

New York Times: A Post-Iraq G.I. Bill

By JIM WEBB and CHUCK HAGEL, New York Times

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MEMBERS of Congress and other political leaders often say that the men and women who have served in our military since 9/11 are the “new greatest generation.” Well, here’s a thought from two infantry combat veterans of the Vietnam era’s “wounded generation”: if you truly believe that our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are like those who fought in World War II, let us provide them with the same G.I. Bill that was given to the veterans of that war.

In terms of providing true opportunity, the World War II G.I. Bill was one of the most important pieces of legislation in our history. It paid college tuition and fees, bought textbooks and provided a monthly stipend for eight million of the 16 million who served. Many of our colleagues in the Senate who before the war could never have dreamed of college found themselves at some of the nation’s finest educational institutions.

Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey went to Columbia on the G.I. bill; John Warner of Virginia to Washington and Lee and the University of Virginia Law School; Daniel Inouye of Hawaii to the University of Hawaii and the George Washington University Law School; and Ted Stevens of Alaska to the University of California, Los Angeles, and Harvard Law School.

Veterans today have only the Montgomery G.I. Bill, which requires a service member to pay \$100 a month for the first year of his or her enlistment in order to receive a flat payment for college that averages \$800 a month. This was a reasonable enlistment incentive for peacetime service, but it is an insufficient reward for wartime service today. It is hardly enough to allow a veteran to attend many community colleges.

It would cover only about 13 percent of the cost of attending Columbia, 42 percent at the University of Hawaii, 14 percent at Washington and Lee, 26 percent at U.C.L.A. and 11 percent at Harvard Law School.

College costs have skyrocketed, and a full G.I. Bill for those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan would be expensive. But Congress has recently appropriated \$19 billion next year for federal education grants purely on the basis of financial need. A G.I. Bill for those who have given so much to our country, often including repeated combat tours, should be viewed as an obligation.

We must put together the right formula that will demonstrate our respect for those who have stepped forward to serve in these difficult times. First-class service to country deserves first-class appreciation.

Jim Webb, Democrat of Virginia, and Chuck Hagel, Republican of Nebraska, are United States senators.