



# 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.***

**H**ere'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 veterans, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

**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. when war broke out on the Korean peninsula. 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 in 1956.

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 service members.

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.

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 were especially hit 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 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.

#### **Cost of War.**

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 readjust.

"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."

**Honoring Service.** American Legion National Commander Marty Conatser has a suggestion for critics who think the 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."

Service members, 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." **R&NG**

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