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# The History of Veterans' Policy in the United States: A Comparative Overview

*Olivier Burtin\**

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**Abstract:** »Die Geschichte der Veteranenpolitik in den Vereinigten Staaten: Ein vergleichender Überblick«. The United States is one of the foremost examples of a country that adopted an "exclusive" approach to veterans' policy: namely, where welfare programs for veterans are treated separately from those covering the rest of the population. Ranging from free healthcare to old-age pension to civil service preference, former U.S. soldiers have access to a wide range of benefits administered by a single federal entity, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Though these programs are more varied and expensive than anywhere else in the world, their origin remains unexplored. This is not only because scholars of the welfare state have tended to focus on programs targeting traditionally marginalized groups, but also because scholars of veterans' affairs rarely place their topic in the larger context of U.S. social policy. Both gaps stem from the prevailing assumption that veterans are one of the few privileged groups in American society whose benefits do not fall under the category of "welfare" but instead of earned rights. This paper bridges this divide by adopting a threefold approach: it places veterans' benefits within the framework of the U.S. welfare state as a whole, it retraces their evolution from the colonial period to the Vietnam War, and it sets the U.S. experience in comparative perspective. In doing so, it highlights a series of factors that reflected not only the specific nature of warfare in U.S. history – such as its frequency and intensity – but also its timing and the fact that it rarely caused major civilian casualties or economic destruction, which allowed veterans to claim that they alone bore war's burden – but also of its political system – for instance, the country's relative political stability and the fact that the early extension of white male suffrage allowed U.S. veterans to influence politics before their counterparts in other industrialized countries.

**Keywords:** Welfare, veterans, United States, war, social policy, comparative.

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## 1. Introduction

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The range of veterans' benefits available in the United States today is remarkably varied. The budget of the cabinet agency in charge of all programs for former soldiers (the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, better known as the VA) is projected to reach an all-time high of 220 billion dollars for fiscal year 2020. With a staff of over 370,000, the VA is in charge of a total veteran population of over 18 million, for whom it administers not only healthcare benefits (via the single largest integrated hospital system in the nation), but also disability and death pensions, education benefits, job search services, and life insurance, among other programs. Veterans applying for civil service jobs at the federal and state level are also entitled to preference over other applicants: as a result, they currently make up for almost a third of the federal workforce despite accounting for only about 6 percent of the total population (Office of Personnel Management 2017; Lewis 2013). Non-U.S. citizens who served in the military (as well as their relatives) can be naturalized under more favorable conditions. Finally, former soldiers enjoy various local or state-level benefits such as tax breaks. Together, these various programs form what I call the "veterans' welfare state": a range of benefits available only to former soldiers and to their relatives or survivors, which are similar to but legally separate from the policies available to civilians.

From a comparative standpoint, this parallel welfare state represents an unusual policy outcome. To be sure, the United States is far from the only country to administer veterans' benefits through a separate agency (so do Canada and Australia, for instance). Rather than its separate nature, what sets the United States apart is the breadth and depth of its system. Put another way, the country offers its former soldiers more types of benefits and on more liberal terms than virtually any other. Not only is the U.S. one of the very few nations to provide its veterans with programs such as educational benefits, job assistance, and life insurance, but it also compensates them for a large range of non-service-connected disabilities, whereas most other countries tend to limit such assistance to military service (U.S. General Accounting Office 1993). Historically, U.S. veterans have also tended to enjoy more liberal civil service preference terms (Miller 1935; Baruch 1945). In other words, the United States is perhaps the foremost example of what some scholars have called the "exclusive" approach to veterans' policy, which treats former soldiers not on the same level as the rest of the population but rather as a separate "status group" entitled to preferential treatment (Danilova 2010; Crotty and Edele 2013).

This phenomenon is so deeply embedded in American life that it has largely avoided the attention of social scientists. Most scholars of the U.S. welfare state have focused on programs that targeted traditionally marginalized categories of the population, such as single mothers, racial minorities, and the poor. As a result, they have largely neglected the major role played by war veterans

(a group that until recently was made up almost exclusively of white men) in the growth of social policy. Scholars of veterans' affairs have for their part tended to study their topic separately, failing to place it within the larger context of the welfare state. Both of these blind spots stem from the same assumption, which is especially pervasive among scholars native to the United States: namely, that former soldiers are a deserving group of the population whose benefits should be seen not as "welfare" (a term often negatively understood as connoting handouts for the undeserving poor) but rather as "earned rights." In accepting this dichotomy, scholars (and the general public) have treated as natural something that was in fact the result of a contingent historical process, in which veterans have defended their material interests by asserting their superiority over civilians. Rather than taking the division between "welfare" and "veterans" for granted, the article follows its development over time in order to understand how U.S. social policy came to treat former soldiers as a distinct group, separate from the rest of the population.

