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The History of Veterans Benefits: From the Time of the Colonies to World War Two

Mariano Ariel Corcilli*

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I. INTRODUCTION

There can be no doubt that properly caring for our veterans is a national imperative. The desire to respect and honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans has long been voiced by our leaders. In his second inaugural address in 1865, President Abraham Lincoln, articulating his desire to heal the nation from the wounds of the Civil War, stated that the nation must strive “to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.”¹

To this very day, the importance of properly caring for our veterans remains a popular political motif amongst our leaders. On Veterans Day in 2010, President Barack Obama told a group of active duty troops stationed in South Korea that:

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¹ *President Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address* (1865), available at <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=38> (last viewed March 29, 2015).

“We recall acts of uncommon bravery and selflessness. But we also remember that honoring those who’ve served is about more than the words we say on Veterans Day or Memorial Day. *It’s about how we treat our veterans every single day of the year. It’s about making sure they have the care they need and the benefits that they’ve earned when they come home.* It’s about serving all of you as well as you’ve served the United States of America.”²

But beautiful rhetoric only serves to mask the real failures in our attempt to properly care for *each and every deserving veteran*. While we, as a nation and a society, have invested vast resources³ (approximately \$154 Billion in 2014) and have made great strides towards properly caring for all our veterans – there are still many veterans whom are not receiving the benefits, care, and consideration they have already earned. There is no lack of reporting on these issues from both traditional⁴ and modern⁵ media outlets.

² Remarks by the President Honoring Veterans Day in Seoul, South Korea (November 10, 2010), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/10/remarks-president-honoring-veterans-day-seoul-south-korea> (emphasis added).

³ See VA 2015 Budget Requests Fast Facts, <http://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/fy2015-fastfactsvasbudgethighlights.pdf> (last viewed March 29, 2015) (outlining the Budget of the Department of Veteran Affairs).

⁴ Several examples of coverage of veteran benefits issues covered by traditional media outlets include: Ben Kesling, *VA Makes It Easier for Veterans to Get Care Outside System*, WALL ST. J., March 24, 2015, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/va-makes-it-easier-for-veterans-to-get-care-outside-system-1427209292>; The Associated Press, *VA: Steps Underway to Fix Problems in Philadelphia Office*, N.Y. TIMES, March 25, 2015, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/03/25/us/politics/ap-us-veterans-affairs-philadelphia.html>; Monica Disare, *Despite Progress in Backlog, Thousands of Florida’s Veterans Still Wait for Benefits*, MIA. HERALD, August 10, 2014, available at <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article-1979259.html>; Andrew Rafferty, *Obama Pledges to Restore ‘Trust and Confidence’ of Veterans*, NBC NEWS, March 13, 2015, available at <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/va-hospital-scandal/obama-visit-phenix-va-facility-heart-crisis-n322991>.

⁵ Several examples of coverage of veterans benefits issues covered by modern media outlets include: Kendall Breitman, *Report: Veterans Affairs manager mocks vet suicides*, POLITICO, March 10, 2015, available at <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/03/veterans-affairs-emails-mock-suicides-115929.html>; Scott Bronstein, Drew Griffin, Nelli Black, and Curt Devine, *It’s Not Over: Veterans Waiting Months for Appointments*, CNN, March 14, 2015, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/13/us/va-investigation-los-angeles/>; Ruth Ravve, *Combat Veterans Face ‘Cruel’ Struggle to prove their service to VA, amid missing records*, FOX NEWS, March 27, 2015, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/03/27/combat-veterans-face-cruel-struggle-to-prove-their-service-to-va-amid-missing/>; Greg Levine, *The Jon Stewart Effect? VA Tweaks Health Care Rule After ‘Daily Show’ Slam*, ALJAZEERA AMERICA, March 25,

In this Note, I'll provide a historical overview of the history of veterans benefits, from the time of the colonies through World War Two.

II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The United States of America has provided benefits to veterans since even before the birth of our nation.⁶ As early as 1636, Plymouth, the first Colony to provide benefits for their veterans, provided money to those veterans disabled in the colony's conflicts with Native Americans Indians.⁷ As the birth of our nation, as well as its rise to prominence in the world, is tied to its involvement in various military conflicts, the need for us to care for our veterans has been a constant issue throughout our national history.

