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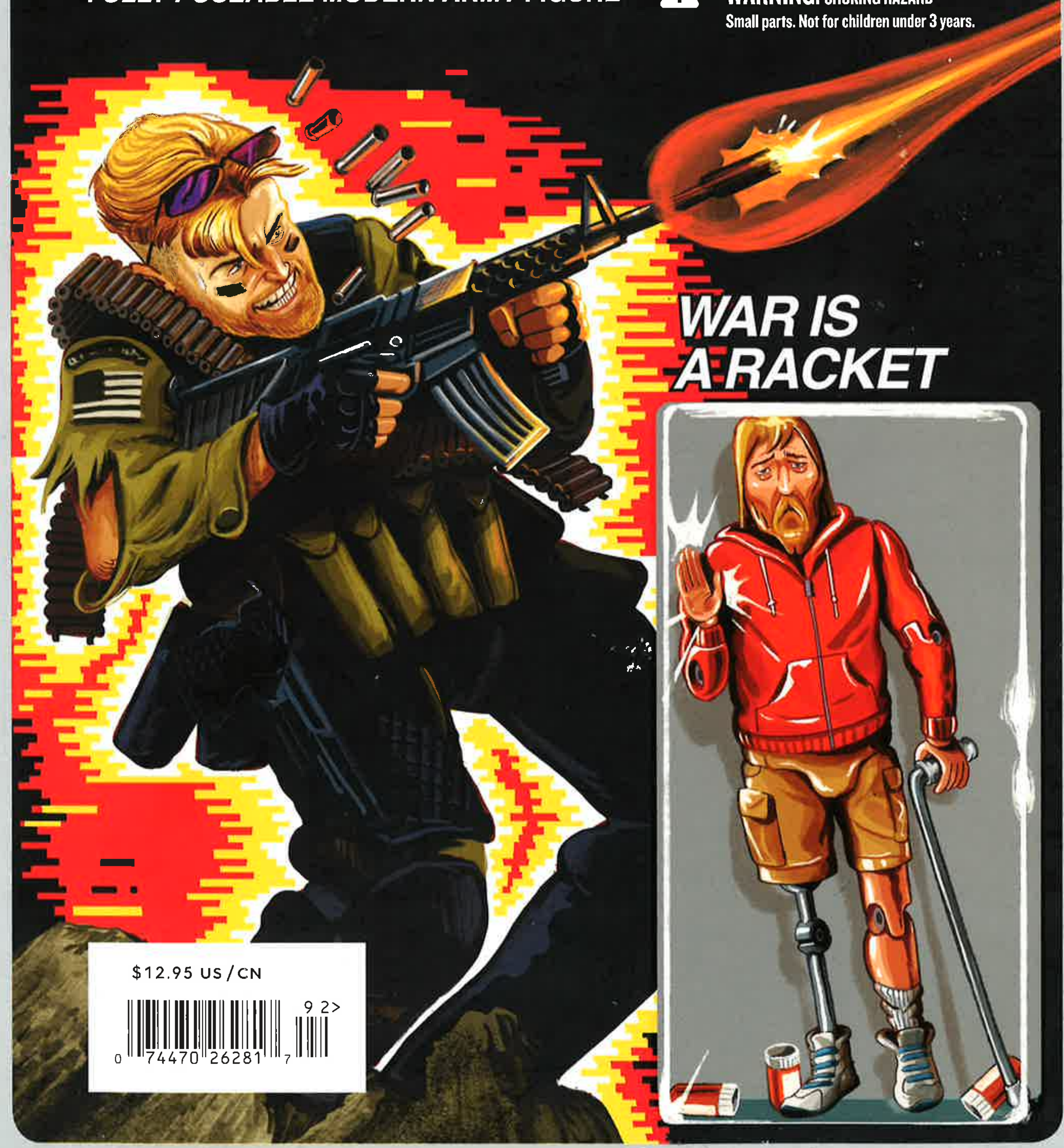

