

[East Valley Tribune](#)

Luke Larson

I would like to give Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., a well-deserved public thank you for his co-sponsorship of a bill that would increase educational benefits to veterans.

On April 29 in Washington, D.C., hundreds of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans from across the country converged on Capitol Hill to join lawmakers in advocating a "21st Century GI Bill" for our newest generation of veterans.

The bill introduced by Sens. Jim Webb, D-Va., Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., and John Warner, R-Va., in the Senate and by Mitchell, Bobby Scott, D-Va., Ginny Brown-Waite, R-Fla., and Peter King, R-N.Y., in the House calls for immediate legislative action.

The legislation boasts strong bipartisan and bicameral support with 57 co-sponsors in the Senate, 234 co-sponsors in the House and the endorsements of the nation's leading veterans' organizations.

As a Marine infantry officer, I led America's finest young all-volunteer force into Ar Ramadi, Iraq, for two combat deployments in 2005 and again in 2007. Time and time again I was impressed by the Marines' resolve to do the right thing in the face of adversity. These young men and women often times finish their service with two and three tours to Iraq or Afghanistan.

A very small percentage of the United States population has answered the call of duty and volunteered to serve in the military since Sept. 11, 2001. When these patriots joined, they knew full well that they would be going into harm's way. They deserve to be rewarded for their sacrifice through educational opportunity.

My grandfather Carl Snyder, 84, a 40-year Scottsdale resident and an World War II Army veteran, told me what an awesome opportunity the GI Bill was for him in 1946. He was able to attend the University of Cincinnati and receive a civil engineering degree. He told me that without a healthy GI Bill that paid all of his tuition and also gave him a \$90 monthly stipend, there is no way he would have been able to finish his degree.

Today's veterans do not benefit from the same generous federal GI Bill aid that my grandfather received. The College Board reported that the average cost of a four-year public in-state degree is more than \$65,000. A veteran who takes full advantage of the current GI Bill benefits can draw only \$39,636.

The disparity speaks in the numbers. With the rising costs of higher education, the current Montgomery GI Bill has not kept pace. Our wartime veterans deserve better. The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act would help close this gap in disparity and give veterans a

better chance to receive an education. This bill would also have positive long-term effects for the U.S. economy. A congressional study showed that for every dollar invested in WWII veterans, \$7 were generated.

Webb and Mitchell have both been quoted as saying that educating our nation's veterans is a cost of war. I passionately agree.

Having seen firsthand what we ask of these volunteers and the immeasurable sacrifice they make for our country, I feel we have an ethical obligation to pay them back. Webb notes that three former presidents, a dozen U.S. senators, three Supreme Court justices and 14 Nobel Prize winners went to school on the GI Bill.

As a country we owe this generation's veterans the chance to receive the same educational opportunity. I applaud Mitchell's efforts to deliver this much-needed bill.

Luke Larson is a Scottsdale resident.