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Source: *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Autumn, 1967), pp. 37-50

Published by: Wisconsin Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4634286>

Accessed: 01-03-2020 03:50 UTC

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A BLUNDER BECOMES CATASTROPHE:

Hoover, the Legion, and the Bonus Army

By DONALD J. LISIO

WHEN a President runs for re-election in the middle of a depression, his campaign is apt to be more than a little defensive. When he has used troops to break up a demonstration of unemployed veterans in the national capital, he may expect the people to call for some sort of explanation. In the summer of 1932 Herbert Hoover found himself compelled to justify his actions before he could raise the campaign to the level of principles and programs. In June and July the Bonus Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) had encamped on the outskirts of Washington and had petitioned Congress to approve immediate distribution of the World War I bonus, originally scheduled for payment in 1945. On July 28 the peaceful occupation had ended in a riot; the encampment had been burned; and soldiers had dispersed the B.E.F.

During the following month questions and criticism mounted, and the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars castigated the administration for its "unnecessary, criminally brutal, [and] morally undefensible" use of troops.¹ A determined minority in the American Legion proposed to censure the President and demand immediate payment of the bonus. The Legion's annual convention was to meet in Portland, Oregon, on September 13. It would be an important test of the President's reputation, for if the minority forced through a resolution of censure in the

last weeks of the campaign, Hoover might lose his already slim chances of re-election. On the eve of the convention Hoover released a Justice Department report on the B.E.F. incident, hoping thereby to vindicate himself and rally his supporters. Instead the report, which was confusing, vaguely documented, and tactlessly presented, confirmed the suspicions of his enemies and silenced many of his friends.

While the legionnaires posed a threat and a challenge, Hoover did not lack ardent defenders. On July 29, 1932, the day following the riot, most newspaper editors accepted without question the explanation that the rioters had been "animated by the essence of revolution," as charged by Army Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur. According to MacArthur, who had commanded the eviction,

¹ "Heroes," *Time Magazine*, XX:9-10 (September 12, 1932). *Time* editors reported that the threat of Legion censure "sent cold chills up and down the spines of the Republican high command." Much of the evidence cited in this paper is based on previously restricted manuscripts at the recently opened Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa. The Pelham D. Glassford Papers at U.C.L.A., the Patrick J. Hurley Papers at the University of Oklahoma, and others cited herein are important sources, but the Hoover Papers are the only source that fully reveals the administration's reactions to the riot and the rout of the Bonus Army, as well as its plans for a defense before the American Legion national convention.

Jones, *The American Legion*

President Herbert Hoover addresses a friendly American Legion convention in Boston, 1930.

the rioters were “insurrectionists,” plotting to overthrow the government by force and to institute a “reign of terror.” Secretary of War Patrick J. Hurley enthusiastically supported his explanation.² Since rumors of such communist plots were plentiful in late July, the frightened editors lavished praise upon the President for his decisiveness in the face of radicalism and anarchy. Hoover himself assured them that “subversive influences” had gained control of the Bonus Army, and had “inaugurated and organized” the riot. To the editors, therefore, Hoover was the President who placed national welfare above partisan politics or temporary political advantage. He emerged from the wreckage of the bonus riot as the hero of the day, and to some the savior of the Republic.³

In the wake of such widespread newspaper acclaim Hoover at first more than held his own. Most editors seemed satisfied by assurances from high administration officials that proof of a communist plot would soon be forthcoming. But a small group of critics was not so easily swayed. The members of the B.E.F. were not communists or radicals, they argued, but loyal, patriotic Americans who had served their country well. Beaten down by a long and cruel depression, these poverty-stricken men had sustained a consistently peaceful lobby during two sultry months in

the nation’s capital. Nor was this an easy task for a group whose numbers varied from time to time between fifteen and twenty thousand marchers. They had worked hard to maintain order and had succeeded admirably. Their repeated demonstrations beseeching Congress to authorize the World War I bonus quickly were exceptionally respectful. When the Senate rejected their appeals, the petitioners who had gathered at the steps of Congress had not rioted, but had responded by singing “America.” Defenders of the B.E.F. interpreted the veterans’ continued discipline after repeated defeats as proof of patriotism, not communism.

The riot had occurred on July 28 only after the administration had tried to force the veterans out of several vacant government buildings scheduled for demolition. No one could reasonably deny that the marchers’ resistance to repeated attempts to remove them peacefully from the buildings was unjustified. It was also generally acknowledged that the angry veterans had stoned and mauled the police who had attempted to evict them, and that a brief

² Transcript, Press Interview, July 28, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/298, in the Hoover Papers. MacArthur never abandoned his argument that the riot was an insurrection plotted by the communists. In March, 1964, he stated: “The movement was actually far deeper and more dangerous than an effort to secure funds from a nearly depleted federal treasury. The American Communist Party planned a riot of such proportions that it was hoped the United States Army, in its efforts to maintain peace, would have to fire on the marchers. In this way, the Communists hoped to incite revolutionary action. Red organizers infiltrated the veteran groups and presently took command from their unwitting leaders.” *Reminiscences* (New York, 1964), 93.

³ William Starr Myers, ed., *The State Papers and Other Public Writings of Herbert Hoover* (2 vols., New York, 1934), II:244-245; New York *Times*, July 30, 31, 1932; New York *Herald Tribune*, July 29, 30, 31, 1932. Both the *Times* and the *Herald Tribune* published editorial comments from a variety of newspapers supporting the President. Secretary of War Patrick J. Hurley established a highly detailed newspaper survey which tabulated the reactions of 102 newspapers during the period July 30 to August 5, 1932. Riot Folder, in the Patrick J. Hurley Papers, Division of Manuscripts, University of Oklahoma, (Hereafter cited as Hurley Papers.) For additional newspaper comment see Bonus Files, 1-E/298, in the Hoover Papers. Also see E. Francis Brown, “The Bonus Army Marches to Defeat,” in *Current History*, XXXVI:688 (August, 1932); “The Progress of the World,” in *Review of Reviews*, LXXVI:18 (September, 1932).



