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Suzanne Mettler. *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. xvi + 252 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-518097-8.

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Generating Citizens: Military Veterans, Public Policy, and Democratic Citizenship

One of the most exciting developments in the recent study of U.S. political history has been the renewal of the dialogue between political scientists and historians. Over the past twenty years, as political historians have increasingly focused on policy formation and implementation rather than the electoral and legislative processes, a growing number of political scientists have emphasized the historical dimensions of institutional development, especially the importance of historical contingency. These trends have led to the growth of a rich body of literature that engages both historians and political scientists, and blurs the disciplinary boundaries almost beyond recognition. U.S. political history–that fusty old don of academia–is now a surprising model of cutting-edge interdisciplinarity.[1] One prominent scholar associated with this phenomenon, Suzanne Mettler, Alumni Associate Professor of Political Science at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, already has made an important contribution with her work on the gendered structures undergirding New Deal public policy.[2] Luckily for scholars of U.S. social policy, veterans' issues, and post-World War II political culture, Mettler employs her considerable talents in an excellent new study of the of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the G.I. Bill.

In *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation*, Mettler analyzes the impact of the G.I. Bill both on the veteran population that utilized the legislation's generous social provisions, and on postwar American politics and society. By utilizing extensive archival research and data from a series of surveys and interviews of World War II veterans, she argues that the G.I. Bill made a tremendous difference in the economic and social status of benefit recipients, and more importantly, led to a marked increase in recipients' levels of civic engagement. Mettler maintains that the bill's provisions, and the manner in which they were implemented, left lasting imprints on a cohort of veterans who had not only won the "good war," but who would also have the highest twentieth-century rates of political involvement. She explains, "Those veterans who utilized the [G.I. Bill] provisions became more active citizens in public life in the postwar years than those who did not" (p. 9). In other words, federal policies helped create the "greatest generation," a generation long venerated for its level of civic engagement and political participation. With this interpretive salvo, Mettler explicitly links two subjects of enormous historical and contemporary relevance: the impact of social policy on citizen beneficiaries and the decline of participatory democracy.

Mettler begins her study with a description of the G.I. Bill's creation. While the treatment is brief, she reminds readers that New Deal-era ideas about social provisioning did not generate Congressional momentum for the G.I. Bill. To a large degree, more traditional notions of citizenship grounded in military service gave the legislation its cultural and political resonance. She writes that proponent's arguments were "voiced not as progressive demands for all citizens to enjoy broader access to economic security and welfare. Rather, supporters promoted the social rights in the legislation by observing their connection to civic obligations" (p. 22). Moreover, the bill's veteran organization champion, the otherwise conservative American Legion, took the reins by aggressively promoting the bill and bore responsibility for the more inclusive, generous, and egalitarian provisions relating to education and training. All of this is important background, but Mettler's real focus here is the G.I. Bill's impact, not

its creation.[3]

It is commonplace to note that Congressional passage of the G.I. Bill created an unprecedented level of federally funded social provisioning for sixteen million World War II veterans. From college education to job training to federally subsidized home and business loans, the G.I. Bill allowed veterans to parlay their military service into significant social and economic advancement–or, at least that is the conventional wisdom. Surprisingly, however, little empirical research exists to confirm this truism of the postwar historical narrative. In fact, recent work on the G.I. Bill emphasizes its exclusionary implementation for African Americans, women, and homosexuals rather than its supposed largesse. For this reason, Mettler's detailed analysis of the bill's influence on the life course of veteran recipients is particularly welcome.[4]

In a series of three interlocking chapters, Mettler investigates the totality of the G.I Bill experience for veteran recipients to more clearly assess how it influenced their life circumstances. Using the results of veteran surveys and interviews, she addresses critics' complaints that the G.I. Bill merely perpetuated existing class, race, and ethno-religious cleavages in U.S. society. Similar to the more celebratory G.I. Bill accounts, Mettler highlights the importance of the college education benefit to veterans' levels of educational attainment, social mobility, and income. But she breaks new and important ground in showing the impact of the sub-college programs of vocational training. Mettler points out that some 5.6 million veterans utilized vocational training, while only 2.2 million veterans attended colleges and universities. She also asserts that African Americans particularly flocked to these programs. Thus, when the sub-college programs are factored into consideration, Mettler argues that rather than reinforcing social divisions, the G.I Bill "truly opened the doors to higher education for many from the lower and lower middle class" and "featured especially broad accessibility, being utilized by veterans regardless of socioeconomic background, socialization, age, or any other demographic factors" (p. 53). She writes later, "The higher education provisions fostered impressive increases in beneficiaries educational attainment, with eventual effects on their occupational status and income; the sub-college provisions yielded more immediate strong effects on users' job status and income" (p. 104). As importantly, Mettler describes the overwhelmingly positive experiential effects of the bill's implementation. White and black veterans believed that G.I. Bill programs and funding were administered fairly, evenly, and with little intrusive scrutiny or harassment of benefit recipients. To Mettler, this transmitted clear signals to veteran recipients "not only about the value of one particular program but also, more broadly, about government's responsiveness to people like them" (p. 59).

After explaining veterans' decidedly positive experiences with the G.I Bill, Mettler delves into the ways the legislation, its implementation, and its attitudinal effects impacted levels of civic and political engagement. Statistically controlling for other influences such as socioeconomic standing and educational attainment, she finds that G.I. Bill usage promoted a larger degree of civic and political participation among veterans. Mettler explains, "All else being equal, veterans who benefited from the [G.I. Bill] provisions were members of a significantly greater number of civic organizations–approximately 50 percent more–than non-users, and they were involved in about 30 percent more political activities" (p. 107). To Mettler, this proves that the G.I. Bill policy itself, not merely the benefits that it provided, provoked increased participation. She writes, "Through the program's inclusive design, its fair manner of implementation, and its transformative socioeconomic effects, it communicated to beneficiaries that government was for and about people like them, and thus it incorporated them more fully as citizens" (p. 106). In a powerful interpretive passage, Mettler points out that the "greatest generation" cohort, long lauded as exemplars by advocates of participatory democracy, was prompted to civic and political participation by federal social policy. Mettler is careful to limit these findings to non-black male veterans, using separate chapters to discuss the impact of the G.I. Bill on black veterans and women–veterans and non-veterans, alike.

