
Defense Report

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G.I. Bill Education Entitlements—An Incentive to Serve That Should be Reestablished

At the close of World War II millions of men and women who had served in our armed forces returned to their homes and took deserved advantage of a law popularly called "The G.I. Bill." It paid the cost of tuition and books for higher education and provided a modest allowance for living expenses. It was a great success. A roster of those who used it would read like a **Who's Who** of today's leaders in all walks of life.

Eligibility for the G.I. Bill was continued for those who served through the Korean War period and onward through Vietnam, although the form of the benefits changed. Eligibility even continued into the first four years of the all-volunteer force but ended for those who enlisted after December 31, 1976. It was replaced by a voluntary plan that calls for the service member to contribute part of the accumulated benefits. It is not popular.

At the time Congress cut off eligibility for the G.I. Bill it also set an expiration date of 1989 for the use of the benefits. This means that any service member who had residual G.I. Bill entitlements must use them up by that date. To take advantage of the full-time education benefit a service member would have to leave the service as early as 1985 to complete work on a baccalaureate degree by December 31, 1989. Those who entered the service between 1966 and 1976 would have to make the choice between staying on active duty until eligible for retirement or dropping out of the service at mid-career to avoid losing the G.I. Bill entitlements. Hopefully the Congress did not intend to have this kind of impact on the ability of the volunteer force to retain its trained people. The Army has proposed an amendment which would extend eligibility well past the final discharge date of anyone eligible for G.I. Bill assistance. Unless this is done, 1985 is the predictable point at which the services will begin to lose a substantial number of fully trained, valuable people who have many years of potential service remaining.

In view of the growing need for today's armed forces to have personnel trainable on complex weapons systems the population of young people seeking higher education or training in advanced skills seems to be the most logical target for the recruiters. For that group, the prospect of post-service education provided by the Government must surely be a telling argument in favor of enlistment.

The modification needed to retain the last of the people eligible for the old G.I. Bill on duty through a fully useful military career should be made at once. The Administration and the Congress should, in the meantime, be drafting a new G.I. Bill, as close as possible to its World War II predecessor, to be put into action immediately.