National Archives

A convoy of trucks brings tanks to Washington for use against the Bonus Marchers.

riot had caused momentary panic. But what angered Hoover's critics most was that the Army had employed troops, tanks, and tear gas not merely to stop the riot, but to drive the unarmed marchers and their families out of the capital. Many had not taken part in the riot, and had not even found time to gather their few personal belongings or to eat what little food they had. The Army's action, the critics argued, was not only unnecessary but inhumane.⁴

Some of the President's detractors were even harsher in their condemnation; they contended that beneath the facade of respectability Hoover was a brutal man, one who might well have deliberately provoked the riot and planned the sudden rout of the helpless veterans in order to create a sensational beginning for his re-election campaign.⁵ William R. Rice, commander of a local American Legion post, congratulated the President for fi-

nally revealing to the nation his "sadistic principles of government."⁶ One angry citizen noted that Hoover had helped the starving people of the world, but, he accused, "as soon as your own get near enough to ask for food you order them shot down."⁷ Floyd Gibbons, the noted radio broadcaster and war correspondent, compared the bedraggled band of fleeing veterans to World War I refugees. The only difference was that the members of the B.E.F. were "American refugees fleeing from the fire and sword of the Great Humanitarian."⁸

EVEN under such savage attack Hoover did not at that time publicly reveal that anyone other than himself was responsible for the tragic rout of the veterans. Many years later, however, he emphatically denied that he had commanded the rout of the Bonus Army. He argued that he had complied with the District of Columbia Commissioners' urgent request for troops to clear the riot area, but that he had not directed the troops to drive the veterans out of the capital. Rather, they were to move the rioting veterans out of the business district and return them to their camps where they would be placed under army guard until a systematic investigation could identify the communists, criminals, and non-veterans which he and others in his administration assumed had plotted and directed the riot.⁹

Unfortunately, Hoover did not offer any proof to substantiate his new explanation. Further, his public statements at the time of

⁴ William R. Rice to Hoover, July 29, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/299, in the Hoover Papers. Fiorello LaGuardia warned Hoover that "Soup is cheaper than tear bombs, and bread better than bullets in maintaining law and order in these times of depression, unemployment and hunger." LaGuardia to Hoover, July 30, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/298, *ibid.*

⁵ R. V. Kohl to Hoover, August 1, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/298, *ibid.*

⁶ New York *Evening Journal*, August 1, 1932, The *Evening Journal* also carried a full-page editorial denouncing Hoover. Also see "Foreign Sympathy for the B.E.F.," in *The Literary Digest*, CXIV:11 (August 13, 1932).

⁷ Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Great Depression, 1929-1941* (3 vols., New York, 1952), III:226-227; Theodore G. Joslin, *Hoover Off the Record* (New York, 1934), 268.

⁴ Adolph J. Sabath to Herbert Hoover, July 30, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/299 and 1-E/300, in the Hoover Papers; "Heroes," 11; "Bullets for the B.E.F.: Hoover, New Style," in *The New Republic*, LXXI:328-329 (August 10, 1932).

⁵ Paul Y. Anderson, "Tear Gas, Bayonets, and Votes: The President Opens His Reelection Campaign," in *The Nation*, CXXV:138 (August 17, 1932); "Political Gesture," in *The New Republic*, LXXII:139 (September 21, 1932).

the riot had given no hint that his orders had been disobeyed. More important, if Hoover's explanation was accurate, one could in fact question why those who had disobeyed his orders were not immediately disciplined.¹⁰ Rather than a statement of fact, Hoover's latter-day assertion that he was not responsible for ordering the rout appeared instead to be a feeble attempt to find some justification for a tragic mistake.

Despite the seeming weakness of Hoover's assertion, it is now evident that his explanation was correct. On the afternoon of the riot Hoover responded to the Commissioners' request for help and directed his Secretary of War, Patrick J. Hurley, to assemble the troops. Hurley immediately relayed the message to the Army Chief of Staff, General Douglas MacArthur, with the result that the President quickly lost control over the swiftly moving events. Once in command MacArthur quickly showed his contempt for civilian interference in what he considered to be military affairs. The young Chief of Staff, basing his judgment partially upon a secret Army intelligence report and partially upon his own equally jaundiced disdain for all "radicals," concluded that the rioters were actually communist insurrectionists bent upon executing a well-planned, bloody coup d'état.¹¹

¹⁰ Pelham D. Glassford, D.C. Metropolitan Police Chief, raised this question in a letter which he apparently never sent to Hoover. Glassford stated: "It would seem that if General MacArthur exceeded his authority disciplinary action would have been in order." Glassford to Hoover, no date, in the Pelham D. Glassford Papers, Powell Library, Department of Special Collections, University of California at Los Angeles. Most of the Glassford Papers relating to the bonus riot are housed in the Institute of Industrial Relations located in the Social Science Materials Center, Research Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

¹¹ The report stated that Walter W. Waters, Commander-in-Chief of the B.E.F., was collecting machine guns and "gun-men from New York and Washington." It claimed that the B.E.F. was plotting to establish a permanent occupation so that the government would be compelled to force the veterans out of the capital. "Word has been passed around in Syracuse," the report continued, "that the first blood shed by the Bonus Army at Washington, is to be the signal for a communist uprising in all large cities, thus initiating a revolution. The entire movement is stated to be under communist control with branches being rapidly developed in commercial centers." See Conrad H. Lanza, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, to Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, 2nd Corps Area, July

