

Literacy Sponsorship and The Post-9/11 GI Bill

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the Post-9/11 GI Bill (2008), despite its enormous scope, is failing those who need it to ascend in the economic order. The essay supports its position through a rhetorical analysis of several key texts connected to literacy relations between the US government and Post-9/11 veterans: a January 2001 press statement announcing the government's abandonment of higher education sponsorship; *America's Army*, a video game used to attract recruits; The American Council on Education's "Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services"; and the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Expanding Deborah Brandt's notion of "sponsorship" to include both purveyance (providing) and the government's right of purveyance, this essay explains how the Bill consolidates literacy, particularly through transferability, which allows experienced veterans (those serving or agreeing to serve for a decade) to transfer their education benefits to spouses or children. Initial data about GI Bill use indicate high veteran attendance at for-profit institutions with poor retention rates, veteran confusion in interpreting GI Bill benefits, and bureaucratic tangles resulting in benefit delays. The government did not begin tracking graduation rates of veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill until 2013, further evidence that military recruitment and political aggrandizement, rather than democratizing literacy, were the Bill's primary goals.

KEYWORDS

GI Bill, Post-9/11, sponsorship, purveyance, literacy, veterans

In 2011 the American Association of State Colleges and Universities named veterans' education the eighth most pressing issue affecting higher education (AAC&U), fueled by the anticipated influx of veterans entering college via the Post-9/11 GI Bill, officially known as the Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008. This Bill provides educational benefits to GIs and in some cases their spouses and dependents and is considered to be the most generous veteran education benefit package since World War II,¹ allowing for 36 months of full-time enrollment in post-secondary education (public or private) and, depending on a veteran's active duty status, a living stipend and book allowance (McBain). Within one year of the Bill's passage, 500,000 veterans had applied for education benefits certification, and over 300,000 had

enrolled in higher education institutions (Steele, Salcedo, and Coley). Congress revised the Bill in 2010, accelerating claims processing, extending benefits, and capping the amount offered for private school tuition at \$17,500 annually.² US Veterans Affairs (VA) anticipates that, by 2018, the program will have cost the government \$78.1 billion (US Government Accountability Office). The Bill would seem to be the inheritor of a legacy of opportunity, social access, and government largesse.

Read within the context of a knowledge economy, however, the benefits conferred by the Post-9/11 GI Bill interpellate the veteran as literacy consumer in an education marketplace designed to favor those who have already gained access. The promise of the Bill—the potential to provide higher education, skills, educational choice, and ultimately social mobility—is being deflected as too many veterans are unable to access and/or convert their awards into an education that allows them to make lasting positive changes in their lives. As war has become a matter of successful recruitment tactics and incentivizing, educational access represented by the Post-9/11 GI Bill has become the reward for risking health and life. For some, military service may be the only apparent route to social access and opportunity, and “educational body” acquires a literal significance. Military individuals, accustomed to never leaving their comrades behind and returning to a country dedicated, presumably, to “no child left behind” now face the risk of being closed out—in effect left behind—in a race to compete.

In this essay I examine several key texts connected to literacy relations between the government and Post-9/11 veterans: a press statement in January 2001 announcing the government’s abandonment of higher education sponsorship; *America’s Army*, a video game used to attract recruits; the Post-9/11 GI Bill; and The American Council on Education’s “Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services.” I provide a rhetorical analysis of these texts to establish the military’s initial lack of interest in soldier and veteran literacy and its subsequent return to literacy purveyance as a way to attract recruits with varying literacy needs—those seeking higher education, as well as those seeking to transfer literacy benefits to family members. Finally, I argue that the Bill is failing those who need it to ascend in the economic order and is instead functioning to consolidate literacy among those who have already accessed higher education. This kind of sponsorship, I argue, constitutes both the act of purveying and the government’s right of purveyance.

THE GI BILL AND A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The Post-9/11 GI Bill sits within a constellation of literacy relations between veterans and the government. “Literacy” involves a broader range of skills and contexts than it did seventy years ago, the result of changing technologies, changing social contexts, and changing ideas about meaning itself (Brandt, *American Lives*; George; Kress; Selfe³). Deborah Brandt explains that literacy has often been understood as a source of stability—a way of making sense of the world, of participating in it, and of being employable; however, literacy today is also “valuable—and volatile—property” (*American Lives* 3). Brandt situates literacy at the center of the knowledge economy, describing it as “one of the great engines of profit and competitive advantage in the twentieth century . . . a lubricant for consumer desire, a means for integrating corporate markets, a foundation for the deployment of weapons and other technology, a raw material in the mass production of information” (*American*

Lives 18). As Brandt notes, literacy is also a means of exacerbating social inequity, as the requirements for what constitutes “literacy” continue to escalate, and fewer people have access to the full gamut of literacy opportunities.

