



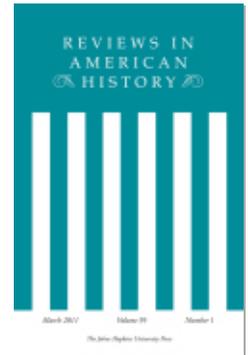
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LOSING THE WAR

Beth Bailey

Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin. *The GI Bill: A New Deal for Veterans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. xi + 272 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$24.95.

Kathleen J. Frydl. *The GI Bill*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xvi + 396 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$80.00.

Authors are not responsible for the cover designs of their books, and for every cover proudly posted on campus office doors or Facebook pages, some smaller number have been greeted with a vague sense of disappointment. Within the historical profession, of course, dust jackets matter little; we all understand that complexities of historical argument are not easily translated into visual design, and in any case we know better than to judge a book by its cover. Nonetheless, the best place to start making sense of these two identically titled books may be with their covers.

The dust jackets of both Kathleen Frydl's and Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin's versions of *The GI Bill* picture soldiers returning from war. Altschuler and Blumin's veterans are the AP photo version, jubilant men crowded onto the deck of a transport ship, grinning and waving as they pull into dock. The Signal Corps photograph on Frydl's book portrays a different homecoming, the men somber, no more than silhouettes, dark shapes in helmets and heavy packs, rifles evident, heads bowed, trudging single file down the gangplank to shore. The black-and-white photograph on Altschuler and Blumin's book is embedded in patriotism, the book's title rendered in red, white, and blue, a strip of full-color U.S. flag running along the cover's top edge. The black-and-white photograph that fills Frydl's cover is washed, top to bottom, in dark, murky green. In one way, the covers' different promises are fulfilled: the first book is forthright and generally celebratory, a straightforward work with little irony and no hidden layers. The second is full of ambivalence and ambiguity. But in a more fundamental way, these images are misleading. For in *The GI Bills* of Frydl, Altschuler, and Blumin, war offers only the most distant of contexts.

The GI Bill is an American icon, one of the key stories of bipartisan domestic triumph in twentieth century U.S. history. In popular memory, the story of the GI Bill is a story of success, of a program created in gratitude, meant to offer some partial repayment of the nation's debt to those who had sacrificed to defend their country in a difficult but necessary war. By any account, its reach was vast: GI Bill unemployment benefits smoothed the often difficult transition from military service to civilian life for millions of those demobilized at the end of World War II. GI Bill education benefits helped more than two million veterans attend college or begin postgraduate programs and an additional 5.6 million to enroll in some form of job training or certificate program. (The Bill's education provision alone cost the nation more than the Marshall Plan to reconstruct Europe in the years following the war.) GI Bill loan guarantees made it possible for four million veterans to buy homes on extremely favorable terms and for others to secure farmland or to start businesses. By 1955, 78 percent of the nation's military veterans had benefitted directly from at least one provision of the GI Bill. That translates into 12.4 million people—roughly one in thirteen of all living Americans, or one for every four U.S. households. The opportunities offered through the GI Bill, millions of Americans could claim, had changed their lives. One can make a strong argument that it also changed the lives of their families for generations to come.

Note to academic publishers: these two works make the case that a good historical topic isn't exhausted by one book. Both versions of *The GI Bill* are worthwhile, but they are profoundly different from one another and will find different audiences. Altschuler and Blumin's *GI Bill* is, as its title suggests, a history of the GI Bill. Frydl's *GI Bill* is a political analysis of state development and capacity that centers on the creation and implementation of the GI Bill. Altschuler and Blumin's book is part of the Oxford University Press "Pivotal Moments in American History" series; Frydl's is a Cambridge University Press monograph that incorporates a lengthy review of literature and has footnotes at the bottom of the page. The first book is by two senior scholars, historians well in command of broader context and historical form, writers who know how to focus in on the telling quote or perfect story and use it to advantage; they mean this work to be read by people who aren't professional historians as well as those who are. The second is an ambitious dissertation-turned-book, exhaustively researched and close to its topic, somewhat carelessly edited and proofread, still full of excess detail, and with the occasional key point buried in the middle of a paragraph. The first will be useful in undergraduate classrooms. The second is likely to prompt some changes in historians' conversations.