To do so, the article follows a threefold approach. First, it sets the American experience in comparative perspective. This is a new approach, since almost all studies of U.S. veterans' benefits focus on this country alone. Only by means of comparison can we break from this exceptionalist perspective and understand the specificities of the U.S. case. Second, the article places veterans' benefits in the larger context of U.S. social policy. The point here is to remind us that these programs are only one branch of the broader welfare state and that their separate status is a rather recent development in American history (for similar approaches, see Skocpol 1992; Jensen 2003). Third, the article traces the evolution of veterans' benefits from the colonial period to the Vietnam War (the last conflict on which substantial research is available). This long-term approach represents a departure from scholars' traditional focus on veterans of a single war (Ortiz 2012), which is why we still lack a comprehensive overview encompassing the kind of "big, slow-moving" processes that unfolded over more than one generation (Pierson 2003).

By bringing these three perspectives together, we can see that the development of veterans' policy in the United States was not the result of an exceptional cultural tradition but rather of a succession of contingent factors.

Drawing on Kathleen Thelen and James Mahoney's theory of institutional change (Thelen and Mahoney 2003), we can describe the history of U.S. veterans' policy as a long and path-dependent process driven in large part by the unpredictable "exogenous shocks" of wars, which provoked rapid spurs of expansion at irregular intervals. A similar process followed each conflict, in which veterans' pressure and budget surpluses led to new benefits being slowly "layered" on top of existing ones and initially strict access rules being gradually "displaced" by looser ones, thereby increasing the number of beneficiaries. The extension of benefits from service-connected to non-service-connected recipients was the foremost example of this process. Another striking feature of

the history of the U.S. veterans' welfare state is how little success its opponents, or "insurrectionaries," have had. While critics were able at times to halt or slow its growth, they never succeeded in rolling it back entirely. This was not because everyone agreed that former soldiers deserved more privileges, but because politicians often acted as "opportunists" who feared the damage that being branded as "anti-veteran" could cause them at the ballot box and chose the path of least resistance. The U.S. veterans' movement never really faced the same kind of organized countermovement that the labor or the civil rights movement did, which explains its success in making demands upon the state.

More specifically, the distinct nature of warfare in U.S. history helped produce a more comprehensive and exclusive set of benefits. For instance, the remarkable frequency with which the country practiced war-making (so often that some scholars have called it a "habit") meant that it had to deal with the problem of how to treat large numbers of veterans earlier and more often than many of its industrialized counterparts (Sherry 2018). The fact that most wars waged by the United States did not result either in large numbers of deaths among its own civilian population or in massive damages to its domestic economy also meant that – similar to other countries like Australia or Canada, but contrary to post-World War II Germany or Japan – "war-induced needs were largely restricted to soldiers and their dependents," which made their claims to separate status more compelling (Obinger et al. 2018, 430). It further meant that the United States tended to have the wherewithal necessary to finance generous outlays on veterans' programs. In addition, the periodic use of the national draft between 1863 and 1973 made veterans' demands harder to resist, for they could claim that the state owed them something in return for having forcibly interrupted the course of their lives as civilians. Finally, the successful conclusion of most of these wars endowed U.S. veterans with an aura of prestige that legitimized their claims.

Outside of war itself, several other mechanisms played an important role. Most fundamental was the fact that the United States did not experience regime change: political stability meant that veterans were almost always able to make their claims on the same regime that had sent them to war, which enhanced their legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> Timing also mattered: the fact that the United States engaged in acts of warfare regularly, on a large scale, and with successful results *before* it developed an expansive social safety net available to most citizens meant that its veteran population had a clear incentive to seek its own set of benefits. Since the country adopted white male suffrage at a comparatively early time in world history, its veterans (who overwhelmingly belonged to this category of the population) could exert pressure on the political system in ways that their

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<sup>1</sup> The only exception to this rule shows its importance: veterans of the Confederacy, who were of course on the losing side of the Civil War, were thereafter barred from nearly all federal benefits.

counterparts from other nations could not. Finally, path dependence was key: over the course of several centuries, the early steps taken toward an exclusive veterans' policy became deeply entrenched in the structure not only of the state (in the form of separate executive agencies and congressional committees) but also of civil society (with the existence of a powerful veterans' movement). Given these powerful counterweights, critics found it increasingly hard to steer the country onto a different course. The result is the United States that we know today, where social policy treats veterans as a group above and apart from the rest of the civilian population.

This article proceeds chronologically, following the slow process of policy evolution from its roots in the colonial period through the successive transformations wrought by the Revolution, the Civil War, and the global conflicts of the 20th century.

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## 2. Body

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The first laws providing veterans' benefits in the early modern period were the result of the military revolution (Rogers 1995). Faced with the need to recruit soldiers for their increasingly large standing armies, which in turn produced growing populations of disabled ex-soldiers, many European states began to offer their veterans various types of advantages, often drawing on models from ancient Rome. For instance, Spain and many other nations founded hospitals for disabled veterans beginning in the late 16th century, the same period when England passed its first veterans' pension law. Soon after, disbanded officers of the British Army were given half pay, and various systems were employed to help sustain their widows. States like France, Prussia, or Russia also offered their veterans preferential treatment in access to civil service positions (Glasson 1918, 9-12; Van Ells 2001, 3-5).

British colonial settlers on the North American continent were thus only building upon a well-established trend when, following the lead of the Plymouth colony in 1636, they began to pass laws providing relief for disabled or sick soldiers as a way to encourage military service. Other colonies like Maryland or New York also used pension legislation to motivate enlistment; Rhode Island had the most comprehensive of all (Glasson 1918, 15-7). A long history of colonial warfare against Native American nations or competing European empires helps explain why veterans' benefits were already a familiar feature long before the 13 colonies came together to form the United States.