“Stuck in the Sand,” a blog by a Desert Storm veteran suffering from PTSD and struggling to finish college, describes the literacy imperatives produced by a knowledge economy:

It used to be that you could find a job to keep you fed, clothed, and housed without some sort of degree. A high school diploma was enough for some jobs. My Dad worked in a truck frame factory for most of his life, and retired with a decent pension and health insurance. He didn't go to college. He did, however, start working there in the 1960's. . . . The important part here is that walking away from a university, technical college, or trade school grants you a temporary reprieve, but doesn't solve the problem of school being hard to manage. You still need an education of some sort. (8 July 2011)

The anonymous writer (screen name: airmanopus), struggling not to “wash out” (drop out) of college, articulates the considerable gap of possibility between his father's experience and his own. Like Jack May in Deborah Brandt's study (*American Lives* 92-98), he must keep pace with an economy that demands increased literacy, or he will find himself “stuck”—slowed to a point that prohibits his survival. Moreover, the writer acknowledges that such survival is not simply a matter of gaining access; school is “hard to manage,” so access to formal education is only one component of what one needs to obtain food, clothing, and shelter. While his father survived in a nascent knowledge economy, the son is entering a different economic order in which the knowledge stakes are higher and more complex and in which the government is not doing enough to provide him with a path forward.

The US military has had a long and complex association with literacy, impacting its definition, measurement, and teaching through an ever-tightening bond with technology (Brandt, “Drafting” 495). By the end of the nineteenth century, advancements in manufacturing produced mass-market periodicals and books offering self-improvement, self-knowledge, and affordable, accessible leisure reading, which served as commodified replacements for a declining religious sensibility via a “therapeutic ethos” (Lears). At the same time, mandatory, tax-funded schooling and the Morrill Act's establishment of land grant universities (Thelin) positioned the government as a literacy provider. The government expanded this knowledge economy during World War II through the military's development of computer technologies (Drucker 25) and the GI Bill, which aimed at incentivizing veterans to attain higher education and enter the workforce as quickly as possible with advanced degrees. Peter Drucker contends that the GI Bill heralded a significant change in the state's role from “provider” to “*manager*”: the government did not run the colleges or control either veterans' choice of college or colleges' acceptance of veterans (122-23, emphasis added). This managerial role also meant that the Bill did not address barriers related to race (Bound and Turner; Onkst⁴) or gender (Daniel Clark; Fox-Genovese; Hartmann; Solomon⁵), and, as Keith Olson has concluded, despite its role in individual transformations,⁶ the Bill actually achieved very little overall educational reform (610). The Post-9/11 GI Bill appears to be similarly poised.

PRE-9/11 RECRUITING AND ITS ANTI-EDUCATION APPEAL

Understanding the context of the Post-9/11 GI Bill requires an understanding of the military-literacy climate immediately preceding it. Prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the desire for expedience played a role in establishing the military as a competitor against literacy. For a few months, the military appeared to abandon the literacy marketplace. During a January 2001 press conference, Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera announced that the Army had missed its recruiting goals three times in the previous six years, falling short “by tens of thousands of soldiers” (US Department of Defense), and that it would be abandoning any form of literacy appeal. Caldera explained: “We are not selling money for college. We are selling how the Army strengthens you as an individual.” The Department of Defense (DOD) realized this shift from literacy to self by hiring advertising agencies that targeted under-represented groups in higher education: Leo Burnett Worldwide and their partners, which Caldera announced as Cartel Creativo, “a Spanish language-oriented firm—Hispanic-owned firm,” and “IMAGES USA, an African-American-owned firm” (US Department of Defense). The DOD established a \$150 million annual advertising budget aimed at recruitment. Caldera explained that a new campaign would present the army as a “door-opening opportunity that will strengthen [recruits] mentally, morally, physically, by virtue of the training that [they] will get.” He noted that “Be all you can be,” the former slogan, was rejected for giving the impression that it was “telling” young people what to do. By contrast, the new campaign, “An Army of One,” had “the concept of teamwork ... that with training, with technology, with support, who I am is better than who I was.” The campaign included brief biographies of soldiers of all races and both genders, selected for their relatability (US Department of Defense).

