

Introduction

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Since the nation's founding, veterans have been a constant presence in American political life. Veterans' special claims on the state, made concrete through a broad array of entitlements (veterans' policies) and their unique role in American politics (veterans' politics), have greatly influenced partisan politics and state formation in the United States. Given this, one would assume that veterans of the modern era (1898–present), their organizations, and their role in American electoral politics and political culture are all well-studied topics. After all, during a century-plus dominated by American military intervention abroad, millions of veterans became beneficiaries of a wide range of federal entitlements, from preferential governmental hiring to the enormous level of social welfare provisioning that guarantees health care, educational and vocational benefits, and easy access to home ownership. Moreover, veterans' civic organizations such as the American Legion, Disabled Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars reached into the social fabric of every community and into the halls of Congress as powerful lobbyists. And yet, with one notable exception, the G.I. Bill of 1944, most topics relating to modern U.S. veterans remained underexamined.¹

Recently, scholars have begun to turn their attention to veterans' issues more regularly and more rigorously. This anthology compiles some of the best of this new work on the formation and impact of veterans' policy, the politics of veterans' issues, and veterans' political engagement over the course of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States. To date, this research on veterans' policies and veterans' politics stood segregated within the various social science disciplines and their subfields. So while veteran-focused research is indeed now flowering, there has been little cross-pollination. To counter this trend, *Veterans' Policies*, *Veterans' Politics* brings together the work of scholars in history, the history of medicine and science, and political science to highlight veterans' issues as a field of interdisciplinary inquiry and debate unto itself.

This collection asks us to examine veterans' issues as a window into the larger topics of modern American history and to explore the continuing political implications of military service. Topics of analysis such as social welfare, health care, disability, and employment invariably come into sharper focus. But the essays also prod us into recognizing the centrality of veterans' issues and politics to modern state formation, the rise of interest group politics, understandings of citizenship, and American political culture and behavior. One key insight that informs the collection is that the debates surrounding veterans' issues nearly always turned into larger ideological battles over the nature of citizenship and the role of the federal government, two inextricably linked things. From the creation of the Veterans Bureau to the 1944 G.I. Bill to the contemporary battle over benefits to the veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, the politics of veterans' issues was, and remains, not a site of consensus but one of ideological contestation made all the more antagonistic because the recipients of benefits and provisioning are such potent symbols in American political culture and form an important voting constituency.

Three common, broad themes emerge in this volume. The first is the way that modern liberalism and conservatism have grappled over veterans' policy. At critical junctures, veterans' issues have been viewed as vehicles for broader political agendas. During the Progressive Era, liberals sought to rationalize veterans' policy and end the corrupting influences of the Civil War pension system. After the New Deal, however, some liberals viewed veterans' policy as an avenue to expand American social welfare provisioning for all, regardless of military service. Others viewed it as an obstacle to the type of universal social provisioning being pioneered in European countries since it privileged military service as the precondition for entitlements. While early-twentieth-century conservatives sought to limit sharply the scope of veterans' entitlements and often joined with Progressive Era liberals in delineating veterans' policy, their post-New Deal counterparts tried to quarantine social welfare provisioning within the veterans' system, hoping this would derail liberals' drive for universal social provisioning. Explored by many of the essays, this larger debate and the tensions that were exposed because of it have meant that modern U.S. veterans' policy can be viewed simultaneously as an expansion of social welfare policy *and* its rejection.

A second broad theme is that modern veterans' policy was, and is, a complex policy arena with multiple actors and sites of politicization. While it is associated with the federal veteran agencies created in twentieth-century such as the Veterans Bureau, the Veterans Administration, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, other key players shown in these pages to have been important include the War Department (Department of Defense), the military service

branches, Congress—especially congressional committees and subcommittees dedicated to veterans’ issues—veteran organizations, and even individual veterans struggling in and against the veterans’ welfare system. The contributors’ diverse methodological and theoretical approaches to “the political” continually shift the focus among these institutional and cultural forces.

The essays in this volume all build upon a third theme, the importance of not viewing veterans as a monolithic power bloc, nor veterans’ politics as a struggle between veterans and nonveterans. Political engagement, activism, and policy preferences have varied considerably within the veteran population. Often these differences *within* the veteran community are more pronounced than those between the veteran community and the population at large. Indeed, battles over veterans’ issues often serve as proxy wars with veterans on both sides: between supporters of southern white supremacy and their critics, between the forces of labor activism and the business community, between modern liberals and conservatives, between hawkish military interventionists and noninterventionists.

