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Soldiers of Misfortune

BONUS ARMY



(Herbert Hoover Presidential Library)

Members of Bonus Army Baffling Police

It has been called the Great Depression, but there was nothing great about it. It probably should have been called the Terrible Depression. From the late 1920s through the 1930s, the U.S. economy suffered its worst setback. Banks closed, businesses failed, farm prices fell, and millions of Americans lost their homes and jobs.

Throughout the nation people struggled to survive. For shelter some people built rickety shacks from scraps of wood and cardboard. Some took to the road, moving from town to town seeking food and jobs. In cities it was common to see long lines of people waiting for free meals of soup and bread donated by charities. Once prosperous workers now suffered the pains of poverty.

Included among the unemployed were tens of thousands of World War I veterans—men who little more than a decade before had fought to defend democracy. Now many of these men decided to fight a new battle. They would go to Washington and demand that Congress provide some financial relief from their woes of poverty.

Most nations have a tradition of rewarding those who fought their wars. In keeping with that tradition, Congress passed a law in 1924 providing medical and other benefits for veterans. Included in the law was a provision that veterans would receive a payment of money in 1945. This payment became known as the bonus and would amount to a few hundred dollars for each veteran. Faced with the unemployment and hunger brought on by the Depression, many veterans believed they should receive their bonuses at once and not have to wait until 1945.

In May 1932, a few hundred veterans in Portland, Oregon decided to march to Washington. They intended to demonstrate in favor of a bill before Congress that would provide immediate payment of the bonus. The veterans did not march the entire way. When possible they got into freight trains headed east. Because the marchers could not pay, railroad officials tried to prevent them from getting on board. In such instances, the veterans would block the tracks or engage in other disruptive actions until they were permitted back on the trains.

The marchers soon received publicity. As other unemployed veterans heard of the march, many decided they, too, would go to Washington. Soon there were reports of thousands of veterans, a "Bonus Army," moving toward the capital.

In Washington, city officials were worried. What would they do with thousands of unemployed, former soldiers? It appeared the

veterans were not coming for a short visit. Walter W. Waters, the man selected by the veterans as their leader, had announced: "I don't know when we'll get to Washington, but we're going to stay there until the bonus bill is passed if it takes until 1945."

Waters seemed the ideal leader for the veterans. In his mid-thirties, he was tall, energetic, and a stirring public speaker. The former army sergeant had also suffered from the Depression. Unable to find steady work, he and his wife had only fried potatoes for their Christmas dinner. He was determined to get the bonus he believed the veterans deserved.

Washington officials became even more worried when they heard that Communists were involved in the veterans' movement. There was a small Communist party in the United States at that time, and some veterans were members. The Communists supposedly hoped for violent confrontations that would lead to an overthrow of the government. Officials feared that might happen if thousands of angry ex-soldiers in the streets of Washington became influenced by the Communists.

Police Chief Pelham D. Glassford was not as concerned as some other Washington leaders. At that time, the city was governed by three district commissioners appointed by President Hoover. One of the commissioners, Glassford's superior, wanted to use force to move the veterans out of the city. Glassford disagreed. He believed more harm than good would come from using force. He argued that order could be maintained by trying to control the Bonus Army rather than fighting it. The commissioner reluctantly gave in to Glassford—at least for a while.

By early June thousands of veterans had entered the city. A West Point graduate, Glassford had been a general during the war. Now he met with ex-sergeant Waters who had become, in effect, the general of the Bonus Army. For a time the two men were able to work together.

Waters organized the army into military units to help maintain order. Each marcher had to show papers proving he was a veteran. Waters also organized a military police force to help assure that no Communists were allowed into the ranks of the Bonus Army.

Chief Glassford tried to prepare the city for what was to come. He told the citizens that the veterans, like other Americans, had a right to come to Washington. As for the Communists, they were a legal

political party. Although they advocated the overthrow of the government, the chief believed he had to protect their rights to demonstrate as long as they did not break the law.

The chief arranged places for the Bonus Army to stay. The largest group was to camp on the Anacostia Flats, a few miles from the center of the city. Glassford thought this a good site because, in the event of trouble, a drawbridge across the Anacostia River could be raised to prevent easy access to the downtown area.