In this sense, the Revolution marked less a turning point than the consolidation of policies that had already existed for over a century. To keep the military afloat in the middle of its civil war with Great Britain, some of the first laws passed by the Continental Congress in 1776 were to provide half-pay for life for officers as well as pensions for invalid soldiers. The former measure gener-

ated a fierce debate: since the Revolution was in part motivated by republican fears of the corrupting effect of “standing armies” and by rejection of the aristocratic society of Europe, many found the idea of creating a permanent caste of ex-officers receiving public subsidies unpalatable. Only the fear of more resignations or desertions convinced Congress to pass this law, which it commuted a few years later under public pressure into the equivalent of only five-years’ pay in government certificates (Glasson 1918, 24-30; Jensen 2003, 57).

In the immediate aftermath of the war, both Congress and the general public held veterans of the Continental Army in low regard, believing that independence had been won as much by them as by “citizen-soldiers” (militiamen who had served for a short period before returning home). Compounded by the new nation’s unsteady finances, these sentiments forced Congress to reduce pensions to a paltry level. As patriotic feelings grew in the wake of the War of 1812, however, more and more Americans began to view Revolutionary veterans as symbols of the new nation and to express gratitude for their service (Resch 1999). Two years after a large budget surplus in 1816, Congress thus extended pensions to veterans “in need of assistance” for the first time, instead of merely to those with service-connected disabilities (Glasson 1918, 67). Pension advocates stemmed mostly from Northern and Middle Atlantic states, not only because a majority of Revolutionary veterans lived there but also because those states saw the high cost of veterans’ pensions as one way to justify maintaining a strong tariff that would protect their own industrial base (Jensen 2003, 111-16). However, the number of veterans who submitted claims under the 1818 law far exceeded expectations, prompting a Congressional investigation that resulted in purges of the public rolls (though many pensioners were restored a few years later during a new period of budget surplus; Glasson 1918, 71-4). In the 1830s, pensions were extended to all veterans with over two years of service regardless of income and a growing number of widows were granted payments (Glasson 1918, 91; Jensen 2003, 117).

In sum, the years that followed the Revolutionary War witnessed the first manifestation of a pattern that would repeat itself in the future. Though the benefits adopted in wartime were initially limited to service-connected deaths or disabilities, over the course of the postwar period they were gradually expanded to include widows and orphans, as well as soldiers whose disability had been incurred after discharge (becoming in effect based on service alone, hence the name of “service pensions”). By the time the last beneficiary of Revolutionary pensions passed away (in 1906), this system had benefited over 70,000 soldiers, sailors, and widows, for a total cost of approximately \$70 million (Glasson 1918, 95-6).

Two further points about this period are worth stressing here. First, pension legislation was not the result of organized pressure by veterans’ groups but rather of widespread feelings of nationalism, nostalgia, and gratitude. The organizations that represented the veterans’ movement during this period, such

as the Society of Cincinnati (for officers) or the Society of St. Tammany (for enlisted soldiers), were still small and had little influence on national politics (Davies 1955, 3-20; Pencak 1984). Second, these laws shaped the development of the U.S. welfare state more broadly. As Laura Jensen has argued, the 1818 pension law was the first piece of legislation to entitle a specific group of the population to federal benefits. As such, it set into motion a process whereby future social policy would be more likely to follow not a universal but a selective pattern. This was the case not only because it encouraged other categories of the population to demand similar treatment, but also because the establishment of a separate system so early in the country's history created state actors (such as the Bureau of Pensions in 1815) with a vested interest in maintaining their own separate status. Their entrenchment only grew over time, helping buttress the claims of those who championed an exclusive approach to veterans' policy (Jensen 2003).

In addition to monetary assistance, Revolutionary veterans also received public land warrants. These plots were initially located in specific military districts on the western frontier, so as to create a buffer to protect white settlers from Native American attacks. By 1860, an area larger than the current state of Arizona (over 73.5 million acres) had been distributed in this way to former soldiers of all wars from the Revolution to the conflict with Mexico. As with pensions, this system set an important precedent for other major state-building initiatives, such as the use of land grants to finance public colleges or the building of railroads (Oberly 1990; Rockoff 2006, 342).

From a comparative standpoint, such policies were far from unique. For instance, at the turn of the 19th century Revolutionary and Napoleonic France also recognized that the state owed a "sacred debt" to its veterans, which it paid in the form of pensions and land grants – though these were often of a more limited nature (Woloch 1979, 316). These measures were a common solution to the familiar problem of how to deal with the demobilization of large standing armies when few alternative sources of public support existed. Where the United States differed from other countries was in extending such programs even to those veterans who had not been disabled in service. Throughout the 19th century, for instance, Great Britain nearly always avoided granting "statutory rights to servicemen in the form of war pensions or dependents' allowances" (Hally 2019, 29), while successive French governments from the Bourbon Restoration to the Third Republic also refused to provide fully for veterans' welfare and conserved their discretionary power to decide who would be granted assistance (Petiteau 2003).

