

## A Path to Progress: How the GI Bill Revolutionized U.S. Higher Education

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### Abstract

The GI Bill, formally known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, profoundly influenced the trajectory of higher education in the United States. This paper examines the history of the GI Bill from its inception during World War II to its modern iteration as the Forever GI Bill. It highlights how this landmark legislation transformed access to postsecondary education for military veterans, reshaping American higher education's landscape and fostering significant social mobility. By analyzing the political, social, and economic contexts of the GI Bill's evolution, this research uncovers its dual role as a tool for veteran reintegration and as a catalyst for addressing broader educational inequities. Key themes include the GI Bill's impact on institutional expansion, diversity in higher education, and its contributions to the burgeoning middle class. The paper also explores how subsequent amendments and updates to the legislation reflect shifting societal values and educational priorities. Employing a historical framework, it connects these developments to contemporary discussions on equity and access in higher education. Ultimately, this analysis provides critical insights into how the GI Bill's legacy continues to shape the higher education landscape, serving as a case study in the politics of education policy and social change.

### Keywords

GI Bill; History; Higher Education

### Suggested Citation

Hendrix, C. (2025). A path to progress: How the GI Bill revolutionized U.S. higher education. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 60-67.

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### Introduction

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the GI Bill, stands as one of the most transformative pieces of legislation in American history. Initially designed to assist veterans returning from World War II, the GI Bill's educational benefits sparked a revolution in U.S. higher education, fundamentally altering the landscape of college attendance, accessibility, and funding. By providing tuition and living expenses to veterans, the GI Bill enabled millions of individuals to pursue higher education, thus expanding access to college in ways previously unimaginable.

This legislative initiative not only elevated the educational attainment of veterans but also reshaped American society by fostering a more educated workforce, promoting social mobility, and strengthening the nation's economy. Over the decades, the GI Bill has evolved, with subsequent versions adjusting to the needs of veterans from later conflicts, yet its central impact on U.S. higher education remains undeniable. This paper explores the historical context of the GI Bill, its transformative influence on higher education, and the ongoing challenges and limitations it faced, particularly in relation to race and accessibility. In doing so, it underscores the enduring legacy of the GI Bill as a catalyst for both individual empowerment and national progress.

### What Happened After WWI

World War I ended in 1918, but it wasn't until 1924 that Congress overrode President Coolidge's veto to enact the World War Adjusted Compensation Act, also known as the Bonus Act (Anacostia Park, 2022). This legislation promised World War I veterans a bonus of up to \$500 for stateside service and \$625 for overseas service. However, the bonus was deferred and scheduled to be paid on each veteran's birthday in 1945 (Anacostia Park, 2022).

During the Great Depression, veterans were allowed to borrow against their bonus certificates starting in 1927. By 1932, however, banks were running short on credit, leaving many veterans financially desperate. This led to the formation of the Bonus Expeditionary Force (BEF), a group of approximately 40,000 veterans who marched on Washington, D.C., demanding immediate payment of their bonuses (Anacostia Park, 2022).

The struggles of veterans between the wars, highlighted by the Bonus Army's march, exposed the need for stronger support systems. As the next Great War intensified, these challenges fueled the creation of the GI Bill.

### WWII: The Start of the GI Bill

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or GI Bill, revolutionized higher education and reshaped American society. Over 2.2 million veterans attended college, and another 5.5 million pursued training courses, contributing \$14.5 billion to American higher education (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2014). By 1947, WWII veterans accounted for 50% of college enrollments (Spaulding, 2000). The bill paid \$500 annually for tuition and a monthly stipend of \$50 for single veterans and \$65 for married ones, making education accessible even to those who didn't meet traditional admission standards (Congressional Research Service, n.d.). For example, Brown University created a Veterans College to serve underqualified applicants (Olson, 1974).

