Young veterans from across America converged on the steps of the U.S. Capitol Building on April 29 to voice support for a new and improved GI Bill. They spoke about how difficult it is for veterans to earn college degrees these days. The benefits were failing to cover the cost of tuition. In some cities, the payments for veterans of the reserves failed to cover the cost of getting to and from campus.

Several members of Congress joined these outspoken individuals and stressed the need for a “21st-century GI Bill” that would provide benefits worthy of our veterans and offer the same opportunities afforded to those who fought in World War II. After months of political haggling, Congress finally passed a new and better GI Bill.
BY PHILIP M. CALLAGHAN

Here’s the problem: We send our young men and women off to war in distant lands, testing their strength, commitment and courage under fire – sometimes for three or more tours of combat duty. Then we bring them home, thank them for their service, turn them out to the civilian world and watch them struggle to succeed.

As troops, they are revered for defending our nation against terror. As veterans, they slip from our sight as they pursue college degrees. The GI Bill of recent years was a far cry from the original, having gradually lost value while the cost of higher education soared. The American Legion worked with Congress for more than three years to deliver a meaningful veterans education benefit, one that truly meet the needs of our 21st-century veterans.

On June 26, Congress finally fixed a problem that has persisted for half a century: little by little, our veterans have been losing their college education benefits. By a vote of 92-6, the Senate approved the “Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act,” which cleared the House by a 268-155 vote. Four days later, President Bush signed the bill into law.

“We applaud Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi,” American Legion National Commander Marty Conatser said after Congress passed the measure. “Thanks in large part to her committed leadership, this momentous piece of legislation will resonate as a landmark in American history.”

Starting in August 2009, veterans who served in the military for at least three years will qualify for full tuition payments at any in-state

### 1944 GI Bill

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 was crafted by The American Legion, led by Past National Commander Harry W. Colmery. He wrote the original draft for a bill that was introduced in Congress on Jan. 10, 1944. Deadlocked in a House committee vote, the GI Bill almost died. To break the tie, the Legion tracked down Rep. John Gibson of Georgia, drove him through a rainstorm, and flew him to Washington just in time to cast his “yes” vote on June 10, 1944, as the Normandy invasion raged across the Atlantic. Twelve days later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the GI Bill into law.

### The Incredible Shrinking GI Bill

Seven senators in the U.S. Congress got full rides to universities and law schools, using World War II veterans educational benefits. If they tried the same thing with today’s shrunken payments, they’d be out of money after a few weeks. Skyrocketing costs haven’t helped the situation; back in 1945, most universities charged less than $500 for a year’s tuition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senator</th>
<th>Educational Institution</th>
<th>Degree funded by the GI Bill</th>
<th>2006-2007 costs$</th>
<th>2006-2007 costs covered by Montgomery GI Bill</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daniel K. Akaka</td>
<td>University of Hawaii, 1952</td>
<td>Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>$14,456</td>
<td>$6,000* (41.5%)</td>
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<td>Daniel K. Inouye</td>
<td>University of Hawaii, 1950</td>
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<td>Frank R. Lautenberg</td>
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<td>Juris Doctor Degree</td>
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<td>Ted Stevens</td>
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<td>(R-Alaska)</td>
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<td>John Warner</td>
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<td>(R-Va.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jim Webb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chuck Hagel</td>
<td>U.S. Naval Academy, 1968</td>
<td>Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>$51,530</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Georgetown Law School, 1975</td>
<td>Juris Doctor Degree</td>
<td>$15,230</td>
<td>$6,000 (39.4%)</td>
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† Costs are defined as tuition, fees, books room and board. *According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, the average annual Montgomery GI Bill payment in FY ’07 was $6,000. The maximum annual benefit under the current Montgomery GI Bill payment is $9,675.
public university in the country. Essentially, this increases annual GI Bill benefits from $40,000 to a maximum of about $90,000 – not just for active-duty troops, but also for reserve and National Guard members.

