

World War II's 'Silent Army' Produced 'Silent Revolution'

by David M. Gosoroski

As the ultimate citizen-soldiers, WWII veterans became the engineers of massive social change and the architects of postwar American society.

When he died in July 1997, Jimmy Stewart was hailed as more than just a movie star. His military record was widely publicized. For a generation of Americans he was the quintessential WWII citizen-soldier and American hero.

An 8th Air Force pilot who flew 35 combat missions over Europe and recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross, he once remarked, "My service in the military has made me a better citizen."

To many Americans, he symbolizes the best qualities of the 16 million Americans (then 9% of the U.S. population) who answered the call to serve during the war.

Today, they number less than 6.7 million. But as a group, they have had an impact on American society, politics and economic growth far out of proportion to their numbers in the nation.

'For Our Families Our Nation'



President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs the Selective Service Training Act.

The [Selective Service Act of 1940](#) conscripted eligible males ages 18-37 "for the duration and six"-the end of the war plus six months. Though draftees comprised the great majority of all forces in WWII (66%), some attempted to volunteer but were officially conscripted because of the manpower needs of the Army ground forces.

Those who were employed were

guaranteed re-employment rights upon discharge by section 8 of the act.

The typical WWII soldier was single and 28 -- older than in most other American wars - and had finished the sophomore year of high school.

High school dropouts accounted for 28% of all American forces while 33% had completed only elementary school. (The demands of the Depression were overwhelming.) Some 14% of those in uniform had attended college, but only 3% had four-year degrees.

Support for the war was universal. Motivation for serving was best summed up by writer Jeremiah O'Leary: "The fire already was burning in most of our hearts. We all knew why. We did it because the American democracy, with all its wends and flows, was worthy of preserving.

"We fought Japan because we were attacked and we fought Germany because she declared war on us. We fought, of course, for each other, but we also fought for our families, our nation"

'Living the Life of a Savage'

Some 73% of GIs served overseas, with a distinct minority at the "tip of the spear" in Europe, North Africa, the Pacific and Southeast Asia. The ratio of support to combat troops was 10-to-1.

Women sent abroad numbered 17,000, while blacks made up 4% of troops overseas. Those who, through no fault of their own, remained stateside were derisively called "USO Rangers."

All told, American forces suffered 293,131 killed in action, 115,185 noncombat deaths and 670,846 wounded¹. These were only the physical casualties.

Battle fatigue, also called combat neurosis and combat exhaustion, affected some 1,393,000 men. Of all WWII Army ground combat troops, 37.5% were discharged for psychiatric reasons, found Richard Gabriel in *No More Heroes: Madness & Psychiatry in War*. This was often sarcastically referred to by GIs as "nervous in the service" or being "fright-burned."

¹ The US Merchant Marine suffered approx 10,500 killed and missing (presumed dead)

According to Dixon Wecter in *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* (1944), the most difficult of all rebuilding tasks was often restoration of nerves and minds shattered in battle.

After Guadalcanal, Marine PFC. John J. Conroy wrote to his father on Christmas Eve 1942: "I have been shell-shocked and bomb-shocked. My memory is very dim regarding my civilian days. Of course I'm not insane. But I've been living the life of a savage and haven't quite got used to a world of laws and new responsibilities.

"The medics here optimistically say I'll pay for it the rest of my life. My bayonet and shrapnel cuts are all healed up, however. Most of us will be fairly well in six months, but none of us will be completely cured for years."

Mustering Out

Actual planning for demobilization had begun as early as 1942. In mid-1943, the Armed Forces Committee on Post-War Education for Service Personnel was formed. Within a month of victory, 100,000 GIs were mustered out every 30 days by a point system based primarily on months in service and overseas. By September 1945, 25,000 men were being discharged daily.

At the end of 1946, only 3 million men were still in uniform out of 12 million at war's end. By 1948, the Army had gone from a high of 8 million soldiers to 545,000. Nevertheless, demobilization didn't proceed fast enough for either servicemen or anxious wives left behind.

