

By Rep. Peter Welch

When the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957, the United States Congress responded with a peaceful counterstrike: the National Defense Education Act. This Cold War-era response was intended to stimulate educational advancement and new opportunity around the country.

And it worked. It expanded educational opportunities to millions of Americans-Americans who now have sons and daughters, and grandsons and granddaughters who today seek that same chance to receive a higher education.

One of those beneficiaries was my late wife, Joan Smith. Joan grew up proud, but poor. Her prospects of receiving a college education were slim. America's response to the Soviet Union gave her the opportunity to be part of the first generation in her family to attend college. Not surprisingly, for anyone who knew Joan, she took the opportunity and ran with it, eventually serving as Dean of the University of Vermont's College of Arts and Sciences and helping new generations of Vermonters achieve their own dreams. It was a job she loved.

However, Dean Joan Smith also saw hundreds of Vermont families struggling to pay for college, and all too many incurring huge loans and debt to do so. And those were students not totally discouraged by today's burdensome costs to even think of attending college.

I believe a recommitment to help a new generation of Vermonters and Americans afford a college education is long-overdue. Higher education or technical training has gone from being an American dream to a pragmatic necessity for many careers.

Earlier this month, and with strong bipartisan support, the U.S. House made that essential commitment by passing an \$18 billion student aid increase- the largest increase since the GI Bill in 1944. The U.S. Senate has now passed a similar bill.

If signed into law, this legislation is expected to benefit over 10,000 Vermont students right away, providing an estimated \$44 million in direct financial aid and cutting interest rates on loans held by Vermont students and families. This bill will help make college more affordable for Vermonters and open the doors of higher education to new generations of our state's college-bound students.

The College Cost Reduction Act of 2007 takes four major steps toward higher education affordability:

First, it increases the size of Pell grant scholarships by \$500. This will increase aid by \$44 million over five years for the more than 13,570 Vermont students who take out need-based loans each year.

Second, it cuts the interest rate Vermont students will pay on loans from 6.8 percent to 3.4 percent, saving the average Vermont student \$4,370 over the life of his or her loan.

Third, it provides tuition assistance for undergraduate students who agree to be public school teachers and loan forgiveness for graduates that go into public service professions, much like we have done here in Vermont for certain professions such as nursing.

And finally, this bill provides incentives and rewards for colleges to contain costs. It provides additional need-based assistance for colleges that contain their annual tuition increases and grants to institutions that provide students with opportunities to work and support themselves financially while attending school.

On the whole, this forward-looking initiative represents the greatest advancement in opening the door of higher education to future students in over half of a century.

And the best part: it is accomplished at no new cost to taxpayers.

The legislation pays for itself by reducing excessive federal subsidies paid to large lenders in the college loan industry, while reducing the federal deficit nearly \$1 billion. Future generations should not shoulder the burden of government spending today.

To provide such an enormous public benefit at no additional cost is truly a reflection of how new priorities in Washington can really make a difference to hard-working Vermonters.

My hope is that our commitment today will open the door to a college education for a new generation of Vermonters, each achieving their own unique accomplishments, much like Joan.