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee that determines VA spending, gave credit to The American Legion. “Passing this historic new GI Bill into law could not have happened without the dedicated efforts of The American Legion, and I want to thank them for their critical support throughout this process.”

The new education package will cost about $62 billion over the next decade. Veterans who serve 10 years or more will earn the option of transferability to spouses and children. Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., was an early supporter of such a provision, which he introduced in separate legislation. “I always felt this was important,” he said. “It gives the veteran the option of whether to use it for himself or allow his family to use it.”

Was King surprised the bill passed so easily? “I actually was, but the stars were properly aligned and this bill took on a life of its own,” he said. “It was a combination of a sense in Congress that this was overdue, and very active lobbying by veterans groups such as The American Legion.”

Yes, Congress certainly feels good about doing right by our veterans and updating a sorely outdated GI Bill. But the question remains: how did the situation get so bad, before it finally got fixed?

Lessons from the Great War. The first GI Bill was so great because “it eased the readjustment of 16 million men and women,” says University of California-Berkeley assistant professor of history Kathleen Frydl. “Veteran readjustment is a tricky proposition, and when it’s mishandled, it not only can endanger the lives of veterans, it can actually endanger entire political systems.”

That’s what happened little more than a decade after World War I when Depression-starved veterans joined the “Bonus Army” and camped out in Washington, demanding cash payments for their services during wartime. The threat of military force drove them out.

“We have a shameful history of doing poorly by our veterans,” says author Edward Humes, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. “Most of the Revolutionary War veterans were dead before their pensions, promised 40 years earlier, were finally dispersed.” That pattern continued right up through World War II, when Humes says a “mixture of altruism and fear” broke the cycle. Some of our leaders began to wonder what might happen in the United States if our government neglected 16 million veterans from one of the greatest military forces ever assembled.

The American Legion wondered the same thing and testified before Congress that if it didn’t do right by its returning war veterans, all hell could break loose. Colmery holed up in Room 570 of the Mayflower
In Washington during the first week of January 1944. He wrote in
longhand on the back of hotel stationery a document that would shift
the course of U.S. history.

Around that time, Colmery told an audience in Topeka, Kan., that the
re-assimilation of veterans “is the gravest social problem which con-
fronts us. They can either make the country or break it, save democracy
or scrap it, promote world order or World War III. The result depends on
us, not them.”

The legislative masterpiece was signed into law by President Franklin
D. Roosevelt on June 22, 1944. That same day, the Soviet Army began its
great summer offensive against the Germans; five days later, Allied
troops liberated the French city of Cherbourg as they pushed forward
from the beaches at Normandy. The smell of victory was in the air.
Veterans would be coming home soon. When he signed the bill, FDR
said the measure gave “emphatic notice to the men and women in our
armed forces that the American people do not intend to let them down.”

The GIs were largely oblivious. They were too busy fighting to worry
about legislative committees and bill markups. Dr. Suzanne Mettler,
who teaches in Cornell University’s department of government, says the
GI Bill came as a complete surprise to most veterans. “I’ve interviewed
many veterans from the World War II era, and I asked them, ‘Did you
feel you were owed the GI Bill?’ And they would tell me, sometimes
rather vehemently, ‘No, we were not owed the GI Bill.’”

Mettler says most served their country out of desire and a sense of
duty. “The GI Bill was something that was thought of as a gift from the
nation to them.”

Few at the time realized what a fantastic gift it was. The 1944 GI Bill,
Humes says, “was an anomaly, and The American Legion knows this
better than anyone, because it’s part of why the organization was
founded in the first place: the utterly shabby way in which veterans had
been treated in every preceding conflict.”

Humes says the Legion’s vision of the GI Bill went beyond what FDR
contemplated. “For instance, it revolutionized home-buying for every-
one. There was that mixture of wanting to do right by the veterans, and
not wanting to see a Bonus March – times 100 – come Armistice Day. So
it was a unique chemistry that led to this remarkable legislation.”

