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Source: *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Winter, 1994-1995, No. 6 (Winter, 1994-1995), pp. 104-108

Published by: The JBHE Foundation, Inc

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2962479>

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Never a Level Playing Field: Blacks and the GI Bill

Nearly 8 million servicemen and servicewomen were educated under the provisions of the GI Bill after World War II. But for blacks, higher educational opportunities were so few that the promise of the GI Bill went largely unfulfilled.

by Hilary Herbold

SINCE THE Serviceman's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the GI Bill, became law over 50 years ago, in June of 1944, it has been widely celebrated as a benchmark of opportunity for Americans who have served in the armed forces. A recent study conducted by the Joint Economic Committee of Congress estimates that military personnel who used their benefits to complete a college degree or vocational training program earned an average of \$10,000 to \$15,000 more annually than those who had not. And those increased earnings have generated tax revenues eight to ten times greater than the total cost of the program. Many analysts call it the best investment the U.S. government has ever made. All together, 7.8 million servicemen and servicewomen were educated under the GI Bill after World War II.

It is not difficult to understand why the GI Bill is held in such high regard. But did the Serviceman's Readjustment Act present black ex-servicemen with a level playing field? The consensus among both scholars and soldiers is "no." Given the obstacles facing blacks in 1944, one must acknowledge that the GI Bill provided a more level playing field for blacks seeking education and a more dignified means of living than the almost perpendicular slope most American blacks had known since Reconstruction. But that is not saying very much.

Race was contested terrain in the very inception of the GI Bill. One of the sponsors of the measure, Senator John Rankin, a Democrat from Mississippi, was notorious for his prosegregationist and racist position on all issues relevant to

blacks. Despite his advocacy of veterans' concerns, Rankin's agenda regarding black soldiers was ensuring that they would be relegated to their proper position of servitude after the war. Rankin's views on blacks are best illustrated by his remarks: In a 1920 editorial on the epidemic of lynching following the 1917 Armistice, Rankin attributed the problem to black soldiers having passed themselves off as "sunburnt Yankees" or American Indians while serving in Europe, and returned to America "more brutal and bold"

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in their affronts to white womanhood. He decried those blacks in the military who believed that their contributions would "bring the social millennium, lift him through 4,000 years of education and

development, make him the peer of the white man, and place him on terms of social and political equality with the members of the Caucasian race."

Rankin's sponsorship of the GI Bill is important, since it strongly suggests that the congressional negotiations that shaped the legislation were not egalitarian where race was concerned. Sponsors of the bill were acquainted not only with its terms but also with the inequities of the segregated culture in which they lived. Even though the official specifications of the bill (at least with regard to educational benefits) did not discriminate by race, the terms of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act — and indeed the principles of almost any law — were interpreted one way for blacks and another for whites. One does not require a particularly acute historical sense to surmise that the GI Bill was built on premises of both legal and de facto inequality; the certainty that blacks would encounter racial restrictions in moving to



Photo: UPI/Bettmann

A black airman from New York City examining the "Colored Waiting Room" sign at Terminal Station in Atlanta, 1956

claim their benefits was surely understood by the political architects of the measure.

After World War II ended, many black veterans learned how the Veteran's Administration (VA) kept them from receiving unemployment benefits. When blacks refused employment at wages considerably below subsistence level, the VA was notified and unemployment benefits were terminated. Many industries, having of necessity (and, because of the wartime labor shortage), under presidential decree opened skilled labor positions to blacks, returned to the pre-war practice of hiring blacks only for menial and low-paying jobs. For black veterans who, by persistence and ingenuity, managed to achieve a measure of economic momentum, retaliatory violence was a real threat. In 1946 and 1947 alone the lynchings of two black veterans, in Georgia and Louisiana, were carried out as economically motivated reprisals toward men who used their military benefits and their augmented sense of identity as citizens to build profitable farms. Further, the poverty of most black families in

the 1940s and 1950s made it problematic for blacks to seek an education when labor and income were needed at home.

The black veteran who fought for the right to a college degree at the institution of his or her choice found few allies in the VA. A 1947 survey conducted by scholar Howard Johnson found that "of 1,700 veterans employed in the Veteran's Administration in one southern state, only seven are Negroes," despite the fact that blacks comprised a third of all southern veterans at the time.^{*} As the NAACP's massive files on veterans' affairs reveal, that organization expended huge amounts of time and energy fighting the administration's arbitrary, discriminatory, and indifferent treatment of blacks — and clearly, those blacks who went so far as to seek help from the national offices of the NAACP represent a tiny fraction of those denied their educational benefits. "The Legion and VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] endorse and encourage segregation and discrimination against

^{*}Howard Johnson, "The Negro Veteran Fights for Freedom!" *Political Affairs*, May 1947, p. 430.

Negro veterans,” Johnson stated in 1947. “At [the Legion’s] last national convention, not a single Negro spoke or was elected to any leading post. Not satisfied with that, a mob of Legionnaires left the convention to attack and beat up Negro veterans who were picketing outside against Jim Crowism.”*

“The American Legion granted five of its state offices to charter posts for African-American servicemen — but only if they were segregated.”

