

## The GI Bill

*Learn about the origins and effects of the GI Bill, which provided American veterans with housing and tuition benefits.*

### Overview

- Enacted by Congress in 1944, the **GI Bill** sent more than eight million World War II veterans to school between 1945 and 1956.
- It also backed home loans, gave veterans a year of unemployment benefits, and provided for veterans' medical care.
- The bill was a huge success, propelling Americans to new heights of education and helping to fuel the economic prosperity that characterized the postwar era.



*Figure 1: Franklin D. Roosevelt signing the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (GI Bill) into law, June 1944. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.*

### The GI Bill

After the end of World War II, American soldiers anxiously awaited their return to civilian life. Those stationed in Europe, Asia, and the Pacific hoped they would soon be reunited with their families and quickly employed in the bustling industrial economy of the United States.

The US government was anxious, too, but for a different reason. World War II had revived American prosperity after more than a decade of depression, and the government was desperate to fend off the economic turmoil that 15 million veterans reentering the workforce might wreak.

Hoping to provide servicemen and women with a measure of financial security upon their return (and, hopefully, siphon a substantial proportion of veterans away from the labor market and into educational programs), President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the **Servicemen's Readjustment Act** on June 22, 1944. Commonly known as the **GI Bill**, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act offered veterans a year of unemployment pay after their homecoming; guaranties for loans to purchase homes, businesses, or farms; and tuition and living stipends for college or vocational programs.

Not everyone greeted this plan with enthusiasm. Accustomed to a pre-war society where college education was reserved for the elite, the president of the University of Chicago griped that "Education is not a device for coping with mass unemployment . . . colleges and universities will find themselves converted into educational hobo jungles."

But this judgment proved premature. The GI Bill was an unprecedented success, sending eight million veterans to school in the decade after World War II and completely reinventing American higher education. Despite the hefty price tag of the program - about \$14.5 billion dollars - veterans who took advantage of the educational subsidy earned, on average, \$10,000-15,000 more per year than those who did not, generating ten times the cost of the program in tax revenue. Consequently, some analysts have called it "the best investment the US government has ever made."

## Origins of the GI Bill

In 1944, FDR was running for reelection, seeking an unprecedented fourth term as president of the United States. During the [Great Depression](#), he had won broad popular support through the [New Deal](#), which sought to use government programs to ensure baseline economic security for the American people. During his State of the Union address in 1944, Roosevelt proposed a radical "economic bill of rights" that would guarantee American citizens employment, health care, education, and housing. In the midst of the wartime economic boom, however, this promise of security failed to animate voters as it had a decade earlier.

What did get their attention was Roosevelt's promise that returning GIs (a nickname for soldiers derived from their "general issue" uniforms) would be entitled to certain perks for their faithful service. With the assistance of the American Legion, the economic bill of rights was revamped as the **GI Bill of Rights**.

The GI Bill, as it was abbreviated, had three key components:

- 1) **Educational support.** Veterans were entitled to \$500 per year toward tuition and as well as a living stipend of \$65-90 per month depending on whether the veteran had a family to support during his or her schooling.
- 2) **Unemployment benefits.** The GI Bill stipulated that veterans could receive \$20 per week for a year while looking for work. More than eight million veterans took advantage of this benefit.
- 3) **Loan guaranties.** Although the government did not give veterans money to purchase homes, businesses, or farms, it pledged to back veterans' borrowing, making it much easier for them to get credit.

The GI Bill also provided for veterans' medical care, even building new hospitals to meet the increased demand.



Cartoon depicting the many choices available to GIs upon their return. Image courtesy [National World War II Museum](#).

## Scope of the GI Bill

From 1945 to 1956, about 50% of the American veterans who served in World War II availed themselves of one or more aspects of the GI Bill. 2.2 million veterans went to college, 3.5 million went to technical or vocational school, and 700,000 took instruction in agriculture. The number of Americans who earned college degrees more than doubled before and after the war, from just over 200,000 in 1940 to nearly half a million in 1950.

The GI Bill expanded American university instruction from a curriculum focused solely on the liberal arts to one encompassing a range of career paths, including science, business, and engineering. Historian James T. Patterson has called it "the most significant development in the modern history of American education."

The government guaranty for home and business loans also prompted an economic boom, financing the construction of thousands of new homes, like those that sprang up in [suburbs](#) such as Levittown, New York.

Overall, the GI Bill was a major factor driving the prosperity of the postwar era. Not only did it save the American economy from a potential unemployment epidemic, it was also the gift that kept on giving: as more Americans took advantage of higher education, they earned higher wages, and could therefore pump more money into the economy by buying homes and consumer goods.

---

### What do you think?

1. Imagine you were returning from World War II. Which of the GI Bill benefits do you think would be most important to you and why?
2. Why do historians believe the GI Bill to be so transformative in American education?
3. How was the passage of the GI Bill related to the rise of America suburbia?

