Roots of America's Veterans Benefits: Colonial Period to Civil War

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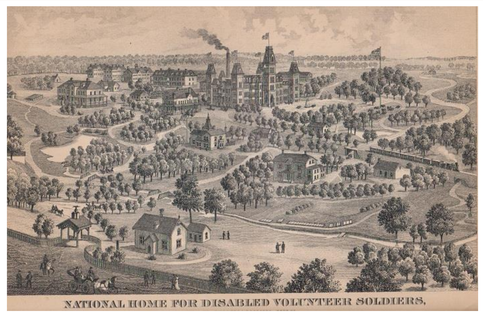
Introduction

The idea that the veterans of the United States Armed Forces deserve compensation for their service that goes beyond that of other professions is a near-universal one in American politics. In 2008, the Bush administration's proposed budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was $88.7 billion. That number has steadily grown over the past decade, as President Trump recommended that the VA be allotted $198.6 billion for 2019. Despite these increasing costs, politicians seemingly avoid cutting veterans benefits for fear of being perceived as "Anti-veteran".

However, this overwhelmingly accepting attitude towards veterans benefits has not always been the norm. It has not always been the view of the American people that the government ought to provide privileges to veterans in such areas as education, financial assistance, and healthcare.

The goal of this project was to examine government documents and existing scholarly literature to catalog the development of veterans' benefits in the United States from the colonial period to the late 19th Century. Furthermore, through this analysis, the goal was to identify the historical factors which lead to the implementation of these benefits and the political debates over their institution. With this historical context in mind, one may better examine the enormous, expensive program of veterans' benefits we have today, as well as view the factors which lead to the long-term establishment of social policy more generally.



Northwestern branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Image Originally published in 1885 Wisconsin Blue Book[9]

Kinds of Benefits

- **Pensions:** Payments from the government to former soldiers
  - Disability Pensions are the most common form, though several Service Pensions have existed for veterans of particular wars
  - Most important and widespread benefit by far; 92-100% of the cost of veterans benefits in the period examined.
- **Land Bounties:** Grants of land to former soldiers
  - Practiced by several colonies before and during Revolutionary War
  - Federal government granted bounties until 1855
  - More than 61 million acres of land granted under these bounties
- **Healthcare:**
  - Several colonies mandated for the care of maimed, disabled soldiers
  - National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers founded 1865
- **Preference in Federal Employment:**
  - After the Civil War, disabled veterans were given preference in Federal employment over equally qualified candidates
  - Eventually extended to allow certain protections for veterans and their relatives once employment had been obtained.

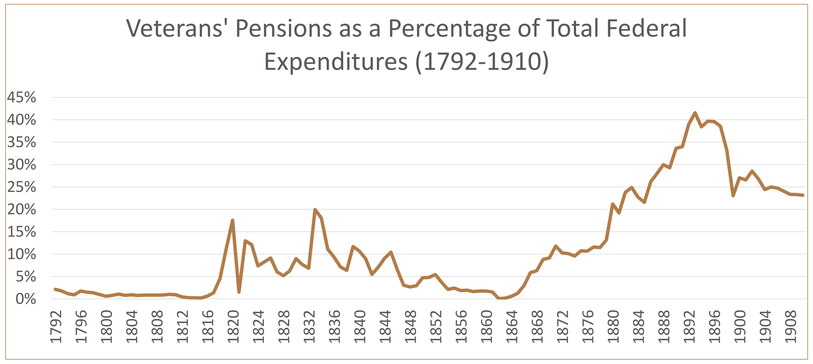


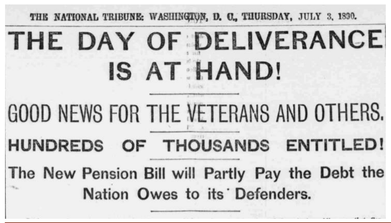
Figure 1: Federal Expenses on Veterans' Compensation and Pensions as a proportion of all outlays of the Federal Government
In 2019, the federal government's VA budget represents around 4.5% of total federal spending
Source: Historical Statistics of the Unites States: Colonial Times to 1970 *(1975)*