With this campaign, the Army no longer sold the promise of higher education; it instead claimed a direct path to self-improvement predicated, in part, on technological adroitness. Caldera would go on to draw the lines of the marketplace more starkly by suggesting that

[t]he real competition for recruits is not the hot economy, it's higher education. Three-quarters of high school graduates are going to higher education. That's why we've done things like improve our in-service education programs through Army University Access Online, our Distance Education Program for soldiers, because we want to communicate a message that says, “You can learn while you serve.” (US Department of Defense)

The army was positioned to out-compete higher education by delivering a finished product to the marketplace more quickly: the self-satisfied individual who had experienced what Min-Zhan Lu refers to as a “standardized template of selfhood” that prevented him or her from registering the contradictions of his or her own education (“An Essay” 44). The Army strategized to edge out literacy competition (higher education) by offering a faster route to gratification. Nine months before al-Qaeda’s attacks on the US, Caldera established the Army and by extension the military as a competitor for literacy consumers.

The campaign’s reliance on immediacy (“who I am”) as opposed to emergence (“be all you can be”) played to the principles of fast capitalism. Caldera outlined the mindset of the army’s target

audience: “They want to know how does being in the Army benefit me today, how does it benefit me now, not how does it benefit my country or how will it benefit me when I'm 50 or 60 and looking back at the course of my life; how does it benefit me today” (qtd. in US Department of Defense). If literacy requires a cumulative process of skills acquisition, Caldera’s announcement was the ultimate anti-literacy appeal. In that press conference, Caldera simultaneously invoked the individual as commodity (raw material to be shaped into finished product) and consumer, poised to barter for the finished product of the self. The pitch emphasized immediate gratification rather than long-term investment or achievement. This campaign publicly established the military’s priorities far afield from the long-range literacy futures of its soldiers.

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The Army’s recruitment campaign appropriated and redirected recruits’ existing literacies. As part of its Army-branding efforts, the Leo Burnett agency created *America’s Army*,⁷ a video game that users could download for free in exchange for their email addresses. The game

was not released for download until a year after the September 11 attacks, when enrollments were still high, driven by renewed patriotism. Purporting to simulate army life, the game was designed to minimize graphic gore so that it would receive a “T” for teen rating, allowing it to reach both those old enough to enroll and their younger siblings. The very qualities that make literacy malleable and open to re-appropriation by individuals (as when literacy skills learned on the job are then used to further personal interests and aspirations) also make it available for institutions. This institutional diversion allowed the government to capitalize on individuals’ literacies and advance an ideology normalizing war.

America’s Army featured shooting simulations that provided authentic sound and practice in aiming, firing, and reloading, thus diverting gaming literacy to embrace a version of military life as fast-paced, exciting, and endlessly entertaining. The game joined a genre of training video games that, as Galloway notes, are “skill-builders in a utilitarian sense or simply instructive of a larger militaristic ideology.” Via this game, the government offered instruction, forwarded an ideology, and altered its sponsorship to accompany what Brandt might describe as a “transformation in literacy” (*American Lives* 85). The video game skills and motivation that recruits bring to the game are transformed into a literacy about warfare that constitutes war as a combination of shooting skill and adrenaline bursts without bodily or material sacrifice. This particular literacy teaches war as a text devoid of tedium, physical and psychological stress, and moral complexity.

Against and despite these recruitment efforts, quantity and/or quality enrollments⁸ in several branches of the armed services declined from 2005-2007 (Kapp). The self wasn’t selling, and the military needed to return to purveying literacy. In 2008, Congress passed the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which was described by the RAND Corporation as “a vital renewal of the nation’s commitment

to US service members” that would “help ease the transition from combat to civilian life” (Steele, Salcedo and Coley). Whereas the original GI Bill rewarded the military service of “citizen soldiers” (Mettler)—those who had been drafted—the Post-9/11 GI Bill was used as a recruitment tool in an all-volunteer army. A key component of this Bill was “transferability,” through which a service member with at least ten years of service (or six years served and a commitment for an additional four years) could pass his or her benefits to a spouse or child. Service members most likely seeking to transfer the benefit would be those who already had obtained the education and skills they sought. This particular benefit offered a consolidation of literacy within families—that is, it was directed at those who had already accessed higher education. Because it could be transferred, it was not necessarily “easing the transition” from combat to civilian life for the soldiers who had served. Moreover, it was not necessarily equipping soldiers with the literacy skills needed to succeed in a post-Fordist, fast capitalist economy in which successful “people possess amalgams of flexible skills that can be transported and transformed to changing contexts as need arises” (Gee 61). The terms “post-Fordist” and “fast capitalist” both warrant some unpacking, which I do below, within the context of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

