

The road to a better GI Bill

by Philip M. Callaghan

Young veterans from across America converged on the steps of the U.S. Capitol Building on April 29 to voice support for a new and improved GI Bill. They spoke about how difficult it is for veterans to earn college degrees these days. The benefits were failing to cover the cost of tuition. In some cities, the payments for veterans of the reserves failed to cover the cost of getting to and from campus.

Several members of Congress joined these outspoken individuals and stressed the need for a "21st-century GI Bill" that would provide benefits worthy of our veterans and offer the same opportunities afforded to those who fought in World War II. After months of political haggling, Congress finally passed a new and better GI Bill.

Here's the problem: We send our young men and women off to war in distant lands, testing their strength, commitment and courage under fire - sometimes for three or more tours of combat duty. Then we bring them home, thank them for their service, turn them out to the civilian world and watch them struggle to succeed.

As troops, they are revered for defending our nation against terror. As veter-



U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Lisa Harris, assigned to 407th Air Expeditionary Services Squadron, explains to Senior Airman Eric Owens, assigned to 407th Expeditionary Civil Engineer Squadron, the College Level Examination Program tests available at the education center on Ali Air Base, Iraq. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Jonathan Snyder)

ans, they slip from our sight as they pursue college degrees. The GI Bill of recent years was a far cry from the original, having gradually lost value while the cost of higher education soared. The American Legion worked with Congress for more than three years to deliver a meaningful veterans education benefit, one that truly meet the needs of our 21st century veterans.

On June 26, Congress finally fixed a problem that has persisted for half a century: little by little, our veterans have been losing their college education benefits. By a vote of 92-6, the Senate approved the "Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act," which cleared the House by a 268-155 vote. Four days later, President Bush signed the bill into law.

"We applaud Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi," American Legion National Commander Marty Conatser said after Congress passed the meas-

ure. "Thanks in large part to her committed leadership, this momentous piece of legislation will resonate as a landmark in American history."

Starting in August 2009, veterans who served in the military for at least three years will qualify for full tuition payments at any in-state public university in the country. Essentially, this increases annual GI Bill benefits from \$40,000 to a maximum of about \$90,000—not just for active-duty troops, but also for Reserve and National Guard members.

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee that determines VA spending, gave credit to The American Legion. "Passing this historic new GI Bill into law could not have happened without the dedicated efforts of The American Legion, and I want to thank them for their critical support throughout this process."

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The new education package will cost about \$62 billion over the next decade. Veterans who serve 10 years or more will earn the option of transferability to spouses and children. Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., was an early supporter of such a provision, which he introduced in separate legislation. "I always felt this was important," he said. "It gives the veteran the option of whether to use it for himself or allow his family to use it."

Was King surprised the bill passed so easily? "I actually was, but the stars were properly aligned and this bill took on a life of its own," he said. "It was a combination of a sense in Congress that this was overdue, and very active lobbying by veterans groups such as The American Legion."

Yes, Congress certainly feels good about doing right by our veterans and updating a sorely outdated GI Bill.

But the question remains: how did the situation get so bad, before it finally got fixed?

Lessons from the Great War.

The first GI Bill was so great because "it eased the readjustment of 16 million men and women," says University of California-Berkeley assistant professor of history Kathleen Frydl. "Veteran readjustment is a tricky proposition, and when it's mishandled, it not only can endanger the lives of veterans, it can actually endanger entire political systems."

That's what happened little more than a decade after World War I when Depression-starved veterans joined the "Bonus Army" and camped out in Washington, demanding cash payments for their services during wartime. The threat of military force drove them out.

"We have a shameful history of doing poorly by our veterans," says author Edward Humes, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. "Most of the Revolutionary War veterans were

dead before their pensions, promised 40 years earlier, were finally dispersed." That pattern continued right up through World War II, when Humes says a "mixture of altruism and fear" broke the cycle. Some of our leaders began to wonder what might happen in the United States if our government neglected 16 million veterans from one of the greatest military forces ever assembled.

The American Legion wondered the same thing and testified before Congress that if it didn't do right by its returning war veterans, all hell could break loose. Colmery holed up in Room 570 of the Mayflower Hotel in Washington during the first week of January 1944. He wrote in longhand on the back of hotel stationery a document that would shift the course of U.S. history.

Around that time, Colmery told an audience in Topeka, Kan., that the re-assimilation of veterans "is the gravest social problem which confronts us. They can either make the country or break it, save democracy or scrap it, promote world order or World War III. The result depends on us, not them."