The influx of veterans entering college campuses created significant logistical challenges. Clark (1998) observes, "Numerous articles highlighted the cramped living conditions; one stated 'the revolution at Old Ivory Tower and Old Siwash,' as 'the old wishing oak is hidden by a trailer settlement,' and children's diapers hung from the maples" (p. 175). Similarly, Hutcheson and Kidder (2011) describe veterans "living in overcrowded spaces such as college gymnasiums and Quonset huts, which were literally half-cylinders of aluminum" (p. 225).

This era also saw an explosion in community colleges, growing from 58 in 1943 to 328 by 1947 (Spaulding, 2000). The GI Bill's economic impact was profound: for every federal dollar spent, \$10 was returned to the U.S. Treasury, thanks to increased tax revenue from educated veterans. The U.S. Census Bureau noted that veterans' lifetime incomes increased by up to 40%, underscoring the transformative power of this policy (Department of Defense, 2019).

The GI Bill wasn't just about numbers—it prevented a flood of job-seekers post-WWII, strengthened vocational and technical education, and introduced veterans to new technologies. By paying tuition directly to institutions, the bill supported higher education infrastructure and ensured veterans' access to transformative opportunities that continue to shape American society today.

### **Limitations of the WWII GI Bill**

While the WWII GI Bill offered transformative opportunities for many veterans, black veterans faced systemic barriers that limited its benefits. In 1946, only 15,000 of the 100,000 black veterans using GI Bill educational benefits enrolled in college, with most attending already overcrowded Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Segregation laws in the South barred black veterans from predominantly white universities, which received the bulk of state funding to expand (Mencke, 2010).

The GI Bill also failed to address racial discrimination in VA home loans, managed locally by biased realtors, often denying black veterans access to housing. Even those admitted to white institutions faced exclusion from social events, athletic teams, and fraternities. Many black veterans had to use the GI Bill to complete high school or attend trade schools, though these often relegated them to menial roles instead of providing real vocational training (Mencke, 2010). Limited congressional representation and the pervasive racism of the time further compounded these inequities. The GI Bill's potential for black Americans was undermined by systemic discrimination, leaving them unable to fully leverage the benefits afforded to their white counterparts.

## **Changes by Conflict**

### **Korea**

The Korean War GI Bill, introduced through the Veterans Assistance Act of 1952 expanded benefits for veterans but with notable changes. Unlike the WWII GI Bill, payments were sent directly to veterans rather than institutions, and living expenses were no longer included. Veterans received \$110 per month for up to 36 months—12 months less than their WWII predecessors (Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, 1963). This program saw 43% of Korean War veterans utilizing educational benefits, with over 1.2 million attending college and another 1.18 million enrolling in training courses. While impactful, the reduced duration and lack of stipends limited its accessibility compared to the WWII GI Bill (Spaulding, 2000).

### **Vietnam**

The Vietnam-era GI Bill, established by the Veterans Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966 introduced significant changes. For the first time, service members could use their benefits while still on active duty. Eligibility required 180 days of service, but full benefits were only granted after 36 months of service (Committee on Veterans Affairs, 1966). Initially, veterans received \$100 per month, increasing to \$376 over 17 years, with benefits lasting up to 36 months. During this period, 5.1 million veterans attended college, and another 3.1 million enrolled in training courses (Congressional Research Service, n.d.). However, inflation eroded the purchasing power of these benefits. The American Legion lobbied successfully for increased payments and advocated for states to provide free tuition for veterans, helping to offset these challenges (Spaulding, 2000).

### Persian Gulf War

The Montgomery GI Bill marked a shift in focus toward recruiting an all-volunteer military force. For the first time, service members had to contribute to the program, paying \$100 per month during their service—a challenge for many lower-enlisted members, who often qualified for food stamps. Eligibility required two years of service, with benefits increasing based on service length. The top benefit paid \$536 per month for up to 36 months, but this often fell short of covering education costs, prompting many veterans to choose two-year programs over bachelor's degrees (Committee on Veterans Affairs, 1989).

