

Consequences of the GI Bill

GRADES 6-12



Overview

This activity is geared toward participants in grades 6-12. The estimated amount of time to deliver this lesson is 45 minutes.

In 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, which promised extensive benefits for veterans of World War II. It was intended to support veterans accessing education, loans, employment and housing after their service. However, Jim Crow laws and other structural inequalities in place during the 1940s prevented many veterans from actually using the benefits that were supposed to support them. Participants will use several primary sources, including oral histories, to explore the impact of the GI Bill on Black Americans.

In this lesson, the term "negro" is used to describe Black Americans. At the time, this term was not considered offensive; however, today it is considered inappropriate. Please preview the lesson materials and discuss with your students in advance.



Objective

Participants will be able to discuss the ways that systemic racism prevented Black veterans from accessing opportunities that were supposed to be available to all World War II veterans.



Materials

- Letter to Dorothy Parker from the Veterans Administration
- Eleanor Roosevelt fundraising letter from the National Committee for Justice in Columbia, Tennessee
- Supreme Court Report: Shelley v Kraemer
- Supreme Court Report: Sipuel v Board of Regents
- Untitled photo of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his study with members of the Office of Personnel Management, Fair Employment Practice Committee
- Oral history compilation of Charles Schlag, John Kiselak and Alonzo Swann



Inquiry

Introduce participants to the Veteran Administration's letter to Dorothy Parker. Dorothy served in the WAVES during World War II, from 1944 to 1946. She received an honorable discharge. The letter describes the benefits provided by the World War II Servicemen's Readjustment Bill. Discuss the following questions:

- Who could access GI Bill benefits?
- What areas of veterans' lives was the government targeting with the GI Bill?
- Was there anything that could have stood in the way of all veterans accessing the rights that the letter describes?



Investigation

Listen to or read transcripts of [oral histories](#) from Charles Schlag, John Kiselak and Alonzo Swann. All three men served during World War II. Charles Schlag was a Lieutenant Commander, John Kiselak was an Aviation Radioman and Alonzo Swann served as a steward on *Intrepid*, except when the ship was under attack and needed extra gunners. When necessary, Swann and several other Black stewards would be called to fill a gun tub. Provide background content on the GI Bill of Rights. Discuss the following questions:

- What benefits of the GI Bill do these veterans describe?
- How did the GI Bill shape their lives after service?
- The GI Bill was passed in 1944, and World War II ended in 1945. Can you anticipate any problems some veterans might have faced in accessing all of the benefits described in the GI Bill?



Activity

Primary Source Exploration

Distribute the collection of primary sources to participants along with the Primary Source Worksheet. Share background content on the restrictions Black veterans faced when attempting to access their GI benefits. The worksheet will ask participants to describe how the problem identified in each source hindered veterans from accessing the benefits promised in the GI Bill. They will look at the following primary sources:

- Eleanor Roosevelt's fundraising letter from the National Committee for Justice in Columbia, Tennessee
- Supreme Court Report: Shelley v Kraemer
- Supreme Court Report: Sipuel v Board of Regents
- Untitled photo of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his study with members of the Office of Personnel Management, Fair Employment Practice Committee

Discuss the following questions:

- How might the problem identified in each source hinder a veteran from accessing the benefits promised in the GI Bill?
- Do any of these problems still exist today?



Lesson Connection

See our lesson, **Fight for Desegregation**, for more content on the advocacy groups and work done that led to Executive Order 9981.



Background

Servicemen's Readjustment Act

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act, which would come to be known as the GI Bill, provided loan, education, disability and unemployment support to veterans of World War II. The federal government provided low-interest loans for purchasing homes, farms or farming equipment, or business property. It supported technical school or college up to a monetary limit and provided vocational rehabilitation for up to four years.

Unemployment and disability allowances were promised on varying scales, as well as some money immediately after discharge. The GI Bill also offered access to Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals, prosthetics, allowances for dependents and inexpensive life insurance. The initial GI Bill expired in 1956 but was extended several times and eventually replaced by newer Veterans' benefits bills.

Challenges to Access

The GI Bill was purposely written with race-neutral language, purporting to be written for all veterans. However, numerous roadblocks stood in the way of Black veterans attempting to access benefits. During World War II, much of the United States was still under Jim Crow laws, especially in the South. This affected the day-to-day life of every Black American.

Despite the Bill guaranteeing home loans, for example, Black veterans were denied them because certain areas were closed to Black residents. Even when capitalizing on education benefits, Black veterans had to attend segregated schools that often lacked critical courses and equipment. Universities in the North and South barred Black enrollment or were slow to admit them. Others were physically and verbally intimidated when they attempted to move into new housing developments. Black disabled veterans struggled to be awarded appropriate disability ratings from the VA, which they needed to receive disability payments.

