
Defense Report

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GI Bill Extension—An Urgent Need Now

There are presently in the Army some 295,000 men and women eligible for benefits under the Vietnam-era GI Education Bill. To be eligible, a soldier must have entered the Army on or before 31 December, 1976. Present law establishes a termination date for this entitlement of 31 December, 1989. This means for a soldier to take full advantage of the law—36 months of college tuition assistance from the federal government—he must leave the service and enter college by September, 1986.

Just how many soldiers will choose to leave the Army for the campus during the next two years is unknown; not all who are eligible are going to want to leave. Most officers already have college degrees, and some non-commissioned officers are not going to be interested in four years of college. However, logic suggests that a substantial body of trained soldiers will be tempted to seek discharge and use their earned benefit.

A recent Pentagon study suggests that soldiers who would opt for the educational benefit fall into two groups: those eligible to retire and those who have not made a career commitment. This study estimates that in 1985 approximately 22,000 noncommissioned officers with 20 or more years' service, and thus eligible to retire, could apply for the benefit and leave the Army. Another 130,000 eligible soldiers would be between their eighth and 14th years of service. This group consists of mid-level noncommissioned officers for whom the lure of college tuition assistance might be an offer impossible to refuse.

In short, 1985 could see the departure from the Army of over 150,000 trained junior leaders and technicians. To be sure no one really knows how many of these soldiers will choose to leave the Army, but it is safe to say that those who do will be of a quality the Army can ill afford to lose.

How does the Army avoid this pending talent hemorrhage? The congress must act to extend the termination date of the Vietnam-era bill, a move it seems reluctant to make. The Pentagon has draft legislation, supported by the services, and DoD has agreed to fund it! What remains is for Congress to stop stalling and enact the legislation. Time is running out.