In commenting on Operation Desert Storm of 1990–91, comedian Bill Hicks once quipped that he “was in the unenviable position of being for the war, but against the troops,” lampooning the overwhelming praise expressed by both advocates and critics of war for the plight of America’s fighting forces. For many, it has become an article of faith that Americans have always regarded those who serve in the nation’s military as being due a unique status and are due special honors and benefits to its veterans. Olivier Burtin’s A Nation of Veterans: War, Citizenship, and the Welfare State punctures this narrative to show that veterans’ privileged position in American life has not always been guaranteed. In fact, he argues that a significant part of veterans’ ability to receive special benefits in the twentieth century was due to the concerted effort of veterans’ groups to ensure that the country’s former service personnel could look forward to government benefits provided by a grateful nation. Even the so-called “Greatest Generation” of World War II veterans had to convince their fellow citizens of the need to treat veterans as a special group who required their own benefits provided by the state. The efforts of veterans organizations on behalf of service personnel were contested by politicians and others who sought to prevent those who served in the military from being designated as a class apart from civilians. A Nation of Veterans ably demonstrates that ideas of what America owes its veterans for their service have changed over time and have been part of larger political debates about citizenship, patriotism, and social policy.

Burtin notes that the central question of the book is “how, in the middle decades of the twentieth century, did U.S. veterans manage to build the world’s most generous separate welfare state despite relentless criticism across the political spectrum?” (4). The answer for him is what he terms “the veterans’ movement” (5), a social movement organized primarily by “The Big Three” veterans’ organizations: the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and, most notably, the American Legion. Understanding that social movements have often been defined by scholars as having been led by radicals and political outsiders, Burtin seeks to utilize the social movement framework to show that veterans’ political mobilization to secure a generous “veterans’ welfare state” was not simply the work of political lobbying at the highest levels of government. Through the creation of networks of local groups, veterans’ organizations secured their influence “from their ability to reach deep into local communities and to use their grassroots infrastructure to translate the support of ordinary citizens into political action” (6). This social movement,
then, had a tremendous political impact, as American veterans received generous benefits following World War II that outstripped those provided by the country’s wartime allies.

*A Nation of Veterans* also investigates the ideas that veterans’ groups utilized and curated to provide ammunition for their political arguments in favor of the veterans’ welfare state. In particular, Burtin explores the notion of “martial citizenship,” which underpinned arguments for both the special status of America’s former service personnel and also the obligations that the state had to veterans. Benefits were portrayed by veterans’ organizations as “a sacred and inviolable debt, the result of a moral contract between the state and those who served under its banners” (6). Burtin is quick to add that martial citizenship as constructed by the veterans’ social movement had its limits. Women, racial minorities, and gays and lesbians were not included in the veterans’ movement or in discussions of veterans’ benefits. The white, heterosexual male made up the overwhelming majority of veterans, but veterans’ groups also were complicit in the racism and sexism of the time by excluding true participation by marginalized former service personnel.

In the first part of his book, Burtin outlines how notions of martial citizenship and the veterans’ movement developed from the interwar years through World War II. He traces how veterans’ organizations grew in membership, as well as influence. Even during the economic turmoil of the Great Depression, The Big Three veterans’ groups were responsible for convincing Americans that the government needed to provide special assistance to former servicemen. Taking a non-partisan, grassroots approach to political organizing, The Big Three struggled with Progressive-Era politicians and later, New Deal officials who wanted to extend aid to veterans not as a special class, but as another category of worker or citizen. Veteran leaders knew that using the rhetoric of martial citizenship to argue for benefits apart from other Americans was crucial to securing the help that their membership deserved and actively recruited recent veterans of World War II to join the veterans’ movement. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal allies sought to use demobilization as a moment to propose widespread social programs that would treat the needs of veterans and civilians equally. The Legion and VFW utilized their considerable skill and resources to bring the administration to heel and eventually guided the creation of the G.I. Bill, one of the most important pieces of social legislation in the country's history. Burtin writes, “As a measure for veterans only, the G.I. Bill reinforced the separation of their programs from those for civilians” (65). With its passage, the G.I. Bill codified the importance of martial citizenship legislatively and demonstrated how powerful the veterans’ movement had become.

Even with this major legislative victory, the veterans’ movement was not static in its ideas. When the postwar housing crunch directly affected returning veterans, the government created legislation to create more public housing to ease the crisis. Initially, the American Legion, led by politically conservative World War I veterans who supported business interests, spoke against the efforts of Truman administration and Congressional liberals on public housing. Virtually alone among veterans’ organizations in opposing federal action, the conservative Legion leadership was moved to support public housing by white veterans of World War II who the group was actively courting for membership. Burtin views this as an important moment when veterans from two wars came together to lead the organization into the fifties. This unity was necessary to beat back a Republican-led committee to scale back government expansion, led by former president Herbert Hoover. The Hoover Commission, as it was named, created reports and targeted the veterans’ welfare state as a prime example of government overreach. Suggestions for streamlining the Veterans Administration, removing veteran preferences in government hiring, and restructuring veterans’ life insurance all received public support and were viewed as a threat by veterans’ groups. The Big Three employed all of their lobbying might to defeat the Hoover Commission’s proposals that stated plainly “that it is no longer feasible, and practical, to

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4 Keith W. Olson, *The GI Bill, The Veterans, and the Colleges* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press: 1974);

set [this group] apart from the rest of the population” (115). This challenge to the primacy of martial citizenship as justification for the veterans’ welfare state was brought down by aggressive lobbying, as well as the unity of veterans from the World Wars in protecting veterans’ importance in social policy.

