

[East Valley Tribune](#)

Bill Richardson

The sign of a true leader is someone who hasn't forgotten where they came from and those who have always looked up to their wisdom and concern for the well-being of the little guy.

For many political leaders, hobnobbing with the fat cats who write big campaign contribution checks is a way of life once elected.

What may be the rule for many isn't the way Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., does business. Harry still goes to Ray's ASU Barbershop, eats hot dogs at Ted's, drives a car with more miles on it than most and seems to have an endless supply of khaki pants and plaid shirts just like he wore when he taught at Tempe High School.

When Harry taught at Tempe High, the war in Vietnam was being fought. He watched as I left his class mid-year to enlist in the Marines and saw many more who enlisted or got drafted. He remembers those who came home and those who didn't. My memory is that it had a profound impact on the man who taught American history and government. He knew what the past and present was, and had a good guess about the future and the total cost of war.

Tempe was filled with veterans from World War II when Harry grew up. Home from the war and looking for a new start. Then as now, a good education was the first step in turning the military experience into a great fresh start following service to one's country.

Following World War II, vets could afford to go to school with the benefits from the GI Bill. I can't think how many people I know who went to school after the war on the GI Bill and who then made continued and countless contributions to their country and community.

Unfortunately those benefits went by the wayside and while the new GI Bill helped, it took that and two jobs to get my degree. It's even tougher now with the increased costs associated with just being able to survive, much less pay for books and tuition.

That could soon change thanks to Harry and Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va. Webb is a former secretary of the Navy under President Reagan and a former Marine officer awarded the Navy Cross, Silver Star, two Bronze Stars and two Purple Hearts during his service as an infantry officer in Vietnam. The two have introduced bills that would drastically change the GI Bill and give veterans a real opportunity to get an education much like their predecessors had following World War II.

The bill would pay for three years of higher education for all military service people returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, including members of the National Guard and reserves.

Harry's partnering with one of the most respected members of the Reagan administration, along with the 217 congressman and 56 senators, on both sides of the aisle, is a testament to his leadership and resolve to get something done that really matters back home and across the country.

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, H.R. 5740, and S.22, would provide educational benefits to military veterans for 36 months, or four years based on a nine-month school year.

At a recent Saturday get-together in Tempe Harry met with veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Cold War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was a face-to-face, up-close-and-personal meeting that included several just returned from the war zone.

From what veterans tell me he also makes his presence known often at the Carl Hayden Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Phoenix. No show, no entourage, just finding out how are veterans are being treated and what he can do to help.

As a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and Chairman of the Subcommittee on VA Oversight and Investigations, Harry has used his clout to help give vets hope and opportunity.

As ugly and difficult as things seem to be at times, especially for returning war veterans, the efforts of Harry and Webb, whose son is a Marine, may soon give vets the tools they need for their future and ours.

I strongly encourage you to let your congressman and senators know this must pass and sent to President Bush for immediate enactment.

And if you see Harry down at Ray's barbershop getting a haircut or eating a hot dog at Ted's, tell him thanks for not forgetting those who chose to serve. He'll talk to you - he hasn't forgotten where he came from.