

# Rules for discharging disabled veterans, 1919

## Introduction

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When World War I ended in 1918 more than 4.6 million men returned to the United States from war. The American people and the US government were unprepared to reintegrate and care for the men who returned with physical injuries and psychological damage that would affect many of the veterans for the rest of their lives.

According to the Library of Congress, 224,000 soldiers returned home with a permanent physical or mental disability. Of the injured, 4,400 were amputees. Almost 100,000 soldiers had been removed from combat due to psychological injuries and 40,000 of them were subsequently discharged.<sup>1</sup> With no government agency dedicated to veteran's affairs at the time, responsibilities for veterans were scattered between several agencies. On January 29, 1919, "Rules for the Discharge of Disabled US Soldiers" were published in the *Official US Bulletin*, issued by the US War Department and the Office of the Surgeon General.

Despite the nation's good intentions, disabled veterans were overwhelmed with confusing paperwork to fill out. Many WWI veterans faced unemployment, poor housing conditions, and inadequate medical care. As a result, veterans and other Americans founded organizations like the Disabled American Veterans of the World War and the American Legion to support and fight for the rights of disabled veterans. Their efforts led Congress to establish the US Veterans Bureau in 1921, which was a precursor to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

## Excerpt

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It is the policy of the War Department to retain, so far as practicable under military control, for the purpose of medical and surgical treatment (a) officers and soldiers suffering from acute diseases or acute exacerbations of chronic diseases or unhealed lesions; (b) officers and soldiers suffering from communicable diseases or who are 'carriers,' whose discharge would be a danger to the civil community; (c) officers and soldiers suffering from disabilities incurred in the line of duty which are correctible within their terms of service or enlistment; (d) officers and soldiers suffering from chronic or permanent disabilities incurred in the line of duty, which are susceptible of improvement by measures for mental or physical reconstruction designed to fit them for return to their homes, for the resumption of their former vocations, or, with their consent, for the industrial opportunities or the training courses provided by the Federal Board for Vocational Education.

In the accomplishment of this policy, it is the intention to restore officers and soldiers, who are held in service as provided above, to health and function as fully as possible, considering the nature of their disabilities, the limitations of the military service, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Reft, "World War I: Injured Veterans and the Disability Rights Movement," Library of Congress Blog, December 21, 2017, <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2017/12/world-war-i-injured-veterans-and-the-disability-rights-movement/>

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other provisions which the Government has made for the care of the permanently disabled.

### Questions for Discussion

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Use your historical knowledge and the transcript below to answer the following questions:

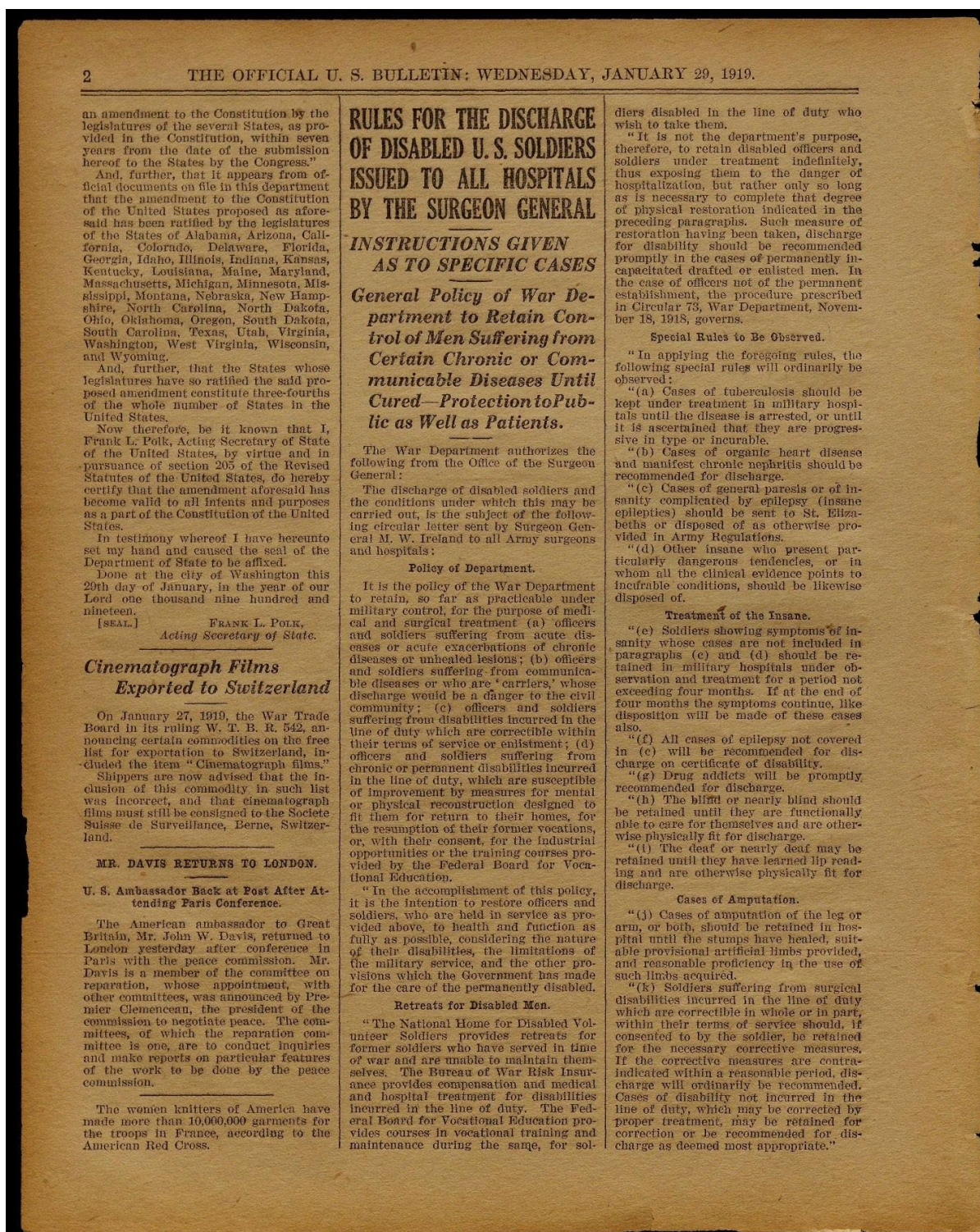
1. Does it seem that the American government tried to meet the needs of disabled veterans? Explain.
2. Are there any notable/visible shortcomings in the plan for treating and discharging the disabled veterans? Any strengths? Explain.
3. The sheer numbers of men suffering from what was then called shell shock—now part of what is known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during and after the war was staggering. Did the government effectively address this issue? Explain.
4. Does the treatment for drug addiction seem callous or appropriate? Defend your answer.

Extension Question/Project(s):

1. What were some social challenges disabled veterans faced as they tried to re-enter society after being discharged?
2. What impact did the staggering numbers of physical injuries and psychological trauma have on the American government and the programs necessary to support disabled veterans?

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Image



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THE OFFICIAL U. S. BULLETIN: WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 29, 1919.

an amendment to the Constitution by the legislatures of the several States, as provided in the Constitution, within seven years from the date of the submission hereof to the States by the Congress."

And, further, that it appears from official documents on file in this department that the amendment to the Constitution of the United States proposed as aforesaid has been ratified by the legislatures of the States of Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

And, further, that the States whose legislatures have so ratified the said proposed amendment constitute three-fourths of the whole number of States in the United States.

Now therefore, be it known that I, Frank L. Polk, Acting Secretary of State of the United States, by virtue of and in pursuance of section 205 of the Revised Statutes of the United States, do hereby certify that the amendment aforesaid has become valid to all intents and purposes as a part of the Constitution of the United States.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the Department of State to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington this 29th day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and nineteen.

[SEAL.]

FRANK L. POLK,  
Acting Secretary of State.

## Cinematograph Films Exported to Switzerland

On January 27, 1919, the War Trade Board in its ruling W. T. B. R. 542, announcing certain commodities on the free list for exportation to Switzerland, included the item "Cinematograph films."

Shippers are now advised that the inclusion of this commodity in such list was incorrect, and that cinematograph films must still be consigned to the Societe Suisse de Surveillance, Berne, Switzerland.

## MR. DAVIS RETURNS TO LONDON.

U. S. Ambassador Back at Post After Attending Paris Conference.

The American ambassador to Great Britain, Mr. John W. Davis, returned to London yesterday after conference in Paris with the peace commission. Mr. Davis is a member of the committee on reparation, whose appointment, with other committees, was announced by Premier Clemenceau, the president of the commission to negotiate peace. The committees, of which the reparation committee is one, are to conduct inquiries and make reports on particular features of the work to be done by the peace commission.

The women knitters of America have made more than 10,000,000 garments for the troops in France, according to the American Red Cross.

