

Over the last several years, the Army has consistently been missing its recruiting goals. As a result, the Army has relaxed its enlistment policies, lowered the standards for signing up new soldiers, and implemented a stop-loss policy to keep soldiers in beyond their contract obligation. This formula is symptomatic of a military in America which today is under severe strain. It is a formula that will, over time—and it already has—erode the quality of our armed services. The benefits under this 21st century GI bill will reverse this trend by attracting a new generation of high-quality recruits who come to the service of their country for the promise of an education in return.

S. 22 is a powerful recruitment tool. It is also a very smart economic investment. Each month it seems we read a new report describing how America is falling behind in education and losing its global competitiveness. With tuition costs rising, more and more young Americans are finding college out of reach. Ask those young Americans in college today or ask their parents today about how far out of reach college has become for them.

Veterans who in another era would have been able to use their Montgomery GI bill to pay for college now find their benefits have not kept pace with tuition growth. After years of service to their country and multiple deployments, college remains out of reach.

By making college accessible again to those who have answered the call since September 11, we will be making one of the smartest investments we can possibly make. By giving veterans a clear path from the military to the classroom, we will be equipping them with the skills and knowledge they need to lead our world. We will be helping them fulfill their destiny as the greatest generation of their time, leaders in their community, leaders in business, and leaders for America and the world in the 21st century.

I am proud of all of my colleagues who are behind this bill. I am proud of the leadership of Senator DANNY AKAKA, the chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. I am proud of Senator WEBB, who has led this. I am proud of Senator HAGEL, whose principled voice serves our soldiers so well; Senator WARNER, whose wisdom and leadership on the Armed Services Committee has been so valuable for so many years; and Senator LAUTENBERG and Senator AKAKA, who both attended college under the GI bill in World War II. I thank each of them for their leadership.

I am proud the 21st century GI bill is included in this fiscal year 2008 supplemental. I am proud we have resisted efforts to weaken the bill. I am proud we have the opportunity to honor the service of our veterans with this GI bill to better reflect their sacrifice.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Hawaii is recognized.

A NEW GI BILL

Mr. AKAKA. Madam President, I rise to speak in support of a new GI bill for the 21st century.

As chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and as one of the 8 million veterans who took advantage of the opportunity to attend college on the original World War II GI bill, I know first-hand the value of this benefit. It is one of the reasons why I am here today in the U.S. Senate.

Without the generous support I received from the GI bill and the maturity and discipline I gained from my military experience, I am certain that my life would have turned out much differently. Being able to attend the University of Hawaii—with all expenses covered—and receiving an allowance of \$113.50 a month—gave me the start in life that led to me standing here in this body today.

Now we should give that same opportunity to those young people—stepping forward—who put themselves in harm's way for our country. That is why I have given my enthusiastic support to the provisions that will come before the Senate later this week in the supplemental appropriations bill that would establish a new program of educational assistance for veterans and servicemembers.

Those provisions are drawn from S. 22,—the proposed Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2007, which was introduced by my good friend and colleague from Virginia, Senator WEBB, who serves with me on the committee. This is a bipartisan measure that has already been approved by the House of Representatives.

This legislation will give thousands of young men and women who sacrificed for our country the opportunity to return to civilian life and pursue a full-time college education without worrying about what they will live on. It makes good on our promise of an education in return for volunteering to serve in our military and for honorable service.

To those who have concerns about the impact that this proposal might have on the Armed Forces ability to recruit and retain quality personnel, there are a number of points which must be made.

First, this new GI bill for the 21st century would be a powerful recruitment tool for our military. Our bright, college-bound high school seniors will see this as an attractive way to pay for their advanced education. By completing a 3-year commitment, they will earn a benefit that will allow them to attend school without accumulating thousands of dollars of debt.

As for retention, the armed services cannot retain those who they do not recruit.

In addition, this proposal incorporates a number of tools that the military can use to make longer commitments attractive, including retention kickers and the option of transfer benefits to family members.

I believe that those who would rely on transferability as an incentive to longer service would be disappointed. In 2006, the Army began offering this option to certain soldiers in critical skill areas. Less than 2 percent of the 17,000 soldiers who were given an option to transfer benefits to a spouse accepted it. Now the program has been expanded to permit transferability to children, but much more experience is needed before anyone can positively say that this benefit would have the desired impact on retention.

Finally, I want to say a few words to those who are concerned about the cost of the program. I have long said caring for veterans is a continuing cost of war. This Nation will be paying for the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan for many years. The cost of this program is a very small portion of the total funds that have already been spent and will continue to be incurred in the future. As others have pointed out, this program would be an extremely small percentage of what these conflicts are costing us each day.

I have worked very closely with Senator WEBB in developing this legislation. I take this opportunity to thank both Senator WEBB and his staff, especially Phillip Thompson and William Edwards, for their cooperation and collaboration. I also thank Senator JOHNSON and Appropriations Committee staff, Chad Schulken, as well as Senator HAGEL and his staff member, Sarah Pullen for their cooperation and assistance.

I believe that what the Appropriations Committee has reported, and that will be before us later this week, is a workable and effective proposal and I urge my colleagues to support it and the President to sign it into law.

It is time for a new GI bill for the 21st century.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. CANTWELL. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

GAS PRICES

Ms. CANTWELL. Madam President, I rise today to talk about the out-of-control oil prices we are seeing and what we can do about it right now. I see we have reached another record in gas prices with the national average topping \$3.79 a gallon, and today is the 13th day in a row we have seen an increase in gas prices.

It is time Congress be more aggressive at trying to solve this problem. We have taken some action in the last week, both on the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and on the farm bill, trying to put more teeth into the CFTC. But we need to do more.