

GI Bill: A Success

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On November 11, 1918, an armistice between Germany and the Allied nations took effect. Exactly one-year later, King George V of the United Kingdom held the first official Armistice Day on the grounds of Buckingham Palace. The event set the trend for a day of remembrance in many nations for fallen comrades-in-arms.

President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that November 11 in the US should be "filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service and with gratitude for the victory." Eventually, Congress changed the name from Armistice Day to Veterans Day to honor all Americans, living or deceased, who served in the military at any time.

Like the US, other nations honor those who served on Veterans Day or other designated national holidays. Our country, however, has also sought to ensure that returning veterans can successfully re-enter society once their duty is complete. Many approaches to supporting re-entry originated in 1943 when the National Resources Planning Board recommended a bundle of education and training programs to address anticipated postwar problems. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (popularly known as the GI Bill) on June 22, 1944.

The GI Bill provided a range of benefits for returning World War II veterans that included low-cost mortgages, low-interest loans to start a business, cash payments of tuition and living expenses to attend university, high school or vocational education, as well as one year of unemployment compensation. Combat duty was not a requirement. Benefits were available to veterans who received an honorable discharge after serving for at least ninety days during the war years. Similar measures were applied to Korean War veterans in an updated 1952 GI Bill.

Later, Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough made education funding a keystone of his legislative agenda for 15 years on Capitol Hill beginning in 1957. Seeing education as an effective way to ensure individuals a chance to improve their quality of life, Yarborough believed all veterans should receive compensation for lost opportunities regardless of whether they served in times of war or peace. Seeing the GI Bill as the mechanism that had corrected what Yarborough called "this injustice," but only for service in times of war, the Senator authored the 1966 update to the GI Bill. He amended it to benefit all veterans serving in times of war and peace.

Since the original GI Bill, Congress also created other benefit programs to assist veterans with a hand-up for a range of basic needs such as housing, employment, and health care. Additionally, many states use federal money for their own initiatives.

Angelo State University, for instance, is currently participating in partnership with seven Texas community colleges to help veterans and service members maximize academic credits for their service when attending the university. The initiative is part of a current State of Texas College Credit for Heroes program to encourage colleges and universities to grant higher education credit for military experience as appropriate. The objective is to expedite the transition of both current service members and veterans into the Texas workforce.

The Census Bureau’s 2008-2012 5-year combined American Community Survey (ACS) data shows that 11.3 percent of San Angelo residents were veterans. The Bonham School neighborhood had the highest percentage concentration (17%) while Fort Concho-East, stretching out to the east of downtown, had the lowest percentage (4.7%) of veteran residents.

Comparison of Veteran and Non-Veteran Economic Indicators

Neighborhood	Veteran Residents					Non-Veteran Residents				
	Percent	College Degree	Median Income	Poverty Rate	Unemployment	Percent	College Degree	Median Income	Poverty Rate	Unemployment
Bonham	17.0%	20.4%	\$57,639	6.4%	1.2%	83.0%	30.6%	\$31,952	7.4%	1.7%
Glenmore	16.7%	21.9%	\$42,723	11.0%	1.7%	83.3%	13.9%	\$26,406	14.4%	2.6%
Paulann	14.2%	28.1%	\$43,466	7.3%	2.1%	85.8%	12.3%	\$20,012	21.3%	5.0%
Southland	13.7%	30.7%	\$55,811	1.6%	2.1%	86.3%	34.6%	\$29,725	8.6%	1.9%
Central	12.4%	16.2%	\$32,813	5.6%	1.7%	87.6%	11.8%	\$20,297	14.5%	6.2%
Rio Vista	11.8%	9.8%	\$21,548	6.4%	2.0%	88.2%	15.0%	\$19,617	21.4%	4.2%
Sunset	11.3%	36.9%	\$48,816	3.0%	2.4%	88.7%	29.4%	\$29,805	9.6%	2.0%
San Angelo	11.3%	23.4%	\$35,385	8.2%	3.5%	88.7%	16.9%	\$21,872	16.4%	5.4%
The Bluffs	11.2%	26.6%	\$59,375	10.5%	1.9%	88.8%	17.9%	\$19,946	15.5%	3.8%
Bentwood-Nasworthy	11.0%	51.5%	\$52,375	5.5%	3.4%	89.0%	38.5%	\$31,097	4.0%	1.5%
ASU-College Hills	10.7%	27.6%	\$26,184	3.2%	3.0%	89.3%	15.8%	\$13,535	18.1%	14.4%
Riverside	10.7%	15.2%	\$40,714	2.7%	4.3%	89.3%	8.5%	\$19,350	14.9%	7.0%
Reagan	10.3%	8.5%	\$17,402	7.4%	2.6%	89.7%	2.8%	\$15,050	24.6%	6.3%
Angelo Heights	10.2%	7.0%	\$22,560	7.8%	11.6%	89.8%	8.3%	\$17,894	14.6%	7.5%
Santa Rita	10.1%	40.6%	\$39,632	15.5%	4.2%	89.9%	30.3%	\$35,603	14.3%	2.9%
Belaire	9.8%	25.2%	\$32,500	3.3%	3.0%	90.2%	11.7%	\$16,735	21.4%	9.9%
Ft Concho	9.8%	14.7%	\$18,550	3.8%	3.8%	90.2%	7.1%	\$18,119	14.4%	6.1%
Lakeview	9.5%	13.0%	\$33,523	19.2%	7.5%	90.5%	9.3%	\$19,337	14.7%	4.2%
Vista del Arroyo	8.5%	37.9%	\$35,906	14.1%	4.5%	91.5%	23.1%	\$25,170	11.0%	3.0%
Blackshear-Downtow	7.6%	19.5%	\$14,122	28.3%	7.1%	92.4%	1.7%	\$12,365	38.0%	6.3%
Ft Concho-East	4.7%	9.5%	\$12,039	27.9%	5.4%	95.3%	5.7%	\$15,421	33.5%	9.3%

