

Cristian Ramirez

*The Struggle for Mobility:
The G.I. Bill and African American Veterans in the South
after World War II*

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the impact of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill), signed by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944. The G.I. Bill presented an opportunity for upward social mobility for returning World War II veterans. Its provisions guaranteed qualifying veterans access to unemployment benefits, job training, vocational schooling, and four-year-college tuition, all for which contributed to the economic growth that would come to define this era in post-war America. However, as this article shows, these benefits were obstructed for African American veterans, particularly in the South, regardless of their service and sacrifice. The rule of Jim Crow and the efforts of John E. Rankin, a U.S. Congressman from Mississippi, ultimately laid the foundation for the inequitable distribution of benefits in one of the most impactful forms of legislation to date.

KEYWORDS: U.S. history; post-World War II era; Servicemen's Readjustments Act (G.I. Bill) (1944); Veterans Administration; African Americans; Mississippi; John E. Rankin; Jim Crow; segregation; vocational schooling

Introduction

In 1944, as World War II entered its final stages, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act in anticipation of the millions of veterans who would reenter the workforce at war's end. With the Great Depression (1929-1939) still on the minds of Americans, the new law, commonly referred to as the G.I. Bill, would provide veterans with access to unemployment benefits, job training, vocational schooling, and four-year college tuition. This new government program would be funded by the federal government, and the Veterans Administration (V.A.), founded in 1930, would be tasked with granting veterans access to their benefits. The G.I. Bill can be credited with providing social mobility for millions, thus providing the blueprint for the United States' expanding middleclass and later the collective nostalgia for this postwar period.

For veterans who had experienced the Great Depression, the G.I. Bill represented everything the 1920s and 1930s had not offered them, namely opportunity. The G.I. Bill's initiative for a successful transition to a peacetime economy has generated a positive outlook toward the bill that can be summed up as a "win-win situation for students, for institutions of higher education, for vocational education, and for society."¹ Prior to 1944, college education had not been easily attainable and had strictly been for those with the requisite financial means. Therefore, it is no surprise that, during the bill's creation, education received great emphasis. According to Suzanne Mettler's *Soldiers to Citizens: The*

¹ Murray Levine and Adeline Gordon Levine, "Who Said the Government Can't Do Anything Right? The World War II G.I. Bill, the Growth of Science, and American Prosperity," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 81, no. 2 (2011): 149-156, here 151.

G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation (2005), “51 percent of World War Two veterans, a total of 7.8 million” utilized the educational benefits of the G.I. Bill, and by 1947 “veterans accounted for 49 percent of students enrolled in American colleges.”² When veterans heard the news about what awaited them back home, optimism ran rampant and for good reason. The G.I. Bill undoubtedly was one of the most successful policies enacted in terms of economic gains in the United States at that point in time. What made the bill so revolutionary was its racial inclusivity on paper. Minority veterans had justified cause for optimism; first-class citizenship seemed imminent.

However, despite the G.I. Bill’s supposed inclusivity, the United States’ notorious history with racism, particularly in the rural Jim Crow (i.e., segregationist) South, undermined African American veterans’ access to vital provisions within the bill. Education and homeownership were becoming signs of prosperity in America, but these aspects of the G.I. Bill were thwarted when considering black veterans. The G.I. Bill embodied the American Dream, the vision of a prosperous middle class, and the migration out of cities to beautiful picket-fence suburbia, but it would remain a dream for thousands solely on the basis of race. How then was it possible for such a racially unbiased bill on paper to be stripped of its inclusivity on the basis of race when put into practice? Much of the answer lies in the crafting of the G.I. Bill and the efforts of Mississippi Congressman John E. Rankin who sought to preserve segregation the South.³ His efforts drastically contributed to the hardships many black veterans would encounter after the war. Ultimately, the persistence of racism, particularly in the South, and the efforts of a racially motivated congressman led to the unequal application of the G.I. Bill. Furthermore, despite some of the gains these veterans experienced during the post-war period, their opportunity for social mobility was obstructed in terms of education, employment, and homeownership.