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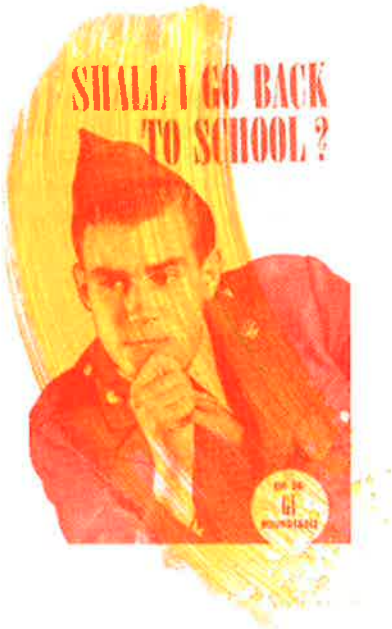
WAYS OF SEEING

BY BEN DAVIS

The GI Bill Made Art



SHALL I GO BACK TO SCHOOL?
GI

The GI Bill is proof: if people have access to education and the means to live, they'll create meaningful art.

What is the most important arts policy in US history? Nostalgic lefties will vote for the Works Progress Administration, which gave life-saving support to thousands of artists during the Great Depression and helped seed a new spirit of public art and social documentary. Liberals will pay homage to the National Endowment for the Arts, which grew out of the Great Society and Cold War attempts to buff America's image.

Socialists might make a case, however, for another piece of policy altogether, one whose effects were all the more far-reaching because you don't think of it as related to art at all: the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, aka the GI Bill.

Sometimes remembered as the last hurrah of the New Deal, the GI Bill's impact on the texture of American life is hard to overstate. Government benevolence toward returning World War II fighters in the form of the GI Bill's home loans, school aid, and unemployment insurance, and how it was all repaid in the form of social stability and suburbanized prosperity, has become part of Greatest Generation folklore — though it is important to note that the largesse was born from the collision of contemptuous neglect and radical activism.

The United States had not treated its World War I veterans well. Soldiers returning from its industrial-scale horrors were infamously slighted, receiving just $60 (less than $1,000, in inflation-adjusted terms), not even close to enough to compensate for lives interrupted and wages foregone. Angry vets organized and eventually won the passage of an expanded "bonus" providing for up to ten times as much compensation. That bill was passed over the veto of President Calvin Coolidge, who insisted that demanding reward for service to one's country was unpatriotic.

But that Great War bonus was to be paid in installments over twenty years, and in the misery of the Great Depression, simmering resentment turned to demands for immediate full payment. The agitation culminated in a "Bonus Army" of tens of thousands of vets and their families from across the country descending on Washington, DC, sitting in on the Capitol steps. When the government still refused, the Bonus Army dug in, a shantytown of penniless veteran families occupying the swampy Anacostia Flats. An alarmed DC establishment decried it as a "weed in the front lawn of democracy."

Deeply unsettled, Hoover ordered the Bonus Army camp cleared. The ensuing full-scale military assault, commanded by Douglas MacArthur with support from future president Eisenhower, mobilized two hundred mounted cavalry, four hundred infantrymen, tanks, and armored vehicles against poverty-stricken veterans. Tear gas turned the scene into something that resembled the battlefields of Europe; flames from the burning camp lit up the sky — and the newsreels — as troops systematically incinerated the meager remaining possessions of occupiers.

Such images were etched deeply into the national consciousness. Roosevelt thought it sealed the 1932 election for him. A decade later, in the throes of World War II, as provisions for the postwar transition were pondered, planners predicted that the end of war-fueled industry would lead to a return of depression. The specter loomed of embittered working-class men, now weapons-trained and disciplined, seeding insurrection. The response was the GI Bill, one of the largest entitlement programs in US history.

The war economy had drastically expanded the government's planning powers. Roosevelt and like-minded New Dealers thought they could use the new legitimacy of government to win universal provisions for health care and education during the transition to peace. Conservatives and the American Legion (born in 1919 as a vehicle to win embittered vets away from the siren song of socialism) thwarted this ambition, arguing that no benefit awarded to a veteran should also be received by a civilian. By the end, seeing how "veteran exceptionalism" was used to break wider reform, prominent New Dealers voted against the 1944 act.

