“Safely investing one’s money requires study of the markets and a reasonable understanding of its forces. Here is an investment option that is guaranteed to pay high dividends for years to come.” VA Secretary Eric Shinseki wasn’t talking about mutual funds or Roth IRAs when he recently took to the blogosphere to address veterans. He was speaking about an investment in the education of our veterans through the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the comprehensive new package of education benefits aimed at the most recent generation of men and women to answer the call when their country came under attack.

Secretary Shinseki uses the perfect metaphor to describe the veterans who benefit from the Post-9/11 GI Bill. It is an investment not only in the men and women who have proved themselves worthy of the consideration, but also in the future of our nation. The uncertainties we face require bright, disciplined and energetic citizens who are not afraid of tough decisions, hard work and the responsibilities of leadership. Sounds to me like our nation’s veterans fit the bill.

If history is a guide, investing in our veterans is also an opportunity to positively shape the American landscape. Our nation’s “middle class” was clearly defined, if not created, by the 16 million veterans returning from World War II who were extended new benefits for both education and housing.

As “Greatest Generation” veterans were able to purchase homes at a staggering rate (residential construction jumped from 114,000 in 1944 to 1.7 million in 1950), the suburbs exploded with growth and the modern subdivision emerged.

Unfortunately, the middle class has slowly but definitely
deteriorated with the passage of time and economic circumstances.

But our spirit as a nation—embodied by the fighting men and women of our armed forces—lives on.

I firmly believe that this new Post-9/11 GI Bill is a great opportunity to redefine the middle class by the ever-growing number of veterans—and disabled veterans—of the 21st century.

Of course, any bold initiative is bound to have kinks to work out, the kinds of fits and starts that always seem to plague visionary acts that take us into uncharted territory. Delays in payments for student veterans marred the Post-9/11 GI Bill’s commencement this past fall. While there is no excuse for broken promises that place additional hardships on veterans, I am encouraged by how quickly and decisively the VA reacted to the problem and worked to correct it.

Some glitches may still exist, but secretary Shinseki has made debugging the payment process for student veterans a priority.

We deserve better, but, as disabled veterans, we’ve been through worse. I remember my first experiences with higher education after being injured in Vietnam. Nothing about recovering from severe burns and the loss of both of my arms was easy, but my first day of school was a true test of my courage.

Thankfully, I was a determined young man who was surrounded by a supporting cast of friends, family and especially other veterans, who were also making the journey into higher education. Plus, I was a Marine and therefore maybe a little too confident. Sometimes overconfidence from one area of your life can help when you’re lacking in another.

I enjoyed my undergraduate college experience so much, I returned for my master’s degree and carved out a career path in education. Like thousands of my fellow Vietnam veterans, I
found a new home in college and used my educational benefits as an investment in my future.

I’m proud to see so many young men and women returning from the battlefields to begin their education and investing in their own futures. And I’m proud of the new Post-9/11 GI Bill that makes this investment possible.