



After the War: Blacks and the G.I. Bill

For many black American veterans, coming back home after the war became a period of difficult transition. The treatment blacks received in Europe was much different than the racism and prejudice they had experience in America. In Europe they had been treated just like any other soldier, the color of their skin was not a consideration. One young soldier commented, “Had the ten months I spent in France been all in vain? Were those white crosses over the dead bodies of those dark-skinned boys lying in Flanders fields for naught? Was democracy merely a hollow sentiment? What had I done to deserve such treatment?” This fundamental shift in treatment raised hope and expectation that things would be different once they returned to American soil. A metaphorical reading of *Untitled* by African American artist Charles White suggests that the two African American figures are barred from participating in the society which they are able to view from their window. The two boards across the narrow window restrict the two figures within the space of the composition. This artwork, created in 1950, captures the anger, unease, and sense of displacement that would feed the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s.

The effects World War II had on the lives of African Americans were viewed both as successful and unsuccessful. After the war all branches of the military committed to review their policies for racial integration, yet racism and prejudice ran rampant in many areas of civilian life. Some black soldiers did not find their service to be a satisfactory experience yet others noted that they gained skills, an education and the chance to experience life outside of the United States. When they returned home, the **G.I. Bill**, or the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, sought to provide returning service members with many benefits. Among these benefits were low-cost mortgages, high school or vocational education, payments for tuition and living expenses for those electing to attend college, and low-interest loans for entrepreneurial veterans wanting to start a business. These benefits were open to all veterans, including those honorably discharged, who had served at least 120 days of active duty (combat duty was not required). The bill not only helped individual service members, but also stimulated long-term economic growth. Though the law was deemed a political and economic success, there was one segment of veterans who were denied many of the bill’s benefits – African Americans.

One of the more important benefits that African American service members were unable to take advantage of were low-cost mortgages. In theory, this benefit allowed all veterans to purchase homes in the quickly growing suburbs, homes whose value would rise steadily in the coming decades, creating new wealth for vets in the post-war era. However, black veterans were not able to take advantage of this benefit because banks would not make



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loans for mortgages in black neighborhoods. Additionally, they faced rampant racism if they attempted to buy into suburban neighborhoods, which at the time were overwhelmingly white. See [Urban to Suburban](#) for more information on this topic.

Unemployment benefits were also a major problem. Under the G.I. Bill, veterans were guaranteed one year of unemployment compensation. Many industries had opened up skilled labor positions to blacks during the war, but post-war many of them returned to the practice of hiring blacks for only low-wage jobs. When these lower wages, which were below average subsistence levels in the United States, were turned down by blacks, the **Veteran's Administration** (VA) was notified that they had been offered a job and didn't take it, so their unemployment benefits were terminated. Arguably the greatest benefit blacks were able to take advantage of was the payment for college-level education. Many prospective students elected to attend historically black colleges, but a few pioneers ventured into uncharted territory, attending primarily white universities and opening the doors to integration and school desegregation.

Glossary

G.I. Bill: formally known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the act provided a range of benefits to returning World War II veterans.

Veteran's Administration: this is the benefits arm of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, the government agency formed in 1930.