

Book Review

THE BONUS ARMY: AN AMERICAN EPIC¹

REVIEWED BY COLONEL THOMAS D. ARNHOLD²

After every American war, one or more crises affect the veterans of that war. Often, the problems the veterans face are widespread and galvanizes the public in their favor. Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen detail an epic story of poverty-stricken World War I veterans and their quest to obtain a service bonus to which they felt entitled. In early 1924, Congress finally passed a bonus for these veterans of \$1 per day for each day served and \$1.25 for each day served overseas, but the bonus was only redeemable, with interest, in 1945.³ President Calvin Coolidge promptly vetoed the bill, but the Senate overrode his decision.⁴ The authors devote only a few short pages to the history of the original bonus legislation, but do briefly discuss the lobbying influence of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars in obtaining passage of the bill.⁵

The Bonus Army consisted of World War I veterans, many of whom were accompanied by their family members. The Bonus Army did not form until after the Great Depression began. Many of the veterans began lobbying the President and Congress for early payment of the bonus for a variety of reasons. The Bonus Army later declared that they would not leave Washington D.C. until legislation was passed granting them an immediate payment of their bonus. The veterans were supported by the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars and had a champion in Congressman Wright Patman of Texas. Dickson and Allen explain how the confluence of the Great Depression, Prohibition, media coverage, and organized veterans with vibrant leadership made the Bonus Army an organized political force. Eventually, many veterans from all parts of the United States converged on Washington, D.C. to occupy parts of the city. They did not intend to leave until Congress passed and the President signed a bill immediately granting them their bonuses. Many of the veterans were joined by their families, and at one point there were over 20,000 veterans and family members in the city. The Bonus Army issued its own newspaper with a circulation of 50,000.⁶ Dickson and Allen effectively mix interesting short biographies of historical figures that played an important role in the Bonus Army. Refreshingly, the authors do not denounce those who opposed the bonus demanded by the veterans, but rather explain why those opposed to the bonus viewed it as ill-advised.

II. Analysis

The authors present the history of the bonus bill and the Bonus Army in a chronological fashion that is easy to follow. First, the authors relate several interesting factual situations that took place in World War I, which later had a direct impact on the Bonus Army. One ironic twist involves Major (MAJ) George S. Patton, Jr., who was wounded in World War I, but saved by his aide, Sergeant (SGT) Joe Angelo.⁷ Later, SGT Angelo walked from New Jersey to Washington, D.C. to join the Bonus Army,⁸ and Patton, his former commander, assisted in evicting the Bonus Army from the city.⁹ In one of the saddest moments relayed in the book, MAJ Patton later denied knowing SGT Angelo, the aide who earlier saved his life.¹⁰

The book tells of a variety of historical characters with many different motivations, including President Hoover, who was adamantly opposed to granting the veterans an immediate bonus, and his successor, President Franklin Roosevelt, who also was a surprising opponent of advancing the bonus. The authors also detail the meteoric rise of Walter W. Waters, a former sergeant and World War I veteran. Waters, from Portland, Oregon, led a small group to Washington, D.C. and eventually

¹ PAUL DICKSON & THOMAS B. ALLEN, *THE BONUS ARMY: AN AMERICAN EPIC* (2004).

² U.S. Army. Currently the Staff Judge Advocate, 35th Infantry Division (Mechanized).

³ DICKSON, *supra* note 1, at 29.

⁴ *See id.*

⁵ *See id.* at 28.

⁶ *See id.* at 133.

⁷ *See id.* at 17.

⁸ *See id.* at 35.

⁹ *See id.* at 176.

¹⁰ *See id.* at 194.

became the undisputed leader of the Bonus Army.¹¹ Eventually, Waters flirted with fascism¹² and disappeared into history with no other noteworthy achievements.

Particularly compelling figures are Pelham D. Glassford and Evalyn Walsh McLean. Glassford was a brigadier general in World War I who became the police chief of Washington, D.C.¹³ Although responsible for keeping order during the Bonus Army's occupation of Washington D. C. and actively participating in their later eviction, Glassford donated large sums of his personal money to assist the veterans.¹⁴ McLean was the wife of the owner of *The Washington Post*, which came out against advancing the bonus for veterans. McLean, however, urged the Red Cross to help the Bonus Army, and at one point purchased 1,000 sandwiches and coffees from a local café to distribute to hungry veterans.¹⁵

The authors expertly describe the historical backdrop of the times. Dickson and Allen describe the effect of the Great Depression on the veterans seeking to receive their bonus immediately. They also relate how the fear of communism, fascism, and rebellion caused American political leaders to condemn the Bonus Army and what it stood for.¹⁶ In fact, only a few members of the Bonus Army were communists or fascists. The authors patiently explain that most of the veterans just wanted the bonus money to pay bills or start new businesses.