Some groups of marchers were allowed to stay in abandoned old buildings that were soon to be demolished for new construction. Glassford made sure that those who said they were Communists were separated from the rest of the veterans. About two hundred Communists were housed in a building away from the main body of veterans. There it was easier for the police to keep a watch on them.

Glassford also helped provide food, beds, and medical services for the growing Bonus Army. Waters tried to prevent food from going to the Communist veterans. Although he opposed the politics of the Communists, Glassford said they had to be fed like the other veterans.

Glassford's success in obtaining donations of supplies from Washington citizens and the government were appreciated by most of the veterans. He was often cheered as he rode his motorcycle through the camps checking on conditions. For a while he even served as the treasurer of the Bonus Army.

Glassford and his police had a difficult job. The president believed control and care of the Bonus Army was the responsibility of local Washington officials and not a matter for the federal government. Glassford's job was made somewhat easier because the vast majority of the veterans were patriotic and law-abiding. Their number was menacing, however. By mid-June about twenty thousand veterans were camped in the city.

The sight of hungry, often ragged veterans living in makeshift shelters brought much public sympathy. It was discouraging to see the former war heroes struggling to survive. Sympathy for the marchers did not translate into support for the bonus bill then being debated in Congress. Opponents of the bill said the cost of the bonus would virtually deplete the federal treasury. They said the veterans were only a small proportion of unemployed Americans and should not be singled out for special treatment at the expense of others. Those who favored the bonus bill said the veterans had risked their lives for their

country and deserved the bonus in advance. Some also argued that the bonus would stimulate the economy by giving the veterans more spending power.

There was little chance that the bonus bill would pass in Congress. Even if it could have passed, President Hoover would probably have vetoed it as an expense the nation could not afford during a depression. The veterans demonstrated for their bonus, talked with members of Congress, and packed the galleries to listen to the debates on the bill. The final Senate vote occurred June 17, 1932, and about eight thousand veterans waited outside the Capitol to hear the outcome.

After the Senate vote, Walter Waters stepped out to announce the news to the veterans. They were stunned; the Senate had voted down the bonus bill. During the tense silence that followed, some observers feared the Bonus Army might riot or attack the capitol. It did not. Waters led the disappointed veterans in singing a patriotic song after which they returned to their camps.

After the defeat of the bonus bill, many thought the veterans would leave the city, but the old soldiers would not fade away. Some left, but more came. Waters repeated his pledge that they would stay until 1945 if necessary.

Glassford was torn. He continued to provide aid to the Bonus Army, but he also wished they would leave. In speeches he tried to persuade the marchers to go home. In meetings with the district commissioners, however, he urged the establishment of semipermanent housing. Glassford was convinced that a hard core of the veterans planned an indefinite stay.

The commissioners were unimpressed with Glassford's suggestion. They said the chief's kindness was one reason the veterans were staying. Also, the government needed to get to work demolishing the old buildings so that new construction could begin. Occupation of the old buildings meant construction and demolition workers would be without work. The commissioner said that Glassford must move the veterans out.

Glassford continued to try to persuade the veterans to leave. Congress helped by providing money to help pay the veterans' expenses for traveling back to their homes. Some veterans did leave, but many others probably felt the same as one man who wrote: "Why should we go home? My savings were exhausted in the Summer of 1931; since that time I don't know how I and my family lived, that's not the

word—existed—no home—no money—I might as well be here, and here I shall stay even if in jail."

Waters did what he could to keep the men in Washington. His military police reportedly threatened any veteran who wanted to leave. Nerves became strained as the hot summer wore on. More and more there were fears of a violent clash between the veterans and the authorities. A Communist group attempted to march around the White House but was pushed back by the police. Adding to the tension were rumors that members of the non-Communist Bonus Army were gathering weapons.

Federal officials decided it was time to act. Authorities prepared orders to evict the veterans from the downtown buildings. Glassford hoped the eviction would be peaceful. On July 27, he brought Waters to meet with the district commissioners so that the eviction could be planned. The commissioners refused to meet Waters face-to-face. As a result, Glassford carried messages from one room to another. Eventually Waters agreed to order the men out of the buildings. He later said that he had been given a few days to complete the removal. That was not the official plan, however. Federal officials were to order the veterans out the following day. Glassford was ordered to protect the officials.

