

INTRODUCTION

People usually think that wars are a great cleansing; that, purified through sacrifice, they can start from scratch along their ideal paths after it is all over. Because of their innate wishfulness, people inevitably forget that every event is interrelated and one cannot go outside of history and “start over.”

—American sailor writing home from the Pacific in 1945

Veterans have always been with us. In the beginning, as tiny settlements of colonists clung to the New England and Virginia shorelines, they were often the only thing standing between survival and death. At the start of the seventeenth century, veterans of past wars constituted a body of experience in arms, and they used that know-how to defend their communities and prosecute war against the Native Americans. They imported a body of military knowledge from Europe that accompanied their weapons and bulky armor. Although the latter would be discarded as impractical, the tradition of military service would increase in importance as America grew.¹

Veterans participating in local militias remained the backbone of colonial America as the frontier first clustered along the Atlantic seaboard and then began to move west. In the bloody clashes between Virginians and the Powhatan in the 1620s and during the vicious fighting that erupted between the scattered settlements in New England and an alliance of Native American tribes led by Metacomet (otherwise known to the English as King Philip) in 1675, militias constituted the single barrier to outright annihilation. As each generation fought, it passed the benefits of experience to the next generation of citizen soldiers.²

Not every lesson was learned, however. Colonial America’s militias

remained notoriously inconsistent in their training, equipment, and discipline. While a few attempted to keep a sharp edge through periodic drills, most militias began to decline as the frontier moved and the proximity to danger moved with it. Without the presence of an imminent threat, it became difficult at best to convince local militias to render mutual aid or deploy beyond their colonial borders.³

Yet, they remained at the core of American life in a manner that gradually became more political than military. For colonists who were growing increasingly restive under the mantle of British rule, the veteran employed in his local militia began to serve as a bulwark not against the Native American but against the threat of a standing professional army. As the years passed and the seventeenth century moved into history, it became a distinctly American article of faith that a well-equipped militia served as a check against the coercive power of the national state.⁴

Even as these political concepts evolved and spread, the veteran, periodically employed in his local armory, developed yet another facet of his status and service. In many respects, local militias were key social-gathering points in America, where like-minded men and their families could not only meet and reinforce their common agreement regarding military duty but also pursue a broader spectrum of activities that included fund-raising for charity, business partnerships, and personal friendships. Once the mundane task of drill was complete, it was normal for wives, children, and soldiers to gather to drink, gossip, and enjoy each other's company.⁵

Certain units also reflected the social status of their sponsoring communities. The well-bred elites of Philadelphia created the first and oldest cavalry troop in America. Other militias that were located in the rural western reaches of the colonies were composed primarily of farmers, tradespeople, and simpler folk. Consequently, veterans' status, like membership in a particular church congregation or private club, was an early means of establishing a bond within an American community and defining—or defending—one's place in the social hierarchy.⁶

Veterans' status rather quickly became an American litmus test for leadership. George Washington's experience at the conclusion of the Revolution illustrated what would become a very strong thread in American history. When the commander in chief of the Continental forces bade farewell to his officers on a cold December day in 1783,

the moment was marked by Washington's quiet modesty and the deeply held devotion of his senior officers. The same could not be said of the crowds of boisterous New Yorkers who gathered along the old general's route to Whitehall Ferry and what he thought would be a restful retirement.⁷ The outpouring of public adulation would be Washington's greatest burden and his greatest asset for the rest of his life. For years after the Revolution, one of his greatest difficulties was attempting to allay fears that he would use his old military network to transform the fledgling American republic into a dictatorship.⁸ This never came to pass. However, Washington's credibility as the first president of the United States clearly benefited from the reputation for leadership he had accumulated during the war. The common features of his performance in combat—Washington's coolness under fire and almost foolhardy bravery—and, perhaps more important, his dogged determination to pursue victory despite defeat, definitely shaped a conventional wisdom that prepared a path to the presidency in 1789.

