

The Bonus Army Veterans' Protest of 1932, "The Cruellest Year of the Great Depression"

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July 28 will mark almost the 90th anniversary of one of most controversial protests in U.S. history and yet it remains virtually unknown to most Americans. On that day, in 1932, 500 U.S. army infantrymen with loaded rifles, fixed bayonets and gas grenades containing a vomit inducing ingredient, 200 cavalry, a machine gun squadron, 800 police and 6 M1917 army tanks, prepared to attack 17,000 unarmed men, plus thousands of their wives and children. Moments before the assault, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, in charge of the operation, turned to a police official standing next to him and said, "I will break the back of the enemy."



Photo credit: [Historynet.com](#)

The attack was ordered by President Herbert Hoover and commanded by Gen. MacArthur. Dwight D. Eisenhower was MacArthur's aide and Major George S. Patton led the tank unit. After donning gas masks, the army tossed hundreds of tear-gas grenades into the encampment which started raging fires and the assault drove all the bedraggled occupants from the area. The encampment was then burned to the ground.



Tanks under the command of Major George S. Patton, Jr. roar down Pennsylvania Avenue NW to attack the Bonus Marchers on July 28, 1932.

The troops in front of the tanks (at the rear of the photograph) are rushing to attack the Bonus Army.

This wasn't Cuba, the Philippines or the Mexican border — but in Washington, D.C. The camp, nicknamed "Hooverville," occupied by WWI veterans who were living in tents and shanties others living in crumbling government buildings along Pennsylvania Avenue near the capital. If your education was anything like mine, there wasn't any mention of this event in any history class.

Some 4 million vets had returned from the war and found that others had taken their jobs at a considerably higher wage than the \$1 per day soldier's pay and expected more help from their government. Presidents Wilson, Harding and Coolidge each firmly opposed making any payments to the mostly unemployed vets, with Coolidge stating that "Patriotism, bought and paid for, is not patriotism." In 1924, Congress kicked the can down the road by promising a bonus payment of \$1.25 for each day of overseas service and \$1.00 for every day of home service. There would be a limit of \$625 for overseas service and \$500 for home service. But Catch-22 was that it could not be redeemed until 1945. The vets quickly dubbed it the "Tombstone Bonus" because many of them would be dead before collecting.

With the Great Depression deepening, demands for making an immediate payment were escalating. Finally, a bill was passed but President Hoover vetoed it. In response, some 300 veterans, led by ex-sergeant Walter Waters boarded a freight train in Portland, Oregon in early May, 1932, and headed for Washington, DC. Soon, others began their pilgrimage to the Capital from across the country in dilapidated buses, overcrowded pick-up trucks, walking and hitchhiking. The vets and their families were in desperate financial shape with overdue bills to pay, hungry and with evictions hanging over their heads. They demanded immediate payment of the bonus.

Calling themselves the Bonus Expeditionary Forces (BEF) and soon known as the "Bonus Army," between 17,000 and 25,000 trekkers began arriving on May 23, 1932. Assuming their demands wouldn't be met any time soon, they proceeded to set up a long term presence. In orderly fashion, they mapped out streets named for states, set up a library, the

“B.E.F. Post Office, barbershop, military-style sanitation, appointed M.P.s to keep order, published their own camp newspaper and even organized evening vaudeville shows. Some ten thousand other vets occupied partially-demolished government buildings on a stretch between the Capitol and the White House. Extremely patriotic, the vets insisted that an American flag fly over every tent and shanty.

Further, as Roy Wilkins, then a young reporter with a press pass, wrote, “There was only one absentee in the camp: James Crow.”¹ The entire, massive undertaking was one in which Blacks and whites shared everything together. During WWI, the military was still segregated as was Anacostia Park when the marchers arrived. The vets who had fought a war together deliberately decided to live side-by-side and set up in the “black” section of the park. This fact alone may have led some people to fear the movement. General MacArthur’s “most trusted subordinate” Brig. Gen. George Van Horn Moseley portrayed black and white veterans living together as “proof that Negroes and Jewish Communists were planning a revolution.” In truth, radicals and communists were dismissed by the BEF and were never a serious element in the movement.²

As noted American historian Howard Zinn wrote, “In the 1930s, America was in a state of near-revolution, something that very much worried the people in Washington.”³ The vets were labeled “Red Agitators” and Gen. MacArthur declared that the marchers were “... traitors bent on overthrowing the government — pacifists and its bedfellow communism are all around us.” The Army’s Military Intelligence Division thought that Communists were deeply involved in the efforts and J. Edgar Hoover, the new FBI director, was intent on proving that the Bonus Army was inspired by reds. Fitting then, that in instructing his troops on the possible use of force during the assault, Maj. Patton advised that “Large numbers of casualties will become an object lesson.”

