“SOLDIER-CITIZENS”:
THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS AND VETERAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM
FROM THE BONUS MARCH TO THE GI BILL

By

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This document is dedicated to my parents, who have waited a long time for its completion, and to Renée, who has made it possible with her unending love and support. Finally, this is dedicated in loving memory of Barley, the exuberant Briard whose immense joy in living was only surpassed by the size of his heart.
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“SOLDIER-CITIZENS”: THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS AND VETERAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM FROM THE BONUS MARCH TO THE GI BILL

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This dissertation examines the fundamental watershed in twentieth-century American political life: the transformation in the relationship between the federal government and ordinary citizens associated with the New Deal. By exploring the political and cultural mobilization of a major veteran organization, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), this work traces the significant role played by veterans in this process. Veterans’ sophisticated organizational structure, their trenchant critique of the American political and economic system, and their gendered definition of citizenship made them a potent political force during the formative era of the New Deal.

This study contends that the VFW emerged as the leader of veteran political activism in the 1930s. More significantly, however, the issues that provoked veteran political mobilization situated the VFW at the epicenter of important Depression-era movements. The work argues that the VFW played a foundational role not only in the Bonus March, but also the New Deal dissident movement led by Huey P. Long and
Father Charles E. Coughlin, and the isolationist movement of the 1930s. The VFW’s critique of the increasingly corporate economy, and the national and international political systems that sustained it, relied on veterans’ interpretations of the causes of World War I. This critique provided the ideological thread linking the organization to these disparate, seemingly unrelated, Depression-era groups.

By examining the cultural dimension of the VFW’s political mobilization, this study also explores the confluence of gender, citizenship, and personal identity in the making of the GI Bill. I argue that overseas military service defined veteran conceptions of masculinity and citizenship, and served as the ideological basis for veteran political activism during the Depression era. Veterans constructed a sense of collective identity out of personal experience and common ideological and historical references. Yet, veterans grounded their identity in a shared masculine ideal based on service for the common good and personal sacrifice. By promoting this version of masculinity, veterans challenged the hegemony of economic individualism. In so doing, veterans both challenged the gendered basis of the liberal state and helped found the martial welfare state epitomized by the GI Bill.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: VETERANS AND VETERAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

Writing in the 1930 Armistice Day edition of *The Commonweal*, Oliver McKee, Jr. declared that the “veteran of the World War has won a secure foothold in American politics.” By way of example, he pointed to the fifteen senators, sixty-three members of Congress, and multiple Hoover Cabinet members that had served in the Great War. McKee explained that the veterans’ ascendancy in politics could be traced to three related factors: vibrant veteran organizations gave ex-soldiers a strong collective political voice and “the machinery” to enact national or state laws, the war’s selective service and commissioning processes meant that veterans were “the pick of their generation, physically and mentally,” and “the training which the ex-service man gets in his own organizations” provided valuable political skills. McKee concluded, “The American veteran of the World War has arrived on the political scene and … brought a new force into our political life. Hereafter, we must reckon with him.” Entitled “The Political March of the Veterans,” McKee’s article would prove prescient, but not in a way that he could have possibly predicted. Within eighteen months veterans truly launched a “political march” when some twenty thousand mostly unemployed and homeless World War I veterans descended on Washington, D.C., in what became known as the Bonus March.¹

The Bonus March situates veterans and veteran political activism at the center of the interwar historical narrative. In May and June of 1932, over twenty thousand veterans marched on the Capital to lobby Congress for immediate payment on their adjusted service certificates, certificates usually referred to as the Bonus. After weeks of mounting tension, and the Congressional defeat of the Bonus, the United States Army forcibly evicted the Bonus Marchers and their families from makeshift encampments on the Anacostia River. Both the March and its ending remain prominent features in historical accounts of the Great Depression. For, besides vividly capturing the era’s social dislocation, the violent conclusion to the Bonus March has become a symbol of the Herbert Hoover Administration’s perceived disregard for the suffering of average Americans and, thus, historical shorthand for the failures of the Hoover presidency. But the Bonus March is also used as a point of comparison. Sympathetic New Deal chroniclers contrast Franklin D. Roosevelt’s magnanimous treatment of the much smaller 1933 Bonus Army to the 1932 episode to illustrate both the New Deal’s concern for “the forgotten man” and FDR’s considerable political savvy. After 1933, however, presumably placated by the New Deal’s relief programs, veterans more or less disappear from discussions of New Deal politics.