For many of Washington's presidential successors, war served as a crucible for political leadership. A belated victory over the British in 1815 thrust Andrew Jackson into national prominence. Many a lawmaker grumbled that Jackson's prowess in battle resonated dangerously with the growing number of Americans who were gaining the ability to vote. Henry Clay famously lamented during the election of 1824 that "I cannot believe that killing 2,500 Englishmen at New Orleans qualifies for the various, difficult and complicated duties of the Chief Magistracy."⁹ To an older cadre of Americans who had been raised in a much more exclusive version of democracy, the glorification of military service represented all of the worst qualities of low politics and misguided public passions. Yet, as the century wore on, it became a key test of leadership and something that had to be treated carefully. Candidates with less than distinguished military records handled their veterans' status gingerly. Throughout his political career, Abraham Lincoln often joked about his lack of combat service during the Black Hawk War of 1832 but considered his election as a militia company commander to be one of the highlights of his life.¹⁰

Certain politicians have recognized the value that military service has provided at key moments in American history. In 1868, in the aftermath of the Civil War, it was no coincidence that U.S. Grant was first unofficially nominated for the presidency at the Soldiers and

Sailors Convention in Chicago. Nor was it an accident that former Union officers joined the national speech circuit for him, while enlisted veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic organized torchlight parades to campaign for their old leader.¹¹ Similarly, Theodore Roosevelt understood the value of military service as a means of appealing to the country, particularly at the end of the nineteenth century, when the horrors of the Civil War had passed into popular nostalgia. From the tailored Brooks Brothers uniforms he had made before departing for the Spanish-American War, to the still and motion-picture camera operators who accompanied his regiment to Cuba to capture his performance, Roosevelt's campaign for veteran's status was homage to the concept. It was also highly successful. Although Col. Teddy Roosevelt was relatively well known as a Progressive reformer before 1898, it was his famous reputed moment at San Juan Hill that made him and his Rough Riders national celebrities. On the campaign trail only a few weeks after the war, he was commonly seen addressing crowds flanked by old veterans of the regiment and in many cases introduced by his old bugler, Emil Cassi. Colonel Roosevelt, as he was now known, rode on public acclaim into the New York governor's mansion in 1899 and the Republican national convention to receive the vice presidential nomination a year later.¹²

As they created a place for themselves in American politics, veterans gradually established a dominant place in public policy. Very early on, it was commonplace for the colonies to establish benefits for old soldiers and their families. In 1636, the Plymouth Colony decided that any soldier who was disabled as a result of his service should be maintained by the colony for the rest of his life. In 1718, Rhode Island enacted a law that included medical care and an annual pension drawn from the colony's treasury.¹³ Once a national government began to form, it too addressed the issues of benefits for veterans of the Continental Army, promising bounty lands to the west and pensions for Revolutionary War soldiers. Rudimentary programs for disabled veterans were also created by the federal government shortly after the war. In 1782, Congress agreed to provide a pension of five dollars a month to sick and wounded soldiers for the duration of their lives.¹⁴

In the years following the Revolution, the issue of veterans' benefits became the subject of moments of great generosity and debate over excessive cost. Programs often appeared in the flush of enthusiasm that followed the end of the conflict. Unfortunately, as the years passed

and sobriety returned to Congress and the public alike, the financial realities of a cash-strapped republic soon set in. One senator's statement during the debate over an 1818 bill expanding veterans' pensions illustrated what would become the most common and formidable obstacle to veterans' benefits: "I consider this bill as a branch of a great system, calculated and intended to create a permanent change upon the Treasury, with a view to delay the payment of the public debt, and to postpone, indefinitely, the claims of the people for a reduction in taxes, when the debt shall finally be extinguished."¹⁵

Controversy and scandal clung to the administration of veterans' benefits throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Poor record keeping at the state and federal levels left the veterans' pension system ripe for fraud and manipulation. When a pension act for Revolutionary War veterans was passed in 1832, for example, the War Department had complete records for militia service from only Virginia and New Hampshire. Protests regarding favoritism flared up almost as soon as the American Revolution ended. When Congress granted lifetime pensions for Washington's officers, an uproar ensued. The Massachusetts legislature denounced the decision in a public letter to federal lawmakers, claiming the policy was "inconsistent with the equality which ought to subsist among citizens of free and republican States." Problems evolved from that point onward. Almost as soon as benefits payments to veterans began, a small cottage industry sprang up to falsify service records or conjure up dependent family members to claim the pensions of deceased veterans. Over time, lawmakers invested more effort in defending veterans' programs from these assaults at the expense of new legislation.¹⁶

