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Review by Larry Grant

The War Against the Vets: The World War I Bonus Army during the Great Depression

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In *The War Against the Vets: The World War I Bonus Army during the Great Depression*, author Jerome Tuccille tells the story of the "Bonus Expeditionary Force" (BEF), a group of First World War veterans and their families who gathered in Washington, D.C. in 1932 to petition the federal government. Nearly a decade earlier, in 1924, Congress passed the World War Adjusted Compensation Act, which promised the veterans a war bonus for their service to be paid in 1945. But, in 1924, America was in the middle of an economic boom. By 1932, the nation was in the midst of the Great Depression, and the veterans argued that to delay the promised payment until 1945 when their families were suffering, was a shameful way to treat former soldiers who fought for the nation. They wanted the money they had earned, and they wanted it now.

Though Tuccille does not mention the history of the practice, Congress had long provided additional benefits above and beyond a soldier's daily wage to compensate war veterans for their service. In this case, the compensation afforded to World War I veterans was analogous to benefits given to earlier generations of American fighting men. For example, Revolutionary War soldiers were awarded grants of land for their service, a practice revived in the late 1840s that continued into the mid-1850s. Later soldiers also received post-conflict and post-service rewards from the federal government, a practice that continues today in the form of the many programs administered by the Veterans Administration. Guaranteed home loans might even be considered a direct descendent of the earlier land grants.

The War Against the Vets is arranged in twenty chapters of about ten pages each and divided into three parts. The first section of nine chapters, "The Great March," establishes the background to the main story, setting the scene in 1918 by describing the cost of the war to those who fought it. Tuccille surveys the good times of the 1920s and the great stock market crash that brought the good times to a sudden halt in October 1929. This unexpected crisis of finance, unemployment, and despair gave birth to the BEF; it also gave birth to another crisis that contributed to Herbert Hoover's replacement as U.S. president by Franklin D. Roosevelt.

As Tuccille notes, "For many of the vets the IOU ["I owe you"[i]] the government had given them in lieu of cash represented their only real asset" (p. 29). Politicians like Democrat Wright Patman, first elected in 1928, who would eventually serve for 47 years as the representative of Texas's first district, "seized the opportunity to agitate for the immediate payment of the bonus owed to the World War I veterans" (p. 29). Patman's legislation to pay veterans was sidetracked by pro-Hoover supporters in Congress, but he and others "believed that political expediency would force Hoover to change his position when he ran for reelection in 1932" (p. 29).

However, as Tuccille points out, Hoover did not change his mind. Instead, he "criticized the vets' demands for a $4.5 billion handout 'under the guise of giving relief of some kind or another' as an expenditure the government could not afford" (p. 30). Tuccille adds that bankers and other "business moguls joined ranks with [Andrew] Mellon and maintained that the government should hold the line on further expenditures. Most hypocritical of all was...Pierre S. DuPont, whose

chemical company was a major beneficiary of the war." DuPont called the veterans "the most favored class in the United States...having health, youth, and opportunity" (p. 30). This passage highlights one of the conflicts Tuccille sets up in his narrative.

His use of Mellon and DuPont to personify some of the opponents of the Bonus Marchers underlines the perception of many Americans at the time that a symbiotic relationship existed between capital and war—a connection that continues to attract the attention of some anti-capitalists today. In this view, the veterans were not only victims of the war, the Great Depression, and an unsympathetic government, but they were also pawns of a group of industrialists like DuPont and bankers like Mellon who—allegedly—had dragged America into World War I to insure their profits against an Allied defeat. As Tuccille quotes Missouri Democrat Congressman John J. Cochran, this situation was fundamentally unfair: "'The war contractors' all got theirs, and now it was time for the men who did the actual fighting to get the money owed to them" (p. 31).

DuPont's quote above also highlights a view of returning veterans that has been subject to considerable revision in recent years. Researchers investigating the consequences of exposure to the stress of combat have shown that veterans are not favored uniformly with good health and opportunity, however youthful they may seem after their service. Like veterans today, many of the soldiers who went to France in 1917 did not return with their health intact, nor did they always find opportunity waiting. A more nuanced view of their shared human experience suggests that First World War veterans probably suffered from the same issues that are familiar to those professionals of veterans' affairs and others who work with modern returning veterans.

Again, Tuccille makes little mention of this problem, which is unfortunate. Arguments about veterans' relationships with society, and society's debt to veterans continue, on almost exactly the same terms today as in the 1930s. Accounts like Tuccille's should offer the opportunity to extract the lessons of these earlier episodes to inform the discussions and decisions of present-day policy makers.