Veterans and veteran politics re-emerge eleven years later with the enactment of the GI Bill. In 1944, sixteen million World War II servicemen learned that their military obligation would accrue them social and economic benefits of unparalleled proportions. The political origins of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, more commonly known as the GI Bill, lay in the concerns over the social and economic reintegration of veterans and the political consequences if that reintegration failed. The rampant unemployment and the potential for attendant political unrest epitomized by the Bonus March demonstrated the dangers of not easing veterans’ readjustment into civilian life. Thus, the material benefits offered by the GI Bill created the largest welfare service in the history of the country. Veterans enjoyed vocational training and education benefits, a generous unemployment policy, easy access to home mortgages, and an expansive healthcare entitlement, all at the expense of the federal government. Millions of veterans took advantage of the entitlements making the GI Bill arguably the most significant piece of legislation in the formation of postwar American society.  


The Bonus March and the GI Bill, therefore, make military veterans fixtures in the political, social, and economic narratives of the twentieth-century United States. Any cursory look through a U.S. history textbook unfailingly finds extended discussions of these two episodes, typically linked in causal terms. The Bonus March marks the *sine qua non* of interwar veteran political activism; the GI Bill stands as its successful denouement. Yet, the relationship between them is more implied than demonstrated. Indeed, the causal linkages are rendered problematic since much of the veteran political activism between these two events is less well-studied. The most recent attempt to connect these episodes, Jennifer D. Keene’s groundbreaking *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, calls attention to the importance of military conscription in creating a dynamic renegotiation of the social contract between veterans and the federal government, an effort that culminated in the GI Bill. Yet, Keene inadvertently strengthens the historiographical tradition by jumping from the Bonus March to the GI Bill with only limited discussion of the intervening years. This study, however, attempts to uncover the breadth of veterans’ political struggles during the interwar period by casting the two episodes as starting points, not the entire story. To do so is to better understand both the politicizing influence of military service and the importance of the historical memory of World War I to the political battles of a generation.5

While there is much to be gained by fleshing out the connections between the Bonus March and the GI Bill, a study of veterans and veteran political activism speaks more broadly to a variety of traditional and contemporary historiographical issues.

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Foremost, examining veteran political activism in the New Deal period challenges some of the basic emphases of the period’s political narratives. In traditional political histories of the New Deal, veteran political activism is tied to the success or failure of Bonus Marches. As a result, depictions of Roosevelt’s gentle disarming of the much smaller 1933 Bonus March render veterans as early beneficiaries and eventual supporters of the New Deal. Yet, a detailed examination of FDR’s veterans’ policy and the fierce political mobilizations against it reveals that veterans played a critical role in the dissenting politics of the New Deal, even if no demonstration on the scale of the Bonus March materialized. In that regard, this study follows the lead of earlier work on the importance of continued Congressional power and on the multi-faceted political challenges to the New Deal. Assessing the political impact of a little-studied constituency on New Deal politics, then, creates new, less FDR-centered narratives.6

By challenging the tenets of the New Deal narrative, an examination of veterans can also speak to scholars interested in the development of the state in the interwar period. The group of historians, political scientists, and sociologists that labor under the rubric of “American Political Development” have already demonstrated the importance

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of veteran pensions in their studies of state formation. Theda Skocpol and Ann S. Orloff’s pioneering work on the origins of the American welfare state describes the role of veterans’ policy in the emergence of twentieth-century social policy. Skocpol and Orloff persuasively argue that the expansive system of pensions and benefits developed for Civil War veterans served as a negative point of reference for policy-makers when constructing the social welfare legislation of the New Deal. Moreover, literature on the GI Bill emphasizes its massive impact on state-building. But the role of veterans during the New Deal era in the politics of social policy, what Skocpol refers to as the “policy feedback” of state-formation, remains relatively unexplored. The title of this study, “Soldier-Citizens,” alludes to the ways in which the federal government made a national citizenry through military service (never more so than through conscription during the Great War) and the veterans’ welfare bureaucracy. But “soldier-citizens” also refers to the manner in which veterans understood and negotiated the democratic process for their own benefit. By studying veteran political activism in the interwar period, these very important linkages between social policy, state formation, and electoral politics can be better explained. Indeed, a study of veterans might even be categorized as part of the new interest in war as a chief means of political development.7