It was not until the Civil War that veterans' benefits programs took a major step forward. Contemplating hundreds of thousands of new additions to the ranks of American veterans, Congress began significant revisions of existing policy in the spring of 1862. One author has described the result as "epoch-making" law. It provided for extensive increases in pensions for disability and disease. The definition of family dependents also changed significantly. Widows and children under sixteen qualified for benefits after the death of the veteran head of the household. Mothers and orphan sisters, previously excluded by federal law, could also receive the pensions of their sons and brothers. All in all, the veterans' law of 1862 committed the federal government to an enormous and costly benefits program that would extend far

past the lives of the original veteran beneficiaries. The rapidly rising cost of this program mirrored its commitments. Although Congress estimated that the 1862 law would cost the treasury \$7 million per year, two years later the budget for pensioners had almost doubled, to \$13.4 million. By 1874, it had increased to \$30.5 million. By 1893, it had ballooned to a breathtaking \$158.1 million.¹⁷

Substantial holes in the law remained despite the massive increases in expenditures for veterans. In the post–Civil War era, benefits did not include hospitalization or rehabilitation for former soldiers and sailors. Most veterans and their families were expected to rely upon their own devices for long-term recovery. When individual resources proved inadequate, private charity was often the only recourse. The years following the war saw the expansion of organizations such as the American Red Cross and the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers to meet the needs of this large body of sick and wounded veterans.¹⁸

The next major breakthrough in veterans' benefits did not appear until the First World War. The unprecedented scale of mobilization for the war, a process that saw four million Americans wear their country's uniform, and the staggering lethality of modern industrial combat produced the largest number of veterans in the nation's history—and the greatest need for care in three generations. By the time the guns fell silent in Europe, more than two hundred thousand Americans had been wounded in the war.¹⁹

New laws and programs soon emerged to meet a staggering demand. The War Risk Act of 1918 provided rehabilitation for the war injured. Approximately 675,000 veterans of the Great War would apply for benefits through this one law. Under the Rehabilitation Law of 1919, disabled veterans received tuition, books, and a subsistence allowance of between \$90 and \$145 per month. To meet the acute need for hospital care, the Wilson administration initially assigned responsibility for veterans to the Public Health Service in 1919.²⁰

However, many unmet problems remained for the millions seeking work, homes, and a means to reassimilate after the war. Demobilization for the vast majority of veterans was abrupt, and little attention was paid to their transition back into civilian life. Discharged soldiers normally received a sixty-dollar separation payment and a railroad ticket home.²¹ Beyond these most rudimentary steps, individual veterans were left alone to negotiate a postwar American climate that was characterized

by a sharp economic recession that lasted until 1921, the Red Scare, the outbreak of the great influenza epidemic, and a general consensus to tuck the war as far away in the public memory as possible.

For its own part, the federal government attempted in 1921 to redress some of these difficulties by consolidating all of the old functions of the benefits system into the Veterans' Bureau. Unfortunately, corruption quickly overwhelmed the new agency. One of the most famous scandals of the decade enmeshed Col. Charles R. Forbes, a loyal campaign worker appointed by Warren Harding, as the first director of the bureau. Forbes was charged with fraud while arranging bids for the construction of veterans' hospitals. Criminal investigators discovered that he had accepted bribes for bids on contracts and a kickback of up to one-third of the profit made on the construction of each facility during his time in office. Forbes was eventually convicted and sentenced to two years in prison.²²

Disgruntled over what appeared to be public apathy regarding their plight and doubting that policy makers could successfully create an agency to represent their interests, veterans began to organize for themselves. In 1919, the American Legion (AL) joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) as the second major national institution designed to protect and promote the interests of former service members.²³ In many important respects, the legion and VFW represented the time-honored desire for veterans to simply congregate and enjoy the camaraderie that was rooted in common service. Meeting halls became cultural enclaves in which old soldiers could not only meet and exchange "war stories" but also, and perhaps more importantly, maintain an identity that represented one of the most profound and important aspects of their lives.²⁴ Locally, chapters of the VFW and American Legion became aggressive community activists, sponsoring charity fundraisers, youth sports, educational contests, and a host of other activities.

