



## *The War against the Vets: The World War I Bonus Army during the Great Depression* by Jerome Tuccille.

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Book reviewers do not usually complain about the mountain of books that land on their desks, especially when they contain good stories well told. *War against the Vets* is such a book. In a little over two hundred pages, prolific journalist and biographer Jerome Tuccille churns through the vivid, boisterous story of the Depression-era “Bonus Army”<sup>1</sup> of some seventeen thousand veterans and a thousand of their wives and children. This grassroots manifestation of the nation’s economic desperation, heightened by wartime service, descended on Washington, DC, in late July 1932. The penniless ex-servicemen set up makeshift “camps” across the capital and demanded immediate payment of the “bonus” promised to all 3.5 million soldiers below the rank of captain in the Adjusted Compensation Act of 1924.

The act provided a \$1.00 per day bonus for domestic military duty beyond sixty days, up to a maximum of \$500; and a \$1.25 per day bonus for overseas service, up to \$625, to be issued in federal certificates due to mature in 1945, when the average value of a certificate would have amounted to one thousand (2017) dollars. If full face value had been paid in 1932, as the veterans wanted, \$3.4 billion dollars would have been drained out of the US Treasury. That cost persuaded Presidents Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin Roosevelt to veto every bonus bill passed by Congress over the next decade: “buying” citizen service and financing a “raid” on the Treasury was a hard sell in the midst of a depression. The House of Representatives agreed to pay the bonus thirteen years early, but the Senate refused, thus triggering “one of the sorriest episodes in the history of the American republic” (9). It is hard to disagree with that assessment.

President Hoover, who had established a reputation for callous moralizing, ruthlessly ordered Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the Army Chief of Staff, to disperse the sullen veterans, fearing they might foment “insurrection” and “bloodshed.” His apprehensions were intensified by MacArthur, Secretary of War Patrick Hurley, Attorney General William D. Mitchell, and the FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover, all of whom viewed the BEF as rife with “criminals” and communists. Sensing an “incipient revolution in the air,” MacArthur translated Hoover’s order into a military operation and “decided to go into active command in the field” (102, 114-15). Six hundred mounted cavalry, six tanks led by George Patton, and three hundred helmeted infantrymen, bayonets fixed, forced the motley marchers out of their shanties, setting fire to the huts as they went, and back into the mud flats of Anacostia. Not only did MacArthur ignore the president’s twice-repeated command to desist, newsreel photographers captured the melee for the whole country to see. Over a thousand veterans were injured and two were killed. This ugly public relations disaster for the Hoover administration helped FDR win the presidency in November.

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1. “Organizers called the demonstrators the ‘Bonus Expeditionary Force,’ [BEF] to echo the name of World War I’s American Expeditionary Forces [AEF], while the media referred to them as the ‘Bonus Army’ or ‘Bonus Marchers’”—Wikipedia, s.v. “Bonus Army.”

The new president waited out the sputtering efforts to revive the BEF, sending his wife, Eleanor, instead of the Army to hear out the protestors. He ordered the erection of a tent-city at Fort Hunt in Fairfax County, Virginia, and encouraged the vets to join the Civilian Conservation Corps's reforestation efforts or enter Federal Emergency Relief Administration camps in the Carolinas and the Florida Keys to construct public works. Twenty-six hundred accepted the offer of food, clothing, lodging, and a dollar a day; four hundred got free transportation home. A devastating hurricane on Labor Day, 1935, killed almost three hundred members of the CCC's "Forest Army." The sudden disaster, along with a sixth, finally successful, override of a presidential veto earlier in the year, brought an end to the story of the Bonus Army.

*The War against the Vets* has its flaws. Its author can be careless: for example, his tally of 126,000 American deaths in the Great War is misleading, evidently including Spanish Influenza deaths (13). Tuccille's citations follow no consistent format, with partial and inexact references to "phone conversations," "interviews," and "papers." More serious is his devotion of 20 percent of his text to the hurricane, which was no more integral to the Bonus March than the GI Bill was to the Pacific War in 1941–45. Tuccille also largely ignores the historical context of the BEF, extending back to the Continental Army and forward to the post-World War II debate over veterans' benefits.

This is a succinct, easy to read book that benefits from a journalist's eye for telling details about key participants. But it adds little to the existing literature on its subject. Reputable historians have written solid scholarly studies<sup>2</sup> of the Bonus Army grounded in relevant printed and archival records and adopting slightly different perspectives. Jerome Tuccille's contribution does not meet their standards of historical research in scope or depth, despite his claim to have "discovered scores of other books and countless articles" (215). Frankly, in light of the book's deficiencies, one wonders why an academic press chose to publish it.

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2. See, e.g., Roger Daniels, *The Bonus March: An Episode of the Great Depression* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1971); Gary Dean Best, *FDR and the Bonus Marchers, 1933–1935* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992); Donald J. Lisio, *The President and Protest: Hoover, MacArthur, and the Bonus Riot*, 2nd ed. (NY: Fordham U Pr, 1994); Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen, *The Bonus Army: An American Epic* (NY: Walker, 2004).