On the other hand, Tuccille's description of General Douglas McArthur's July 28, 1932, attack on the veterans and their families using tear gas, tanks, cavalry, and infantry shows that the government's response to veterans' issues is considerably more enlightened today than the Bonus Marchers experienced in mid-1932. The destruction of the veterans' camps led Democrat presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt, commenting on a *New York Times* story, to say, "The election's all but over. Why didn't Hoover offer the men coffee and sandwiches instead of turning Doug MacArthur loose" (p. 127)? Roosevelt called MacArthur "'the most dangerous person' in the country."

FDR's administration, recognizing the public relations and political dangers presented by images of veterans being attacked in the nation's capital by armed soldiers, successfully defused the situation. The new president provided the veterans with shelter and food and offered to enroll them in his new Civilian Conservation Corps to give them work. He also moved the veterans into Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA—later WPA) camps far removed from Washington, D.C. to help get them out of the public eye. Moreover, in 1935, Congressman Patman reintroduced his bill to settle the veterans' claims early. This time he succeeded, though President Roosevelt, who brought massive deficits to government to fund his New Deal, tried (and failed) to veto the bill. FDR claimed, "I do not see how, as a practical business sense...a government running behind two billion dollars annually can consider...the bonus payment until it has a balanced budget, not only on paper but with a surplus of cash in the Treasury" (p. 90).

This would seem to end the bonus saga, but most of the last quarter of Tuccille's book traces the impact of the 1935 Labor Day hurricane on the veterans living in FERA camps in Florida. The camps of tents and flimsy shacks "were situated on land virtually flush with sea level" (p. 164). Tuccille writes that a "near-certain disaster was in the making, and no one in Washington was

concerned about taking adequate measures to avert it" (p. 165). This criticism seems partially valid at best. Even in the twenty-first century, with days of warning from satellites and storm hunting aircraft, hurricanes that strike Florida or anywhere else still lead to disasters that humans have little power to avert. When the disaster arrived, unsurprisingly, "the *Washington Post* blasted the administration" charging that there was "considerable evidence to support [the] conclusion that 'gross negligence somewhere' was responsible" (p. 193). Tuccille devotes the remaining pages to a short discussion of veterans' benefits since the Bonus March in 1932.

It is interesting to note that only about 20,000 veterans, out of a total of about 4 million men who served during WWI, took part in the 1932 Bonus March on Washington. This amounts to only one half of one percent of those who wore the uniform. What were the others doing? Though it was likely beyond the scope of Tuccille's story, it would have been a useful perspective to know more about them, at least briefly. It would not have made the difficult circumstances of the Bonus Marchers less compelling; it would have reminded readers that many veterans simply returned home to do the best they could in difficult circumstances.

Tuccille, also the author of biographies of Rupert Murdoch, Alan Greenspan, and Donald Trump, writes in an informal conversational voice. His narrative in *Vets* resembles something of a romance. It is not a dry academic retelling of the Bonus Marchers' story, and it has few of the trappings of such a work. A professional historian might have supplied (and be disappointed by the lack of) more complete endnotes and a more extensive bibliography, but the story is dramatic and likely to be compelling for the average reader.

While it provides a bibliography of secondary works, Tuccille does not seem to have taken advantage of any of the primary sources, even though some, like the FBI's files on the marchers, are available online. The endnotes are incomplete and presented usually about one per page in a frustrating format. Footnotes would have been better and easier on the reader, but the notes add little to the text in any case. Despite these shortcomings, *The War Against the Vets* is an engaging and entertaining work that is worth reading.

There are two important messages in Tuccille's book for students of veterans' studies. The first is captured in the cliché that is supposed to have originated with Mark Twain: "History doesn't repeat itself but it often rhymes." Almost nothing in Tuccille's account of the veterans' story is unique, and that is part of its attraction. As pointed out above, Congress often provided veterans with bonuses of one sort or another. Marches on Washington (with and without) political implications (and consequences) are now almost routine; and unforeseen and unintended consequences, despite the best efforts of government, can lead to disasters. Seeing the shared similarities reinforces the second important message suggested by *The War Against the Vets*, which follows from the axiom that professionals study their profession, and they study history as part of that project. In no other way can the study of humanity find the depth and breadth of evidence of motivation, behavior, and intellectual challenge. History provides thinking professionals with examples upon which to sharpen their critical thinking skills and to escape narrow utilitarianism. Why study histories like *The War Against the Vets*? Because that is how we gain access to the record of human experience.

[i] An IOU is a term used to describe an informal promissory note, though in this case the veterans held actual financial instruments. Their objection was to the fixed maturity date that did not meet their immediate needs.

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