At the state and national levels, the two veterans' groups rather quickly became political forces to be reckoned with in the post-World War I era. With its headquarters in Indianapolis, the American Legion, for example, maintained constant contact with state and local chapters through telegrams, correspondence, and the American Legion Magazine. Overall, veterans represented a highly organized and integrated constituency that formed a powerful voting bloc at nearly every level of the political process. Attaining an endorsement from the Veterans

of Foreign Wars and the American Legion became a rite of passage for aspiring American politicians. Drawing on war chests created by the membership dues of hundreds of thousands of veterans, both organizations were able to maintain lobbyists in state capitals and Washington.²⁵ There they maintained constant pressure for the expansion and refinement of existing veterans' programs. In many cases, they were hugely successful. It is somewhat ironic that, by 1932, the year of the disastrous Bonus March on Washington, 12.8 percent of the total federal budget was dedicated to veterans. A year after the march, the Veterans' Administration recorded 412,482 beneficiaries who were receiving compensation for non-service-connected disabilities.²⁶

World War II changed everything. The conflict catapulted the United States to the permanent status of global superpower. In 1945, America could blacken the skies and cover the visible horizon of the sea with its fleets of planes and ships. Also in 1945, after the dramatic test at Trinity site, the United States could claim an atomic monopoly. Perhaps more important to the next generation was America's position as the sole, untouched industrial power in the world, a standing that would grant the country both an advantage in technology and production and access to global markets that it would maintain for the next thirty years. With this dominance came a new optimism and sometimes a new arrogance about what Henry Luce called "the American Century," a time when the fundamental blueprint of the world might be reshaped by American hands, where democracy, free markets, cultural mores, and security would find more American forms.²⁷

At home, dramatic change was also afoot. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt died near the end of the war, many assumed that the New Deal might expire with him. Republicans in particular, hearkening back to the days of balanced budgets and a laissez-faire approach to regulation, hoped for a postwar era of government retrenchment. However, none of this came to pass. The grasp and reach of the federal government grew to gargantuan proportions during the war.²⁸ Contained in selective service, the federal income tax, the Office of Price Administration, or the alphabet soup of agencies that descended upon the country, the national government attained a permanent and fixed place in American conventional wisdom. As it did, so too did public expectations that the government would provide for not only security but also a host of other functions contributing to the public good. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the Servicemen's Readjustment

Act of 1944 (popularly known as the GI Bill of Rights), arguably the greatest social-welfare program in U.S. history, and a host of programs in nearly every state mirrored or extended the benefits set down by the federal government.²⁹ For millions of Americans—veterans and their families—the GI Bill would solidify the link between public expectations and public policymaking.

Cracks in the American social status quo began to form as a result of the war. Pragmatism and the need for utility driven by national survival burst apart the taboos that encompassed life. Women, married or not, flocked to the workplace and demonstrated unrivaled competence. Their efforts, particularly in meeting the massive administrative needs of the modern War Department, proved crucial to victory. Minorities surged into factories and recruiting offices intent on demonstrating a patriotism on par with, if not greater than, the mainstream and with great hopes that the goals of the war would find their way home. Millions of GIs, contemplating their discharge from the service, saw in the future an opportunity for upward mobility for both themselves and their children. Their attitudes reflected a nation perched on the brink of enormous social change.

Despite the collective enormity of these events, historians today tend to gloss over the post–World War II period, particularly as it applies to veterans. In this instance, the problem might lie in the simple passage of time and our tendency to compress the past into manageable, but increasingly inaccurate, clichés that are useful for the sake of their brevity. Nearly every teacher has confronted the fundamental conflict between details and time remaining on the classroom clock. Serious scholars of modern American history have fewer excuses. Yet, the tendency in too many contemporary treatments of the postwar forties is to focus on victory in 1945; address the general political, economic, and social difficulties faced in the first Truman administration; and segue immediately to McCarthyism, the Cold War, the Baby Boom, and the fifties.³⁰

Although valuable, all of this scholarship ignores a question that is fundamental to the forties and much of American history of subsequent decades: How did sixteen million veterans come home after World War II? From this basic starting point, questions multiply. Beyond the accommodations made by new law, how did society prepare for them? How would men who had been weaned on bloody combat fare as husbands and the fathers of an emerging and massive generation

of children? How did the economy manage to incorporate them as productive wage earners without plunging the country into a postwar depression? How might American politics evolve to capture a formidable new constituency?

Second, but perhaps of even greater importance, how did these veterans change America? Their numbers alone tell a story that is hard to ignore. In 1945, approximately sixteen million Americans with a common experience of sacrifice, separation, and service came home to a country that was, in many ways, alien terrain after their years of military service. Did these former soldiers create what amounted to their own subculture within American society? If not, how did these veterans, both individually and collectively, reshape the nation to achieve what they perceived to be a better future? What imprint did they leave on the ballot box, the classroom, and popular culture?³¹ This second area of study offers what might be one of the most rewarding and untouched segments of twentieth-century American history.

