

July 28, 1932: Bonus Army Attacked

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On July 28, 1932 the U.S. government attacked WWI veterans with tanks, bayonets, and tear gas, under the leadership of textbook heroes MacArthur, Patton, and Eisenhower. The WWI vets were part of a Bonus Army who came to Washington, D.C. to make a demand for their promised wartime bonuses.



To evict the Bonus Army marchers, troops donned gas masks, fixed bayonets, and, with sabers drawn, moved down Pennsylvania Ave. Source: National Archives

As Mickey Z. explains in the article below,

While they may have fought in Europe as a segregated army, the Bonus Army did not invite Jim Crow to this battle. Arriving from all over the country, alone or with wives and children, both Black and white veterans of huddled together, mostly across the Potomac River from the Capitol, in what were called 'Hooverilles,' in honor of the president who adamantly refused to hear their pleas.

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By Mickey Z.

"In the sad aftermath that always follows a great war, there is nothing sadder than the surprise of the returned soldiers when they discover that they are regarded generally as public nuisances. And not too honest." —H.L. Mencken

Long before the cries of “support the troops” became commonplace during every brutal U.S. military intervention, the powers-that-be made it clear how much they intended to follow their own counsel.

From Shays Rebellion in 1787 to the quarter-million homeless vets today, generation after generation of U.S. military personnel has suffered a lack of support from their government. The American soldiers who fought in World War I were no exception. In 1924, WWI vets were voted “Adjusted Compensation” by Congress: \$1.25 for each day served overseas, \$1.00 for each day served in the States. To the “doughboys,” it was seen as a bonus.



Veterans owed \$50 or less were paid immediately. Everyone else was given a certificate that would collect 4 percent interest with an additional 25 percent tacked on upon payment. However, there was a catch: the certificate was not redeemable until 1945. . . and a little something called “The Depression” was looming over the horizon.

One of the enlisted men stuck in such a predicament was Joe T. Angelo of Camden, New Jersey. In 1918, Private Angelo saved the life of a certain Major George S. Patton on a battlefield in France (Angelo was Patton’s orderly). For his efforts, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

In the spring and summer of 1932, disgruntled, broke, and unemployed veterans like Angelo got the idea to demand payment on the future worth of the aforementioned certificates. Anywhere from 17,000 to 25,000 former doughboys formed a Bonus Expeditionary Force (BEF), otherwise known as the “Bonus Army,” and—bonus certificates in hand—they marched on Washington to picket Congress and President Herbert Hoover.

While they may have fought in Europe as a segregated army, the men of the BEF did not invite Jim Crow to this battle. Arriving from all over the country, alone or with wives and children, both Black and white veterans of huddled together, mostly across the Potomac River from the Capitol, in what were called “Hoovervilles,” in honor of the president who adamantly refused to hear their pleas.

The House of Representatives passed the Patman Bill for veterans’ relief on June 15, 1932, but the bill met defeat in the Senate just two days later. More vets swarmed into the nation’s capital. Shacks, tents, and lean-tos continued to spring up everywhere, and the government and newspapers decided to play the communist trump card for the umpteenth time. Despite the fact that the BEF was made up of 95 percent veterans, the entire group were labeled “Red agitators”—tantamount to declaring open season on an oppressed group of U.S. citizens. Right on cue, Hoover called out the troops. . . led by three soon-to-be textbook heroes.



Bonus Marchers face police and army, 1932. Source: National Archives.

The commander of the operation was Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur, who branded the BEF traitors bent on overthrowing the government. . . declaring, “Pacifism and its bedfellow communism are all around us.” MacArthur’s young aide was none other than Dwight D. Eisenhower, while Patton led the Third Cavalry—which spearheaded the eventual eviction of the Bonus Army. Patton shared MacArthur’s hatred of “reds” and lectured his troops on how to deal with the BEF: “If you must fire do a good job—a few casualties become martyrs, a large number an object lesson. . . . When a mob starts to move keep it on the run. . . . Use a bayonet to encourage its retreat. If they are running, a few good wounds in the buttocks will encourage them. If they resist, they must be killed.”

