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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Doing the Troops Wrong

By **BOB HERBERT**

At the top of the list of no-brainers in Washington should be Senator Jim Webb's proposed expansion of education benefits for the men and women who have served in the armed forces since Sept. 11, 2001.

It's awfully hard to make the case that these young people who have sacrificed so much don't deserve a shot at a better future once their wartime service has ended.

Senator Webb, a Virginia Democrat, has been the guiding force behind this legislation, which has been dubbed the new G.I. bill. The measure is decidedly bipartisan. Mr. Webb's principal co-sponsors include Republican Senators Chuck Hagel of Nebraska and John Warner of Virginia, and Democratic Senator Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey.

(All four senators are veterans of wartime service — Senators Webb and Hagel in Vietnam, Warner in World War II and Korea and Lautenberg in World War II.)

Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are on board, as are Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader, and Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the House.

Who wouldn't support an effort to pay for college for G.I.'s who have willingly suited up and put their lives on the line, who in many cases have served multiple tours in combat zones and in some cases have been wounded?

We did it for those who served in World War II. Why not now?

Well, you might be surprised at who is not supporting this effort. The Bush administration opposes it, and so does Senator John McCain.

Reinvigorating the G.I. bill is one of the best things this nation could do. The original G.I. Bill of Rights, signed into law by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1944, paid the full load of a returning veteran's education at a college or technical school and provided a monthly stipend. It was an investment that paid astounding dividends. Millions of veterans benefited, and they helped transform the nation. College would no longer be the exclusive preserve of the wealthy and those who crowned themselves the intellectual elite.

As The New York Times wrote on the 50th anniversary of the G.I. bill: "Few laws have done so much for so many."

"These veterans were able to get a first-class future," Senator Webb told me in an interview. "But not only that. For every dollar that was spent on the World War II G.I. bill, seven dollars came back in the form of tax remunerations from those who received benefits."

Senator Lautenberg went to Columbia on the G.I. bill, and Senator Warner to Washington and Lee University and then to law school.

The benefits have not kept pace over the decades with the real costs of attending college. Moreover, service members have to make an out-of-pocket contribution — something over \$100 a month during their first year of service — to qualify for the watered-down benefits.

This is not exactly first-class treatment of the nation's warriors.

The Bush administration opposes the new G.I. bill primarily on the grounds that it is too generous, would be difficult to administer and would adversely affect retention.

This is bogus. The estimated \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion annual cost of the Webb proposal is dwarfed by the hundreds of billions being spent on the wars we're asking service members to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. What's important to keep in mind is that the money that goes to bolstering the education of returning veterans is an investment, in both the lives of the veterans themselves and the future of the nation.

The notion that expanding educational benefits will have a negative effect on retention seems silly. The Webb bill would cover tuition at a rate comparable to the highest tuition at a state school in the state in which the veteran would be enrolled. That kind of solid benefit would draw talented individuals into the military in large numbers.

Senator Webb, a former secretary of the Navy who specialized in manpower issues, said he has seen no evidence that G.I.'s would opt out of the service in significantly higher numbers because of such benefits.

Senator McCain's office said on Monday that it was following the Pentagon's lead on this matter, getting guidance from Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Under pressure because of his unwillingness to support Senator Webb's effort, Senator McCain introduced legislation with substantially fewer co-sponsors last week that expands some educational benefits for G.I.'s, but far less robustly than Senator Webb's bill.

"It's not even close to the Webb bill," said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, an advocacy group.

Politicians tend to talk very, very big about supporting our men and women in uniform. But time and again — whether it's about providing armor for their safety or an education for their future — we find that talk to be very, very cheap.

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