The passage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 — or GI Bill — opened up a dialogue about men’s physical and mental health, for it addressed very directly what ordinary men would need to recover from extraordinary violence. Political leaders identified veterans’ “welfare,” by which they meant general well-being, as a top priority of World War II’s recovery, and the GI Bill was the centerpiece of their agenda. The bill’s passage was an impressive legislative triumph, the collective product of massive medical, legal, and social science research, bipartisan politicking, and veterans’ activism. It provided education, housing, and small business assistance, along with mental and physical rehabilitation in government-funded hospitals. All of these programs, whether they served mind, body, or wallet, amounted to welfare — a set of government-sponsored policies and services designed to aid a soldier’s transition from enlisted man to healthy, productive citizen. Thus we have to think about the broad reach of the GI Bill’s welfare provision as one of the health legacies of World War II.

The United States has gone to war many times, and so the problem of providing for returning soldiers has a long history, dating from even before the American Revolution. The scale of World War II, however (16 million Americans in uniform around the world), and its timing (coming on the heels of the Great Depression) challenged policymakers to write a comprehensive bill that could address the many layers of a veteran’s experience, from lost income to lost limbs. This essay focuses not on the bill’s legislative aspects but rather on the policy conversations that surrounded its enactment. Even though the GI Bill was drafted and passed during the war, I want to frame it as a postwar conversation about welfare, a conversation that resuscitated much older debates about the American welfare state’s most thorny dilemmas: who deserves the state’s help and how should assistance be delivered?1

These debates become visible only if we frame the GI Bill as part of a larger story of the United States’ demobilization from World War II. Peace did not just happen to Americans, they had to make it — just as they had made war. My larger project traces this conversion to peace from working-class neighborhoods in Chicago to elite policy arenas in Washington, D.C., to understand how people confronted war’s messy aftermath — a period of both great promise and uncertainty.

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As a national experience, demobilization reintroduced an array of questions about the rights of citizenship and the scope of the modern state. Now that the obvious home front sacrifices were no longer necessary, what were the state's expectations of engaged citizenship in a post-conflict — but still unstable — world situation? And more urgently, what, if anything, did the government now owe its citizens after enlisting them in a long war?

At the grassroots, citizens’ answers to these questions varied widely, depending on military status, region, race, gender, and the remaining money in one's pocket at war's end. At higher levels, presidential and congressional debates focused on the role of government in the wake of a war that had reached deeply into everyday life. Liberal hopes that an activist, regulatory state could spread widely peace's economic rewards clashed with conservative plans to restore free enterprise as the core of a new peacetime economy. This partisan debate over government's peacetime reach had profound implications for every proposed expansion of the American welfare state after World War II.

One of the central questions of my research is how war — especially a total war — shapes popular expectations of government after the battle concludes. War is violence, loss, and sacrifice, but I argue it is also an act of governance that can reconfigure, tweak, or deepen people's worldviews about the state's operation in their lives. As I will show, the passage of the GI Bill did not settle the debate over how much or how little government in war's aftermath — it revived it.²

Well before the war ended, military planners, academics, and the media considered what a demobilization of 16 million soldiers would require in terms of legislation, budgets, industrial reconversion, and from family members, nuclear and extended.

Postwar democracy hinged on this successful transformation. The boom in this returning vet literature provoked Bill Mauldin, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist of GI everymen “Willie and Joe,” to lampoon its dire forecasts in Back Home, his own chronicle of the shift to civilian life. He called the genre “trash,” put out by “hungry authors” who “had paid off the mortgage on the old homestead by posing as authorities and writing quick-selling books on the subject.”⁵

