

STATEMENT OF

ERIC A. HILLEMAN, DEPUTY DIRECTOR  
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE  
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE THE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

WITH RESPECT TO

THE MONTGOMERY GI BILL

WASHINGTON, DC

JANUARY 17, 2008

MADAM CHAIRWOMAN AND MEMBERS OF THIS SUBCOMMITTEE:

On behalf of the 2.4 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and our Auxiliaries, I would like to thank this committee for its diligence, dedication, and bipartisanship exhibited in updating the Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB). We applaud this committee for its efforts and Congress for including post-service usage of the MGIB for service members eligible under Chapter 1607 benefits into the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act. With this accomplishment, we strongly urge this committee to continue updating the MGIB.

The following are the VFW's top five recommendations for achieving a GI Bill that meets the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:

- Increase the MGIB rates to cover the full cost of education: tuition, room, board, fees, and a cost-of-living stipend.
- Eliminate the current qualifying impediment for Guard and Reserve members, which rewards the longest continuous tour of active duty. Our troops deserve a benefit that aggregates on a monthly basis and pays a percentage of the active duty benefit with an equitable benefit.
- Repeal the \$1,200 MGIB buy-in charged to active duty troops during the first year of their enlistment.
- Allow all service members to utilize earned benefits throughout the duration of their lives, removing the 10-year delimiting date.
- Remove all laws and rules limiting veterans from accessing college financial aid due to military service income and/or GI Bill benefits.

These recommendations reflect the needs of veterans and the original spirit of the GI Bill. In 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the *Serviceman's Readjustment Act*, known as the GI Bill of Rights. This bill helped millions of Americans realize the American dream. Nearly 12 percent of Americans served in uniform between 1945 and 1956 and more than 8 million returning veterans received debt-free college educations, low-interest home mortgages and small-business loan assistance. In 1947, half of the nation's college students were veterans. For many, they were the first in their families to further their education beyond high school. Today the WWII GI Bill is credited with creating the middle class.

Subsequent wartime GI Bills were not nearly as robust as the WWII bill. The Vietnam-era GI Bill was a scaled down version from the WWII style bill. Nearly 6.8 million veterans out of 10.3 million eligible veterans used their benefit. Education benefits during the Vietnam era aided veterans in their transition from active duty to civilian life, but the benefit fell short of the original.

So too, the current MGIB is not meeting the need of our veterans. The inflationary rate of higher education is much greater than the national inflationary rate. Over time, this disparity in inflation is causing the current GI Bill rate, which is pegged to the national inflationary rate, is causing the GI Bill to erode.

It is time for a new GI Bill! It is time to revitalize the American dream; invest in the overall health of our slowly depleting military force; expand the socio-economic makeup of the military; and provide the ONE PERCENT of our population that dons the uniform a life-changing benefit.

The VFW has long advocated for the creation of a GI Bill for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the fashion of the original WWII bill. We envision a transition benefit that will be a lasting contract with our veterans. We want:

- A GI Bill that increases military recruitment efforts, broadening the socio-economic makeup of the military, and strengthens our national security by attracting an increased number of young talented recruits – many of whom may not have considered military service.
- A powerful transition assistance program, allowing veterans to readjust to civilian life, improving their ability to care for themselves and their families, and becoming the leaders of tomorrow.
- A GI Bill that recognizes the unique sacrifices of the hundreds of thousands of Guard and Reserve members who have served in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, during Katrina and other national/international emergencies; and is proportional to their Active Duty counterparts.

We are not a nation at war; we are a nation with a military at war. Many troops have been to Iraq and/or Afghanistan multiple times. Some Guard and Reserve units are serving their second or third tours in country. Now is the time to honor their service with a GI Bill for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, providing them with opportunities to become future leaders of our nation.

Pause for one moment and consider the quality of life that WWII GI Bill recipients passed on to their children and grandchildren. We as a nation need to recognize the indirect benefits our families received thanks to the education, housing and small business investment benefits a grateful nation gave to the Greatest Generation.

Many in Congress have recognized the importance of these issues and have introduced bills to improve this key program. We urge you to examine these bills with an eye toward enacting a robust GI Bill that realizes the promises of previous generations.

***H.R. 1102, Total Force Educational Assistance Enhancement and Integration Act of 2007***

We support this legislation, which eases the administration of education benefits, simplifying U.S. Code, and giving the Department of Veterans Affairs the responsibility of administering the benefit as they currently do with the Active Duty GI Bill. The VFW believes the GI Bill is primarily a transition tool allowing veterans and troops to seek an education and skills training. Placing the Guard and Reserve education programs, Chapter 1606 and 1607 of Title 10, into Title 38 (the section of the code regulating the Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]) allows the Congress to better oversee this program and eliminates contradictions in the oversight process. Currently, the VA tracks veteran enrollment at institutions of higher learning, triggers the veteran's GI Bill discernment, and performs a great deal of the outreach to education veterans on the varying of education benefits.

