



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 19, 2019

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The Bonus March

It was the third summer of the Great Depression. An angry mob of 5,000 men, part of what became known in history as “the Bonus March,” moved under the hot sun of July 28, 1932, up Pennsylvania Avenue in the direction of the Treasury Building and the White House. In between them were the D.C. police force, but they were outnumbered five to one. As the police confronted the menacing throng moving inexorably forward, Pelham Glassford, superintendent of the Washington police, was manhandled and stripped of his superintendent’s gold badge.



Gunfire erupted and two men were killed, with at least 20 more severely injured. The police had lost control of the situation, and the mob was poised to break through to the White House itself.

The Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia made a desperate plea for federal troops. President Herbert Hoover quickly huddled with Patrick Hurley, the secretary of war, and they agreed that only the Army could stop the mob. Hurley immediately sent an order to General Douglas MacArthur, the Army chief of staff.

“The President has just now informed me that the civil government of the District of Columbia has reported to him that it is unable to maintain law and order in the District,” Hurley wrote to MacArthur. “You will have United States troops proceed immediately to the scene of disorder.”

Hurley further told MacArthur to “cooperate fully with the District of Columbia police force,” and to turn over all prisoners to them. Hurley added that “any women and children who may be in the affected area be accorded every consideration and kindness.”

Six hundred soldiers were quickly deployed under General Perry Miles, drawn from units near the city. Miles told his unit commanders, “We are acting on the orders of the President of the United States. The cavalry will make a demonstration down Pennsylvania Avenue. The infantry will deploy in line of skirmishers in the rear of the cavalry. You will surround the area and evict the men in possession there.”

Meanwhile, several members of the American Communist Party had infiltrated the mob, hoping at best for an immediate violent revolution against the U.S. government, or at least some bloodshed, about which in the words of communist organizer John T. Pace, “The communists didn’t care how many veterans were killed. I was told Moscow had ordered riots and bloodshed in the hopes that this might set off the revolution.”

Despite these nefarious goals of the communists, the judicious use of force by General MacArthur ended the threat without firing a shot. As MacArthur recalled in his 1964 autobiography *Reminiscences*, “The sticks, clubs, and stones of the rioters were met only by tear gas and steady pressure. No one was



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killed and there were no serious injuries on either side.”

Pace later told the House Committee on Un-American Activities, “It is my opinion that had this gone on another week, the Communists would have gained the leadership of the bonus expeditionary forces,” noting this could have led to “disastrous” results for America. By the time Pace testified to HCUA in 1948, he had left the Communist Party, but during the Bonus March in 1932, he was among the leading Communist Party agitators hoping to use the event to advance their ultimate goal of a Soviet America.

Having failed to either initiate a violent revolution immediately, or instigate mass bloodshed that could then be used for propaganda purposes and another try at eventual revolution against the U.S. government, the communists and their allies grossly distorted what happened in hopes of still being able to accomplish their goals. A principal target of this propaganda effort was MacArthur. He wrote in *Reminiscences*, “Speeches pictured me in full dress uniform astride a fiery white charger, bedecked with medals, waving a bloody saber, and leading a mad cavalry charge against unarmed and innocent civilians.”

But the truth was quite different, as there was no cavalry charge, no fiery white horse, and no saber. Historian Paul Johnson, writing in his book *A History of the American People*, said of the Bonus March, “No episode in American history has been the basis for more falsehood, much of it deliberate.”

Because such history is misrepresented for a purpose — to advance the cause of those who would like to see America fundamentally transformed into a hard-core socialist country — it is necessary to challenge this falsified history with what really happened in the Bonus March, and demonstrate how the radical Left still uses similar events for their own purposes.

The Origin of the Bonus March: the Bonus Bill

To better understand what happened in 1932, we need to go back to the end of the First World War, which concluded in 1918. More than 100,000 American soldiers had died in the year that the United States was actively engaged in the fighting, and many more had suffered debilitating injuries. Beyond that, the war had produced hundreds of thousands of war veterans.

The American Legion, formed in 1919, took the lead in lobbying for a larger “bonus” for these veterans than the \$60 they had been initially awarded. Another organization, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, took up the cause of a larger bonus, as well. These two organizations provided a powerful political force in favor of a larger “bonus.”

Senator Warren Harding of Ohio, a Republican, had won the 1920 presidential election, promising to return the nation to “normalcy” after the Progressive years of Democratic President Woodrow Wilson. The nation had expended a tremendous sum of money to fight Wilson’s war “to end all wars,” and the government had been left with a large war debt. The war had left the country with an inflationary spiral, followed by a rather severe economic depression, and the federal government had to contend with drastically reduced revenues.