A few factors contributed to this distinctive path. First, the comparatively smaller numbers of U.S. veterans help explain why lawmakers were less reluctant to grant them generous benefits. Although the 16,000 veterans who qualified under the 1818 law were far more than what had been expected, they remained a much smaller group than the 140,000 who were receiving pensions in



1817 in France – themselves only a fraction of the eligible population (Petiteau 2003, 94; Cogan 2017, 16). The political stability of the United States also played a role. After their return, the veterans who had served from 1775 to 1783 could make their claims on the same government that had sent them to war, which enhanced their legitimacy. By contrast, after Napoleon was overthrown in 1815 his veterans faced a newly restored monarchy that regarded with suspicion those who had fought for its sworn enemy. The Bourbons often rescinded the benefits of soldiers who had taken part in the Hundred Days (Petiteau 2003, 92-6). Finally, the fact that the United States extended universal white male suffrage earlier than its European counterparts was significant (Keyssar 2009). Since U.S. veterans overwhelmingly belonged to this category of the population, it gave them the ability to exert direct pressure on their representatives through tools such as petitions drives and public demonstrations, which made their demands harder to resist (Oberly 1985).

The Civil War (1861-1865) further consolidated the early moves taken by the United States toward an exclusive policy. The “general law system” of pensions adopted in 1862 was initially limited to disabilities or deaths that were connected with service, but it was gradually expanded during the postwar period until it covered nearly every ex-soldier and their survivors. By 1907, a law effectively granted a pension to all Union veterans older than 62 regardless of disability (Blanck and Millender 2000, 9). There were 900,000 pensioners in 1910, with their benefits administered by a separate agency, the Pension Bureau (Glasson 1918, 273). Many of the conditions that produced this outcome were the same as in previous years: a large number of white, male, former soldiers returned home endowed with the aura of victory and able to make claims on the same regime that had sent them to war, in a context where social policy remained underdeveloped. In addition, the fact that some of them had been conscripted made their claims on the state even more difficult to resist.

The result was a massive expansion of veterans’ welfare state. Put simply, the Civil War was the first conflict in which the total cost of veterans’ benefits topped that of the war itself (Carter et al. 2006, Table Ed168-179 ). From 1880 to 1910, over a quarter of all federal spending was devoted to Civil War pensions, with a peak at 40 percent in 1890 (Skocpol 1992, 65; Rockoff 2006, 344). This was in part the result of the dramatic increase in the number of recipients: the Civil War produced around 2.2 million veterans on the Union side, the largest cohort of former soldiers to this point in U.S. history. But higher costs also reflected the creation of new *kinds* of benefits: the state not only offered veterans pensions and land grants, but it also established homes to care for the old and indigent. By 1900, 100,000 Union veterans lived in them (Kelly 1997; Van Ells 2001, 10). In addition, the federal government gave former soldiers preference for jobs in civil service. Benefits available at the state and local levels were even more expansive (Marten 2011, 240-1). Veterans of the

Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War were later given access to much of these same programs.

Other factors specific to the post-Civil War period contributed to this expansion. For instance, the late-19th century witnessed the emergence of interest groups as important players in U.S. politics, from labor to women's rights to agriculture (Clemens 1997). Union veterans played a central role in this larger process, with the creation of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) in 1866. Initially focused on social and charitable activities, beginning in the early 1880s the group devoted itself almost single-mindedly to advocating for more generous benefits on behalf of its constituents. With 400,000 members in 1890, it was one of the most powerful lobbies of the Gilded Age and a fervent believer in the ideal of martial citizenship – the view that veterans formed a select group of citizens entitled to privileged treatment by virtue of their military service (Davies 1955; McConnell 1992). Expert at pressuring both the executive and legislative branches, the GAR played a key role in lobbying for the successive laws that made pensions increasingly generous. When an individual benefit claim was denied administratively, Congress often intervened with a special pension bill on that person's behalf: from 1865 to 1917, legislators passed a total of 53,000 private pension bills (Glasson 1918, 280). Though this triangular relationship between the GAR, the Bureau, and Congress was never as rigid as critics have portrayed it to be, it nevertheless went a long way toward explaining why veterans' spending reached new highs during this period.

Indeed, the United States was perhaps the first country to witness the politicization of its veterans' movement. In Great Britain, for instance, "the first national organization set up and run by veterans, for veterans, not as a social club, regimental association or traditional charity, but as a political pressure group" was not founded until 1917 (Hally 2019, 22). Veterans' groups existed in other countries, to be sure (in Austria, the first one was created in 1820), but they often limited their activities to participating in war commemorations, undertaking relief work, and providing a social outlet for their members (James 2016, 78-9).