Both of these books are shaped, in part, by the GI Bill's iconic weight. In writing her introduction, Frydl felt it necessary to distinguish between "idolizing" (bad) and "honoring" (good) the bill, while the introduction to Altschuler and Blumin's more conventionally positive assessment of the bill

and its legacy begins with a photograph of a museum display case containing a handwritten draft of the American Legion's proposed "Bill of Rights for GI Joe and GI Jane" and concludes with a promise to "take the bill outside of its shrine" (p. 9). More significantly for readers of the *RAH*, however, these two versions of *The GI Bill* address the too-easy summoning of the GI Bill in history textbooks and other historical analyses. Throughout the past several decades historians have often used the GI Bill as a kind of shorthand—almost *deus ex machina*—explanation for the emergence of a rapidly growing middle class in the years following World War II. More recently, historians have held the GI Bill responsible for strengthening and consolidating inequalities in postwar American society. The index to Elizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic*, for example, reads as follows: "GI Bill of Rights (Servicemen's Readjustment Act; 1944), . . . and discrimination against African Americans, . . . and discrimination against women, . . . and discrimination against working class, . . . home ownership and, . . ." ¹ There is much truth to these claims, all authors agree, both those of possibility and social transformation and those of discrimination and foreclosed opportunity. And both works, in different ways, reconcile these divergent stories by demonstrating that nothing is quite that simple. As Frydl writes of her analysis: "The inability to present a simplified story is not a fault; our desire for one is" (p. 35).

And Frydl's story is not simple, in part because she forces an analysis of state development into a narrative structure more suited to an overview of the GI Bill. Frydl's primary goal is (in sociologist Theda Skocpol's phrase) to "bring the state back in" to our purposeful tellings and retellings of the history of the GI Bill, and her history of state development is, like much current political history, influenced by the political science and sociological analysis of the past several decades. ² Although Frydl's work is unapologetically historical (her claim to have worked "systematically" and "seriously" with the records of the Veterans Administration is no exaggeration), she nonetheless turns from the specificity of history to offer a model—the "two opposing ideal-types" of Rome and Athens—to make her case about the "logics of state power." She describes an "inward-looking" Athenian state that located authority in local communities and resisted the creation of centralized power. In times of war, the men of Athens fought as citizens and returned as citizens; they received no special status or rewards, and while the burden they bore was severe, it was also equitable and occasional. Rome, in her contrast, was an activist state, looking outward to conquest and competition. Its veterans were distinguished from other citizens, and the state offered "rewards for service . . . under a model of citizenship that compelled a citizen to do less and featured a state that did much more" (pp. 39–41). Athens, here, has notable parallels to an ideal republic; Rome to a liberal state.

Frequently calling upon these ideal types, Frydl traces the logic of state power and of citizenship that shaped struggles over the creation and implementation of the GI Bill. She is arguing, in part, that the major expansion of the state does not come in the New Deal or even during World War II, but instead in the postwar years when "a tremendous reordering of political power" underwrote a major expansion of the federal government. For Frydl, the GI Bill signals that transformation of state power, even if it was a "stilted, ungraceful, and often unconscious transformation" (pp. 10, 70).

Frydl's analysis centers on the role of Congress. What are the consequences, she asks, of relying on congressional stewardship of federal power, of allowing Congress to play "broker" in the "'uneasy state'?"³ Her tale is of the devolution of authority to state and local institutions; while it is the modern state that makes the GI Bill possible, she argues, the bill wears a variety of masks that obscure the expansion of state power. Frydl's is also an intersecting story of complex and intertwined political battles. As the American Legion makes an argument of obligation, claiming that veterans have earned benefits that distinguish them from other citizens, conservatives scheme to prevent the creation of a new, broadly based federal entitlement program and emphasize the short-term needs for postwar "readjustment." The resulting program, restricted to veterans, could be legitimately located in the Veteran's Administration—an agency whose federal status was fairly easily obscured and, most significantly, one whose immensely limited capacity essentially assured that the bill's provisions would be implemented by state and local agencies. This decision limited the supervisory power of the federal government and virtually guaranteed that the color-blind language of the GI Bill was subordinate to local politics and culture. In other words, implementation mattered.