The three military icons got their chance on July 28, 1932 when a scuffle by the BEF and D.C. police resulted in two fatally wounded veterans. The U.S. Army assault integrated four troops of cavalry, four companies of infantry, a machine gun squadron, and six tanks. When asked by BEF leader Walter Waters if the Hoovervilles campers would be “given the opportunity to form in columns, salvage their belongings, and retreat in an orderly fashion,” MacArthur replied: “Yes, my friend, of course.” But, after marching up Pennsylvania Avenue, MacArthur’s soldiers lobbed tear gas and brandished bayonets as they set fire to some of the tents. In a flash, the whole BEF encampment was ablaze.

“Disregarding orders—a common thread running through his career—MacArthur decided to finish the job by destroying the Bonus Army entirely,” historian Kenneth C. Davis writes. “After nightfall, the tanks and cavalry leveled the jumbled camps of tents and packing-crate shacks. It was put to the torch.”

Video Clip

Bonus Army: US military attacks demonstrating American War Veterans



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/sNOsIB5VMSQ>

Two veterans lost their lives in the assault and an eleven-week-old baby died from what was believed to be gas-related illness. In addition, an eight-year-old boy was partially blinded by gas, two police had their skulls fractured, and a thousand veterans suffered gas-related injuries.

In the smoldering aftermath, a dazed, rail thin Joe Angelo approached his old boss but was harshly rebuked. "I do not know this man," Major Patton growled. "Take him away and under no circumstances permit him to return."

The next day, the *New York Times* ran an article under the headline: "A Calvary Major Evicts Veteran Who Saved His Life in Battle."

After this impressive military success, the members of the BEF were forced to leave Washington and many of them joined the other two million or so Americans who lived their lives on the road during the Great Depression.

"Some states, like California," Davis notes, "posted guards to turn back the poor."

Less than ten years later, MacArthur, Patton, and Eisenhower would be earning a place in history books by sending many of those same disenfranchised poor to grisly deaths on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a candidate for president in 1932. It is said that the day after the BEF eviction, he told an aide there was no longer any need for him to campaign against Herbert Hoover. He may have been right. . . but his subsequent election did little to help WWI veterans. FDR not only refused to pay the bonuses; he also reappointed MacArthur as Army Chief of Staff.

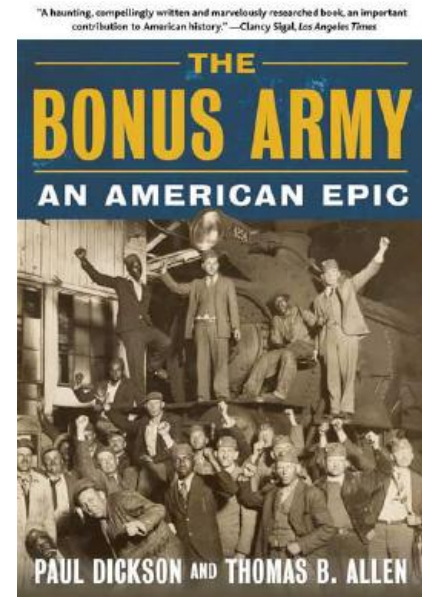
Roosevelt did throw some veterans a New Deal bone when bonus seekers were given the opportunity to work in "Veterans Rehabilitation Camps" like those in the Florida Keys. There they met with an ignominious end on Labor Day 1935 when "a hurricane unlike any ever recorded in the United States" struck.



A historical novel by Milton Meltzer for grades 7+ about a teenager who goes to the Bonus March.

“Wind gusts estimated at two hundred miles an hour slammed into the work camps in Florida’s upper Keys, turning granules of sand into tiny missiles that blasted flesh from human faces,” write Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen in *Bonus Army: An American Epic*. “The storm brought death to at least 259 veterans. The final indignity was mass cremation.”

Despite such treatment, the legacy of the Bonus Army lives on not only in the passing of the G.I. Bill in 1944, but in every sit-down strike, every march, and every demonstration for economic justice. As the *Washington Evening Star* wrote during the Bonus Army’s stay in D.C., “These men wrote a new chapter on patriotism of which their countrymen could be proud.”



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See the PBS documentary, “The March of the Bonus Army.”

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