

3-1985

Texas and the Bonus Expeditionary Army

Donald W. Whisenhunt

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Whisenhunt, Donald W. (1985) "Texas and the Bonus Expeditionary Army," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol23/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

TEXAS AND THE BONUS EXPEDITIONARY ARMY

by Donald W. Whisenhunt

By 1932 the United States was in the midst of the most severe economic depression in its history. For several years, but especially since the Stock Market Crash of 1929, conditions had been getting worse by the month. By the summer of 1932 the situation was so bad that many plans to end the depression were put forward by various groups.

Texas suffered from the Great Depression just as much as the rest of the country.¹ Rising unemployment, a decline in foreign commerce, and the reduction of farm prices combined to make life a struggle during the 1930s. When plans, no matter how bizarre, were offered as solutions, many Texans joined the movements. One of the most interesting and one that gathered much support was the veterans bonus issue.

Throughout American history the military veteran has been of social, economic, and political importance. At the end of the First World War a movement began to pay the veteran a "bonus" for his military service that would make his wartime income comparable to that of the civilian worker during the war. After much debate, a bill was passed in 1924 to provide "adjusted compensation" for the veteran equal to \$1.00 per day of domestic service and \$1.25 for each day served overseas. Instead of paying the money immediately, however, the bill provided for endowment insurance policies to be paid on January 1, 1945, with added interest.

As the depression deepened and pressure mounted, Congress passed a bill in February 1931, over President Herbert Hoover's veto, allowing veterans to borrow from the government up to one-half the face value of the certificates. Shortly thereafter a movement led by Wright Patman of Texas began to pay the balance of the certificates immediately.² There was some difference of opinion among the veterans' groups about the advisability of this proposal. Patman was pleased that his bill had the support of such organizations as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Disabled American Veterans. After a speech by President Hoover to its convention, however, the American Legion, the largest veterans' group, adopted a resolution opposing the bill.³

The adjusted compensation bills fathered by Patman had very controversial and confusing lives. The first bill (H.R. 1), introduced on the first day of the first session of the Seventy-Second Congress, December 8, 1931, provided simply for the full payment of the certificates without any mention of the source of the money. Later, other bills

Donald W. Whisenhunt is Vice President of Wayne State College, Wayne, Nebraska.

were introduced to provide for the printing of Treasury notes that would serve the double purpose of expanding the currency and aiding the veteran.⁴

The arguments in the Congress for and against the proposal were of some significance. Patman warned the House of Representatives that the country was facing a grave situation brought on by the depression. He demanded that Congress aid the veterans as a stop-gap measure to prevent violence. This would do more, he believed, to restore confidence than all of the efforts of the Hoover administration for the past two years. Thomas Blanton, a congressman from Abilene, said that the President's opposition only reflected the Republican policy of aiding industry and the wealthy and letting the people shift for themselves. Other proponents of the bill declared that payment would show the good faith of Congress in dealing with its constituents. It would, likewise, bring relief to thousands and perhaps millions of people by putting more money into circulation. It might, in fact, be the thing required to bring the nation out of the depression. Opponents, on the other hand, believed it would not solve the problem, that it would destroy faith in American currency, and that it would only foster demands by other groups for federal aid.⁵

In Texas about the only groups to oppose the bill were the big city daily newspapers and an occasional business publication. By and large, however, business stayed out of the controversy. The *Galveston Daily News*, one of the most outspoken opponents, believed it to be merely class legislation designed to aid veterans at the expense of other segments of the economy. The newspaper also questioned whether the nation really had any moral obligation to the veteran and if the veteran himself really wanted the payment. Perhaps, the editor thought, it might merely be election year politics that motivated it.⁶ Other opponents declared that the payment of the bonus would do no good. One paper claimed the bill would hurt the veteran more than it would help him since the original idea had been to provide aid for his old-age. If the certificates were redeemed ahead of schedule, he would be left without any resources at retirement.⁷ Obviously, to this editor, the depression was not serious enough to merit immediate payment.

Most Texans supported early payment of the bonus. The Texas State Senate and organized groups from such diverse places as Crowell, Blum, and Bonham petitioned Congress to pass the bill to alleviate distressed conditions.⁸ Maury Maverick, a county official from San Antonio who had made a tour of the state, reported that most of the transients in Texas, although they knew little about it, had the vague idea that it might help conditions. Of the few newspapers that supported the bonus, the *Ferguson Forum* and the *Big Spring News* were the most outspoken.⁹ Most of the individuals who supported the measure believed

that it and other relief measures were the only things that would offer true relief and really make a dent in the depression.¹⁰ As the controversy continued, the sentiment, particularly among the veterans and the poor, became increasingly class-conscious. Perhaps a letter written to Governor Sterling, despite its length and the near-illiteracy of its author, best represents the trend of public opinion.