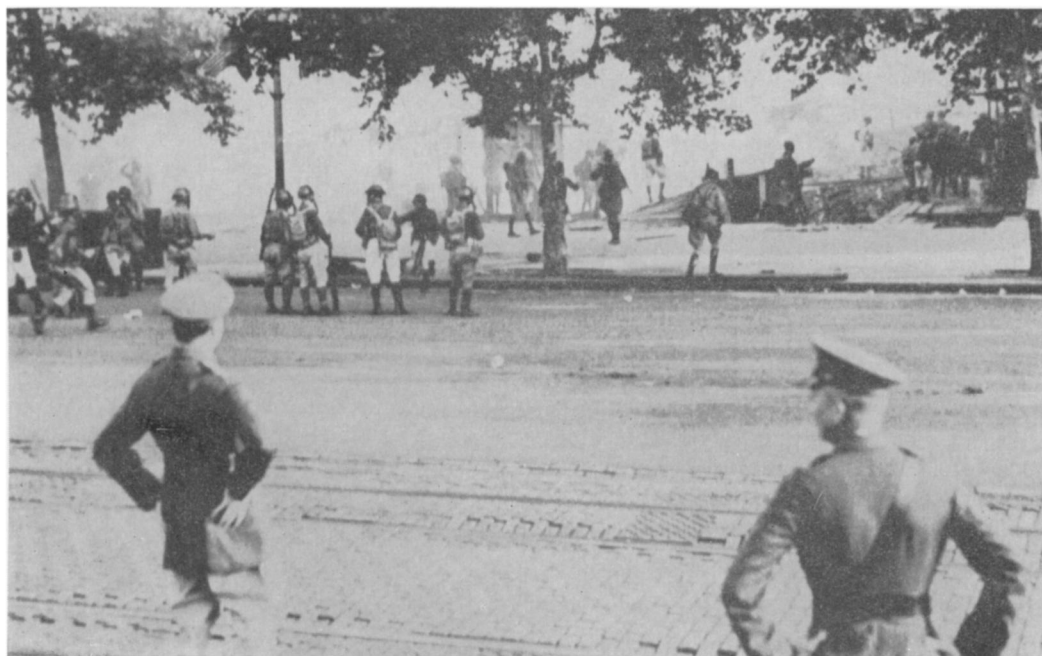
Upon assembling his troops near the White House MacArthur decided that "the dispersion and expulsion from the District . . . became thus the only logical answer the Government could make to the mob's action."¹² In arriving at this decision he discarded previously arranged Army plans which, in the event of a riot, called for an orderly transportation of the veterans to their home states upon the authorization of a presidential proclamation.¹³ He also rejected the advice of his Adjutant General on the legality of Army initiative and action and proceeded on his own to evict the veterans. Dwight D. Eisenhower, MacArthur's aide, advised him that he felt it "highly inappropriate for the Chief of Staff" to assume personal supervision of the troops, but nothing could dissuade the General from his self-appointed mission to save the Republic.¹⁴

5, 1932, in War Department Records Division, Record Group 94, Box 1181, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹² MacArthur to Hurley, August 15, 1932, "Report From the Chief of Staff, United States Army, to the Secretary of War on the Employment of Federal Troops in Civil Disturbance in the District of Columbia July 28-30, 1932," in the Hurley Papers.

¹³ Major General Blanton Winship to Chief of Staff, July 28, 1932, *ibid.* The Judge Advocate General sent MacArthur two long memos on July 28, 1932, the day of the riot, in which he outlined Army plans for dispersing the veterans in the event of a riot. He stated that the veterans must be transported to their home states in Army trucks under armed guard as it was "obvious that a mere scattering of the members of this force at the places of their present encampments, or driving them beyond the borders of the District of Columbia, would not effect a permanent dispersion of the force, so as to bring the insurrection or threat of insurrection . . . to an end." At any rate, Winship's memo to MacArthur had clearly stressed an orderly eviction in the event of riot. And since Hoover insisted when the riot actually occurred that all participants be returned to their own camps to be turned over to civil authorities, even the proposals Winship cited were not authorized.

¹⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (New York, 1967), 216. Eisenhower recalls that MacArthur was convinced that there was "incipient revolution in the air." He also makes the following assessment of MacArthur: "Most of the senior officers I had known always drew a clean-cut line between the military and the political. Off duty, among themselves and close civilian friends, they might explosively denounce everything they thought was wrong in Washington and the world, and propose their own cure for its evils. On duty, nothing could induce them to cross the line they, and old Army tradition, had established. But if General MacArthur ever recognized the existence of that line, he usually chose to ignore it."

Current, et al., *American History*

MacArthur and his aide, Major Dwight D. Eisenhower, supervise the deployment of troops.

Secretary of War Hurley had earlier attempted to convince the President to sign a proclamation establishing martial law and thus clearing the way for the Army's dispersal of the marchers.¹⁵ Hoover had refused. He had given Hurley clear instructions for handling the riot. This is evident from an order which Hurley had drafted to MacArthur, but which for some inexplicable reason he did not issue. The importance of Hurley's drafted order lies not so much in the interesting question of why he failed to send it as in the fact that its wording closely follows that of Hoover's explanation years later. Hurley obviously understood the President clearly as he directed MacArthur to "Surround all the veteran camps in Anacostia and hold all campers, rioters and marchers until the names of all of them can be tabulated and their fingerprints taken." Thereupon, the Secretary concluded, those "who had incited riot and death will be arrested and delivered over to the civil authorities for prosecution." Hurley's order did vary from Hoover's stated plan in one respect. Contrary to Hoover's instructions to return the men to their own camps, Hurley instructed MacArthur to force the rioters across the Ana-

costia Bridge into Camp Marks, the largest camp on the Anacostia Flats, and hold them there. Except for this divergence, Hurley's draft followed the President's instructions completely.¹⁶

Don Lohbeck, Hurley's authorized biographer further supports Hoover's explanation. Lohbeck admits that the President had stated "certain methods for suppressing the riot," with which Hurley did not agree, and that Hoover's order limited Hurley to moving the rioters out of the business district, which would not allow for either Hurley's plan to force them into the Anacostia camp or MacArthur's decision to drive them out of the capital. He further admits that "Hurley did not comply" with Hoover's methods for suppressing the riot. Nonetheless, Lohbeck's authorized version seeks rather feebly to defend Hurley by arguing that Hoover's instructions were not in writing and "not in the form of

¹⁵ Hurley to Hoover, July 28, 1932, in the Hurley Papers.

¹⁶ Hurley to MacArthur, no date, *ibid.* This order was filed in a separate folder dated July 28, 1932.

a directive or order."¹⁷ Yet the evidence is quite clear that Hurley fully understood Hoover's directions but chose not to insist upon their strict implementation.

Not only did Hurley understand the President's intentions, but certainly by the time the troops arrived at the Anacostia bridge MacArthur was also informed of them. While the troops herded the panic-stricken veterans toward Camp Marks, Hoover realized that MacArthur had disregarded his orders, and the President acted to stop the rout. He told Hurley to forbid the troops to cross the Anacostia bridge, and Hurley relayed the order. Instead of sending the written directive, Hurley dispatched a high-ranking personal courier, General George Van Horn Moseley, to inform MacArthur of the President's instructions. General Moseley was Hurley's personal assistant as well as Army Deputy Chief of Staff. Still another envoy, Colonel Clement B. Wright also delivered the same order. However, according to Eisenhower, MacArthur was "too busy" and, in an incredible response, snapped that he did "not want either himself or his staff bothered by people coming down and pretending to bring orders."¹⁸ The rout proceeded under MacArthur's direction until all the veterans had been forced out of the capital and their encampments burned to the ground.