I. Hurdles at the Veterans Administration (V.A.)

The deliberate disenfranchisement of African American veterans can be attributed to the crafting of the G.I. Bill itself. In his 1947 political address to the state of Mississippi, John E. Rankin declared: “I can say without fear of contradiction that I have done more for our veterans than any other man who ever served in the Congress of the United States.”⁴ In contrast to what Rankin may have believed, the reality of his political career says otherwise in regard to his commitment toward citizens and veterans. Rankin was a blatant racist who was against anything that did not resemble the model of white Anglo-Saxon

² Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

³ “Rep. John Rankin, 78; Lost House Seat in ‘52,” *The Washington Post*, November 28, 1960, B3.

⁴ “John E. Rankin Political Address, October 7, 1947.” Jackson, Mississippi, Department of Archives and History [Digital Archives], AU 1009/SR 034/SR 087-088/TR 044, [page] 3, accessed May 31, 2019.

Protestantism. During President Truman's efforts to establish anti-lynching laws, Rankin led the fight against this measure, opposing any federal jurisdiction over the matter while advocating for the issue to be handled at the state level.⁵ It is no surprise then that when President Roosevelt insisted that the G.I. Bill be administered on the federal level, the politically powerful congressman strictly opposed this and generated a bill that was, on the surface, free from any discriminatory measures, but extremely vulnerable to racial prejudices as the bill was to be implemented at the state level.

When the G.I. Bill was applied at the state level, as Rankin had intended, the Veterans Administration became the primary dispenser of the bill's benefits, which ultimately exacerbated unequal conditions in the rural South. Other agencies, such as the U.S.E.S. (United States Employment Service) and the American Legion were given the same responsibility as the V.A. Having the V.A. as the primary distributor of the G.I. benefits meant that veterans had to visit their local V.A. counselors to seek approval for their loans, unemployment benefits, and tuition costs. To qualify, one had to have served for a period of no less than 90 days and have anything other than a dishonorable discharge to receive one's benefits. As simple as this process may seem, it was highly flawed, considering the issues that could arise when black veterans in the South had to visit their local V.A. counselors, positions filled primarily by white men. Black veterans experienced intense misrepresentation in the South, having by 1947 a total of twelve African American counselors in Alabama and Georgia and "not one in Mississippi."⁶ The V.A. in the South would be notorious for finding miniscule details about these veterans that would bar them from future success, discouraging thousands in the process despite policies that prohibited discrimination based on race. Rankin and his political allies sabotaged the American Dream for African Americans in the South and kept the G.I. Bill under state control, leaving thousands of black veterans vulnerable to discrimination by the V.A. which would have a dramatic effect on their return to American society.

II. Obstructed Access to Education

The G.I. Bill is often viewed with a sense of naivety due to its sweeping popularity with an entire generation of its beneficiaries. It is difficult not to romanticize what was arguably the most successful legislation for veterans the United States had ever produced, especially at that point in time. The bill revolutionized education in America, having the number of about 160,000 students before the war reach half a million by 1950.⁷ The government had

⁵ Edward Humes, "How the G.I. Bill Shunted Blacks into Vocational Training," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 53 (2006): 92-104, here 95.

⁶ David H. Onkst, "'First a Negro... Incidentally a Veteran': Black World War Two Veterans and the G.I. Bill of Rights in the Deep South, 1944-1948," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 517-543, here 519.

