

The GI Bill ^[1]

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When President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, few people had any inkling of the profound impact it would have on American higher education and on society as a whole.

The GI Bill of Rights, as it became known, provided unemployment benefits, home loans, and, most important, financial support for veterans returning from World War II to attend college or take vocational training. (The term "GI" referred to "government issue" and became synonymous with "soldier.")

In the 1940s, little more than 20 percent of American military forces had secondary school diplomas, and only 3 percent had college degrees. Prior to the GI Bill, colleges were predominately private, elitist ^[2], liberal arts, and often highly discriminatory.

The GI Bill changed all that. As scholar Milton Greenberg points out: "Today, American universities are now overwhelmingly public (80 percent of enrollments); focused heavily on occupational, technical, and scientific education; huge, urban-oriented, suitable for commuter attendance; and highly democratic."

No one anticipated the enormous enthusiasm with which returning veterans embraced the opportunity for a college education, especially when the bill paid tuition and living expenses for any school to which a veteran could gain admittance. In 1940, 160,000 people earned college degrees; by 1950, that number had leapt to 500,000. Veterans studying under the GI Bill totaled almost half of all college students in the late 1940s.

In addition to the 2.2 million veterans who attended college under this historic legislation, another 3.5 million took vocational training courses. By the time the initial GI Bill expired in 1956, the United States, according to Greenberg, had gained 450,000 trained engineers; 240,000 accountants; 238,000 teachers; 91,000 scientists; 67,000 doctors; 22,000 dentists; and more than 1 million other college-educated individuals.

Equally significant, GI Bill educational and home loan benefits created a large, skilled, upwardly mobile American middle class that would sustain the nation's growth and development for decades to come. The GI Bill also lifted the educational expectations of the children of these veterans and established a strong belief in the value of learning as a lifelong pursuit.

Later versions of the GI Bill have continued to provide educational benefits for veterans, whether they served in peacetime or during conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq.

Sketchbook U.S.A. Edited by George Clack, et al. U.S. Department of State: Bureau of International Programs, 2016. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170907124737/https://kr.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/75/2017/04/sketchbook.pdf> ^[3].

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