HOOVER was angry and dismayed when he heard that MacArthur had disobeyed his orders, and shortly after the rout he requested that both Hurley and MacArthur either publicly acknowledge their responsibility for the rout, or at least inform a member of Congress who could then defend the President against the critics. Both refused.¹⁹ After the riot they had weighed the idea carefully, discussing it with friends and advisers. Their refusal to comply with Hoover's request, on the grounds that their action was necessary and correct, and therefore needed no public justification, further supports Hoover's version of the rout. According to Hurley, MacArthur felt that such a public admission "would be bragging," that it would cast them "in the role[s] of hero[es]." They both agreed that they should not "hit the foot lights." The idea of using a Congressman to

defend the President was equally unacceptable to them. Hurley contended that since the support for the President was already "99 percent," it was not necessary to "defend a just action." "That," he argued, "would be trying ourselves, and you know how fickle the public is." Rather than defend himself, the Chief ought to enjoy the glory, "standing at the head where he should be," with "nobody against him except Scripps Howard and a bag of scatterbrains."²⁰

The exchange between Hoover and Hurley not only pointed up Hoover's dismay with the rout, it also reflected his fear of campaign repercussions and his concern for developing an adequate public defense. A more seasoned politician might have insisted upon protecting himself, but Hoover decided to accept full responsibility for the actions of his administration. He withdrew his request that MacArthur or Hurley make a statement and even discarded the idea of using a Congressman to defend him. That was a crucial blunder, an error that shaped the entire, unfortunate nature of his public defense. By accepting Hurley's argument, Hoover displayed his surprise and confusion over the rout. Instead of demanding either MacArthur's or Hurley's resignation, or at the very least a public explana-

¹⁷ Don Lohbeck, *Patrick J. Hurley* (Chicago, 1956), 487.

¹⁸ Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 217-218. Evidence gathered from the Hoover, Hurley, Lohbeck, and Eisenhower sources conclusively establishes that the President's orders were not carried out.

¹⁹ Lawrence Richey memorandum, July 30, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/300, in the Hoover Papers. Richey, one of Hoover's secretaries, recorded Hurley's telephone message to Hoover. In 1934 Hoover became angry over reports that MacArthur might be presenting a different version of the rout and informed Richey that "If MacArthur [*sic*] is putting out this kind of stuff, I shall tell what really did happen, and it will do McArthur [*sic*] no good." Hoover to Richey, October 23, 1934, Temporary Bonus File, *ibid.*

²⁰ Richey memorandum, July 30, 1932, *ibid.* On August 12, 1932, MacArthur answered a request from Richey for his opinion regarding a letter of protest from the American Civil Liberties Union. MacArthur advised him to ignore it, and added, "The Civil Liberties union have [*sic*] made frequent attacks upon the Army in every possible way. Their basic purpose, of course, is the destruction of all constituted authority." MacArthur to Richey, August 12, 1932, in the War Department Records Division, Record Group 94, Box 1181, The National Archives.

tion, Hoover vacillated. Whether he trusted Hurley's predictions of glory, he probably was encouraged by the already strong newspaper support. It was obvious, however, that the critics would launch a scathing attack upon him in the belief that he had ordered the rout, and that he would need a sound defense. Yet since Hoover believed in the strong possibility that radicals had precipitated the riot, Hurley was able to convince him that it had actually been a scheme to topple the government, and Hoover therefore could not bring himself to repudiate publicly either Hurley or MacArthur. Worried about the forthcoming election, he reluctantly decided that the only course was to silence his critics with the charge of insurrection, and to that end he waged an all-out effort first to incriminate the leaders of the riot and finally the entire Bonus Expeditionary Force. The imputation of a radical plot thereby became the cornerstone of Hoover's political strategy, a fateful and unfortunate decision which placed the burden of proof squarely upon the President.

ON THE MORNING following the riot government forces arrested forty-two alleged radicals, but this action failed to result in either the conviction of the supposed conspirators or proof of insurrection.²¹ By early August, shortly after the eviction of the B.E.F., reports from Republican leaders indicated that the critics were successfully casting doubt on the administration's allegations against the Bonus Army.²² In response to the growing criticism, Hurley quietly modified his public support of the insurrection thesis. By August 3 he contented himself with emphasizing the radical nature of the riot and its leaders and implying that the government had no choice but to drive them out of Washington.²³

Hurley's new position did not stop other Republican leaders, however, from repeating and even embellishing upon the charge of a communist plot to overthrow the government. Royal C. Johnson, former chairman of the

House Veterans Committee, informed the press and local American Legion posts that he had proof that communist leaders in the B.E.F. had collected dynamite, guns, and ammunition for their nefarious plot. The troops had prevented the use of these weapons, but the intent was clear. Communists, Johnson stated, "don't bring in dynamite to start a Y.M.C.A. or Sunday school meeting, and they don't bring in pistols to start a pink tea."²⁴ Significantly, no one in the administration informed the press that no arms had been found. Several Republican leaders suggested that the public reaction against the administration was the result of a carefully concealed conspiracy by bonus agitators and unprincipled Democrats to make the rout of the B.E.F. into a campaign issue by systematically spreading false information.²⁵ This would explain why many Americans, despite clear evidence to the contrary, had come to believe the widespread rumor that the troops had brutally shot and killed the defenseless petitioners.²⁶

Especially alarming for Hoover were rumblings of discontent in the American Legion state conventions. The legionnaires were angry over the use of troops against fellow veterans, and in retaliation most state conventions by mid-August reversed their earlier support of the President and instructed their delegates to the national convention to demand the immediate payment of the bonus.²⁷ National Legion officers had, however, made determined efforts to prevent bonus resolutions in the state conventions, and in some cases they succeeded, with strong backing from both Frank T. Hines, chief of the Veterans Administration, and local Republican leaders.²⁸

Nonetheless, the tide seemed to be running against the President. On August 27, Assistant Secretary of War F. Trubee Davison, a candidate for the Republican gubernatorial nomi-

²⁴ New York *Herald Tribune*, August 16, 1932.

²⁵ Royal Johnson to Richey, September 8, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/300, in the Hoover Papers.