***H.R. 1211, the Resuming Education After Defense Service Act of 2007***

We support this legislation allowing Guard and Reserve members to apply their total aggregate months of deployment towards accruing GI Bill benefits. Currently, Guard and Reserve troops may only apply their longest continuous period of active duty service toward drawing the GI Bill benefit, most tours fall far short of the Active Duty GI Bill. This results in some troops serving two or three years in a combat zone while only receiving 40 or 60 percent their active duty counterparts. We strongly believe GI Bill benefits should reflect equitable benefits for service to our nation.

***H.R. 1214, the Veterans' Survivors Education Enhancement Act of 2007***

This act would increase the maximum amount of GI Bill benefits available for eligible veterans' survivors and dependents from the current \$788 a month, paid over 45 months equaling \$35,460, to approximately \$1,778 a month totaling \$80,000. It allows the benefit to be used for special restorative training, apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and tutoring assistance. And it allows survivors and dependents to draw the benefit until their 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, extending the usage age from 26<sup>th</sup> birthday.

We deeply respect the loss, challenge and pain survivors and dependents suffer. Benefits paid to widows/widowers and orphans grant a degree of security when faced with the sudden loss of a loved one. The VFW fully supports enhancement of educational assistance for survivors and dependents of veterans, but we also feel the benefit should move in tandem with the education benefit available to the Chapter 32, Title 38 active duty GI Bill.

The current Chapter 32, Title 38 active duty GI Bill benefit total is approximately \$37,000 and the survivors education benefit is approximately \$35,500; thus giving some relative parity in the two benefits. H.R. 1214 would award survivors twice the earned benefit available to active duty troops. We favor increasing this survivor's benefit, but only in tandem with the active duty benefit. The VFW believes this bill would create an unfortunate inequity.

**H.R. 2247, the *Montgomery GI Bill for Life Act of 2007***

The Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) has opened the door to higher education for millions of Americans. This bill seeks to eliminate time limits that often prevent service members from using a life-enhancing benefit when they need it the most. H.R. 2247 would eliminate the post-service 10-year time limit for the active duty MGIB and the in-service 14-year time limit for Guard and Reservists. Time limits prevent service members from seeking training and education later in life or at mid-career milestones. The VFW supports the life-long career approach to the benefit. If a service member has earned the benefit, why prevent them from using it?

Many service members seek education and retraining later or at mid-career. This helps them adapt to the ever-changing economy, transitioning from fields that may offer more job security. Also, many younger veterans and service members have family obligations that prevent them from seeking an education early in life. The VFW supports H.R. 2247 and the repeal of time limits on the GI Bill.

**H.R. 2385, the *21st Century GI Bill of Rights Act of 2007***

We support H.R. 2385, which would extend eligibility to Active Duty troops and National Guard and Reserve members who serve an aggregate of two years on active duty. This bill would pay tuition, books, fees, room and board over the course of four years of full-time education. It lifts the \$1,200 buy-in fee. This educational benefit would pay students a rate equivalent to the cost to attend school or training inclusive of tuition, housing, and other expenses.

**H.R. 2702, the *Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2007***

This legislation would enhance military strength while providing an educational benefit that equips a generation of veterans to face the challenges of tomorrow. The VFW has long advocated a GI Bill in the spirit of the original WW II bill, which would cover tuition at the highest State institution including housing, fees, books, and provide a cost-of-living stipend. This legislation would accomplish these goals and more. It recognizes the tens of thousands of guard and reserve members who have actively served an aggregate of 24 months defending our nation. It lengthens the post-service usage period from 10 to 15 years from the date of discharge and establishes a post-service benefit for the Guard and Reserve. The VFW enthusiastically supports this bill.

**H.R. 2910, the *Veterans Education Tuition Support Act of 2007***

The VFW strongly supports this legislation honoring the service of thousands of Reservists and National Guard troops who withdraw from college, placing their lives on hold, to protect and serve our nation.

In 2006, nearly 90,000 Reservists and National Guard soldiers were enrolled in college; one fourth of which have been deployed at least once. These students face unique hardships when they are called to defend our nation. H.R. 2910 addresses some of those hardships by; allowing veterans to resume their academic status upon their return, requiring colleges to refund tuition for service members who deploy, capping student loan interest payments at 6% while the student is deployed, and extending the period of time a student-soldier has to re-enroll after returning from active duty service.

Our National Guard and Reserve troops do not deserve to sacrifice doubly by serving our nation while enduring educational and financial penalties; they deserve every opportunity toward their future and their education.

Ms. Chairwoman, I again thank you for the opportunity to present the VFW's testimony. We very much appreciate what this subcommittee has done, and continues to do, to improve the GI Bill. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or the members of the Subcommittee may have.