Whatever its quality or intent, this literary gush on veteran reentry continued, even into the 1950s, and it expressed a genuine anxiety about the grand transition from war to peace shared by all citizens. At the core of the deliberations was a partisan-philosophical debate about the functions of government. The 1930s welfare state and the 1940s warfare state had brought the federal government into people's everyday lives in ways that both rewarded and regulated. By the end of World War II, the social security card and the rationing card represented the two poles of that statist intervention: one stood for government provision, the other for government regulation.⁶ How to recalibrate the size and scope of government now in peacetime presented an enormously complex policy challenge for World War II's managers. Their decisions would impact all aspects of veterans' resettlement, from jobs, to housing, to health care.
For ordinary veterans, such policy matters were, at first, eclipsed by the more urgent, local practicalities of coming home. In Chicago, as in the rest of the nation, a soldier's reentry began in the train station. Chicago was the nation's railroad depot, “the place where Americans changed trains,” whether civilian or soldier. Migrating workers, military recruits, and the families that followed comprised a mass migration to and through the city. The soldier’s presence in the city was especially conspicuous, not only because so many came through by rail, but because two of the military’s largest service centers were located just outside of it. Those either passing through or returning to Chicago could rely on organizations like the Travelers Aid Society (TAS) to steer them to a meal and temporary housing. As the self-described first responders for war’s home front casualties, the TAS — even before the war ended — worried that cities were not ready to reabsorb 16 million veterans. Overwhelmed by war’s human traffic, a TAS worker in May 1945 said, “As I see the increasing load…the resources seem so small that there is a feeling of almost panic that comes to me with each new client…I read of reconversion and the discharge of thousands of veterans and see only the beginning of the problem.”

To address “the problem,” the private and public welfare agencies that had helped Chicagoans gear up for war now began to plan for a peacetime urban invasion. The Veterans Administration’s Chicago office calculated a returning veteran population of 900,000 for the state and three of Indiana’s northern counties. Chicago’s housing officials estimated that the city had sent over 400,000 of its 3.5 million residents to war, and that roughly the same number would be coming back to restart their lives (alongside the additional quarter of a million newcomers). Such statistics motivated the city’s social welfare organizations to ramp up their activities for the peace in the same spirit they had mustered for the war. Local branches of government agencies such as the United States Employment Service (USES), along with city and county relief agencies, set up new offices or carved out new spaces in already cramped quarters, all to accommodate the varied needs of returning vets.

The challenge for demobilizing soldiers was not so much a lack of services but rather their decentralized abundance. The combined efforts of government agencies and private organizations formed an unwieldy system that was hard to know where to enter. As one confidential report griped, “Almost every conceivable agency, federal, state, local, professional, civic, and social, is trying to do something for the veteran.” In Chicago, as in other cities, the Veterans Administration (VA) was the main agency coordinating postwar benefits, and its local office was supposedly a returning soldier’s first stop. Here, veterans filed for their benefits and presented claims for medical and vocational rehabilitation if they had received a “service-connected” injury. But how to fill out all the forms? A local chapter of the American Red Cross was responsible to help them do that. For employment, a veteran had to locate the local USES office, which was not in the same place as the VA office. For disabled veterans floundering financially, help was available from the Red Cross or a local social service agency until a claim could be adjudicated over at the VA. The Chicago Welfare Administration, a local agency, helped veterans and their families who needed public assistance (due to a disability or pending settlement of a claim). Private agencies — run by staff and volunteers — absorbed the messy remainders: the emotional and knotty family troubles that the war had either set in motion or exaggerated. Groups like the Salvation Army, for example, focused on “family problems” and the “readjustment of the man back into the community.”

The creation of a Chicago Veterans Information Center in late 1945 was designed to deal with this muddle by providing a one-stop service for all veteran issues. But its own September 1946 report documented continued confusion, citing the plethora of aid groups (government and private) as the hindrance: “the veteran has difficulty determining which one of these agencies is in a position to handle his problem.” These frustrations, of course, were rooted in a larger, intractable design flaw of the American welfare state: its decentralized and multi-track character. As much as they were fêted and fussed over, veterans who needed pensions, vocational and physical rehabilitation, housing, and assistance for dependents still found themselves entangled in a federalist system that divided the labor of caring for war’s victims among federal, state, county, and private charity organizations. The result was a patchwork system that delivered much to the veteran (certainly more when compared with programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children), but not without considerable confusion and complaint.

National planners were aware of veterans’ local trials, and they worried that such frustrations could lead to larger, more unwieldy national problems. Memories of World War I’s troubled aftermath haunted them and references to avoiding the mistakes of that war’s demobilization can be found at every layer of postwar policymaking. In particular, planners agreed that they wanted to avoid a situation where veterans would be squeezed by lower wages and higher prices, which many feared might lead to another national Bonus March on Washington. Indeed, lingering beneath
every policy initiative for World War II veterans was a fear that restive veterans, jobless and homeless — or at least, poorly housed — were capable of political mischief, maybe even violence. As Kathleen Frydl puts it, "the GI Bill was born from fear." This was neither unique to the United States, nor to the time period. Scholars have documented other examples of veteran provision that were driven by fear of veterans’ potency as a destructive political force. A recent comparative review of demobilization efforts around the world, for example, suggests “if former combatants cannot see a role for themselves in the postwar order, they may turn to banditry.”