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As such, Harding opposed any additional “bonus,” arguing that this massive expenditure would “virtually defeat the Administration’s program of economy,” and would be a “disaster to the nation’s



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finances.” Harding successfully vetoed the first attempt to enact the bonus, but he died in 1923. His successor, Calvin Coolidge, was in total agreement with Harding on the issue, arguing that “patriotism ... bought and paid for is not patriotism,” but the pro-bonus lobby in Congress did not give up, and a bonus bill eventually passed over Coolidge’s veto in 1924. Under the bill, each veteran would be slated to receive a bonus of \$1.25 for each day of overseas service, capped at a total of \$625.

The bill provided that the bonus would be paid in 1945 — typical of the tendency of lawmakers to “kick the can down the road.”

But by early 1932, Texas Congressman Wright Patman saw a way to score political points and introduced what Don Lohbeck called in his book *Patrick J. Hurley*, “a demagogic bill calling for the printing of 2 ½ billion dollars of fiat money and the immediate payment, at full maturity value, of all soldiers’ adjusted silver certificates.” Walter Lippman, a political commentator at the time, wrote of the proposal, “To demand payment of the principal of a debt ... before it is due is to demand money that is not owed at all now and to demand more money than is owed ultimately.”

Under normal circumstances, most Americans would have probably agreed with these sentiments. But the introduction of the legislation that would provide some money to hundreds of thousands of World War I veterans in the depths of the Great Depression led Walter W. Waters, an unemployed cannery superintendent, to organize jobless veterans in Portland, Oregon, to lead a march to the nation’s capital and pressure Congress to pass the Patman bill.

The Communist Party’s Effort to Use the Bonus March

The reality is that the Bonus March, when it happened, caught the Communist Party somewhat by surprise, but as is its pattern, it quickly moved to use the march to advance its own goals. The American Communist Party had been trying to create a revolutionary mood in the United States for several months. For example, in 1930, it instigated what it termed a “hunger march” of about 10,000 people who paraded in Washington, D.C., and picketed the White House. The Communist Party hoped this presence of desperate unemployed people would provoke a confrontation with the local police.

That having failed, the Communist Party joined others in calling for an immediate cash payment of the bonus in early 1932, and even advocated in its official newspaper, *The Daily Worker*, for a march on the nation’s capital to demand it. But then Waters unexpectedly took the lead.

At first, Waters’ call for a Bonus March attracted few followers — only 300 men by May 1932, but the propaganda machine of the Communist Party quickly moved into action. Its front group, the Workers Ex-Servicemen’s League, issued its own call for a veterans’ march in early June. Benjamin Gitlow, a Communist Party leader at the time of the Bonus March, explained in his book *The Whole of Their Lives*, “In less than two weeks’ time the Communists were on their way to Washington from New York, Chicago, Seattle, and Los Angeles.”

According to Lohbeck, in *Patrick J. Hurley*, the communists had two goals they hoped to achieve in joining the Bonus March: to focus the attention of the world on this bold assault on the seat of capitalist government, and to provoke incidents that could be used in building the Communist Party in America.

As out-of-work veterans from across the country began to move toward the nation’s capital, the Communist Party was determined to get its people there, as well, and take over leadership of the Bonus March. Pace recalled that some Communist Party radicals even successfully commandeered a freight



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train in Detroit and used it to make it most of the way to D.C. “The Party tried to instill in the minds of the workers that all these things [such as privately owned freight trains] were the result of the labor of the workers and that they had a right to commandeer them and take them,” Pace explained to the HCUA in 1948. He added that it was party policy to, whenever possible, encourage violation of the law. This, they hoped, would provoke an overreaction from the police, which the communists hoped would lead to bloodshed, which could then be blamed on the government.

The marchers began to pour into the areas near Washington, and party operatives huddled to consider how to proceed. A major question was whether they should distribute themselves among the various camps in and around the city or settle in their own camp. After a discussion, as Pace later told the HCUA, “We concluded that we should settle in a camp to ourselves in order to create a base for operations. We had learned that a part of our contingent had already been sent to Camp Anacostia and about 100 had billeted in Camp Bartlett. I immediately contacted Camp Bartlett and registered there as a bonus marcher.”

After getting organized and developing a plan on how to best exploit the Bonus March to advance the cause of the Communist Party, Pace told his fellow communists to “penetrate other contingents in the camp to organize a mass meeting that evening in the camp” so that he could make an appeal for a march into the city itself.

“The following morning, after the meeting that evening, we took our blankets and our mess kits that had been issued to us in the camp and proceeded to march to Washington,” Pace later recalled. “Major French [the provost marshal of the camp] and two District of Columbia policemen stepped in the gateway and told us that we could not go to Washington. Of course, we knew that three people could not stop 700 or 800, so we just pushed them out of the way and proceeded to march to Thirteenth and B Streets, SW.”

