

[East Valley Tribune](#)

Rep. Harry Mitchell (D-AZ) and Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite (R-FL)

In a time when partisanship prevails far too often, Congress is on the brink of setting aside partisan differences to pass what will be one of the most important pieces of legislation of the past decade: the 21st Century GI Bill.

Our nation has an opportunity, and we believe an obligation, to strengthen America's commitment to our men and women in uniform by extending real education benefits to those who have served in combat.

It's a commitment we first made 60 years ago when Congress unanimously passed and President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act - more commonly known as the GI Bill.

Under the GI Bill, 8 million World War II veterans earned an education, and went on to form the backbone of the Greatest Generation. This national investment in knowledge, training and potential helped to spur exponential economic growth and build the American middle class.

We are proud to have joined forces as the primary sponsors in the House of Representatives of a bipartisan 21st-century GI Bill that strengthens our commitment to veterans and invests in our economy. Sens. Jim Webb, D-Va., and Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., have thrown aside party labels to join forces and champion this legislation as well.

A majority of those in both the House and Senate have signed on as co-sponsors of the legislation, making it one of the most widely supported pieces of veterans' legislation before Congress.

This new commitment is simple: If you have served at least three months in combat since Sept. 11, 2001, we will honor your sacrifice and cover up to four years of a college education,

depending on your length of service, plus stipends for books and housing. This benefit would apply to everyone - those on active duty as well as the National Guard and Reserve.

This is an important change in benefits that reflects the changing dynamic of our military and how we have fought the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the past, our military generally relied on active-duty personnel. In this war, National Guardsmen and Reservists have been critical to our efforts and have served just as valiantly as their active-duty counterparts.

Yet, many of these soldiers remain ineligible for robust education benefits when they return from combat. And without a new GI Bill, they won't achieve parity with those who served the same mission. They took the same risk. They made the same sacrifices. They deserve the same opportunity for success.

The current GI Bill, known as the Montgomery GI Bill, has served a worthy purpose, and has helped hundreds of thousands of Americans earn an education. But it was designed for peacetime service. We believe that as the nature of military service has changed in wartime, so too should benefits for those who volunteer to service.

Perhaps the most universal benefit of a new GI Bill is how it would work to strengthen our economy today, and in the future. For every dollar we invested in the World War II GI Bill, we produced seven more in economic growth. That's exactly the kind of boost our economy needs right now.

Our returning soldiers are precisely the kind of top-quality people who can be valuable leaders: disciplined, hard-working individuals who are looking to improve their lot in life and serve their country. We know they can continue to strengthen our country, even after their time in uniform comes to a close.

But they need Congress and the president to act. With our help, today's veterans will get a shot at becoming the next Greatest Generation.

*Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., and Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite, R-Fla., serve together on the House*

*Veterans' Affairs Committee.*