The legislative masterpiece was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 22, 1944. That same day, the Soviet Army began its great summer offensive against the Germans; five days later, Allied troops liberated the French city of Cherbourg as they pushed forward from the beaches at Normandy. The smell of victory was in the air. Veterans would be coming home soon. When he signed the bill, FDR said the measure gave "emphatic notice to the men and women in our armed forces that the American people do not intend to let them down."

The GIs were largely oblivious. They were too busy fighting to worry about legislative committees and bill markups. Dr. Suzanne Mettler, who teaches in Cornell University's department of government, says the GI Bill came as a complete surprise to most

veterans. "I've interviewed many veterans from the World War II era, and I asked them, 'Did you feel you were owed the GI Bill?' And they would tell me, sometimes rather vehemently, 'No, we were not owed the GI Bill.'"

Mettler says most served their country out of desire and a sense of duty. "The GI Bill was something that was thought of as a gift from the nation to them."

Few at the time realized what a fantastic gift it was. The 1944 GI Bill, Humes says, "was an anomaly, and The American Legion knows this better than anyone, because it's part of why the organization was founded in the first place: the utterly shabby way in which veterans had been treated in every preceding conflict."

Humes says the Legion's vision of the GI Bill went beyond what FDR contemplated. "For instance, it revolutionized home-buying for everyone. There was that mixture of wanting to do right by the veterans, and not wanting to see a Bonus March—times 100—come Armistice Day. So it was a unique chemistry that led to this remarkable legislation."

A Slow Erosion. It could be said that the golden age of college benefits for veterans ended on June 25, 1950, at about 4 a.m., Korean Standard Time. Soon after war broke out between on the Korean peninsula, U.S. forces took on the brunt of responsibility to drive communist forces back across the 38th Parallel. Veterans returned home to find their education benefits diminished by the Veterans Adjustment Act of 1952. The government no longer paid tuition directly to colleges and universities; instead, veterans got a flat monthly fee of about \$110. From that, they were expected to pay for all of their education.

GI Bill benefits were cancelled altogether in 1956. "The World War II GI Bill actually ran into a lot of implementation problems," Frydl says. "And Congress and Eisenhower

resolved those problems, in large part, by making the Korean War GI Bill much less generous." In 1959, a report by the Bradley Commission determined that serving in the military should be "an obligation of citizenship, not a basis for government benefits." Apparently, the government saw no good reason, during a time of relative peace, to reward its former servicemembers.

By the time the Vietnam War escalated in the 1960s, flat rates for education payments were firmly in place. "The flat rates favored the 'Sun Belt' states, because community college costs were low," says Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., a Vietnam War veteran, author, and sponsor of S. 22, the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, introduced early this year to substantially improve benefits. "In the

Northeast, the GI Bill didn't cover the costs. There was also a tendency to look at benefits through the eyes of the Pentagon, espe-

cially when the all-volunteer force started up, and retention issues became a larger concern."

As time went on, payments went down, and tuition went up. When the Montgomery GI Bill was passed in 1984, it had no provision for dealing with meteoric increases in higher education costs across the United States.

National Guard and reserve veterans have been hit especially hard by the widening gap between cost and benefit, receiving just \$400 a month.

Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, D-S.D., says the Defense Department has allowed National Guard and reserve benefits to erode from 40 to 29 percent of the active-duty rate. "There's certainly a balance that has to be acknowledged," Sandlin says. "But some DoD officials seem to think that so long as recruitment and retention goals are being met, those reserve benefits could go down to 9 percent, and that would be OK."

Over the past 20 years, the cost of a four-year education at a public institution has gone up by 278 percent. Pell grants and other federal assistance programs have provided some relief for the general student population; the GI Bill has failed to provide similar relief for veterans.

