

Podcast: The Pig War and Pelican Girls Companion Podcast
Episode: 05
Title: The Bonus Army
Written / Produced by Author Joe Cuhaj
Time: 9:40
Breaks: No breaks

[Tipperary song clip]

In 1914, a continent wide war was waging in Europe. British author H.G. Wells wrote of the conflict that it would be “the war that will end war. That quote later morphed into the phrase, “the war to end all wars.”

Following the end of World War 1, a movement began in the United States urging Congress to provide war veterans a small monetary bonus for their service and sacrifice. What resulted is one of the largest violent protests to hit Washington D.C. This is the story of the *Bonus Army*.

[Theme up and under]

Welcome to “The Pig War and the Pelican Girls: Forgotten Stories from American History.” I’m Joe Cuhaj.

This series is a companion podcast to my latest Prometheus book, “The Pig War and the Pelican Girls,” which recalls long forgotten tales of American history.

[Theme fade]

[End of War Clip]

November 11, 1918 – Armistice Day, the day World War 1 ended with the signing of “The Armistice Day” document. By war’s end, 9.7 million military personnel and 6.8 million civilians had died, with countless others returning home severely injured. Those who survived the war found life back home extremely difficult. There were no jobs to be had and in many cases, the homecoming they received made them question the sacrifices they made as Richard Hughes, curator of the Imperial War Museum explains.

[Richard Hughes Clip]

Veterans of the war felt they deserved additional compensation for serving in the bloody conflict. In 1924, Congress made a promise that they would pass a bill that would provide that bonus. The bill did pass both houses of congress, but was vetoed by President Calvin Coolidge who said, “patriotism which is bought and paid for is not patriotism.”

Congress overrode the veto and the bill became law. Veterans who were scheduled to receive \$50 or less would receive payment immediately, the remainder received certificates that they could later redeem. And by later they meant much later – 1945.

The veterans waited patiently, making their way through life the best they could when the unthinkable happened.

[Stock Market Crash Clip]

Millions of people were left jobless, penniless, and homeless. Three years into the crisis, there was no end in sight and the life not only the veterans but average Americans as well was becoming more dire with each passing day.

By 1932, with no foreseeable hope of the financial crisis ending, Congressman Wright Patman of Texas introduced legislation in the House of Representatives that would allow World War 1 veterans to redeem their certificates immediately to aid them during their time of need. After passing the House, it was killed in the Senate.

The only way that vets could cash in their certificates immediately was if they died and the money was left to their families. Because of this stipulation, the bill became known as “The Tombstone Bonus.”

Veterans could not wait another fourteen years to claim their cash, so they took it upon themselves to force the issue.

The movement began on May 17, 1932, in Portland, Oregon. A group of 300 veterans led by Walter M. Waters set out for Washington determined to force the government into redeeming the certificates.

By the first of June, the number of veterans who descended on Washington numbered 25,000. Some brought their families. They built a makeshift shanty town made up of tents and scrap lumber. They even took up residence in abandoned buildings.

Tensions were rising in the capital as the veterans remained intrenched waiting for congress to come through for them. On June 15th, the House once again pushed a bill to the senate. When it became clear it would fail, protestors amassed outside the capitol building ignored police orders to leave. The fuse was lit. City police were called in.

[Buildings Clip]

Despite opposition by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, President Herbert Hoover made a fateful decision.

[Troops Clip]

A contingent of 800 soldiers armed with guns and bayonets, as well as a battalion of tanks rolled into the city. It was described as the “greatest concentration of fighting troops in Washington since 1865.”

The city was set ablaze, some by soldiers burning settlements in an attempt to route the protestors, others by the protestors themselves. Tear gas was released to disperse the crowd and gunfire rang out.

[All Quiet on the Potomac Clip]

In the end, thousands were injured by tear gas, one eleven week old baby died from the gas, and eight year old was blinded by it. Two veterans died. 69 police officers were injured.

When the smoke had literally cleared, the typical Washington blame game began claiming that the protestors were not veterans but communist agitators.

Following the uprising, Congress continued to work to release the bonuses to the veterans, but time after time, it was either shot down in the house or senate and on several occasions, vetoed by Franklin Roosevelt. In June 1936, Congress had enough votes to override Roosevelt's veto and the first checks went out to the veterans averaging \$580 per man.

By now, elected officials understood the hardships the veterans of World War I had suffered and were working on a new bill, the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill. Following World War II, over 8 million veterans took advantage of the legislation that provided health care, educational benefits, and more. Countless more have relied on the GI Bill to better their lives after dedicated and selfless service to the nation.

[Theme up and under]

I'm Joe Cuhaj and thank you for joining me for “The Pig War and the Pelican Girls,” a companion podcast to my latest Prometheus book of the same name that recalls long forgotten tales of American history, available at your favorite local and online book store.

My thanks go out to the National Archives for clips used in this episode. You can view these clips online at joe-cuhaj.com/podcast (Cuhaj is spelled “C-U-H-A-J”) and click on the PIG WAR link.

Our theme song is called “Creative Minds” by Benjamin Tissot and is courtesy of BenSounds.Com.

If you liked this obscure tale of American history, then please, share it with a friend. Thank you for joining me for these forgotten tale from American history.

[Theme out]