POST-9/11 VETERANS AND POST-CAPITALISM

While World War II veterans were the forebears of the relationship among technology, knowledge and marketplace education, Post- 9/11 veterans are its direct descendants. In understanding the economic context facing veterans like the “Stuck in the Sand” blogger, “post-Fordist” and “fast capitalist” are useful concepts to contrast against the economic order inhabited by the original GI Bill veterans, but they have limitations. As Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu, drawing on the work of Ulrich Beck, have argued, “post-Fordist” connotes a simple trajectory in which the Fordist assembly-line, service-oriented systems are relics of the past (117), replaced by the “flattened hierarchy” in which multi-skills have supplanted compartmentalized work-skills (New London Group 11). Lu and Horner caution that “we need to be vigilant toward the tendency to project any neat, linear, monolithic progression of a clear, complete sharp break from an older to a newer economy, culture, and attendant sensibilities” (124). Despite this warning, it is nonetheless clear that Internet technologies, for example, have changed the nature of literacy. Today’s veterans compose web pages, blogs, and Twitter feeds. Compared to veterans of other wars, Post-9/11 veterans have greater access to means of telling their own stories. While television brought the Vietnam War via journalists into civilians’ living rooms, the Internet can bring Iraq and Afghanistan veterans into their lives. A search of “veteran” in the blog search engine Blogsearchengine.org yields 34,600,000 results of blogs by or about veterans addressing such topics as education, military life, readjustment, homelessness, employment, physical health, and mental health.⁹ The presence of these digital compositions indicate both that information about veterans’ lives is ubiquitous and that the veterans who write them participate in self-sponsored writing independent of institutional involvement as they engage what Brandt terms the “real” economy of writing, which is “socially useful to them and others, on its own terms” (“Afterword” 775).

But the liberating potential of social media and other technological affordances has not

necessarily been realized in today's economy. Individual workplaces and even individual positions contain a mix of Fordist and post-Fordist elements. Locked inside the post-Fordist economy, human workers continue to staff assembly production lines and service-centered jobs, such as those in the fast food and cleaning industries. Even as they take breaks to read cell phone messages or return home to update their blogs, today's veterans may very well find themselves employed in assembly line jobs with no health care and little promise of advancement. Although Post-9/11 veterans work, learn, and seek education in a changed landscape, many of the constraints surrounding social mobility remain.

Like "post-Fordist," the phrase "fast capitalism" presents its own occlusions, suggesting an economic order in which all interactions occur at lightning speeds. However, while certain elements of life have accelerated, conditions in some contexts are painfully slow. Since its passage, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has been plagued with a backlog of claims processing. In what one analyst described as a "surreal" event, several information technologies within the V.A. did not interface with each other, forcing claims to be filed manually and slowing their processing so that by September 2009 the V.A. had processed only 188,000 of the 260,000 claims it had received (McBain). Claims backlogs mean delays in veterans' ability to purchase books or pay rent or tuition; in short, delayed claims can mean non-attendance, a slowing or even complete stoppage of the education the Bill was intended to provide. But the demand for speed on the part of workers—if they are to secure or maintain their employment—remains. The speed element of the current economic order is a conflicted one—"fast" at some moments but slow at others.