Staffed almost entirely by whites empowered to deny or grant the claims of black GIs, the VA became a formidable foe to many blacks in search of an education. Strongly affiliated with the all-white American Legion and VFW, the Veteran’s Administration in 1946 refused accreditation to the newly formed United Negro and Allied Veterans of America, the only agency formed expressly to assist black veterans at that time. In 1947 the American Legion granted five of its state offices permission to charter posts for African-American servicemen — but only if they were segregated.

In an organization like the Veteran’s Administration, segregated in practice if not in principle, and closely linked with the leadership of the avowedly segregated American Legion and the VFW, educational opportunity for blacks was hardly a burning issue. The additional fact that black veterans’ housing and hospitals were officially segregated and inferior to whites’ likewise indicates the VA’s position on matters of race. As Johnson’s 1947 study noted, “Banks and mortgage agencies refuse loans to Negroes, thus making the GI Bill ineffective. Restrictive covenants confine Negroes to the worst slum areas in the nation.” And according to a recent study, the legacy of discrimination in GI Bill lending is evident today. Analyzing the large disparity between the net worth of the average black family and the average white family, the *Christian Science Monitor* remarks, “Not many blacks were able to take advantage of the GI Bill of Rights after World War II to buy homes at low interest rates. Their children are suffering financially as a result.”**

*Johnson, p. 434.

**David R. Francis, “Black Wealth Hit by Racial Heritage,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 6, 1990.

It is important to note the link between the GI Bill and the rise of the white middle class. When universities accommodated themselves to the needs of veterans, the structure of education itself in this country changed. In a recent article Peter F. Drucker notes, “The GI Bill of Rights and the enthusiastic response to it on the part of America’s veterans signaled the shift to a knowledge society. In this society, knowledge is the primary resource for individuals and for the economy overall.”* The wave of veterans changed the emphasis in universities from the gentleman’s classical education to more applied sciences such as engineering and economics, according to historian Michael Bennett who says, “[The veterans] took higher education out of the Ivy League and into something more approaching the real world.” The GI Bill afforded a generation of working-class Americans an unprecedented opportunity to earn a college degree, and served for many as a lever into economic security. At the same time, the university came to define and ensure the ongoing production of a white middle class, rather than solely a training ground for the moneyed elite.

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But because blacks had fewer opportunities to earn college degrees, with or without benefits, the black middle class failed to keep pace. The bill broke down class lines in higher education, but inequities of race remained more difficult to dislodge. Although in the abstract the government would pay tuition, that was of little help to blacks who could not enter college, either because of overcrowding at black colleges or inadequate preparation for college-level work. Public education for blacks was in so deplorable a state that very few blacks had the academic qualifications for admission to competitive colleges. Budgets for black schools in most areas were about one fourth of those for white schools which, for their part, were often far from exemplary. In Mississippi, for example, as late as 1950, black schools received \$32.55 in education funding whereas white schools received \$122.93. In the same year 70 percent of black adults in the southern states had a seventh grade

**Harvard Business Review*, Sept.-Oct. 1992, cited in “History of the GI Bill,” Veteran’s Affairs Committee, 1994.

education or below. The educational impoverishment of blacks in the era of World War II is reflected in graduation figures: in 1940 just over 1 percent of the black population had graduated from college.

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And qualifying for admission was only half the battle. Though Congress granted all soldiers the same benefits theoretically, the segregationist principles of almost every institution of higher learning effectively disbarred a huge proportion of black veterans from earning a college degree. This was particularly true in the northern states where few historically black institutions existed. Most universities discouraged blacks from matriculating, and official or unofficial quotas existed at those places that did admit blacks. As a result, during the 1940s the number of blacks who sought admission to predominantly white colleges remained small. As Charity Early, a black WAC during World War II told JBHE, “Discrimination was part of the military. The veterans didn’t want to come home to fight that battle again.” Most blacks opted to remain on the waiting list at an HBCU, even if that meant waiting a year or longer to be admitted.

In cases of blacks who wished to enter the most exclusive institutions, the Veteran’s Administration often joined with the university in efforts to channel highly qualified applicants into degree programs or colleges judged more suitable — and less prestigious — with the threat of denials of benefits, and actual denials of benefits, to bring black applicants into line. It is clear, from the experiences of black veterans themselves, that the Veterans’ Administration subscribed to the Booker T. Washington “industrial philosophy” of black education. Advocates of this theory believed that blacks should be trained for agricultural and technical work, for that was the route to economic advancement; they had no use for the benefits of a liberal arts education. Blacks were discouraged from seeking a college degree until well after the Korean War. Congressman Charles B. Rangel (D-N.Y.) recounts a story confirmed by the experience of other black

servicemen. A Korean War veteran who had earned four battle stars, a Bronze Star, and a Purple Heart in an all-black battalion, Rangel returned home to confront white military guidance counselors, who advised him to seek a trade rather than apply to college. Rangel recalls being informed that he should become a mortician or an electrician; instead, he went on to graduate from St. John’s University Law School. In another instance, NAACP records include the case of a black veteran who, having completed his bachelor’s degree before enlisting, sought to use his GI Bill benefits to complete a master’s degree; the VA denied the claim, informing him that he needed no further education.

