

Editorial: Educating America's Newest Greatest Generation

By George Lisicki and Paul Rieckhoff

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On his first day in office, Sen. Jim Webb (D-Va.) introduced the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act (S. 22) to update a 20-year-old peacetime GI Bill with 21st century realities. Yet now, 15 months later, only half the Senate and one-fourth of the House have endorsed the legislation, despite strong bipartisan support of fellow GI Bill beneficiaries Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) and John Warner (R-Va.).

As the leaders of America's oldest major veterans' organization and its newest, we must ask, "Why?"

There is nothing controversial about S. 22 or its companion bill in the House, H.R. 2702. It would provide our troops a new GI Bill that is more representative of today's cost of education in our nation's colleges and universities.

The current Montgomery GI Bill accounts for only 50 percent of the average cost of college today, and the benefit for Guard and Reserve members is drastically less. S. 22 would pay the highest in-state public institution rate, plus cover books and fees, and provide a cost-of-living stipend. It would delete and refund the \$1,200 enrollment fee, significantly increase Guard and Reserve benefits, and provide a dollar-for-dollar tuition match for those private institutions who choose to participate.

President Roosevelt made a calculated decision in 1944 when he signed the original GI Bill of Rights. World War II was still raging on all fronts, but Roosevelt knew that all wars end, and that our nation of 133 million could not absorb 16 million demobilized servicemen and women back into a fragile civilian economy that was still reeling from the effects of the Great Depression.

The World War II GI Bill is widely regarded as one of the most significant pieces of legislation of the 20th century. It created America's middle class. Its home loan guarantee

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built the suburbs. It helped 8 million veterans who took advantage of the educational benefit to attend college – regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds – and they became the scientists, scholars, politicians and captains of industry who enabled our nation to flourish in the latter half of the century. The government also reaped a 7:1 return on investment in the form of higher taxes paid on the higher wages earned from the higher education.

A wartime GI Bill awaited America's Greatest Generation to recognize their service and to invest in their potential. So why can't those who tout today's military men and women as America's Newest Greatest Generation pass a new GI Bill for the 21st century'

Critics say a modern day GI Bill would hurt military retention efforts. Instead of throwing tens of thousands of dollars at the feet of potential recruits, we say boost military pay and allowances and benefits, and use the recruiting dollars for retention bonuses to keep mid-career officers and noncommissioned officers who are crucial to the military.

Budget hawks say the \$2 billion estimated annual cost to implement S. 22 is too much, that there are other priorities for the limited funding, and that the cost wouldn't be palpable to the general public. We say when a nation commits its forces to war, it is the inherent responsibility of government to take care of the veterans it creates with educational assistance, healthcare services, and compensation, pension and benefits programs.

A responsible, educated, military veteran reentering society is a win-win for America. That's why getting a new and fully-funded GI Bill for the 21st century is one of the highest legislative goals of our two veterans' organizations, and we sincerely hope that those who are running for public office this fall will also embrace its passage as their goal, too.

Successful military leaders throughout history have held dear one basic premise: Take care of the troops and they will take care of the mission. As we mark five years of war in Iraq and approach seven in Afghanistan, those in positions of authority would do well to remember those words.

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