

# **In The Spring Of 1932, Approximately 20,000 Unemployed World War I Veterans Descended On Washington To**

**In The Spring Of 1932, Approximately 20,000 Unemployed World War I Veterans Descended On Washington To** demand early cash bonuses promised to them for their military service, highlighting the deep economic distress facing the United States during the Great Depression. This historic event, known as the Bonus Army march, became a pivotal moment in American history, illustrating the struggles of veterans seeking financial relief and the federal government's response to widespread unemployment and economic hardship. The march and its aftermath not only exposed the severity of the Great Depression but also significantly influenced public opinion and policy toward economic relief programs and veteran affairs.

## **The Context of the Bonus Army March**

### **The Economic Hardship of the Great Depression**

The year 1932 marked the depths of the Great Depression, a period characterized by unprecedented unemployment, bank failures, and economic instability. Unemployment rates soared to approximately 25%, and many Americans faced poverty and despair. The plight of veterans was particularly acute, as many had returned from World War I with limited financial security and were eager to access the bonuses promised to them for their service.

### **The Original Bonus Act and Its Provisions**

In 1924, Congress passed the Adjusted Compensation Act, commonly known as the Bonus Act, which authorized the payment of bonuses to WWI veterans. However, these bonuses were scheduled to be paid in 1945, 13 years later, which many veterans viewed as unjust given the economic hardships they faced in the early 1930s. As unemployment skyrocketed, veterans began to advocate for immediate cash payments of their bonuses.

## **The March on Washington: The Bonus Army's Journey and Goals**

### **The Formation of the Bonus Army**

By the spring of 1932, thousands of unemployed veterans, many of whom were suffering from poverty, decided to take direct action. Led by Walter W. Waters, a former army sergeant, and organized through veteran associations, the group aimed to pressure Congress into passing legislation that would grant early payment of the bonuses.

## **The Route and Assembly of the Veterans**

The veterans traveled from various parts of the country, converging on Washington, D.C., with the goal of camping near the Capitol and protesting their economic plight. They set up makeshift camps along the Anacostia River and in other vacant areas near the city, effectively creating a large, organized protest encampment.

## **The Objectives of the Bonus Army**

The primary goal was to secure immediate payment of the bonuses owed to them, which amounted to more than \$1 billion in total. They believed that early access to these funds would alleviate their suffering and provide a much-needed boost to their economic stability.

## **The Events of the Bonus Army March**

### **The Arrival and Settlement in Washington**

By late spring, approximately 20,000 veterans, along with their families and supporters, occupied various parts of Washington. They constructed shanty towns, notably in Anacostia Park, and organized demonstrations to garner media attention and political support.

### **The Government's Response**

Initially, the government was reluctant to confront the veterans. However, tensions escalated as the veterans persisted in their protests. President Herbert Hoover and his administration viewed the march as a potential threat to public order and sought to disperse the protesters.

### **The Use of Force and the Eviction**

In July 1932, the Hoover administration ordered the U.S. Army, led by General Douglas MacArthur, to remove the Bonus Army from their camps. The eviction involved tear gas, cavalry charges, and infantry assaults. The confrontation resulted in injuries and a few deaths, including a baby who was killed during the chaos.

## **The Aftermath and Significance of the Bonus Army Incident**

### **Public Opinion and Political Impact**

The violent eviction shocked the nation and damaged Herbert Hoover's reputation. Many Americans viewed the government's response as excessively harsh and uncaring toward veterans and unemployed citizens. The incident fueled criticism of Hoover's handling of the economic crisis.

## **Legislative Outcomes and Legacy**

Though the immediate goal of the Bonus Army was not achieved—since Congress rejected early bonus payments—the event influenced subsequent policy changes. The most notable was the passage of the Economy Act in 1933 and later the passage of the Rescission Act of 1934, which adjusted veterans' benefits. The event also led to greater advocacy for veteran rights and economic support programs.

## **Lessons Learned and Historical Significance**

The Bonus Army march underscored the desperation of Americans during the Great Depression and highlighted the importance of government responsiveness to citizens' needs. It also served as a catalyst for future social welfare reforms and shaped the political landscape concerning veterans' affairs.

