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Chapter 4

Race, Place and Historic Moment – Black and Japanese American World War II Veterans: The G.I. Bill of Rights and the Model Minority Myth

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Abstract

The most commonly touted social change in the United States following the end of World War II is the expansion of the American middle class. The more frequently invoked narrative holds that the G.I. Bill, by providing veterans previously unavailable educational opportunities, elevated the socioeconomic status of a substantial segment of the American population as they entered their most productive working years. Black and Japanese American soldiers who fought abroad in racially segregated units to “make the world safe for democracy,” returned to fight, with others, for full citizenship rights at home in the civil rights movements of the mid twentieth century. During this period second generation Japanese Americans (*Nisei*), but not blacks, achieved near economic parity with whites causing some to characterize them as a “model minority.” Historian Roger Daniels, writing that “the transformation [of Japanese Americans] from ‘pariah to paragon’ [was not] merely a mechanical adjustment of market forces”, urged historians to more closely examine the factors contributing to the relative post-war economic success of Japanese Americans. This chapter takes on an aspect of Daniels’ challenge. It asks whether the advantages allegedly conferred on WWII veterans who received G.I. Bill benefits explains the current socio-economic status of Japanese Americans, or whether other factors better explain their relative postwar success

World War II...represents an historical event that is unmatched over the past century in the degree to which it created and shaped a generation of Americans¹

Introduction

The most commonly touted social change in the United States following the end of World War II is the expansion of the American middle class. Prior to the war, homeownership was

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¹ Jay Teachman & Lucky M. Tedrow, *Wages, Earnings, and Occupational Status: Did World War II Veterans Receive a Premium?*, 33 SOC. SCI. RES. 581, 581 (2004).

unattainable for the vast majority of Americans, especially non-whites,² and few Americans were college educated or middle-class.³ The availability of benefits through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (AKA the G.I. Bill of Rights⁴) is one commonly-cited trigger for this change.⁵ Under the G.I. Bill, eligible veterans qualified for a series of major benefits: job placement⁶, unemployment compensation⁷, low interest home, farm and business loans and mortgage insurance.⁸ The most notable benefit, however, was up to four years of paid education or vocational training.⁹ The common narrative holds that the G.I. Bill, by providing veterans previously unavailable educational opportunities, elevated the socioeconomic status of a substantial segment of the American population as they entered their most productive working years.¹⁰ Increased educational, employment and housing opportunities, in particular, gave rise to

² See EDWARD HUMES, *OVER HERE: HOW THE G.I. BILL TRANSFORMED THE AMERICAN DREAM* 91 (2006); see also IRA KATZNELSON, *WHEN AFFIRMATIVE ACTION WAS WHITE: AN UNTOLD HISTORY OF RACIAL INEQUALITY IN MODERN AMERICA* 115 (2005). Melissa Murray writes: "Prior to World War II, home mortgages required a 50% down-payment with short repayment periods, making homeownership impossible for all but the elite." Melissa Murray, *When War is Work: The G.I. Bill, Citizenship, and the Civic Generation*, 96 CAL. L. REV. 967, 972 (2008) (citing HUMES, *supra* at 91; KATZNELSON, *supra* at 115). This is perhaps an overstatement since the 1940 census records white homeownership at 43%. See Leah P. Boustan & Robert A. Margo, *White Suburbanization and African-American Home Ownership, 1940-1980* (NBER Working Paper No. 16702, 2011), at 3, available at http://www.econ.ucla.edu/lboustan/research_pdfs/research17_ownership.pdf (last accessed 2-15-2011). Historian Andrew Wiese looking at conventional histories of suburbanization argues that the presence, albeit in small numbers of black homeowners has been overlooked. ANDREW WIESE, *PLACES OF THEIR OWN: AFRICAN AMERICAN SUBURBANIZATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY* 4-9 (2004)

³ See Murray *supra* note 2, at 973-4; see also MICHAEL J. BENNETT, *WHEN DREAMS CAME TRUE: THE GI BILL AND THE MAKING OF MODERN AMERICA* 20 (1996).

⁴ Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, Pub. L. No. 78-346, 58 Stat. 284.

⁵ See, e.g., GLENN C. ALTSCHULER & STUART M. BLUMIN, *THE GI BILL: A NEW DEAL FOR VETERANS* (2009); HUMES, *supra* note 2 at 94; SUZANNE METTLER, *SOLDIERS TO CITIZENS: THE G.I. BILL AND THE MAKING OF THE GREATEST GENERATION* (2005); BENNETT, *supra* note 3 ; KEITH W. OLSON, *THE G.I. BILL, THE VETERANS, AND THE COLLEGES* (1974); LIZABETH COHEN, *A CONSUMERS' REPUBLIC: THE POLITICS OF MASS CONSUMPTION IN POSTWAR AMERICA* 137 (2003) (noting the "tremendous impact" the G.I. Bill had in establishing an affluent post war American society).