Of course, blacks encountered barriers not only in the VA but in the colleges themselves. Even from a distance of just 50 years, we must be reminded of how firmly segregated were most institutions of higher education after World War II. White institutions in both the North and the South were essentially closed to blacks in the 1940s. The University of Pennsylvania, by no means the most elitist of the Ivy League universities, included among its 9,000 students only 46 blacks in 1946.

At Princeton debate persisted throughout the 1940s over whether to admit blacks to the university at all; a poll on “The Negro Question” conducted four years earlier by the *Nassau Sovereign*, a campus newspaper, found 62.4 percent of the students opposed allowing blacks to attend Princeton. Even those in favor proposed restrictions, the terms of which, ironically, reflect the barriers blacks in fact faced in their efforts to go to college: “The Limitations included such demands as a ban from Prospect Street [where upper-class housing is located], much higher standards than for white people, and definite quotas.”* Those blacks who did manage to enter white colleges were prohibited from playing on athletic teams, going to dances and other social events, and joining fraternities. In 1946 only one fifth of the 100,000 blacks who had applied for educational benefits had been registered in college.

Overcrowding at the historically black institutions of the South, and discriminatory admissions policies at other colleges and universities, meant that for many veterans in search of a college degree, vocational training programs and trade schools were the only available options. Professor John Butler, a military historian at the University of Texas,

**Nassau Sovereign*, October 1942.

estimates that 95 percent of black former servicemen who served in World War II and used their educational GI Bill benefits were educated in the South. "The GI Bill helped blacks to go to college, but it helped whites more," says Butler. "There wasn't enough room at black colleges for all the black veterans; most colleges had quotas for blacks."

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Pressure on HBCUs

The impact of the GI Bill at historically black colleges and universities was strong, and the large pool of applicants put particular pressure on these already struggling institutions. Because the HBCUs were located in the southern states, which accounted for 79 percent of the black population and in which segregated education was the law, they assumed a large share of the influx of black GIs in search of a degree. According to one study, at white institutions the percentage of veterans enrolled grew by 29.4 percent in 1947; the increase at black colleges during that year was 50 percent. This presented some problems: not only were the physical resources of the HBCUs unequal to the number of applicants, but also a history of unequal endowment meant that HBCUs, in one scholar's words, "rested at the bottom of the collegiate academic hierarchy, the poorest colleges in the poorest educational region of the country." According to historian Keith Olson, "postwar enrollment at the Negro colleges, which in 1940 was 43,003 and 10 years later 76,600, reached the breaking point. Limited facilities forced the colleges, during 1946 and 1947, to turn away an estimated 20,000 veterans."

Moreover, black veterans who enrolled at historically black colleges discovered an educational system that was vastly unequal. The southern states regarded HBCUs first and foremost as a way of keeping blacks out of white institutions, and as a requisite to getting federal money for white land-grant colleges. At the HBCUs funding was inadequate and resources minimal. Olson sums up the condition of the historically black colleges at the inception of the GI Bill:

Less than 5 percent of these colleges enjoyed accreditation by the Association of American Universities. No school had an accredited engineering department or a graduate program at the doctoral level, and seven states had no graduate program at all. Half of the Negro colleges had fewer than 250 students. Southern Negro elementary and secondary schools, moreover, lacking adequate budgets, teachers, and support, generally sent to college students less prepared than the graduates of separate and unequal white schools.*

The training offered by the HBCUs was limited by discriminatory vocational philosophies and hiring practices. Well into the 1940s, black institutions continued to be defined by the Washingtonian "preach and teach" philosophy of higher education, training students either as educators in black schools or as clergy. The arrival of veterans forced the HBCUs to expand — or, in many cases, to form — departments outside the disciplines of pedagogy and the church. The effect of the bill on black colleges, then, was similar to its impact on white institutions insofar as it effected a shift in educational philosophy. But at the HBCUs the transition to a curriculum beyond preaching and teaching took place slowly, in part because employment in technical and scientific fields was still largely closed to blacks. It made little sense to pursue a degree in electronics if industry continued to confine blacks to unskilled jobs; then as now, hiring practices played a part in determining the choice of disciplines.

Clearly, the GI Bill was a crack in the wall of racism that had surrounded the American university system. It forced predominantly white colleges to allow a larger number of blacks to enroll, contributed to a more diverse curriculum at many HBCUs, and helped provide a foundation for the gradual growth of a black middle class. The educational and economic benefits of the GI Bill, to both blacks and whites, are considerable. At the same time, however, we must also acknowledge the obstacles — economic, legal, institutional, intellectual, de facto — that blacks uniquely encountered in the pursuit of education, and look squarely at the results of those obstacles 50 years after the passing of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act. To do otherwise risks misrepresentation, not only of the past, but of the present as well. JBHE

*Keith W. Olson, *The GI Bill, the Veterans, and the Colleges* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974) p. 74.

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