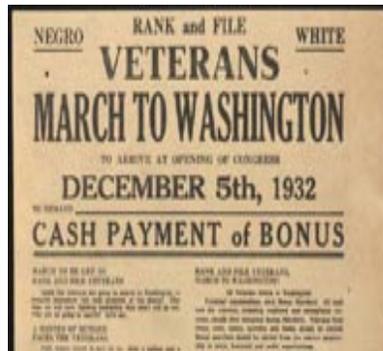


# The Bonus Army



Few images from the Great Depression are more indelible than the rout of the Bonus Marchers in the summer of 1932. In 1924, Congress voted to pass the Service Certificate Law, a bonus to be issued to World War I veterans. The certificates, similar to bonds, were set to mature a full 20 years from the date of their original issue. Therefore, according to the law, the certificates could not be redeemed until 1945 because the first certificates were issued in 1925.

However, by 1932 the United States, like several nations around the globe, had slipped into the throes of economic chaos. As the Great Depression deepened and frustrations mounted, a band of jobless veterans, led by a former cannery worker named Walter W. Walters, began arriving in Washington, D.C. in May 1932. Calling themselves the “Bonus Expeditionary Forces,” the veterans demanded immediate payment of their certificates.

Army Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur was convinced that the Bonus Army was a communist conspiracy to undermine the United States government. MacArthur continued to see a conspiracy within the movement despite intelligence reports that indicated only 3 of the 26 leaders of the Bonus Army were communists. And the percentage within the rank and file was likely even smaller. Journalist Joseph C. Harsch later reported, “This was not a revolutionary situation. This was a bunch of people in great distress wanting help.... These were simply veterans from World War I who were out of luck, out of money, and wanted to get their bonus—and they needed the money at that moment.”

By the end of June, the Bonus Army had swelled to approximately 20,000 tired, hungry, and frustrated men. The atmosphere around Washington was palpable. The House of Representatives, seeking to alleviate the tension, passed a Veterans Bill on June 15 despite the threat of a presidential veto from Herbert Hoover. But the Senate reacted by defeating the bill on June 17. The veterans weighed their choices. On the morning of July 28, several veterans, with bricks in hand, rushed the headquarters of the Washington, D.C. Police Department. President Hoover then ordered the army to clear the capital of the protesters.



On July 28, a force of tanks and cavalry under the command of MacArthur (including George S. Patton, Jr.) stormed the camps and drove the veterans out across the Anacostia River. Although no shots were fired, the cavalry had advanced with their swords drawn and some blood would spill. By nightfall, hundreds had been injured by gas (a baby who later died), bricks, clubs, bayonets, and sabers. Then, MacArthur was ordered to stop his pursuit of the veterans. However, MacArthur, fueled by his paranoia of a communist conspiracy, ignored the order and continued the pursuit into the Bonus Army's main encampment. Soon, a fire erupted with the makeshift camp, and with it, a great blaze burned with the sight of the U.S. Capitol in the background. "Flames rose high over the desolate Anacostia flats at midnight tonight," read the headline in the *New York Times*, "and a pitiful stream of refugee veterans of the World War walked out of their home of the past two months, going they knew not where." -- Source: *PBS.org*



Image Sources: *Library of Congress and PBS.org*

Eyewitness Account:

**"I was horrified to see plain evidence of hunger in their faces."**

*Evalyn Walsh McLean was the wife of the owner of the Washington Post and a pillar of Washington Society. McLean was also the owner of the Hope Diamond (now part of the Smithsonian Collection) from 1911 until her death in 1947. She describes the scene as the Bonus Army first entered Washington and marched past her elegant mansion:*

"On a day in June, 1932, I saw a dusty automobile truck roll slowly past my house. I saw the unshaven, tired faces of the men who were riding in it standing up. A few were seated at the rear with their legs dangling over the lowered tailboard. On the side of the truck was an expanse of white cloth on which, crudely lettered in black, was a legend, BONUS ARMY.

Other trucks followed in a straggling succession, and on the sidewalks of Massachusetts Avenue where stroll most of the diplomats and the other fashionables of Washington were some ragged hikers, wearing scraps of old uniforms. The sticks with which they strode along seemed less canes than cudgels. They were not a friendly-looking lot, and I learned they were hiking and riding into the capital along each of its radial avenues; that they had come from every part of the continent. It was not lost on me that those men, passing anyone of my big houses, would see in such rich shelters a kind of challenge.

I was burning, because I felt that crowd of men, women, and children never should have been permitted to swarm across the continent. But I could remember when those same men, with others, had been cheered as they marched down Pennsylvania Avenue. While I recalled those wartime parades, I was reading in the newspapers that the bonus army men were going hungry in Washington.

That night I woke up before I had been asleep an hour. I got to thinking about those poor devils marching around the capital. Then I decided that it should be a part of my son Jock's education to see and try to comprehend that marching. It was one o'clock, and the Capitol was beautifully lighted. I wished then for the power to turn off the lights and use the money thereby saved to feed the hungry.

When Jock and I rode among the bivouacked men I was horrified to see plain evidence of hunger in their faces; I heard them trying to cadge cigarettes from one another. Some were lying on the sidewalks, unkempt heads pillowed on their arms. A few clusters were shuffling around. I went up to one of them, a fellow with eyes deeply sunken in his head.

'Have you eaten?' He shook his head.

Just then I saw General Glassford, superintendent of the Washington police. He said, 'I'm going to get some coffee for them.'

'All right,' I said, 'I am going to Childs!'

It was two o'clock when I walked into that white restaurant. A man came up to take my order. 'Do you serve sandwiches? I want a thousand,' I said. "And a thousand packages of cigarettes.'

'But, lady - '

'I want them right away. I haven't got a nickel with me, but you can trust me. I am Mrs. McLean.'

Well, he called the manager into the conference, and before long they were slicing bread with a machine; and what with Glassford's coffee also (he was spending his own money) we two fed all the hungry ones who were in sight.

...One day Waters, the so-called commander, came to my house and said: 'I'm desperate. Unless these men are fed, I can't say what won't happen to this town.' With him was his wife, a little ninety-three-pounder, dressed as a man, her legs and feet in shiny boots. Her yellow hair was freshly marceled.

'She's been on the road for days,' said Waters, 'and has just arrived by bus.'

I thought a bath would be a welcome change; so I took her upstairs to that guest bedroom my father had designed for King Leopold. I sent for my maid to draw a bath, and told the young woman to lie down.

'You get undressed,' I said, 'and while you sleep I'll have all your things cleaned and pressed.'

'Oh, no,' she said, 'not me. I'm not giving these clothes up. I might never see them again.'

Her lip was out, and so I did not argue. She threw herself down on the bed, boots and all, and I tiptoed out.

That night I telephoned to Vice-President Charlie Curtis. I told him I was speaking for Waters, who was standing by my chair. I said: 'These men are in a desperate situation, and unless something is done for them, unless they are fed, there is bound to be a lot of trouble. They have no money, nor any food.'

Charlie Curtis told me that he was calling a secret meeting of senators and would send a delegation of them to the House to urge immediate action on the Howell bill, providing money to send the bonus army members back to their homes."

**Source:** Evalyn Walsh McLean, *Father Struck it Rich* (Boston: 1936), 303-305

The Federal Bureau of Investigation checked its fingerprint record files to ascertain the police records of persons who had been arrested during the Bonus Army riots or who had participated in the Bonus March. Connect to the Internet and click on the following link to read the full FBI report thanks to the Freedom of Information Act. [Bonus March files from the Federal Bureau of Investigation](#)