LITERACY SPONSORSHIP VERSUS LITERACY PURVEYANCE

On the face of it, the Post-9/11 GI Bill appears to be another instance of what Deborah Brandt refers to as "literacy sponsorship" (*American Lives* 19; "Sponsors of Literacy"), a process through which an agent can both enable and suppress access to literacy. As Brandt uses the term, "sponsorship"

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allows an agent to cultivate a literacy skill-set for its own purposes, as when the US military needed literate armed forces to understand and operate increasingly complex war technologies. "Sponsorship" and its attendant concepts are particularly useful for examining many of the literacy relations between the government and veterans. The literacy relationship between the government and veterans via the Post-9/11 GI Bill, however, is less direct than it is in most instances of sponsorship, in

which an agent cultivates literacies that are used in furthering its aims. By contrast, the Bill does not foster literacy skills that are necessarily used for military service. Military service provides value that is exchanged for a promise of literacy via the Bill. The Bill signifies literacy deferred, exchanged, and

in some cases transferred, as when the Bill is used to attract highly literate individuals who transfer Bill benefits to family members. Military service in and of itself does not produce the literacies promised by the Bill. To account for these differences in literacy sponsorship, and the exchange-value of the Bill, I adapt Brandt's notion of literacy "sponsorship" to include a sub-category that I refer to as literacy "purveyance," drawing upon both the contemporary usage of "purvey" as in *to provide*, and the historical use of "purveyance" to indicate the act of procuring goods for a sovereign at a price established by that sovereign. In the thirteenth century, purveyance was a royal right allowing the Crown to set the price of goods that it purchased so that it could cheaply clothe and feed armies, in a sense forcing the farmers and peasants selling those goods to subsidize military aggression. The act of purveying and the right of purveyance—related but different—help to frame the GI Bill's use in attracting veterans with differing literacy interests. Some use the Bill to pursue vocational training, some use it to pursue advanced degrees, and others transfer the benefits to a spouse or child.

MILITARY SERVICE AS LITERACY PURVEYANCE

To purvey a good or service is to provide it for a price. A grocer, for example, purveys foodstuffs for money. Similarly, the government purveys literacy through the GI Bill for the price of military service. Unlike the on-the-job literacy training afforded by the early print shops Brandt examined, contemporary military service does not produce the literacies enabled by the GI Bill. Instead, via the Bill, military personnel trade their services for the promise of a future, undetermined form of literacy. Recruits provide labor and risk their lives in exchange for the promise of a higher education or vocational training credential that they can access after they have completed their service. In this instance, the government has provided (purveyed) literacy for the price of service. But in other instances, the government is also purchasing literacy at a price it determines. Chapter 33, the 2010 amendment to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, allowed those who had served six years and agreed to serve for an additional four years to transfer their benefits to spouses or dependent children. This version of the Bill was aimed at retaining experienced military personnel. At one point, Congress debated offering this transferability benefit only to those in "difficult to fill" military specialties (Carden), an idea that ultimately was rejected but that nonetheless speaks to the anti-democratic impulses at work in the Capitol. The Bill's transferability acts as a literacy purveyance mechanism in which the government, as sovereign, acquires the literate skills of veterans for its war efforts, and the transferability of GI Bill benefits are the price at which such skills are purchased.

The struggle over who has access to GI Bill literacy is most evident in Kafkaesque¹⁰ contestations over eligibility, as the Bill has undergone successive modifications to determine who qualifies for financial support (which veterans and/or which of their relatives), the amount for which they qualify, what the support may be used for, and the length of time for which support can be requested. The informal discourse said to characterize the fast capitalist workplace has not been employed in the legal language of the Bill, and thirty-eight percent of surveyed veterans reported that they struggle to understand their benefits options (Steele, Salcedo, and Coley). They lack the literacy needed to fully access the subsidy available to them. Moreover, the official systems put in place to help veterans

understand their benefits in some instances, can do little to translate. As one analyst put it, “the VA does not always speak the same language as the higher education community” (McBain).

Under the initial Post-9/11 GI Bill, for example, colleges’ tuition and fees were separated, though colleges themselves typically bill tuition and fees together. Because the Bill allowed veterans to receive the highest tuition and fees within their states of residence, a veteran’s tuition rate might be based on tuition at one institution and his or her fee rate might be based on another. One analyst cited the largest discrepancy as occurring in Utah, where in the 2009-2010 academic year \$208.86 was the maximum tuition charge per credit hour, but \$63,576.50 was the maximum fee payment rate. Moreover, “in states such as California ‘fees’ is commonly and legislatively used to mean ‘tuition’” (McBain). This disconnect means that the fundamental question of “what does a college education cost?” is unclear, both to veterans and to those who would assist them.

