



# IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS OF AMERICA

## **Joint Economic Committee Hearing on the Future Costs of Funding the Iraq War Testimony of Tom Tarantino, IAVA Policy Associate**

Mr. Chairman, ranking member and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and our tens of thousands of members nationwide, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding economic challenges facing our nation's veterans, and the long terms costs of veterans' unemployment.

I began my military career in 1997 when I enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves as a Civil Affairs Specialist. In 2003 I was commissioned a 2LT in the Armor Branch and deployed to Iraq as a Platoon Leader from 2005-2006. Currently, I am a Policy Associate for the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America; the first and largest nonpartisan nonprofit organization for veterans of the current conflict.

My story serves as a good example of the challenge that many NCOs and Officers face when leaving the service. During my tenure as a Civil Affairs Specialist, I was trained in populace resource control, disaster and emergency management, civil defense planning, and humanitarian relief operations. I graduated from University of California Santa Barbara with a degree Global Studies and International Relations. For the next four years I served as a combat arms officer, holding several jobs across many functional disciplines. In addition to leading two platoons through combat, I, on a monthly basis, conducted and participated in the most complex training the military has to offer while assigned to the Opposition Force at the National Training Center. As a Headquarters Executive Officer at the National Training Center, I was responsible for the logistics and administration of a company of 400 with 3 multi-million dollar budgets. As a public relations officer, I was the public face of a regiment that not only trained the force, but prepared themselves to re-deploy. I had a long and honorable service. I gained skills and accomplished tasks that many of my civilian peers would not face until much later in their careers. Conventional wisdom, and the rhetoric from the Army's Transitional Assistance programs, told me that I should have no problems finding employment in the civilian world.

This, however, turned out not to be the case. After putting my belongings into storage and returning home after 10 years of service, I began what would be a 10 month journey of shock, disappointment and education as to the disposition of the civilian work force toward members of the military. I learned that in the civilian world, military achievements and equivalent skills are misunderstood and undervalued. In many positions I had practical experiences that matched or far exceeded the prospective job, yet employers did not understand or were not interested in learning how experience as an officer and a soldier translated to their industry. Additionally, I found that there was a fear attached to hiring former combat soldiers; the stigma of combat stress made employers view me as a potential liability to the company.

My difficult experience in the civilian job market is not unique. According to a recent report prepared for the Department of Veterans Affairs, recently separated service members are more likely to be unemployed and tend to earn lower wages than their nonmilitary peers. Among veterans who completed their service within the last 1 to 3 years, 18% were unemployed, and a full 25% earned less than \$21,840 a year. College-educated new veterans suffered the largest wage gap – earning almost \$10,000 a year less than their nonmilitary peers. We can all agree: veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan deserve better.

Over time, the lost economic opportunities of this generation of 1.7 million Iraq and Afghanistan veterans will have an untold cost not only for our military and their families, but for the economy as a whole.

IAVA has made a number of policy recommendations to help veterans transition to civilian life, and to forestall the dire economic consequences of a generation of underemployed veterans. These suggestions include:

- Tax credits for patriotic employers who support their deployed reservists. When reserve component employees are called to active duty for over 90 days, employers who pay the difference between the service members' civilian salary and their military wages deserve tax credits.
- Tax credits for the hiring of homeless veterans
- Better protections under the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act.

You can see these complete recommendations in our Legislative Agenda. While IAVA believes that these issues present a roadmap to better the lives of veterans, there is one issue that is immediate and before you now as members of Congress. The WWII GI Bill was never designed as a first rate economic stimulus plan, or the most effective recruitment tool in military history. These benefits were welcome side effects. The GI Bill was and will be the single most important readjustment tool to the 1.7 million veterans of this conflict; reducing the long term strain on veterans services while providing them

with an opportunity at a first class future. It is for these reasons that I would like to focus on the GI Bill.

After World War II, Americans fulfilled their responsibility to the millions of troops coming home by helping them readjust to civilian life. In 1944, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the "Servicemen's Readjustment Act," better known as the GI Bill, which made higher education affordable for eight million veterans. The original GI Bill, which expired in 1956, covered tuition, fees, and books, and gave veterans a living stipend while they were students. The only requirements were at least 90 days of military service and an honorable discharge.

The GI Bill helped reinvent America after a half-decade of war. The GI Bill has given many of our nation's leaders their start, including the Senators and combat veterans who are supporting a new GI Bill: Jim Webb, John Warner, Chuck Hagel, Frank Lautenberg, and Daniel Akaka.

But the GI Bill has benefited more than just a handful of America's leaders and luminaries. 2.2 million Veterans attended a college or university on the original GI Bill. It is estimated that almost half a million of these veterans would not have been able to go to college without it. An additional 3.5 million veterans went to vocational schools, 1.5 million vets got on-the-job training, and 700,000 more received farm training. The GI Bill produced "238,000 teachers, 91,000 scientists, 67,000 doctors, 450,000 engineers and a million assorted lawyers, nurses, businessmen, artists, actors, writers and pilots." Although the vast majority of beneficiaries were men, the GI Bill also put 64,000 women through college.

Perhaps most impressively, every dollar spent on educational benefits under the original GI Bill added seven dollars to the national economy in terms of productivity, consumer spending and tax revenue. And the effects of the original GI Bill are still being felt today.

This Congress has shown tremendous foresight in passing the new GI Bill as a part of the emergency supplemental funding for the war. More than any other single piece of legislation, the GI Bill will make a difference in the economic futures of the troops returning every day from Iraq and Afghanistan. We look forward to this key legislation being quickly signed into law.

The battle for a new GI Bill highlights a key gap in our accounting of the Iraq war. All of the care and support for our veterans, including programs to help them reintegrate into civilian life, should be understood and categorized as an unavoidable cost of war, and yet the cost of the GI Bill is not typically accounted for in the war's budgets. In the long term, budgeting should reflect all the support our troops deserve – before, during, and after combat.

Thank you for your time.