

## Congressman Pickering's Testimony before Subcommittee on Benefits of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Reyes, members of the committee, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to testify as you consider HR 1291. Before I begin, Mr. Chairman, I have letters from three universities and one junior college in Mississippi supporting today's bill, and I would like to ask that they be included in the hearing record with my statement.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Montgomery GI Bill Enhancement Act is a critical piece of legislation for our men and women of the Armed Services. It is critical that we pick up the torch that was carried for so long by former Chairman G.V. Sonny Montgomery.

I come before you today as the Representative of Mississippi's Third Congressional District. As most members are aware, this district was represented for 30 years by Representative Sonny Montgomery. His legacy is all over the state and his name adorns numerous military and veterans' buildings. His legacy to the nation takes the form of the GI Bill that now bears his name. As the current representative of Mr. Montgomery's former district, I feel a strong sense of duty to continue the great legacy of support for our nation's veterans.

Mississippians have always had a proud heritage of supporting our nation's armed services. In my district I represent 4,763 members of the Army and Air Force National Guard, 1,410 active duty Air Force personnel located at Columbus Air Force Base, and 1,646 active duty members of the Navy and Marine Corps stationed at Naval Air Station Meridian. The majority of these service men and women are within the enlisted ranks. These are the individuals that benefit the most from the Montgomery GI Bill. These are the personnel that the services are in a desperate battle to recruit and retain. Educational benefits are a key element for recruitment and retention for our nation's All Volunteer force.

HR 1291 serves to provide the benefits originally intended with the GI Bill of 1944. The intent was to provide the means for former service members to get a quality education after having served their nation. In its current form, the GI Bill has not kept pace with the dramatic increases in higher education. The increase from \$650 to \$1,100 over the next three years will not cover the entire costs of an education in Mississippi, but it goes from covering 55% to approximately 90% of education and living expenses for students in my district.

As an original cosponsor of HR 1291, I fully support this bill in its efforts to restore the power of the Montgomery GI Bill. Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you and your committee for taking up this very important piece of legislation and affording me the opportunity to speak before you today on its behalf.