As a result of this early start, by the turn of the 20th century the U.S. veterans' welfare state was an international outlier. Broadly speaking, prior to World War I veterans' benefits in most other industrialized countries – including not just Europe but also Japan and Australia – remained either non-existent or rudimentary (Obinger, Petersen, and Starke 2018). In fact, U.S. programs were so extensive that they sometimes overshadowed the more universal systems implemented in certain Western European countries (Skocpol 1992). As one contemporary expert noted, in the United States

the military pension system has acted in great measure as a workingman's pension system. Many of the old men and women who, in Europe, would be in almshouses are found in the US living upon pensions with their children or in homes to which paupers are not sent. (Henderson 1909, 276-7)

Another one claimed that in the 1910s, the United States was spending “more than three times” more on its veterans’ pensions than the entire “British pension system,” and that “our pension roll numbers several hundred thousand more names than that of Great Britain” (Rubinow 1913, 404). The U.S. system was so extensive, in fact, that British and Canadian officials who opposed extending the same kind of statutory entitlements to their own veterans would later cite it as a cautionary tale (Morton and Wright 1987, chap. 3; Hally 2019, 21).

Outsiders were not the only ones to express reservations about the colossal scale of Civil War pensions. Progressives in the United States voiced their disapproval as well. Not only did they allege that the system was plagued by widespread patronage and corruption, but they also argued that it allowed veterans to avoid work, thereby encouraging idleness and dependence instead of productive and “manly” work habits (Linker 2011). By the 1910s, the GAR no longer stood in the way of their reform efforts: death had so thinned out the ranks of Union veterans that the group was but a shadow of its former self. Progressives therefore welcomed the decision of Woodrow Wilson to join the First World War in April 1917 as an opportunity for them to chart a new course in this field.

In a process that would be repeated time and again in the years to come, the design of veterans’ policy during the Great War was therefore in large measure a reaction against the perceived flaws of the legislation adopted during the previous major conflict. Rather than extending the pension system created in 1862, Congress devised a brand-new program whose cornerstone was the War Risk Insurance Act of 1917. The overarching goal behind this new law was to preempt the future growth of another set of ruinously expensive benefits, by forcing veterans to return to civilian life as quickly as possible and by settling all debts that the state might still owe them upon discharge. In an attempt to avoid the return of a service pension, the act provided “Doughboys” with up to \$10,000 in life insurance at advantageous rates (which they could keep after the war) and it limited pensions strictly to those recipients whose disability or death had occurred in the line of duty. Disabled veterans could take advantage of new medical care and rehabilitation services, which Progressives hoped would “cure” their impairment and return them to a productive status as wage-earners once and for all. Seeing the Pension Bureau as hopelessly corrupt, the law vested authority for these new programs in other agencies. In short, Progressives hoped that the new system would pave the way toward a more inclusive model of veterans’ policy in which former soldiers would be treated on a similar basis to the rest of the population (Linker 2011; Kinder 2015, pt. II; Adler 2017).

Not unlike what had happened after the Revolutionary and the Civil Wars, however, wartime legislation was quickly superseded by a spate of more generous laws in the postwar period. One of the reasons for this policy change was

a lack of foresight on the part of Wilson and his administration: taken aback by the sudden collapse of Austria-Hungary and Germany in November 1918, they had had little time to plan for the demobilization effort. The agencies charged with assisting veterans proved unable to deal with the flood of pension claims, while former soldiers often had trouble finding their way through the new bureaucratic maze. The economic recession that started a few months after the armistice compounded these problems, as did allegations that the head of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance Charles R. Forbes, who took the lead in dealing with veterans' problems, had embezzled large amounts of public funds (Stevens 2016). This chaotic context created a political opening for the veterans' movement, which pushed for more generous benefits.

The story of the next decade or so after the war is therefore to a large extent that of how the Progressive vision for a new model of veterans' policy unraveled under the relentless assaults of veterans' groups. Foremost among them was the American Legion, a World War I-only group created in 1919, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), initially open only to veterans of the Spanish-American War but later expanded to all those who had served abroad, and the Disabled American Veterans, an organization advocating for those who had been disabled in service. Though they represented different subgroups of the veteran community whose interests did not always coincide, these three organizations shared with the GAR a common belief in martial citizenship. Over the next few years, they were successful in rolling back Progressives' more inclusive approach. Not only did they manage to bring the administration of all veterans' programs under a single and separate roof for the first time (with the merger of existing agencies into the Veterans Administration in 1930), but they also won passage of two major laws in 1924: one that provided for the future payment of "adjusted compensation" – a sum meant to compensate veterans for the wages that they felt they had lost by joining the military, which their critics derided as a "Bonus" – and another that extended eligibility for medical benefits to patients whose disabilities were not connected to military service. In other words, World War I veterans obtained precisely what Progressives had hoped to permanently eradicate: the extension of benefits to veterans without service-connection and the creation of an executive agency that recognized their separate status.

The result was a system whose cost once again exploded. Throughout the second half of the 1920s, slightly more than one-fourth of the federal budget went to veterans' benefits (Ross 1969, 24). At its peak in 1932, the VA was spending over \$830 million and more than a quarter of all veterans of the Great War were receiving a pension (Carter et al. 2006, Table Ed297-310 and Ed337-350). That same year, almost two-thirds of the 43,000 veteran patients remaining in hospitals were treated for non-service-connected disabilities, a dramatic increase compared with 1925 when they made up only 14 percent of 26,000

patients (*Annual Report* 1941, 49). Clearly, the Progressives' experiment had been short-lived.

