
Defense Report

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The New GI Bill—It's Good, But It Needs Some Fixes

Recognizing that educational incentives head the list of potential inducements toward service in the ranks of the Armed Forces, Congress this year passed legislation establishing a test program of educational assistance for young people who enter the service after June 30, 1985. This is a first-ever peacetime GI Bill.

To participate, a recruit must contribute \$100 a month for the first 12 months of his enlistment. In return for his \$1,200 contribution and three years of service, the soldier can receive \$300 monthly for up to 36 months while attending a college or university.

The benefit would be reduced to \$250 a month for two years of service, and to \$140 a month for six years in a reserve component. The reserve service benefit is also a first-time-ever provision and is not contributory.

On top of the basic benefit there are some added inducements payable at the discretion of the secretary of defense for individuals possessing critical specialties or for longer enlistments.

The new program should be an excellent enlistment incentive, but it needs some minor changes to be fully effective in attracting college-bound youth to enlist in one of the services. The deduction of \$100 a month from a recruit's pay is substantial; it represents about 17 percent of pay before taxes. It would be easier for a new recruit to afford \$50 a month for 24 months. This stretch-out would likely attract more participants.

At the present time there is no provision for refunding the contribution of a participant who does not complete the enlistment or who later chooses not to attend college. A refund in these circumstances should be available.

Finally, a decision whether to participate can only be made on the first day of an enlistment. A teenaged recruit already has a "full plate" of decisions to make as he or she moves through enlistment processing and takes the oath. A more reasonable approach would permit enrollment anytime during the first year of service.

This is a good bill. To make it better, the new Congress should consider and adopt these minor but necessary changes to a program vital to continuation of the all-volunteer force.