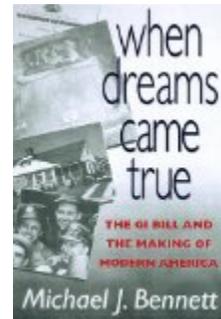


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael J. Bennett. *When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America.* Washington, D.C., and London: Brassey's, 1996. xvi + 335 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57488-041-0.

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If politics makes for strange bedfellows, then modern social policy has made for some seemingly very odd combinations at points in twentieth-century American history. Consider the case of the G.I. Bill of Rights. Passed by the emerging conservative coalition of Southern Democrats and Republicans only one year after an assault on various New Deal agencies, the bill was signed into law by liberal Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt under the formal title of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. Often interpreted as a reward from a grateful nation to the only generation of wartime American veterans to receive humane treatment in the postwar years,[1] the GI Bill grew out of a maze of conflicting developments to become one of the most popular and successful pieces of social legislation in U.S. history. Recently Harvard sociologist Theda Skocpol, author of some of the most thoughtful policy histories to grow out of the new interest in political and institutional history, wrote that the "history of the GI Bill suggests that, sometimes, surprising political alliances can come together to mark watersheds in the development of American public social provision." [2] In this account, former *Boston Herald* and *Detroit News* reporter Michael Bennett seeks to "make scholars realize how significant the GI Bill was...and to tell a great story for not only those who benefited from the bill but also for their children and grandchildren" (p. x). Disillusioned by the antipoverty efforts of the War on Poverty and the social protests of the 1960s, Bennett interprets the GI Bill as a successful effort by wartime conservatives to recreate the Jeffersonian dream via home ownership paid for with Veterans Administration (VA) loans and college degrees financed with GI Bill educational benefits.

To buttress his thesis about the GI Bill, Bennett pro-

vides ten narrative chapters on the origins, politics, provisions, and impact of the bill, paying particularly close attention to the work of key political actors including Harry Colmery, former national commander of the American Legion; newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst and his editor Walter Howey; Senator Joel Bennett "Champ" Clark (D-MO), chair of the Senate veterans subcommittee; Representative John Rankin (D-MS), chair of the House veterans committee; Edith Nourse Rogers (R-MA), ranking Republican on the House veterans committee; and a host of Hearst newspapermen and press releases that along with a national letter-writing campaign coordinated by the American Legion led to adoption of the final bill which Colmery had initially written as a "Bill of Rights for GI Joe and GI Jane." After detailing the political origins of the bill in Chapters 2 through 6, Bennett includes separate chapters on the 52-20 clubs that provided unemployed veterans with \$20 compensation for up to fifty-two weeks; the influx of veterans onto the nation's college campuses peaking in 1946 and 1947 that gave the country the best-educated generation of middle class citizens it has ever seen; the postwar impact of VA housing loans on priming the pump for suburbia, franchising, malls, and the dominant lifestyle of late 20th-century America; and a conclusion suggesting that Clinton administration proposals for reform of public housing may hint at a new GI Bill in the making.

Bennett's effort is an ambitious one. For popular readers unfamiliar with the provisions and impact of the GI Bill, the account is well written and centers on colorful personalities. Yet in claiming to be the first full account of this key social policy initiative, the work has serious shortcomings.. Ranging from the eccentric (scholars should return to Louis Hartz's classic consensus inter-

pretation over the contentious one of Howard Zinn)[3] to the downright cantankerous (had returning veterans not stayed on the sidelines in the postwar strikes of 1946 the country would have turned to class conflict and socialism), this work proves to be an unfortunate exercise in futility. In taking scholars to task for ignoring the history of the GI Bill, Bennett ironically has to rely on the two standard scholarly accounts[4] for the most reliable details in his own work!

Bennett's account is based almost exclusively on a very narrow and odd research base. He obtains most of the political details from the standard account by Davis R. B. Ross, *Preparing for Ulysses* (1969), while the section on the impact on higher education draws from Keith W. Olson's more succinct, more thoroughly researched *The G.I. Bill, the Veterans, and the Colleges* (1974). The only new sources are from interviews with several Hearst newspaper reporters and the son of Congressman John Gibson (D-GA) who provided the key vote in the congressional conference committee, contacts from his own reportorial career, and the unpublished text of a documentary on the GI Bill. Other than drawing a few details from a three-part 1949 series in the *American Legion Magazine* and a November 1994 article in *Smithsonian Magazine*, Bennett has done no original research in primary source materials other than a few brief forays into the *Congressional Record* and *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (1975). His use of secondary works to substantiate certain claims leaves considerable doubt in the reader's mind as to the accuracy and usefulness of this reporter's "first draft of history." In the preface, Bennett confesses to his own disillusionment with governmental action during the 1960's, his anger at the conflict interpretation in Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States* (1980), and his nostalgia for the simpler time of postwar American white middle class life. The interpretative focus presented here tells us more about the author than the subject at hand.

At numerous points in the narrative, the text diverges from the issue at hand to discuss matters only distantly connected with the current chapter. In the chapter on the origins of the GI bill, for example, the author presents a Cold War-era interpretation of the 1919 strikes and the Red Scare while overlooking the ultra-conservative aims of the newly-founded American Legion.[5] The caricatured view of New Deal planners that appears at points throughout the work belies the origins of the idea of postwar planning for military and home front veterans under the aegis of Frederic Adrian Delano, FDR's uncle, who chaired the planning board's committee on post-

war benefits that suggested some of the provisions of the 1944 bill in 1942. Throughout, the narrative presents conflicting arguments that serve to confuse the reader. For example, Chapter 9, "Making Modern America," simultaneously presents the GI Bill as the progenitor, result, and midpoint in the evolution of postwar housing policy, Levittown tracts, shopping malls, interstate highways, and such franchising operations as Korvette's and Holiday Inn. The author cannot seem to decide if this is a book on the GI bill, wartime politics, or the postwar economy of abundance.