The United States was far from the only country to devote large amounts of resources to the welfare of World War I veterans. In France and Germany, such programs were respectively the third and the second largest items on the budget in 1932 (Jedell 1932; Philip 1932). Nor was it the only one to set up a separate administrative structure in charge of their welfare programs: Great Britain, Canada, and Australia adopted a similar approach and provided many of the same types of benefits (Garton 1996; Morton 1998; Barr 2005). Rather, what set the United States apart was the comparative generosity of its veterans' spending, which in 1932 was as high as that of Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Canada combined (*New York Times* 1932). This was all the more remarkable in light of the fact that the country had suffered far fewer casualties and mobilized fewer soldiers than other belligerents – a mere 234,000 out of 4.7 million, when France alone had suffered 5.6 million casualties out of an army of 8.3 million. Again, this difference stemmed from the wider range of benefits that the United States made available even to those former soldiers whose disabilities were not directly connected to service. A few other countries adopted the same approach but never to the same extent (in 1930 for instance, France granted a small old-age pension to Great War veterans above the age of 50; Prost 1992, 38; Cabanes 2014).

A brief comparison with the situation in Western Europe highlights some of the reasons behind this discrepancy. The first is perhaps the most obvious: while the Great War severely weakened European economies, it had the opposite effect on the United States (Nolan 2012). There, the presence of large federal budget surpluses in the 1920s made it harder for advocates of economy to push back against veterans' demands (Cogan 2017, 58). Also important was the fact that U.S. veterans' groups did not face strong opponents. In Britain, the existence of a powerful labor movement proved a major obstacle. Not only did trade unions and their allies in the Labor Party tend to see veterans' organizations as potential competitors that might divide their working-class base, but they also opposed in principle the idea that former soldiers should be granted privileges over workers (Morris 2019). The comparative weakness of the U.S. labor movement meant that it was never in a position to block the emergence of groups like the Legion or the VFW. Lastly, the U.S. veterans' movement benefited from its nonpartisan approach, contrary to countries like Germany where veterans' groups were divided along political lines (with the nationalist *Stahlhelm*, the social-democratic *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold*, and the Communist-affiliated *Roter Frontkämpferbund*; Whalen 1984). In the United States, major veterans' groups learned from the example of the GAR (whose affiliation with the Republican Party helped tar the Civil War pension system with accusations of patronage). Remaining largely nonpartisan throughout the interwar period, they were able to exert influence on whichever party was in

power. All these mechanisms – economic stability, the absence of a counter-movement, and bipartisanship – contributed to the remarkable expansion of the U.S. veterans’ welfare state in the first half of the interwar period.

This growth was temporarily slowed by the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, but never fully stopped. In the context of the economic downturn, lavish benefits for veterans provoked mounting cries of a “racket” (Burlingame 1932). Drawing on this backlash, one of the first pieces of legislation that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed upon taking office in 1933 was the Economy Act, which allowed him to cut \$460 million in veterans’ programs and to repeal the service pension for veterans of the Great War. This was only the second time in U.S. history that veterans’ benefits were cut by law (the first was in 1820) and the first time that a service pension was repealed (Ross 1969, 26; Ortiz 2010, 75; Rostker 2013, 171). Roosevelt also adamantly refused to grant immediate payment of the Bonus on the grounds that military service was a duty not a privilege and that able-bodied veterans should therefore be treated like any other group of citizens. Yet even a widely popular President in the midst of a severe economic crisis proved unable to steer veterans’ policy in a more inclusive direction. The fierce lobbying of veterans’ groups led Congress not only to reverse most of the cuts of the Economy Act but also to override a presidential veto in 1936 to pass immediate payment of the Bonus (Ortiz 2010). To be sure, FDR’s record on veterans’ issues was not altogether negative: for instance, he gave them preference in New Deal programs like the Civilian Conservation Camps. Still, overall the 1930s were a period of limited retrenchment: by 1940, spending on World War I veterans’ programs was still a quarter below its 1933 level, while the number of former soldiers and their survivors on the rolls was down by a third (Cogan 2017, 75).

The pendulum swung yet again with the external shock of World War II, which contrary to how it is often portrayed – marked the defeat rather than the consolidation of FDR’s approach to social policy. New Dealers had hoped that the conflict would provide them with an opportunity to further cement the programs implemented in the previous decade, but a number of factors – such as growing Congressional opposition and unpopular labor strikes – produced the opposite result. Instead of comprehensive and national social policies such as health insurance or public assistance, the war saw the passage of “indirect and disjointed forms of public social provision” that targeted specific groups of the population rather than the entire citizenry (Amenta and Skocpol 1988).

