

AMERICAN HISTORY

Help for heroes

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Stephen R. Ortiz

BEYOND THE BONUS MARCH
AND GI BILL

How veteran politics shaped the New Deal era
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In 1924, the US Congress passed the Adjusted Compensation Act, which agreed to pay veterans a bonus for their war service. The justification was that they had received paltry pay while domestic industry boomed. As Stephen R. Ortiz puts it, “between 1917 and 1919 more than 1,000 new members joined the ‘millionaires club’ while doughboys earned less than a dollar a day in the trenches”. There was a caveat though – the compensation would not come until 1945. Disgruntled veterans, arguing that many of their number would be dead by then, christened the deal a “tombstone bonus”. With the onset of the Great Depression, their clamour for early redemption of the adjusted compensation certificates increased too. Ortiz argues that previous accounts of the New Deal have underestimated the consequent political role of veterans of the First World War in the United States in the 1930s.

The Bonus March of 1932 – when an army of veterans travelled to Washington to petition Herbert Hoover’s administration for early payment of the bonus – traditionally features in New Deal narratives among the Republican President’s many maladroit responses to the economic crisis. Ortiz argues that the events of that summer – when Hoover allowed an over-zealous General Douglas MacArthur to rout the “Bonus Expeditionary Force” with tanks, cavalry and tear gas, creating public outrage – were just one aspect of active and long-lasting veteran political engagement.

Moving beyond another well-documented example of activism by former servicemen – the fury when Roosevelt’s Economy Act cut millions of dollars from their benefits in 1933 – Ortiz traces the fortunes of the two major US veterans’ organizations, the first the patriotic American Legion, founded in Paris in 1919, the second the older, smaller and scrappier Veterans of Foreign Wars.

He argues that the VFW’s willingness to campaign vigorously for early bonus repayment – at which the Legion initially balked – propelled it from being a moribund niche group to the status of a major political player. “The VFW had asserted itself as an important

national political actor by staking an unshakable claim to the Bonus issue”, he writes, although membership numbers show that the American Legion remained a much larger organization.

In Ortiz’s reading, the bonus dispute placed veterans in an unlikely political coalition that was potent enough to threaten the Roosevelt administration. This opportunistic alliance included Huey Long, the outspoken Louisiana senator, although there were inevitable strains in an alliance between veterans – notably susceptible to notions of loyalty and patriotism – and Long, the ebullient Southern “Kingfish” who once quipped that he had not fought in the First World War because he “was not mad at anyone over there”.

A striking element of Ortiz’s narrative is the way that elected officials in the 1930s refused to regard veterans as a sacrosanct caste. He quotes President Roosevelt speaking at the National Convention of the American Legion in Chicago in October 1933. “No person, because he wore a uniform, must thereafter be placed in a special class of beneficiaries over and above all other citizens”, FDR insisted. In a postscript on the 2007 VFW encampment in Kansas City, Missouri, the author points out how unthinkable such a sentiment would be



today. At the event Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John McCain all devoted more time to the issue of veterans' benefits than to the conduct of the war in Iraq – a reflection of the contemporary political scene, where support for former servicemen (and now women) enjoys bipartisan political backing.

Veterans are venerated in the United States today, in part because of the drama of their personal stories, yet – fleshing out his case in official correspondence and the passage and failure of legislation – Ortiz unfortunately drains his subject matter of much of this human element. In his attempt to get beyond the Bonus March and make a greater case for veterans' wider political import, he has stripped them of some of their pathos.

The attempt to draw veterans as a distinct political bloc in the New Deal raises – and leaves unaddressed – another issue too. As Brian Waddell has argued, although the 1930s changed the conception of the role of federal power, the eventual model that the expanded American government of the second half of the twentieth century would take was closer to a warfare state than a welfare state. Expanded federal power would manifest itself in the presence of troops in Germany in peacetime and the fleet in the Mediterranean, not in lavish social programmes at home. *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill* highlights the activism of veterans in the 1930s, but passes over the point that the state that evolved out of that decade dispensed much of its largesse to the serving military, not the civilian society the soldiers had rejoined.

