

The Bonus Army

When World War I ended, Congress voted to give World War I veteran soldiers a bonus of \$1.25 for every day they had served overseas, and one dollar for every day they had served in the U.S. The problem was that World War I ended in 1918, and the bonuses were not scheduled to be paid out until 1945. When the Great Depression began in 1929, many veterans lost their savings and their jobs. They needed their bonus money to take care of themselves and their families while they got back on their feet.



So in 1932, a group of veterans organized a march on Washington for the purpose of demanding early payout of the bonuses. 15,000 veterans from all over the country took part in the march. They built shelters out of cardboard, scrap wood, and tar paper and set up camp outside the U.S. Capital. Only veterans and their families were permitted into the camp and organizers insisted that the protestors did not cause trouble. They intended to remain in the camp until Congress passed a bill allowing their bonuses to be paid out early.

Though such a bill was introduced to Congress, and many members wanted to pass the bill, others felt that financing the payout would place too much of a tax burden on the U.S. economy, which was still struggling to recover from the economic disaster that had begun with the stock market crash three years earlier and would ultimately make the Great Depression last even longer. President Hoover opposed the bill. And though it was passed by the House, it was voted down by the Senate.

About 5,000 veterans left, and Hoover used the Army, led by General Douglas McArthur, to disband those remaining using tear gas and bayonets. A year later, Hoover lost his bid for reelection. In 1936, Congress passed a bill that would allow the veterans get their pay early, and though it was vetoed by President Roosevelt, his veto was overridden by Congress.