## **African Americans, Women, and the GI Bill**

*Female and minority veterans faced difficulties accessing their GI Bill benefits.*

### **Overview**

- African Americans and women were entitled to the same benefits as white men under the GI Bill, but often faced difficulty trying to claim their benefits due to discrimination.
- Those who did manage to get benefits were often steered towards training for menial jobs.
- The frustration of African American veterans barred from participating in the postwar economic boom became a major motivating factor in the **Civil Rights Movement**.

### **African Americans, Women, and the GI Bill**

Though the **GI Bill** itself did not bar female or African American veterans from enjoying its benefits, discrimination at the structural level often limited the GI Bill's benefits to white men. Though the program was federally funded, its implementation was directed at the state and local level by the **Veterans Administration (VA)**, which was almost entirely white and closely affiliated with the pro-segregation American Legion. VA job counselors frequently steered African American veterans who applied for tuition benefits towards vocational training instead of university courses. In some cases, black applicants were told that they needed no further education, since the job market had no place for blacks as skilled workers--only as menial laborers.

Even if African American veterans could attain GI Bill tuition money, it was far from certain that they could surmount entrenched prejudice and segregation at the university level to complete their educations. Many colleges had either stated or implied caps on the number of black students they would admit. Weary after enduring the insults of the segregated military, most black veterans elected to attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) when possible, even if it meant waiting a year or more to matriculate due to overcrowding. HBCUs were few and far between in the north, however, so black veterans above the Mason-Dixon line had even fewer opportunities to pursue higher education.

Furthermore, even though African Americans were entitled, in principle, to the same loan guaranties as whites, they faced serious barriers to home ownership. Many banks refused to loan money to blacks, federal guaranty or not. Suburban neighborhoods often boasted of **restrictive covenants** that banned African American families from purchasing homes in their subdivisions. As more and more white families moved to the white-picket-fenced suburbs characteristic of 1950s America, black citizens were confined to decaying inner cities.



*Figure 2: Still from a film reel explaining GI Bill benefits, showing an African American soldier signing his discharge papers. Image from Army-Navy Screen Magazine #43, produced by the Army Information Branch.*

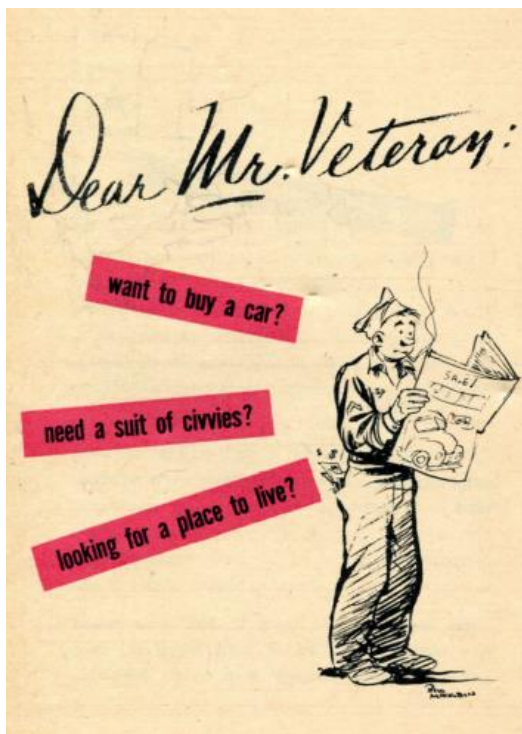


Figure 3: An advice pamphlet for returning veterans. Note the assumption that a veteran was both white and male. Image courtesy National World War II Museum.

Women also took advantage of the GI Bill. Over 332,000 woman veterans were eligible for benefits. Although only about 65,000 female veterans attended college at Uncle Sam's expense, a higher percentage of them opted for university education (as opposed to vocational training) than men. This stemmed in part from the selectivity of the women's branches of the armed services, which--being volunteer organizations--could afford to limit their ranks to the highly-trained and -educated. One university dean estimated that 70% of woman veterans were prepared for college.

Women's experiences varied. Many were not informed that they were eligible for the GI Bill during their demobilization process or faced hostility when trying to take advantage of the program. But the GI Bill also gave unprecedented support to women who never could have afforded to attend school without government support. Many trained in traditionally-female occupations such as nursing and teaching, while a few went into the professions to work as lawyers or architects. Despite these gains, fewer women during this time period received college degrees overall because colleges limited female enrollment in order to make space for male veterans.

### The GI Bill's Legacy

The GI Bill, as a last gasp of the New Deal, demonstrated a growing sense that the US government was obligated to protect the rights of Americans, including the right to work and education as compensation for military service.

The GI Bill was also key in creating the affluent American society of the 1950s and 1960s. But the uneven distribution of its benefits would have ramifications for years to come. Chief among these was the growing resentment of African Americans to being shut out of schools, neighborhoods, and entire economic brackets as the postwar boom stopped at the color line. Their frustration would soon erupt into the modern [Civil Rights Movement](#).

---

### What do you think?

1. Why would some historians regard the GI Bill as a "success" and why would others regard it as a failure?
2. How was the GI Bill related to the Civil Rights Movement?
3. How did the GI Bill impact women's education?