Source: Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008-2012.

Senator Yarborough believed that veterans “should come home to classrooms, not to unemployment lines.” Evidence from the local community suggests we share in that belief in San Angelo. The data indicates that more than 23 percent of our city’s veterans have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher level of education. Veterans in nine of the 20 San Angelo census tract neighborhoods achieved degrees at rates that exceed this citywide level. The Bentwood-Nasworthy area led the way with 51.5 percent. Indeed, the educational achievements of the city’s veterans compare very favorably with the 16.9 percent level of higher education attainment among the non-veteran population.

The achievements of the local veteran population in higher education also pay off in the labor force, just as the architects of the GI Bill had intended. In the 2008-2012 period, for example, the median income for veterans living across San Angelo was \$35,385 compared to a median income of \$21,872 for the non-veteran populace.

On average, for every dollar a non-veteran received in San Angelo, a veteran living within the city had an additional 62 cents. In the Bluffs area, veterans earned an additional \$1.98 for every dollar a non-veteran earned. Fort Concho-East, where the 2008-2012 median income for veterans was only \$12,039, was the only San Angelo neighborhood where veterans did not have a premium on their income compared to the non-veteran residents of the area.

The ACS data for San Angelo also confirms that veterans run less risk of poverty and unemployment compared to the non-veteran population. Non-veterans had higher poverty rates than veterans between 2008 and 2012, not only across the city overall, but also within each of the 20 census tract neighborhoods. Citywide and in most (12 of 20) neighborhoods, veterans also had had lower unemployment rates. Interestingly, the eight neighborhoods where veterans had

higher unemployment during 2008-2012 included some of the city's highest income, lowest poverty areas such as the Bentwood-Nasworthy census tract, Southland, and Santa Rita.

San Angelo has correctly received recognition as a military friendly community. In fact, there are only five of the 24 Texas metro areas with a larger percentage of veteran residents than the San Angelo Metropolitan Area. Texas also is military friendly based on the census data. All of the state's metro areas show the same pattern. More veterans have college degrees, higher median income, and lower rates of poverty and unemployment compared to non-veterans.

Ironically, it is not the goal of the GI Bill to elevate veterans over non-veterans. Rather, the aim is to ensure the social re-integration of those returning from war and to compensate for lost opportunities while in service. The results are a major success story. In fact, the story of the GI Bill in America demonstrates that we do know how to give people the hand-up needed for them to improve the quality of their own lives and increase their capacities to contribute to communities and society.

Still, the success of the GI Bill to elevate the veteran population raises a pivotal question, "what about the quality of life among vulnerable non-veterans in San Angelo and other communities?"

It is not a lack social policies and programs aiming to give the hands-up to struggling low-income and impoverished residents. On the contrary, affordable housing, workforce investment, Medicare and Medicaid, head start, and Pell Grants just begin to list initiatives to help lift vulnerable low-income and poor people in ways similar to the GI Bill strategy for veterans. Why are these not success stories?

Cynics about public assistance to the low-income and poor are likely to answer immediately that the difference lies in some flawed characteristics of these populations such as their lack of motivation, inadequate sense of personal responsibility, and failure to establish priorities for living. This kind of blaming the victim is actually quite widespread; so much, so that the level of public contempt may itself be a better answer to the question.

This Veterans Day we applaud and celebrate how the American public and its leaders did not turn backs on those who served the nation with great valor. At the same time, we should demand that leaders display the same level of patience and commitment to support quality of life programs for all our people. To paraphrase what Senator Yarborough liked to say, we need to put the jam jar on the lower shelf, so that the little people can reach it.