The buildings occupied by the veterans, as well as Camp Anacostia, were federal property. Glassford had arranged for these places to be temporarily used by the Bonus Army. Advisors to President Hoover were concerned that local police would not be able to maintain order if the veterans resisted removal. Hoover was persuaded to call on federal troops if it became necessary. He insisted, however, that troops not be used unless requested by Glassford and the commissioners.

On the morning of July 28, Waters urged the veterans to leave one of the downtown buildings. He was booed and called a traitor to the Bonus Army. The men refused to leave. Federal officials and Glassford's police then came to the scene. The veterans were led, one at a time, out of the building. A few struggled but were quickly subdued. A large crowd had gathered to watch, but no violence occurred. By noon the first building was cleared.

When veterans at Anacostia heard of the eviction, many of them hurried to the area to protest. An angry crowd began milling around. Then, suddenly, a group of veterans, one carrying an American flag, attempted to reoccupy the building. Glassford and his men headed

them off and a fight began. Some people in the crowd threw bricks at the police. After about five minutes peace was restored.

The crowd remained in an ugly mood. Many police officers feared they could no longer control the situation. Chief Glassford, however, did not call for federal troops. The commissioners, on the other hand, did request troops. In their request to the president, the commissioners said that the chief agreed troops were needed. Glassford later denied that he said it.

Early in the afternoon there was another fight between the police and a group of veterans. One officer being attacked began firing his gun. Glassford arrived and ordered the shooting stopped. Two veterans were hit. One was killed immediately, the other died later. It was the first time firearms had been used during the many weeks of the Bonus Army's presence.

The federal troops had been well prepared. General Douglas MacArthur, chief of staff of the army, was in command. President Hoover wanted use of the troops to be limited. His orders to MacArthur were as follows:

You will have United States troops proceed immediately to the scene of disorder. Cooperate fully with the District of Columbia police force which is now in charge. Surround the affected area and clear it without delay.

Turn over all prisoners to the civil authorities. In your orders insist that any women and children who may be in the affected area be accorded every consideration and kindness. Use all humanity consistent with the due execution of this order.

MacArthur had his orders, but he also had his own ideas. Like the commissioners, he believed Glassford's methods had helped create the problem. He was also convinced that the Bonus Army had become dominated by radicals and was a threat to law and order. To MacArthur it was time to drive them completely out of the city.

Late in the afternoon the troops, including cavalry and tanks, began clearing the downtown area. When veterans resisted, tear gas was used. Soldiers also used bayonets to keep the veterans moving.

By evening the troops reached Camp Anacostia. Hoover sent orders that the army should not cross into the camp. MacArthur claimed it was too late to stop the operation. After a brief delay, the troops moved into the camp. Soon the night blazed with fire. The stacks of

the Bonus Army were aflame. Some were set afire by retreating veterans; others were fired by the troops. By early the following morning, the Bonus Army had been driven from the capital.

In a news conference General MacArthur said the Bonus Army had become a mob that might have attempted a revolution. He praised his troops and reminded listeners that no one had been killed during the eviction.

President Hoover was angry at MacArthur's disobedience, but he did nothing to punish the general. Hoover did not publicly admit that MacArthur had gone beyond his orders. Instead he said, "There is no group, no matter what its origin, that can be allowed to violate the laws of this city to intimidate the government." People believed that Hoover had ordered the total eviction of the veterans from Washington.

Many Americans were disgusted with the treatment of the Bonus Army. One editor wrote: "What a pitiful spectacle is that of the American Government, mightiest in the world, chasing unarmed men, women and children with Army tanks." Chief Glassford, eventually fired by the district commissioners, wrote articles blaming the president for mishandling the Bonus Army.

President Hoover, in part because of the Bonus Army episode, became an unpopular president. He was easily defeated by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the November elections.

The major sources for this story were:

Daniels, Roger. *The Bonus March: An Episode of the Great Depression*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971.

Lisio, Donald J. *The President and Protest: Hoover, Conspiracy and the Bonus Riot*. Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1974.

ACTIVITIES FOR "SOLDIERS OF MISFORTUNE"

Write all answers on a separate sheet of paper.

Historical Understanding

Answer briefly:

1. Identify three effects of the Great Depression.