A War Department manpower conference had seriously considered holding personnel in the service. But disgruntlement overseas and frustration at home led to demonstrations and threats of retaliation at the polls, prompting a stateside rotation speedup.

Mustering-out pay, favored by 88% of the public, became law on Feb. 3, 1944, effectively derailing payment of a bonus. Additionally, the Armed Forces Leave Act of 1946 provided for terminal leave pay, with bonds as a bonus substitute. Cash redemption became an option in 1947. By 1955, terminal-leave pay, mustering-out pay and readjustment allowances alone amounted to \$10.2 billion.

A Sucker for the Sacrifice?

GIs experienced anxiety over returning home. Wecter noted: "Whatever the cost to him personally of this war, in time and happiness and wholeness of body or mind, he wants to know it has all been to some purpose -- it has to make sense."

One soldier expressed as much in a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt: "There is one great fear in the heart of every serviceman and it is not that he will be killed or maimed, but that when he is finally allowed to go home and piece together what he can of his life, that he will be made to feel that he has been a sucker for the sacrifice he has made."

That fear "is linked with his feeling about friends who have paid much more than just an installment or two of sweat and pain," wrote Wecter.

The President's wife had warned that veterans might become a "dangerous pressure group in our midst." That sentiment was echoed by Professor Willard Waller of Columbia University in *The Veteran Comes Home*.

Waller cautioned: "The veteran who comes home is our gravest social problem, and certainly the major social problem of the next few years. Unless and until he can be renaturalized into his native land, the veteran is a threat to society."

Though solidly behind the war effort, many civilians also saw returning GIs as competition to their newfound economic security. Average worker income had doubled since 1939 to \$3,000 annually.

Four days before becoming President, Harry Truman made one thing clear: "America will never again permit the callous indifference, the economic and political ineptitude of the late twenties and early thirties to return to political power. No depression will be allowed to grow, like a Frankenstein monster, ultimately threatening our entire social structure." Some religious leaders feared a loss of old-fashioned virtue. War's end "will surely bring a slump of morals and morale," predicted J. Gordon Chamberlin in his 1945 book *The Church and Demobilization*. "The grass may cover war's scars on earth; but the spirits of men, once blighted by war, will pass on that blight."

Such fear-mongering proved groundless. Far more serious concerns required attention.

'Unwanted Battalion'

Public Law 16, the Disabled Veterans Rehabilitation Act of 1943, established vocational rehabilitation for WWII veterans. Participants eventually numbered some 621,000.

Among them were 14,648 veterans who lost one or more limbs, dubbed the "Unwanted Battalion." Prosthetics could be tormenting. For instance, an artificial arm weighed 10 pounds. False limbs were not only uncomfortable, but clumsy, expensive and in short supply.

By fall 1946, 86,000 WWII vets were still hospitalized. Virtually all these men were there as a direct result of the war. That would soon change.

When the Korean War ended, only about 35,000 actual war-wounded vets were among the 175,000 veterans occupying VA beds on any given day. The majority of WWII and Korean War veterans opposed free non-service connected VA care in 1953, according to a Gallup poll.

Psychiatric casualties were another concern altogether. Of the nearly one million men diagnosed as psychoneurotics, a 1951 National Research Council/VA study found only 8% were severely disabled. Some 85% were working, 77% married and 55% drawing no VA disability compensation.

But four years later, in 1955, a National Academy of Sciences study concluded one-third of WWII vets suffered some emotional disorders -- hardly a surprising consequence of war.

Such problems, though, were kept to one's self. Many of that wartime generation, even if aware of symptoms, viewed seeking treatment as a sign of weakness. Others simply denied the emotional stress later diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

By 1994, 210,000 cases of PTSD had been reported among WWII veterans. The most publicized case from WWII was that of Medal of Honor recipient Audie Murphy, the war's best-known hero.

