

The veterans were desperate. Gen. MacArthur ordered U.S. troops to attack them



Gen. Douglas MacArthur directing the operation against the Bonus Army in 1932. (Library of Congress)

By
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July 28, 2017 at 5:00 a.m. PDT

The troops massed on the Ellipse, right outside the White House: More than two hundred soldiers on horseback, plus men on foot and five tanks.

On July 28, 1932, at the command of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, they marched down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Capitol to launch an attack on World War I veterans. It was the height of the Great Depression. Nearly 20,000 unemployed veterans had converged on Washington to demand bonus payments from Congress and President Herbert Hoover. Led by Walter W. Waters, a former sergeant from Oregon, they called themselves the Bonus Army or Bonus Expeditionary Forces, a nod to World War I's American Expeditionary Forces.

Many saw the Bonus Army as heroes.

“They made themselves into a symbol of the Depression — the symbol of the forgotten man,” said historian Lucy Barber, deputy executive director at the National Archives. “Their status as veterans and patriots gave them a much greater claim on the country.

With the image of all the other people lining up at the soup kitchens — in some ways, they were considered the most deserving of those people.”

The former servicemen were scattered throughout the city but two camps stood out — a group squatting around buildings slated for demolition east of the Capitol on Pennsylvania Avenue, and a larger encampment in the Anacostia Flats, south of the 11th Street Bridge in what is now Anacostia Park. A rival group, the Worker’s Ex-Servicemen League, Communist vets at odds with Waters’s group, tented at 14th and D streets in Southwest Washington.



The Bonus Army, thousands of jobless World War I veterans, march on Pennsylvania Avenue. They occupied Washington during the Great Depression to demand cash bonuses for their service. (Historical Society of Washington)

Hoover regarded the Pennsylvania Avenue encampment as an eyesore, no different from the other Depression shantytowns that his critics dubbed “Hooverilles.” But there was a pretext to drive them out: The abandoned buildings were slated to be razed to make way for new construction in downtown Washington.

On July 28, Washington Police Chief Pelham Glassford — who had served as a brigadier general in World War I and donated food and lumber to the Bonus Army — ordered Waters to evacuate the Pennsylvania Avenue camp by 10 a.m. He roped off the area that surrounded the buildings. Wrecking cranes parked nearby.

The evicted veterans began leaving quietly. Then an angry group burst through the ropes. They hurled rocks and bricks, and one hit the police chief in the chest. Soon truckloads of veterans streamed across the 11th Street Bridge from the Anacostia. The chief mobilized 500 officers.

On July 28, 1932, the government forcibly removed nearly 20,000 jobless veterans who encamped on Pennsylvania Avenue to demand bonus payments from Congress. (National Archives)

In the melee that followed, one veteran grabbed a policeman's nightstick. The officer, George A. Shinault, drew his gun and shot and killed two veterans. As the ambulances carried the fatally wounded men away, a St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter told the chief that troops were massing on the Ellipse. Unbeknownst to Glassford, MacArthur had drawn up a plan to quell domestic rebellion. Accompanied by his aide (and future president) [Maj. Dwight D. Eisenhower](#), MacArthur had a contingent of troops at Fort Myer and Fort Washington on alert. At 1:50 p.m., [Maj. George S. Patton](#) ordered his cavalymen to saddle up.

Glassford rode his motorcycle to the Ellipse and asked MacArthur to give the veterans more time to disperse. For two hours, the veterans stood their ground.

At 4 p.m., more than 200 soldiers on horseback, sabers drawn, descended on Pennsylvania Avenue from 15th Street and headed toward the Capitol. They jabbed at everyone in their path, veterans and bystanders alike.

The infantry followed, donning gas masks and lobbing tear gas. The tanks rolled behind the cavalry.

With brutal efficiency, they cleared the Pennsylvania Avenue camp, then headed for the communist encampment. Tanks rolled over shacks. Occupants set fires, then ran with belongings.

At 9 p.m., MacArthur ordered his men to march to Anacostia. According to Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen in the book, "The Bonus Army: An American Epic," the White House sent Gen. George Van Horn Moseley with a written message that the president did not want the Anacostia camp evacuated. MacArthur ignored the message.

At 11 p.m., tanks blocked access to the bridge. Then the troops raised the 11th Street drawbridge. No one could enter or leave.

A National Guard unit turned a searchlight on the pitch-dark camp. As people panicked, the infantrymen entered and lobbed tear gas. Moving down the rows of huts, the soldiers lit folded-up newspapers and systematically torched the dwellings.



Shacks were set ablaze after soldiers rout the Bonus Army from its Anacostia camp. (UPI)

Hearst columnist Bess Furman, witnessing the scene from nearby Hains Point described “a blaze so big that it lighted the whole sky ... a nightmare come to life.”

At midnight, MacArthur held a news conference while the president was in bed and accused the Bonus Army of subversion: “They had come to the conclusion that they were going to take over the government in an arbitrary way or by indirect means.”

The next day’s *Washington Post* carried a banner headline in capital letters: ONE SLAIN, 60 HURT AS TROOPS ROUT B.E.F. WITH GAS BOMBS AND FLAMES.

Newsreels showed the military with tanks, routing unarmed veterans. To many, the action confirmed a view of Hoover as coldhearted and detached from reality. Reading a *New York Times* account, Democratic presidential candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt told his aide, future Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, “Well, Felix, this will elect me.” Politicians had debated the bonuses for years. During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson gave extra payments to civilian government workers to help offset inflation but offered no comparable payments to the military. In 1924, Congress agreed to what veterans called “the tombstone bonus” because the payments couldn’t be redeemed until 1945. As president, Roosevelt opposed making the bonuses immediate, arguing they would be inflationary. But Congress overrode his second veto in 1936, and the bonuses were finally paid.

“Between March and June of 1936, \$2.2. million flows into the economy,” said Stephen R. Ortiz, a historian at Binghamton University and author of “Beyond the Bonus March and the G.I. Bill.” “You have amazing stories about people redeeming bonds to pay off their houses or pay their doctor who had been giving free health care. Clothing sales spike. Car sales spike. Many point to it as a real cash infusion in ways that the New Deal programs weren’t.”

But for some, it was too little and too late.

A grand jury ruled that the police acted in self-defense in the killing of the two veterans. Both men were buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Eric Carlson, from Oakland, Calif., had fought in the trenches in France. He died of his injuries five days after the riot.

William Hushka, who lived in Chicago, died at the scene. Hushka, a Lithuanian immigrant, joined the Army during World War I and took his oath of citizenship at a Kansas boot camp.

Hushka’s funeral took place with full military honors on Aug. 2, five days after the riot. The Chicago Tribune reported that “fifty cars filled with veterans, followed Hushka’s body to its final resting place.”

Time magazine noted with bitter irony, “Last week William Hushka’s bonus for \$528 suddenly became payable in full when a police bullet drilled him dead.”

Hushka’s brother got the money.