Significant Debates

- **Lifetime Half-Pay for Revolutionary War Officers:**
  - "*I do most religiously believe the salvation of the cause depends upon it, and, without it, your officers will moulder to nothing, or be composed of low and illiterate men, void of capacity for this or any other business*" –George Washington
  - "*I should be totally against the plan of allowing the officers half pay after the war. It is a very pernicious precedent in republican states; will load us with an immense debt, and render the pensioners themselves in a great measure useless to their country. If the must have a compensation, I think they had better have a sum certain to enable them to enter into business, and become service-able to the community*" –Governor William Livingston, NJ
- **Service-Pensions for Revolutionary War Veterans:**
  - "*Their claim will be as great, and the precedent you are about to make will be followed. One army you say gained your independence, and the other has given it a new character, and made it worth maintaining… This will be the beginning of a military pension system which posterity may regret*" –William Smith, Senator from S.C.
  - "*for every dollar of revenue raised on them by the present system of duties, to pension the poor soldiers, they are required to pay, and do pay, two dollars to the rich manufacturer.*" – Rep. Thomas Bouldin, VA
- **Civil War Service-Pensions:**
  - "*Why, Mr. Speaker, these newspapers that pretend to be 'friends of soldiers' are the friends of soldiers as vultures are the friends of dead bodies- because they feed and fatten on them… They file the application; they draw their $10; they give notice then that the papers are complete… They have the voice of Jacob, but their hand has the clutch of Esau*" – Rep. Edward S. Bragg
  - "*Federal taxation… is still maintained at the rate made necessary by the exigencies of war. If this bill should become a law, with its tremendous addition to our pension obligation, I am thoroughly convinced that further efforts to reduce the Federal revenue and restore some part of it to our people, will and perhaps should be seriously questioned.*" –President Grover Cleveland

Factors in Expanding Veterans' Benefits

- **Pragmatic Concerns:**
  - Incentivizing enlistment in the Army or militia
  - Maintaining a limited population in a frontier society
- **Scale of Conflict:**
  - Conflicts involving more soldiers amplify the pressure to distribute benefits
  - Psychological scale matters too; more 'important' or 'glorious' wars produce veterans to whom the nation may have a greater debt.
- **Economic Policy:**
  - During times of high tariffs and high government budget surpluses, advocates of protectionist trade policy oppose lowering tariffs by introducing expensive pension laws which would require the existing government surplus if they were to be adequately funded.
- **Machine Politics**:
  - Post-Civil War partisan fight over large veteran constituency
  - Both parties used the Bureau of Pensions to win votes for incumbent administrations
- **Lobbying Efforts:**
  - After the Civil War, the Grand Army of the Republic becomes a powerful force for increasing the benefits of Civil War veterans their relatives
  - Pensions Attorneys also played a large role in lobbying for and disseminating information regarding pensions legislation.


THE NATIONAL TRIBUNE: WASHINGTON, D. C., THURSDAY, JULY 3, 1890.

THE DAY OF DELIVERANCE IS AT HAND!

GOOD NEWS FOR THE VETERANS AND OTHERS.

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS ENTITLED!

The New Pension Bill will Partly Pay the Debt the Nation Owes to its Defenders.

Above: 1890 nameplate of the National Tribune*, a newspaper aimed at former Union soldiers. The image in the center features two men on either side of a Grand Army of the Republic badge. The quote comes from Abraham Lincoln's 2nd inaugural address.[7]*

Left: National Tribune *headline regarding passage of the Dependent Pension act of 1890*

Conclusions

The history of the United States shows that veterans' benefits were not always generous, nor were they always a topic of bipartisan agreement. The system of benefits we have now, one that includes healthcare, education, and financial benefits is the result of a massive expansion of benefits available to veterans after the Civil War, and it came about only because of the demographic, political, and economic factors of the period.

When we view contemporary veterans' benefits as immutable and inevitable, it obscures this historical reality. This is not to suggest that a generous veterans' benefits system is unjust, only that it is important to consider what assumptions underpin our vision of the duty of government. Historical debates over the implementation of veterans' benefits systems are both a consequence and a cause of larger developments in U.S. political thought, and challenge our traditional understanding of the role of government in honoring and caring for its veterans.

Acknowledgements

This project was funded through the University of Minnesota Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program. Special thanks to my faculty mentor, Dr. Tanisha Fazal, for her assistance and advice on this project. Feel free to email treth004@umn.edu with any questions about this project.

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