Murphy, who died at age 47 in a 1971 plane crash, described how he could not sleep without a weapon by his bed and suffered from seven years of insomnia. "The last two or three years of it I was just sleepwalking," he told an interviewer. "There are only two of us left from the outfit, and we're both half dead."

Murphy, like the vast majority of his fellow veterans, persevered -- despite the obstacles -- to have a profound impact on postwar economic and social developments. WWII vets would be represented in the professional and managerial ranks, for example, out of all proportion to their numbers in the general populace.

'Most Important Event of the 20th Century'

Caring for veterans served the broader aim of promoting social welfare. Emergence of the middle class as the dominant force in American life began with passage of the [Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944](#), more commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights.

According to Michael Bennett in *When Dreams Came True*, it represented a reemergence of the Jeffersonian ideal of Americans as "yeomen" -- "educated citizens and independent property owners, neither rich nor poor, neither powerful nor wealthy, but self-sustaining."

The Bill signified the first time in American history that "veterans were treated generously and wisely, rather than callously and foolishly," added Bennett.

Although opposition to the Bill existed, according to Keith W. Olson in *The GI Bill, the Veterans and the Colleges*, it was rooted "not in any defects of the bill or its objectives, but in fear that by carelessness disabled veterans might suffer, as they had in the past."

When the American Legion and VFW reached a funding compromise of \$500 million for VA hospitalization, it paved the way for passage in 1944.

VFW past Commander-in-Chief Paul G. Wolman said: "I think that, in uniting these two great organizations, we have made history here."

In *Post-Capitalist Society*, Peter Drucker wrote: "The GI Bill of Rights -- and the enthusiastic response to it on the part of America's veterans -- signaled the shift to the knowledge society. Future historians may consider it the most important event of the 20th century."

Educational provisions included a maximum tuition of \$500 per year provided the veteran was accepted by the college of his choice. Veterans flocked to the "best colleges and universities," and became their top students.

But the campuses were totally unprepared for the massive influx. University of Chicago President Robert M. Hutchins expressed the fears of many in academia: "Colleges and universities will find themselves converted into educational hobo jungles. And veterans unable to get work and equally unable to resist putting pressure on the colleges and universities will find themselves educational hoboes." Quite the contrary occurred, of course.

In 1947, veterans accounted for 49.2% of total college enrollment. By 1955, 7.8 million veterans -- 50.6% of all WWII veterans in civilian life -- had used GI Bill education and training benefits.

In a November 1947 issue of *The New York Times*, education editor Benjamin Fine wrote of this "most astonishing fact in American higher education. GIs are hogging the honor rolls and the deans' lists; they are walking away with the top marks in all their courses. Far from being an educational problem, the veteran has become an asset to higher education."

By the July 25, 1956, cutoff date, 2,232,000 WWII veterans had enrolled in college using the GI Bill. They had infused \$14.5 billion in federal monies into American institutions of higher learning.

In *Days of Sadness, Years of Triumph*, Geoffrey Perrett noted the GI Bill's recipients had the "assertive, self-respecting attitudes of people whose claims are based on having earned, not simply deserved, what they received."

This was without "the sullen, self-destroying agonies of welfare clients... It was a very middle-class program, all the more effective for the disguise it wore...They and their children are the bedrock of America's modern middle class."

Unemployment compensation provisions of the GI Bill authorized payment of \$20 weekly for up to 52 weeks. Known as the "52-20 Club," it was used by almost nine million veterans from 1944-1949.

The Bill also superimposed the Veterans Placement Service Board on the Veterans Employment Service. Within a year after the war's end, 70% of non-disabled veterans had found employment. Two years after Armistice Day was re-named Veterans Day (Nov. 11, 1954), 5% of WWII veterans still were unemployed since their discharge.

