The G.I. Bill

More than 2,250,000 American veterans of WWII received at least part of their college education as a result of legislation known as "The G.I. Bill."

By Michael D. Haydock

By the time the last American World War II veteran was graduated in 1956, the United States was richer by 450,000 engineers; 238,000 teachers; 91,000 scientists; 67,000 doctors; 22,000 dentists; and more than a million other college-trained men and women, thanks largely to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, universally known as "the G.I. Bill." This landmark legislation helped steer a country geared to winning a globe-spanning war—with roughly 8 million citizens in uniform in 1945 and 22 million involved in war production—smoothly back into a peacetime economy; led to lasting changes in America's system of higher education; and turned uncertainty into opportunity for thousands of war veterans.

The idea of aiding veterans grew partially out of economic concerns. With World War II winding down, many foresaw the day when millions of servicemen and -women would begin re-entering the job market. Government officials wished to find a way to ensure against anything akin to the 1932 march on Washington, D.C., by 15,000 disgruntled World War I veterans, who were suffering from the ravages of the Great Depression. This "Bonus Army" sought immediate credit for the certificates they had received upon being discharged years earlier. These notes were not scheduled to mature until 1945, but the impoverished men who had risked their lives for their country felt they deserved immediate assistance.

The main inspiration for the G.I. Bill, however, was a sincere desire to assist returnees. The American Legion, which would become a primary force in guiding the legislation through Congress, declared that "Veterans earned certain rights to which they are entitled. Gratuities do not enter the picture."

In his "fireside chat" to the nation on July 28, 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt made his first mention of the veterans' benefits that should follow the war and touched on the more practical aspects of the problem. With the suffering of the Depression vivid in his memory, Roosevelt declared that American veterans "must not be demobilized into an environment of inflation and unemployment, to a place on a bread line or a corner selling apples." He suggested government-financed education and training as one facet of veterans' benefits that should be implemented.

The president's concern was echoed in the halls of Congress, where Republican Representative Hamilton Fish of New York, a staunch conservative and frequent foe of Roosevelt's, nevertheless agreed that veterans could not "come home and sell apples as they did after the last war, because if that is all they are offered, I believe we would have chaotic and revolutionary conditions in America."

By November 1943, more than a score of Congressmen were sponsoring bills relating to "veterans' rights." The Senate passed its version of the G.I. Bill in March 1944; the House of Representatives followed suit in May. The compromise bill, ready for the president's signature soon after the June 6 Allied Invasion of Normandy was finally signed into law at the White House on June 22, 1944, with members of Congress and various veterans groups in attendance.

But with the war not yet over, most future candidates for veterans' relief went about their business that day, unaware that their futures may have been altered by what was going on in the nation's capital.

The Keenan twins, for example, were at work in a base hospital in England. The second youngest in a first generation Irish-American family of a dozen siblings, Ellen and Teresa had trained as nurses before the war and enlisted in the Army Nurse Corps in 1942. Their patients, unaware there were two Miss Keenans working on different shifts, referred to them as "that nurse who never sleeps."

An infantryman with the 20th Armored Division, John Rigas was in France when President Roosevelt signed what was officially designated Public Law 346. Rigas had landed in Europe.
As members of Congress and representatives of various veterans groups watched, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act—otherwise known as “the G.I. Bill”—into law on June 22, 1944. Among the motives inspiring the legislation was the desire to spare the veterans and the nation the economic hardships that accompanied the return, years before, of those who fought in World War I.

Don Balfour, honorably discharged because of his poor eyesight, was working hard to pay for his classes at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., where he served as the editor of the school paper, The Hatchet.

The G.I. Bill entitled anyone with ninety days of service to one year of higher education. Each additional month of active duty earned a month of schooling, up to a maximum of 48 months. The law set a $500 per year limit for tuition, fees, and supplies, at a time when the cost of top schools ranged from $350 to $450. Single veterans could claim a subsistence allowance of $50 per month, while those who were married drew $75. By 1948, inflation had pushed these limits to $75 for those who were single and $105 for anyone with two dependents.