It wasn't until Civil Rights victories across the nation that later GI bills were able to function for all veterans. *Brown v. Board of Education* was the landmark Supreme Court case that integrated schools across the nation in 1954. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited racial discrimination in voting and outlawed specific devices used to keep Black Americans from voting, like literacy tests. These achievements opened pathways for Black veterans to access the benefits they deserved.



Additional Resources/References

For more on the Jim Crow Era: <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/jim-crow/>

For more on the Civil Rights Act of 1964: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/civil-rights-act.htm>

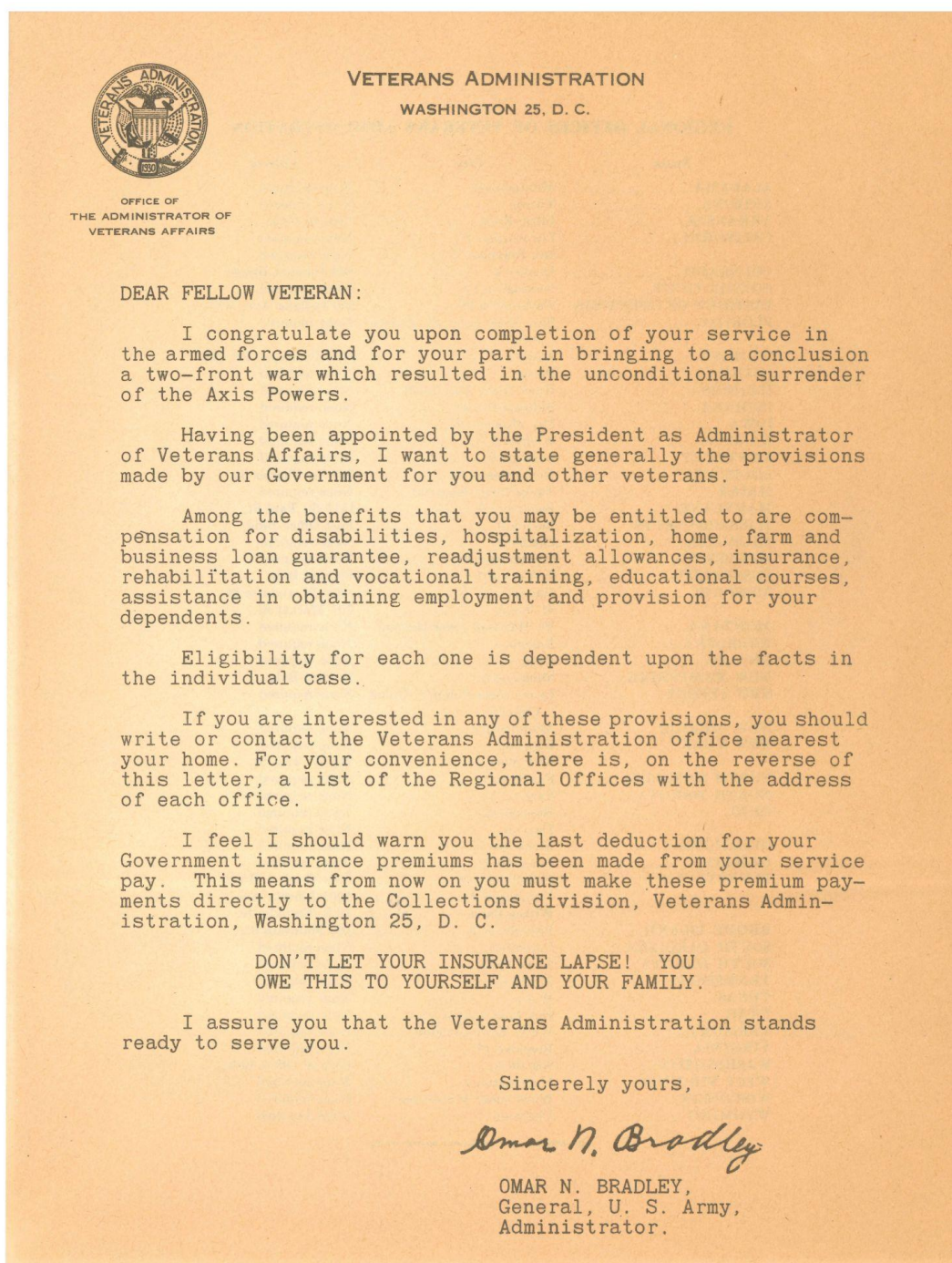


NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

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Documents and Images



Letter received by Dorothy Parker from the Veterans Administration

Credit: USS Massachusetts Memorial Committee Inc. (Battleship Cove)

Transcript:

Veterans Administration
Washington 25. D.C.

