

VFW Says 'Thank You!' for New GI Bill

Congress Delivers for America's Newest Greatest Generation

Jun 26, 2008

WASHINGTON — The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. is saluting Congress for the overwhelming passage of a new GI Bill for the 21st Century. The bill, S. 22, the "Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act," was attached to the war funding supplemental that the House passed June 19 and the Senate is predicted to approve this evening. President Bush is expected to quickly sign it into law.

"This is a tremendous victory for America's veterans, military, and their families," exclaimed VFW national commander George Lisicki, a Vietnam combat veteran from Carteret, N.J., "and we have Sen. Jim Webb of Virginia to thank for his rock-steady determination to get this bill passed."

S. 22 captured the VFW's immediate attention when Webb introduced it on his first day in office, Jan. 4, 2007. His bill – which increases college assistance for veterans – was overshadowed last year by increased calls to end the war in Iraq and the administration's sudden announcement to surge 30,000 additional troops into Iraq. But Webb, the former Secretary of the Navy under the Reagan Administration and a Marine Corps infantry officer who received the Navy Cross for heroism during the Vietnam War, pressed on, fortified by the challenge to get his bill heard.

He worked for more than a year to build a coalition of allies, not only within his own Democratic Party, but from across the aisle and within the House. These allies include 57 other Senate cosponsors, to include five fellow GI Bill beneficiaries: Vietnam veteran Chuck Hagel (R-NE), World War II and Korean War veteran John Warner (R-VA), and World War II veterans Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ), Daniel Akaka (D-HI) and Daniel Inouye (D-HI).

S. 22's companion bill in the House, H.R. 5740, was introduced by Harry Mitchell (D-AZ) and Ginny Brown-Waite (R-FL), and it garnered 302 bipartisan cosponsors, to include Korean War veteran Charles Rangel (D-NY) and Sam Johnson (R-TX), a veteran of both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, who was held as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam for nearly

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seven years.

Webb intended S. 22 to mirror the original World War II GI Bill, which is widely regarded as one of the most significant pieces of legislation enacted in the last century, and one the VFW played a leading role to shape and bring to fruition in 1944. Almost half of the 16 million men and women who served in World War II took advantage of the education benefit. They became the scientists, scholars, politicians and captains of industry who were directly responsible for the tremendous era of growth and prosperity the nation enjoyed during the latter half of the 20th century. Those GI Bill recipients also returned to federal coffers \$7 for every \$1 dollar spent on their education in the form of higher taxes paid on the higher wages earned.

In 2002, the VFW was at the forefront to work with then-House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Chris Smith (R-NJ) to increase Montgomery GI Bill benefits by 49 percent. And now, 64 years after the original World War II GI Bill was signed, the VFW is again leading all veterans' service organizations to ensure that America's newest Greatest Generation is rewarded with a new GI Bill for the 21st Century.

S. 22 will pay the highest in-state public tuition rate, and provide for books, fees, and a living stipend. It eliminates the \$1,200 enrollment fee, extends the use-or-lose benefit requirement from 10 to 15 years, and greatly enhances the amount paid to Guard and Reserve members. The new GI Bill automatically adjusts itself as tuitions increase, and provides a dollar-for-dollar tuition match for private colleges and universities who choose to participate in the program. A new provision added to the bill allows reenlisting servicemembers to transfer their educational benefit to their spouse and/or children. The transferability provision – which is endorsed by the Defense Department – was proposed by Sens. Richard Burr (R-NC), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), an Air Force Reserve colonel, and John McCain (R-AZ), a Vietnam veteran who was held as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam for five and a half years.

Since 1997, the VFW has been lobbying Congress to update the 20-year-old peacetime Montgomery GI Bill with 21st century tuition realities. The VFW did this by testifying at more than 40 congressional committee hearings, through hundreds of VFW Legislative Committee member visits to every House and Senate office in Washington and within their home states, and through the grassroots lobbying effort of 2.3 million VFW and Auxiliary members at 8,300 VFW Posts nationwide.

"The Montgomery GI Bill was good, peacetime legislation, but it only paid about 70 percent of the average cost of today's public tuitions, and barely 30 percent at private schools," said the VFW's national commander. "That's just not a good enough incentive for someone to join a military that's been at war for almost seven years, and it definitely wasn't good enough to compete against public and private employers who also want to recruit America's best

and brightest."

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, almost 400,000 veterans have received secondary education degrees since Sept. 11, 2001. Lisicki said more degrees would have been earned if veterans were not forced to choose between college – and risking financial debt – or getting a job to support their families.

"The passage of S. 22 will go far to eliminate that difficult decision," stressed Lisicki, who said the new GI Bill will benefit 2.2 million men and women serving in uniform today, and 1.6 million more who have separated or retired since 9/11.

"The VFW salutes Senator Webb and every cosponsor in the Senate and House for sticking to their principles to do what's right for a military that has done everything asked of them, and we thank President Bush for his impending signature to reward our military for their faithful service," said Lisicki. "The VFW is proud to once again play a key role in the development and passage of a new GI Bill, because this is a win-win for America."