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Editorial

Our view: The nation will be repaid many times over for the cost of educating a new generation of military veterans

As the United States honors its fallen military men and women this Memorial Day weekend, we were pleased that Congress also showed some gratitude to current members of the armed forces by passing a new GI Bill.

The expanded educational benefits for members of the military who have been on active duty since Sept. 11, 2001, are expected to cost the government about \$51.6 billion through 2017. It's a small price when one considers how much the nation will benefit from the bill.

More importantly, the new GI Bill written by U.S. Sen. James Webb, D-Va., will make a big difference in the lives of U.S. soldiers and sends a message that this nation is truly grateful for their service and sacrifices.

On Thursday, the Senate passed an Iraq war spending bill that included the new GI Bill. Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., voted against the spending bill. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., did not vote. The House passed a similar measure the previous week. Both Southern Arizona Democratic Reps. Raúl Grijalva and Gabrielle Giffords voted for the measure.

President Bush has vowed to veto the spending bill because it is bloated with unrelated domestic spending.

We understand his point. Tacking non-military items onto the war-funding bill is unnecessary.

However, if he does veto the measure and Congress fails to override it, we hope the GI Bill is resurrected as a stand-alone bill.

We believe the new GI Bill is necessary because educational benefits available to today's soldiers are limited and have gone down in value over the years as the price of a college education has risen markedly.

Also, existing benefits were enacted in peacetime, when the demands on soldiers and their families were far different than they are now.

If the nation is going to demand more of soldiers, such as multiple deployments to war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan, then the government should offer rewards commensurate with that level of sacrifice.

The new GI Bill:

- Would reimburse the full tuition costs at any public school in a soldier's home state. Soldiers would have to serve three years or more to benefit.
- Doesn't require soldiers to set aside any of their pay for college costs while on active duty, as is now required.
- Pays \$1,000 a year for books and fees and any costs incurred from tutoring or certification and licensing tests. The bill also would pay an average \$1,000 monthly stipend for housing.
- Allows up to 15 years for the benefit to be used, up from the 10-year limit in the existing Montgomery GI Bill.

"This is really the best news that we could be delivering to our military personnel and veterans," U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., said in a press release after Senate passage of the bill.

"We have the opportunity and obligation as a nation to strengthen our commitment to those who have served in combat. These education benefits will not only help military recruitment, but will strengthen our economy at a time when it needs it the most."

Supporters of the legislation point out the GI Bill enacted after World War II, on which the new measure is modeled, was a boon not only for soldiers, but for the entire nation.

Approximately 7.8 million veterans out of a wartime military population of 15 million took advantage of the WWII-era GI Bill. Educated veterans have higher income levels, which translates into a larger tax base for governments at all levels.

Webb has said that for every dollar invested in veterans, the United States receives seven dollars in return.

If the new GI Bill becomes law, it might also entice more young Americans to join the military.

The Army and Marines have lowered their recruiting standards in the last couple of years to meet recruiting goals. That might no longer be necessary with the new GI Bill.

Opponents of the bill make the counterargument that the new GI Bill could thin the ranks of the military because soldiers would be more inclined to leave the service and go to college. There was a proposal to require six years of service before soldiers could take full advantage of the new GI Bill.

Those arguments lead us to wonder if the president and some members of Congress truly care about the troops or simply see them as a resource to be squeezed for every last drop of military use.

The nation's young men and women should be rewarded for their service, which often puts them in harm's way for a year or more at a time. The new GI Bill is an excellent way to help troops rebuild and enhance their lives when they come home.

Honoring fallen soldiers is privilege and an obligation. However, the new GI Bill shows appreciation of the living.