

The GI Bill

Scholars have argued about U.S. state development – in particular its laggard social policy and weak institutional capacity – for generations. Neo-institutionalism has informed and enriched these debates, but, as yet, no scholar has reckoned with a very successful and sweeping social policy designed by the federal government: the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, more popularly known as the GI Bill.

Kathleen J. Frydl addresses the GI Bill in the first study based on systematic and comprehensive use of the records of the Veterans Administration. Frydl’s research situates the Bill squarely in debates about institutional development, social policy and citizenship, and political legitimacy. It demonstrates the multiple ways in which the GI Bill advanced federal power, and, at the very same time, limited its extent and its effects.

Kathleen J. Frydl has been an assistant professor in the history department at the University of California, Berkeley, since 2003. After receiving her PhD from the University of Chicago in 2000, she worked at the National Academy of Sciences. She has won academic awards from the University of Chicago, the Mellon Foundation, and the Spencer Foundation.

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Preface

I remember my surprise when I learned that some early readers of this manuscript felt I was “coming down on” or criticizing the GI Bill. A few even suggested that I might be a “revisionist” scholar of it, a label that technically means a reversal of or challenge to a previously held view, but one that has come to connote, more broadly, smug academics engaged in nitpicking of a triumphant and largely accurate history.

At the same time, I myself have often been surprised by the appearance of the GI Bill in other, recent academic histories – in particular, I am startled to read about a Bill that afforded easy access to the middle class for white veterans and barred black veterans from the same. Race discrimination in implementation of the Bill is a major storyline in the pages that follow, but it is not a simple one. Some African-American veterans found ways to use the Bill to their advantage (as we shall see). More important, at least in the context of this discussion, readjustment for any veteran – including white veterans – was a difficult, and sometimes perilous, process. For a soldier returning home from war, little was easy, and if the generous terms of the GI Bill helped to negotiate readjustment, then its sloppy implementation often complicated it.

Thus I expect that this book will incur a kind of dual displeasure: some will be upset that the history that follows does not offer a pristine depiction of the World War II GI Bill, while others will find it too celebratory, too willing to excuse or explain the veteran’s decisions and dilemmas. This fate was foretold to me when I circulated a draft version of the dissertation proposal that eventually became the research project that forms the core of this book. One day, I collected feedback in two separate meetings, and I learned from one of my professors that I “really seem to have it out for the veteran” and, later that

day, one of my graduate student friends (who read the exact same proposal) shared her view that I “really seem to take the veteran’s side.”

Though I would like to think that these two faithful readers have since expanded their view of my research, their initial reactions punctuate the two extremes that have greeted my work as it has evolved over time. In a self-authorizing or self-rationalizing way, I view these two polar-opposite responses as guided by preconceived notions about the Bill and, perhaps it is not too much to suggest, political views regarding the United States more generally.

I have taken a kind of contrarian’s pride in upsetting this all-saint or all-sinner approach to history, but the research imperative guiding this book is nothing so small as cleverness or an impish pleasure in contradicting dogmatic views. This is the first book on the World War II GI Bill to treat the records of the Veterans Administration systematically, prominently, and seriously; as a result, we are not embarking on a mission to find the GI Bill we think we already know, but uncovering the one that appears through the eyes of the agency charged with administering it. When we examine the GI Bill through this lens, its triumphs and tragedies begin to resemble the record of other large government programs, and that observation is one central theme of this book.

This theme does “revise” the largely reverential but superficial view of the World War II GI Bill in popular culture. In apprehending this, no reader is then entitled to presume a lack of respect for World War II veterans or GI Bill recipients on my behalf. In fact, it is the opposite: we do ourselves and our veterans a great disservice by idolizing that which we should honor. Worship supposes and supports a distance; it offers rituals to name that which we cannot know. But respect involves recognition; we inhabit an imaginative intimacy, admiring that which is exigent and instructive for our own lives. By remembering the soldiers of World War II as mythical legends, we have robbed them of any ability to touch and transform us. As *Atlantic* editor Benjamin Schwarz has marveled, depictions of World War II soldiers in our current day often approach “plaster saints engaged in a sanctified crusade,” an insulting distortion that persists, in part, because World War II soldiers themselves elected to move on with on their lives rather than chronicle their past in its boring, horrifying, or unnerving detail.¹

¹ See Benjamin Schwarz, “The Real War,” a review of *The Good Fight* by Stephen E. Ambrose, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, (June 2001): p.100–103; which provides a succinct and useful discussion of why some academic and public historians continue to distort the experience of American soldiers in World War II.

To me, bringing World War II and its soldiers down to earth, so to speak, allows some opportunity for us to feel obliged and inspired to follow their example. I know that in the pages that follow these veterans will recognize the war they fought and the world that greeted them when they came home, and it is my hope that in this recognition, they will feel honored.