A Slow Erosion. It could be said that the golden age of college benefits
for veterans ended on June 25, 1950, at about 4 a.m., Korean Standard
Time. Soon after war broke out between on the Korean peninsula,
U.S. forces took on the brunt of responsibility to drive communist forces
back across the 38th Parallel. Veterans returned home to find their
education benefits diminished by the Veterans Adjustment Act of 1952.
The government no longer paid tuition directly to colleges and universi-
ties; instead, veterans got a flat monthly fee of about $110. From that,
they were expected to pay for all of their education.

GI Bill benefits were cancelled altogether in 1956. “The World War II
GI Bill actually ran into a lot of implementation problems,” Frydl says.
“And Congress and Eisenhower resolved those problems, in large part,
by making the Korean War GI Bill much less generous.” In 1959, a report
by the Bradley Commission determined that serving in the military
should be “an obligation of citizenship, not a basis for government
benefits.” Apparently, the government saw no good reason, during a
time of relative peace, to reward its former servicemembers.

AARON ALFSON
Orlando, Fla.,
Columbia University
The other day, Sen. John Warner, R-Va., found something he’d been missing for about 20 years: his father’s American Legion pin. Rummaging through the drawers of an antique bureau, he rediscovered the small but significant family heirloom. After World War I, the senator’s father, also named John, joined American Legion Post 1 in Paris. “My father served in the trenches of France as a young doctor, and he was a very strong influence on my life,” Warner says. “He told me when it was time to serve my country, that I should go. So I went into the Navy. All the kids on our block joined in December 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge. We were only 17 years old.”

World War II ended and Warner returned home in 1946 to find his father terminally ill with cancer. “He was a patient for 18 months before he died,” Warner says. “It really took all the money my mother and father had to care for him. I would not have had the funds, as a consequence of my family’s financial status, to have gone to college. It’s as simple as that.”

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, championed by The American Legion, came to Warner’s rescue. The GI Bill gave him a full ride to Washington and Lee University and another full ride to the University of Virginia Law School, where he graduated in 1953.

“I have to tell you, with a deep sense of humility, that I’m in this chair as a U.S. senator, finishing 30 years, because of strong parents and the GI Bill,” Warner says. “So I feel a strong obligation to pay back today’s generation of veterans with the same wonderful benefits that I received.”

Warner knew The American Legion supported the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and he pushed hard to get it passed this year. “And next time I go to a Legion event,” he says, “I’m going to wear my father’s lapel pin.”

– Philip M. Callaghan
Entry fees

When they’re recruited, about 95 percent of servicemembers sign up for GI Bill benefits, which cost them $1,200 each. When they leave the service, nearly 30 percent of veterans never use those benefits. While 36 months of educational benefits are provided (monthly stipends range from $317 to $1,101), veterans only use an average of 17 months’ worth. While the U.S. government paid out $2 billion in GI Bill benefits last year, it also earned $230 million from veterans who paid their $1,200 “entry fees” but never used their benefits.

now, what you’re offering is a benefit that pales in comparison to what was given to the World War II generation of veterans.”

Cost of War. Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., sits in his Capitol Hill office and ponders the GI Bill’s place in society. “I don’t know how we got here, but we’re here,” he said as the need for a new benefit began making headlines across the country and the question arose about how a better GI Bill might influence recruitment and retention. “Our focus is on fixing it. If you’re trying to attract people to join the military, the GI Bill benefits are certainly part of the package. You’ve got to ramp it up for a wartime military. If we’re going to spend an extra $100 billion on this year’s war supplement, a couple of billion dollars for a meaningful GI Bill should just be part of the cost of war.”

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, puts it this way: “You can’t retain people you haven’t recruited.”

I’m in the Marine Corps Reserve and went to Iraq in 2003, spending time as a machine-gunner with the 3rd Battalion of my reserve unit out of Little Rock, Ark. When I came back, I started the GI Bill and it ran out last year after 36 months of benefits. I was getting the grand sum of $282 a month. After I started at Cal Poly, my benefits were up to $430 a month. But now I don’t get any more benefits, and I still have about three quarters left to go before graduating.