A. Pre-World War One Veterans Benefits

The Continental Congress passed the nation's first pension law in 1776 in an attempt to increase military enlistments.⁸ While the pension law called for half-pay for life for those veterans that became disabled during their service, the Continental Congress lacked the resources and authority to effectuate the law – as a result, the individual states were responsible for making the payments to veterans and many veterans never received the very benefits which induced them to join and serve.⁹ By 1808, veterans benefits were administered by the Secretary of War's Bureau of Pensions.¹⁰ In 1811, the federal government authorized the first veteran's medical facility;¹¹ however, the earliest federal veteran's medical facility was not constructed until 1833.¹² During the Civil War, the Union provided all Union veterans a pension based on rank and disability.¹³

2015, available at <http://america.aljazeera.com/blogs/scrutineer/2015/3/25/the-jon-stewart-effect-va-tweaks-health-rule-hours-after-daily-show-slam.html>.

⁶ See generally *VA History in Brief*, http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/archives/docs/history_in_brief.pdf (last viewed March 29, 2015).

⁷ See *id.* at 3.

⁸ See *id.*

⁹ See *id.*

¹⁰ See *id.*

¹¹ See *History – Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)*, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, http://www.va.gov/about_va/vahistory.asp (last viewed March 29, 2015).

¹² See *National Register of Historical Places Nomination Form*, https://www.dot7.state.pa.us/ce_imagery/phmc_scans/H001489_01H.pdf (last viewed March 29, 2015).

¹³ See *VA History in Brief*, *supra* note 6 at 4. It goes on to mention that at the start of the Civil War, the United States had an approximate 80,000 veterans. The Civil War added another 1.9 million *Union* veterans – “Confederate soldiers received no federal

B. World War One and The Bonus Expeditionary Army

World War One was America's first large scale military participation in the affairs of the old world. By the end of the war, 4.7 million Americans served in the war, resulting in 116,000 dead and 204,000 wounded.¹⁴ Though the end of World War One saw an unprecedented influx of veterans back into society, veteran services and benefits at this time was a patchwork of different bureaus and programs.¹⁵ While our nation has always attempted to provide benefits to veterans who have been injured and disabled due to their military service,¹⁶ after previous wars, able-bodied veterans would simply go home and resume their previous lives.¹⁷ Veterans of World War One, upon their discharge, were given \$60.00,¹⁸ a train ticket home,¹⁹ and the promise of a \$500.00 bonus to be paid in the future.²⁰

The Bonus, authorized in 1924, was not supposed to be paid out to the veterans until 1945 – 21 years later.²¹ The Bonus was based on a congressional formula; “In . . . 1924, Congress . . . passed a bonus for these veterans of \$1 per day for each day served and \$1.25 for each day served overseas, but the bonus was only redeemable, with interest, in 1945. President Calvin Coolidge promptly vetoed the bill, but the Senate overrode his decision.”²²

By 1932, that bonus was still unpaid,²³ leading to the formation and historic march of the “Bonus Expeditionary Army,” also known as the “Bonus Army.”²⁴ In the summer of 1932, twenty-thousand veterans of World War One marched, en masse, on our nation's capitol under the

veterans benefits until 1958, when Congress pardoned Confederate service members and extended benefits to the single remaining survivor.”

¹⁴ See *id.* at 7.

¹⁵ See *id.*

¹⁶ See generally *Veterans Benefits History*, PBS (May 13, 2005), <http://www.pbs.org/now/society/vetbenefits.html>. (Listing a brief outline of veterans benefits history).

¹⁷ See Milton Greenberg, *The GI Bill: The Law That Changed America* at 24 (Lickle Publishing Inc., 1997) (stating that the Federal Government has paid little attention to veterans who were not injured or not disabled).

¹⁸ See *id.* (listing the benefits given to returning veterans of World War One).

¹⁹ See *id.*

²⁰ See *id.*

²¹ See *Veterans Benefits History*, *supra* note 16 (detailing how in 1924 Congress authorized the bonus, however it would not actually pay out for twenty-one years, in 1945).

²² See Thomas D. Arnhold, *BOOK REVIEW: The Bonus Army: An American Epic, Army Law.*, Sep. 2005, at 95.

²³ See Greenberg, *supra* note 17, at 25 (stating that the bonus was paid in 1936).

²⁴ See *id.*; see also *Veterans Benefits History*, *supra* note 16 (estimating the number of veterans at 25,000).

name “Bonus Expeditionary Army,”²⁵ to demand that Congress pay the veterans their bonus.²⁶ The veterans named their group after the American Expeditionary Force, which was the force sent to Europe in World War One.²⁷ The Bonus Army promised to stay until Congress paid them their bonus.²⁸ The protest came to a bloody ending²⁹ when President Hoover ordered his Army Chief of Staff, General Douglas MacArthur, to clear out the protest.³⁰ General MacArthur’s troops, after engaging the veterans with bayonets and sabers, chased the veterans out of the National Mall and into the veteran bivouac in Anacostia.³¹ The troops were then ordered to burn the veteran’s encampment to the ground.³² It was the horrific treatment that those veterans received, and the fear of a future “Bonus Army,” that, in large part, led to the creation of the original G.I. Bill a generation later.³³

C. The Original G.I. Bill

During the early stages of World War Two, the federal government began to contemplate the benefits that should be offered to returning veterans.³⁴ On June 22, 1944, Congress passed, and the President signed, “[a]n [a]ct [t]o provide Federal Government aid for the readjustment in

²⁵ See Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People at 755* (Jane Vaicunas ed., McGraw-Hill Higher Education 2000) (1993).

