
Defense Report

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A GI Bill That Gives the Army and Marine Corps a Competitive Edge—It Makes Good Sense

When GI Bill education benefits were conceived during World War II they were considered to be both a reward for service to the nation and a device to ease the transition from the rigors of service back into civilian life. That concept continued until the advent of the All Volunteer Force, when recruiters began using the availability of educational benefits as another selling device. When congress allowed that benefit to die at the end of 1976 both the recruiters and the nation lost a valuable program.

Throughout the years of volunteerism the Air Force and the Navy have had a clear edge over the Army and Marine Corps in the competition for the best of the recruits because the first two services could offer more opportunities for training in civilian-related skills. The Army and Marine Corps have relatively few jobs that train a man or woman to go to work for a civilian airline or a nuclear power company. Skills with a rifle or in an artillery or tank crew don't translate easily into a civilian job list.

There is no question that it would be best if a new GI Bill could have the same broad applicability as the old one, and if we were still drafting most of our new service members that is the way it would have to be. But in the volunteer environment we must use whatever tools are at hand to keep the ranks filled with the best possible people. So the new GI Bill is being thought of, pure and simply, as a recruiting and retention tool. Statistics show clearly that the Air Force and Navy are attracting far more people in the higher aptitude categories than are the Army and Marines and therefore do not need the same recruiting tools.

The Department of Defense has announced that it will propose legislation early next year to give the Army and Marine Corps, "... a competitive edge" in the quest for young people who might otherwise be going to college. The Air Force and Navy are understandably opposing this plan. But as long as a program as expensive as a GI Bill is to be a recruiting and retention incentive the bulk of its efforts should be focused on the places it is most needed — The Army and the Marine Corps.