Somewhat perplexingly, given her arguments that "a federalist geography of power" allowed states to maintain oppressive racial hierarchies and her conclusion that the GI Bill offered an impressive social welfare system for veterans and their families at the expense of more universal coverage, Frydl deems the GI Bill a "brilliant bargain," the "result of a dialectic between two traditions that achieved a stunningly effective compromise" (pp. 31, 145). While the Bill does show what she calls "a genuine claim to both of the political traditions supporting either federal or local governance," it is, in the end, not necessarily a success—except in relation to Frydl's realistic beginning point: it is not so much that those in power did not create a universal welfare state, but "that it came at all, for anyone and however briefly" (pp. 145, 24).

Glenn Atschuler and Stuart Blumin offer a brief, readable, and fairly comprehensive overview of the GI Bill: its place in the long history of veterans' policy; the story of its creation and amendment; its implementation and use (focusing on education and home ownership); and, finally, its impact on American society. More than anything else, their argument is summed up by

the series title: the GI Bill marks a “Pivotal Moment in American History.” They emphasize the uniqueness of the GI Bill: in scale, in sweep, and in its fundamental break from previous policies toward returning veterans. By looking at “attempts to deal with the specific question of what to do about veterans—the able bodied, as well as the ill and wounded—,” they write, “we learn much about what the U.S. government could and would do at various stages of our past”; and their discussion of the ways in which the successes and failures of each war’s policy shaped the debate over policy in the next is one of the most compelling parts of this work (p. 12).

While Altschuler and Blumin posit a “pivotal moment,” they also portray a bill that “grew in fits and starts,” a bill whose significance was not recognized at the time (not a single editorial appeared in the nation’s major newspapers). Their GI Bill is both a “stunning instance of congressional wisdom and goodwill” and a sweeping, substantive bill that became so in large part because no one in Congress had a clue how its different provisions would be used or—critically—how much it would cost (p. 12). The GI Bill that FDR signed into law on June 22, 1944, they argue, was primarily a safety net, meant to help ease veterans’ transition to civilian life and to manage the rate at which demobilized soldiers attempted to reenter the job market in an economy shifting from super-heightened war-production mode to some form of normality. In addition to unemployment compensation, the initial version of the Bill offered the benefits that made it both “unique” and “pivotal”—education, mortgage guarantees, loan guarantees for businesses and farms—but at levels that made the GI Bill, according to one critic, “meaningless.” In the year following the bill’s signing, fewer than 10,000 veterans had bought homes with VA-backed loans; less than one percent of demobilized veterans had used educational benefits. And as the VA loan officers held to common standards in which credit history trumped war record, officials had approved only four-tenths of one percent of veterans’ applications for business loans. In 1945, what had begun as a temporary readjustment measure with a “shaky start” was revised and recast, as Congress enacted a series of amendments that transformed the safety net into “an engine of opportunity for millions of young veterans” (pp. 8, 6). The remainder of the book traces these programs of opportunity, offering fascinating stories and statistics as well as balanced assessment.

Altschuler and Blumin’s overview is well-crafted, explaining the struggles that animated debates about the GI Bill and placing them in longer historical context. And while Frydl illuminates the structural imperatives of certain forms of political and administrative organization, these historians attempt to make clear what assumptions people at that moment in history were working with, and within—assumptions about race and gender, about war and sacrifice, about the proper roles of government and, in general, about how the world works. In moves that will be valuable in the classroom, they attempt to lead

readers in that complex form of historical analysis: to consider how we, in the present, can understand the varying ways that people in history saw their world, and their options, and then move to judgment.