⁶ In addition to giving veterans priority for jobs, the bill offered employment placement for unemployed veterans through the United States Employment Service (USES). § 600(a), 58 Stat. at 293.

⁷ This benefit provided veterans a full year of unemployment compensation at twenty dollars a week. § 700(a), 58 Stat. at 295. This amount was the equivalent of the median weekly wage for the immediate prewar era. The median salary in 1940 was \$877 per year, which averages to \$16.86 per week. *Wage or Salary Income in 1939*, United States Dept. of Commerce Bureau of the Census, 16th Census, at 4 (1940).

⁸ Under this provision the federal government guaranteed loans for up to fifty percent of the property's value. § 500(a), 58 Stat. at 291.

⁹ § 400(a), 58 Stat. at 287. Depending on length of wartime service a veteran could receive up to four years of educational benefits—up to \$500 for tuition and educational expenses per academic year and a monthly supplement of \$65 for single veterans and \$96 for married veterans. John Bound & Sarah Turner, *Going to War and Going to College: Did World War II and the G.I. Bill Increase Educational Attainment for Returning Veterans?*, 20 J. LABOR ECON. 784, 790 (2002). "At the time, the subsidy for tuition and books was sufficient to cover the charges of traditionally expensive schools like Harvard University and Williams College.... the monthly stipends were about half the opportunity cost of not working for a single veteran and about 70% of the opportunity cost for married veterans, based on monthly median income for the population in 1947." *Id.*

¹⁰ Murray, *supra* note 2, at 976. Some estimates calculate that the combination of the World War II and the Korean War G.I. Bills increased the degree of postsecondary education of men born between 1921 and 1933 by 15 to 20

a new middle class able to accumulate wealth and attain economic security for its children and grandchildren.¹¹

The end of World War II also marked a second equally significant change. Both black and Japanese American¹² soldiers who fought abroad in racially segregated units to “make the world safe for democracy,” returned to a country that continued to treat them in varying degrees as second-class citizens based on their race. Later, these veterans, along with others, fought for full citizenship rights at home in the civil rights movements of the mid twentieth century.¹³

Over the next twenty years, America made significant strides toward remedying institutionalized racial inequality. During this period second generation Japanese Americans (*Nisei*), but not blacks, achieved near economic parity with whites.¹⁴ Although most first generation Japanese Americans (*Issei*) never fully recovered from the set-backs occasioned by WWII, the *Nisei*'s relative post-war success later caused some to label them as a “model

percent. Marcus Stanley, *College Education and the Midcentury G.I. Bills*, 118 Q.J. ECON. 671, 701 (2003). For men born between 1921 and 1926, the World War II G.I. Bill affected an increase in postsecondary education of 20 to 25 percent. *Id.* at 703. “[T]he combined effect of military service and the G.I. Bill was to increase postsecondary educational attainment among World War II veterans above that of their nonveterans, with particularly large effects on college completion.” Bound & Turner, *supra* note 9, at 786. Tellingly, the lifetime income of those World War II veterans educated under the G.I. Bill was \$19,000 higher than those who had not been educated under the bill. Some veterans even credit the generosity of the G.I. Bill with providing the economic “boost” that ultimately allowed their children to attend college. Murray, *supra* note 2, at 977. The benefits of the G.I. bill, however, were restricted to men based primarily on the existing gender roles of the era. In many instances, female veterans were not informed that they were eligible for vocational training or educational benefits upon their discharge from service. *Id.* at 988; accord, METTLER, *supra* note 5, at 149.

¹¹ KATZNELSON, *supra* note 2, at 113. Political scientist and historian Ira Katznelson writes:

With the help of the GI Bill, millions bought homes, attended college, started businesses ventures, and found jobs commensurate with their skills. Through these opportunities, and by advancing the momentum toward suburban living, mass consumption, and the creation of wealth and economic security, this legislation created middle-class America. No other instrument was nearly as important.

Id. Lizabeth Cohen writes: “The magnitude of returning veterans affected[,] and the enormity of the dollars spent have encouraged commentators at the time and since to stress the tremendous impact the GI Bill had in establishing an affluent postwar society.” COHEN, *supra* note 5, at 137. Cohen also adds that changes in the income tax code after World War II reinforced these benefits in many ways. *Id.* at 146.