I served in the Texas National Guards in the year of (1918) nineteen hundred and eighteen and I have not received one penny in payment for the services of same. If you and your class and Senators and etc. are so interested in helping the unemployed why the state should pay us boys for this service which that are about 90 percent of us boys out of work and about 50 percent as like myself with nothing to eat and no place to stay. In the year of 1917 and 1918 your class was hollowing *patriotic* to your country that us boys was fine boys during that time but now we are nothing. You and your Senators and so on says it is hard to get a bill through corporating money. They can stay in Session all the year drawing from five dollars to ten dollars a day, they can vote a bill mighty easy and quick to pay themselves, but you and no other of the state's representatives are in favor of voting a bill to help us boys, I am more patriotic now than I ever was because I am hungry and out of work. But I do not intend to let this country make a numbskull out of me anymore . . .¹¹

As the controversy over the bonus became more serious, a group of Oregon veterans under the leadership of Walter W. Waters, an unemployed thirty-five year-old veteran, decided to go to Washington to present their petitions to Congress in person. The movement began as only an attempt of a few veterans to obtain what they believed was rightfully theirs. However, as the group moved eastward, living as best they could, others began to join them and other groups began to leave from other parts of the country to meet Waters' group in Washington. By the time the group, known as the Bonus Expeditionary Force, reached Washington, it appeared to be more a group of unemployed persons than a group of veterans.¹²

The movement, quite popular among Texans, acquired a sizeable following. Estimates of Texans marching to Washington ran as high as three or four thousand. Of a total of over 28,000 men in Washington, according to Waters, Texas had almost 1300. Texas was eighth in rank with four percent of the total number.¹³ The Texas marchers, like those from around the country, had some difficulty reaching Washington. At least in one instance the Cincinnati police ejected about 700 Texans from a railroad yard where they were trying to get a free ride.¹⁴ Although there is no way to know for sure, it can be safely assumed that the bonus marchers came from all sections of Texas.

At the outset, the majority of the Texas press objected to the

march. Believing that the bonus should be paid, most editors thought the march would probably hurt the cause more than it would help.¹⁵ Despite warnings that the march revealed a dangerous state of mind in the country, the editor of the *Austin Statesman* believed it was really encouraging. He said that the very fact that a peaceful movement of such a large group of people could take place without creating panic in the rest of the country was a sure sign of the strength of American democracy. To buttress his argument, he asked what the reaction would have been if as large a group of German war-veterans had marched on the German government.¹⁶

After the B.E.F. had been in Washington a short time the pension bill finally passed the House by a vote of 211 to 176 with all but two of the Texas delegation voting for it. The bill was defeated in the Senate, however, perhaps because of the threat of a presidential veto. The two Texas Senators disagreed; Morris Sheppard supported the bill but Tom Connally, surprisingly, voted against it. The *Galveston Daily News* believed it to be to the Senate's credit that it rejected the bill in the face of public opinion and in an election year.¹⁷

When it became apparent that the bill was dead, some of the veterans began to leave Washington. When the majority refused to leave, however, Congress proposed several bills to provide funds for them to return to their homes. Perhaps they would have accepted had Congress not stipulated that the transportation funds eventually would be deducted from the money owed to them. Public sentiment, however, believed that they should have accepted the offer.¹⁸

As a last resort, President Hoover ordered a contingent of the United States Army to disperse the remaining veterans. This was done by burning the shacks and tents where the veterans, many with their families, lived. The sight of heavily armed soldiers driving out helpless, starving people aroused more sympathy for the veterans and further tarnished Hoover's image as the Great Humanitarian.¹⁹

Texans reacted bitterly to the manner in which the veterans were ejected from Washington. Even the newspapers that had opposed the bonus from the beginning believed it a pitiful and sorry spectacle and declared it the worst mistake that Hoover ever made.²⁰ Individuals, also distressed about the situation, informed Franklin Roosevelt that the event only guaranteed his election to the presidency.²¹

Hoover defended his actions as necessary because the B.E.F. represented a threat to the government since it had been infiltrated by communists who were using it as a foundation for a violent revolution. General Douglas MacArthur, who was in charge of the military forces, agreed fully with the President. He declared that only a small portion of the men were actually veterans. The larger number, by far, were crimi-

nals and communists. Waters emphasized, however, that the marchers presented no radical threat whatever. He had been constantly on the alert to keep communists out of the B.E.F., a task in which he succeeded very well.²² Despite the charges and whatever truth there may have been to them, the net effect was to destroy most of the President's remaining prestige without any improvement in the situation of the veterans.²³

The bonus bill was passed after the election of Franklin Roosevelt. Interestingly enough, the bonus became a political issue in Houston in January 1933 when a special election was held to fill the congressional seat of Daniel E. Garrett who died in office.²⁴ The hoped-for end to the depression did not occur, however. Undoubtedly, the suffering of many veterans, including many Texans, was alleviated somewhat by the money they received, but the depression continued unabated. The economic crisis was too complex and too deep to respond to such simplistic solutions. Even so, the support it received from Texans revealed the seriousness of the problem and the desperation of many veterans.