Of course, no one in either the policy or popular literature called World War II veterans “bandits,” relying instead on more polite, therapeutic terms like “maladjusted” or “unfulfilled.” As they pondered how to minimize the maladjustment, policymakers grappled with deep and longstanding questions about definitions of citizenship and the parameters of welfare provision. Significantly, it was not a foregone conclusion that veterans should be treated as a separate category of citizen. As Stephen Ortiz has shown, President Roosevelt’s 1933 Economy Act, a New Deal budget reduction measure, cut significantly the benefits for veterans of World War I. In response to veterans’ vigorous opposition, Roosevelt brazenly told the American Legion’s national convention that year, “no person, because he wore a uniform must thereafter be placed in a special class of beneficiaries over and above all other citizens.” Although Roosevelt ultimately signed the celebrated GI Bill, which recognized exactly the opposite, it was nevertheless an important welfare policy discussion in the forties about how to define a “veteran” in a total war. Should civilian workers — whether engaged directly in war production or not — be considered in initiatives to compensate for war-related injuries? Certainly, industrial injuries were a health legacy of World War II. In 1943, for example, over 2.4 million laborers, most of them in manufacturing, were injured at work, with over 100,000 of those injuries defined as partial but permanent. Should the millions of civilian employees working for the much-enlarged military and wartime federal government be folded into a veteran entitlement program, even if they had merely performed clerical work during the war? In planning its own urban transition to peace, Chicago’s City Council claimed that “all work is purposeful and war-connected.”

High-level planners contemplated how to balance the competing welfare needs of these differing categories of demobilizing citizens. Just two months before the passage of the GI Bill, Frank T. Hines, then a director in the Veterans Administration, wrote a lengthy and tortured consideration of the government’s responsibility and financial capacity to help the projected millions of jobless citizens, mindful that the costs, in the long term, “will have to come out of the National economy.” Hines warned that any proposed assistance program would be scrutinized heavily for its fairness to all groups, and that “while the emotional appeal on behalf of veterans is particularly strong, it must be realized that in any post-war period of unemployment, hunger and want is wholly impersonal… between veterans and non-veterans.”

As much as planners sought to avoid a contest between those in uniform and those in overalls, it would be difficult to avoid given how many mov-
trumped whatever federal law dictated. Thus, almost a year after the GI Bill went into effect, the American Council on Race Relations found that officials obligated to help veterans access employment benefits instead “follow[ed] the pattern of the local community with respect to segregation and discrimination.” The result was a national pattern wherein “Negroes, Japanese Americans, and other minority veterans [were] referred, for the most part, only to menial job opportunities.” Further, local counselors, especially in the South, advised African-American vets to take unemployment as a way of steering them away from jobs – and from an area entirely. This fostered “group antagonisms” between whites and non-whites, said the Council, for it sustained a long-held welfare myth that African-Americans, whenever they could, would seek the dole rather than hard work.

The feared tensions between veterans and “stay at homes” over postwar benefits grew out of an even larger worry about the GI Bill’s funding into the next decades. In the Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion (OWMR), staffers warned of long-term fiscal and political consequences for such generosity to vets. Over a year after VJ-Day, OWMR planner Donald Kingsley complained that despite the GI Bill’s passage and popularity, no real long-range plan existed for funding and delivering veterans’ benefits, creating a policy gap that was “a matter of tremendous consequence to the Nation.” Decentralized planning and program delivery, the lack of a coherent set of basic planning principles, and the cost — projected for 1947 as $6.2 billion, or 27% of the (non-defense) federal budget — meant that yearly enhancements or tweaks to the GI Bill in Congress would go forward without rigorous evaluation. With “no effective means of dealing with the extreme pressures that build up behind veterans’ bills,” Kingsley maintained, there was a “serious probability” that “broad extensions of existing rights and benefits” would be enacted “with serious effects upon the whole economy.”