Early Government Sympathy With the Marchers

After communists and the veterans made camp in the city, they were soon visited by Pelham Glassford, the police commissioner of the district, who was very sympathetic to the cause of a veteran bonus. Pace and his fellow communists were disturbed as Glassford became “very fraternal” with the campers, especially when many of the non-communists began to warm up to him. The communists viewed the police as the supporters of the capitalist system and their enemy.

As more marchers arrived, many in destitute condition, Glassford became concerned. Some were living in shelters made of egg crates, scraps of junked cars, old wall paper, and rusty bed frames. He housed many in unused government buildings, and telegraphed the governors of all 48 states urging them to dissuade more veterans from coming. According to a 1963 *American Heritage* article by John Weaver, Glassford told the governors that “relief resources were already overtaxed.” Glassford requested militia tents and rolling kitchens from the National Guard, and General MacArthur issued an order to meet Glassford’s request. A number of rolling kitchens were set up on the Anacostia Flats, where many of the marchers were in camp.

This humanitarian gesture, however, caused concern from some in Congress that giving the marchers meals would encourage even more of the millions of unemployed Americans to descend on the nation’s capital. This concern led to the eventual withdrawal of the rolling kitchens.

In his book *Reminiscences*, MacArthur recalled the growing tension throughout the month of June. “The



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camps [were] now occupied by an estimated 17,000 spread out to every sizeable vacant lot. At night, morose men squatted by burning campfires listening silently to the endless speeches, always tinged with the increasing violence of Communist propaganda. The privations, the punishing heat, the unsanitary living conditions, and the interminable hours of wishful waiting for the slightly more than one thousand dollars which was to be each man's share — if Congress relented — took its toll."

During this time, the communist front group calling itself the Workers Ex-Servicemen's League began traveling among the camps to spread propaganda among the veterans, designed to smear the non-communist leaders in the camps. Especially targeted was Walter Waters, who had initiated the march. Pace later explained to Congress the reasoning of the communists: "The purpose was to discredit them in the eyes of their followers in order to create confusion and eventually a split in the ranks of the followers, which would give our forces a wedge" so as to capture the leadership of that contingent from Waters and other non-communists who were accused of being sell-outs to the cause. Additionally, Pace testified, the communists would make common cause with the more militant members of each camp, hoping to wrest control away from the more moderate leaders.

Many in the federal government and the district's police force failed to grasp what was happening: the communists were steadily taking over the Bonus March, hoping to either cause an immediate revolution, or more likely to cause an incident with massive numbers of casualties that could be used to cast the government as oppressive and fascist. While the regular Bonus Marchers, such as those led by Waters, were motivated mainly to petition Congress for an immediate cash payment of the bonus, abiding by the law, the communists had a different goal. Pace, one of those communists hoping to use the Bonus March to advance the goals of the communists, later told Congress (after he had left the party) that the communists and their allies hoped to "use these grievances — the general economic situation — this demand for a bonus, to build a revolutionary force and *to gain followers for the cause of the revolution.*" (Emphasis added.)

As such, the nightly speeches by the communist agitators focused more on the general unfitness of the U.S. government itself, rather than on the bonus. "They charged that the government was an agency of business — the government was handing out all kinds of doles to industry and banks — not doing anything for the veteran and the unemployed," Pace explained.

The intention was to enrage the marchers enough to provoke law enforcement into a violent reaction, Pace added.

Then the House of Representatives voted to pay the bonus immediately, resulting in a wave of exultation throughout the camps; however, the Senate quickly defeated the Bonus Bill. When that happened, some veterans accepted the defeat and began to drift away. Congress voted an appropriation of \$100,000 to provide the veterans with transportation home and out of D.C. Glassford — the police commissioner — mounted a blue motorcycle and drove through the camps, urging them to take the government offer. As marchers left, however, they were soon replaced by an even larger number, more open to the radicalism of the Communist Party.

Seventeen thousand veterans assembled in front of the Capitol as Congress prepared to adjourn. Hoping that all the veterans would join those in leaving the city, Waters was invited to meet with Secretary of War Hurley and Army Chief of Staff MacArthur on July 26. During the five-hour meeting, Hurley was blunt with Waters: "You and your bonus army have no business in Washington. We are not



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in sympathy with your being here. We will not cooperate in any way with your remaining here.”

Waters then turned to MacArthur and asked, “If the troops should be called out against us, will the B.E.F. [Bonus Expeditionary Force, as they were calling themselves by this time] be given the opportunity to form in columns, salvage their belongings, and retreat in an orderly fashion?”

MacArthur told Waters, “Yes, my friend, of course.”

As it happened, however, Waters had lost control of the Bonus March, and a small group of radicals rushed police lines on July 28, following the evacuation of the buildings, and a brick battle ensued. After Glassford called for a “lunch armistice” in a vain attempt to defuse the situation, he was himself struck in the chest with a brickbat. Quickly, a brawl broke out, and some police officers fired on the veterans, killing two. Three officers were sent to the hospital.

