Vietnam veterans in total held seats in the national legislature—ten in the House and one in the Senate. Without significant representation in either the organizations or Congress, Vietnam veterans “virtually disappeared” from benefits debates. Additionally, their absence from these key places made it more difficult for the public to understand the character and nature of Vietnam veterans beyond media portrayals. The big three’s inability to understand Vietnam veterans, the low numbers of Vietnam veterans in the organizations, the decreasing influence of the organizations in general, and the fractious nature of the Vietnam class made it difficult to present an

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358 Ibid., 19, referencing the assessment of a “critical observer of the veterans’ organizations.”
359 Scott, Vietnam Veterans Since the War, 8.
360 Ibid.
image that the American public could relate to, leaving room for less nuanced, more provocat
evive representations.

Indeed, one of the major readjustment problems Vietnam veterans faced was a pervasive sense of misunderstanding. In order to understand and combat this, the federal government ordered a series of studies over the course of a decade specifically seeking to understand the Vietnam veteran’s problems. On of the earliest, a survey commissioned by the VA in 1971 entitled *A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans*, exposed the growing rift between so-called “alienated veterans,” who were predominantly non-white or less educated, and the rest of the young veteran population in feeling that society still owed them a debt.\(^{361}\) Overall, the study presents a picture of low levels of dissatisfaction or resentment among veterans, except for the alienated groups, and public satisfaction regarding the government’s accommodations for veterans and the public’s reception of them.\(^{362}\) One major observation, however, was that even among white and educated veterans, a significant portion felt alienated, underappreciated, or that the public underestimated the difficulties of readjustment.\(^{363}\)

In 1974, the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Vance Hartke, an opponent of the war, ordered the creation of *Source Material on the Vietnam Veteran*, a compilation of media coverage and academic studies concerning Vietnam veterans. The 900-page compendium offers a generally bleak group of articles, many focusing on drug addiction and the social discomfort surrounding veterans. In his introduction, Hartke wrote, “almost 7 million men and women have re-entered civilian life as

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\(^{362}\) *Ibid.*, see 8, 57, 72, 87.

Vietnam Era veterans and in large measure we know little about them or their attitudes...[they have] often been the center of a storm of controversy and many of the articles herein reflect this.” The volume provides no definitive statements on Vietnam era veterans, except perhaps to show the deep confusion surrounding the veterans at the highest levels of federal responsibility. Two more studies, *Myths and Realities: A Study of Attitudes Towards Vietnam Era Veterans*, released in 1980, and *Legacies of Vietnam: Comparative Adjustment of Veterans and their Peers*, released in 1981, also sought to make sense of the chaotic response to the veterans and the muddled reports of the veterans’ readjustment.

Efforts continue among academics, journalists, policy makers, and veterans to tease out the causes, effects, and implications of the return of Vietnam veterans throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Each new discovery illuminates new and changing perceptions and realities of the Vietnam veteran readjustment process, but the search for a way to understand the experience of Vietnam veterans, and how to respond via policy changes, continues.
Conclusion

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, public opinion toward veterans rose significantly.\(^{364}\) Yellow ribbons, a symbol used during the Gulf War as well, sprouted on lapels and car bumpers as the “support our troops” slogan gained prominence in political and social contexts.\(^{365}\) Sixty-four years after the original GI Bill’s signing, Congress passed the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, legislation which provides higher education tuition payments for any veterans who have served a minimum of 90 days on active duty and been discharged honorably.\(^{366}\) While traditional veterans groups like the VFW and the American Legion provided support for the bill, veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were a substantial part of the advocacy process, frequently acting through a new organization, the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA).

The 2009 act provided the most generous educational benefits since the World War II GI Bill. With just 90 days of service, veterans were eligible for 40 percent of the maximum benefit, while after 36 months of service veterans became eligible for the maximum tuition benefit.\(^{367}\) Maximum tuition and fees benefits were capped at the price the most expensive public undergraduate institution in the state in which the

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\(^{367}\) Office of the Press Secretary “Background on the Post-9/11 GI Bill” (2009), White House.
veteran resides. For veterans eligible for the maximum benefit amount, but still unable to pay the full tuition, the Yellow Ribbon Program allowed schools to enter into a voluntary partnership to match federal funding.\textsuperscript{368} The bill marked another stage in the evolution of the GI Bill system, and although the bill’s tuition benefits were amended down in subsequent years, they still covered substantial tuition payments.

The history of veterans’ benefits can be neatly divided into two sections: before and after the GI Bill of 1944. From the Revolution through the bill’s passage, only officers and the disabled were granted federal pensions while the remaining veterans resumed a civilian political status despite the social implications of military service. Though Civil War pension policies played an important role in liberalizing federal spending and growing the administrative bureaucracy of the state, they maintained the bifurcation of the veteran population into the deserving and those who were not. Largely due to the efforts of the American Legion, the GI Bill cut ties with tradition and included all veterans in its groundbreaking benefit program. Further, the Legion’s relentless politicking efforts ensured that all of the GI Bill’s now-famous provisions—education, unemployment payments, job training, home and business loans, health care—were administered through the VA. In achieving these legislative victories, the Legion and its Congressional allies ensured that regardless of disability, veteran identity would lead to special benefits and thus elevated political status.

The Legion insisted that the benefits included in the bill applied only to veterans in part to protect the veterans’ political status from the extension of benefits to other non-veteran citizens. However, the passage of programs like Medicare,

\textsuperscript{368} Ibid.
Medicaid, and the Higher Education Act in the 1960s placed the special status of veterans into jeopardy. Despite these external threats, the Legion’s administrative tactic—to insulate veterans’ benefits within the VA—helped keep lines between veteran and non-veteran benefits sharp. In the 1970s, however, credible suggestions that some VA benefits integrate into larger federal programs threatened the bulwark of the new veteran political status. Although the VA was able to survive intact, the durability of the separate veterans’ system had been fundamentally questioned. In addition to these political challenges, the negative public reaction and media portrayal of Vietnam veterans largely removed the privileged social status veterans had traditionally enjoyed.

Whether the September 11 attacks will restore veterans’ social or political status is unclear. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have inspired outrage and political backlash at home, but veterans remain a popular political rallying point. Supporting veterans has become increasingly appealing in Washington since the revelations of the 2014 VA scandal and investigation. The American Legion and other older veterans’ organizations continue to testify in hearings about concerns over the sanctity of the VA system. Yet the Affordable Care Act of 2012 has increased federal health care assistance and marked even more people as deserving of federal assistance. A proposal from President Barack Obama during this year’s State of the Union to fund free community college threatens another of the most revered GI Bill benefits. Indeed, in January 2015, journalist Jonathan Alter predicted that when the
proposal to fund community college is signed into law, “we’ll look back on the idea as Barack Obama’s GI Bill.”  

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