²⁶ McGrew to Richey, August 5, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/298, *ibid.*

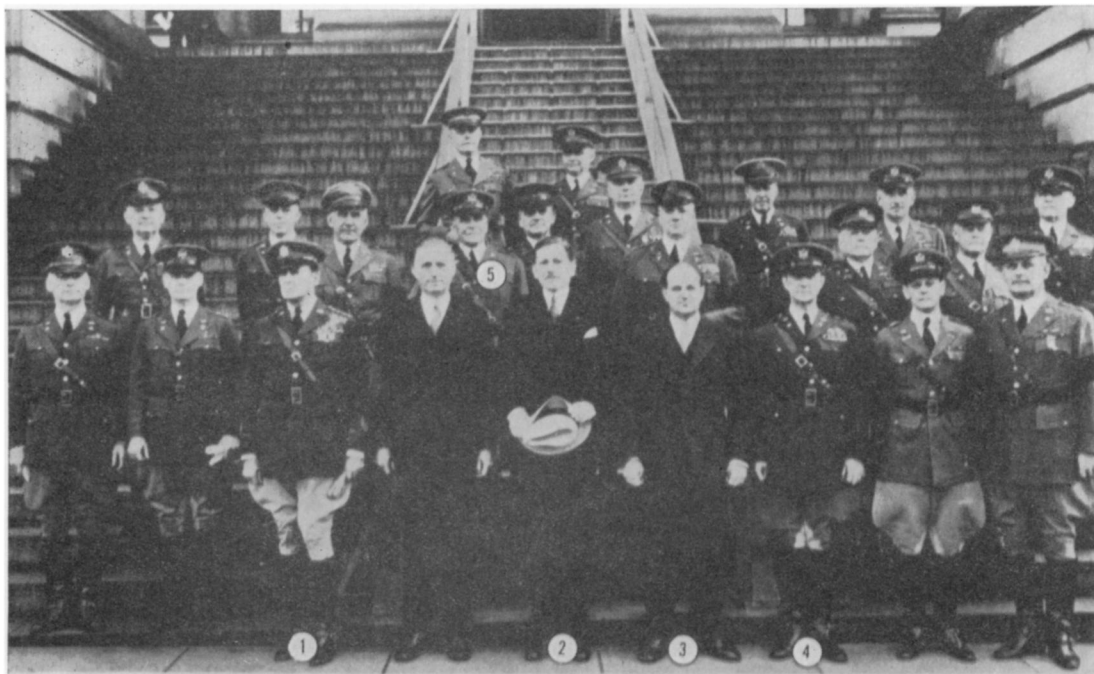
²⁷ New York *Evening Post*, August 16, 1932.

²⁸ Frank T. Hines to Walter H. Newton, August 15, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/300, in the Hoover Papers. Also see Newton to Hines, August 19, 1932, 1-E/299, *ibid.*

²¹ New York *Times*, July 31, 1932.

²² Don Boone to Richey, August 2, 1932; Louis McGrew to Richey, August 5, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/298, in the Hoover Papers.

²³ Transcript of Press Statement, August 3, 1932, *ibid.*



Lee and Henschel, Douglas MacArthur

Chief of Staff MacArthur (1), Secretary of War Patrick J. Hurley (2), Assistant Secretary F. Trubee Davison (3), General George Van Horn Moseley (4), and General Blanton Winship (5) pose with the rest of the War Department staff in 1933.

nation in New York, told his state Legion convention that a bunch of communist-led tramps and hoodlums had caused the riot. The convention responded with waves of hissing, booing, and catcalls. The New York legionnaires simply refused to believe either the original charge of insurrection or the lesser charge of a communist dominated riot.²⁹ To demonstrate their disbelief, eight state conventions not only demanded the bonus, but also passed resolutions censuring Hoover for using troops. It seemed certain that Hoover's enemies would try to force censure at the forthcoming national convention.³⁰

With the legionnaires' noisy demonstrations still ringing in their ears, panicky Republican leaders became convinced that Hoover had no choice but to fight it out at the Portland convention.³¹ Royal Johnson implored the President to marshal the evidence against the rioters into a hard-hitting, comprehensive indictment. It must be ready certainly no later than the eve of the American Legion national convention. Should the President fail to use the report at the proper time, Johnson predicted

that "its force and effect will be lost."³² Meantime, however, *Time* reported that the President had "no relish for a fight in which he was doomed to defeat." Instead, he was "lying low, having abandoned all efforts to try to stop the Legion's stampede for the Bonus."³³ *Time* could not have been farther from the truth. Even before Johnson's letter arrived at the White House, Hoover had decided to confront the legionnaires.

While the threat of Legion censure was a real one, Hoover and his advisers were overly apprehensive. The vast majority of state conventions, under pressure from Hines and other officials of the Veterans Administration, had

²⁹ James N. MacLean to Richey, August 22, 1932, Hines to M. E. Head, August 24, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/300, in the Hoover Papers; New York *Times*, August 28, 1932.

³⁰ "Heroes," 10.

³¹ Mark Regua to Richey, August 12, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/297, Richey to Regua, August 13, 1932, Bonus files, 1-E/300, in the Hoover Papers.

³² Johnson to Hoover, September 3, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/297, *ibid.*

³³ "Heroes," 10.

refused, despite their bonus resolutions, to condemn the use of troops. National Legion officers feared that a convention fight would split the Legion. They implied that any criticism of the administration might seriously damage its standing with the Republican party and reduce congressional support for future Legion demands.³⁴ Nonetheless, there was still a chance that the national convention might censure the President, and Portland therefore seemed the best place for the administration to launch a counterattack against the critics and stifle any adverse resolutions. Should the strategy prove successful, it might at least refurbish Hoover's reputation and enhance his slim chances for re-election.

ACCORDINGLY, during the week or two before the Portland conclave, the Justice Department hurriedly gathered its forces, well aware that newspaper editorials and personal assurances were no longer sufficient. On September 1, Nugent Dodds, Assistant Attorney General, told J. Edgar Hoover that Hurley had "asked me personally to compile at once a summary of all information . . . now in the hands of the Department of Justice," and ordered the F.B.I. chief to submit an immediate report. Nor would Dodds listen to any plea for more time to complete the investigation. No matter what shape the information might be in, he added, "I must have access to it as it is now."³⁵

The decision to confront his critics and overwhelm them presupposed that the President had evidence to support the charges of a radical plot bent upon overthrowing the government, or at least of a riot organized and led by communist agitators. In fact, he had no such evidence. Ever since July 28, the day of the riot, the administration had involved several government agencies in a careful and painstaking search for proof of its thesis, yet even the increased activity uncovered little that was not already known. Government attorneys continued taking depositions from principal witnesses while the F.B.I. diligently investigated rumors of communist plots.³⁶ Much of the inquiry was disheartening. Royal Johnson's favorite charge of communist guns and ammunition could not be verified. Neither could his suspicion that a deserter from the

British army was the brains behind the conspiracy.³⁷

The investigation did prove that the troops had not initiated the burning of the B.E.F. camps but merely completed the process after some veterans had first set fire to the huts.³⁸ Photographs of the riot were also utilized. On September 6, Walter H. Newton, one of the President's principal secretaries, supplied Republican National Committeeman Henry J. Allen with shots of veterans hurling stones at policemen. He instructed Allen to use this evidence to convince doubters "that this was a real onslaught on the forces of law and order," and that "no one could foretell what possible consequences might follow."³⁹ But since no one denied that a riot had occurred, the photographs were not likely to alter opinion significantly. The chief criticism centered not on the necessity of stopping the riot, but on the use of tanks, troops, and tear gas to drive the veterans out of the capital.

