The GI Bill and the Recruiting Cap

In the past several years, the recruiting of manpower has not been as large a concern to the National Guard or to the active components as it was in the middle and late 1970s. That is one reason why Congress, during its 1981-82 session, after an initial rush of support, backed away from serious consideration of reenactment of a GI Bill of educational benefits as an inducement for service.

That bill and a proposal to significantly increase the monetary value of the strength of the Army National Guard are again before Congress in the current session. Again, both are getting some favorable attention. Now would be a good time to enact both.

However, the Department of Defense and service personnel chiefs have held back their full support... particularly of the GI Bill (H.R.1400). Congress is going slow because of the obvious lack of a “right-this-minute” justification for it. The lack of immediacy is linked to the fact that both the active services and the Guard and Reserve are meeting their current fiscal year recruiting quotas with high quality personnel and have done so for several years. But that fact does not lessen the requirement for this legislation nor measure affect the advisability of recruiting a full-bore right now rather than waiting several years (in the case of the GI Bill) or clapping another recruiting cap on the Army Guard and active services (in the case of paid-strength centers).

Under the Department of Defense budget proposal as endorsed by the Reagan Administration, the Army Guard’s end strength will be a maximum of 417,019 on September 30 this year. However, Lieutenant General Emmett H. Walker, Jr., Chief of the National Guard Bureau, noted recently that drill strength as of the end of March this year already was more than 418,000, presaging another recruiting freeze like the one that occurred in 1982 unless this cap is lifted.

He further stated that he foresees no budget increases in the Army budget to alleviate the problem this fiscal year.

But what is worse, the defense budget sets the end strength for the Army Guard at just 421,000 for FY84, a gain of only 4,000 new recruits over FY83. Recruiters say that in the current climate, they could easily far exceed that.

In fact, restrictive ceiling seriously will hamper Army Guard recruiting efforts because it will barely allow individual recruiters to recruit their strength during part of the year. The long-term adverse effect, however, of restricting end strength is that it hampers the Army Guard from reaching its currently programmed wartime strength of 450,000 or the estimated 1986 wartime strength of 480,000. It certainly isn’t that the Army Guard recruiting force couldn’t vastly increase its production of new recruits. The fact is that even if we eschewed accepting most Category IV personnel (non-enlistment, mental level permitted), we could still reach right about 424,000 in end strength this year and far more than that in FY84.

That is why it is good news that the Army’s new Armed Services Committee has approved a provision setting Army Guard end strength at 433,000 for FY85. Such a figure will permit actual aggressive recruiting of high-quality personnel for the Army Guard in a time when recruiting is most productive. We certainly don’t want to wish economic bad luck on anyone, Guardsmen and civilians in particular. However, the fact that until the economy is fully recovered, recruiting for all services will continue to be good—and this is the time when we should capitalize on our ability to attract the best young men and women to the Guard.

There is a similarly convincing argument for the GI Bill. True, no GI Bill is required to act as an inducement to lure young people into the service, active, Guard or Reserve, today. However, that may not be true by the end of next year. That’s the best reason yet for Congress to act now.