

The American Legion and the G.I. Bill of Rights: A Tribute

Robert G. Duffett

President, Dakota Wesleyan University

Mitchell, South Dakota

Kudos, hats off and a rousing 21-gun salute to The American Legion. Amid all the fanfare of the World War Two Memorial dedication, the 60th anniversary of the D-Day invasion and the state funeral for President Reagan was an important red-letter anniversary in American history. On June 22, 1944, two weeks after D-Day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 – The GI Bill of Rights. Truth be told it probably should have been called The American Legion's Bill of Rights for GIs. Why? Because The American Legion conceived, wrote, named and fought for the bill all the way through Congress until the president signed it. The GI Bill of Rights is to The American Legion what the New Deal is to President Franklin Roosevelt and winning is to the New York Yankees – inseparable!

Many were concerned about what to do with the 15 million GIs after the war. Roosevelt talked about it. Over 600 bills were submitted to Congress in order to deal with post-war demobilization concerns. Despite the president's worry and the other 600 bills, the Legion's bill passed both houses of Congress unanimously! Your bill became the bill.

Why? In retrospect, the brilliance of The American Legion was its unitary approach to veterans' needs after the war. You anticipated the future and unlike others, made the case that **all** veterans would need assistance after the war. America had the moral obligation to tend to the wounded that may require years of medical and rehabilitation treatment. And, able-bodied vets needed readjustment benefits too. Even vets who returned to America without a scratch served Uncle Sam and democracy and deserved help, at tax payer expense, to restore them to the position in life they might have been if not called to service. Readjustment benefits included unemployment compensation, job training, and loans for homes, farms and business, and stipends for education. The goal of the Legion was simple – develop a comprehensive program to aid all veterans from the time of discharge to final rehabilitation.

But the critics said it could not be done. You wrote one comprehensive bill that included all the important demobilization needs from your long experience of working with veterans. That was not the way things were done in Washington! You should have carved the pieces and sent them to the appropriate House committees. The educational part should have been submitted to the House Committee on Education, the home, farm and business loans to the house Banking and Currency Committee and the unemployment compensation portion to the powerful Ways and Means committee. But, the Legion did not listen and angered everyone. Like Frank Sinatra, you did it your(my) way. From the perspective of 60 years it was more than a risky legislative strategy. The only contemporary equivalent description would be a "hail Mary" pass. Never had a comprehensive (omnibus bill) veterans' benefits bill passed Congress.

Sixty years later the impact of your GI bill was greater than imagined. It created a seismic shift in America that went for more than a touchdown. Consider the following:

First, the GI Bill changed the notion that a college education was only for those from the right side of the tracks or who wanted to be a lawyer, doctor or minister. The GIs stormed the

campuses of America like they stormed the beaches of Normandy and Iwo Jima. Three times as many GIs as estimated went to college virtually free. How the Legion wheedled \$500-a-year tuition benefit and a monthly subsistence allowance out of Congress when we were still fighting a two-front war after 10 years of economic depression still baffles me. In 1945 Harvard was only charging \$400 a year for tuition! No wonder college attendance mushroomed fifty percent in less than a decade. The most significant change was yet to come. Children of WWII vets, baby boomers, followed dad and mom's example. Twice as many boomer kids went to college as their parents. Because of the GI Bill, in one generation, a 300-year pattern of college attendance was overturned. College was not for the social elite but for the qualified masses.

Second, the GI Bill provided the same benefits to qualified women, African Americans and Jews. This was radical at a time when there were restrictive admissions quotas for Jews in some elite universities and women and Blacks were plainly excluded from many universities – even some state schools. The bill helped undermine gender, racial and religious exclusionary admissions policies.

Third, the GI Bill created the most highly educated work force in world history. And, it did so at the precise time when the American economy shifted from an industrial base to a technological one. This shift could not have happened without a highly educated and skilled workforce.

Finally, it made money for Uncle Sam. By the mid-1960s the additional taxes from better paying jobs courtesy of the GI Bill more than paid for the original cost of the bill. And, your best earning years were ahead!

So, as a college president and son of a man who went to college courtesy of the GI Bill, I say thank you and God bless The American Legion. When you evaluate the social, economic and educational results of the GI Bill, no wonder many say that the GI Bill of Rights was the most successful piece of legislation in the 20th century.

My fellow South Dakotan Tom Brokaw is perhaps correct when he says that the WWII generation may be America's "greatest generation." If so, then my money says it was the GI Bill, above all else, that made it so. And it was the American Legion that made the GI Bill great!