A similar disconnect occurred when the Bill was revised to allow states more autonomy in interpretation. The initial version of the Bill allowed veterans to receive free tuition at any public college or university. Under Chapter 33 (passed in 2010 and implemented in 2011), eligibility became more complicated, with veterans able to receive public assistance in their states of residence. “Residence” became a loaded term, as each state was allowed to determine the meaning of “residency,” and out-of-state veterans and public universities were expected to pay the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition. Only some states provided subsidies to cover this gap, and veterans like Hayleigh Perez found themselves caught in the legislative change, as well as the conflicted meaning of “resident,” as the federal government held fast to its role as literacy manager.

Perez enlisted in 2005, under the first iteration of the Bill, which allowed veterans to go to any public university in the US. She served for four years, was discharged in 2009, and in 2011 applied to The University of North Carolina at Pembroke and Fayetteville State in North Carolina. By that time, the GI Bill benefit laws had changed, and veterans were eligible to receive only in-state resident tuition and fees. Fayetteville declared Perez to be an in-state resident, but Pembroke decided she was an out-of-state resident. Perez owned a house, had paid property tax, and had been registered to vote in North Carolina since 2008, but when her husband, also in the military, was transferred to Texas, she had moved with him. The state of North Carolina determined that Perez was not an in-state resident because she had been living in Texas for two years. Perez, through the Student Veteran Advocacy Group, sued the UNC Board of Governors (Breed). Military personnel are frequently reassigned and transferred from state to state, and the definitions of “resident” vary from state to state. “Residency” is a murky area, but it is tied to thousands of education dollars for veterans seeking to attend public institutions. Conflict and confusion over residency within the states, themselves, abounds. For Perez and others in similar situations, the government’s sponsorship post-service necessitates an understanding of legislative discourse at both the federal and state levels. The sponsorship here is contingent and ever-changing as the Bill undergoes further modification.

The government’s decision to appeal to recruits by emphasizing a sponsorship of educational choice meant that veterans had to possess consumer literacy in educational resources. In addition to the higher education choices of the past, veterans now may also choose among online degrees, certificates, and an array of for-profit institutions. The wide range of options reinforces the Janus

face of the Bill: on one side, the freedom and flexibility of options; on the other, the risk of choosing poorly. For the civilian middle-class student, choice often involves a squadron of formal and informal advisers including guidance counselors, teachers, friends, siblings, and parents, as well as a “family economy” of values and past experiences (Brandt, *American Lives* 87). For veterans, choice involves geographic proximity, veterans’ familiarity with the college, and the degree to which the college is perceived as being “veteran friendly.” In response, the government positions itself as a consumer education coach, announcing on its GI Bill Facebook page that “[t]he Federal Trade Commission has got your back! Check out their helpful new guide that provides 8 questions to ask when choosing a college” (The Post-9/11 GI Bill, 5 December 2013). With this post, the government sanctions the education marketplace as a battlefield. College offerings now constitute an arena in which veterans must be wary consumers, in need of someone to have their backs, while the government protects them through coaching.

These lessons in literacy consumerism seem not to have taken hold, however, as fast literacy continues to dominate veterans’ literacy experiences through the Bill. The GI Bill’s Facebook page explains: “The GI Bill can provide you with up to 36 months of benefits. It’s enough time to get a degree but you do have to strategize to make the most of your benefits. . . . Make sure you get that diploma or certificate and have something to show for the time you put in” (The Post 9/11 GI Bill, 16 July 2013). For-profit institutions use various marketing strategies to connect with veterans through appeals to immediacy: a greater proportion of veterans attend for-profit institutions, which include online colleges such as DeVry and the University of Phoenix, than their civilian peers. Nineteen percent of students using GI Bill benefits are enrolled in for-profit institutions, as opposed to six percent of all college students (Field). Field notes that “[t]he reverse holds true for private, nonprofit colleges, with 20 percent of all students enrolling at those institutions compared with just 6 percent of GI-Bill students attending one of the top-500 colleges.” Under the initial iteration of the Post-9/11 Bill, provided benefits were only sufficient to cover community college education costs in full; by comparison, benefits would cover seventy-three percent at four-year public institutions and thirty-one percent at four-year private colleges (Field). The 2011 versions of the Bill were designed to close some of that gap, but the effects of those efforts remain to be seen. Of the 500 institutions enrolling the greatest number of veterans, only three are private nonprofits, and none belong to the Association of American Universities, an organization of leading research universities in the US and Canada (Field). Furthermore, as Wick Sloane observes, there are relatively few veterans enrolled in the nation’s most elite colleges. College choice for veterans, as for an increasing number of students, enacts Brandt’s argument that “access [to literacy has become] contingent and pragmatic” (“Drafting” 497). My point here is not that private four-year institutions necessarily offer a “better” education but that the Bill does not confer the seemingly broad access it would appear to; the government, again, is not actually providing education but is instead purveying it.