Initially few thought that the program would have much impact. When the War Department conducted several surveys concerning the number of service personnel who intended to enter college after the war, the results were not encouraging. Before the adoption of the bill, the Research Branch of the Morale Service Division concluded, after canvassing a representative cross-section, that only seven percent of those eligible intended to return to school or college after the war and that a government subsidy would increase that number only to eight percent. A 1945 poll confidently predicted that “a minimum of eight percent and a maximum of twelve percent of all veterans of Army service in World War II will attend full-time school or college.” The surveys also concluded that married men, those over 24, and those who had been in college prior to their entry into the military and had now been away from school for more than a year would be “quite unlikely to return to a school.” An article entitled “G.I.’s Reject Education,” which appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, concluded that as beneficial as the G.I. Bill seemed to be, it had one conspicuous drawback: “The guys aren’t buying it.”

Don Balfour did not see the Post article, but he learned of the passage of the law and thought it would make a good story for The Hatchet. He called on a vocational officer at the Veterans Administration one day after President Roosevelt had signed the bill. Part way through the interview Balfour asked if be
The response of the returnees to the G.I. Bill overwhelmed many colleges, which saw their student population swell dramatically almost overnight. Scenes such as these were typical as veterans fought long lines to purchase supplies or register for classes.

In addition to the established institutions, veterans could choose to attend one of the new schools that seemingly sprang to life overnight, often on the sites of former military bases. Congress amended a 1940 act that created housing for defense workers to allow the facilities to be turned over to returning veterans. In August 1945, Congress went further, approving the use of surplus war-related buildings for educational purposes.

Out West, the University of California at Berkeley gained 17 buildings, totalling more than 185,000 square feet of floor space, under the federal program. Nationwide, the U.S. Office of Education estimated that the Veterans Educational Facilities Program, as Congress had named it, supplied 78 percent of the space that colleges urgently needed.

As the veterans began to crowd onto campuses across the nation there were, naturally enough, instances of "culture clash." Lehigh's freshmen had been required, since before anyone could remember, to wear brown socks, a brown tie, and a beanie. Those who did not don such attire could expect punishment from the Junior Vigilante Committee. But, when veterans at Lehigh chose to ignore the tradition, it was a rash upper-classman indeed who attempted to force a brown dink onto the skull of a man who might have fought on Iwo Jima or on the beaches of Normandy. The school paper, which was still controlled by "civilians," ran an editorial pointing out the advantages offered by hazing, paddling, and wearing beanies. Few of the veterans bothered to respond; none took up wearing beanies.

All across the country colleges scrambled to meet the needs of the returning veterans. Lack of classroom space, teacher shortages, and inadequate housing for the students, all became immediate problems. At the University of Pittsburgh, there were so many students that classes had to be held on both a day and a night schedule. At Iowa State University too, classes began at 7:30 A.M. and went until 10:30 at night. The University of Florida, where enrollment jumped 155 percent, conducted a 61-hour academic week.

During the first year of the program, 8,200 ex-servicemen and -women enrolled in college; by November 1945, the number had swelled to 88,000. But the real deluge came with the discharge of millions of military personnel in the fall and winter of 1945-46. By late 1946, total college enrollment in the United States, for the first time, exceeded two million, 48.7 percent of whom were veterans attending under the G.I. Bill.
Military surplus Quonset and Nissen huts, used both for additional classroom space and for student housing until more permanent quarters could be built, soon dotted the nation’s campuses. Before the arrival of these structures, students camped out in gyms, auditoriums, and any other space not already occupied. Having known far worse living conditions, the veterans did not complain.

At RPI, the more permanent residential quarters initially took the form of one hundred units of prefabricated housing obtained from the federal government. The commitment to build these structures was announced in February 1946. Only a month later, the list of RPI families looking for housing had grown to 250; the construction program was expanded.

Because the concept of married students was new to most of the colleges, their presence on campus created unique problems. The schools rose to the challenge by supplying both on- and off-campus family housing. They also set up day care centers and pediatric health clinics for the children.

Campus life presented unique challenges for the married students as well. Barbara Gunn, wife of a veteran studying at the University of Oregon, and a student herself, neatly summed up the experience when she wrote: "For my husband Rex and me, and many like us, college has been anything but a shelter from real life—it’s been a baby crib squeezed into one corner, diapers drying over the furnace, and grocery bills instead of prom tickets." Barbara and Rex—24 years old and a 4-year veteran of the Pacific Theater—had signed up for veterans’ housing during his freshman year. But the waiting list was long, and they never did get in.

Instead, just before their baby was born almost two years later, the Gunns managed to rent a one-bedroom house in Eugene for $45 a month—no small feat in a city where the population had grown from 35,000 in 1940 to 86,000 by the war’s end. The house was a large step up from the one-room, converted workshop that the couple had occupied earlier, where the cooking was done on a hot plate, the heat came from a cast iron stove, and the bath facilities were out the back door and thirty steps down a gravel path.