DEAR FELLOW VETERAN:

I congratulate you upon completion of your service in the armed forces and for your part in bringing to a conclusion a two-front war which resulted in the unconditional surrender of the Axis Powers.

Having been appointed by the President as Administrator of Veterans Affairs, I want to state generally the provisions made by our Government for you and other veterans.

Among the benefits that you may be entitled to are compensation for disabilities, hospitalization, home, farm and business loan guarantee, readjustment allowances, insurance, rehabilitation and vocational training, educational courses, assistance in obtaining employment and provision for your dependents.

Eligibility for each one is dependent upon the facts in the individual case.

If you are interested in any of these provisions, you should write or contact the Veterans Administration office nearest your home. For your convenience, there is, on the reverse of this letter, a list of the Regional Offices with the address of each office.

I feel I should warn you the last deduction for your Government insurance premiums has been made from your service pay. This means from now on you must make these premium payments directly to the Collections division, Veterans Administration, Washington 25, D.C.

DON'T LET YOUR INSURANCE LAPSE! YOU
OWE THIS TO YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY.

I assure you that the Veterans Administration stands ready to serve you.

Sincerely yours,

OMAR N. BRADLEY,
General, U.S. Army,
Administrator.

NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR JUSTICE IN COLUMBIA, TENNESSEE

20 WEST 40th STREET
New York 18, N. Y.

LONGACRE 3-6890

May 29, 1946

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Channing H. Tobias

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John Hammond

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Marian Wynn Perry

Chairman

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Bishop William Scarlett
David O. Selznick
Bishop Bernard J. Sheil
Frank P. Stanley
Nathan Straus
Herbert Bayard Swope
Dr. Stephen S. Wise

Dear Friend:

Thirty-one Negro citizens of Columbia, Tennessee are under arrest, charged with crimes ranging from attempted murder in the first degree to carrying concealed weapons. Two other Negro prisoners have been killed, shot down in the Columbia jail by officers of the law.

These men, more than half of their number recently discharged servicemen, have been the innocent victims of race hatred and violence. The events which took place in Columbia on February 25th and 26th rose out of a dispute between a white shopkeeper and a Negro customer. They culminated in lynch threats, an armed invasion of the Negro district, wanton destruction of Negro property and wholesale arrests and beatings of Negro citizens. The enclosed pamphlet, "Terror in Tennessee," adequately describes this series of outrages.

Our Committee was formed to provide every possible safeguard to those Negroes unjustly charged with crimes and to assure them the justice denied them by sworn officers of the law in Tennessee. We shall work with the legal staff of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in providing adequate legal defense to the victims. We will work to assure that those responsible for this bloodshed and mockery of the law be tried for the real crimes committed. We shall attempt, so far as it lies within our power, to provide reparations for the damage occasioned Negro businessmen and householders by brutal mob action. Finally and above all, we will tell the people this story of injustice and race hatred at Columbia so that Americans may take measures to guard against a repetition of this tragic situation in their own communities.

Please help us to win these objectives through your generous contribution. Every dollar you give will help to assure simple justice to humble men who today stand charged with crime while the real criminals are free. We want an America where every man, Negro or white, may stand on the same footing before the law. Help us to achieve that.

Sincerely yours,

Eleanor Roosevelt Channing H. Tobias

P.S. This Committee represents a joint effort on the part of all organizations and individuals working to secure justice for the defendants in Columbia. If you have received and responded to a previous appeal in connection with this case, please pass this letter on to a friend.

AG. NO. 71-7

Fundraising Letter from the National Committee for Justice in Columbia, Tennessee

Credit: Tennessee State Library and Archives

Transcript:

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Channing H. Tobias

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CASES ADJUDGED
IN THE
SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES
AT
OCTOBER TERM, 1947.

SHELLEY ET UX. v. KRAEMER ET UX.

NO. 72. CERTIORARI TO THE SUPREME COURT OF MISSOURI.*

Argued January 15–16, 1948.—Decided May 3, 1948.

Private agreements to exclude persons of designated race or color from the use or occupancy of real estate for residential purposes do not violate the Fourteenth Amendment; but it is violative of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment for state courts to enforce them. *Corrigan v. Buckley*, 271 U. S. 323, distinguished. Pp. 8–23.

(a) Such private agreements standing alone do not violate any rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. Pp. 12–13.