While defining what a “better” education might consist of is beyond the scope of this essay, it is nevertheless reasonable to expect that colleges’ completion rates must figure into that understanding, particularly when students are taking out loans to attend. Unfortunately, colleges with poorer graduation rates are garnering a larger share of GI Bill funding. According to the National Center for

Education Statistics, in 2008 for-profit colleges graduated “22 percent of their first-time, fulltime students seeking bachelor’s degrees, compared with 55 percent at public institutions and 65 percent at nonprofit private universities” (Golden). Furthermore, “only 36 percent of their students repay the loans, compared with at least 54 percent at traditional colleges, according to an analysis of government data by the Institute for College Access & Success, a nonprofit group in Oakland, California” (Golden). The government has attempted to reduce the high default rate and poor performances of these institutions, and at least one for-profit college in Westwood, Texas, is under investigation. Clearly, though, the economy of literacy is allowing some to profit substantially. At the same time, veterans pursuing their education at for-profit institutions risk becoming casualties when the government, as Brandt puts it, attempts “to speed up the race, not equalize the pace” (“Drafting” 500), creating a fast literacy that does little to help those trapped in its spokes. In the post World War II era, increased educational access created a paradoxical bulwark against complaint: by producing a shortage of space, the large numbers of students applying to college made veterans and non-veterans alike so grateful to have won coveted places that they did not protest. Faculty, for the most part, shouldered increased loads as their own patriotic contribution. The expansion of the education marketplace, including the proliferation of online opportunities, has rendered much of this paradox invisible. While some online education is delivered responsibly and expands educational opportunities for thousands of students, some of it (as with traditional offerings) is far less responsible. Additionally, the availability of education that is just a click away augments the ease and urgency of choosing, and increased pressure to enter the workforce as quickly as possible—a factor of veterans’ age and social class—may mean that expedience plays a significant role in choice.

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The government has addressed the demand for fast literacy by encouraging veterans to seek education credit for their military experiences, again purveying literacy. The American Council on Education publishes the “Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services,” which provides credit guidelines for military occupations and courses. The Guide, which has been published in one form or another since 1946, contains detailed descriptions of the duties and skills required of each occupation, along with recommendations for the amount of academic credit colleges should award. Veterans are encouraged to consult the guide, look up their military work and courses, and then seek credit for them at the colleges they attend. The description for aviation machinists’ mates, for example, notes that they “maintain aircraft engines and their related systems” and then specifies skills ranging from the ability to inspect, repair and replace engines, as well as the ability to use Microsoft Suite software. Depending on the rank achieved within this enlisted occupation, the Guide recommends that colleges award 12-17 semester hours in a lower-division/associate degree category and confer additional credits in maintenance management, human resources management,

computer applications, and management in the upper-division baccalaureate degree category (American Council on Education). In these instances, the military has purveyed literacy, providing it to soldiers; the Bill then transforms that literacy into college credit via the Guide. The kind and function of literacy veterans receive is prescribed by their military experience, emphasizing service, adherence to authority, and skills tied to the military technology of the moment. Officers' work generally qualifies for more advanced and/or more kinds of credit than the occupations and rank of enlisted personnel, so the awarding of credits signifying literacy consolidates advantage around those who already have it.

The kinds of military experiences included in the Guide have increased over the years, with the military itself racing to keep pace with its own rapidly changing literacy needs, as the Guide notes:

The 1974 edition of the Guide marked the beginning of the publication of biennial editions of the Guide through computerized composition, continual staff review of courses, and the computerized storage of course information for a more rapid updating of credit recommendations. In 1994, the computerized Guide system came in house, with all data managed by the Military Evaluations Program staff. (American Council on Education)

The function of college is reduced to that of credentialing agent, and the GI Bill simply fuels the act of re-affirming the worth of military experience. Literacy itself becomes a casualty in the economic order of fast literacy, as the rush to get in and get out—underscored by the Bill's coverage of 36 months of higher education—favors those who enter college with the skills needed to succeed. For those who need more time to adapt and or to acquire the skills they need, the pressure to finish quickly disadvantages them.