Though the authors of these two books never intended them to be the subject of a compare-and-contrast essay, reading them in conjunction is somewhere between frustrating and fascinating. The careful reader may find some inconsistencies, including the insignificant but amusing difference in one story they both tell. In June 1945, a congressional conference committee was working to reconcile House and Senate versions of the amended bill. On June 9, 1945, with the final vote scheduled for the following morning, the committee was tied, three to three, with Representative John Gibson absent, back in his Georgia district seeking treatment for illness (Altschuler and Blumin) "due to a reported illness, but really there to 'mend political fences'" (Frydl, p. 143). In Altschuler and Blumin's version, the Georgia congressman is intercepted as he returns from a doctor's appointment; in Frydl's, repeated appeals broadcast over local radio stations finally reach Gibson, who is playing poker at a truck stop.

Despite their different goals and purposes, the two *GI Bills* share major questions. Most fundamentally, both recontextualize the Bill, shifting focus from the war that gave it birth to the ongoing reform struggles begun in the New Deal. Like other historians, they ask whether the GI Bill was a victory or a loss for progressive reform. Frydl is most insistent on the reform-based origins of the bill. She emphasizes FDR's ongoing attempts to create a broad program of social welfare that encompassed all citizens, persuasively quoting his 1933 statement before the American Legion convention that "no person, because he wore a uniform, must thereafter be placed in a special class of beneficiaries over and above all other citizens," documenting his desire to house a rehabilitation service for both disabled veterans and civilians injured in war-production work in the Federal Security Administration, and then tracing Truman's efforts to rekindle broader programs of social reform as he took charge of the grieving nation (p. 53). Frydl's conclusions about the bill's legacy for social welfare policy are mixed. A "costly and generous" social welfare state was created by the GI Bill, she argues, for the almost half of all Americans who were, by 1960, either veterans or members of a veteran's family. Frydl's GI Bill helped forge a powerful central state, but because it was based on notions of veterans' exceptionalism and because it "tacitly" repudiated central power and "executive civilian social policy," the bill also made it more difficult to extend such benefits to citizens who were not veterans (p. 359).

Altschuler and Blumin also see the failure of progressive goals, though their ultimate conclusions are more positive. They trace FDR's recasting of political tactics and objectives, situating his claims that the nation has a special obligation to veterans ("we, at home, owe a special and continuing obliga-

tion to these men and women in the armed services") within the president's broader vision of inclusive reform. In many ways, theirs is a "rising tide" sort of argument. "It might not be entirely accurate to say that the New Dealers had lost the battle but won the war," they write, but because the GI Bill made it possible "to apply the powers and resources of the federal government . . . with less controversy and less restraint," the "extent to which the lives of all Americans and not merely the nation's veterans were changed vindicated their fondest hopes" (p. 83).

Race is central to both works, and, for both, race is where the GI Bill fails on its own, egalitarian terms. Though African Americans and Latinos were as fully entitled to benefits as white veterans, they faced much greater obstacles, from racial segregation and discrimination in higher education to a much lower high-school graduation rate that left black veterans less able to take advantage of education benefits; from the practice of "redlining," which worked to deny loans for houses in primarily African American or mixed-race neighborhoods, to the individual racial prejudices of VA officials. While fully acknowledging the weight of racial discrimination and the ways in which decentralized authority allowed local discriminatory practices, Altschuler and Blumin also acknowledge the more complicated landscape of race and ethnicity in the immediate postwar era. Focusing on universities, they document the ways in which the GI Bill fostered broader access across lines of ethnicity, class, and religion: by 1952, they note, 25 percent of Harvard students were Jewish (Yale resisted such changes). As students were drawn from much broader backgrounds, they argue, the GI Bill offered a "'living laboratory' in which to test assumptions about whether 'average Americans' could make the most' of the opportunity for higher education" (p. 147). In the same context, Altschuler and Blumin discuss female veterans and the GI Bill, attributing women's much lower use of benefits to an "ideology of domestic containment" (p. 123).

Frydl largely ignores gender, class, and ethnicity; her larger argument about federal power and state authority in an age of Jim Crow predisposes her to focus on a black-and-white world. In this context, Frydl carefully weighs the impact of the GI Bill on African Americans, and her conclusions are mixed. While the GI Bill was egalitarian in nature, making no distinctions of race, gender, or rank, it functioned as many proponents of VA control and decentralization had wished: "community-based administration empowered the forces of institutional racism" (p. 223). Nonetheless, she insists, an account that focuses solely on discrimination would miss the "confidence, racial solidarity," and "resilient determination to capitalize on those opportunities," however limited, shown by many black veterans (p. 223). In her telling, African Americans incorporated their experiences with the GI Bill, both positive and negative, into their political understandings, and those experiences helped to shape the civil rights movement that emerged powerfully in the decade to come.

