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Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

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Is the Occupy Movement Really Unique?

A Historical Case Study

There have been a number of articles recently comparing the Occupy movement to the anti-war movement of the 60's, particularly in the area of lessons learned about crowd control. However, there is another historical event that is an even closer parallel to the Occupy movement: the Bonus Expeditionary Force and the occupation of Washington DC in the spring and summer of 1932.

Like the Occupy movement, the BEF was driven by economic need and the perception of unfair treatment. Like Occupy, the BEF attempted to influence the government by its physical presence. And like Occupy, it provoked an over-reaction on the part of government authorities.

The Cause

Starting in 1776, it was traditional for Congress to vote a bonus to the army for service in time of war. This came to an end in 1898 when Congress opted not to award a bonus to veterans of the Spanish American War.

Congress expressed a similar reluctance to compensate veterans following World War I, awarding veterans only \$60. This led to formation of the American Legion in 1919 and considerable political lobbying on behalf of the veterans.

In 1924, Congress over-rode a veto by President Coolidge and passed the World War Adjusted Compensation Act. Each veteran was to receive \$1 per day of domestic service to maximum of \$500 and \$1.25 for overseas service, capped at \$625. Amounts under \$50 were paid immediately. The remainder, amounting to some \$4 billion, was paid in the form of Certificates of Service, payable after 20 years in 1945. Veterans could borrow up to 22.5% of the face value of the Certificates

With the advent of the Great Depression in 1929, pressure began growing for early redemption of the Certificates of Service. Congress was supportive but President Hoover and the Republicans opposed it because of the cost – increasing taxes to pay for the redemption would slow recovery.

The March

Beginning in the spring of 1932, unemployed veterans began drifting into Washington with the intent of picketing Congress and President Hoover. They began to organize, calling themselves the Bonus Expeditionary Force, a parody on the American Expeditionary Force of World War I. By July, there were between 17,000-25,000 veterans in Washington.

The majority of the BEF established a camp on the Anacostia Flats, a muddy area across the Anacostia River, south of central Washington. Other camps were established within Washington itself. Although built from scavenged materials, the camps were laid out with military precision and tenants had to register and prove they had been honorably discharged.



Tent City. Theodor Horydczak (ca. 1870-1971) Veterans Bonus March, Washington, July 1932
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division
Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

On June 15, the House of Representatives passed the Wright Patman Bonus Bill providing for early redemption of the Certificates of Service. On June 17, the BEF marched to the Capitol to support the bill but the bill was soundly defeated in the Senate. The BEF remained in Washington, continuing to petition Congress and the President.

The Conflict

On July 28, Attorney General William Mitchell ordered the DC police to remove the veterans from the camps in Washington. When the veterans reoccupied the camps, police, feeling threatened by the crowd, opened fire, killing two. Hoover ordered the US Army to remove the veterans. (Washington DC is exempt from the Posse Comitatus Act that prohibits the use of troops for law enforcement purposes.)

At 4:45 AM, troops personally led by Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur entered the camps. Using fixed bayonets and a vomiting agent and supported by tanks, machine guns, and cavalry, the troops evicted the veterans and burned the camps. Most veterans fled to the large camp on the Anacostia Flats. Although the President ordered the assault halted, MacArthur had the camp razed.

The Lessons

There are some striking parallels between the BEF and the Occupy movement. The BEF was the product of desperate financial times and the perception of unfair treatment, issues similar to those that sparked the Occupy movement. Despite their service, the veterans were branded communists and Red agitators in much the same way Occupy protestors are branded as anarchists. This depersonalizing led in both cases to an over-reaction on the part of government agencies.

Ultimately, the BEF incident was one of the factors that cost Hoover the Presidency in 1932. Under Roosevelt, the veterans received priority for enrollment in the Civilian Conservation Corps. They finally received their bonuses in 1936 (again over Presidential veto). It remains to be seen if the Occupy movement will be as successful. 