
Defense Report

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A Permanent GI Bill Educational Benefit—It's Now Up to The Senate

Despite some rather evident foot dragging on the part of the Department of Defense, the House of Representatives has done right by the military services and the young men and women who serve by voting to make the new GI Bill permanent. At present, educational benefits are paid to enlistees under a three-year test program that is scheduled to expire this June. By a 401-2 vote, the House provided a real boost to military recruiting efforts, which are facing a period of dwindling numbers of eligible youths to fill the ranks of the armed forces.

The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee unanimously passed a similar measure, but it hit a snag in the Armed Services subcommittee on manpower and personnel. Senators there are asking for more data concerning the long-term costs of the program and its effects on recruiting. They need go no further than the annual posture statements presented by every service secretary and military chief in support of the 1988-89 budget. Army Chief of Staff Gen. John A. Wickham Jr. said: "The GI Bill is the single most important personnel policy tool we have to recruit a quality Army. The Congress must ensure that this powerful incentive remains in place."

During testimony on the GI Bill before both House and Senate committees, the Pentagon's top personnel officials offered a new DoD proposal that would "restructure" the basic benefit for some future recruits and would transfer funding of the benefits from the Veterans Administration to DoD.

Neither of the DoD proposals makes much sense. Restructuring really means reducing the benefits to a point where it is more advantageous for a potential enlistee to join the reserve program than the active forces. Such a move would yank the rug out from under Gen. Wickham's quality Army.

As for transferring the funding from the VA, with its more than 40 years experience in the administration of GI Bill benefits, to DoD, there is neither cost reduction nor other efficiencies in such a move.

By its overwhelming vote in favor of making the GI Bill a permanent program, without these changes, the House told DoD not to bother. With the right kind of encouragement, maybe the Senate will be equally resolute.

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