

HISTORY

SOLDIERS TO CITIZENS: The GI Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation.

By Suzanne Mettler. Oxford Univ. Press. 252 pp. \$30

It's difficult to imagine how many postwar Americans would have made the leap from working class to middle class without the GI Bill. The educational funding made the dream of college a reality for millions of veterans, and the guaranteed low-interest loans allowed thousands of young couples to become homeowners for the first time. In *Soldiers to Citizens*, Suzanne Mettler argues that the legislation bestowed a less tangible benefit too: Veterans became more active citizens.

Mettler, a professor of political science at Syracuse University, documents her case primarily through a survey she conducted of 1,500 former GIs, and follow-up interviews with 28 of them. "Those veterans who utilized the provisions [of the GI Bill] became more active citizens in public life in the postwar years than those who did not," she reports. GI Bill beneficiaries were more likely to join fraternal organizations, labor unions, and service groups such as the Lions and Rotary International. Participation in those organizations made politics more accessible by teaching members about public issues and introducing them to office seekers. Thanks in part to this experience, veterans who took advantage of the GI Bill were more likely to vote and to run for office.

Participation in civic groups didn't just make veterans better informed and more engaged; it prodded them to become more progressive, Mettler believes. Many of these groups brought together citizens of diverse social backgrounds, and better-off veterans became more sensitive to the plight of the underprivileged. "Such associationalism," she writes, "may help explain why public officials of the postwar era, who were themselves active in such organizations, were more responsive to the needs of average Americans than has been the case in recent decades."

Mettler has done a lot of spadework, and she generally supports her thesis that the GI Bill contributed to the so-called golden age of civic participation. Still, some of her reasoning seems a bit of a stretch. Her assertion that mingling at community events helped foster a more progressive politics is a case in point: Few civic organizations of the 1950s qualified as melting pots of ethnicity and class.

Though the book is laden with data and dry prose, the reminiscences of the veterans themselves make for engaging reading. Take the story of Henry Hervey, an African American and former Tuskegee Airman who attended Northwestern University on the GI Bill. After papering Chicago banks with résumés, he was



Returning World War II veterans take advantage of GI Bill benefits at the University of Washington in 1946.

offered work only as a mailroom clerk or janitor — "the same job offer I would have gotten if I had not gone to college." Hervey, concluding that the status quo needed shaking up, became a civil rights activist.

In its broad reach and magnanimous terms, the GI Bill — which celebrated its half-century anniversary last year — has no parallel on the U.S. political landscape today. A postsecondary education has become increasingly important, yet many students find college almost impossible to finance. Mettler reminds us that the last time we expanded the educational horizons of young Americans, and gave generously to them, they responded in kind.

—ALEXANDRA STARR