Despite opposition from the Washington Post and major unions, ex-GIs also got a boost from the [Veterans Preference Act of 1944](#). Adopted by Congress as a national policy, by 1954 almost half of all federal civilian employees were veterans.

Housing was another critical issue after WWII. So the Veterans Emergency Housing Act of 1946 required expedited new home construction on a large scale. This act proved to be the catalyst that spurred the growth of suburbia.

William J. Levitt capitalized on the housing shortage by pioneering affordable suburban tract home development on Long Island. By 1956, 26% of civilian veterans had utilized GI Bill loans worth \$33 billion to pay for more than a third of those new homes-about 4.3 million.

VA mortgages took the fear out of home buying for both buyer and lender. Purchases could be made with no money down, but were backed by the full faith and credit of the federal government.

In addition to federal assistance, states offered bonuses. Illinois' provisions (the most generous) granted \$ 15 monthly for a maximum of \$882.50 for overseas service. Families of deceased veterans received \$900.

By the end of 1949, 19 states had authorized bonus payments of \$2.6 billion to 7.8 million living WWII veterans and survivors of those deceased. In comparison, 20 states granted bonuses after WWI.

Within a decade of the war's end, the need for certain veterans' compensation was being challenged. In 1956, the President's Commission on Veterans Pensions (the Bradley Commission) made 70 recommendations, 36 of which were approved by VFW.

But the VFW opposed two of the commission's major ideas: gradual termination of benefits for non-service connected veterans and elimination of compensation for those with 10% and 20% disabilities.

The commission concluded: "The ordinary or non-service-connected needs which veterans have in common with all citizens should be met wherever possible through the general welfare programs under which veterans are covered along with other people."

Direct Political Action

Fantasies of disenchanted veterans overthrowing the government were popular in academia during WWII. Waller claimed: "The veteran is, and always has been a problematic element in society, an unfortunate, misused and pitiable man, and, like others whom society has mistreated, a threat to existing institutions."

So when veterans in Athens, Tenn., in August 1946 cleaned up political corruption with their own direct action methods, it caused quite a stir in some circles.

After the local political boss hired gunmen to enforce his corrupt regime, the vets answered in kind with bullets and dynamite. Some 450 VFW members in nearby Blount County offered a hand, too. In the end, all five veteran-candidates were elected to office.

The New York Times editorialized: "Today it appears that this political coalition of WWII veterans for direct action in community affairs, regarded as likely to develop nationally in the postwar period, was purely a local phenomenon in which veteran participation was incidental."

Postwar history has shown veterans to be a potent political force in both parties. In the late '40s, two-fifths of all voting-age males were war veterans and one-third were WWII veterans. Half of the 80th Congress (1947) was made up of veterans.

Living Legacy

Fifty years later, America is only now coming to grips with how to permanently remember World War II vets. The proposed World War II Memorial is ironic in light of how Americans viewed such reminders immediately after the war.

Wrote historian Geoffrey Perrett in 1973: "Preparing for the postwar world also required that some thought be given to erecting suitable memorials in memory of those who had fought for the country. After the last war, cities and towns everywhere had put up architectural horrors in stone, concrete and marble and dedicated them to the dead.

"There was a strong aversion in most communities now to setting up useless, costly eyesores and calling them tributes. Instead, this postwar era would bring thousands of useful civic facilities, such as memorial parks, memorial auditoriums, memorial hospitals, memorial stadiums. They would be called the 'Veterans this' and the 'Veterans that,' but in their use they honored not just the veterans, but the entire nation in wartime."

While the sort of memorial most proper is debatable, the contributions of WWII vets to society are beyond debate.

"They were a silent army making a silent revolution, building the foundations of a new and better American society," wrote Bennett.

In the article, "[The Veterans Make Their Choice](#)," which appeared in the September 1946 issue of Harper's, Sam Stavisky wrote. "In the latent strength of the WWII veteran, whose full voice is yet to be heard, lies the hope of national security and world peace."