

VFW Demands Passage of New GI Bill for 21st Century

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WASHINGTON — The national commander of America's largest organization of combat veterans is demanding that Congress pass S. 22, the "Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act."

"A new GI Bill for the 21st century must be passed," said George Lisicki, who leads the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S., a veterans' service organization that includes more than 70,000 Afghanistan and Iraqi war veterans among its 1.7 million members.

"We have an all-volunteer force that has accomplished everything asked of them," said Lisicki. "We need to reward them for their service by helping them to reintegrate back into society with an educational package that meets today's cost of tuition. I join with the leadership of Congress and my fellow veterans' organizations to say that S. 22 is the right bill at the right time."

S. 22 was introduced by Sen. Jim Webb (D-Va.) to mirror the original World War II educational benefit. It would repeal the \$1,200 enrollment fee, match tuition at the highest in-state rate, and provide for books and fees, and a living stipend. For those veterans accepted to private institutions, S. 22 would also provide a dollar-for-dollar tuition match for those colleges and universities who choose to participate in the program.

Lisicki is hopeful that strong bipartisan support will finally help the new GI Bill for the 21st century become reality. S. 22 now has 57 other co-sponsors, to include fellow GI Bill beneficiaries Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), John Warner (R-Va.), Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.), and both democratic senators from Hawaii, Daniel Akaka and Daniel Inouye. Its companion bill in the House, H.R. 5740, currently has 242 co-sponsors; it was introduced by Harry Mitchell (D-Ariz.) and Ginny Brown-Waite (R-Fla.).

"The 20-year-old Montgomery GI Bill was good, peacetime legislation, but it is no longer good enough to attract new recruits who know they are signing up to go to war," said Lisicki, a Vietnam combat veteran from Carteret, N.J.

"The Montgomery GI Bill only accounts for 50 percent of the average cost of tuition today,

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and the benefits for Guard and Reservists are drastically less," he said. "If the military is to successfully compete against public and private employers who also want to recruit America's best and brightest, the military must offer potential recruits something more attractive and tangible than just a 'Join the Military, See the World' sales pitch."

The U.S. Department of Labor said 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs of the future will require some postsecondary education or training, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development said American college graduates earn nearly twice as much as workers with just a high school diploma.

"Enacting a new and fully-funded GI Bill for the 21st century is one of the VFW's highest legislative goals," said Lisicki. "It is something the troops expect from their nation, and it is something the 2.3 million members of the VFW and our Auxiliaries demand from our Congress."