Skocpol and Orloff’s work also reflected a broader investigation of the centrality of gender and gendered conceptions of citizenship to social policy and state formation in the Progressive and New Deal eras. The centrality of gender and citizenship to veterans’ attempts to refashion the state exposes an ideological and cultural nexus involving veterans’ identity and their attendant conceptions of masculinity and citizenship. Repeatedly veterans articulated a definition of citizenship, a decidedly gendered one based on military service and personal sacrifice, that challenged the hegemony of an economic-based citizenship. In the process, veterans challenged the gendered basis of the liberal state and, later, presented the cultural formulations that the passage of the GI Bill hinged upon. The convergence of veterans’ identity, and conceptions of gender and citizenship, forged the cultural foundations of the “martial” welfare state and is an important factor in American Political Development that requires more thorough investigation.  

If war, gender, and American Political Development form important new avenues of inquiry that studies of veterans can begin to address, so too does the renewed interest 

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in combining discussions of foreign policy with those of domestic policy and politics. One of the inadvertent consequences of the social and cultural turns in history in the last decades of the twentieth century included the relative isolation of American foreign policy history from the larger profession. Recent criticism of this artificial distinction between foreign and domestic policy has led to attempts to place the United States more fully in international and trans-national contexts. But it has also led to significant works that try to collapse the distinctions between foreign and domestic policy, and national and international politics. An examination of veterans, the living—and vocal—reminders of past foreign policy decisions, and their political activism in the realms of national security and foreign policy, shines light on a liminal space where domestic and foreign policy issues converge.9

Last, veterans form a vital component in the expanding body of literature on historical memory and nationalism. Sparked by seminal studies on the origins of nationalism by Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, the cultural interpretation of nationalist movements by George Mosse, and the relationship between history and memory by Pierre Norá, historians have recognized that veterans invariably play an essential role in the performance of nationalistic rituals and in the construction of

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historical memory and nationalist ideologies. In the American context, pioneering works by John Bodnar, G. Kurt Piehler, and David Blight demonstrate the vital functions played by war, veterans, and the ritualistic remembrance of war through monuments and memorials, in the constructions of American historical memory and the politics of national identity. Indeed, veteran organizations’ strident nationalism and unwavering opposition to communism led to comparisons—fairly or not—with contemporaneous European fascist movements, movements spearheaded by veterans of the Great War. Thus, a study of veterans that focuses on the manipulation of war’s historical memory can expose the intensely political nature of such a project. Moreover, it can also show how war shaped the lives of the men who waged it by highlighting the ways that memory of political events structures a generational perspective.

As this review of current scholarship suggests, the benefits to be derived from further study of veterans and veteran political activism are numerous and far-reaching. Any study of veterans and veteran political activism must come to grips, however, with

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the organizations that advanced veterans’ interest. In a recent assessment of the “new directions” in political history, Meg Jacobs and Julian E. Zelizer call for a re-examination of the links between citizens and their government. They call for studies of “the political and voluntary institutions through which Americans gained their political standing, and mediating institutions that connected citizens to elected officials.” National veteran organizations served both of these purposes. They mediated veterans’ relationship with the state, both with elected officials and the Veterans’ Bureau (changed to Veterans’ Administration in 1931) and provided the “machinery” that structured veterans’ political involvement. Undergirding interwar veteran politics, as Oliver McKee, Jr. correctly pointed out in 1930, stood veteran organizations. 12

During the interwar period, two major national organizations vied for the membership of American veterans: the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). Other smaller organizations based on ideological orientation, ethnicity and religion, and disability, groups such as the Communist Party-affiliated Workers’ Ex-Serviceman’s League, Jewish War Veterans, and the Disabled American Veterans, also competed for veterans’ affiliations. Yet, the American Legion and VFW far outdistanced the others in terms of membership and national political influence and were the major rivals among the associations. 13


