

Conflicting Versions of the Battle of Anacostia

The Battle of Anacostia, in which troops, led by Army Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur, used excessive force to drive thousands of unarmed, protesting WWI veterans from Washington, D.C., was a turning point in U.S. history. The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 explicitly forbade the use of U.S. military forces against American citizens. President Hoover blamed MacArthur for mishandling the whole incident, saying he had usurped authority by disobeying explicit orders.

The District of Columbia government asked federal troops to preserve order. Hoover reluctantly agreed, but only after limiting Major General MacArthur's authority. MacArthur's troops would be unarmed. The mission was to escort the marchers unharmed to camps along the Anacostia River. But [Army Chief of Staff] MacArthur ignored the President's orders, taking no prisoners and driving tattered protesters from their encampment.

After Hoover ordered a halt to the army's march, MacArthur again took things into his own hands, violently clearing the Anacostia campsite. A national uproar ensued. Democratic presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt grasped the political implications instantly. "Well," he told a friend, "this elects me."

Source: "From Hero to Scapegoat," Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum. <hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/Hooverstory/gallery07/gallery07.html>

General Douglas MacArthur

From MacArthur's statement, the night his men burnt Hooverville to the ground:

That mob down there was a bad-looking mob. It was animated by the essence of revolution. The gentleness, the consideration, with which they had been treated had been mistaken for weakness and they had come to the conclusion... that they were about to take over in some arbitrary way either the direct control of the Government or else to control it by indirect methods.... Had the President... permitted this thing to go on for 24 hours more, he would have faced...a real battle. Had he let it go another week,...the institutions of our Government would have been very severely threatened.... It can be safely said that he had not only reached the end of an extraordinary patience but that he had gone to the very limit in his desire to avoid friction and trouble before he used force. Had he not used it at that time, I believe he would have been very derelict indeed in the judgment in which he was handling the safety of the country.... Had he not acted with the force and vigor that he did, it would have been a very sad day for the country tomorrow....

A reign of terror was being started which may have led to a system of Caponeism, and...later to insurgency and insurrection. The President played it pretty fine in waiting to the last minute.... I think as a military maneuver,...it was unique. I have been in many riots, but I think this is the first riot I ever was in, or ever saw, in which there was no real bloodshed. So far as I know, there is no man on either side who has been seriously injured.
Source: News conference, July 28, 1932. <www.presidency.ucsb.edu/site/docs/index_pppus.php>



President Herbert Hoover

From Hoover's memoirs:

The bonus march was in considerable part organized and promoted by the Communists and included a large number of hoodlums and ex-convicts determined to raise a public disturbance. They were frequently addressed by Democratic congressmen seeking to inflame them against me for my opposition to the bonus legislation. They were given financial support by some

Was it "Bonus Army" insurrection, or just the Army Chief of Staff's insubordination?

publishers of the sensational press. It was of interest to learn in after years, from the Communist confessions, that they also had put on a special battery of speakers to help Roosevelt in his campaign, by use of the incident.

When...no legislation on the bonus [was] passed by Congress, I asked...[for] funds to buy tickets home for the legitimate veterans.... Some 6,000 availed themselves of [this] aid, leaving about 5,000 mixed hoodlums, ex-convicts, Communists and a minority of veterans....

General MacArthur was directed to take charge. General Eisenhower (then Colonel) was second in command. Without firing a shot or injuring a single person, they cleaned up the situation....

The misrepresentation of the bonus incident for political purposes surpassed any similar incident in American history. Not only did Roosevelt use the incident in the 1932 campaign, but Democratic orators...continued to use it for twenty years.... I was portrayed as a murderer and an enemy of veterans.

Source: Excerpts from *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover*, 1952 -1953, published in *Buttons and Ballots*, March 1997. <www.msys.net/cress/ballots2/bonus.htm>



Bonus Marchers: Loyal Vets or revolting "Reds"?