Further, Kingsley disparaged the federal-state-local chain of GI Bill service delivery as a harbinger of renewed efforts to organize other national programs around local control. In a debate over whether to increase state governors’ responsibilities to run Veterans Information Centers, such as the one in Chicago, Kingsley endorsed more and better federal administration of them, wary of ever more delegation to the states. The “political implications” of such an approach, he said, were “extremely serious,” for veterans’ state-run centers served only to offer “the States’ rights advocates some excellent ammunition” to decry federal management of any program. This was an especially potent charge, given that burgeoning civil rights movements in the north and south — many of them filled with World War II veterans — were renewing their attacks on states’ rights politics.

Such warnings about the GI Bill’s long-range consequences reveal that its final passage in 1944 was only the beginning of a new, postwar conversation about the size and scope of the welfare state. The bill was designed to compensate veterans for what the fight had taken from them — physically, psychologically, economically. It represented a massive government outlay to house, educate, employ, and mend returning soldiers, from joyous homecoming to deathly departure. It was, as Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin put it, “a New Deal for veterans,” an extension of government activism and welfare provision passed through bipartisan effort, notably in a climate where conservatives were more openly criticizing the statism of the thirties. Yet, despite the broad consensus that veterans were “deserving” recipients of the state’s help, the bill reopened what was essentially a welfare debate about government’s peacetime functions and its obligations to the citizens who had just heeded its calls to war. By following the debates that emerged after the bill’s passage — as part of a longer process of this country’s transition from war to peace — we gain a better perspective on how the GI Bill fits into a larger history of war-related and highly contested national welfare policymaking, reaching all the way back to the Freedmen’s Bureau during Reconstruction.

Finally, it is worth pondering how deeply intertwined warfare and welfare have become after World War II, in ways both narrow and expansive. As the Cold War took shape, it became difficult to discuss expansions of government social provision without invoking some association with communism — unless the proposal was somehow connected to national security or war. G.I. benefits during the Korean War grew stingier in such a climate, but the idea of a sturdy welfare program for deserving veterans remained firmly embedded in Cold War political culture. Yet the path to permanent militarization fostered by a world war and then a cold war made it difficult for politicians and citizens alike to decouple citizenship from war. Should one’s citizenship — and thus welfare — rights flow primarily through military service, with (mostly female) dependents latching onto such benefits through marriage? What are the larger implications of a welfare entitlement bound so tightly to military service? If the New Deal’s legislative agenda advanced the notion of a noble citizen-worker, then the GI Bill solidified the notion that it was the citizen-soldier who should earn a society’s first-class treatment. Certainly, many American veterans have enjoyed this kind of extra-strength citizenship long after World War II. Interest-
ingly, a lone alternative view to this postwar framework came from a group of veterans themselves, the American Veterans Committee. Their motto, “citizens first, veterans second,” suggests a way to think about citizenship — and thus civic well being through government provision — outside of a martial context. It was an imaginative and democratic notion then, especially in the context of a Cold War that began so soon after a declared war ended.30

References


3. Women comprised 2% of those in the armed forces — about 350,000. The issues involved in their access to the GI Bill’s benefits are covered nicely in Mettler, supra note 1, at chap. 9, and M. D. Gambone, The Greatest Generation Comes Home: The Veterans in American Society (College Station, Tex.: Texas A & M University Press, 2005). Few works on the GI Bill analyze deeply its gendered dimensions, but L. Cohen’s work is suggestive here. See Cohen, A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); at 137-144. I posit the GI Bill as the first male breadwinner movement of the postwar era. See McNeney, supra note 2.


5. B. Mauldin, Back Home (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1947): 40-41. Notably, one of the contributors to this “trash” was none other than the American Historical Association, whose 1943-1945 G.I. pamphlet series addressed veterans postwar concerns on topics ranging from foreign relations (Can We Prevent Future Wars?), to economic affairs (Will There Be Work for All?), to family matters (Can War Marriages Be Made to Work?). Historians, too, it appears, wanted to be part of the urgent national conversation about war’s economic and psychic toll. See the American Historical Association, “Constructing a Postwar World: The G.I. Roundtable Series in Context,” available at <http://www.historians.org/Projects/GIroundtable/index.html> (last visited December 7, 2010).

