

Happy Birthday to the GI Bill of Rights

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After three years in Europe during WWII as an infantryman, Al Neuharth entered the University of South Dakota in the fall of 1946. That same fall Harold Hall of Fulton resumed his studies up the road in Brookings. After his discharge from the Army and putting two crops in the field, he was delighted to be back in college. Bomber pilot George McGovern wasted no time finishing his college degree. He graduated from Dakota Wesleyan University in the spring of 1946. That fall he was both a seminary student at Garrett Seminary in Evanston, Ill., and pastor of Community Methodist Church in Diamond Lake, Ill. Dwight Opperman, born in Perry, Iowa, served in the Army Medical Corps during WWII. With his parents now living in Mitchell, he entered Dakota Wesleyan University in the fall of 1946.

In 1946 these men did not know each other. Born between 1922 and 1924, they grew up, lived or went to school within 40 miles of Mitchell. All were honorably discharged veterans of WWII; college or seminary students; and benefactors of Public Law 346, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights. All later went on to distinguished careers.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the GI Bill into law on this date 60 years ago, June 22, 1944. Both houses of Congress unanimously passed the bill. By the time Neuharth, Hall, McGovern, and Opperman were in college during the fall of 1946, the bill paid for up to \$500 per year for tuition, books and fees, as well as up to \$90 per month as a subsistence allowance. All qualified veterans could go to any college, seminary or university they chose, public or private, paid for by the government. To put the generous provisions of this bill into context, in 1944 and 1945 Harvard College charged \$400 per year for tuition.

The federal government had two concerns in passing the GI Bill of Rights. First, was the fear that the economic depression of the 1930s would return after the war. Most economists and business leaders predicted a severe economic downturn with massive unemployment during the transition from a war to a peacetime economy. The educational benefits of the GI Bill solved an economic and social problem at the same time. It encouraged GIs to attend college and restore the nation's intellectual capital lost in the war. And, the generous provisions would entice thousands of GIs out of the work force and into college. The GI Bill then was not only an act for servicemen's readjustment, but it was also an economic readjustment act as well. The second concern of the federal government was a moral mandate to help rehabilitate the ever-increasing severely wounded GIs.

The GI Bill of Rights that President Roosevelt signed was one of 600 similar bills introduced into Congress. The reason this particular bill became law, rather than any one of the other 600, was due to the American Legion. The legion conceived, wrote and fought for the bill all the way through Congress. The brilliance of the American Legion bill was its unitary approach to veteran readjustment needs after the war. The legion argued that all 15 million veterans of WWII needed adjustment and help after the war. The wounded needed medical and rehabilitative services. The able-bodied also needed educational and job training stipends to restore them to where they might have been had Uncle Sam not conscripted them into the war.

By any measure, the GI Bill of Rights was a smashing success. By 1955, Neuharth, Hall, McGovern, and Opperman, along with another 2.2 million veterans, attended college under the bill. This number

was three times larger than predicted. The result was the most highly educated work force in world history, just when the American economy was changing from an industrial base to a technological one.

Some claim the GI Bill was another example of government “pork”, or a federal boondoggle. Some higher education leaders were critical as well. The GI Bill encouraged the many, not just the meritorious few, to attend college. The unwashed GIs, with uncouth habits from the carnage of war, would pollute the citadels of the social elite thought some of higher education's leaders. And the federal government would pay the bill. Their criticism was partially true. The GI Bill changed college campuses and American educational expectations forever. Before the war, only 10 percent of youth attended college; almost 15 percent did by 1948. Within a few years, college attendance mushroomed 50 percent because of the GI Bill. But the best, or worst, depending on your perspective, was yet to come. Nearly a third of the baby boomers, children of GI Bill veterans, attended college. The GI Bill dramatically raised educational expectations and changed a 300-year pattern of college students in America.

Statistics tell part of the story, but not the whole story. What is most interesting is how the GI Bill changed individual lives. Throughout the next two weeks, the *Daily Republic* will feature stories of how the GI Bill of Rights affected the lives of Al Neuharth, Harold Hall, George McGovern and Dwight Opperman. Is South Dakota's own, Tom Brokaw, correct? If WWII veterans are America's "greatest generation," then could it be that the GI Bill made the greatest generation great? In the next few weeks we will see how the GI Bill helped Neuharth, Hall, McGovern and Opperman become great.