Veterans’ policy was the primary example of this larger path-dependent pattern. At the beginning of the conflict, memories of the bitter divisions created by the interwar debate over pensions and the Bonus were still fresh in lawmakers’ minds. They helped create a consensus that Congress needed to do more to soften the return of the next generation of veterans. Building on this widespread sentiment, Progressives sought to design a demobilization plan that would address the needs of both former soldiers *and* civilians, and to lodge

administrative authority for such plans in a friendly entity like the Federal Security Agency (FSA), which Roosevelt had established in 1939. But the conservative coalition of Southern Democrats and right-wing Republicans who dominated Congress in wartime had no appetite for such proposals. They pushed instead to limit the scope of readjustment plans to former soldiers and their dependents. In this effort, they enjoyed the backing of both the veterans' movement and the larger public, which supported any effort to reward the G.I.'s (Sparrow 2011). The result was legislation that not only extended all of the programs for earlier generations to World War II veterans, but also created a new category of veterans' benefits with the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act, otherwise known as the "G.I. Bill of Rights." This landmark law provided all former soldiers of the conflict with educational benefits, unemployment compensation, job search services, and housing, business, and farm loan guaranties. This was the first time in U.S. history that the federal government explicitly recognized that not just disabled but also able-bodied former soldiers needed assistance to readjust to civilian life (Ross 1969; Skocpol 1997; Altschuler and Blumin 2009; Frydl 2009). Rather than limiting veterans' rights, as FDR had long hoped, the war only ended up expanding them even further.

As a result, in the postwar period veterans and their families were once again the most important beneficiaries of the U.S. welfare state. At its peak in 1949, veterans' spending reached \$6.9 billion, nearly a third of all federal spending on social welfare (Carter et al. 2006, Table Ed297-310 and Bf188-195). That same year, the VA was responsible not only for disability compensation, pension, or retirement benefits for 2.3 million veterans, but also for 129 hospitals admitting half a million patients a year as well as for over 7 million life insurance policies. With a staff of nearly 200,000, it had more personnel under its charge than any other federal entity save the Post Office and the military (Administrator of Veterans Affairs 1950, 1-4). This was not all: by the early 1950s, nearly three-fifths of the federal civil service workforce were veterans or their relatives, up from only 15 percent in 1945 (American Legion 1952, 173). The list of advantages available to former soldiers had grown so vast and expensive that *Fortune* magazine considered the American welfare state to be essentially a "veterans' state" (*Fortune* 1952).

This new spur of growth was the result of familiar mechanisms. The United States was again coming out of a total war in which its domestic economy and civilian population did not experience major destruction or suffering. The fact that the conflict mostly took place overseas gave G.I.'s a stronger claim that they – as opposed to civilians on the home front – had borne the costs of the war. The use of the draft reinforced their demands. Contrary to other victorious countries like France or Great Britain, the United States also emerged from the conflict with the wherewithal to spend lavishly on veterans' programs. Not only did its former soldiers enjoy the prestige of victory, but they could make their claims on the same regime that had sent them to war – contrary to places

like postwar Germany or Japan, where the Allied occupation forbid any kind of social policy for veterans lest they would contribute to the return of militarism (Kasza 2018; Starke 2018). Finally, the existence of a powerful veterans' movement during World War II meant that contrary to what had happened in the previous conflict, this time the G.I.'s had advocates in the halls of power. All these factors converged to form a perfect storm that consolidated the exclusive trajectory in which U.S. veterans' policy had long been engaged.

Beyond the sheer increase in the scope and cost of veterans' welfare state, World War II marked a turning point in the sense that it cemented its separation from civilian programs. Until then, the U.S. Congress had typically granted veterans' benefits on an ad hoc and temporary basis, with each cohort receiving its own set of programs that were expected to expire after the demise of their last member. No unified system encompassing all veterans existed. The pension regime available to veterans of World War I was legally distinct from that of their Civil War elders, for instance. A major step toward a more permanent and comprehensive framework had been taken in 1930, when for the first time a single federal agency (the VA) was made responsible for the benefits of all veterans with no distinction of generation. Yet as we have seen, as late as World War II New Dealers were still hoping to place veterans' programs into the hands of a "civilian" agency such as the FSA. The failure of their plans and the placement of the G.I. Bill under the authority of the VA set a precedent: in the postwar period, the idea that all veterans' programs should be administered by the same separate agency would no longer be seriously questioned. This was also the time when all veterans' legislation was brought under the jurisdiction of a single committee in the House of Representatives.<sup>2</sup> Only in the mid-20th century, then, was the exclusive approach to veterans' policy definitively embedded in the structure of the state.

Still, the triumph of martial citizenship was as complete as it was brief. The very generosity of G.I. Bill benefits enticed fraud; by the late 1940s, the press was full of the same accusations of scandals and corruption that had been made against the Civil War pension system in the Gilded Age or against the Veterans' Bureau after World War I (Frydl 2009). Partly in reaction to these charges, Congress granted Korean War veterans a series of benefits that were broadly similar to those from World War II (including their own G.I. Bill) but with less freedom of choice, stiffer penalties, and lower payments (Pash 2012). More broadly, the onset of the Cold War and the rise of the "national security state"

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<sup>2</sup> Prior to 1946, veterans' bills had fallen under the responsibility of four different committees in the House, not all of them veteran-focused: the Committees on Pensions, the Committee on Invalid Pensions, the Ways and Means Committee (which was in charge of all financial matters), and the Committee on World War Veterans' Legislation (created in 1924 to handle all bills related to World War I veterans, and to World War II veterans after January 1944). The Senate did not have its own committee on veterans' affairs until 1970.



ushered in a new era for veterans' policy. With the United States now embarked upon a long-term ideological conflict with the Soviet Union, the return of the peacetime draft in 1948 meant that the veteran population would steadily increase for the foreseeable future, leading many observers to fear that the country would soon become "a nation of veterans" where a vast portion of the population would be entitled to special treatment (*New York Times* 1953). Facing a continually rising defense budget, lawmakers had to find ways to make veterans' programs more financially sustainable (Hogan 2000).