## **Legacy and Reflection on the 1932 Bonus Army March**

### **Memory in American History**

The Bonus Army remains a potent symbol of protest and government accountability. It exemplifies the struggles of marginalized groups during times of crisis and the importance of compassionate policymaking.

### **The Impact on Future Veteran Policies**

The public outrage and political fallout from the Bonus Army's eviction spurred reforms in how the United States supports its veterans. It contributed to the development of the G.I. Bill after World War II, which transformed veteran benefits and education opportunities.

### **Modern Perspectives and Commemorations**

Today, the event is commemorated as a pivotal moment in American history, emphasizing the enduring importance of veterans' rights and the necessity of government responsiveness during economic hardships.

## **Conclusion**

The march of approximately 20,000 unemployed World War I veterans on Washington in the spring of 1932 was more than a protest—it was a desperate cry for economic justice amidst a nation in turmoil. The events not only highlighted the struggles faced by returning soldiers but also exposed the failures of the government to address the urgent needs of its citizens during the Great Depression. The legacy of the Bonus Army continues to remind policymakers and citizens alike of the importance of compassion, responsibility, and the enduring power of collective action in shaping a more equitable society.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What was the main reason for the arrival of approximately 20,000 unemployed World War I veterans in Washington in 1932?**

They were demanding early payment of a promised bonus for their military service, which they wanted to access during the Great Depression when many were unemployed.

### **How did the U.S. government initially respond to the Bonus Army's protest in 1932?**

The government, led by President Hoover, attempted to disperse the veterans peacefully but ultimately used military force, including tear gas and cavalry, to remove the protesters from the Capitol area.

### **What impact did the Bonus Army's protest have on public opinion and President Hoover's presidency?**

The violent dispersal of the Bonus Army damaged public perception of Hoover, portraying him as uncaring toward veterans and worsening his political standing during the Great Depression.

### **Were the veterans' demands ultimately met after the 1932 Bonus Army protest?**

No, the Bonus Army's demands for early payment of the bonuses were not met at that time; the legislation was later passed in 1936, but only after significant public pressure and political debate.

### **What role did the Great Depression play in motivating the Bonus Army's march on Washington in 1932?**

The economic hardship caused by the Great Depression left many veterans unemployed and in financial distress, prompting them to demand early access to their promised bonuses as a form of relief.

### **How did the government justify the use of force against the Bonus Army in 1932?**

Officials claimed that the protest had become unruly and that the use of force was necessary to restore order and protect government property, though critics argued it was an excessive response.

### **What was the long-term significance of the 1932 Bonus Army**

## incident?

The incident highlighted the government's failure to address veterans' needs and contributed to widespread criticism of Hoover, influencing future policies on veterans' benefits and government response to protests.

## Did the Bonus Army incident influence subsequent legislation regarding veterans' benefits?

Yes, it helped build momentum for future legislation, leading to the passage of the Adjusted Compensation Act in 1936, which provided for early payment of the bonuses to the veterans.

## Additional Resources

In The Spring Of 1932, Approximately 20,000 Unemployed World War I Veterans Descended On Washington To demand early payment of a bonus they had been promised, an event that would become a pivotal moment in American history. This mass gathering, known as the Bonus Army protest, exposed deep economic and political tensions during the Great Depression and significantly influenced public opinion and government policy. To fully understand this dramatic episode, it's essential to explore its causes, the sequence of events, the key figures involved, and its lasting repercussions.

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### Introduction: The Context of 1932 and the Bonus Army

The early 1930s was a period of unparalleled economic hardship in the United States. The stock market crash of 1929 had triggered the Great Depression, leading to mass unemployment, widespread poverty, and social unrest. Among those severely affected were veterans of World War I, many of whom found themselves unemployed and struggling to make ends meet.

The Bonus Army was the collective name for a group of approximately 20,000 unemployed veterans, their families, and supporters who descended upon Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1932. They demanded the early payment of a bonus that Congress had authorized for veterans, originally scheduled to be paid in 1945. The veterans believed that the federal government owed them the promised compensation for their service, especially during such desperate economic times.

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### The Origins of the Bonus and Its Political Significance

#### The Adjusted Compensation Act of 1924

The veterans' bonus was established by the Adjustments Compensation Act of 1924, commonly known as the Bonus Act. This legislation awarded veterans certificates that could be redeemed for cash or used for other purposes, payable in 1945, 13 years after the end of World War I. The idea was to provide post-war economic security, but the delayed payment became a point of contention during the Great Depression.