²⁶ See *id.*

²⁷ See *id.*

²⁸ See *id.*

²⁹ See *id.* at 756 (stating that there were several deaths and over 100 were injured).

³⁰ See *id.* (stating that MacArthur led, with the assistance of his aide Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Third Cavalry, commanded by George S. Patton, two infantry regiments, a machine gun detachment, and six tanks down Pennsylvania Avenue. The veterans fled and the army followed them across the Anacostia River and burnt the veteran’s camp to the ground).

³¹ See *The Unfinished Nation*, *supra* note 25 at 756 (describing how General MacArthur’s troops chased, at gun and sword-point, the veterans across the Abacostia River).

³² See *id.* (stating that the troops burnt the veteran’s encampment to the ground).

³³ See Thomas D. Arnhold, *The Bonus Army: An American Epic*, *Sep ARMY LAW*. 78 (2005) (attributing the origins of the Original G.I. Bill to the horrible treatment of the bonus Army).

³⁴ See generally Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Former President of the United States, Message to Congress (Oct. 27, 1943), <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/odgiced.html> (last viewed Feb. 5, 2008) (outlining educational benefits that the Congress should provide to returning veterans); see also generally Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Former President of the United States, Message to Congress (Nov. 23, 1943), <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/odgiccl.html> (last viewed Feb. 6, 2008) (suggesting to Congress that Congress should to expand on existing veterans benefits to better help returning veterans reintegrate into civilian life).

civilian life of returning World War Two veteran”³⁵ called the “Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944”,³⁶ which is commonly known as the G.I. Bill of Rights.³⁷ The law provided veterans with healthcare benefits,³⁸ the right to be represented by veterans’ organizations,³⁹ a board of review,⁴⁰ educational benefits,⁴¹ a home loan guarantee,⁴² employment benefits,⁴³ and unemployment benefits.⁴⁴ At the time of the law’s passing, the focus of the benefits was the unemployment provisions.⁴⁵ Those veterans that received the unemployment benefits

³⁵ Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, Pub. L. No. 346, 58 Stat. 284.

³⁶ *See id.* (providing World War Two veterans with a litany of novel benefits) It should be noted that the bill was almost killed by Mississippi Representative John Rankin. Congressman Rankin was an open racist and took issue with the fact that black veterans would be getting the same benefits as white veterans. Congressman Rankin held up the committee by refusing the cast the proxy vote he held for Georgian Representative John Gibson. With the help of the American Legion, Hearst Radio, and police, Representative John Gibson was located. He was flown to Washington and was able to cast his vote in favor of the bill before the deadline. His vote was cast just 4 days after D-Day, and as he cast his vote, Representative Gibson reminded his colleagues that men were dying.

³⁷ *See Veterans Benefits History, supra* note 16 (listing the common names of the veterans educational benefits. The original veterans educational benefits package found in the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (Pub. L. 346, 58 Stat. 284 (1944)) was dubbed the “G.I. Bill of Rights” by the American Legion); *see also id.* at 12 (explaining that the term “G.I.” originally stood for “Government Issue” but later became a term that represents an enlisted person from any of the branches of service and that the combination of the two terms “G.I.” and “Bill of Right” provided a very powerful image); *see also Harvey v. Brown*, 6 Vet.App. 416, 417 (Vet.App. 1994) (stating that present veterans educational assistance benefits under chapter 30 of title 38, United States Code, the “All Volunteer Force Educational Assistance Program” are referred to as the “G.I. Bill of 1984”, the “New G.I. Bill”, or “NGIB”); *see also Greenberg, supra* note 17, at 106 (stating that the law is also known as the “Montgomery G.I. Bill” in honor of Mississippi Congressman Gillepie “Sonny” Montgomery, who fought for many years to get the law passed).

³⁸ *See Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944*, Pub. L. No. 346, 58 Stat. 284 (providing, among other things, \$500,000,000 for new hospital facilities and ensuring that servicemen execute a claim for disability before they are discharged).

³⁹ *See id.* at § 200 (providing veterans the option of being represented by a veterans organization when the veteran has a claim in the veteran administration system).

⁴⁰ *See id.* at § 300 (authorizing the services, and the Department of Veterans Administration, to create departmental review boards to review the discharges of veterans as well as establishing the process that is due).