(b) The actions of state courts and judicial officers in their official capacities are actions of the states within the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment. Pp. 14–18.

(c) In granting judicial enforcement of such private agreements in these cases, the states acted to deny petitioners the equal protection of the laws, contrary to the Fourteenth Amendment. Pp. 18–23.

(d) The fact that state courts stand ready to enforce restrictive covenants excluding white persons from the ownership or occupancy of property covered by them does not prevent the enforcement of covenants excluding colored persons from constituting a denial of equal protection of the laws, since the rights created by § 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment are guaranteed to the individual. Pp. 21–22.

*Together with No. 87, *McGhee et ux. v. Sipes et al.*, on certiorari to the Supreme Court of Michigan.

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Shelley v Kraemer

Credit: U.S. Reports: Volume 334 via Library of Congress

Transcript:

CASES ADJUDGED IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES AT OCTOBER TERM, 1947
SHELLEY v. KRAEMER
CERTIORARI TO THE SUPREME COURT OF MISSOURI
Argued January 15-16, 1948.--Decided May 3, 1948.

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- (a) Such private agreements standing alone do not violate any rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.
- (b) The actions of state courts and judicial officers in their official capacities are actions of the states within the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment.
- (c) In granting judicial enforcement of such private agreements in these cases, the states acted to deny petitioners the equal protection of the laws, contrary to the Fourteenth Amendment.
- (d) The fact that state courts stand ready to enforce restrictive covenants excluding white persons from the ownership or occupancy of property covered by them does not prevent the enforcement of covenants excluding colored persons from constituting a denial of equal protection of the laws, since the rights created by § 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment are guaranteed to the individual.

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SIPUEL *v.* BOARD OF REGENTS OF THE UNIVER-
SITY OF OKLAHOMA ET AL.

CERTIORARI TO THE SUPREME COURT OF OKLAHOMA.

No. 369. Argued January 7–8, 1948.—Decided January 12, 1948.

PER CURIAM.

On January 14, 1946, the petitioner, a Negro, concededly qualified to receive the professional legal education offered by the State, applied for admission to the School of Law of the University of Oklahoma, the only institution for legal education supported and maintained by the taxpayers of the State of Oklahoma. Petitioner's application for admission was denied, solely because of her color.

Petitioner then made application for a writ of mandamus in the District Court of Cleveland County, Oklahoma. The writ of mandamus was refused, and the Supreme Court of the State of Oklahoma affirmed the judgment of the District Court. 199 Okla. 36, 180 P. 2d 135. We brought the case here for review.

The petitioner is entitled to secure legal education afforded by a state institution. To this time, it has been denied her although during the same period many

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Syllabus.

white applicants have been afforded legal education by the State. The State must provide it for her in conformity with the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and provide it as soon as it does for applicants of any other group. *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada*, 305 U. S. 337 (1938).

The judgment of the Supreme Court of Oklahoma is reversed and the cause is remanded to that court for proceedings not inconsistent with this opinion.

The mandate shall issue forthwith.

Reversed.

Shelley v Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma

Credit: U.S. Reports: Volume 332 via Library of Congress

Transcript:

SIPUEL v. BOARD OF REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
CERTIORARI TO THE SUPREME COURT OF OKLAHOMA
ARGUED JANUARY 7-8, 1948--DECIDED JANUARY 12, 1948
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The petitioner is entitled to secure legal education afforded by a state institution. To this time, it has been denied her although during the same period many white applicants have been afforded legal education by the State. The State must provide it for her in conformity with the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and provide it as soon as it does for the applicants of any other group. *Missouri ex. rel. Gaines v. Canada*, 305 U.S. 337 (1938).

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FDR's Fair Employment Practice Committee asked him yesterday to issue specific orders to government agencies not to discriminate against Negroes when hiring people. It has received "scattered complaints" of such discrimination. Left to right are Chairman Mark Ethridge, Earl B. Dickerson, John Brophy, Milton P. Webster and David Sarnoff. *Photo by Wide World*

Negroes in United States: - 1941

7962-2E

Untitled photo of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his study with members of the Office of Personnel Management, Fair Employment Practice Committee

Credit: George Skadding, photographer. Library of Congress, [LC-USF34-007962-ZE]

Transcript:

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Photo by Wide World

ACTIVITY: PRIMARY SOURCE EXPLORATION

Read each primary source and describe how the problem identified in it hindered veterans from accessing the benefits promised in the GI Bill.

1. Letter from Eleanor Roosevelt
2. Shelley v Kraemer
3. Sipuel v Board of Regents
4. FDR's Fair Employment Practice Committee