

Happy Anniversary to the GI Bill of Rights

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Sixty years ago, June 22, 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. More commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights, the bill provided up to \$500 per school year for college tuition, fees and books, plus a monthly living allowance for up to 48 months. Although today \$500 would hardly pay for a couple of courses at a junior college, in 1944, Harvard charged only \$400 per year for tuition. In other words, Uncle Sam would pick up the tab for a college education for any of the 68,000 South Dakotans who served during World War II.

President Roosevelt signed this bill two weeks after the D-Day landings on the Normandy beaches in France. The GI Bill was filled with paradox. It passed both sides of Congress unanimously, yet many were critical of the bill. Roosevelt thought it was too expensive and excessive. Some veterans' groups wanted government aid for only the wounded. The American Legion, chief sponsor of the GI Bill, argued successfully that all 15 million veterans, not just the wounded, needed some assistance in readjusting to civilian life. Higher education leaders were diffident. The president of the University of Chicago, Robert M. Hutchins, said that allowing any GI to attend college would turn American universities into "hobo jungles." But in the end, concerns about the post-war economy, a possible return to the Depression and the moral mandate to take care of wounded veterans won the day.

With the hindsight of 60 years, the GI Bill may be the most successful piece of legislation in the 20th century. Why? First, three times as many veterans as anticipated stormed the campuses like they stormed the beaches of Normandy and Iwo Jima. The result of this massive attendance was the breakdown of the stereotypical college student profile. Now students from either side of the tracks could attend and become whatever they chose. Further, it created the most highly educated work force in world history, who then helped usher in the post-capitalist, post-industrial age of technology.

Second, in a subtle, indirect way, by paying the same level of benefits to women, African Americans, Jews and Christian white men, anti-Semitism, sexism and racism were subtly undermined. African American GIs flocked to Black colleges and any college that would admit them. More than 60,000 women used the educational benefits from the GI Bill. And, although anti-Semitism continued to surround America's elite colleges, the GI Bill began the process of eliminating Jewish admissions quotas. This point was not missed on legislators, educators or general society.

Finally, the GI Bill paid for itself in approximately 20 years. In 1965, the U.S. Departments of Labor and Commerce estimated that the educational benefits of the GI Bill for both WWII and Korean War veterans cost the federal government \$19 billion. Yet, those GIs who took advantage of the educational benefits paid \$20 billion in additional taxes due to better paying jobs. And when these estimates were made, most of these WWII and Korean War vets were not even in the prime of their earning years. No wonder Edwin Kiester, Jr. entitled his article about the GI Bill "The GI Bill May be the Best Deal Ever Made by Uncle Sam."

The lesson from the GI Bill is clear: federal support to individuals pursuing their dreams and developing their intellectual talent pays huge economic and social capital benefits to society. This is a classic example of a federal bureaucracy success story. Our GIs determined their plan of study and career path, and chose the public or private university that was best for them. And, Uncle Sam picked up the tab for their individual educational choices.

Tom Brokaw called this group the "greatest generation." To whatever extent his assessment is true, it is largely the GI Bill that made the greatest generation "great."