13 On the American Legion, see William Pencak, For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919-1941 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989); Raymond Moley, Jr. The American Legion Story (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1966); Keene, Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America;
The Legion, founded in 1919 by members of the American Expeditionary Force, opened admission to all honorably discharged veterans of World War I, a pool of some 4.5 million potential members. Between 1929 and 1941, Legion membership fluctuated dramatically. In 1929, it had 794,000 members. The first two years of the Great Depression witnessed a growth in Legion membership due, in large part, to a campaign to find jobs for a million veterans. In 1931, the Legion reached its interwar-period zenith with 1,053,000 members. That number then precipitously declined until 1935, reaching a low of 700,000. In 1931 alone, the Legion lost 130,000 members. In 1932, the year of the Bonus March on Washington, D.C., the Legion lost an additional 162,000 members. Not until 1944, with the influx of new World War II veterans, would the Legion attract as large a membership. At precisely the same moment the Legion began to lose members, however, its major rival began to achieve astounding rates of growth.14

From 1929 to 1941, veterans gravitated to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The VFW traced its origins to three veterans groups of the Spanish-American War that formed in 1899 but officially consolidated in 1914. After 1914, the VFW opened its membership to all honorably discharged veterans who served “on foreign shores or in hostile waters in any war, campaign or expedition recognized by Congress with a campaign badge or service clasp.” The potential pool of membership for the VFW, including veterans of the Great War, the Spanish-American War, the Boxer Rebellion, and various expeditions into

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Latin America, was just over 2 million—fewer than half of the 4.5 million the Legion could claim. This difference in membership criteria helps to explain why the VFW never challenged the primacy of the American Legion as the largest veteran organization. Even at its numerical zenith, the VFW claimed less than half of the membership of the Legion. But, by contrast, between 1929 and 1941, the VFW surged from less than 70,000 to 214,000 dues-paying members, more than tripling its membership in a steady increase. Moreover, in the same period, the VFW extended its presence in local communities, growing from 1,767 to over 3,600 posts. In both cases, this was despite the fact that the Depression wreaked havoc on most dues-paying voluntary associations.15

With both the American Legion and the VFW, the most vexing question concerning the respective memberships is “who joined?” The social composition of the veteran organizations is not easy to ascertain. Little evidence exists to make even tentative claims. Both organizations took pride in a cross-class, cross-region, cross-ethnic, and cross-racial membership. Indeed, evidence of African-American posts can be found for each organization, as can posts from communities traditionally associated with specific ethnic groups. Regionally, both organizations’ memberships in the South lagged behind the other regions of the country, most likely due to the thorny issues of race and veteran status. Yet, looking at the VFW’s expansion of posts, one can see that it experienced tremendous growth spread fairly evenly among regions (excepting the South), cities, small towns, and rural areas. Using a 1938 membership survey conducted

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15 Quotation from the mission statement of Foreign Service, the VFW’s monthly publication. Estimated membership totals in Goldsmith, “The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States,” 194-195. Contemporaries put the membership total closer to 300,000 in the mid-1930s but chronic turnover made the true membership total elusive at best. For the stresses on Depression-era associations, see Skocpol et al., “Patriotic Partnerships: Why Great Wars Nourished American Civic Voluntarism,” 169.
by the American Legion to help boost advertising in its publication, William Pencak argues that the organization tilted toward the middle and upper-middle class with fewer than 10 percent receiving veteran benefits and 92 percent of all Legionnaires earning over 1,000 dollars at a time when the average family income was 1,244 dollars. Only 2 percent of the Legionnaires surveyed were farmers and 4 percent were unskilled workers. This type of evidence on class composition is completely lacking for the VFW. Regrettably, those seeking a good social portrait of veterans who joined these organizations will not find one here.16

The diverging fortunes of the two major veteran organizations did reflect, however, fundamental political and ideological differences that distinguished the VFW from the American Legion at the level of national leadership. In particular, the VFW's persistent and vehement demand for the immediate cash payment of the soldiers’ bonus, and the pointed critique of the political economy that informed the VFW’s foreign and domestic policies, offered veterans a real alternative to the more conservative Legion. This is not to suggest that the two organizations’ agendas were always opposed to one another. Undeniably, the VFW and American Legion agreed on a whole host of issues and worked in tandem to realize their shared goals. Yet, most of the research done on veteran organizations only considers the American Legion. While there are very good methodological reasons for this, by emphasizing the Legion, scholars have underestimated the breadth, scope, and complexity of veteran political activism throughout the period.17

