

Thursday, June 19, 2008

Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 5740, the Post 9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act - bipartisan legislation that honors our men and women in uniform and strengthens our military.

I am pleased that this bill was included as part of the emergency war funding measure that the House is considering today because I believe taking care of those who serve in war is a cost of war. America should never fight wars without taking care of our own.

Since World War II, our nation has offered education benefits to returning GIs. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the first GI Bill, which was passed unanimously by this House, paid for the tuition, books, fees, training costs, and even a monthly stipend for our returning veterans.

After World War II, nearly 8 million veterans, out of a wartime veteran population of 15 million, used the original GI Bill to earn an education. The economic return was unprecedented. For every dollar we spent on the GI Bill, we generated seven more into our national economy. Millions of newly-educated veterans led our nation in business and innovation and created the American middle class. It's no wonder the GI Bill of 1944 is regarded as one of the most successful pieces of legislation to earn this House's approval in the 20th Century.

Since that time, Congress has passed other GI bills, but over time, the value of the education benefit has declined. The current Montgomery GI Bill, for example, was designed for peacetime service, and is not meeting the needs of our newest generation of veterans, many of whom are returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our veterans - whether active duty, Reservists or National Guardsmen - deserve an education benefit that accounts for the stress of war and keeps up with the rapidly increasing cost of a higher education. That is why, with the backing of a broad, bipartisan coalition, I introduced H.R. 5740, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act.

Under the legislation, GIs returning from Iraq or Afghanistan would receive up to four academic years of education benefits, including stipends for housing and books. They can even use their benefits at private schools through the Yellow Ribbon G.I. Education Enhancement Program, in which the federal government will match, dollar for dollar, any voluntary additional contributions to veterans from institutions whose tuition is more expensive than the maximum educational assistance provided under this legislation.

Veterans would even have up to 15 years after they leave active duty to use their education benefits.

When I was elected to this House, my constituents asked me to work in a bipartisan way to find reasonable solutions to our common problems. And I think we achieved that with this bill.

Working together with my Democratic and Republican colleagues, we attracted more than two-thirds of the House as cosponsors. Ninety-five Republicans, nearly half of the minority party's membership, lent their support.

I am happy that House leadership was able to build on this support and work with the President to come to a bipartisan agreement to provide this robust educational benefit to our veterans.

I encourage the Senate to act quickly to pass this new GI Bill and make good on our promise of a higher education.

Our veterans have fought for us. The least we can do is fight for them.

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