

GI Bill Turns 75 Years Old

On 22 June 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, more commonly known as the GI Bill. Roosevelt wanted to make sure the soldiers in WWII were treated better than the returning soldiers of WWI. The first draft was written by Republican National Chairman and American Legion National Commander Harry W. Colmery. His proposal benefits to all WWII Veterans, male and female. The GI Bill established Veterans hospitals, made low-interest mortgages available and provided funds for college tuition and expenses. In addition, there was a provision for unemployment compensation. In the peak year of 1947, Veterans accounted for 49 percent of college admissions. The original GI Bill ended in 1956. By that time, 7.89 million of 16 million eligible WWII Veterans had participated in an education or training program. The VA backed nearly 2.4 million home loans for Veterans. While the GI Bill was being debated in the Congress, many members were opposed to paying Veterans unemployment money, claiming it was welfare. However only 20 percent of the funds allocated for unemployment were actually paid to Veterans. Since then, Congress has passed several more laws providing benefits to Veterans. The Benefits Act of 1966 during the Vietnam War provided benefits to all Veterans, not just war Veterans. The monthly rate in 1968 when I was discharged was \$110 which was supposed to cover tuition, fees, books and living expenses. I used the GI Bill to complete my undergraduate degree and when the GI Bill was changed to provide funds for graduate study, I used it for my graduate degree. The GI Bill changed and improved my life in a very positive way. Bills modifying the GI Bill have provided funding for Guard members and families.

Veterans of WWI did not have such benefits and many of the returning Veterans had a very difficult time returning to civilian life. Congress did pass the Bonus Act of 1924, which promised Veterans a Bonus based on the number of days served. However, the bonuses wouldn't be paid until 1945, almost 20 years later, much too late to help struggling Veterans. About 20,000 Veterans, known as the Bonus Marchers marched on the Capitol in D.C. demanding their bonus money. President Herbert Hoover sent the Army to remove the marchers, pitting soldiers against Veterans; not a pretty sight.

Congress has not been ready to help our Veterans for many of our conflicts. In 2002, while I was a member of a national organization we went to D.C. and talked to committees about the debate of the war with Afghanistan and Iraq. We pleaded with them to allocate funds for the returning soldiers and were told there wasn't enough money. As our Administration is considering going to war in the Middle East again, let us hope that the plans include funding and support for our soldiers who have to fight in the war.