⁷ Levine and Levine, "Who Said the Government Can't Do Anything Right," 151.

assumed that veterans would not widely utilize the educational provisions of the G.I. Bill of Rights, however, enrollment among veterans soared. Because of this, the G.I. Bill is also referred to as one of the greatest investments the government has ever made. The federal government invested approximately 14 billion dollars in education and non-collegiate programs, and benefitting veterans contributed 35 billion dollars to the economy over the next few decades.⁸ As impressive as these numbers may seem, this does not depict the full picture of postwar America. Who benefited from the bill depended on region and race, which is why it requires further evaluation with regard to its impact on African Americans. Despite the influence of Jim Crow in the South, many scholars are caught up in the romanticism of the G.I. Bill, including author Suzanne Mettler who concludes that, despite intense racial barriers, “black veterans who were prepared for college seized the chance to attend, and others took advantage of the sub college programs at greater rates than white veterans.”⁹ This flawed analysis equates higher numbers of black usage rates of the G.I. Bill to its overall success, ignoring the divisive factors in the South’s already segregated schools. Ira Katznelson, author of *When Affirmative Action Was White* (2005), has voiced similar criticism with regard to Mettler’s assertion that participation rates equal success, and has raised the question, “participation in what?”¹⁰ When evaluating the social conditions that disabled thousands of black veterans to utilize the benefits that contributed to social mobility for white soldiers, the romanticized narrative of the G.I. Bill collapses.

When observing the obstruction of equal opportunity in terms of education that was offered under the G.I. Bill, the experience of U.S. army veteran and Chicago native Monte Posey illustrates not only his difficult experience with the discriminatory V.A., but the experience of many black veterans in the South when attempting to pursue a college education. Having served his time in the military, Posey wished to begin his college career. He had been accepted to the University of Chicago, and all that was left for him to do was to visit his local V.A. counselor for approval to receive his tuition and living expenses as guaranteed by the G.I. Bill. However, despite his qualifications, the V.A. counselor, a white man, objected to Posey’s request and requested that he pick up a trade instead. When Posey asked why, the counselor responded by claiming “there are no opportunities out there for college-educated Negroes. You’ll be wasting your time.”¹¹ Fortunately for Posey, he would later manage to persuade his V.A. counselor and go on to having a successful career in education despite his initially frustrating experience. Posey’s experience was outside of the South,

⁸ Levine and Levine, “Who Said the Government Can’t Do Anything Right,” 151.

⁹ Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens*, 57.

¹⁰ Ira Katznelson and Suzanne Mettler, “On Race and Policy History: A Dialogue about the G.I. Bill,” *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 3 (2008): 519-537, here 522.

¹¹ Humes, “How the G.I. Bill Shunted Blacks into Vocational Training,” 92.

which demonstrates that discrimination was not just a regional experience but something that occurred throughout the country.

Still, one can only imagine the intensity of the situation with Jim Crow dominating a large portion of the country, which begs the question of whether Posey's experience would have been different had he been from a state like Mississippi or Alabama. One of the key factors in the experience of many black veterans was the unregulated manner in which the G.I. Bill was administered, allowing not only V.A. counselors to discriminate, but educational institutions as well, generating further disparities among black veterans in the South. One of the most undermining aspects in the G.I. Bill was allowing state control instead of federal control. The ability to discriminate without repercussion arguably hindered the opportunity for many vulnerable black veterans.

III. Segregated Education: Creating the Achievement Gap

Due to discriminatory practices and the segregation of education in the South, African American veterans utilized their higher education benefits primarily for historically black colleges where they faced numerous disadvantages. There were fewer of such institutions, limited funding, and not enough space to accommodate the returning wave of veterans. While Rankin's fight for state control undermined the G.I. Bill's success for minority groups in America, the Second Morrill Act of 1890, too, worked in favor of white separatists. According to that law, states were "disallowed federal support [...] if they did not create separate schools for blacks when other state colleges excluded them."¹² Though this created seventeen institutions in the South, white colleges still outnumbered these historically black colleges five to one before and after the war.¹³ Consequently, these limited institutions became the main source for obtaining higher education, which presented another issue, namely space. Black institutions faced severe underfunding since white institutions were given the priority. When it came to housing, white institutions did not face the issue to the same degree as black institutions. For example, housing and lack of space was so severe that "21 of the southern black colleges indicated that 55 percent of all veteran applicants were turned away [...] compared to 28 for all colleges and universities."¹⁴ For veterans who could enter these impacted schools, the lack of funding also resulted in fewer schools that offered a degree beyond the baccalaureate, leaving these opportunities mostly to returning white veterans.