In the chapter, "Mobilizing for Equal Rights," Mettler addresses the importance of the G.I. Bill for the political involvement of African Americans in the postwar United States. Mettler contends that African-American veterans widely benefited from the G.I. Bill's education and vocational benefits, even if the housing loan provision had been implemented in a discriminatory and exclusionary manner. She expands this finding by explaining that black veterans who used the G.I. Bill, like their white counterparts, were more involved in civic and political organizations, but they were also more likely to be active in organizations involved in civil rights issues. She writes, "Black G.I. Bill users immersed themselves in confrontational political activity, challenging politics as usual in order to gain the rights of equal citizenship" (p. 138). While others have seen black veterans as instrumental figures in the Civil Rights movement, Mettler offers this intriguing explanatory alternative to combat

and military service as a possible mechanism leading to black veterans' political activism.

In the chapter, "Created with the Men in Mind," Mettler details both the lesser impact of the G.I. Bill on the lives of female veterans, and the gendered "civic consequences" of a bill so clearly beneficial to male socioeconomic standing and male citizenship. On the first issue, Mettler explains that while women veterans did utilize the G.I. Bill provisions for education and vocational training, there were far fewer women veterans and they participated at a slightly lower level (40 percent) than men (51 percent) (p.145). Given the gender climate of the 1940s and 1950s, and most female veterans' stage in the life cycle during those years, women used the benefits less and later, and did not experience the provisions as male veterans had. Mettler writes, "The G.I. Bill's effects ... proved less transformative and conveyed less powerful messages among female veterans than had been the case among males" (pp.151-152). The result for female veterans was that they "thought of the G.I. Bill as targeted primarily toward males, and perceived themselves as fortunate secondary beneficiaries" (p. 153), a perception not conducive to accelerated rates of civic participation. As importantly, if female veterans did not undergo a civic revitalization, the vast majority of American women also "did not experience incorporation as citizens through the G.I. Bill, and they were deprived of its mobilizing effects for civic and political involvement" (p. 158). This gendering of social provisioning, according to Mettler, mightily contributed "to the gender inequality that persisted in American citizenship during the middle of the twentieth century" (p. 158). Regrettably, this provocative assertion about what was lost by women's exclusion from the G.I Bill lacks the empirical grounding of Mettler's other claims.

This is an impressive study, with important empirical findings and interpretive passages in each and every chapter. There are, of course, limitations and weaknesses. First among these is Mettler's characterization of the postwar period of civic-mindedness as one of "peacetime democracy." To be sure, the postwar period did not have the total mobilization of World War II, but Cold War militarization and the heightened ideological struggle–not to mention shooting wars in Korea and Vietnam–strike this reader as important, unexamined contextual information. If veterans found affirmation in the state and in democracy, cold war rhetoric may have accentuated their sense of civic obligation. And, in this, G.I. Bill education might have proven a valuable mechanism through which veterans received ideological reinforcement, if not outright propaganda. Furthermore, Mettler treats veteran identity as a static phenomenon rather than one that waxes and wanes over the life cycle, and in response to national crises. Perhaps the continual state of war promoted a stronger sense of veteran identity than a "real" peacetime. Another weakness is the lack of attention to the role veteran organizations played in the G.I. Bill's implementation and in veteran politicization. Far too little discussion of these organizations occurs, but when it does, they are categorized as civic organizations that sometimes cross over into politics. Mettler's chapter on the G.I. Bill's creation, however, by demonstrating the American Legion's powerful role in its development, public promotion, and subsequent liberalizing revisions, should remind us of veteran organizations' overtly political characteristics: as lobbying groups, as springboards to political candidacy, and as intermediaries between veterans and both the veterans' bureaucracy and Congressional veterans' committees.

None of the above criticism should detract, however, from Mettler's powerful and insightful book. If she had merely written an empirical study outlining the impact of the college and sub-college benefits on white and black veterans, this book would come highly recommended. But Mettler's demonstration of how government programs' provisions and implementations can impact the ways Americans experience citizenship and, therefore, the practice of democracy, makes *Soldiers to Citizens* required reading for historians and political scientists interested in twentieth-century politics, social policy, and veteran affairs.

Notes

[1]. For the purposes of this review, the list of the important literature is impossibly long. The best overview of the literature and of this development, however, can be found in Julian E. Zelizer, "History and Political Science: Together Again? " *Journal of Policy History* 16, no. 4 (2004): pp. 126-136.

[2]. Suzanne Mettler, *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[3]. Fortunately, a more extensive discussion of the G.I. Bill's development can be found in Suzanne Mettler, "The Creation of the G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944: Melding Social and Participatory Citizenship Ideals," *Journal of Policy History* 17, no. 4 (2005): pp. 345-374.

[4]. For the exclusions and limitations of the G.I. Bill,

see David H. Onkst, " 'First a Negro … Incidentally a Veteran': Black World War Two Veterans and the G.I. Bill in the Deep South, 1944-1948," *Journal of Social History 31* (Spring, 1998): pp. 517-544; Margot Canaday, "Building a Straight State: Sexuality and Social Citizenship under the 1944 G.I. Bill," *Journal of American History* 90 (December 2003): pp. 935-957; and Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

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