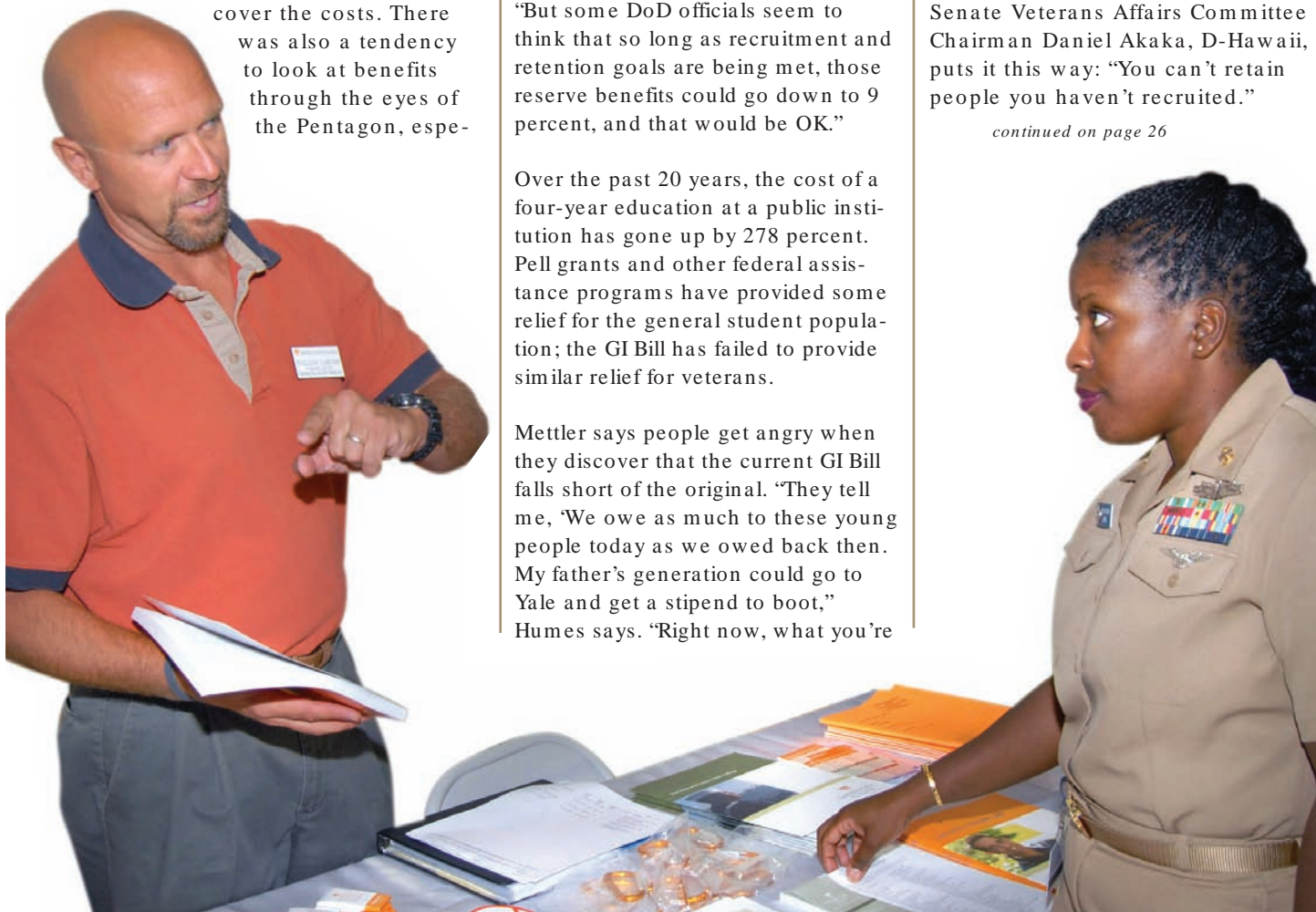
Mettler says people get angry when they discover that the current GI Bill falls short of the original. "They tell me, 'We owe as much to these young people today as we owed back then. My father's generation could go to Yale and get a stipend to boot,'" Humes says. "Right now, what you're

offering is a benefit that pales in comparison to what was given to the World War II generation of veterans."

Cost of War. Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., sits in his Capitol Hill office and ponders the GI Bill's place in society. "I don't know how we got here, but we're here," he said as the need for a new benefit began making headlines across the country and the question arose about how a better GI Bill might influence recruitment and retention. "Our focus is on fixing it. If you're trying to attract people to join the military, the GI Bill benefits are certainly part of the package. You've got to ramp it up for a wartime military. If we're going to spend an extra \$100 billion on this year's war supplement, a couple of billion dollars for a meaningful GI Bill should just be part of the cost of war."

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, puts it this way: "You can't retain people you haven't recruited."