The reunion of soldier and country was not always a happy one. The world that received soldiers returning from World War II was filled with uncertainty and different from the one these men and women left behind. A small town in the rural south was now without about 15 percent of its population, strained by racial tension and the rule of southern oligarchs, and skittish with fears of a race war. A veteran who came home would find some relatives and friends gone and a town that viewed him – whether he was white or black – apprehensively. An industrial city in the north might be richer from war contracts, but its wealth came so quickly, it grew in haphazard and unsustainable way. A veteran walking through the streets of his old working-class neighborhood would likely find slap-dash housing hastily thrown up along the streets, brimming with new occupants. He would certainly not find any housing for himself, and a young man accustomed to the company of his peers and changed by war would now very likely resettle himself in the house in which he grew up, an awkward experience that would hasten his decision to move away for school or for a job. A young veteran from the Midwest might have been so impressed by glimpses of California sunshine during the war that he decided to resettle himself out West; perhaps he did so with his new bride, a wartime girlfriend, and if so the chances would be great that they would be divorced within two years. Maybe this same young man wandered over to the shipyards, looking for steady skilled work; there the unionized workers, who had accrued savings and seniority during the war, viewed him with a tangible hostility and assigned him to jobs that were perceived to be denigrated in status because they had been performed by women or blacks during the war.

These vignettes give a small clue to how challenging even just the first few moments and first few decisions were for veterans. The readjustment of soldiers coming home from war is always a delicate and risky process, and this observation is another major theme of this book. To me, this point seems obvious – at times, painfully so. Yet, as these words were written, Senator James Webb recently proposed a readjustment package for soldiers returning home from the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq, choosing to call it a new “GI Bill,” and his plan was initially greeted with a startling amount of criticism from the current president, George W. Bush, the presumptive

Republican nominee, John McCain, and the Pentagon. To be sure, any reader of this book will emerge with a well-founded skepticism regarding claims that this new “GI Bill” will produce a cohort of recipients who will “pay back” the amount spent on them by producing more for the economy and making more money, thus paying more in taxes. These best-case scenarios will play out in some of these veterans’ lives, but not in others. But I hope that any reader will also know that the cost of *not* dealing generously with veterans is much greater than the money spent on a readjustment package – greater in ethical, economic, and political terms. We simply cannot afford to have soldiers disregarded or dismissed by the country that sent them to war.

Finally, I want to take issue with the use of the term “GI Bill” to describe the Webb proposal or the Montgomery “GI Bills” that are its immediate predecessor. Both refer to readjustment packages intended to serve an all-volunteer force (AVF), not a draft force. Thus their closest and most reasonable historical analog is the gifts of land given to soldiers who enlisted to fight in the Mexican War. “GI Bills” are, in our recent past, packages meant for soldiers drafted to fight in a war. I clarify this not because historians are fussy about the little details of our past (though this may be true), but because “GI Bill” has come to be a kind of synonym for dealing with our soldiers justly and generously, hence its use can be unintentionally deceptive. Our veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan deserve all the benefits we can give them, but nothing will resolve the crisis of legitimacy and power in our military except a more equitable model of service and more deliberation over the wars they are sent to fight. The ability of the World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War GI Bills to successfully readjust soldiers rested, first of all, on the perception of the fairness of the fight – and, insofar as this was not true, that is also where the problems began. The Webb proposal is generous (and deserved), but it will not, by itself, make the United States’ current force structure just, nor will it compensate for sending soldiers off to fight an unnecessary and unwise war in Iraq. These points touch on another overarching and important theme of this book: we cannot sequester the world of the military, the fighting of war, and the return of soldiers from the larger questions and problems of American history. We, as Americans, are the force we send, the fights we choose, and the favors we bestow.

San Francisco, CA
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Acknowledgments

That this book exists is a credit to Barry D. Karl, gifted political historian and my intellectual mentor at the University of Chicago. His vision, and occasionally his voice, can be found on the pages of this book. Karl retired shortly after I came to Chicago (I assume no correlation), and so the duties of chairing the dissertation that forms the research basis of this book fell to Neil Harris, a man whose humor and prodigious intellect provided both solace and inspiration throughout my graduate school days. Many students who have passed through the halls of the Chicago history department would recognize the dynamic duo of Barry and Neil; they have, between them, created a small army of academics and even greater legions of admirers. I am lucky to be a part of both.

Bill Novak added to my blessing at Chicago, and were it not for his crucial intervention in my second year, I would not have made it through graduate school. Though Alan Brinkley was (and is) at Columbia, he agreed to join my dissertation committee; since then, I have had many occasions to feel lucky to know him. As grateful as I am to him for setting aside time to devote to me and my work, I am even more grateful that he provides such an exceptional model of a public intellectual, committed academic, and gracious colleague.