⁴¹ *See id.* at § 400 (establishing the parameters of the educational benefits).

⁴² *See id.* at § 500 (authorizing the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Administration to guarantee home loans, up to fifty percent of the price of the house).

⁴³ *See id.* at § 600 (developing a federal hiring scheme that is preferential to veterans).

⁴⁴ *See id.* at § 700 (establishing an unemployment benefit to be utilized by veterans to assist them to reintegrate into civilian life).

⁴⁵ *See Greenberg, supra* note 17, at 18 (discussing how some in Congress did not want that provision included, for fear that it would create widespread abuse).

commonly referred to themselves as belonging to the “52/20 Club”⁴⁶ because it provided a veteran 20 dollars a week for 52 weeks while the veteran searched for employment.⁴⁷ It was the educational and housing provisions, however, which ultimately had the greatest effect on the veterans and the most lasting effect on the nation.⁴⁸

The educational benefits provision of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 stated that the Department of Veteran Administration was to pay all of the veteran’s tuition and fees and that the Administrator was further allowed to pay for all books and supplies associated with the student-veteran’s curriculum.⁴⁹ The law also provided a sizable subsistence allowance that provided the student-veteran with monthly spending money, the amount of which was increased depending on the number of dependents the student-veteran had.⁵⁰ As a result of this benefit, in 1949 almost half of all college students were veterans on the G.I. Bill.⁵¹ The home loan guarantee spawned the unprecedented and unexpected development of the unique American “suburb.”⁵² The entire G.I. Bill was such an overwhelming success that many veterans who benefited from it would today say that “[t]he 52-20 Club sure helped for a short while, until I went to college on the G.I. Bill, and then took out a VA loan to buy my first house.”⁵³

⁴⁶ See *id.*

⁴⁷ See Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, Pub. L. No. 346, 58 Stat. 295 (providing fifty-two weeks of unemployment benefits); see also *id.* at 297 (establishing the rate of the unemployment benefit at twenty dollars per week. If the veteran was working but earning less than twenty dollars, this provision provided the veteran with a weekly benefit that would pay the veteran an amount that, when added to his earned wage, would equal twenty dollars).

⁴⁸ See Greenberg, *supra* note 17, at 16.

⁴⁹ See Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, Pub. L. No. 346, 58 Stat. 289 (stating that the Administrator shall pay for tuition and fees and may pay for books and supplies).

⁵⁰ See *id.* (stating that a veteran would receive fifty dollars per month if the veteran had no dependents and seventy-five dollars per month if the veteran had dependents).

⁵¹ See Greenberg, *supra* note 17 at 17 (detailing the enrolling statistics caused by the G.I. Bill: from 1940 to 1950, the number of yearly graduates rose from 160,000 to 500,000; in 1947 forty-nine percent of all college students were veterans; Catholic, Jewish, and black veterans enrolled in colleges that did not previously allow their enrollment; married veterans, many with children, enrolled in colleges that previously did not allow married students to attend; about 2.2 million veterans took advantage of the educational benefits of the G.I. Bill, half of those veterans were the first in their family to attend).

⁵² See generally *id.* at 73-6 (detailing how the home loan guarantee led to millions of veterans needing housing, which led to large tracts of land being developed into homes, which were later called the “suburbs”).

⁵³ See *id.* at 18.

III. CONCLUSION

*Lack of money should not prevent any veteran of this war from equipping himself for the most useful employment for which his aptitudes and willingness qualify him. The money invested in this training and schooling program will reap rich dividends in higher productivity, more intelligent leadership, and greater human happiness. We must replenish our supply of persons qualified to discharge the heavy responsibilities of the postwar world. We have taught our youth how to wage war; we must also teach them how to live useful and happy lives in freedom, justice, and decency.*⁵⁴

-Franklin Delano Roosevelt

The words above can very easily apply to those young men and women who, after serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere in the world, are now leaving the Armed Forces and attempting to reintegrate into civilian life. Those words, however, are part of an October 27, 1943, message from then President Roosevelt to the United States Congress.⁵⁵

As we continue to assess the current veterans benefits landscape, we should be mindful, as our history has demonstrated, that making a robust and substantial investment in the care of our veterans is not only a societal duty we owe to the men and women whom have volunteered to defend us, but could also serve as a catalyst to strengthen and improve the nation as a whole.



⁵⁴ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Former President of the United States, *Message to Congress* (Oct. 27, 1943), <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/odgiced.html> (last viewed March 29, 2015) (lobbying Congress on the importance of passing comprehensive legislation that would provide benefits to the men and women who would return to civilian life after the termination of World War Two).

⁵⁵ *See id.*