
Defense Report

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The GI Bill of Rights—Who Should It Help and How Much?

The first legislation commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights became law during World War II. It and its successors have helped millions of veterans of the Nation's wars accomplish many things, most notably gaining an education they might otherwise have been unable to afford. The tax money spent to support this program has been an excellent investment in the future.

But now some things have happened that cloud this picture. First of all it has been decided that members of the All Volunteer Armed Forces who joined the service after December 31, 1976 will no longer be eligible for regular GI education benefits but will have to participate in a program to which they must contribute a third of their eventual entitlement.

Second, veterans who are still eligible for assistance under the regular GI plan are finding that the current policy of giving them a fixed amount each month to pay for living expenses as well as educational fees just doesn't work in many cases. Even in state-supported colleges the tuition fees often far exceed the veterans allowance, forcing them to seek other income and deflecting them from concentration on education.

The verdict is still out on the program to help new service personnel. Those responsible for recruiting the Volunteer Armed Force viewed the loss of the GI Bill incentive as a serious one. There was a rush to enlist before the December 31st deadline and recruiting results have been somewhat shaky since then—although no direct cause and effect relationship has been confirmed. Of the almost 200,000 men and women who have enlisted since the deadline only 13,300 or about 7 percent have opted to participate in the contributory plan.

In the meantime Congress is looking at a number of plans that would make the GI Bill education stipend suit the need better. One proposal would permit total entitlements to be expended at a faster rate to meet higher costs but would have the disadvantage of shortening the length of subsidized schooling. A second proposal would provide a sliding scale of payments in addition to living expenses to meet tuition costs of up to \$1600 a year, generally adequate to cover costs at state-supported institutions. Both of these approaches were features of the original World War II GI Bill and worked well at that time.

Federally-supported education is expensive but its dividends as an incentive to serve and as a source of leadership for the Nation are obvious. The veterans benefits should be amended to make them practicable. The program to help new members of the armed forces should be watched carefully to make sure it does the job intended.