



U. S. Army photo

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Peter Braestrup

Abandoning Our Vietnam Veterans

Amid widespread attention to the 600 returning POWs since February, there has been little new emphasis in Washington on schools, jobs, and other benefits for the 2.5 million other veterans who served in Vietnam in 1965-72.

Sen. Vance Hartke (D-Ind.), chairman of the Senate veterans committee, and a handful of likeminded colleagues on Capitol Hill voiced the hope that Mr. Nixon's focus on the POWs, climaxed by last month's White House dinner in their honor, would help the Vietnam ex-GIs as well.

According to both congressional and administration sources, no such effect has occurred. Indeed, the administration, largely on budget grounds, has quietly resisted congressional pressure for more "action" to help veterans.

"Our POWs," observed Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) recently, "deserve all the attention they are getting. Our disabled and unemployed veterans deserve equal attention which they are not getting."

Veterans Administration sources said that the \$12 billion a year agency had received no fresh guidelines from the White House Office of Management and Budget to speed up VA benefit payments, including GI Bill checks, in response to recent criticism, notably in Denver and San Diego.

Moreover, these sources said, OMB was still exploring ways to cut VA disability payments to Vietnam amputees and others as an anti-inflation measure. A VA "draft" plan, ordered by OMB, to cut such benefits up to 60 per cent was withdrawn last February by White House order after an uproar on Capitol Hill.

Education and jobs have been the chief congressional concerns.

One major contention by Sen.

Hartke, Sen. Charles McC. Mathias (R-Md.) and their allies is that the current \$1,980-a-year allowance to Vietnam veterans for tuition, living expenses and all other college costs fails both to meet 1973 costs and to match, in real terms, the tuition-plus-\$75 a month GI Bill enjoyed in the '40s by World War II veterans. Veterans Administrator Donald E. Johnson has not argued otherwise in congressional testimony.

Under a law signed by President Nixon, Oct. 14, Johnson had six months to produce a comparative study of World War II and Vietnam era GI Bill costs and benefits. Congress wanted

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the study by April, 1973, in order to revise Vietnam veterans' benefits in time for the start of 1973 school year.

In April, Johnson quietly informed the Senate and House veterans panels that his agency had been unable, because of various procedural problems, to get started on the study. He said it would be ready in September.

Hartke was enraged. He wrote Johnson May 3 that Vietnam veterans "may infer that this delay is intentional" so as to handicap any congressional action to increase GI Bill benefits "prior to the start of the 1973 fall term."

On May 7, Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.) with the backing of four other

senators, introduced legislation adding up to \$1,000 per year in tuition payments to the current \$1,980 GI Bill benefits — theoretically enough, with work-study programs and other aid, to get the ex-GI through most schools, despite inflation. A similar bill is being circulated in the House.

However, Hartke plans no hearings on McGovern's bill, on grounds that the more conservative House, buttressed by White House objections as in the past, will reject it both as too generous and as conducive to "profiteering" by educational institutions.

Hartke's own revived proposition, also likely to encounter White House objection but more House sympathy, is to allow Vietnam veterans to borrow up to \$1,000 a year for school costs, repayable with safeguards at low interest in 10 years, from the \$7 billion National Service Life Insurance trust fund. The fund is financed by GI insurance premiums paid mostly by World War II veterans.

None of these congressional initiatives has stirred administration support or the fervor of most congressmen. Only after a lawsuit by veterans did the U.S. Office of Education agree last month to start spending \$25 million appropriated by Congress last fall as incentives to colleges to admit and counsel ex-GIs — too late for the 1973 spring term. Not one of 70 new Labor Department specialists, ordered by Congress in the 1972 law to monitor civil service hiring under veterans job preference regulations, has been hired.

Meanwhile, for veterans aged 20-24, the April unemployment rate is 9.1 per cent, versus 7.7 per cent for their non-veteran contemporaries.