While war-shattered Britain got the National Health Service, the economically emboldened United States got a beefed-up Department of Veterans Affairs. As the historian Kathleen J. Frydl argues in her history of the bill, "one important reason there is no strong welfare state is because of the World War II GI Bill itself."

"Of course," Frydl adds, "another way to put that is that, over a discrete period of time, for veterans and their families, there was a strong welfare state, a provisional but impressive victory of social policy and federal power." The GI Bill offers a glimpse of what larger effects thoroughgoing social-democratic benefits might have on society. It is in that spirit that we can look at its unexpected effects in art.

Art-historical convention speaks of "postwar American art" as a distinct epoch. The unusually broad-minded generosity of the GI Bill's Title II, which funded school for veterans at the institution of their choice (if they could get in), is a big reason for the unusually

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broad ferment in art. A simple list of the wildly different artists who benefited indicates as much.

Robert Rauschenberg served in a Navy hospital; the wily eclecticism of his art was informed by the wide-ranging experience he gathered via a GI Bill–fueled education that took him to Kansas City, Paris, New York, and North Carolina. Roy Lichtenstein saw combat in the infantry in Europe; he would finish his studies at the Ohio State University with government help, where he met the mentor whose advice helped him become the key painter of pop art. Peter Voulkos, the foundational figure in art ceramics, served as an airplane gunner in the Pacific; the GI Bill took him to the California College of Arts and Crafts, where he discovered the medium that he made famous.

For a number of people who would never otherwise have considered higher education, let alone studying art, the assist was decisive. "[T]hat's the only way I could go to school," Robert Irwin, who would go on to shape LA's Light and Space movement, remembered. "It really was the only way I could think of at that time." Bay Area painter Wayne Thiebaud was even more succinct when asked if he had benefited from the GI Bill: "Boy, I couldn't have done it otherwise."

So pervasive are the GI Bill's effects on society that its absences and flaws probably account for some lasting absences and flaws of art as well. Veterans were, of course, mainly men, and the influx of the GI Bill crowded women out of the teaching pool. By design, it failed to challenge racist admissions, meaning that black veterans didn't have the same range of options.

Even so, the likes of John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, and John T. Riddle, key figures in black collage aesthetics in Los Angeles, all benefited from the GI Bill. As Richard Cándida Smith remarks, Purifoy, who left the South as part of the Great Migration, "had to overcome his misgiving that art was too frivolous an endeavor for a black person. He decided that because it was government money, he could afford to experiment."

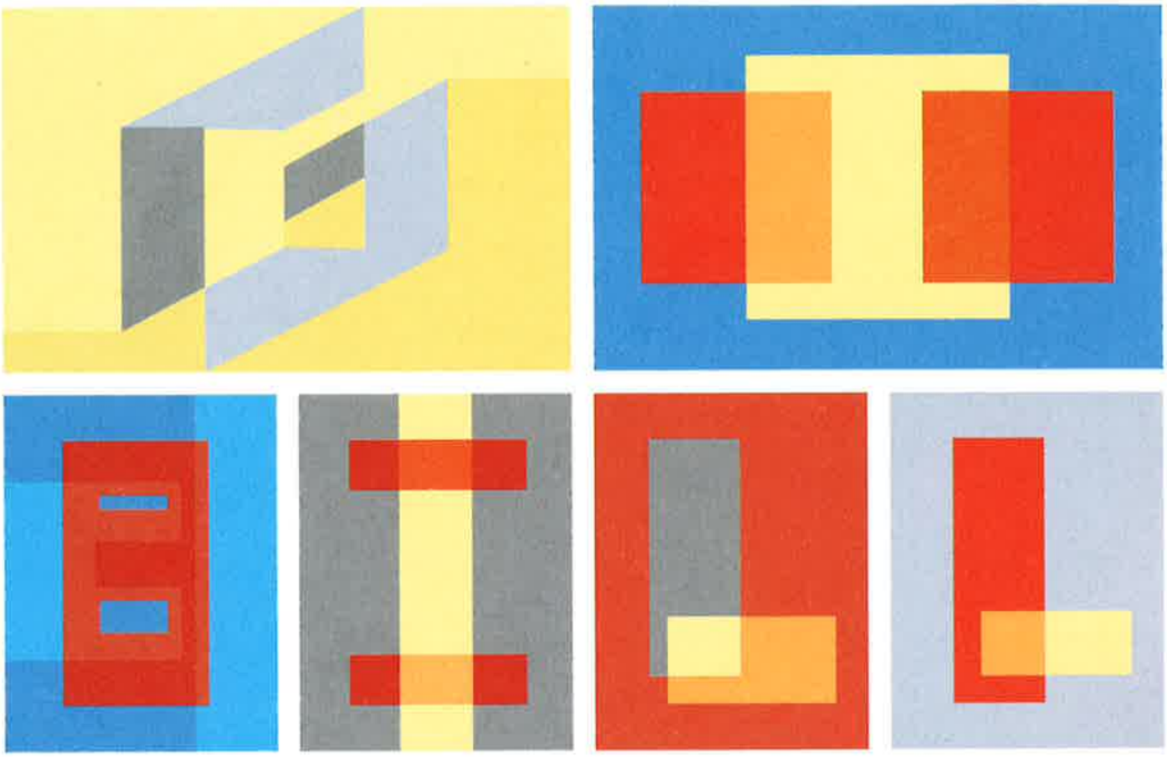
There were countless other less famous stories. Given the opportunity, thousands of former soldiers defied stereotypes by trying their hand at the anarchic opposite of military discipline: art. This swelled the ranks of schools, expanding not only the opportunities for artists as teachers but also the long-term audience for art.

No institution looms larger in the lore of US postwar art than Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which germinated on its faculty both German refugee Josef Albers's color theories and wild-card architect R. Buckminster Fuller's research on geodesic domes, and whose freewheeling student body coalesced the first "happening." The school could not have sustained its glories without its influx of GI Bill enrollees. The fact that its shuttering in 1957 coincides with the end of the bill attests to this.

According to a memo dug up by the *Carolina Public Press*, one of the final blows to the school was an FBI investigation into whether its methods were so unconventional as to count as fraud, which would have disqualified it from GI Bill money. "The veterans do not attend the classes in the normal sense and on a regular basis," one investigator wrote disapprovingly to J. Edgar Hoover. "For example, a student may do nothing all day and in the middle of the night may decide he wants to paint or write, which he does, and he may call on his teachers at this time for guidance. They advised that everything is left to the desires of the individual."

The association with fraud is a forgotten aspect of the bill, and an important one. It was ultimately the excuse for clamping down on government generosity:

Maybe one reason there's no strong welfare state is because of the GI Bill itself.



"One-third of the $14.5 billion that the government spent on Title II went to fictional schools, real schools overcharging the government, or on-the-job training hoaxes," Frydl reports, citing testimony from the General Accounting Office. Yet, from the point of view of postwar creative flowering, some of this "fraud" was just vets finding their path to the life experience necessary for their artistic voice.

Before becoming the great exemplar of hard-edge abstraction, Ellsworth Kelly served with the 603rd Camouflage Engineers (aka the "Ghost Army"), then used his GI Bill to study at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston — before hopping to Paris, where he enrolled in a school that he hardly ever showed up to just to get the stipend, a popular hustle with US vets. Painter Al Held, a Navy vet steeped in New York radicalism, was accepted to a Paris academy without knowing a word of French in 1951, using the GI Bill to eject himself from McCarthyite America and freeing himself to explore abstraction.

"It was an instinctive urge to start a new life," Held said later. "Which is essentially what I did do in Paris." And so it went for scores of artists or would-be artists who went to Paris in a similar way, returning home with new ideas to reflect upon when the money ran out (like Romare Bearden) or staying on to explore (like Ed Clark), cross-pollinating art scenes.

Veteran benefits are not where you normally look for answers about art. But that's the point. Because its indiscriminate nature produced such success — and because its weaknesses were, on the whole, exactly where it did discriminate — the GI Bill proves that one of the best policies for supporting art might actually just be education and the means to live, universally granted, with the faith that art's success is a side effect of a more general good. ■