The benefits helped so I didn’t have to work as much, but since I don’t want to take out any loans, I was relying on benefits and working. And I was taking a full course load. So the GI Bill was somewhat helpful, but it only amounted to about half the cost of my monthly rent. And my tuition is roughly $1,500 a quarter. If I wasn’t a California resident, it would be about $7,000.’

Evan Aanerud
San Luis Obispo, Calif., California Polytechnic State University
‘I’m a Navy reservist attached to Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 18. We were deployed to Fallujah, Iraq; I spent six months there. It was very scary at times, but we had a mission to complete and we worked diligently to accomplish that mission. When I returned, I went back to Boise State University. My tuition is roughly $8,000 a year, and my GI Bill is $440 a month. Because I’m a reservist, I don’t qualify for the active-duty GI Bill. I don’t think anyone is worth less than anyone else, and we risk our lives the same as active-duty people do. We’re gone from our families, and fighting the war on terrorism just the same. Yet the benefits are not the same. The $440 a month covers my rent, and that’s pretty much it.’

ELIZABETH LAHNY
Boise, Idaho, Boise State University

Recruiters have it hard enough, Webb says. “About 8 percent of their target age group has a propensity to serve in the Army or Marine Corps right now. So they’re pounding the heck out of (that population) with enlistment bonuses, etc. The worst thing in recruiting is not making your goal, because it’s a career-ender.” Webb says expanding education benefits makes recruitment easier, and because the new GI Bill gives veterans 15 years to cash in, he doesn’t think retention will be harmed.

In an April 29 letter to Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., Secretary of Defense Robert Gates wrote that “serious retention issues could arise if the benefit were expanded beyond the level sufficient to offset average monthly costs for a public four-year institution.”

The Congressional Budget Office analyzed Webb’s legislation in May and concluded it would cost taxpayers $51.8 billion over the next 10 years. It also noted that “raising the educational benefits as proposed in S.22 would result in a 16-percent increase in recruits.” CBO also estimated that DoD could offset retention losses by ratcheting up selective re-enlistment bonuses to $25,000.

Dr. Michael Gambone, history professor at Kutztown University, knows something about how well veterans re-adjust. “I teach a lot of those kids. They come back, and there’s some difficulty in adjusting to an academic environment.” He believes school is one of the best ways for veterans to make the transition.

“When soldiers leave the military, they can disassemble weapons, and they understand basic tactics, but what they lack are skills that will make them relevant in the job market,” he says. “(Higher education) gives them the type of civilian mission they can apply themselves to, and that’s very important in allowing these people to re-assimilate.”

Jerome Kohlberg, a World War II veteran and successful entrepreneur, started the Fund for Veterans Education with $8 million of his own money. About 400 veterans have received scholarships. As for the retention argument fronted by DoD, “we don’t buy that,” says Matt Boulay, director of the fund. “People don’t separate from service just to go to college. There are a host of reasons to separate. On the other hand, most people sign up in order to get their college paid for. That’s what DoD sells in their recruiting slogans.”

Honoring Service. American Legion National Commander Marty Conatser has a suggestion for critics who think a new GI Bill is too expensive. “Visit Walter Reed. War is expensive. The bulk of that cost is paid for by the men and women who wear the uniform. Benefits are just a small, small cost of war.” He points out that back in 1944, even some veterans groups thought the GI Bill stood likely to break the Treasury.
‘I served in the U.S. Army, joining in 2001. I was in the 3rd Infantry Division, 3rd Brigade, out of Fort Benning, Ga. I did a seven-month tour in Kosovo, then went to Iraq in January 2003. We stayed in Kuwait until war was declared, then hit the borderline and went straight to Baghdad.

The benefits I’m getting right now help me cover about half my costs. Another thing is, the GI Bill doesn’t pay until after the first month of classes. Some schools don’t give extensions, so I’ve got to pay out of my pocket until that first payment comes in. I get about $550 a month, and that’s not nearly enough. Per semester, I’m paying $1,200 – plus books and gas.’