The essays in this book are organized thematically, and, only incidentally, chronologically. Thematic sections are dedicated to health care, disability, the politics of race and labor, veteran entitlements such as the bonus and G.I. bills, and contemporary views of veterans’ engagement and political preferences. Other very important veteran arenas such as housing and education have not been included because they have been researched and presented in the rich literature on the G.I. Bill. (Even still, there remains an unmet need to explore these arenas in the post-1944 G.I. Bill period.)

The book’s opening section investigates the early origins of veterans’ health care—probably the most taken for granted aspect of the veterans’ entitlement system. Yet, as Carol R. Byerly and Rosemary A. Stevens describe the inception of the veterans’ health care system in the early twentieth century, it was a site of bureaucratic confusion and competition, with locally autonomous actors continuing to shape policy and implementation until the creation of the Veterans Bureau. Throughout the 1900–1921 period, veterans’ health care was shaped by individual veterans’ agency and resistance at the local level, political mobilizations by veterans’ groups, and critical congressional oversight. Byerly captures the idiosyncrasies that guided the health care of veterans suffering from tuberculosis by focusing on Fort Bayard, a hospital dedicated to serving the health care and hospice needs of military veterans prior to the emergence of the Veterans Bureau in 1921. She deftly teases out the strands of what made this local implementation of a federal matter unique and what was intrinsic to the system in this very early age of state development. Stevens crafts a counter-intuitive trajectory of state development in her essay on the hospital provision-

ing provided to veterans of World War I. The ad hoc, makeshift care described by Byerly became swamped by the needs of the large World War I veteran cohort. In Stevens' reading, despite the antiradicalism and fears of socialism that colored the era, Congress moved to establish "socialized medicine" for veterans in the name of efficiency and in response to public outcry and mounting criticism from Congress and veterans' groups. Thus, even in the antistatist period of the 1920s, veterans' care took on many features of a strong, central administrative state.

In the second section, John M. Kinder and Audra Jennings explain the importance of veterans' disability issues to Americans' cultural understandings of disability and to the slow and constrained evolution of federal disability policies writ large. Kinder explores the experience of disability within what he calls the "architecture of disability" created through federal veterans' policy. The very spaces created for disabled veterans represented the relationship that veterans maintained both with the federal government and with the civilian population. As such, Kinder contends, these spatial arrangements materially and symbolically defined "disability" as a group identity and a social experience. Jennings investigates the ways in which federal veterans' disability policies crafted for the World War II cohort continued the veterans-only, exceptionalist approach, thus undermining the emergence of a coherent wartime and postwar disability policy for all citizens. While wartime industrial accidents produced a staggering number of severe injuries requiring rehabilitation, Congress's enshrinement of veterans' disability programs as separate, inviolable entities ensured that disability welfare would fall short of the nonveteran population's needs. Mirroring the concurrent debates over which agencies of the federal government would administer the education provisions of the 1944 G.I. Bill, the battle at the heart of Jennings' essay demonstrates the ways in which modern U.S. veterans' policy has been both a model and deterrent for broader social welfare policy.

Jennifer D. Keene and Nancy Gentile Ford delve into the politics of race and labor in the aftermath of the Great War. In each case, their essays highlight how a complex policy arena involving veterans' agencies, War Department agencies, and the private sector caused unique combinations of problems and opportunities for returning veterans. More important, the essays explain clearly how federal veterans' policies were constrained at the local, state, and federal levels. Existing social and political norms such as segregation, racial and ethnic discrimination, and intense antiradicalism worked to reshape ostensibly neutral federal policies, often to the detriment of African American, ethnic, and working-class veterans. Ford investigates the War Department's attempts to reintegrate returning soldiers into the economy following World War I. When

Congress and the business community deemed the Labor Department and its U.S. Employment Service too sympathetic to organized labor and, by implication, radicalism, the War Department became the primary federal entity responsible for veterans' demobilization and labor placement policy. Thus, even though new federal agencies such as the War Risk Insurance Bureau and Federal Board for Vocational Education were empowered to ameliorate veterans' reintegration problems, the venerable War Department successfully stepped in to address, and largely solve, the matter of economic reintegration. Keene reveals how African American veterans faced enormous obstacles to obtain the provisions to which they were entitled due to military service. Keene argues that discrimination in the implementation of veterans' policy inflicted further damage to African Americans suffering from their wartime experiences, yet discrimination also served as a rallying point for civil rights' organizations and the African American community energized by the ideological aims of the Great War and by wide African American participation in it.