Historians agree that 1932 was “cruellest year” of the Great Depression and on June 25, 1932 the U.S. House of Representatives passed a compensation bill but it was defeated in the Senate by a vote of 62-18. By July, General MacArthur and Secretary of War, Patrick Hurley were anticipating violence, not just in the Capital but especially in the slums of dozens of major cities. Over the preceding two months, MacArthur had been secretly training special army units in “riot control.” Interestingly, the Marine Corps was not involved in these activities and in an Army intelligence report, not declassified until 1991, we learned that it was feared the Marines were unreliable because they might side with the Bonus marchers. Apropos to this concern, Marine Corps Gen. Smedley Butler, the most decorated Marine in the history of the Marine Corps, had visited the encampment and told the vets:

I never saw such Americana as is exhibited by you people. You have just as much right to have a lobby here as any steel corporation. Makes me so damn mad, a whole lot of people speak of you as tramps. By God, they didn’t speak of you as tramps in 1917 and ‘18.⁴

In November, Gov. Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president. Although he also opposed the bonus, after the assault he said, “This will elect me.”

It’s interesting to speculate what might have occurred had the Bonus Army still been there after FDR’s inauguration. Wouldn’t any president have acted in similar fashion to Hoover?

In 1933, FDR sliced \$480 million from veterans' benefits including reducing disability payments by 25 percent (20 percent of the marchers were disabled) "to balance the budget." In 1936, the legislature passed another bonus bill but again FDR vetoed it, arguing it wouldn't be "fiscally prudent." Convinced that his New Deal efforts had saved capitalism from socialism, Roosevelt returned to being a conventional politician advocating for balanced budgets.⁵ This time, both the Senate (76-19) and the House (324-61) overrode his veto and the vets received \$583 on average. Some jobs went their way under the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps and 700 worked in so-called "Veterans' Rehabilitation Camps" in Florida. In the end, some 45,000 BEF members had passed through Washington before scattering across the country to join millions of others during the depths of the Great Depression.

I'm not an historian but one lesson that occurs to me is that this episode, which has been relegated to the dustbin of U.S. history, is the critical role of mass protest in achieving even a modicum of justice. For example, the Bonus Army's march and its aftermath was a major factor contributing to the passage of the G.I. Bill — something else omitted from my history textbooks. With millions of vets returning from WWII, politicians could not be unmindful of what occurred in 1932. Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen, two eminent scholars on the era, remind us of the primary motive behind the eventual passage of the bill:

Beneath all of this was the very real fear the nation would pay for lack of a comprehensive plan to help veterans by facing a much larger and more hostile version of the Bonus Army. Representative Hamilton Fish Jr., now a political foe of Roosevelt, agreed that veterans could not come home and sell apples as they did after the last war, because if that is all they are offered, I believe we would have chaotic and revolutionary conditions in America.⁶

Experts working for the American Legion, not the Congress, drafted a rough version of what eventually became law. Opponents included leaders of elite colleges who feared that working class men and women would lower the educational standards of their institutions. Robert Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, predicted that American colleges and universities "will find themselves converted into educational hobo jungles." Southern politicians were dismayed that millions of Black vets would be given \$20 per week, thus undermining the wage system in the Deep South.

The Senate passed the bill 50-0 and it passed the House, 387-0 because the \$20 per week provision was stripped from the original version. After more intense wrangling which cast doubt on the bill being passed at all, the powerful American Legion Lobby brought intense pressure on opponents. Finally, FDR set aside his opposition to "special privileges" for vets and signed the G.I. Bill on June 22, 1944 — with the \$20 per week wage intact. Some 12 million vets took advantage of it. (Note: My father was one of them).

It's no wonder that Dr. Martin Luther King and his advisers studied the Bonus Army's tactics for inspiration in preparing their own multiracial Poor People's Campaign events in Washington, D.C. during the Spring of 1968, just weeks after King's assassination. Another important lesson from the Bonus Army marchers was: "if you have a grievance, take it to Washington, and if you want to be heard, take a lot of people with you."⁷

Finally, today we have a confluence of factors, including the capitalist state's failure to

protect its citizens from the Covid pandemic, looming fiscal austerity in the face of another Great Depression and newly transparent institutional racism, has provided an unparalleled opportunity to replicate the Bonus Army’s action in the nation’s capital, this time on a hitherto unprecedented scale, depth, and breath of demands.

• (Thanks to Kathleen Kelly, my in-house editor, for her helpful comments)

1. Alan Spears, quoted in Nicolas Brulliant, [The Forgotten March](#), The National Parks Conservation Association (Fall, 2018), p.7. [
2. Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen, *The Bonus Army: An American Epic* (New York: Walker and Company, 2004), p. 7. For those interested in further reading, Dickson and Allen’s meticulously researched account is the best source. [
3. Howard Zinn, “Howard Zinn: How FDR Forestalled a Second American Revolution,” Interviews with Ray Suarez in 2007, first published as, Howard Zinn with Ray Suarez, *Truth Has a Power of Its Own: Conversations About a People’s History* (New York: The New Press, 2019). Mickey Z, “The Bonus Army,” *50 American Revolutions You’re Not Supposed to Know* (New York: Disinformation Books, 2005). [
4. The Bonus Army: How a Protest Led to the G.I. Bill, “All Things Considered,” NPR, November 11, 2011. The following year, Gen. Butler gave a speech about his military service, saying “I spent most of my time being a high class muscleman for Big Business, for Wall Street and for Bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism.” [
5. For more, see, Gary Olson, “[Was It Only Fear Itself?: FDR and Today](#),” *Common Dreams*, June 19, 2020. [
6. Dickson and Allen, p. 269. [
7. Ibid., p. 277. [

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