LARRY SOTO
Miami, Fla., Florida International University

Vietnam War GI Bill: William Walton

When William Walton was drafted into the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War, no one told him anything about his GI Bill benefits. “They didn’t need to,” he chuckles, “because we were a captive audience back then.”

Today, Walton is CEO for investment corporation Allied Capital in Washington. He also serves as president of the National Symphony Orchestra’s board of directors. He’s closely followed the GI Bill issue in Congress this year and what it might mean for future veterans. He cares not just because the GI Bill helped him reach his career goals, but also because he’s got a son in the Army who plans to use those educational benefits as well. “In general, members of the military aren’t paid that much money, so they really don’t have the ability to save for college or grad school,” Walton says. “Having that tab picked up as part of the military service should be part of the bargain.”

After serving in the Army for two years, the elder Walton went back to school at Indiana University, where his veterans benefits covered about two-thirds of his expenses. That support meant he could spend more time studying and less time working.

On campus, Walton remembers that veterans “tended to be extremely serious and dedicated students, and got an awful lot out of the college experience.”

After graduating from IU, Walton eventually enrolled in graduate school. Once again, the GI Bill helped pave his road to success. Walton believes that road should now be crowded with veterans returning from combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. “As citizens and taxpayers, we owe a great deal to the young men and women who served in our military,” Walton says. “They’ve made enormous sacrifices to protect and defend the country.”

Walton hasn’t forgotten how important the GI Bill was for him and his fellow veterans. “Looking back at the Vietnam era,” he says, “to be a returning veteran was not to be welcomed with open arms. And to have the GI Bill there ... was not only a show of financial support, it showed some emotional support as well.”

WILLIAM WALTON, CEO, Allied Capital, Washington

‘As citizens and taxpayers, we owe a great deal to the young men and women who served in our military.’

– Philip M. Callaghan
Instead, it created a world economic superpower. “The critics were wrong then,” Conatser says. “And they are wrong now.”

The war against terror is likely to continue for some time, if not indefinitely. More and more veterans will be coming home, looking for a chance at the same kind of prosperity their grandparents had. They expect benefits, not penalties. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., who introduced the companion bill to Webb’s legislation in the House, says he talks “to veterans continually who are coming back, working two jobs, trying to go to school, have children. It’s a real burden.”

Rep. Chet Edward, D-Texas, says a new GI Bill “is a show of respect, and just as we focused last year on increasing funding for VA health care, this is a logical follow-up.”

In 1968, Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., and his brother, Tom, served together in Vietnam. They came back home and went to school at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Their GI Bill benefits helped, but they still worked part-time jobs. Hagel says a new GI Bill is “the smart and right thing to do for our nation to recognize the service of individuals who’ve earned this benefit. This is not a welfare program.”

In Mettler’s mind, there’s another level to the GI Bill argument: the implication for democracy, and the impact on civic engagement. “So here’s a policy from the past, with a tremendous record of promoting more active citizenship, for people to have a greater voice in self-governance, and to participate in organizations that make communities healthy. We ought to be doing that for today.”

Frydl, who is writing a book about the GI Bill, says we should remember the main legacy of the original GI Bill: the peaceful readjustment of veterans into society.

“That was a real challenge,” Frydl says. “And we have no reason to think it’s less of a challenge today. Service-members, and communities themselves, often encounter very serious problems. We all really stand to suffer if veterans are not given a peaceable path back to civilian life.”

Says Hagel: “Most people don’t stop to recognize that we’re asking about 1 percent of the American people to bear all the burden, make all the sacrifices, do all the fighting, do all of the dying, in defense of this country.

“We will break down that system if we don’t do something, and I think educational benefits are one of those things that can help us. At a time when we’re at a crisis point in our military, these young men and women, and their families, need to be reassured that something’s going to be there for them later.”

Philip M. Callaghan is managing editor of The American Legion Magazine.

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