¹² Japanese Americans constituted the largest group of Asian American World War II veterans. While approximately 250,000 Filipino nationals volunteered or were inducted into the U.S. military during the war, as nonresident foreign nationals they were largely excluded from benefits under the G.I. Bill. See Michael A. Cabotaje, Comment, *Equity Denied: Historical and Legal Analyses In Support of the Extension of U.S. Veterans’ Benefits to Filipino World War II Veterans*, 6 ASIAN L.J. 67 (1999); Deenesh Sohoni & Amin Vafa, *The Fight to Be American: Military Naturalization and Asian Citizenship*, 17 ASIAN L.J. 119 (2010); Paul Daniel Rivera, Note, “We’ve Been Waiting a Long Time”-The Struggle to Pass the Filipino Veterans Equity Act and a Bittersweet Ending to a Sixty-Three-Year Battle, 7 HASTINGS RACE & POVERTY L.J. 447 (2010); Antonio Raimundo, Comment, *The Filipino Veterans Equity Movement: A Case Study in Reparations Theory*, 98 CAL. L. REV. 575 (2010).

¹³ For instance, historian Suzanne Mettler writes that Latino veterans denied membership in local chapters of the Veterans of Foreign Wars “formed their own vibrant organization known as G.I. Forum, and also participated ... in the federated League of United Latin American citizens (LULAC), Community Service Organization (CSO), and others that flourished in the postwar era.” METTLER, *supra* note 5, at 129. Further, many civil organizations were restrictive in their membership by sex, race, or ethnicity. *Id.*

¹⁴ See *infra* notes 122-156 and accompanying text.

minority.” This stereotype, criticized by scholars, appeared in the mid-1960s, and has been imposed on all Asian Americans.¹⁵

However, historian Roger Daniels questioned this characterization, writing that “the transformation [of Japanese Americans] from ‘pariah to paragon’ [was not] merely a mechanical adjustment of market forces.”¹⁶ Rather, he writes, this “model minority status, real or imagined, [if such a transformation ever occurred] . . . did not take place right after the war but sometime later.”¹⁷ Daniels urged historians to more closely examine the factors contributing to the relative post-war economic success of Japanese Americans.

This chapter takes on an aspect of Daniels’ challenge, questioning claims that Japanese Americans achieved postwar success, despite structural discrimination, because of some inherent “goodness” or cultural values not possessed by black Americans. It asks whether the advantages allegedly conferred on WWII veterans who received G.I. Bill benefits explains the current socio-economic status of Japanese Americans, or whether other factors better explain their relative postwar success. By exploring the impact of racial subordination situated in both geographic location as well as historic moment, this chapter compares and contrasts black and Japanese American veterans’ abilities to use G.I. Bill benefits in their quest for racial equality. This examination illustrates how universal social uplift legislation seldom results in equal outcomes for whites and racial minorities. It concludes that a variety of factors explain the different socio-economic outcomes for blacks and Japanese Americans in the twenty years following the end of World War II.

¹⁵ Neil Gotanda, *New Directions in Asian American Jurisprudence*, 7 *ASIAN AM. L.J.* 5, 8 (2010). According to Gotanda: “the term ‘Model Minority’ has become associated with Asian Americans, and goes far beyond a simple erroneous characterization. The term’s origins in 1965 inserted Asian Americans into the Civil Rights struggles as an intermediate group between Blacks and Whites.” *Id.* at 11. For scholarly discussions of the model minority stereotype, see Harvey Gee, *Asian Americans, Critical Race Theory, and the End of the Model Minority Myth*, 19 *TEMP. POL. & CIV. RTS. L. REV.* 149 (2009) (analyzing the model minority myth through the lens of critical race theory, proposing that the myth has changed in relation to Asian Americans); Nancy Chung Allred, *Asian Americans and Affirmative Action: From Yellow Peril to Model Minority and Back Again*, 14 *ASIAN AM. L.J.* 57 (2007) (discussing the model minority myth in the context of affirmative action admissions programs); Pat K. Chew, *Asian Americans: the ‘Reticent’ Minority and their Paradoxes*, 36 *WM. & MARY L. REV.* 1 (1994) (arguing that the model minority stereotype masks deeper discrimination against Asian-Americans); Robert S. Chang, *Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-Structuralism, and Narrative Space*, 81 *CAL. L. REV.* 1243, 1258-65 (1993) (discussing effects and consequences of stereotypes associated with Japanese Americans).

¹⁶ Roger Daniels, *The Exile and Return of Seattle’s Japanese*, 88 *PAC. N.W. Q.* 166, 166 (1997) (citing William Petersen, *Success Story, Japanese American Style*, *N.Y. TIMES MAG.*, Jan.6, 1966, at 20ff; *JAPANESE AMERICANS: OPPRESSION AND SUCCESS* (1971); THOMAS SOWELL, *ETHNIC AMERICA: A HISTORY* (1981); Peter I. Rose, *Asian Americans: From Pariahs to Paragons*, in *CLAMOUR AT THE GATES: THE NEW AMERICAN IMMIGRATION* (Nathan Glazer ed., 1985)).

¹⁷ Daniels, *The Exile and Return of Seattle’s Japanese*, *supra* note 16, at 171.