
Defense Report

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A New GI Bill Education Benefit – An Incentive to Enlist Can Also Be an Incentive to Stay

For a brief time early in the spring of 1981, there was strong sentiment among our lawmakers in Washington for a new GI Bill-type educational incentive. The consensus at that time was that this would be a way to lure otherwise college-bound young people into uniform, thereby improving the overall quality of our forces. There was even a provision in the bill to be presented to the House which would permit a service member to pass the benefit on to his or her children after serving a substantial period of time. The Army's leaders are convinced that this feature and eligibility for use of the benefit after retirement would be as much of an incentive to stay in the service as it would be to enlist in the first place.

But enthusiasm for the new educational incentive has quite obviously waned. The Reagan Administration has never supported it actively, even when recruiting was not going well. Now that recruiters are filling their quotas, non-support has become active opposition on the basis of cost. It would not be feasible, the Administration is saying, to spend substantial sums of money to attract better people when those people are almost sure to leave the service once their initial enlistment is completed.

It need not be that way if the legislation to authorize a new education incentive is properly designed. Service members could use the benefit while still on active duty to prepare for advancement within the service (almost every military installation of any size in the United States or overseas has a branch campus of one or more excellent universities and those facilities are already used extensively). With a GI Bill-type benefit, service members who are married and have children could use those on-post colleges when they could not otherwise afford to do so. And, as previously noted, the availability of a "pass-along" feature for children could be an excellent enticement to spend a full career in uniform.

Survey after survey has shown that an education incentive ranks high among the fringe benefits of military service but we haven't had an effective one since 1976. Congress is charged with the prime constitutional responsibility for manning the armed forces. Hopefully, it will overlook Administration opposition and get on with creating a new GI Bill.