Part II of A Nation of Veterans traces the decline of the centrality of the veterans’ movement to American politics in the fifties and early sixties, even as the veterans’ welfare state became an entrenched part of the federal budget. A major reason for this decline in political relevance was the association of veterans’ groups with conservative anti-Communism. Focusing on the leadership of the American Legion, Burin finds that this vocal minority pushed anti-Communism at the national level while many rank-and-file members were much more moderate on the issue. He argues that the Legion was the “‘civic heart’ of the Second Red Scare” and instrumental in the rise of conservative anticommunism, yet many local chapters wanted to focus on more positive messages about American beneficence rather than hammering the anticommunist message (153). Rather than being an organizing force, the Legionnaires were conflicted about best to fight Communism. Complicating matters further, right-wing activists, motivated by paranoia, supported conspiracy theories about a world government, led by the United Nations, that sought to control the United States. Pushing the Legion to condemn the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a world government advocacy group, the hardliners outvoted moderates, and the Legion issued an official condemnation of UNESCO.6 The response from the general public was overwhelmingly negative, and “having lost its bipartisan and respectable status, the group was no longer such an attractive partner for the state” (155). The veterans’ movement, which had been so successful at lobbying lawmakers on the part of its members, was being limited by its conservatism into a more limited role in American politics.

The lessening of the power of veterans’ groups continued with the impact of the Korean War, as the veterans’ movement lobbied for a G.I. Bill for the war’s veterans. Weakened by fraud scandals linked to the previous G.I. Bill, veterans’ organizations had a harder time defending themselves from critics of veterans’ special benefits.7 In addition, the politically conservative Big Three increasingly attacked the Truman administration, especially after President Harry Truman’s dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur. This partisan activity weakened the veterans’ movement’s ability to lobby lawmakers, and it was not able to secure equal benefits for Korean War veterans. Also, arguments appealing to martial citizenship were less effective as Congress was made up of increasing numbers of skeptical veterans who could defend themselves from attacks on their commitment to America’s fighting forces. A Nation of Veterans concludes with a discussion of veterans’ group continued lobbying into the sixties, ensuring continued benefits for veterans in the face of attacks from the Eisenhower administration and the American Medical Association. Yet, veterans’ groups split over a Legion-proposed pension plan with World War I vets in mind (which was subsequently defeated). Congress eventually passed a compromise bill in 1959 with limits tied to income. Though the importance of the veterans’ group to national politics was waning, the bill was a victory in the sense that it was passed in the face of widespread opposition to martial citizenship demonstrating how fixed the relationship between the government and veterans’ welfare state had become.

Burin’s analysis of veterans’ issues and the creation of the veterans’ welfare state provides a much-needed examination of the factors that are often taken for granted when discussing veterans’ policies. The idea that lawmakers uncritically bestowed benefits to the nation’s heroes ignores the complexity of the veterans’ return in all of America’s wars and how notions of martial citizenship were contested by a variety of political actors. However, this theme could be explored more by a closer examination of veterans who acted outside the veterans’ movement’s parameters. Although A Nation of Veterans consistently provides perspectives on veterans who did not fit the white, heterosexual male model pushed by the veterans’ movement, the inclusion

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of one case study involving a marginalized group and their struggle for benefits may have proved useful to contrast the overall narrative. Also, Burtin uses the term veterans’ movement to encompass different groups’ participation, but the book often focuses heavily on the American Legion in favor of groups like the VFW. In particular, the unique issues and rhetoric of the Disabled American Veterans could have been placed more prominently in the veterans’ movement argument. That being said, *A Nation of Veterans* covers an enormous amount of historical territory and ambitiously reframes veteran politics and their importance in the postwar era.

*A Nation of Veterans* is an important contribution not just to policy history or the history of social movements but also to the understanding of the importance and conflicted nature of America’s relationship with its veterans. Burtin concludes the book with a discussion of further generational conflicts in the veterans’ community with returning soldiers from Vietnam and also how the notion of martial citizenship has continued to have an impact in political life. On one hand, veterans are heralded as heroes, but Burtin points out that recent presidential elections have proven that veteran status has not led to victory for veteran candidates. He writes that, “respect for the military in the United States [is] both broad and shallow” (218). One can simply remember President Donald Trump’s attacks on Senator John McCain’s history of being a prisoner of war in Vietnam (“I like people who weren’t captured.”) to understand this. In this way, through his work, Burtin has shown that easy understandings of military service, patriotism, and American politics are not sufficient to truly explain the importance of the veteran to American politics and culture.

Robert Francis Saxe is Associate Professor of History at Rhodes College. He is the author of *Settling Down*: *World War II Veterans’ Challenge to the Postwar Consensus* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007). He is currently writing a book on Norman Mailer’s political world.

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