

## Texas Military Initiative

*By Bill Hobby*

Right when you think good sense is on permanent leave, along will come an example of such good leadership, good policy, and good timing that one is encouraged to settle back for another century or two of democracy. The example at hand is a way to make it easier for military veterans to become schoolteachers.

Congress has provided transition and retirement benefits for veterans who want to become teachers. Texas has provided the means to speed up teacher certification for those who qualify. The two actions match up the career needs of former military personnel caught in the reduction of America's armed forces and the nation-wide shortage of qualified teachers in our public schools.

J. H. Hexter, professor emeritus of Yale and Washington universities, is a vocal champion of the concept of military veterans as public school teachers. Early on in the public dialogue Hexter advocated "some carefully coordinated jaw-boning" among federal, state and local governments to jump-start the process of matching the teacher shortage with a supply of highly trained people. He believes that "it is time for America to rev up the military-educational complex."

Real problems face well-disciplined and highly trained military men and women who had thought to make the military their career, and who now--or soon may be--out of work.

Many of these veterans obviously are men of minority races-- just the kind of role models we need in classrooms. They are trained leaders and disciplinarians. They are the kind of people who can help reduce the dropout rate. One fourth of our young people drop out before finishing high school. So the stakes are high: livelihoods of former soldiers, wise use of scarce resources, and quality education. And it looks like some constructive jaw-boning just might save the day, or at least attract and train a number of exceptional new teachers from the ranks of the military and place them in classrooms in areas of critical need. The project is called Texas Military Initiative in Texas. Florida and South Carolina have similar programs.

The Texas Military Initiative came about because of the vision of the chairmen of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, Representative Les Aspin (now Secretary of Defense), and Governor Ann Richards. The Texas commissioners of public and higher education, Lionel Meno and Kenneth Ashworth, co-operated to bring a program into being quickly.

The Army identified several thousand personnel interested in a second career in teaching and set up on-base transition career counseling and job opportunity networks. The Congress adopted a Senate proposal to assist separated active duty military to obtain teaching certificates via a stipend to school districts with whom they are ultimately employed. The Governor enthusiastically signed a Letter of Intent with the Army agreeing to utilize the state's alternative teacher certification to further national education goals and to take full advantage of the "unique skills, knowledge, and instructional abilities of our nation's soldiers."

The leadership and top staff members of the state education agencies analyzed and brain-stormed, creating a user-friendly system of recruiting and training that maintains and promotes the highest standards of quality. The centers that provide the content and "hands-on" experience designed a specific, uniform alternative certification program.

When highly trained people are out of work, the nation suffers with them. When students drop out of school, they condemn themselves to stunted lives and we all pay the cost.

The Texas Military Initiative is a classic solution. Everybody wins.

*Originally published Feb. 7, 1999, in the Corpus Christi Caller-Times.*