More important, despite their vigilant efforts, none of the investigating agencies—neither the F.B.I., the Secret Service, the Metropolitan Police, the Veterans Administration, the Immigration Bureau, the Military Intelligence Division of the War Department, nor the Attorney General's office—could uncover any evidence to support the charge of either communist insurrection or communist leadership in the riot.⁴⁰ An earlier grand jury investigation, conducted in secrecy, had also failed to produce the evidence which Hoover sought. During the investigation the administration's hopes were dashed by the respected chief witness, Major Pelham D. Glassford, superintendent of Washington, D. C. Metropoli-

³⁴ New York *Times*, September 14, 1932.

³⁵ Nugent Dodds to J. Edgar Hoover, memorandum, September 1, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/300, in the Hoover Papers.

³⁶ Dodds to Herbert B. Crosby, September 8, 1932, J. Edgar Hoover to Richey, September 9, 1932, *ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Transcript of Testimony, Glassford to Grand Jury, August 1, 1932, *ibid.*

³⁹ Newton to Henry J. Allen, September 6, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/297, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ "Bonus March Conditions" Report, Bonus Files, 1-E/300, *ibid.* In his report to the President, Attorney General Mitchell did not claim that communists had actually directed the riot. See William D. Mitchell to Herbert Hoover, September 9, 1932, *ibid.*

tan Police. Glassford had won the respect of the veterans and the citizens of Washington for his consistently efficient and impartial handling of the Bonus Army since its arrival in June. He was personally well acquainted with the few radicals who had attached themselves to the B.E.F., and when questioned about the riot, he categorically stated that he had not only personally supervised police action against the rioters and had restored order long before the troops arrived, but that he was "convinced that the rioting was not of communistic origin, but was entirely due to an aggravated frame of mind on the part of the veterans."⁴¹

Glassford's statement was totally unacceptable to the administration, but, as the grand jury did not make his testimony public, his views did nothing to alter the official explanation. His account did demonstrate clearly, however, the weakness of Hoover's justification for the Army's rout of the veterans. Indeed, since the riot Hoover's chief spokesmen had argued the existence of a red plot, mainly on the assumption that as some communists had been observed prior to the riot, they must have organized and led it. Despite the release of the forty-two alleged radicals, and the failure of repeated investigations to produce evidence in support of their view, the President and his advisers remained stubbornly con-

vinced of communist responsibility.⁴² But they decided to play down that charge for the moment.

Instead they decided to try another tack. Attorney General William Mitchell for some time had been investigating the personal character of the men who comprised the B.E.F. With the help of the Veterans Administration and the F.B.I. he had checked the military and civilian records of the more than 5,000 veterans who had taken advantage of government transportation loans to return home before the riot occurred. He discovered that 1,069 of these men had police records, mostly for minor offenses.⁴³ Assistant Attorney General Dodds at first discounted this information as irrelevant. "It has nothing to do . . . with any persons who were here during the riot," he argued. Dodds was correct, and he might have added that it also did not have any relationship to communism or radicalism.⁴⁴ Still, it was the most damaging evidence that the investigation had been able to uncover, and in desperation Hoover and Mitchell decided that it must constitute the burden of the administration's defense before the Legion.

ON September 12, 1932, the night before the national Legion convention, Hoover released the Attorney General's findings. The shift in strategy immediately became obvious. The administration no longer emphasized the charge that the B.E.F. leaders were communist insurrectionists. Instead the Mitchell report sought to demonstrate that an impressive percentage of the veterans were criminals. It was impossible, the report stated, to understand the conditions that caused the riot unless one knew "something of the character of the Bonus Army." The government had proof that 22.6 per cent of those veterans who had returned home on government loans before the riot took place were men with criminal records. Since these men were "the most sensible and least disorderly," he argued, it followed that "a considerable portion" of those who remained and therefore participated in the riot

⁴¹ Transcript of Testimony, Glassford to Grand Jury, August 1, 1932, *ibid.*; for a contemporary analysis of Glassford's leadership see Fleta Campbell Springer, "Glassford and the Siege of Washington," in *Harper's Magazine*, CLXV:641-655 (November, 1932). See also Washington (D.C.) *Herald*, November 2, 1932. Months after his testimony, on November 2, 1932, just two days before the election, Glassford suddenly modified his position somewhat. He assumed that some communists, taking advantage of "Hoover's disastrous blunder" of forcing the veterans out of the unused buildings, "probably" had precipitated the riot. However, he consistently denied that the riot was organized or a communist-led plot or a threat to the government. He steadfastly maintained that the cause of the riot was the decision to force the veterans out of the buildings without waiting for him to effect a peaceful transition. For testimony of witnesses supporting the administration, see *Memorandum of the Testimony Presented to the Grand Jury District of Columbia* (2 vols., August, 1932), 1-198, in the Department of Justice Records Division, Record Group 60, The National Archives.

⁴² Harry K. Daugherty to Richey, August 18, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/300, Richey to Requa, August 13, 1932, in the Hoover Papers.

⁴³ J. Edgar Hoover to Richey, September 1, 1932, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Dodds to Hurley, September 2, 1932, in the Hurley Papers.

were communists, radicals, or disorderly elements. The evidence clearly established that "the Bonus Army brought to the City of Washington the largest aggregation of criminals that had ever been assembled in the city at any one time."⁴⁵ B.E.F. criminals had cooperated with the communists who had precipitated the riot, and thus endangered the government. The circuitous logic which led to this conclusion mired the President deeper and deeper in a position that offered little hope for retreat.

