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Greatest Legislation for the Greatest Generation

By Daniel M. Dellinger

Seventy years ago this month, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed what many historians and economists consider the greatest social legislation ever passed by the United States Congress. As popular as the GI Bill remains today, the passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 was by no means a slam dunk.

"Everything that glitters is not necessarily gold," leaders of four major veterans' organizations wrote in an open letter opposing the measure just months earlier. Even Roosevelt was initially opposed, telling an American Legion convention in 1933 that "no person because he wore a uniform must thereafter be placed in a special class of beneficiaries over and above other citizens." Of course, World War II clearly changed Roosevelt's thinking. Moreover, veterans did not want to be placed in a "special class;" they just wanted a shot at the American dream that they fought so hard to defend.

While the GI Bill was indeed expensive, critics wrongly focused on cost while ignoring the great return. To be sure, the \$14.5 billion total spent for education and \$20 per week for 52 weeks of unemployment pay were no pittance, but it paled in comparison to the higher tax revenue gained from an educated working class and a housing boom resulting from millions of homeowners. When the initial GI Bill period ended in 1956, 7.8 million out of 15.4 million veterans had enrolled in an education or training program. In 1955, the Veterans Administration backed one-third of housing starts. Levittown and many other communities owed their very existence to the affordable mortgages made possible by the GI Bill. It has been estimated that the GI Bill returned \$7 to the economy for every \$1 of cost.

Drafted on stationery at Washington's Mayflower Hotel by Harry Colmery, a World War I veteran and past national commander of The American Legion, the provisions of the GI Bill reflected the input of a committee of prominent Legionnaires, including the organization's then-National Commander Warren Atherton and former Illinois Gov. John Stelle. It also benefited from the strong support of newspaper titan William Randolph Hearst, who believed that the previous generation of World War I veterans were not adequately compensated.

Plenty of drama followed, including the dispatch and holding of an Eastern Airlines flight to Georgia to secure the vote of a pivotal congressman.

The cultural ramifications of the GI Bill of Rights would shape the nation that America is today. The new benefit was color-blind, enabling African American and women veterans to pursue higher education years before Rosa Parks made her brave stand on a bus. Beneficiaries of the GI Bill included future presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush; Sen. John Glenn, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Chief Justice William Rehnquist, actor Paul Newman, singer Johnny Cash and Americans in every occupational field. University presidents, business leaders, doctors and scientists who made it possible for the United States to win the race to the moon proved repeatedly that America was wise to invest in their educations.

And while America thrived in the decades following World War II, it avoided the pre-war unemployment rates that marked the Great Depression. Most importantly, the 16 million returning World War II veterans came home to options.

I am proud that my organization, The American Legion, lobbied hard for educational benefits to assist later generations of veterans. In fact, former U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards said that the Post- 9/11 GI Bill would not have happened without The American Legion. And while Roosevelt's signing of the original Servicemen's Readjustment Act on June 22, 1944, remains one of the finest moments in American history, The American Legion will continue to see that all future GI Bills are worthy of their name.

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