

Reward for Service

Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan deserve an improved GI bill.

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NEARLY A CENTURY after the end of the war that was supposed to end all wars, tens of thousands of Americans are fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. The sacrifices of these brave men and women imbue Veterans Day with special meaning. It requires more than pausing between shopping and football to say thank you.

For example: Lasting fixes are needed for the treatment, rehabilitation and compensation of the returning wounded. The crisis in care and disability has been well-publicized, and it's time Congress act on the recommendations of a bipartisan commission formed in the aftermath of a Post investigation of Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Similarly, there is a need to reform the antiquated system of education benefits afforded the men and women in the U.S. military. A bill sponsored by Sens. James Webb (D-Va.) and Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) has focused attention on the inadequacies of a program designed for peacetime, not wartime, service.

The legislation would give veterans of the Sept. 11 era the kind of educational benefits afforded service members at the end of World War II in the first GI bill. Veterans who have served on active duty for at least two years would receive tuition, room and board, and a monthly stipend.

Even though Congress has made changes to the GI benefit several times since its inception, the expansion has not kept pace with the increased costs of college. For example, the maximum a veteran can receive under the current program is about \$1,100 per month for four years, or roughly \$38,000. The benefits pale in comparison to the actual costs of going to college. There are other problems with the current system, such as how it shortchanges members of the National Guard and reserves who serve combat tours.

Backers of the bill put the cost at \$2 billion, but others place it much higher. It's important to calculate the real cost and figure out where the money will come from. But Mr. Webb is right when he argues that the education of the nation's veterans must be considered a cost of war and one that the nation can't afford not to pay.