16 Pencak, For God and Country, 80-83. VFW post information gleaned from Foreign Service, 1929-1941.

17 Historians have concentrated on the American Legion not simply because it was the largest of the interwar veteran organizations with a cadre of prominent national leaders, good reasons as those may be.
By exploring the political activism of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, this work traces the significant role played by veterans in mediating the relationship between the federal government and ordinary citizens during the interwar period. I maintain that the VFW’s sophisticated organizational structure, its trenchant critique of the American political and economic system, and its gendered definition of citizenship made it the leader of veteran political activism in the 1930s. More significantly, however, the issues that provoked veterans’ political mobilization situated the VFW at the epicenter of important Depression-era movements. I argue that the VFW played a foundational role not only in the Bonus March, but also the New Deal dissident coalition led by Huey P. Long and Father Charles E. Coughlin, and the isolationist movement of the 1930s. The VFW’s critique of the increasingly corporate economy, and the national and international political systems that sustained it, relied on veterans’ interpretations of the causes of World War I. This critique provided the ideological thread linking the organization to these disparate, seemingly unrelated, Depression-era groups. It also revealed the politicizing influence of military service and the importance of the historical memory of the Great War to the political battles of a generation.

Chapter 2 contends that the VFW’s activities in the Bonus saga, a saga that included but is not confined to the Bonus March, are under-appreciated in the historical literature. Accounts of the Bonus March depict it as a spontaneous protest by working-class veterans, unsupported by the major veteran organizations. While it is true that the American Legion national leadership opposed early payment of the Bonus and

The Legion is studied more also because it maintains a library and extensive official archive at its national headquarters in Indianapolis. The VFW national headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri, on the other hand, holds very little archival material save for the complete set of its monthly publication, Foreign Service.
condemned the Bonus Marchers, the sole emphasis on the American Legion has led historians to underestimate the level of organized veteran political activism for the Bonus. Well prior to the 1932 March on Washington, D.C., the VFW called for immediate payment of the Bonus and employed a wide-range of lobbying techniques, techniques including marches at the Capitol. Only in rethinking the role of the veteran organizations in the March can the role of organized veteran political activism in the ensuing years be fundamentally recast.

Chapter 3 examines the VFW’s reaction to FDR and the New Deal. The second piece of legislation that passed in the New Deal’s “Hundred Days,” the Economy Act, reduced veteran benefits by 400 million dollars. In the response to the Economy Act, the VFW immediately broke ranks with the FDR Administration and questioned the authenticity of the New Deal’s claims to helping the forgotten man. In their aggressive response to the Economy Act, the VFW joined with other early critics of the New Deal who chastised FDR’s unwillingness to reconfigure the nation’s political economy.

The importance of the Bonus to the group I call the “New Deal Dissidents” is the subject of Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4, the VFW’s efforts in 1934 to reintroduce the Bonus into the political landscape are outlined. With no allies in the American Legion and the opposition of a popular President and his powerful Congressional stalwarts, the VFW managed to keep the Bonus issue alive, even securing its passage in the House of Representatives. These efforts, eventually supported by both Senator Huey P. Long and Father Charles E. Coughlin, kept the veterans in the VFW in the vanguard of New Deal dissent. By examining the political mobilization for the Bonus between 1935 and 1936, Chapter 5 reconsiders the political origins and the political triumph of the “Second” New
Deal. The Bonus aroused veterans against the FDR Administration, precipitating widespread veteran political activism. But it was also the point of convergence for a politically threatening coalition of Long, Coughlin, and VFW-led veterans, a coalition whose activities built to a crescendo in the late spring of 1935. In exploring the struggle for the Bonus, then, one finds the VFW and veteran political activism at the core of New Deal politics.

Chapter 6 locates the VFW in the U.S. foreign policy debates of the 1930s. The VFW’s mid-1930s foreign policy agenda continued the organization’s focus on the restructuring of the American political economy. But, as the VFW underwent a radical reorientation in its foreign policy agenda from stridently isolationist to actively interventionist, I contend that the historical memory of the Great War continued to be employed as an interpretive framework. Moreover, this examination of veteran foreign policy attitudes helps reveal the dynamics of the shift in American public opinion before American belligerency in World War II.