When looking at the veterans of World War II, scholars have tended to focus on key institutions or specific attributes of the veterans' experiences. The impact of the GI Bill on American higher education has garnered a great deal of attention.³² Studies of the rise and decline of the veterans' health-care system, motivated to a degree by the Vietnam War experience, have also appeared in historical scholarship over the years.³³

It is only in the very recent past that scholars have begun to examine the diverse components of the experiences of the World War II veterans. Social historians have broadened the field beyond examinations of law and bureaucracies to include the impact of race and ethnicity on military service and veterans' status. A significant body of work has appeared that addresses the histories of African American, Latino, and Nisei service personnel.³⁴ The past ten years have also seen significant growth in histories of women veterans.³⁵ Moreover, in the aftermath of Tom Brokaw's *Greatest Generation* series and with the enormous popularity of Steven Spielberg's movie *Saving Private Ryan*, both amateur and professional historians have received an enormous boost to expand oral-history collections drawn from World War II veterans.³⁶

Despite this growing body of work, comprehensive histories of the World War II veteran are rare. The most recent example, *To Hear Only Thunder Again*, published by Mark D. Van Ells in 2001, is an important addition to what remains a fairly anemic historical field.³⁷ This is un-

fortunate, particularly since these veterans touched so many facets of American life—from their raucous demands for redeployment home that stampeded lawmakers who were eyeing the rapidly approaching 1946 congressional elections, to the revolution in medical care the Veterans' Administration established to treat hundreds of thousands of sick and disabled members of the armed forces, to the more subtle changes they invoked in college classrooms once the GI Bill began to pick up momentum. The broad array of places where veterans touched America after World War II deserve to be integrated into one complete story.

That is the contribution I would like to make with this book. As I have pursued this research over the years, it has led me to social, political, and economic subjects related to the veteran. It has also pushed me outside the traditional bounds of my own historical discipline to include the relevant aspects of medicine, psychology, psychiatry, and film. In the process, this search has led me to undiscovered areas that may add to the texture and depth of our understanding of the legacy these veterans bestowed upon a nation in the forties and fifties and beyond.

The structure of the book follows a fairly logical order. In chapter 1 I address the impact that military service had on the veterans' perceptions of home, from the time basic training rewrote the basic elements of social normalcy, to the image that civilian life retained while military personnel served around the world, to their first reactions upon returning to a much different country when the war finally ended. Chapter 2 focuses on the need to heal the many wounds inflicted by World War II. It covers the scandalous situation that greeted returning veterans in need of medical care in 1945 and the truly Herculean efforts by Omar Bradley to reverse this situation in the Veterans' Administration. Chapter 3 follows the veterans as they gradually found their way back into civilian life through work, education, and politics, leaving a significant imprint upon each as the decade progressed. Chapters 4 and 5 introduce distinct groups of veterans—women, African Americans, Latinos, and Japanese Americans—who not only shared some of the specific attributes and accomplishments of military service but also served under the burdens of discrimination distinct to midcentury American society.

Nevertheless, the wartime experience proved a catalyst for change and rising postwar expectations for veterans as much as for the majority

population. Arguably, the war was also a catalyst for both modern-day feminism and the civil rights movement. Chapter 6 addresses the influence of World War II upon popular culture, specifically as it applies to the movies, one of the most popular contemporary-entertainment mediums in American history. With the arrival and substantial success of *The Best Years of Our Lives* in 1946, veterans appeared prominently in Hollywood drama, including the increasingly popular film noir crime films that appeared after the war. As veterans found their way onto the screen, their numbers in movie audiences also markedly altered the manner in which war was depicted on film. In a clear departure from wartime portrayals of conflict, war movies after 1945 placed a much higher premium on realism and the perspective of the common soldier. Chapter 7 brings the story full circle, to a time when thousands of comfortably demobilized veterans once again faced military service in Korea. Accompanying the national story that unfolded, the chapter also examines the service experience of the 28th Pennsylvania National Guard Division from its first mobilization, through training, and to its eventual deployment overseas. Chapter 8 addresses the long-term legacy that World War II veterans had for the baby-boom generation, which grew to adulthood during the Vietnam era.

Clearly, this is a story made complex by the massive size of the GI generation, the vastly different qualities that veterans introduced to American history, and the scope of the six decades that have followed World War II. The enormity of the task is daunting to say the least. However, I hope that this book will contribute in some way to an understanding of a pivotal moment in time and render appropriate justice to those who served in time of war and helped to build the subsequent peace.