¹² Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-century America*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 131.

¹³ Bernadette Kristine Buchanan Menke, "Education, Racism, and the Military: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of the G.I. Bill and Its Implications for African Americans in Higher Education" (PhD diss., Washington State University, 2010), 131.

¹⁴ Sarah E. Turner and John Bound, "Closing the Gap or Widening the Divide: The Effects of the G.I. Bill and World War II on the Educational Outcomes of Black Americans," *The Journal of Economic History* 63, no. 1 (2003): 145-177, here 153.

Even when some schools in the South began to desegregate, the issue of equal accommodation still persisted. In the case of the University of Florida (UF), in 1947, the institution repealed the Buckman's Act, a law that had segregated the schools in the state, but U.F. "continued to maintain its distinction as an all-white institution."¹⁵ Though black veterans had the ability to utilize their educational benefits under the G.I. Bill, opportunity often eluded them due to unsatisfactory measures of accommodation in colleges and universities.

These factors would augment the already growing gap between the races with regard to educational and economic achievement. Much of the G.I. Bill's success was due to its overall ability to grant thousands of veterans the opportunity to obtain a college education, which was a saving grace for the generation that had lived through the Great Depression. Despite some of the divisive outcomes caused by the saboteurs of what had been intended as a race-neutral law, the G.I. Bill was still a socially opportune form of legislation for African Americans, even with Jim Crow. However, the consequences still proved to be detrimental considering how severe some regional barriers were. When the G.I. Bill was signed into law, the opportunity for social mobility became obvious in its educational provisions. When it became apparent that the G.I. Bill would be undermined by Jim Crow, this generated a variation of educational gains between the races both inside and outside of the South. A study conducted by Sarah Turner and John Bound found that white veterans both from inside and outside the South achieved the same levels of education compared to their counterparts.¹⁶ Black veterans in the South were reported to make no real significant gains when compared to those outside the South. As a result, Turner and Bound concluded that these disparities "exacerbated rather than narrowed the economic and educational differences between blacks and whites."¹⁷ The G.I. Bill failed a majority of black veterans who sought an education, proving how inequitable the G.I. Bill was when put into practice, especially in a region of America that for many years had championed its "separate but equal" laws.

IV. Discrimination by the United States Employment Service (U.S.E.S.)

As if being barred from higher education was not enough for black veterans, G.I. Bill employment benefits, too, became difficult to acquire in the South. A recurring theme that arises when examining the G.I. Bill and its inability to establish equitable success for black veterans is the influence of Jim Crow in the Deep South. Black veterans came back from World War II with an array of experiences in highly skilled labor – a crucial quality for those returning veterans seeking positions as mechanics, linemen, carpenters, radio operators, and

¹⁵ Todd McCardle, "A Promise Deferred: Black Veterans' Access to Higher Education through the G.I. Bill at the University of Florida, 1944-1962," *Educational Studies: Journal of the American Educational Studies Association* 53, no. 2 (2017): 122-134, here 125.

¹⁶ Turner and Bound, "Closing the Gap or Widening the Divide," 166.

¹⁷ Turner and Bound, "Closing the Gap or Widening the Divide," 172.

welders.¹⁸ Thus, education was not the only benefit that was met with much optimism. The G.I. Bill also provided veterans with assistance to obtain skilled labor, for which they were now qualified, along with unemployment benefits to ease their transition back into the job market.