This GI Bill struggled as a recruiting tool due to its upfront contributions, delayed full eligibility, and reduced appeal compared to earlier versions. Efforts like The Partnership for Veterans Education in 2000 aimed to increase monthly payments to \$975 and restore benefits to the purchasing power of the WWII GI Bill (Spaulding, 2000). However, concerns persisted about service members leaving after their first contract to capitalize on the benefits, leading to debates about its structure and funding. This particular benefit package is still available to current service members.

## A Modern Legacy

### Post-9/11 GI Bill

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 marked a significant evolution in veterans' educational benefits. Unlike the Montgomery GI Bill, the Post-9/11 GI Bill does not require service members to pay into the program, offering instead a generous living allowance and robust educational benefits (Committee on Veterans Affairs, 2008). Interestingly, both President George W. Bush and Senator John McCain initially opposed the bill, fearing that while it might encourage enlistment, it could also disincentivize reenlistment. However, Vietnam-era veterans in Congress championed the measure, ultimately securing its passage (Buck, 2014).

By 2010, the Post-9/11 GI Bill had outpaced all previous iterations in both participation numbers and financial investment, becoming the most widely utilized GI Bill in history as shown in Figure 1. This era also saw a notable demographic shift: compared to earlier conflicts, there was a significant rise in women veterans and non-white veterans using the benefit, reflecting changing patterns of military service (Buck, 2014).

Motivations for military service during the Global War on Terror era included a desire to serve the country, the pursuit of adventure, and access to GI Bill benefits. Notably, the option to transfer educational benefits to spouses or children added profound value. With frequent deployments during the Global War on Terror, this feature allowed families to access education, sometimes with spouses utilizing the benefits while their partners served overseas (Kroskob, 2019). The Post-9/11 also includes various programs designed to assist with disabilities, transitioning from military service, employment, and other areas of support (Committee on Veterans Affairs, 2008).

The Post-9/11 GI Bill not only transformed opportunities for veterans but also strengthened support for their families, cementing its legacy as one of the most impactful pieces of veterans' legislation (Kroskob, 2019).

### Forever GI Bill

In 2017, the Forever GI Bill, officially titled the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, introduced transformative updates to veterans' education benefits. One of its most significant changes was the removal of the 15-year time limit for using benefits, making them available indefinitely—hence the nickname "Forever GI Bill" (Committee on Veterans Affairs, 2017). The bill also addressed contemporary needs, offering a STEM extension of up to nine additional months with a \$30,000 lump sum, aimed at preparing veterans for high-demand careers in science, technology,

engineering, and mathematics. Additionally, it included regular increases to benefits to keep pace with inflation, ensuring the program remains sustainable and relevant (Committee on Veterans Affairs, 2017).

However, its rollout was not without challenges. The VA's outdated technology systems caused significant delays in processing payments, leaving some veterans without critical financial support (Committee on Veterans Affairs, 2018). This led to devastating consequences, including evictions for some veterans awaiting benefits (Absher, 2018). Despite these hurdles, the Forever GI Bill represents a critical step forward, enhancing flexibility and support for veterans pursuing education and career advancement.

### **Conclusion**

The GI Bill, from its inception in 1944 to the present day, has played a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of U.S. higher education. Initially designed to support veterans returning from World War II, the bill provided unprecedented access to educational opportunities, empowering millions to pursue college degrees and vocational training. Its effects were far-reaching, contributing to the democratization of higher education, the expansion of community colleges, and a surge in the nation's intellectual and economic capacity. However, as the GI Bill evolved to meet the needs of veterans from later conflicts, it faced challenges, particularly regarding racial inequities and accessibility for marginalized groups. Despite these limitations, the GI Bill's transformative influence on American society cannot be overstated. It not only opened doors for veterans but also contributed to the broader social and economic mobility of the American population.

Today, with the advent of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Forever GI Bill, the legacy of this legislation continues to support veterans and their families, ensuring that education remains a powerful tool for personal and societal advancement. Ultimately, the GI Bill's enduring impact on U.S. higher education highlights its role as a cornerstone of post-war American policy, shaping not only the educational system but also the broader cultural and economic fabric of the nation.