Dickson and Allen do not lose sight of the real story—the veterans. They vividly describe the dire plight of the veterans and their families. Reading about the staging of boxing matches between the children of the veterans in order to raise money for food makes one sympathetic to the veterans' plight. While camped in Washington, D.C., the veterans built shelters out of anything they could find. One veteran built a home out of an old chicken coop.¹⁷ Another lived in an oil drum filled with grass.¹⁸ One pleasant side effect of the Bonus Army was the inadvertent integration of black and white veterans. United by a common cause, they lived and ate side by side. One veteran, Charles Green, recalled, "You could see blacks and whites, and they were living as a unit."¹⁹

Eventually, the Hoover administration decided to evict the Bonus Army from Washington, D.C. First, a carrot was used to entice the veterans to leave: a \$100,000.00 fund was available to veterans who wanted to return home.²⁰ Few veterans accepted, however, and in July, 1932, President Hoover used force to evict the veterans. At the time, police counted 11,698 veterans in twenty-four camps, not including family members.²¹ Not with sadness, but in a matter-of-fact manner, Dickson and Allen describe how Soldiers, many of them veterans of World War I themselves, evicted the Bonus Army using rifles, machine guns, pistols, and tanks.²² Many members of the Bonus Army were cut by sabers in a cavalry attack by the unit commanded by MAJ Patton.²³

The authors also describe how the Roosevelt Administration was just as opposed to granting the veterans an immediate bonus as the Hoover Administration. While Roosevelt created many new programs to put people back to work and end the Great Depression, he was adamantly opposed to advancing the Bonus Army and the bonus they so sorely sought. Roosevelt vetoed several bills passed by Congress granting the veterans their bonus.²⁴ Several famous political figures, including the controversial Father Charles E. Coughlin, urged the passage of an immediate bonus bill.²⁵ At one point, Father Coughlin held

¹¹ See *id.* at 56.

¹² See *id.* at 135.

¹³ See *id.* at 43.

¹⁴ See *id.* at 136.

¹⁵ See *id.* at 98.

¹⁶ See *id.* at 7.

¹⁷ *The Human Side of the Bonus Army*, LITERARY DIG. 28 (June 25, 1932).

¹⁸ DICKSON & ALLEN, *supra* note 1, at 108.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 118.

²⁰ *Id.* at 143.

²¹ See *id.* at 158.

²² See *id.* at 230.

²³ See *Coughlin's Bonus Plea*, N.Y. TIMES, May 6, 1935.

²⁴ See DAVID M. KENNEDY, FREEDOM FROM FEAR: THE AMERICAN PEOPLE IN DEPRESSION AND WAR, 1929-1945, at 791 (N.Y. Oxford Univ. Press 1999), and DAVID McCULLOUGH, TRUMAN 200 (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster 1992).

²⁵ See DICKSON & ALLEN, *supra* note 1, at 245.

a rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City, which was attended by 23,000 people, to attack Roosevelt's veto.²⁶ Loyal to his fellow veterans, Senator Harry S Truman broke with his future running mate and voted for the bonus.²⁷

The history of the Bonus Army did not end with the eviction of the veterans from Washington, D.C. Dickson and Allen explain that many veterans of World War I and later the Bonus Army went to work in federal work programs established by President Roosevelt. They did so because the Great Depression had not ended, and they needed to serve. The authors devote an entire chapter describing how many veterans sent to a camp in the Florida Keys were killed in a hurricane.²⁸ Famed author Ernest Hemingway criticized the deaths of these 259 veterans as unnecessary, faulting the Roosevelt Administration for not giving the veterans proper warning of the impending hurricane.²⁹ While the chapter about the Florida Keys disaster is interesting, the authors appear to blame this tragedy on the veterans' eviction from Washington, D.C. and the government's failure to provide them their bonus immediately. This attempted nexus is far-fetched, but illustrates the pathetic plight of the World War I veterans.

In the book's epilogue, Dickson and Allen discuss the origin of the GI Bill, which they attribute, in large part, to the shabby treatment of the World War I veterans. During World War II, many of the congressional proponents of the Bonus Army pushed for some type of legislation to provide long term assistance for veterans. By the end of 1943, 243 bills were pending before Congress that would give veterans some type of benefits.³⁰ On 8 June 1944, the GI Bill passed Congress, with D-Day being the deciding factor. Until then, a southern congressmen blocked the bill, fearing it would assist in educating black veterans.³¹ Finally, on 22 June 1944, due to overwhelming public support, President Roosevelt signed the GI Bill.³²

III. The Thesis and Its Application

Dickson and Allen are experts at detailing an interesting and perhaps largely unknown part of U.S. history. Their epilogue tells how the Bonus Army's efforts eventually led to the GI Bill's passage. After each conflict, American Veterans face problems and issues unique to their war. After Vietnam, many veterans faced Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome and Agent Orange disabilities. After the Gulf War, former Soldiers had difficulty convincing military leaders they suffered from Gulf War Syndrome. In all of these instances, the Soldiers, media, veterans' organizations, and influential, sympathetic citizens mobilized political action to aid the veterans. The lesson to be learned from this book is that veterans of war will struggle financially, socially and psychologically, and the U.S. government must take care of its military veterans. Through the actions of the Bonus Army, treatment of veterans became a political issue. By banding together, members of the Bonus Army became a political force to be reckoned with, and were an example to future generations of veterans.

IV. Conclusion

The Bonus Army is an excellent read. It has a sufficient mix of facts, figures, personal recollections, and historical tales to be interesting and relevant. Some non-fiction books can be read only a few pages at a time before the reader must put the book down in order to digest what has been read or to keep from falling asleep. This was not one of those books. By reading this book, Soldiers and civilians will understand the political basis for the passage of legislation such as the Soldier's and Sailor's Civil Relief Act, and other veterans' legislation. The reader will also come to an understanding that members of the Bonus Army suffered tremendously, and did so not because it was a noble cause, but because they were trying to eke out a living for themselves and their families.

²⁶ See Ernest Hemingway, *Who Murdered the Vets?*, NEW MASSES, Sept. 17, 1935, at 9.

²⁷ See DICKSON & ALLEN, *supra* note 1, at 253.

²⁸ See *id.* at 224-51.

²⁹ See *id.* at 245.

³⁰ See *id.* at 269.

³¹ See *id.* at 270.

³² See *id.* at 274.