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U.S. Navy Chief Personnel Specialist Patricia Aughtry talks to William Yaeger, an outreach assistant for Empire State College, at the first Education Fair for Precommissioning Unit George H.W. Bush (CVN 77) Newport News, Va. The Education Fair brought together more than 20 schools to help inform PCU Bush Sailors of education opportunities available to them through the Navy. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Narina Reynoso).

Recruiters have it hard enough, Webb says. "About 8 percent of their target age group has a propensity to serve in the Army or Marine Corps right now. So they're pounding the heck out of (that population) with enlistment bonuses, etc. The worst thing in recruiting is not making your goal, because it's a career-ender." Webb says expanding education benefits makes recruitment easier, and because the new GI Bill gives veterans 15 years to cash in, he doesn't think retention will be harmed.

In an April 29 letter to Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., Secretary of Defense Robert Gates wrote that "serious retention issues could arise if the benefit were expanded beyond the level sufficient to offset average monthly costs for a public four-year institution."

The Congressional Budget Office analyzed Webb's legislation in May and concluded it would cost taxpayers \$51.8 billion over the next 10 years. It also noted that "raising the educational benefits as proposed in S.22 would result in a 16-percent increase in recruits." CBO also estimated that DoD could offset retention losses by ratcheting up selective re-enlistment bonuses to \$25,000.

Dr. Michael Gambone, history professor at Kutztown University, knows something about how well veterans re-adjust. "I teach a lot of those kids. They come back, and there's some difficulty in adjusting to an academic environment." He believes school is one of the best ways for veterans to make the transition.

"When soldiers leave the military, they can disassemble weapons, and they understand basic tactics, but what they lack are skills that will make them relevant in the job market," he says. "(Higher education) gives them the type of civilian mission they can apply themselves to, and that's very important in allowing these people to re-assimilate."

Jerome Kohlberg, a World War II veteran and successful entrepreneur,

started the Fund for Veterans Education with \$8 million of his own money. About 400 veterans have received scholarships. As for the retention argument fronted by DoD, "we don't buy that," says Matt Boulay, director of the fund. "People don't separate from service just to go to college. There are a host of reasons to separate. On the other hand, most people sign up in order to get their college paid for. That's what DoD sells in their recruiting slogans."

Honoring Service. American Legion National Commander Marty Conatser has a suggestion for critics who think a new GI Bill is too expensive. "Visit Walter Reed. War is expensive. The bulk of that cost is paid for by the men and women who wear the uniform. Benefits are just a small, small cost of war." He points out that back in 1944, even some veterans groups thought the GI Bill stood likely to break the Treasury. Instead, it created a world economic superpower. "The critics were wrong then," Conatser says. "And they are wrong now."

The war against terror is likely to continue for some time, if not indefinitely. More and more veterans will be coming home, looking for a chance at the same kind of prosperity their grandparents had. They expect benefits, not penalties. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., who introduced the companion bill to Webb's legislation in the House, says he talks "to veterans continually who are coming back, working two jobs, trying to go to school, have children. It's a real burden."

Rep. Chet Edward, D-Texas, says a new GI Bill "is a show of respect, and just as we focused last year on increasing funding for VA health care, this is a logical follow-up."

In 1968, Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., and his brother, Tom, served together in Vietnam. They came back home and went to school at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Their GI Bill benefits helped, but they still worked part-time jobs.

Hagel says a new GI Bill is "the smart and right thing to do for our nation to recognize the service of individuals who've earned this benefit. This is not a welfare program."

In Mettler's mind, there's another level to the GI Bill argument: the implication for democracy, and the impact on civic engagement. "So here's a policy from the past, with a tremendous record of promoting more active citizenship, for people to have a greater voice in self-governance, and to participate in organizations that make communities healthy. We ought to be doing that for today."

Frydl, who is writing a book about the GI Bill, says we should remember the main legacy of the original GI Bill: the peaceful readjustment of veterans into society.

"That was a real challenge," Frydl says. "And we have no reason to think it's less of a challenge today. Servicemembers, and communities themselves, often encounter very serious problems. We all really stand to suffer if veterans are not given a peaceable path back to civilian life."

Says Hagel: "Most people don't stop to recognize that we're asking about 1 percent of the American people to bear all the burden, make all the sacrifices, do all the fighting, do all of the dying, in defense of this country."

"We will break down that system if we don't do something, and I think educational benefits are one of those things that can help us. At a time when we're at a crisis point in our military, these young men and women, and their families, need to be reassured that something's going to be there for them later." ●

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