A changed geopolitical outlook was not the only mechanism that placed veterans' welfare state under renewed pressure; the evolving landscape of social policy also played a role. While FDR had failed to prevent the passage of legislation recognizing veterans' special status during his own presidency, the new welfare programs that he created with the Social Security Act of 1935 nevertheless had an impact: no longer could veterans' advocates claim that their constituents did not have access to an alternative safety net. By the 1950s, in fact, many experts were beginning to think that the growth of New Deal programs made a parallel welfare state for former soldiers outdated. Since veterans and their relatives could access many welfare programs as civilians, and since the draft turned military service into an almost universal obligation (for men) as opposed to a burden shouldered only by a few, the need to grant veterans special benefits no longer seemed so acute. This was the central argument of the Commission on Veterans' Pensions created by President Eisenhower, whose final report issued in 1956 found the view that "anyone who has served in the Armed Forces in wartime has a right to special privileges from the Government for the rest of his life" to be "clearly outmoded" (*The President's Commission on Veterans' Pensions* 1956, 134-5). The Commission recommended the eventual elimination of non-service-connected pensions, though it recognized that veterans who were disabled in service should continue to receive government assistance. Some of the Commission's proposals were accepted, but the firm opposition of veterans' groups succeeded in preventing most major cuts.

In addition to these external mechanisms, the effort to expand martial citizenship ran against deep divisions within the veterans' movement itself. For instance, in the late 1950s some lawmakers pushed to pass a "Cold War G.I. Bill" that would extend some readjustment benefits to peacetime veterans, but without success. This setback was the result of opposition coming not only from the administration (which sought to expand welfare programs open to all citizens rather than those available only to veterans) but also from the Legion. In its view, peacetime veterans were less deserving than former soldiers who had served in wartime and should therefore not be entitled to the same programs (Boulton 2014, 59).

All these trends converged during the Vietnam War. While Congress passed a new G.I. Bill in 1966 that provided all veterans who had served after 1955 with educational and vocational training as well as housing assistance, the

monthly subsistence payments for veterans attending college were initially set at an even lower level than those for Korean veterans. With the major veterans' organizations focused on defending the interests of previous generations of former soldiers (especially World War II, which formed the majority of their members), Vietnam War veterans were left largely without a voice in Washington, D.C. The less generous approach of the 1966 law stemmed not only from the fact that it was meant to apply to both peacetime *and* wartime veterans, but also from President Lyndon Johnson's focus on expanding general welfare programs. Given the budgetary pressures created by the war effort, he was reluctant to increase spending on programs that targeted only a specific portion of the population (Boulton 2014).

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### 3. Conclusion

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The year 1973 marked the end of both direct U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and conscription. With the return to a professional military, veterans' benefits assumed once again the role that they had played in the days of the Revolutionary War, namely of enticing recruits into the military. This similarity notwithstanding, the situation of veterans' policy in the 1970s had of course little in common with what it had been two centuries earlier. The U.S. veterans' welfare had now reached colossal proportions, offering a wider array of benefits to a larger proportion of the veteran population than those available in virtually any other country.

Scholars have tended to see this peculiar outcome as predetermined by a uniquely American tradition of respect for the military. As we have seen in this article, nothing could be further from the truth: throughout their history, Americans have been no less critical of their veterans than other nations, and the adoption of an exclusive policy that treated former soldiers as a separate and privileged group was far from irresistible. The path taken by U.S. veterans' policy was determined not by an exceptional cultural trait but rather by the specific timing of various mechanisms that were in no way unique to this country.

Several of these stand out. The frequency of warfare in U.S. history explains why veterans were able to make claims on the state so early and so consistently. The fact that most of these wars were victorious and that they did not seriously damage the country's civilian population or its economy meant not only that the United States could reward its soldiers, but also that veterans could more credibly claim to have shouldered most of the burden of war and therefore argue that they deserved privileged status. The adoption of the draft during the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War gave the claims of their former soldiers even more legitimacy. The relative absence of welfare programs available to all civilians prior to the New Deal helps explain why

veterans demanded their own programs. The enfranchisement of white men, which occurred earlier in the United States than in other industrialized countries, contributed to making the political system receptive to the claims of veterans, who during the period covered in this article belonged overwhelmingly to this group of the population. Finally, the lack of any systematic counter-mobilization made the demands of the veterans' movement much harder to resist.

This is of course not a comprehensive list, not only because of the limitations of space imposed by this article but also due to the relative lack of research in comparative veterans' policy. As more work on this topic emerges, we will surely know more about what made the United States similar to or different from other countries. Rather than focusing on the specific nature of these mechanisms, we should therefore remember that it was the timing in which they followed each other that mattered: the fact that veterans were the first group to obtain their own selective entitlement program so early in the history of U.S. state-building helped cement their separate position, setting into motion a slow-moving and path-dependent process of policy expansion and consolidation that was sometimes halted but never reversed over the next centuries. We are still living with the consequences.

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