Mitchell did include some words of praise for the honorable veterans in the Bonus Army, and in a statement accompanying the report, Hoover sought to soften the indictment by adding that "the extraordinary proportion of criminal, communist, and nonveteran elements should not be taken to reflect upon the many thousands of honest, law abiding men" who had petitioned the government.⁴⁶ But Hoover's attempt to mollify the veterans was lost in the outrage which greeted the new charges. The clumsy attempt to discredit the entire B.E.F. by associating it with criminals and communists added insult to injury and fooled no one. The Attorney General's report immediately boomeranged, turning the newly opened convention into a long and angry demonstration against the President. The minority that had traveled to Portland hoping to secure a resolution criticizing the use of troops quickly became an overwhelming majority which favored both the bonus resolution and the public censure of Hoover.⁴⁷ Floyd Gibbons summed up the bitter reaction when he remarked that there was a lower percentage of criminals in the Bonus Army than there had been in "at least one of the presidential cabinets in which Herbert Hoover has served."⁴⁸

The fury aroused against the administration was further intensified by Hurley's remarks over a national radio broadcast. He had been warned that the veterans harbored intense feelings against him and that his presence at the Legion convention might well cause an embarrassing incident, yet nothing could dissuade him from "going into that battle."⁴⁹ At his first opportunity to address the legionnaires, he carefully avoided any mention of the Bonus Army rout. But during the dinner

for past national commanders, one of the invited speakers, Floyd Gibbons, took advantage of the broadcast to compliment the B.E.F. on its orderly retreat from Washington.⁵⁰ Hurley interpreted Gibbons' remarks as a personal affront and immediately rose to defend himself. Calling for "patriotism above politics," he struck at what he knew to be a widely held belief, that the troops had been ordered to burn the veterans' camps to the ground without giving any warning to the inhabitants. "Upon my honor," Hurley swore, "those billets were set on fire first by the people who occupied them."

Many Americans, however, did not correctly hear the Secretary's hurried comment. They mistakenly thought that he had attributed the sole responsibility to the veterans and denied that the troops had set fire to any of the billets. Hurley's statement, though misunderstood, was accurate.⁵¹ Some of the retreating veterans had first set fire to several huts before the

⁴⁵ William D. Mitchell to Herbert Hoover, September 9, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/300, in the Hoover Papers. Unfortunately Mitchell did not include any material dealing with his report or the bonus riot in his personal papers. See William D. Mitchell Papers, Manuscripts Division, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

⁴⁶ *New York Times*, September 12, 1932.

⁴⁷ "The Bonus Bomb Bursts Into the Campaign," in *The Literary Digest*, CXIV:12 (September 24, 1932); "Not One Bit Impressed," in *The Nation*, CXXXV:241 (September 21, 1932); *Washington (D.C.) Sun*, September 13, 1932; *New York Times*, September 13, 1932.

⁴⁸ See Gibbons' article in Bonus Files, 1-E/298, in the Hoover Papers. Also see Paul Y. Anderson, "Mourning Becomes Herbert," in *The Nation*, CXXXV:280-281 (September 28, 1932).

⁴⁹ Florence P. Kahn to Richey, August 29, 1932, Richey to Kahn, August 30, 1932, Presidential Files, 1-E/60, in the Hoover Papers. Also see Lohbeck, *Hurley*, 116.

⁵⁰ *New York Times*, September 13, 1932. Also see Frederick Steiwer to Newton, September 16, 1932, Presidential Files, 1-E/370, in the Hoover Papers. Although Steiwer believed that Gibbons "was planted at this Convention by the Hearst interests," he informed Newton that Gibbons' reference to the eviction was presented "in a perfectly decent way but he left a clear impression that they had been abused."

⁵¹ H. H. Aylesworth, president of the National Broadcasting Company sent Hurley a transcription of his address which Hurley assured him "saved the day for me." While Hurley believed the transcript was a "lifesaver," the damage had already been done. See Hurley to Aylesworth, November 15, 1932, in the Hurley Papers. Also see *New York Times*, September 13, 1932.

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One of the widely publicized pictures of soldiers setting fire to a veteran's shack.

Army advanced into the camp. Unfortunately, Hurley made only fleeting reference to the firing of the buildings and passed on quickly to castigate all those who hid behind "the splendid spirit of Americanism." Neither did he explain that because of high winds the troops did indeed carry out orders to burn the remaining buildings. Newsmen, photographers, and newsreel cameramen fully recorded that process.⁵² Many listeners therefore concluded that Hurley was simply lying to save face. The editors of *The New Republic* had earlier observed that any child who saw the newsreels of troops burning the billets would conclude, "Mamma, the man isn't telling the truth." What was more significant, they noted, was that "Secretary Hurley has changed nothing, retracted nothing, and the whole administration seems to be supporting him."⁵³

AT THE HEIGHT of the controversy Major Pelham D. Glassford, the capital police chief, exposed further the administration's blunders by taking issue with each of the charges raised in the Attorney General's report. The report accounted for the administration's inability to determine the exact cause of the riot and to bring the conspirators to justice by explaining that on the day of the riot Glassford had suddenly withdrawn the detectives assigned to watch the bonus leaders.⁵⁴ This public attack on Glassford's handling of the riot was one more mistake, for it forced him to defend himself by making public his earlier testimony during the secret grand jury investigation. In his reply to the Legion Glassford stripped the last shreds of credibility from the Attorney General's report. Police detectives had indeed circulated among the marchers, but they had not been able to identify any conspirators because, as he had testified

⁵² Transcript of Testimony, Pelham D. Glassford to Grand Jury, August 1, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/300, in the Hoover Papers. Many witnesses testified that the troops did not begin burning the huts. See, for example, Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 217.

⁵³ "This Week," in *The New Republic*, LXXII:29 (August 24, 1932).