Verifiable empirical evidence about the Post-9/11 GI Bill and veteran social mobility through higher education does not yet exist. Veteran college completion rates would seem a likely place to start, but initial data were questionable. Although an eighty-eight percent college dropout rate among veterans was reported by MSNBC and widely circulated by other news organizations such as *The Huffington Post* (Wood), the report itself was challenged by veterans' groups and news organizations. The original report relied on a report from the University of Colorado Denver, which cited a March 22, 2012 study by the Colorado Workforce Development Council, but the Council has removed the report; the eighty-eight percent statistic does not appear to have any other source (Tarantino). In April 2013, the VA, Department of Defense, and the Department of Education began tracking graduation rates of veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill. It is worth noting that in an age of surveillance and information this evidence of literacy sponsorship was not gathered sooner. The government has not had an interest in this information quite possibly because the Bill has done its one and only job: bringing people to military service, at the price established by the government.

CONCLUSION

While numerous veterans have testified to the success brought to them via the GI Bill, their achievements should not obviate the responsibility of the government to educate its citizens equitably. Brandt poses exactly what is at stake: "the new economic order presents American literacy educators

with a much bigger agenda than increasing the productivity of future workers. From all angles—policy to pedagogy—literacy needs to be addressed in a civil rights context” (*American Lives* 206). She encourages everyone to ask not what responsibility educators and students have to the economy, but what responsibility the economy has to educators. Veterans and those who support them are attempting to create their own multiliterate spaces to thwart the effects of fast literacy and to bring a pluralistic understanding of war to civilian life. Whether these nodes and networks of knowledge and representation ultimately succeed at providing educational access remains to be seen. It would be a cruel irony if those who fought under the banner of democracy were to find themselves denied equitable access to the literacy on which such democracy depends.

NOTES

¹The GI Bill was revised in 1984 by Gillespie V. Montgomery, a former Mississippi congressman; in 1987 it received a permanent designation and was renamed the Montgomery GI Bill (Greenberg).

²The Post-9/11 GI Bill contains a myriad of caveats and complexities regarding the kinds and lengths of military service; program eligibility; and stipends for books, living expenses, and certification-related expenses. For a comprehensive explanation of these details, consult the US Department of Government Affairs "Post-9/11 GI Bill" (http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/post911_gibill.asp). The 2010 revision of the Bill is often referred to as "Chapter 33." In 2014, the House of Representatives passed the "GI Bill Tuition Fairness Act of 2014," which requires all states receiving GI Bill education payments to charge all veterans in-state tuition rates. This Bill is currently in the Senate" (United States). For the purposes of this essay, I will use "Post- 9/11 GI Bill" to designate all versions of the Bill, unless the distinction is relevant to a particular argument.

³The literature on literacy and technology spans decades. In addition to the authors listed, see *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*, edited by Julie Coiro, Michele Knobel, Colin Lankshear, and Donald J. Leu. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008.

⁴Across the country, black veterans were still barred from attending many colleges; it was not until the Brown versus the Topeka Board of Education decision of 1954 that black veterans could attend colleges that had been accepting other GIs under the Bill since its inception.

⁵Daniel Clark explains that, despite their eligibility, women attended college in fewer numbers during the height of the GI Bill. Although women veterans were entitled to the same benefits as men, men were given acceptance over women at some colleges as seats became increasingly scarce (186). For further discussion of the GI Bill's impact on women, see Fox-Genovese, "Mixed Messages: Women and the Impact of World War II"; Solomon, *In The Company of Educated Women: A History of Women in Higher Education in America*; and Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940's*.

⁶For accounts of individual success with the GI Bill, see Mettler, who offers numerous rich narratives connecting the GI Bill to the formation of "citizen soldiers."

⁷Since its launch, *America's Army* has been downloaded more than 40 million times, setting five records in *Guinness World Records: Gamer's Edition 2009*.

⁸"Quality" pertains to individuals without prior military service and is based on high school graduation and scores on the AFQT, Armed Forces Qualifications Test.

⁹It is difficult to obtain an exact count of only those blogs written by veterans about their war and post-war experiences; the figure I offer includes blogs describing veterans' benefits that are not necessarily composed by veterans.

¹⁰My thanks to the reviewers for suggesting this adjective.

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