Throughout the text, factual details contradict interpretive points under discussion. While arguing that the bill's educational benefits crossed not only class and ethnic lines, but also gender and racial lines, the author rightly notes that "only 2.9 percent, or 64,728, of the 2,232,000 World War II veterans who attended college were women" (p. 202) and only an estimated "250,000 blacks were given the opportunity to go to college for the first time under the GI Bill" (p. 260). As a former reporter in Boston, Bennett gives entirely too much credit to the Hearst organization in pushing the American Legion bill through Congress, merely accepting the assertions of one key Hearst player without checking it against any other records.

>From a scholarly point of view, there are serious lapses in judgment, methodology, and familiarity with existing literature on the subject. Bennett relies on secondary accounts that are twenty to thirty years old, while he often mistakes correlations for cause and effect. As a journalist rather than a scholar, Bennett is unaware of more recent works on wartime mobilization by John Morton Blum, Allan Winkler, Studs Terkel, William O'Neill, Michael Adams, and Alan Brinkley that might have given him pause in making a raft of odd interpretive claims.[6] Some direct quotations are used in the text that are not acknowledged, cited, or checked either in primary sources or the few secondary accounts cited in the rather brief notes at the end. There is no bibliography of sources, for which the publisher should take blame.

Despite these major flaws, *When Dreams Came True* unintentionally raises a significant point about the policy process that brought together political conservatives, military veterans, a generous public, and a positive state to reveal the possibilities of a new kind of national policymaking that did not remain trapped in the older nineteenth-century distinctions between private/public, voluntarist/statist, Republican/Democrat, conservative/liberal, native born/foreign born, and upper

class/lower class. Implementation of the GI Bill proved a postwar success story that has not always been appreciated by scholars or the broader public. When speaking about the history of the GI Bill to a local American Legion Post in a small, Southern town several years ago, I ended by reminding the audience of aging World War II veterans how long this policy had reached by allowing their speaker to finish graduate school on educational benefits due to my own father's death from a World War II service-related disability. Afterwards one couple proudly noted that they had purchased their first home with a VA loan, while another related that the husband had completed medical school due to educational benefits and that the resulting income helped put their children through college. Between 1945 and 1955, the federal government underwrote \$33 billion in VA housing loans. By 1956, \$14.5 billion of taxpayer monies had been spent to educate and train 7.8 million of 15.6 million eligible veterans. \$5.5 billion of that educational assistance supported one of the most remarkable generation of college graduates in U.S. history, which included 450,000 engineers; 180,000 doctors, dentists, and nurses; 360,000 school teachers; 150,000 scientists; 243,000 accountants; 107,000 lawyers; and 36,000 clergy members. While eighty percent of these may have pursued a college education even without the GI Bill, this is still one of the clearest examples of the value of social capital investment in human potential and talent in U.S. history. No wonder that scholar Theda Skocpol, former Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, and President Bill Clinton all have issued recent calls for a new GI Bill to build the social infrastructure of tomorrow.

For the origins of the bill based on research in primary sources, one should still turn to the works of Davis Ross and Keith Olson. For a sprightly written account, *When Dreams Came True* might serve the needs of an undergraduate student. Yet we still lack a full-fledged, comprehensive history that addresses the kinds of issues of interest to H-State readers. Future researchers will need to deal with the interpretive issue of whether this landmark piece of social legislation was an outgrowth of New Deal liberalism, wartime necessity, postwar planning, public generosity, or political maneuverings of an emerging postwar conservative coalition. Examination of the passage and implementation of the GI Bill suggests that wartime policy making stemmed from a complicated institutional, political, and cultural nexus that scholars have only started to examine in full detail.

Notes

[1]. Richard Severo and Lewis Milford, *The Wages of War: When America's Soldiers Came Home—From Valley Forge to Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989) is the only account to consider the broad historical sweep of American treatment of military veterans, while placing the exceptional case of the World War II generation in perspective.

[2]. Theda Skocpol, "Delivering for Young Families: The Resonance of the GI Bill," *The American Prospect*, September-October 1996, p. 72.

[3]. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956) and Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

[4]. Davis R. B. Ross, *Preparing for Ulysses: Politics and Veterans During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) is the best account of the origins of the bill, while Keith W. Olson, *The G.I. Bill, the Veterans, and the Colleges* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974) gives the most comprehensive review of the impact of the bill on postwar higher education. Bennett does not cite either Jack Stokes Ballard, *The Shock of Peace: Military and Economic Mobilization after World War II* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), for the historical context of wartime demobilization or Theodore R. Mosch, *The GI Bill: A Breakthrough in Education and Social Policy in the United States* (Hicksville, NY: Exposition Press, 1975), which places the impact of the World War II, Korean, and Vietnam era GI bills in historical perspective.

[5]. There is no comprehensive history of the American Legion, but a good start focusing on the interwar period can be found in William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989).

[6]. John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America during World War II* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1986); Studs Terkel, *The "Good War": An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); William L. O'Neill, *A Democracy at War: America's Fight at Home and Abroad in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1993); Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

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