By exploring the cultural underpinnings of the VFW’s political activism described in the preceding chapters, Chapter 7 examines the confluence of gender, citizenship, and personal identity in the making of veteran political culture. I argue that overseas military service defined veteran conceptions of masculinity and citizenship, and served as the ideological basis for veteran political activism. In this formulation, veterans challenged the gendered basis of the liberal state and laid the cultural foundations for the martial welfare state created by the GI Bill.

This study, then, is dedicated to understanding veterans’ relationship to the federal government, to taking seriously an equally prescient observation made about World War
I veterans by Oliver McKee, Jr.. McKee prophesized that the “sun of the veteran has risen in the political firmament, and his hand will be in the business of government for at least another generation, probably much longer.” Even today, we must reckon with him.18

CHAPTER 2
RETHINKING THE BONUS MARCH: THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS AND VETERAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM, 1929-1932

Their remedy, obviously, is to pool their political strength … and bring irresistible pressure to bear upon the politicians. Various altruistic leaders, eager for the ensuing jobs, already whoop them up to that end. I suspect that they will be heard from hereafter, and in a most unpleasant manner. We are just beginning to pay for the war.

H.L. Mencken on the veterans’ Bonus, December, 1931.¹

In the summer of 1932, approximately twenty thousand mostly unemployed and homeless World War I veterans descended on Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress for immediate payment on their adjusted service certificates, certificates usually referred to as the Bonus. After weeks of mounting tension, and the Congressional defeat of the Bonus, the United States Army forcibly evicted the Bonus Marchers and their families from makeshift encampments on the Anacostia River. The Bonus March, and its pitiable denouement, continue to be prominent features of the Depression-era historical narrative. Any cursory look through U.S. history textbooks invariably finds some description of the episode. For, in addition to capturing the social dislocation wrought by the Great Depression, the violent conclusion to the Bonus March has come to symbolize the Herbert Hoover Administration’s perceived disregard for the suffering of average Americans during the Depression’s bleakest days. Indeed, despite Donald J. Lisio’s persuasive exculpation of Hoover for the rout of the Bonus Marchers, the episode remains historical shorthand for the failure of the Hoover presidency.²


² For the first and most thorough studies of the Bonus March, see Roger Daniels, The Bonus March: An Episode of the Great Depression (West Port, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971) and Donald J. Lisio, The
Yet, the significance of the Bonus March transcends discussions of Hoover and the Depression. In studies of the New Deal it serves as both a point of departure and comparison. New Deal narratives contrast Franklin D. Roosevelt’s magnanimous treatment of the much smaller 1933 Bonus Army to the 1932 episode in an effort to illustrate both the New Deal’s concern for “the forgotten man” and FDR’s considerable political savvy. Newer studies have begun to reconsider the Bonus March more broadly. Jennifer D. Keene examines the March as one of the most dramatic examples of the politicizing influence of World War I military service. Keene employs the Bonus struggle to advance her argument that conscription during the Great War produced a cohort of ex-soldiers with an expansive understanding of the social contract, of the mutual obligations between citizen and state. Lucy G. Barber explores the Bonus March as part of a long tradition, beginning with Coxey’s Army in 1894, of protest marches on Washington, D.C. Barber argues that marches on Washington helped redefine the capital’s public space into an accepted arena for citizens’ political expression.


While these recent studies expand the scope of inquiry, they continue in the historiographical footsteps of earlier scholarship on the Bonus March in a crucial way. All of the historical accounts agree that the March represented a spontaneous protest movement by unemployed veterans, unsupported by the major veteran organizations. This perspective results, in large measure, from an over-reliance on the American Legion national organization as the voice of organized veteran political activism—an over-reliance based on both its stature as the largest veteran organization and its extensive archival material. Thus, while it is true that the American Legion national leadership opposed early payment of the Bonus and condemned the Bonus Marchers, the emphasis on the American Legion obscures the political context from which the Bonus March emerged. Examining the Bonus March from the vantage point of the smaller, but more dynamic national veteran organization of the period, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), not only calls attention to the significant level of organized veteran political activism surrounding the episode, but also underscores the politicizing influence of military service in the Great War.5

