

The "Bonus Army" and the Torching of Hooverville

By Brian R. Train

At the end of WWI, a grateful U.S. government passed legislation authorizing payment of a cash bond that would mature in 1945. The Crash of 1929 wiped out many veterans' savings and jobs, forcing them out into the streets. Veterans began to organize and petition the government to pay their bonus immediately.

In the spring of 1932, 300 veterans from Oregon, calling themselves the 'Bonus Expeditionary Force,' or 'Bonus Army,' traveled to Washington to lobby the government.

By the end of May, over 3,000 veterans and their families made their way to Washington, D.C. Most lived in makeshift huts and tents on the mud flats by the Anacostia River. Similar encampments could be found sheltering the migrant unemployed and poor outside any U.S. large city and were called 'Hoovervilles.' By July, almost 25,000 people lived in Anacostia, making it the largest in the country.

In June, the Patman Bonus Bill, which proposed immediate payment of the veterans' bonuses, was debated in the House of Representatives. There was stiff resistance from Republicans loyal to President Hoover, as the Administration was adamant about maintaining a balanced budget. The bill passed on June 15, but was defeated in the Senate two days later. In response, almost 20,000 veterans shuffled up and down Pennsylvania Avenue for three days. [The National Archives and Records Administration's Hoover Presidential Library-Museum estimates there were 60,000.]

It was alleged that the march was directed by the Communist Party in pursuit of a revolution, but it has since been established that the Party's only actual involvement was sending a small number of agitators and speakers.

Retired Marine General Smedley Butler, an immensely popular figure among veterans and a vocal opponent of the Hoover Administration, participated in Bonus Army demonstrations and made inflammatory speeches. (He was approached in 1933 by fascist sympathizers in the American Legion, who tried to involve him in an actual plot to seize power in a *coup d'état*.)

President Hoover considered the Bonus Army a threat to public order. Many of the marchers left Washington, but there were still over 10,000 angry, restless veterans in the streets. On July 28, two veterans were shot and killed by panicked police in a riot at the bottom of Capitol Hill.

Hoover told Secretary of War Ralph Furley to tell



In 1932, 60,000 veterans were protesting in Washington to demand a "bonus" that was promised to them for WWI services. Many lived in Hooverville, a makeshift shanty town in sight of Congress.

On July 28, MacArthur, Eisenhower and Patton used tanks, tear gas, fixed bayonets, drawn sabres and troops on horseback to drive the "Bonus Army" from Washington. They burnt Hooverville to the ground.

Gen. MacArthur, then the Army Chief of Staff, that he wished the Bonus marchers evicted from Washington. Troops were ordered to remove the marchers from the streets by force.

One infantry battalion and two cavalry squadrons, under the command of Major George Patton, concentrated just west of the White House. The infantry donned gas masks and fixed bayonets, the cavalry drew sabers and, followed by

several light tanks, moved down Pennsylvania Avenue to clear it of people.

Against the advice of his assistant, Major Dwight D. Eisenhower, MacArthur took personal command of the operation. President Hoover had ordered MacArthur to clear Pennsylvania Avenue only, but MacArthur immediately began to clear all of downtown Washington, herding the marchers out. Tear gas was used liberally and many bricks were thrown, but no shots were fired. By 8 p.m. the downtown area was cleared and the bridge across the Anacostia River, leading to Hooverville, was blocked by tanks.

That evening Hoover sent orders via two officers forbidding MacArthur to cross the Anacostia to clear the marchers' camp. MacArthur flatly ignored the President's orders, saying he was 'too busy' and could not be 'bothered by people coming down and pretending to bring orders.'

MacArthur crossed the Anacostia, routed the marchers, along with 600 of their wives and children, out of the camp and burned it to the ground. Then, incredibly, he called a press conference and praised Hoover for taking the responsibility of giving the order to clear the camp. [See opposite page.] Secretary of War Furley praised MacArthur for clearing the camp, even though he too was aware that Hoover had given directly contrary orders.

Hoover could not publicly disagree with his Chief of Staff and Secretary of War, and ended up paying the political cost of this incident. The forceful eviction of the Bonus Army, with four killed (two demonstrators shot by police and two infants asphyxiated by tear gas), turned public opinion against Hoover and contributed to his defeat in 1932.

In the end, some money was paid to veterans. The Economy Act of 1933 cut veterans' disability allowances in an effort to cut federal expenses, but pressure continued until a law was passed over Roosevelt's veto in 1936.

Source: "Hooverville, Bonus Marchers, General Smedley Butler," History 151, UMASS. beachonline.com/hoover.htm