6. Of course, not all workers received social security as it was first designed and implemented. See, for example, A. Kessler-Harris, In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Katznelson, supra note 1, at chapter 2.

7. The Chicago’s Travelers Aid Society (TAS) estimated that between Pearl Harbor and the end of 1945, almost 9 million people had passed through the city’s six train terminals. Information on wartime Chicago taken from P. Duis and S. LaFrance, To Hear Only Thunder Again: Chicagoans and World War II (Chicago, Sewall Co., 1992): at 3, 97, 103. On train station traffic, see Mrs. A. L. Tidball to Statistical Department, 12 April 1946, Folder 15, Travelers Aid Society of Chicago Papers, University of Illinois at Chicago, The University Library, Department of Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois.


10. Frank T. Hines to Colonel Paul S. Lawrence, September 10, 1945, attached report Veterans’ Services in Chicago, July 26, 1945, folder: Veterans’ Relations Inter-Office, box 1, entry 66, Records of the Office of the Veterans’ Relations Adviser, Records of the Office of Price Administration, RG 188 (hereafter Records of the OPA), National Archives and Records Administration—College Park, Maryland (hereafter NARA-CP).


12. Veterans Information Center and Community Referral Service of Metropolitan Chicago, Report of Activities, September 1946, folder: 787-12, box 787, Records of the Veterans Information Center, WCMC Papers, CHM.

13. Scholars are beginning to question the two-track thesis about the American welfare state. See, for example, M. Willrich, “Home Slackers: Men, the State, and Welfare in Modern America,” *Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (2000): 460-489. His work suggests a "third track" and argues that the Progressive Era welfare state heavily regulated men, as well. For now, the best analysis of the two-track and gendered design of early welfare is found in L. Gordon, *Pitted but not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), Frydl analyzes expertly the issues of federalism and the GI Bill's design in her *GI Bill, supra note 1.*

14. Frydl, *supra note 1, at 14; Altschuler and Blumin, supra note 1, at 42-45, 78-79; Van Ells, *supra note 4, at 7-8.*


16. Quoted taken from S. R. Ortiz, “The 'New Deal' for Veterans: The Economy Act, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Origins of New Deal Dissent,” *Journal of Military History* 70, no. 2 (2006): 415-438, at 433. See also his *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill.* Ortiz smartly argues that this veteran opposition must be viewed as part of the early New Deal dissent. See also Altschuler and Blumin, *supra note 1, at 31-33, and Mettler, *supra note 1,* at chapter 1. Bill Mauldin describes similar sentiments from General Omar N. Bradley, who became the head of the VA after the war. He argued that veteran leaders from the American Legion, in particular, were selfishly putting their own “special interests before the welfare of this nation,” when they argued for “special privilege” versus “honest opportunity.” See Mauldin, *supra note 5, at 95-98.*


18. *Journal of the Proceedings of the City Council of the City of Chicago, Illinois,* April 3, 1945, 3189, Harold Washington Library, Chicago, Illinois. However, this statement was made in reference to sustaining production after the war had ended—indeed, during celebrations for VE or VJ Day, not as a proposal for postwar welfare policy. Frydl offers an excellent analysis of President Roosevelt’s deliberations on such matters. See Frydl, *supra note 1, at chapter 1.*


22. The report noted that this same practice was done to Japanese-American veterans. See American Council on Race Relations, “Summary,” Records of the FEPC. See *Id.*


24. Donald Kingsley to Dr. John R. Steelman, September 27, 1946, folder: Retraining and Reemployment, box 173, entry 16, Records of the OWMR.

25. J. Donald Kingsley to Mr. John W. Snyder, January 22, 1946, folder: Retraining and Reemployment, box 173, Records of the OWMR.

26. Altschuler and Blumin, *supra note 1, at 2. It is debatable, however, how strong this sentiment of anti-statism was among working-class citizens. See McEnaney, “Nightmares on Elm Street,” *supra note 2.*

27. For analysis of how women used the Freedmen's Bureau to make postwar claims on the state, see, for example, L. A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Keene makes this point, as well, connecting World War I veterans’ demands with the struggle for mothers’ pensions in the Progressive era. See Keene, *supra note 1.*


29. The citizen-worker formulation is from Mettler, *supra note 1,* at 19.