By the time Barbara and Rex Gunn were graduated, the influx of veterans onto the campuses of the nation had reached its peak and was beginning to ebb. In 1947, more than a million of the college students in the United States—49.2 percent—were veterans. They took an active role in the campus community and made their presence felt on the athletic field as well. The halfback of the University of Michigan’s 1947 championship football team was Bob Chappuis, a top contender for that year’s Heisman Trophy. A few years earlier, during his 21st mission as an aerial gunner, Chappuis had bailed out of his crippled airplane over Italy. The 1947 Heisman eventually went to Johnny Lujack, a quarterback for the University of Notre Dame who had returned to school after three years in the Navy.

By 1948, when the number of veterans in college had slipped to 975,000, there was a growing consensus among educators that the veterans were the hardest working, most serious, and best students that the campuses had ever seen. "The G.I.’s," an education editor for The New York Times wrote late in 1947, "are hogging the honor rolls and the Dean’s lists."
A professor at Lehigh spoke for most of his colleagues when he stated: "The civilian kids consider most of us doddering imbeciles. But the veterans seem to be impressed with our knowledge. They are old enough to realize that they know very little." He added that "They are the most responsive and receptive students Lehigh has ever had." One non-veteran student at Lehigh complained that the veterans "work so hard, we have to slave to keep up."

Even President Conant of Harvard changed his mind about veterans as students. In an article in Life magazine, he admitted that, "for seriousness, perceptiveness, steadiness, and all other undergraduate virtues," the former soldiers and sailors were "the best in Harvard's history." At Columbia University in '47, none of the 7,826 veterans in attendance was in serious academic difficulty. Such performances were the norm on campuses across the country.

Criticisms of the G.I. Bill for alleged abuses were few, but, as with any program of this size—more than $14 billion was eventually expended on it—there were some transgressions. Virtually all problems, however, occurred in education and training on the "trade," not the college, level. Numerous vocational schools had sprung into existence seemingly overnight. Until Congress tightened the restrictions on vocational/technical training in 1949, much of what was offered in some 5,635 such institutions was useless to those enrolled.

In 1948, while living in a cramped studio apartment on Riverside Drive in New York City, the Keenan twins began their studies at Columbia University. Thanks to credits that the school granted for their nurse's training and for courses they had taken in the Army, they received their degrees in 1950. They went on to Catholic University in Washington, D.C., for postgraduate work, earning master's degrees in education. The sisters were among the more than 64,000 women veterans to gain degrees under the G.I. Bill.

John Rigas received his degree in management engineering from RPI in 1950. The yearbook photograph taken of his graduating class includes the wives and children of the veterans. Grouped in the front, next to their gowned husbands and fathers, these family members dominate the picture. Dr. L. W. Houston, then president of the college, is pictured near the center of the photo, holding one of the youngest of the babies in his arms. Instead of looking at the camera, he is smiling down at the child.

The G.I. Bill and the veterans it helped to educate have been the subject of many studies by educators and statisticians in recent years. The findings consistently show that twenty percent of those graduates would never have been able to attend college had it not been for the bill.

By the time the provisions of the original G.I. Bill expired in 1952, roughly 15 percent—some 2.25 million—of the veterans eligible for its benefits had passed through institutions of higher learning. A study conducted by the Veterans Administration, with the assistance of the Departments of Labor and Commerce, revealed in 1965 that the G.I. Bill had substantially increased the earning power of those who had availed themselves of the opportunities it provided, and in the process, it generated an estimated $1 billion in additional income tax revenue. In less than twenty years, the federal government had recouped more than the original $14 billion cost of the program.

In 1969, Paul Cunningham, a reporter on NBC's Today show and a veteran who attended college under the G.I. Bill, spoke affectionately of the legislation on the 25th anniversary of its passage. The occasion, he said, recalled "images like olive-drab sweaters dyed blue or maroon, a lapel hat—what we called a 'ruptured duck'—young wives standing in mud to hang up baby clothes outside a Quonset hut. What it did for this country may never be reckoned... except we know it changed the entire concept of adult education.... Some had suggested, he noted, that a memorial to the G.I. Bill be established. That, Cunningham concluded, might be good. "It might remind us that once in a while we do something right."

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