Part four describes the politics behind the most notable and, indeed, controversial forms of veteran entitlements: bonuses and G.I. bills. The overarching theme in this section is the very fact that, despite substantial lip service paid to the nation's obligations to veterans, veterans' benefits were hotly contested rather than granted graciously by the government for military service provided. The first two of these essays, by Stephen R. Ortiz and Nancy Beck Young, contextualize veterans' entitlements within the politics of the Great Depression, New Deal, and World War II. Ortiz reexamines the origins of the Bonus March, focusing on the interorganizational struggle between the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) that gave spark to the 1932 Bonus crusade to explain the ways that federal veterans' policy made activist citizens out of veterans. Young describes the congressional efforts to undermine rather than advance New Deal social provisioning with the passage of the G.I. Bill. Her attention to the continued congressional power to check New Deal-style liberalism during the war and postwar years reconfirms the fact that the G.I. Bill was hardly "a New Deal for veterans," as one recent book would have it.² Rather, the sharply circumscribed social policy that emerged from Congress helped (many) veterans while promoting administrative decentralization and freely allowing local and state-level discrimination of racial minorities, women, and homosexuals.

Despite the circumscribed nature of the 1944 G.I. Bill, the second half of part 4 demonstrates that subsequent generations of veterans had to fight to come up with G.I. bills anywhere near as generous as the World War II cohort had won. With the corruption that riddled the original G.I. Bill, the ambiguity of Cold War-era soldiering (was stationing in West Germany or Alaska during

the Cold War considered combat?), and the bureaucratic maze in which Vietnam-era veterans found their entitlements enmeshed, late-twentieth-century veterans struggled to gain the same opportunities as the “Greatest Generation.” Melinda Pash details the fight for a Korean War G.I. Bill just years after the successful and popular World War II legislation. The legislation curtailed many of the provisions, Pash argues, because the Korean legislation emerged while Congress was exposed to hearings on World War II-era corruption in G.I. Bill benefits and because the solid footing of the U.S. economy in the early 1950s dampened concerns about veterans’ economic reintegration. Mark Boulton examines the legislative and ideological battle over the 1966 G.I. Bill for Vietnam-era veterans. Since the bill was inclusive of all veterans regardless of stationing or whether they had seen combat, Boulton contends that the bill kept provisioning at a minimum and provoked spirited criticism for being insufficient assistance to Vietnam veterans who needed it desperately.

Finally, Jeremy M. Teigen and Christopher S. Parker explore how veterans’ policy preferences and levels of civic engagement have been shaped in the early decades of the twenty-first century. In each essay, Teigen and Parker assess whether veterans have a different political make-up because of their military service and reflect on what this means for the future. Using statistical analysis of polling data from the 2004 and 2008 national elections, Teigen argues that rather than having a different set of policy preferences than the nonveteran population, veterans match up nearly entirely when other variables such as age and gender are statistically controlled. The most relevant policy difference between veterans and nonveterans, Teigen finds, is their position on the recently rescinded “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy for gays serving in the military. Parker uses interviews of veterans to gauge the impact of military service and combat exposure on levels of civic engagement. While a long-standing assumption has been that veterans are more politically engaged, Parker finds that combat exposure that produced feelings of alienation and mental anguish classified under the category of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) led to decreased levels of civic engagement and lower levels of trust in political institutions and authority. Yet, Parker explains, combat exposure that was viewed by veterans as a positive or neutral experience led them to have high levels of civic engagement much like veterans who had not experienced combat.

When this volume began its slow movement toward publication, it seemed an opportune moment to compile new scholarship on veterans and present it in a unified manner bridging disciplines. If anything, the authors of this volume are more convinced now of the importance of doing this. And if one looks at the temporal and thematic gaps in this volume, the things not covered here could, and should, fill multiple future volumes. Yet the hope is that such