⁵⁴ Mitchell to Herbert Hoover, September 9, 1932, Bonus Files, 1-E/300, in the Hoover Papers. Also see *New York Times*, September 12, 1932.

earlier, the riot was unexpected and unorganized.⁵⁵

More important, Glassford accused the administration of misleading the American public on the character of the bonus marchers. The veterans were by no means criminals who had co-operated with the communists. Police records and statistics would prove that "there was less crime in the District of Columbia during either June or July than during the month of August after the veterans had been evicted." The implication that communists were responsible for the riot, Glassford stated, was equally unfounded. The communists had never been able to muster more than 210 men in the capital, and their attempts to "incite disorder in the loyal camps were completely frustrated by the veterans' [own] military police," a special B.E.F. force sponsored by the police department.⁵⁶

Glassford's sensational rebuttal captured national headlines and whipped the already indignant legionnaires into an even angrier denunciation of the President. Attempts by the Justice Department to undermine his testimony were ignored.⁵⁷ *The New Republic*, which defended Hoover against the charge that he had deliberately provoked the riot in order to gain a winning campaign issue, nonetheless condemned the Attorney General's report as "a campaign document pure and simple." The legionnaires agreed.⁵⁸ They were convinced that the B.E.F. was no pack of criminals. From the evidence at hand it was

far easier to regard Hoover and his spokesmen as a pack of liars.⁵⁹

Administration supporters had not exhausted their resources, however. Even though censure appeared certain, Legion officers rallied their forces in a last desperate effort to stymie the critics. Their strongest argument was that a censure motion would split the Legion, antagonize Republican leaders, and thus endanger their future legislative proposals. In the end Hoover supporters on the resolutions committee forestalled the censure. Some observers suspected that they were able to do so only in a twenty-four-hour session during which they agreed to trade their votes for the bonus resolution in exchange for dropping the censure motion.⁶⁰

Many delegates were keenly disappointed with the recommendation of the resolutions committee, but as the convention rules stipulated that a majority committee report prohibited any contrary motion from the floor, the chair consistently suppressed the critics. Repeated attempts to put forth a censure motion from the floor failed, and the overwhelming majority of the legionnaires had to content themselves with merely passing the bonus resolution.⁶¹ Secretary of War Hurley was not so lucky. Assuming that he had used franked envelopes to distribute to legionnaires thousands of copies of his reply to Floyd Gibbons, the delegates repaid his efforts with a resounding vote of censure. Hurley had not authorized the use of franked envelopes, but despite his denials and proof of his innocence, it was too late to rescind the Legion's action. Like Hoover, Hurley soon came to believe that the Democrats were "engaged in a cabal to destroy my reputation."⁶²

⁵⁵ Glassford to Crosby, September 8, 1932, in the District of Columbia Commissioners Papers, Bonus Army File, District of Columbia Building, Washington, D.C. Glassford's earlier statement to Crosby, one of the Commissioners, explained that the detectives had circulated among the marchers, but they were under orders to seek cover in the event of a riot as only uniformed police were used for that purpose.

⁵⁶ "Press Statement," September 12, 1932, Box 1, in the Glassford Papers, Institute of Industrial Relations, U.C.L.A. Glassford also maintained that he had never requested that the Commissioners call on Hoover for federal troops. See Glassford to D. C. Commissioners, July 29, 1932, *ibid.* Glassford did not send this letter to the Commissioners, but his dissent was well known to them. Also see *New York Times*, September 13, 1932.

⁵⁷ *New York Times*, September 13, 1932.

⁵⁸ "Political Gesture," 139; "The Bonus Bomb," 12; *Washington (D.C.) Sun*, September 13, 1932; *New York Times*, September 13, 1932; *Washington (D.C.) Herald*, September 12, 1932.

⁵⁹ *New York Times*, September 13, 1932.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, September 15, 1932. The *Times* reported that an address by Floyd Gibbons in which he attacked the Mitchell report and defended Glassford, brought the legionnaires to their feet in prolonged "whistling and stamping and cheering."

⁶¹ *Portland (Oregon) Journal*, September 12, 1932; *New York Times*, September 14, 15, 1932.

⁶² *New York Times*, September 16, 1932. J. P. O'Neil, a retired Brigadier General and close friend of Hurley was responsible for using the War Department envelopes. O'Neil to Hurley, September 15, 1932, Hurley to United Press, September 15, 1932, Joseph H. Edgar to Hurley, October 25, 1933, Hurley to Evan L. Davis, September 20, 1932, in the Hurley Papers.

REPUBLICANS who had placed high hopes in the Attorney General's report were stunned and dismayed at Hoover's political ineptness. Mark Sullivan, a well-known correspondent for a number of Republican newspapers, expressed the fear that the controversy might well become the determining factor in the November election.⁶³ Hoover's hope to run as a man who had defeated a radical coup d'état had collapsed, and his credibility was open to serious question. His enemies now attacked him unmercifully, persuading many people to accept every distorted and unfounded charge connected with the routing of the B.E.F. Mayor James Curley of Boston wrongfully accused the President of ordering the troops to shoot down the defenseless veterans "like dogs," an accusation which was widely believed and repeated.⁶⁴ Suspicions that Hoover had deliberately provoked the riot in order to gain a winning campaign issue matched the equally ridiculous Republican belief that the Democrats had formed an alliance with the radicals in order to smear Hoover and undermine the Republic.⁶⁵ Charges and counter charges, virtually all without foundation, stirred the controversy into an emotional frenzy which continued for many years after the Legion convention was forgotten.

Neither the bonus nor the Legion controversy became, as Mark Sullivan had feared, decisive election issues. The overwhelming issue in 1932 was the depression. Most non-veterans, even if sympathetic to the B.E.F., did not favor the immediate payment of the

bonus. The \$2,300,000,000 required led them to conclude that the original idea of compounding interest between 1925 and 1945 would be far more sensible.⁶⁶ What mattered most was not the bonus but the manner in which Hoover and his advisers lost the confidence of the people and turned criticism into fury and repudiation. By listening to Hurley and MacArthur instead of asking for their resignations, by accepting the red plot thesis, and finally by shifting the burden of the attack to the B.E.F. itself, Hoover revealed a distressing lack of political sensitivity. Not only did he destroy his only remaining chances of re-election, he also seriously clouded his personal reputation and reduced his later effectiveness as a party leader. The slander and bitterness which Herbert Hoover was to endure throughout most of his remaining years are part of a personal tragedy. But he and his advisers must share in the responsibility for that tragedy.

⁶³ "Bonus Bomb," 12; Washington (D.C.) *Sun*, September 13, 1932; Washington (D.C.) *Herald*, September 12, 1932; *New York Times*, September 13, 1932; "Storm-Signals in the New Bonus Drive," in *Literary Digest*, CXIV:6 (September 10, 1932).

⁶⁴ *New York Times*, September 13, 1932.

⁶⁵ Anderson, "Tear Gas, Bayonets, and Votes," 138; *New York American*, October 30, 1932. Glassford charged that Hoover deliberately provoked the riot for his own political gain.

⁶⁶ "Behind the Bonus Battlefront," in *The Literary Digest*, CXIV:11 (October 1, 1932); *New York Times*, September 16, 1932; "This Week," in *The New Republic*, CXXII:162-163 (September 28, 1932).

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