Between 1929 and 1932, the VFW’s activities in the Bonus saga, a saga that included but was not confined to the Bonus March, are under-appreciated in the historical literature. From 1929 until 1932, the VFW unswervingly supported immediate payment of the Bonus. After 1930, the VFW legislative offices served as the unofficial

headquarters of Congressional Bonus supporters. Much of the VFW’s early lobbying
effort was aimed at the Legion leadership, attempting to convince the Legion of the rank-
and-file veterans’ support for the Bonus. As the Depression wore on, however, the VFW
leadership began to stake a more energetic claim to the issue. During the spring of 1932,
the VFW reiterated Bonus demands and employed a wide range of lobbying techniques
to call attention to the issue. In the months prior to the Bonus March, the VFW legislative
team argued for immediate payment in testimony before Congress, kept detailed public
tallies of Congressional support, and invited celebrities to tout the Bonus. In an important
precursor to the Bonus March, the VFW led a Bonus rally in which 1500 to 2000
veterans marched to the Capitol to present petitions and encourage Congressional Bonus
supporters.

The VFW’s unambiguous and widely-publicized support for Bonus payment laid
the political foundations from which the Bonus March could emerge. Contemporaries
even blamed the VFW’s lobbying efforts for causing the groundswell of veterans
trekking to the capital. Throughout the summer, local VFW posts and prominent VFW
figures played significant roles in supporting the Bonus Army. VFW members filled the
ranks of marchers. However, this did not mean the VFW national organization sponsored
the Bonus March. On the contrary, much to the dismay of some of the rank and file, the
VFW national leadership believed that the Bonus March hindered the organization’s
lobbying for the Bonus rather than furthering the cause. Moreover, some in the leadership
condemned the March, fearing the activities of Communist veterans would usurp the
March for nefarious purposes. Nonetheless, the VFW always supported the right of the
Bonus Army to gather and lobby, and vehemently condemned the Hoover Administration
for the fateful ending. In the process, the VFW’s support for the Bonus transformed the organization from a small, relatively weak organization, into a clear rival to the Legion in relative size, lobbying clout, and, increasingly, ideology. By the end of 1932, the VFW began to assert itself as an important national political actor, staking a claim to the Bonus issue that it would hold until its payment in 1936.

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Prior to 1929, the VFW joined with the American Legion in battling three successive Administrations over the issue of the Bonus. Immediately following World War I, ex-soldiers began to call for an adjustment of their wartime pay. Soldiers complained that wages of thirty dollars a month, minus mandatory war-risk insurance payments, left them with paltry compensation, especially in contrast to the inflated wartime wages being paid to those not in uniform. The fortunes made in the war industries exacerbated the feelings of inequity. From the start, the VFW echoed soldiers’ calls for a Bonus, but the Wilson Administration opposed any such payment and found initial support from the newly-organized American Legion. While many veterans within the Legion voiced the desire for additional compensation, the Legion suppressed the issue until 1920. Finally, in 1920, Bonus advocates forced the Legion to back some form of adjusted compensation legislation. On October 16, 1920, in a show of political strength and veteran solidarity, 75,000 veterans paraded down New York’s Fifth Avenue demanding a Bonus. One hundred thousand spectators witnessed 100 VFW posts, even more American Legion posts, and the national commanders of both organizations form
the “Petition in Boots.” It appeared that some kind of adjusted payment would be paid following the 1920 election.6

In 1921, the lobbying pressure from both the VFW and the Legion intensified. The fact that many states passed “Bonuses” for their ex-soldiers bolstered Bonus advocates’ demands. Yet, despite a number of proposals circulating through Congress, allies of the newly-elected Warren G. Harding Administration kept Bonus bills buried in committee. In 1922, however, a Bonus Bill broke through the Administration opposition with assistance from the veteran organizations. The bill passed both Houses but lacked enough strength in the Senate to override the Harding veto. Secretary of the Treasury Andrew W. Mellon provided the Administration with the economic arguments that effectively killed the bill in the Senate. Pierre S. Dupont and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce joined the loud business community chorus against payment. When Calvin Coolidge ascended to the Presidency after Harding’s death, he, too, declared his strident opposition to the Bonus.7

In 1924, the Bonus passed again as the Adjusted Compensation Act but did not include immediate cash payment. