US government department created by Congress in 1989, succeeding the Veterans Administration. The government's second-largest department, it is responsible for a nationwide system of health-care services, benefits programmes, and national cemeteries for US veterans and their dependants. Around 70 million people, or a quarter of the US population, are potentially eligible for Veteran Affairs benefits because they are veterans, members of veterans' families, or survivors of veterans. The department employs around 220,000 people (2003). The acting secretary of veterans' affairs is Sloan Gibson (from 2014).

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) administers benefits for servicemen and servicewomen who served in the armed forces of the United States. In 2012, the VA served a veterans population of more than 20 million veterans through 817 outpatient clinics, 152 hospitals, 300 veteran centers, and 56 regional benefit centers. It maintains a network of 131 national cemeteries, which contain the remains of servicemen and servicewomen who died in every American war. More than 7 million veterans hold a life insurance policy, and nearly 3½ million receive disability or old-age pension through the organization. The agency has more than 300,000 employees, the second largest number among federal departments, only trailing the Department of Defense. The VA expended slightly more than $140 billion in 2011.

Organizational Development

After the Civil War, the centerpieces of veterans' benefits were disability pensions and institutional care for disabled ex-soldiers. After gradual expansion, Civil War pensions for Union veterans (but not Confederate veterans) represented more than a quarter of the government's expenditures between 1880 and 1910; disbursement was administered by the Bureau of Pensions in the Department of the Interior. In the peak year of expenditure—1893— the Bureau of Pensions served more than 1 million pensioners.

When the U.S. entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson and reformers sought to avoid creating another class of pensioners. To deal with the veterans' disability and the needs of dependents of wounded or killed service people, the government created a system of War Risk Insurance for the 4 million Americans serving in the armed forces. To meet the needs of veterans with service-related wounds and disabilities, a network of hospitals was created under the jurisdiction of the Public Health Service, before being absorbed into the newly created Veterans' Bureau in 1921. The Veterans' Bureau was mired in scandal under the administration of Warren G. Harding; the appointment of General Franklin T. Hines played an instrumental role in restoring credibility to this agency. In an effort to bring about greater efficiency, President Herbert Hoover created the Veterans Administration and folded the Bureau of Pensions, the National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, and the Veterans' Bureau into this single agency. Hines continued in office under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, only retiring in
1945. Hines established a pattern that would be continued by other presidents and a number of retired generals, most notably General Omar Bradley, served as head of the VA.

World War I veterans believed that they had been unfairly denied a bonus, a cash payment for their service to compensate them for the low wages paid to those in uniform. Every president from Harding to Roosevelt opposed the payment of the bonus. In 1924, Congress agreed to pay a bonus to these veterans after intense lobbying from the Veterans of Foreign Wars and strong grassroots pressure. Under the Adjusted Service Certificate Law of 1924, the bonus would be paid in 1945. During the Great Depression, many veterans mired in poverty and unemployment sought an early payment of the bonus and marched on Washington, D.C. Styling themselves the Bonus Expeditionary Force, these veterans created encampments near the Capitol, hoping to pressure Congress to provide an early payment. Hoover ordered the U.S. Army, under General Douglas A. MacArthur, to evict the demonstrators from downtown Washington, D.C. However, the first Administrator of Veterans Affairs, Hines, rejected the payment of an early bonus. An early bonus would be distributed only after Congress overrode the veto of Roosevelt in 1936.

Even before World War II ended, there existed a strong sentiment within the Roosevelt administration and with the most politically influential veterans' organization, the American Legion, that the federal government must develop government programs to help the 15 million men and women serving in uniform reintegrate into society. The American Legion also sought to promote the interests of World War II veterans in order to stay relevant to this newest generation of veterans. The resulting G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944 is widely considered to be one of the most progressive pieces of legislation ever passed by Congress. In contrast to earlier wars, the G.I. Bill created an array of programs explicitly targeting able-bodied veterans. The VA struggled to administer the diverse range of programs mandated by the G.I. Bill, which included (a) educational allowances; (b) unemployment compensation; (c) home, farm, and business loan guarantees; and (d) job placement service for returning World War II veterans. For instance, veterans seeking disability status and payments often had to wait months, even years, for the VA to make a final decision. Veterans attending college often had to contend with late payment of living allowances. Under the leadership of Bradley a number of major administrative changes were undertaken, including efforts to expand the agency’s hospital system and affiliate it with medical schools to improve the quality of care.

Veterans’ organizations would play a crucial role in lobbying on behalf of the VA and came to form a potent political force in Washington. The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Disabled American Veterans attracted significant support from veterans of the two World Wars. The clout of the VA would be reflected in its effort to defeat attempts by President Jimmy Carter to end veterans' preferences for federal employment. In 1989, veterans successfully lobbied for the VA to be elevated to cabinet status, and President Ronald Reagan signed confirming legislation, even though he had come into office with a pledge to shrink the federal cabinet by eliminating the departments of Education and Energy. Veterans of Vietnam and later wars have joined veterans’ organizations in fewer numbers; as organizations like the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars shrink in size, the VA may struggle in Congress to receive the appropriations it needs to care for not only the needs of aged veterans of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam but also the needs of younger veterans from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Services

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Organizationally, the VA is divided into three subdepartments: (1) the Veterans Health Administration maintains the largest single medical system in the United States and rivals the national health service of many industrialized countries; (2) the Veterans Benefits Administration administers a range of non-medical benefits, including disability payments, educational assistance, and group life insurance; and (3) the National Cemetery Administration maintains a network of cemeteries for veterans and provides monetary grants for the burial of deceased veterans. VA services are generally available only to veterans who were honorably discharged and meet other qualifying criteria.

Since the beginning of the American Republic, there has been a national consensus that the wounded, the disabled, the widowed, and the orphaned should be cared for by the nation. The VA administers programs to provide financial support for disabled veterans and survivors’ benefits for widows and orphans. Although VA programs for the disabled enjoy broad ideological support, for decades the VA has come under fire for its overly bureaucratic processes in administering them. The question of what qualifies as a service-related disability has been a subject of dispute for years, with critics arguing that the VA, in dealing with medical issues associated with Agent Orange, Gulf War Syndrome, and Traumatic Brain Injury, has often taken too narrow a definition of what constitutes a war-related injury. Until the 2000s, veterans could not retain the services of an attorney to assist with filing a veterans claim, under Civil War legislation that limited attorney fees to $10. Veterans groups have played important roles in serving as ombudsmen for veterans filing claims with the federal government, and most organizations offer the services of service officers free of charge to veterans and their families.

Even with the expansion of the federal programs in the areas of education, health, and welfare, veterans programs still have a significant impact on American society. Educational benefits to veterans are the largest single source of financial aid to college students. With the rise of the all-volunteer army in the 1970s, the promise of financial support for college has been a major inducement for enlisting young men and women into the army. The post-9/11 G.I. Bill, authored by Senator James Webb of Virginia, provided increased benefits for veterans of the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq—the most generous educational benefits accorded to veterans since the original G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944.

The range of services offered to veterans are extensive and include (a) low-cost life insurance, (b) assistance in purchasing a first home, (c) provisions for unemployment insurance, and (d) medical care. Despite this array of services, the needs of a significant number of veterans have not been met in their efforts to successfully reintegrate back into American society. In the early years of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, neither the Defense Department nor the Veterans Administration effectively managed the transition of wounded warriors from the military system to the civilian one. Veterans of these recent conflicts experienced higher rates of unemployment and homelessness during the Great Recession of 2007. For those attending college, there is a significant attrition rate before completing their degrees.

No other major industrialized nation provides as wide-ranging a network of services exclusively reserved for veterans as the United States. Instead, most First World countries have opted to create expansive welfare states to care for all citizens, including veterans. The VA and the programs it administers stand as a unique testament to the determination of American society to care for the men and women who served in the armed forces.

See also Agent Orange; American Legion; Arlington National Cemetery; Benefits, Veteran; Cemeteries, Military; Gulf War Syndrome; Medical Disability, Veteran; Medicine, Veterans; Traumatic Brain Injury; TRICARE (Military Health Plan); Veterans of Foreign Wars; War Dead, Disposition of

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Further Readings


Yo Kotaki