

The Bonus Army



WHY THEY MADE HISTORY The Bonus Army was largely made up of World War I veterans who went to Washington in 1932 to claim their promised bonus for serving their country. Their requests were vetoed in Congress and scorned by President Herbert Hoover. The veterans were attacked by the U.S. Army. Still, the Bonus Army's effort had an unforeseen effect: it guaranteed that Hoover would not be re-elected.



© CORBIS



As you read the biography below, ask yourself what factors led to the clash between the U.S. Army and the Bonus Army. Then consider how this clash might have altered history.

There is no doubt that the federal government's handling of the Bonus Army caused much criticism and controversy. For many historians it was a low point during troubled times.

Most soldiers of the Bonus Army were World War I veterans. They had faced a kind of war that had never been seen before, with hundreds of thousands of casualties and horrific living conditions. But they won the war and the nation was grateful for their sacrifices. In 1924 Congress voted that a bonus be paid veterans for their services. However, the payment was not to be made for another 20 years.

As the Depression reached a low point in 1932, veterans of World War I banded together and took to Washington, D.C., the request that under the circumstances, they receive the bonus at once. This group was some 12,000 to 15,000 strong. To show they meant no harm and to illustrate just how bad off they were, many brought their destitute families with them. Under the direction of Walter Waters, a former sergeant, they built a tent city along the Anacostia River, in sight of the Capitol.

Washington in summer can be extremely hot and humid, and the land along the river was swampy and unhealthful. Still, the camp was clean and tidy and the Army disciplined. Initially ignored by Congress and the president, the Bonus Army received help from the Washington, D.C., chief of police, Pelham Glassford, a veteran himself. Glassford quietly asked private citizens to donate food, clothing, and medical supplies to the Bonus Army. Still some veterans clashed with the police, and emotions ran high.

President Herbert Hoover finally sent in federal troops, led by Douglas MacArthur (who would later take part in World War II and the Korean War), to help police break up the camp. The Bonus Army—veterans who

The Great Depression Begins

Biography

were unarmed and no doubt hungry and worn out—were sprayed with tear gas and threatened by foot soldiers, tanks, and horses. All this was done not by a foreign enemy but by their own countrymen and fellow soldiers.

Among the troops were others who would soon make their names, too: Dwight Eisenhower and George Patton. Both questioned MacArthur's tactics. For his part, MacArthur was convinced he was fighting Communist infiltrators in the Bonus Army, though studies later proved him wrong.

Historians disagree on the number of Bonus Army soldiers killed. It does seem certain that one was killed outright and another died later. Many were injured. After the attack, the troops broke up and burned the camp. They used tear gas to get the remaining women and children to leave. One child died from the gas. The ragtag army left Washington with no economic relief in sight. Towns along their way, struggling to feed their own citizens, were not welcoming.

But as word of what happened circulated, public opinion turned in favor of the Bonus Army. Lawmakers and other officials made statements condemning the use of force, calling it brutal, illegal, undemocratic, and un-American. President Hoover was seen at fault; MacArthur was criticized. When movie houses showed film of the attack by federal troops, audiences booed. Herbert Hoover lost his bid for a second term.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Describe** What did the Bonus Army and the federal troops have in common?

2. **Identify Cause and Effect** What factors probably turned public opinion in favor of the Bonus Army after the Washington demonstration?

ACTIVITY

Over the years the United States has treated its troops returning from war in very different ways. In small groups, conduct library and Internet research into how those who fought in the following wars were treated when they came home: World War I, World War II, the Vietnam War, the first Persian Gulf War.