Much like the V.A., the national employment bureau known as the U.S.E.S. also worked to administer the G.I. Bill to veterans. Black veterans encountered similar issues with the U.S.E.S. as they did with the V.A. in terms of fair representation. The U.S.E.S. offered job counseling, and black veterans in the South quickly realized that discrimination would await them since most of the U.S.E.S. counselors were white. Throughout the states of Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama, the U.S.E.S. hired only fifteen black job counselors, leaving many vulnerable to the influence of Jim Crow. This drastic lack of representation altered black veterans' return to the workforce. They had obtained experience with skilled labor during the war, only now to be offered many of their previous low and unskilled positions. In Rankin's state alone, "of the 6,583 non-agricultural jobs that U.S.E.S. counselors filled in Mississippi in October 1946, whites got 86 percent of the professional, skilled, and semi-skilled positions" with black veterans representing "92 percent of the unskilled and service-oriented jobs."¹⁹ The U.S.E.S. had a considerable amount of control over these veterans considering that no effort was made to oversee this state-run system. The unemployment benefits administered to black veterans were also under the U.S.E.S.'s control. To receive these benefits, a veteran had to be actively searching for a position or accept a job the counselor offered, resulting in black veterans regaining their positions in unskilled work from before the war. At stake here was what was often their main source of income due to the minimal pay these unskilled positions had to offer, once again highlighting the cruel reality of what the G.I. Bill under state control had to offer for black veterans in the South.

V. The Hazards of On-the-Job Training and Vocational Schooling

On-the-job training became another dubious attempt at making successful use of the G.I. Bill for African American veterans in the Jim Crow South. This form of hands-on training allowed veterans to receive a paid apprenticeship for up to four years while receiving monthly living subsidies backed by the federal government.²⁰ Veterans were given the chance to apply their wartime skills toward building a future career in skilled work, but the absence of a national set of standards, as well as any oversight of these programs, left many black veterans unable to escape from low-paying occupations. Given their experience with the V.A., many of these veterans turned to finding apprenticeships on their own, which posed an even more difficult situation. White trainers were reluctant

¹⁸ Onkst, "'First a Negro... Incidentally a Veteran'," 519.

¹⁹ Onkst, "'First a Negro... Incidentally a Veteran'," 521.

²⁰ Onkst, "'First a Negro... Incidentally a Veteran'," 523.

to take on black trainees in order to maintain the racial order, a social construct which many like Congressman Rankin wished to preserve. Furthermore, for those who did succeed in finding an employer, most of the training programs throughout the South were highly inadequate, leaving many veterans again, vulnerable to cheap labor with no inspection done to counter such abuses. Inspections might have countered the abuses of employers however, this would have required further expenses and was not made a priority. A study conducted by Adrian L. Oliver, a graduate student working at the Atlanta University of Social Work, found that in one case two black veterans, who were training to become bakers for ten months, "spent all of their time sweeping floors and greasing pans."²¹ When the provisions of the G.I. Bill came to an end, black veterans who sought to utilize the potential opportunity of on-the-job training obtained nothing but inadequate training, which undermined any successful attempt to reenter the workforce in a skilled position. The promises the G.I. Bill had offered these veterans were, yet again, left unfulfilled.

Though vocational schooling was far from perfect, this alternative provided many African American veterans with a greater chance of obtaining skilled positions under the G.I. Bill. These veterans felt more secure with vocational teachers as opposed to on-the-job trainers who often times took advantage of these veterans for cheap labor. Another upside to vocational schooling was that it provided more specified instruction, establishing a more personal experience for veterans who wished to learn a specific trade. Another important factor to consider was that vocational schooling was much more attainable for black veterans who, for centuries, had been put at a disadvantage in terms of schooling and education. Most African Americans in the rural South, due to widespread neglect of their segregated public institutions, only had up to a fifth-grade level of education.²² As a result, on top of some of the more blatant forms of discrimination many faced when attempting to receive a college education, the inequitable treatment of public learning facilities throughout their history, too, barred them from widespread participation in the universities. Nevertheless, despite the optimism many of these veterans felt toward vocational schooling, they unfortunately faced similar issues with on-the-job training programs. As was the case with historically black colleges, "the education provision gave each state the right to determine its own number of vocational schools and the type of instruction that such schools would offer," again leaving many of these veterans vulnerable to Rankin's ideal situation.²³ This meant that few vocational schools were available for black veterans since these schools were also segregated, leaving many without the opportunity for social advancement.

²¹ Onkst, "'First a Negro... Incidentally a Veteran'," 526.

