

WASHINGTON – The House of Representatives delivered a historic victory to our nation’s veterans today by passing a 21st Century GI Bill that would provide military veterans with significant education benefits in return for their combat service.

The House passed the FY 2008 Supplemental Appropriations Bill, which included the GI Bill measure introduced by U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell. The specific measure that included the GI Bill, Amendment No. 3 to the Supplemental Appropriations Bill, passed with a bipartisan vote of 256 to 166.

Mitchell introduced H.R. 5740, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, last month. It currently has 298 House supporters, including 93 Republicans. The Senate companion bill, S. 22, which was introduced by U.S. Sen. Jim Webb of Virginia, has 58 Senate sponsors.

“We have a responsibility to take care of our men and women in uniform,” said Mitchell. “The new GI Bill will provide important education benefits for our veterans, strengthen our economy and strengthen military recruitment.”

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act extends educational benefits to all members of the military who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001, including activated reservists and National Guard. Mitchell introduced the legislation with U.S. Reps. Bobby Scott (D-Va.), Ginny Brown-Waite (R-Fla.), and Peter King (R-N.Y.).

Under the legislation,

- Service members returning from Iraq or Afghanistan would receive up to four academic years of education benefits, including stipends for housing and books.
- Veterans would have up to 15 years after they leave active duty to use their education benefits.
- Veterans would be able to use 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 the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill.

Mitchell strongly criticized House leadership for attaching a tax change to the legislation.

“I strongly disagree with leadership’s decision to raise taxes on the backs of our veterans, and I believe it is wrong that I wasn’t given an opportunity to offer an amendment to strip this from the bill,” said Mitchell. “I will do everything in my power to encourage the Senate to fix this legislation.”

Mitchell made the following statement for the record:

“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.

“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.

“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.

“However, I am deeply troubled by how we got to this point, and am disappointed that this issue has become politicized.

“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 that is what I tried to do with this GI Bill.

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

“But instead of using that coalition to secure overdue educational benefits for our veterans, our leadership has allowed ideological gotcha games to prevail.

“What began as an attempt to fix a broken promise to our veterans has devolved into a fight over who can score the most political points.

“As a result, instead of sending a veto-proof bill to the Senate, we are sending a lesser bill with a less certain outcome.

“This does not hurt any of our political opponents, Madam Speaker; it only hurts our veterans. And, frankly, they deserve better.

“Our soldiers and veterans deserve a House whose actions match its rhetoric. If we mean what we say, that taking care of those who serve is truly a cost of war, then the GI Bill should be included as a part of our war spending.

“I was astonished yesterday when, amidst all the platitudes some members of this chamber made about the need for the GI Bill to meet pay-go rules, those very same members were so willing to throw those rules out the door when it came to the Farm Bill. Wealthy farmers were given greater consideration than our veterans.

“I strongly disagree with leadership’s decision to raise taxes, and I believe it is wrong that I wasn’t given an opportunity to offer an amendment to strip this from the bill. I will do everything in my power to encourage the Senate to fix this legislation.

“However, in order to get the GI Bill to the Senate, and give it any chance to pass, I am forced to vote for the deeply flawed package before me today.

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