## Growing Discontent and Calls for Early Payment

By 1932, veterans and their families faced severe economic hardships. Many believed that the government should honor its commitments sooner rather than later. The Veterans' organizations, particularly the American Legion, supported the idea of pressing for an early payout.

## The Congressional Debate

Efforts to pass legislation for immediate bonus payments gained momentum but faced stiff opposition in Congress. Many lawmakers were hesitant to allocate such funds during a time of economic austerity, fearing it would worsen the national debt or set a precedent for unwarranted government spending.

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## The Formation and Mobilization of the Bonus Army

### Key Figures and Organizations

- Walter W. Waters: A former Army sergeant and leader of the Bonus Army.
- American Legion: The primary veteran organization initially opposed to the bonus payout but later involved in negotiations.
- Veterans' Organizations: Various smaller groups and local veterans' clubs participated in organizing the march.

## The March to Washington

In the spring of 1932, thousands of veterans from across the country, many of them unemployed and destitute, began to gather in Washington, D.C., to protest. They traveled by train, bus, and on foot, often facing poor conditions and limited resources.

## The Formation of the Bonus Army

By early summer, the protest swelled to about 20,000 people, including veterans, families, and supporters. They established makeshift camps, notably around the Anacostia flats, and set up shantytowns in the city, symbolizing their urgent need for help.

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## The Public and Political Reaction

### Public Sympathy and Support

Many Americans sympathized with the veterans' plight, viewing the march as a legitimate protest against unfulfilled promises and economic injustice.

### Political Polarization

The Hoover administration faced mounting pressure. President Herbert Hoover was reluctant to approve early bonus payments, citing concerns over government finances and fears that granting the bonus could set a dangerous precedent.

## Congressional Actions

In June 1932, Congress considered measures to authorize early bonus payments but ultimately rejected them, deepening the veterans' frustration.

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## The Climax: The Dispersal of the Bonus Army

### Orders to Remove the Camps

In July 1932, Hoover ordered the military to clear the veterans' encampments. Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur, along with Major Dwight D. Eisenhower and Major George S. Patton, led the effort.

### The Use of Force

The military used tear gas, cavalry charges, tanks, and bayonets to disperse the veterans. The confrontation resulted in injuries, and in some cases, deaths—most notably, two veterans and a Navy veteran were killed, and dozens were wounded.

### Public Outcry

The violent dispersal shocked the nation. Photographs and news reports showed the brutality of the government's response, leading to widespread criticism of Hoover's leadership.

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## Aftermath and Significance

### Political Consequences

- Impact on Hoover's Presidency: The Bonus Army incident damaged Hoover's reputation, portraying him as unfeeling and disconnected from ordinary Americans' suffering.
- Influence on the 1932 Election: The event became a political weapon used by Franklin D. Roosevelt's campaign, emphasizing the need for government action to aid the unemployed and veterans.

### Long-term Impact

- Veterans' Rights: The event highlighted the importance of veterans' benefits in American policy.
- Government Response to Unrest: It prompted discussions about how the government should handle protests and economic crises.
- Legislative Changes: Although the immediate bonus payout was not granted, the event paved the way for later reforms, including the eventual passage of the G.I. Bill in 1944, which addressed veterans' benefits comprehensively.

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## Reflection: The Legacy of the Bonus Army

The In the spring of 1932, approximately 20,000 unemployed World War I veterans descended on Washington to demand their promised bonuses, an act that symbolized the desperation and resilience

of those who served. Their march and subsequent violent dispersal underscored the dire economic conditions of the Great Depression and exposed the limitations and tensions within American political institutions.

The Bonus Army remains a powerful reminder of the importance of honoring commitments to those who serve and the dangers of neglecting the economic needs of citizens during times of crisis. It also serves as a case study in protest, government authority, and the political climate of the early 20th century United States.

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## Conclusion

The saga of the Bonus Army in 1932 was more than a protest; it was a reflection of a nation in turmoil, grappling with economic hardship, political indecision, and the moral obligation to its veterans. Understanding this event offers valuable insights into American history and the ongoing struggles to balance economic policy, social justice, and government accountability.

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