The Aftermath of World War II  
Section 4-Americans Adjust to Postwar Life

After World War I, the mass cancellation of government contracts had thrown many Americans out of work. Demobilization of millions of soldiers made the unemployment problem even worse. After World War II, American leaders took steps to try to ease the difficult transition from a wartime economy to a peacetime economy.

**From Soldiers to Civilians: The Impact of the GI Bill** In September 1942, three years before the end of the war, President Roosevelt was already planning for the peace. In a radio broadcast heard by American soldiers abroad, Roosevelt spoke of the economic crisis that followed World War I. He promised, “When you come home, we do not propose to involve you, as last time, in a domestic economic mess of our own making.”

One year later, Roosevelt asked Congress to pass the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, better known as the GI Bill of Rights [GI Bill of Rights: a law passed in 1994 to provide federal funds to help returning GIs make the transition to civilian life]. This bill provided federal funds to help returning GIs make the transition to civilian life. Those funds would make it easier for many war veterans to continue their education and to buy a home. Congress passed the GI Bill by unanimous vote in the spring of 1944.

Five months after the war ended, the armed services had released 8.5 million men and women from duty. Several million more came home in the next year. Many veterans took advantage of the GI Bill to enhance their prospects in civilian life. With the bill’s help, some 2.3 million veterans attended college and 7 million received vocational or on-the-job training. The middle class expanded, as veterans became doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals.

Veterans also took advantage of low-interest federal loans to buy homes. By 1955, the government had granted 4.3 million home loans through the GI Bill. These loans enabled millions of Americans to move out of central cities into outlying neighborhoods. Instead of being renters, they became homeowners.

The GI Bill had other benefits. Returning veterans could receive unemployment compensation. They could also take out cheap federal loans to start farms or businesses. The effect of this legislation was not limited to the individuals it helped. As one veteran pointed out, the GI Bill also helped transform society:
“I’m not sure whether I could ever have gone to college without the GI Bill . . . It set a whole new standard of improved education for a large number of people, a whole new standard of improved housing . . . I think the GI Bill gave the whole country an upward boost economically and in every other way.”

—Ex-GI Don Condren, quoted in an interview in The Homefront: America During World War II, 1984

**African Americans Seek New Opportunities** The GI Bill raised the expectations of all GIs, including African Americans. Shortly after the bill became law, the National Urban League predicted that returning black GIs would want “jobs, opportunities to complete their education, a chance to go into business, and the privilege of sharing completely in the future development and prosperity of the nation.”

Not all African American GIs were able to make full use of the GI Bill. Discrimination often prevented African American veterans from buying a home, even if they had the money. Segregation kept them out of many colleges. Still, in the years following the war, many African Americans did become homeowners through the GI Bill. Thousands more received a college education, mainly by attending historically black institutions.

The end of the war did not stop the migration of African Americans from the South. Returning veterans seemed especially eager to leave. By 1947, some 75,000 black GIs had left the South in search of jobs and a better life. A total of 2.5 million black Americans migrated from the region in the 1940s and 1950s.

In general, the lives of African Americans did improve in the postwar years. From 1947 to 1952, the median income [median income: average pay], or average pay, for nonwhite families rose 45 percent. Politically, though, the picture was more mixed. In national elections, most African Americans backed Truman, who in turn supported progress in the area of civil rights. In the South, however, discriminatory state regulations kept many African Americans from voting.
The Demobilization of Women: From Factory Jobs to the Service Sector

By 1947, nearly all war industries had been shut down. The women who had stepped forward to work in shipyards, aircraft plants, and other war-related jobs had received their last paychecks. At the same time, millions of GIs had returned from the war. This set up a potential conflict, pitting men and women against each other for the same jobs.

In the postwar period, most female workers felt a duty to step aside for men. They had been told throughout the war that their jobs were temporary. Yet many women enjoyed the independence and self-esteem that came from holding a paying job, and they wanted to keep working. “They are the women,” a reporter commented, “who feel that if they are good enough to serve in a crisis they deserve a chance to earn a living in peacetime.”

They did earn a living, but not in heavy industry. Those jobs went mainly to men. Instead, many women moved into jobs in the booming service sector, the segment of the economy that does not produce goods. They became teachers, nurses, librarians, bank tellers, and social workers. At these jobs, they earned, on average, just over half of what men earned. For the most part, though, women accepted their new roles and economic status.

Notebook Activity

1. Describe the GI Bill of Rights and the ways it affected the lives of World War II veterans.

2. Note at least two important actions taken by African Americans and women in the years after World War II.
3. Evaluate each action you mentioned above based on the question, After World War II, were these Americans treated differently than in the past? Give two examples of phrases or sentences supporting the thesis that these Americans were treated differently after World War 

4. Now evaluate each action you mentioned above based on the question:

*After World War II, were these Americans treated differently than in the past?*

Give two examples of phrases or sentences supporting the thesis that these Americans were not treated differently after World War II.