Despite her cautiously positive take on African American agency and the GI Bill, Frydl has a larger claim to make. Moving beyond current understandings that blacks were often excluded from government social policy programs, she claims that "racism influenced the institutional setting of American political development" (p. 25). In their attempt to preserve segregation and to maintain racial hierarchies by limiting African American access to benefits the GI Bill offered all veterans, she argues, congressional representatives "reinvented the administrative discretion once available to states in the absence of federal power for an age of massive central government" (p. 25).

The topic of scandal provides another dividing point. Altschuler and Blumin discuss contemporary reports that found widespread fraud and misuse, especially in the Title II sub-college training where new schools came and went, taking advantage of "easy money" and veterans' desire for a subsistence allowance with little effort in return. However, in the sort of move common to social historians who are attempting to use the reports of social workers or police officers to understand "deviant" sexual behaviors, they emphasize that the reports must also be read as documents shaped by the common "ideological currents," class prejudices, and assumptions about gender and race of that time. Frydl takes the evidence of fraud and abuse much more seriously, even (in another model-focused approach) calling for historians to pay more attention to the predictive field of "scandalology." One-third of the \$14.5 billion allocated to GI Bill education benefits, she reports, went to fictional schools, "on-the-job training hoaxes," or to legitimate institutions overcharging the government. Frydl is not quick to condemn the veterans who perpetrated fraud; misuse of benefits likely indicated that veterans would have preferred a cash bonus to the opportunities offered, she concludes, and in any case the funds—no matter how obtained—likely made their transition to civilian life less difficult. Her larger point, however, is that Americans worried little about the prevalent fraud and abuse in the GI Bill, while they were quick to condemn fraud and abuse in other social welfare programs such as Aid to Dependent Children.

Writing of public reluctance to "denounce the fraud perpetuated by veterans using the GI Bill," Frydl concludes that reluctance likely "stemmed from the demographic profile of the guilty party" (p. 200). I thought I knew where she was going: in the aftermath of World War II, many Americans would hesitate to denounce those who had fought a brutal and life-destroying war, no matter that the "chicken-sexing" courses they signed up for were largely a scam. After all, the public had been willing to blame the spread of venereal disease during the war on loose women, rather than servicemen. But Frydl writes, instead: "Who really rushed to condemn a very large group of mostly male and mostly white people," a group to whom "race and gender codes" gave "social standing" (p. 200)? Without in any way dismissing the power

of racial (and gender) discrimination in postwar America, it is also possible to observe that in a nation that was 89 percent white and in many places racially homogeneous, in a nation that had emerged from four years of total war, other divisions might matter. Race is a powerful explanation for much, but not all, of American history.

What's missing here is World War II. Though the United States suffered much less than most combatant nations, war's disruptions and losses had reached into the lives of its citizens. Americans had lived for years with constant reminders, both official and deeply personal, about the sacrifices of "our boys." The majority of veterans never saw combat, but the broader understanding of service and sacrifice—and their reality—was a powerful cultural context for the creation and reception of the GI Bill. Both works make nods in that direction—Frydl's the more interesting, Altschuler and Blumin's the more consistent—but neither work truly explores the war's critical meaning. In turning our attention to political struggles and liberal hopes, to structural implications and economic outcomes, to the implementation and use of the bill, these books offer important correctives to the too-simple understandings that have structured popular memories and historical analyses alike. Nonetheless, I wish they had not so completely lost the war.

Beth Bailey is professor of history at Temple University and the author of *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (2009).

1. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (2003), 550.

2. Theda Skocpol, "Bringing the State Back In," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (1985).

3. The phrase is from Barry Karl, *The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945* (1983). I also studied under Barry Karl at the University of Chicago (and did most of the index for *The Uneasy State*) and was struck by how similar—in very different contexts—are my understandings of power, local elites, and national politics/culture to Kathleen Frydl's.