²² Onkst, "'First a Negro... Incidentally a Veteran'," 527.

²³ Onkst, "'First a Negro... Incidentally a Veteran'," 527.

The states' ability to dictate the type of instruction vocational schools were to offer left many African American veterans with trades that were subpar compared to those of whites, driving many of them back to unskilled work. Fly-by-night schools also became a great cause for concern. These "schools" were nothing more than a front set up by those who sought to extract the maximum amount of money the federal government would provide, facing little to no oversight and exploiting thousands of black veterans in the process. From one day to the next, these schools would rise out of nowhere, offering useless training (if any), wasting millions of taxpayer dollars, exposing some of the more corrupt features of how the G.I. Bill was carried out during the post-war era. For a returning black veteran, the chances for a smooth transition into the post-war era were slim, since many of the opportunity as the G.I. Bill offered were foiled at every turn.

VI. Success Stories

To view the Servicemen's Readjustment Act as a complete failure with regard to race is also not the complete picture. However, despite the G.I. Bill's ability to further exacerbate economic and educational gaps between blacks and whites, especially in the South, for some African Americans the bill paid off handsomely by giving them the opportunity to successfully build careers and enhance their economic status in society regardless of their color. It took one congressman from Mississippi to sabotage thousands of veterans in an attempt to secure Jim Crow in the South, yet, despite his efforts, through the G.I. Bill, Charles Rangel built his career that would eventually enable him to serve in Congress for twenty-three terms. After serving in Korea, Rangel, through the G.I. Bill, was able to earn a degree in Law, even though he had been a high-school drop-out before enlisting in the army. In an interview (2017), Rangel stated that the G.I. Bill took him by surprise: "I had no idea when I went to the Veterans Administration that the services they provided and the scholarships I was able to get would allow me to succeed politically and professionally."²⁴ Rangel also makes an important claim as to the importance of education in America, asserting that, through education, future generations will keep the country "competitive." Likewise, another Korean veteran, Ira T. Neal, was able to garner success through the G.I. Bill of Rights: it enabled him to pursue a career in education and earn his GED in Japan, after he had served as a rifleman in his regiment.²⁵ Despite the racial barriers these men may have faced throughout their lives, they were able to build their success through the G.I. Bill, achieving what many black veterans in the South could not. These men illustrate what so many African American veterans during

²⁴ "Interview: Veterans Advocate Congressman Charles Rangel," *Military History* 33, no. 5 (January 2017): 14-15.

²⁵ Ira T. Neal, interview by Larry Ordner, 2002, transcript, Washington D.C., Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, Veterans History Project, Ira T. Neal Collection (AFC/2001/001/01189).

the war were hoping for, namely an opportunity for success. Given the extremely unequal conditions in the South, it is easy to forget the positive outcomes the G.I. Bill had for African Americans which is why it is not entirely appropriate to consider the bill as unsuccessful. It is safe to say, however, that the G.I. Bill—apart from its positive impact on most Americans—in the South was completely selective and rigged by a system that catered directly to whites.

Conclusion

In essence, the social mobility and the American Dream offered by the supposedly racially inclusive G.I. Bill during the post-war era was an empty check for African Americans in the Deep South. For eligible black veterans, the opportunity to advance socially and economically was ultimately hindered when the bill was administered at the state level. For this reason, the G.I. Bill was anything but inclusive. Congressman Rankin and his supporters had constructed a bill that would abide by the laws of Jim Crow, hindering many black veterans in the South to access the quality schooling, vocational programs, and work benefits that so many white veterans were able to utilize to join the rapidly growing middle class. Despite the sacrifice African Americans had made during World War II on the home front and overseas in the fight for democracy, democracy at home would have to wait. The voices that were silenced during this decade would ring out during the fight for civil rights in the 1960s—a fight that would forever change the lives of millions of African Americans.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Cristian Ramirez of Highland Park/Los Angeles, California, earned his A.A. in History from Mt. San Antonio College. He is currently pursuing a B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). His article printed above originated in a CSUF junior seminar in Historical Writing.