
Defense Report

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Incentives to Serve in Our Volunteer Forces — Education Heads the List

One survey after another has shown that the availability of government-subsidized education heads the list of potential incentives toward service in the ranks of our volunteer armed forces. Yet, Congress and the Department of Defense have been playing games with each other, apparently seeking some sort of absolute guarantee before putting up the money to implement an effective educational incentive program.

The tendency on the part of the legislators and the political appointees who head the defense establishment has been to lure recruits by increasing entry-level pay. By doing so, they have avoided a long-term commitment, while a workable educational incentive carries with it a long-term responsibility for funding and administration. The last vestige of the World War II GI Bill of Rights was wiped out for anyone entering military service after 31 December, 1976, to be replaced by a contributory Veterans Educational Assistance Program that has been a notable failure. Some individual members of Congress have seen the need for a better educational incentive and have written bills to recreate a GI Bill of Rights. But the best they could accomplish in the face of less-than-wholehearted Department of Defense support, was to establish a couple of sketchy test programs.

But now we have a new administration and a new Congress and the Army has put its foot in the legislative door by announcing that a well-designed educational incentive program is its top priority for Congressional action this year. The Army has drafted a bill of its own that will hopefully find support on Capitol Hill. The Army proposes a noncontributory plan (like the original GI Bill), funded and administered by the Veterans Administration, which has long experience in this kind of program. The service member would accrue benefits at the rate of 1½ months for each month of service up to maximum of 36 months or four nine-month school years. The basic benefit would consist of a \$400-per-month stipend, but the service secretaries could supplement that in order to recruit for and retain hard-to-get specialists. Under the Army's proposal, service members would be permitted to transfer their entitlements to their dependents. Soldiers enlisting in the Army Reserve and Army National Guard would receive half the benefits of active service, but would not be able to transfer their entitlements to their dependents.

There is substantial assurance that Congress will pass some form of educational incentive legislation in its new session. The Army proposal will, hopefully, receive full Congressional scrutiny along with the proposals originating with individual members of Congress. It seems logical that whatever law finally emerges will be an amalgamation of several proposals. The features blended into that amalgam will inevitably play a large part in the ultimate success or failure of the volunteer method of filling our military ranks. Congress must act swiftly, but must also take great care to create a satisfactory incentive.