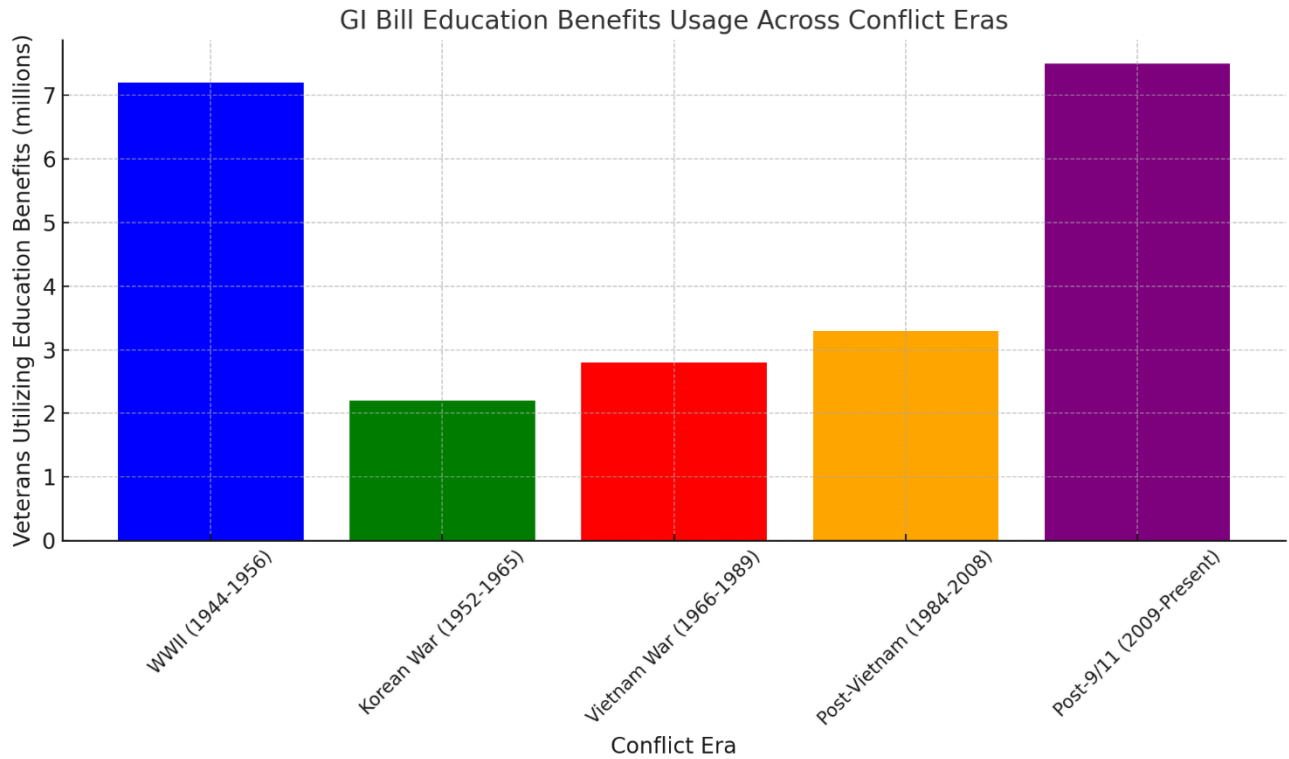
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**Figure 1.**  
*GI Bill Education Benefits Usage Across Conflict Eras*



*Note.* The years indicate when the various programs sunset their benefits. The Post-9/11 GI Bill appears more substantial due to factors such as multiple program usage, the ability to transfer benefits to dependents, and adjustments for inflation. From Veterans Benefits Administration (2014). *70 Years of the GI Bill: A History of VA's Education and Training Benefits*. US Department of Veterans Affairs.