## RULES FOR THE DISCHARGE OF DISABLED U. S. SOLDIERS ISSUED TO ALL HOSPITALS BY THE SURGEON GENERAL

### INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN AS TO SPECIFIC CASES

#### General Policy of War Department to Retain Control of Men Suffering from Certain Chronic or Communicable Diseases Until Cured—Protection to Public as Well as Patients.

The War Department authorizes the following from the Office of the Surgeon General:

The discharge of disabled soldiers and the conditions under which this may be carried out, is the subject of the following circular letter sent by Surgeon General M. W. Ireland to all Army surgeons and hospitals:

#### Policy of Department.

It is the policy of the War Department to retain, so far as practicable under military control, for the purpose of medical and surgical treatment (a) officers and soldiers suffering from acute diseases or acute exacerbations of chronic diseases or unhealed lesions; (b) officers and soldiers suffering from communicable diseases or who are 'carriers,' whose discharge would be a danger to the civil community; (c) officers and soldiers suffering from disabilities incurred in the line of duty which are correctible within their terms of service or enlistment; (d) officers and soldiers suffering from chronic or permanent disabilities incurred in the line of duty, which are susceptible of improvement by measures for mental or physical reconstruction designed to fit them for return to their homes, for the resumption of their former vocations, or, with their consent, for the industrial opportunities or the training courses provided by the Federal Board for Vocational Education.

"In the accomplishment of this policy, it is the intention to restore officers and soldiers, who are held in service as provided above, to health and function as fully as possible, considering the nature of their disabilities, the limitations of the military service, and the other provisions which the Government has made for the care of the permanently disabled.

#### Retreats for Disabled Men.

"The National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers provides retreats for former soldiers who have served in time of war and are unable to maintain themselves. The Bureau of War Risk Insurance provides compensation and medical and hospital treatment for disabilities incurred in the line of duty. The Federal Board for Vocational Education provides courses in vocational training and maintenance during the same, for sol-

diers disabled in the line of duty who wish to take them.

"It is not the department's purpose, therefore, to retain disabled officers and soldiers under treatment indefinitely, thus exposing them to the danger of hospitalization, but rather only so long as is necessary to complete that degree of physical restoration indicated in the preceding paragraphs. Such measure of restoration having been taken, discharge for disability should be recommended promptly in the cases of permanently incapacitated drafted or enlisted men. In the case of officers not of the permanent establishment, the procedure prescribed in Circular 73, War Department, November 18, 1918, governs.

#### Special Rules to Be Observed.

"In applying the foregoing rules, the following special rules will ordinarily be observed:

"(a) Cases of tuberculosis should be kept under treatment in military hospitals until the disease is arrested, or until it is ascertained that they are progressive in type or incurable.

"(b) Cases of organic heart disease and manifest chronic nephritis should be recommended for discharge.

"(c) Cases of general paresis or of insanity complicated by epilepsy (insane epileptics) should be sent to St. Elizabeths or disposed of as otherwise provided in Army Regulations.

"(d) Other insane who present particularly dangerous tendencies, or in whom all the clinical evidence points to incurable conditions, should be likewise disposed of.

#### Treatment of the Insane.

"(e) Soldiers showing symptoms of insanity whose cases are not included in paragraphs (c) and (d) should be retained in military hospitals under observation and treatment for a period not exceeding four months. If at the end of four months the symptoms continue, like disposition will be made of these cases also.

"(f) All cases of epilepsy not covered in (c) will be recommended for discharge on certificate of disability.

"(g) Drug addicts will be promptly recommended for discharge.

"(h) The blind or nearly blind should be retained until they are functionally able to care for themselves and are otherwise physically fit for discharge.

"(i) The deaf or nearly deaf may be retained until they have learned lip reading and are otherwise physically fit for discharge.

#### Cases of Amputation.

"(j) Cases of amputation of the leg or arm, or both, should be retained in hospital until the stumps have healed, suitable provisional artificial limbs provided, and reasonable proficiency in the use of such limbs acquired.

"(k) Soldiers suffering from surgical disabilities incurred in the line of duty which are correctible in whole or in part, within their terms of service should, if consented to by the soldier, be retained for the necessary corrective measures. If the corrective measures are contra-indicated within a reasonable period, discharge will ordinarily be recommended. Cases of disability not incurred in the line of duty, which may be corrected by proper treatment, may be retained for correction or be recommended for discharge as deemed most appropriate."

Official U.S. Bulletin, January 29, 1919, published by the Committee on Public Information, Washington DC.

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01668)

## Rules for discharging disabled veterans, 1919

### Transcript

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