

The GI Bill and African Americans: A Promise Not Kept.

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It would be difficult to name more than a half dozen bills that were as transformative as the original GI Bill of Rights which was passed on June 22, 1944, and was called at the time, "A New Deal for Veterans." The purpose of the law was to fulfill a great social contract that honored the bravery, sacrifice, and selflessness of the men and women that served in World War II, the greatest global conflict the world had ever seen. World War II was a conflict in which the disease of war touched every continent except Antarctica.

During World War II, American soldiers helped turn the tide by leading Allied forces in the liberation of Europe. Along with troops from the United Kingdom, free French forces, Canada, and a half-dozen other nations, Americans led the largest amphibious landing in Normandy, France.

The violence experienced by the more than 16 million American WWII soldiers is nearly unimaginable. In total, more than 400,000 soldiers were killed, and another 670,000 suffered significant injuries. In addition, another 130,000 Americans were prisoners of war, and tens of thousands of them never made it back to American soil.

Beyond the deaths and injuries was the mental toll, and the fields of psychology and psychiatry had only just begun to measure it systematically. The War Department estimated that the average soldier's "breaking point" was between 60 and 240 days of seeing combat depending on the levels of violence. During this era, what we now call PTSD, was known as "shell shock" or "combat fatigue" or even "old sergeant's disease." Researchers have now estimated that at least 1 in 5 veterans suffered from some form of mental trauma and that the vast majority of them never sought or received professional help.

Within this context, the New Deal for Veterans was an appropriate way to pay back those that saved the world from an unimaginable fate. The GI Bill was breathtaking in its scope and ambition. The GI Bill of Rights was a law that helped transform the lives of veterans. The law provided free tuition to colleges and universities. Within the college sector, the post-WWII timeframe is considered the beginning of the modern era of higher education. Before WWII, fewer than 20% of high school graduates pursued a college degree. After WWII, and the advance of the GI Bill, that figure nearly doubled. Total college enrollment doubled in the 5 years after the passing of the bill.

The GI Bill of Rights also provided significant housing benefits, including access to capital and loans that helped propel the expansion of the modern suburb. With builders like Levitt and the expansion of highways, many American soldiers found themselves transitioning from living in the city to an affordable, market-rate suburban home.

The GI Bill also extended health care and unemployment insurance to veterans, and it significantly improved the health and social safety net of those veterans. In total, nearly 8 million Americans accessed the educational benefits of the original GI Bill which ran through 1956, and it contributed to the 1950s economic boom.

The success of the GI Bill could be considered one of the top 5 most transformative bills of the 20th Century if not for what happened to African American soldiers. While the GI Bill did not specifically exclude African American veterans from accessing benefits, it was structured – by design – in a way that effectively shut the door on *1.2 million* black veterans who valiantly fought in every theater of the war while also being treated as second class citizens within the ranks.

During the development of the bill in 1944, many elected officials, predominantly from the South, feared that returning veterans would use their heroic service to advocate against Jim Crow laws. To try to preemptively mitigate any social gains advocated by African Americans, powerful Southern politicians held up the passage of the bill until it was ensured that the benefits would be administered by the state government and not the federal government.

The GI Bill, while transformative for the average soldier, was nearly useless to African Americans. The data speak for themselves—by 1947, fewer than 3% of VA home loans in the Deep South went to African Americans. The north wasn't much better – of the 67,000 VA home loans awarded in New Jersey about 100 went to African Americans.

The GI Bill's educational benefit was also of limited use to blacks. While most southern colleges and universities had an official prohibition against black students, northern institutions had limited capacity for them. Of the few African Americans that could access their educational benefit, over 90% were forced to attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). The HBCUs at the time were filled beyond capacity and could not serve the vast majority of eligible black veterans.

At the expiration of the original GI Bill in 1956, just under 8 million WWII veterans had accessed their education and training benefits, and over 4.3 million home loans worth more than 30 billion dollars had been dispersed. Virtually none of it went to black veterans. As a result of this injustice, employment, college attendance and wealth amongst the average veteran skyrocketed while African American veterans were left behind. There was, states Katznelson, “no greater instrument for widening an already huge racial gap in postwar America than the GI Bill.”

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