My dissertation and, ultimately, this book benefited from the access and assistance afforded to me at various archives: the American Council on Education (Hoover Institution), the National Archives (Washington, D.C., and College Park; collections of the Veterans Administration, Bureau of the Budget, Federal Security Agency), the Truman Archives (Independence, Missouri), the Robert Redfield papers (University of Chicago), the papers of Senator Elbert Thomas (Salt Lake City, Utah), the

papers of Robert Wagner (Georgetown University), the UAW collection (Detroit), Howard University Archives (Washington, D.C.), and the Library of Congress (Robert Taft papers, Southern Regional Council collection, NAACP collection). In addition to these archives, one very important collection deserves special mention. The American Legion is not under any compulsion to open their private archival collection to researchers, yet the organization opened its doors to me willingly and openly. I spent days in their library/archive in Indianapolis, Indiana, stumbling on electrifying (at least to me) research discoveries. I am in debt to the Legion and, in particular, to the wonderful staff who helped me during my visit. I also wish to express my thanks to those who funded my graduate study: the University of Chicago, the Spencer Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation.

The University of Chicago has earned a reputation as one of the nation's best history departments. Though there are many reasons for this high regard, the unmatched intensity that its graduate students bring to their studies is one notable aspect of its distinction. While there, I was lucky to learn from the passion of Amy Amoon, Kate Caldwell, Thomas Hafen, Anita Houck, Ian McGiver, Stephen Provasnik, and David Tanenhaus; even more, their friendship sustained me through the many trials (imagined or otherwise) of graduate school. After receiving my doctorate, I went to work at the National Academy of Sciences. There, the patient mentoring of Carol Petrie and Michael Cohen taught me lasting lessons about professionalism and the importance of humor; I had no idea how useful these values would be in negotiating a career in academe. I am grateful to them, and to the young colleagues who made my time at the NAS memorable and fun: Daniel Cork, Valerie Durant, and, especially, my fellow Nationals fan and occasional partner in crime, Shelly Ver Ploeg. John Eck and David Weisburd, scholars who collaborated on one NAS panel I worked on, showed that it was indeed possible to be a lovely person and a sharp academic at the same time.

When I arrived in the history department at Berkeley, fresh from my job in Washington, D.C., it was something of a culture shock and, in fact, it was a difficult time for me personally. Friends and colleagues who extended their warmth and stimulating conversation eased my transition, and I am especially grateful to Tom and Kathy Brady, Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Margaret Chowning, Max Christoff, John Connolly, Beshara Doumani, Paula Fass, Jon Gjerde, Greta Kroeker, Linda Lewin, Emily Mackil, Rebecca McLennan, Maureen Miller, Irv Scheiner, Jim Sheehan (who teaches at some other institution), Gordon Silverstein, Yuri Slezkine,

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I suffer from a particular defect as a result of my New York upbringing: I tend to imagine and understand the world in playground terms. I invoke this schema now to say that, when "choosing up" sides, my colleague David Henkin would always be my first pick. I would surely also want two amazing scholars-in-the-making at Berkeley on "my team," both of whom helped to make this book possible. I thank Anna Armentrout in the most admiring terms: her research assistance led to new insights and renovated old ones. Jacqui Shine made teaching a demanding lower-division survey less burdensome, so I could conserve just enough energy to finish up this book. That I did so was welcome news to my editor at Cambridge, Eric Crahan, who made the publishing path as simple, friendly, and intellectually clarifying as possible. He guided the manuscript through an extremely valuable review process. Though he has patiently indulged me in my guesses as to who did and did not review the manuscript, he has never actually told me one way or another, not even with a well-timed gesture or slight nod of the head. Too bad: I hope that the anonymous reviewers find their way to these words so that they can learn of my heartfelt thanks. I would also like to express my appreciation to Emily Spangler, editorial assistant assigned to this book, for her patience in answering the many small and sometimes strange questions I peppered her with as this manuscript neared completion and went into production. Charlotte Cowden generously answered my distress signal and proofed the galleys of this book; my thanks to her (which I will render in Japanese, if she likes).

I am certain that there are a number of failings and imperfections in this book. If the reader is bothered by them, then I hope she will pursue

a discussion about it with any of the wonderful people I list above. True, they had nothing to with my errors of fact or judgment, but because they are responsible for so much of what is good in this book, just think how much more skillfully and profitably they would discuss what is bad.

I want to acknowledge a number of personal debts. Frank Sposito rented a Capitol Hill basement apartment to me for a ridiculously low rate; this incredible gesture of friendship enabled me to finish researching and writing my dissertation. Larry Janezich gave me, along with his love, his unshakable confidence, which persisted despite my occasional attempts to rattle him.

I really do not know when in their early lives in Czechoslovakia my parents realized that life could be better and that they had, in them, the resources and resolve to make it so. However it came to be, after Prague Spring, my parents left their old lives behind and came to the United States, a new, terrific, terrifying, and lonely place. I am the child of my father's critical thinking and deeply ethical humanism, and my mother's formidable intuition and cagey survival instinct. These gifts are my heritage and the standard by which I judge myself. I dedicate this book to Josef and Ivana Frydl, my mom and dad, because of one very important lesson their lives have imparted to me, and it is a lesson that millions of veterans would recognize and know well: courage is not just making a decision, it is living with its consequences.