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“Bonus Army” Marches on Washington, DC - 1932

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



This black and white panoramic photograph from the collection at the Pennsylvania Military Museum depicts a large ramshackle encampment comprised of tents, wooden shacks, and vehicles. Erected in the summer of 1932 on the mud flats of Anacostia, south and west of Washington DC, the encampment, known as Camp Marks, was home to the Bonus Expeditionary Force.

The Bonus Expeditionary Force, or Bonus Army was comprised of World War I veterans who, desperate and out of work due to the Great Depression, descended on the capital in 1932 seeking early payment of a compensation bonus promised to them by the World War Adjusted Compensation Act of 1924. The act awarded compensation of one dollar per day spent in service at home and \$1.25 per day for overseas service up to \$625 (an equivalent to more than \$11,000 today) and was issued to veterans as insurance certificates payable in cash in 1945. The men had been galvanized to action by news that Democratic Representative Wright Patman had proposed a Congressional bill that would authorize early payment of the bonuses. Patman argued that putting nearly 2.4 billion dollars of bonus payments into the hands of unemployed veterans would provide a much-needed boost the nation's foundering economy.

Five hundred veterans arrived in May to march on Washington in support of the bill, and soon their ranks had swelled to more than 20,000. The Bonus Army refused to leave Washington until the bill passed. Throughout the month of June, the marchers organized parades down Pennsylvania Avenue. Dressed in hard-worn olive drab uniforms, they carried signs bearing messages like “Here We Stay, ‘Til the Bonus They Pay” and “We Decided to Come and We’ll Decide When to Go”. The bill passed the House of Representatives in June 1932, however it faced staunch opposition from both the Senate and President Herbert Hoover who feared that paying the bonus would put a severe strain on the already-strained federal budget.

Undeterred, the Bonus Expeditionary Force remained peacefully in Washington through most of July. However, on July 28, distrustful and frustrated by the group's refusal to disperse, city officials sent Washington DC police to break up the encampment. The situation deteriorated rapidly as someone threw a brick and the police fired into the crowd. Fearing a large-scale riot, President Hoover ordered the Army, under command of General Douglas MacArthur, to clear out the remaining marchers. MacArthur's forces descended on the Bonus Army camp with tanks, launching tear gas into the crowd, injuring hundreds, and burning the encampment to the ground.

News of the violent demise of the Bonus Army circulated across the nation angering many Americans who felt General MacArthur's actions had gone too far. President Hoover upheld MacArthur's actions, claiming the largely peaceful veterans that comprised the Bonus Expeditionary Force had been political agitators, anarchists,

and Communists whose presence in Washington threatened national security. Facing reelection in the fall and already deeply unpopular with many Americans who believed he was insensitive to the plight of the nation's struggling poor; public opinion of President Hoover sank even further with his support of MacArthur's actions against the Bonus Army, ensuring his defeat.

Disheartened, destitute, and homeless, many of the Bonus Army marchers headed to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, where former prize fighter and mayor Eddie McCloskey said they were welcome, should they ever be forced out of Washington. More than 3000 people setup camp near Ideal Park, an amusement park just outside the city. Their stay in Johnstown, however, was short-lived as by August 7 a public outcry forced Mayor McCloskey to convince the marchers to disband and leave Johnstown.