NOTES

¹For detailed studies, see: William Edward Montgomery, "The Depression in Houston During the Hoover Era, 1929-1932," Master of Arts thesis, Department of History, The University of Texas, Austin, 1966; and Dianne Treadaway Ozment, "Galveston During the Hoover Era, 1929-1933," Master of Arts thesis, The University of Texas, Austin, 1968.

²Broadus Mitchell, *Depression Decade* (New York, 1947), 109; Dixon Wecter, *The Age of the Great Depression, 1929-1941* (New York, 1948), 37; U.S., *Congressional Record*, 72d Cong., 1st Sess., 1931, LXXV, Part 1, 1144-1145.

³*Ibid.*, 1144; William Starr Myers, ed., *The State Papers and Other Public Writings of Herbert Hoover* (2 vols.; Garden City, New York, 1934), II, 151.

⁴*Congressional Record*, 72d Cong., 1st Sess., 1932, LXXV, Part 12, 13044.

⁵*Ibid.*, Part 14, 15496; *ibid.*, 71st Cong., 2d Sess., 1930, LXXII, Part 11, 12246; *ibid.*, 72d Cong., 1st Sess., 1932, LXXV, Part 11, 12395. A full debate on the issue may be found in *ibid.*, Part 12, 12911-12939.

⁶*Galveston Daily News*, April 14, 1932, September 2, 1931, April 27, 1931.

⁷"The A.G.C. Recommends . . .," *Lone Star Constructor*, VIII (October, 1931), 5; *Austin Statesman*, December 13, 1930.

⁸*Congressional Record*, 71st Cong., 3rd Sess., 1931, LXXIV, Part 4, 4000-4001; *ibid.*, 72d Cong., 1st Sess., 1932, LXXV, Part 11, 12655; *ibid.*, Part 10, 10744; Letter, December 16, 1931, Sam Rayburn Papers, Sam Rayburn Library, Bonham, Texas.

⁹Maury Maverick, *A Maverick American* (New York, 1937), 155-156; *Ferguson Forum*, March 12, 1931; *Big Spring News* as quoted in *Terry County Herald* (Brownfield), April 22, 1932.

¹⁰"Pens of the People," *Galveston Daily News*, April 4, 1932; "Letters From Readers," *Dallas Morning News*, November 8, 1930; Letter, February 14, 1931, Box 25, Tom Connally Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C.; Letter, January 4, 1933, Box 733, Democratic National Committee Correspondence, 1928-1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York, hereinafter cited as FDRL.

¹¹Letter, October 17, 1931, Box 180, Ross S. Sterling Files as Governor of Texas, Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas.

¹²Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order*, Vol. 1 of *The Age of Roosevelt* (3 vols.; Boston, 1957), 256-259; Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Roosevelt to Roosevelt* (New York, 1937), 388-389; Harris Gaylord Warren, *Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression* (New York, 1959), 235-236; George Soule, *The Coming American Revolution* (New York, 1934), 185.

¹³*Austin Statesman*, June 3, 1932; *Galveston Daily News*, June 3, 1932; W. W. Waters as told to William C. White, *B.E.F.: The Whole Story of the Bonus Army* (New York, 1933), 307, hereinafter cited as Waters, *B.E.F.*

¹⁴*Austin Statesman*, June 10, 1932.

¹⁵*Haskell Free Press*, June 23, 1932; *Sterling City News-Record*, June 10, 1932; *Amarillo Sunday Globe-News*, June 5, 1932.

¹⁶*Weekly Dispatch* (San Antonio), June 25, 1932; *Austin Statesman*, June 10, 1932.

¹⁷*Congressional Record*, 72d Cong., 1st Sess., 1932, LXXV, Part 12, 13053-13054, 13274; *Galveston Daily News*, June 20, 1932.

¹⁸*Congressional Record*, 72d Cong., 1st Sess., 1932, LXXV, Part 13, 13957, 14725, Part 14, 15747; Sidney Lens, *Left, Right & Center: Conflicting Forces in American Labor* (Hinsdale, Illinois, 1949), 264; Edwin C. Hill, *The American Scene* (New York, 1933), 140; *Galveston Daily News*, July 10, 1932.

¹⁹Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 261-264; Alfred B. Rollins, Jr., *Roosevelt and Howe* (New York, 1962), 355; Mitchell, *Depression Decade*, 110; Karl Schriftgiesser, *This Was Normalcy* (Boston, 1948), 278.

²⁰*Austin Statesman*, July 30, 1932; *Dallas Morning News*, August 5, 1932; *Galveston Daily News*, July 31, 1932.

²¹FDRL, August 6, 1932, Box 724; September 15, 1932, Box 724.

²²Myers, *State Papers of Herbert Hoover*, II, 242; Herbert Hoover, *The Great Depression, 1929-1941*, Vol. III: *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover* (New York, 1952), 225-230; Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York, 1964), 92-94; Waters, *B.E.F.*, 2, 102.

²³Mauritz A. Hallgren, *Seeds of Revolt* (New York, 1933), 188; Hill, *The American Scene*, 143.

²⁴Montgomery, "The Depression in Houston," 198.