

Testimony of
Air Force Sergeants Association
June 7, 2001

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Filner, and distinguished committee members, on behalf of the 135,000 members of the Air Force Sergeants Association¹, it is my pleasure to address an issue that is of great importance to our members -- the Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB), and specifically, H.R. 1291, the “21st Century Montgomery G.I. Bill Enhancement Act.”

First, however, we would like to take this opportunity to thank the committee for their hard work and dedication involved in passing legislation during the 106th Congress to allow former Veterans Education Assistance Program (VEAP) participants to convert to the Montgomery G.I. Bill. This conversion has opened the door for many Air Force members to enjoy the educational benefits offered through the MGIB which they had long envied.

We must not forget however, that there are thousands of servicemembers currently on active duty who never, for whatever reason, enrolled in either VEAP or the MGIB. For those who turned down the MGIB in particular, the reason is often because of the \$1,200 automatic deduction from their pay beginning in basic training. This one-time decision is posed at a time when they are under tremendous stress and when they are making the least amount of money and can often not afford the \$100 monthly deduction. Are the airmen, soldiers, marines and sailors who couldn't afford the pay deduction, or made a poor decision by declining it any less worthy of an education benefit that they have rightfully and dutifully earned?

Legislation has recently been introduced by Rep. Jones, R-NC, that would help alleviate this financial burden by changing the automatic payroll deduction from \$100 per month for 12 months to \$50 per month for 24 months. The bill (H.R. 2020) would also allow those recruits who decline the MGIB during basic training to have the opportunity to enroll into the program at the end of their first enlistment. We believe this will be a tremendous help to our young recruits, however, to completely alleviate the financial burden, and to make the MGIB a benefit earned solely for serving our country, the Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA) recommends eliminating the \$1,200 enrollment fee or, at the least, allow members to enroll at any time during their careers. We also ask that you provide a one-year open window for any military member not currently enrolled in the MGIB an opportunity to do so, especially with benefit increases such as those that would be provided by H.R. 1291.

¹Founded in 1961, the Air Force Sergeants Association is comprised of active duty and retired enlisted members of the Air Force, Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve Command, their families and survivors.

For those members who have enrolled in the MGIB, we hear additional comments such as, “Why can’t I use my MGIB to pay off student loans?” Some also wonder why, if the MGIB is a benefit that they have paid for and are entitled to, they can’t use it when and how they wish. For example, there is currently a time limit of 10 years placed on the benefit. If the member does not use their entire benefit within 10 years of separating from service, they lose any unused portion. AFSA asks this committee to allow transferability of any unused benefits to the veterans’ immediate family members. Another consideration would be to remove the imposed 10-year benefit loss time clock.

AFSA also believes, as does The Military Coalition and the National Military and Veterans Alliance, that the MGIB should be “benchmarked” against the average college costs to provide adequate funding to cover books, tuition and fees toward a higher education for those able to take classes while in the military and/or after leaving active duty. As the costs of higher education continue to rise, so too must the monthly MGIB benefit. According to an October 1999 article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*² outlining the average costs of tuition for the 1999-2000 school year, it costs commuter students nearly \$8,800 a year to attend a public 4-year institution. On the contrary, as of November 2000, the value of the MGIB is \$650 per month for full time students (\$487.50 for three-quarter time students and \$325 for half time students), leaving the military member/veteran to pay close to \$3,000 out-of-pocket a year. While H.R. 1291 does not go all the way to benchmarking nor to providing inflationary educational protection, it is a substantial improvement over the current benefit.

In order to recruit and retain quality members, quality benefits and incentives must be offered to our troops. We believe that the “21st Century Montgomery G.I. Bill Enhancement Act” would provide a large step toward such a benefit, providing close to \$40,000 by the year 2004 to pursue higher education. We believe that should positively persuade many young men and women that the military is a plausible choice to consider after graduating from high school. H.R. 1291 will significantly close the gap between the actual cost of attaining a college degree and the amount the benefit will pay for. Additionally, it will set a precedent for future increases in the MGIB to keep the gap from continually widening.

AFSA is supportive of legislation that strives to improve the quality of life for our young men and women serving in the Armed Forces. We encourage this committee to build on accomplishments achieved last year to improve accessibility to the MGIB. Also, we ask that you champion H.R. 1291, proving to our troops that the Montgomery G.I. Bill is ready to carry them through the 21st Century.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing the Air Force Sergeants Association the opportunity

²The Chronicle of Higher Education, from the issue dated October 15, 1999. Available on the internet at <http://chronicle.com/free/v46/i08/08a05201.htm>.

to submit the “voice of the enlisted.”