This was the moment when the commissioners believed the police had lost control of the situation and prevailed upon President Hoover to call out the Army. Hoover believed the marchers were “organized and promoted by the Communists,” and were even being egged on by his Democratic rivals. He recalled the hunger demonstrations in many American cities, where there were violent confrontations with the police. In March, there had been a riot at a Ford plant in Detroit, where four rioters had been killed by police. The ensuing funeral procession included portraits of Vladimir Lenin, complete with banners of the communist symbol of the hammer and sickle.

Once Hoover made the decision to call out the Army, MacArthur met with General Perry Miles at the War Department to work out contingency plans to protect the White House, the Capitol, the Treasury building, and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Troops assembled behind the White house. In the late afternoon, four troops of cavalry arrived, supported by six tanks. Rather than leave as soon as the Army was called out, the communists decided this was the time to act. Israel Amter, a member of the Communist Party Central Committee, had arrived from New York, and proposed “continuous picketing of the White House.” He told his comrades, “If we allow the veterans to get out of Washington without a fight, we have lost our cause.”

As the soldiers moved out, MacArthur soon arrived at the scene, ignoring the advice of his own chief of staff, Major Dwight Eisenhower, who had suggested that it would be better to leave the actual operation in the hands of Miles. MacArthur disagreed, arguing that “incipient revolution was in the air.” He granted the veterans additional time to collect their belongings. When some veterans still refused to leave, with some in the mob throwing stones and brickbats, and hoisting clubs, MacArthur gave what he later regarded as the most distasteful order he had ever given: Drive the remaining marchers out of the city. He admonished his soldiers to “use all humanity consistent with the execution of the order.”

MacArthur was able to end the ugly situation without gunfire and remarkably few casualties, yet today, many liberal historians find fault with his handling of a very difficult and precarious situation. But Pace, in his testimony to Congress years later, did not.

Pace told the HCUA, “I do not believe that the government had any alternative because of the rapid pace being made. It is my candid opinion that had this thing gone on for another week, the communists would have gained the leadership of the Bonus Expeditionary Forces, thereby resulting in forcing the government to take the action that they did take [call out the Army], at a time when the results would have been much more disastrous.” He added that he was told by his superiors in the party to “use every trick to bring about bloodshed.”



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Joseph Zack Kornfeder, the other communist leader who testified along with Pace in 1949, agreed, telling the committee that had the communists been able to get control of the B.E.F., they would have attempted to storm the White House itself. An Army intelligence report, declassified in 1991, took the same position back in 1932. The report concluded that the B.E.F. intended to storm the Capitol, as well, and call for communist uprisings in all major U.S. cities. Ominously, the report explained that a Marine unit a mere eight blocks from the Capitol was not called upon, out of fear that they might even side with the revolutionaries.

While some have falsely stated the mob was totally unarmed (other than stones and clubs), after the marchers were finally forced out of the city, the Army found several machine guns in the camps.

Fortunately, the wise and prudent use of force by General MacArthur prevented such frightening scenarios.

Unfortunately, the Communist Party and others on the Left have succeeded in painting an alternative historical account. As Arthur Herman wrote in his book, *Douglas MacArthur: American Warrior*, the communists described soldiers charging with “fixed bayonets, firing into a crowd of unarmed men, women and children.” These fictitious accounts told of tents being set on fire “with men and women trapped inside; of cavalymen’s sabers dripping blood from slicing off veterans’ ears, and even of a small child being bayoneted while trying to save his pet rabbit.”

What lessons can be learned from this unhappy episode? Certainly, little has changed from 1932 in the way the violent Left operates. While the actual Communist Party has declined in importance, like-minded radical revolutionaries have taken their place. They still provoke the police at every opportunity, hoping to cause an overreaction. They still promote, with the assistance of most of the media, twisted versions of events, such as “hands up, don’t shoot.”

In some cases, the media even defends violence. In a *Time* magazine article in 2014, “Ferguson: In Defense of Rioting,” the author argued, “Peaceful protesting is a luxury only available to those safely in mainstream culture.”

In the Ferguson riots, the Organization for Black Struggle, a communist-led group, played a key role in the riots. The media glosses over the violence of Antifa (short for Antifascist Action), but its roots can be traced back to the German Communist Party in the 1930s — the logo of Antifa is virtually identical to that of the German Antifa, except, of course, the words Antifascist Action were written in German in Germany.

In short, far-left radicals are like blood-sucking parasites. They latch onto any grievance, real or imagined, and attempt to use it to advance their own Marxist agenda. Those who know their world history are familiar with how the radicals in the French Revolution used legitimate grievances to send France into the Reign of Terror.

That is the lesson of the communists and the Bonus March of 1932, and it is the lesson of Antifa-led riots today. It is a lesson that Americans should take seriously.

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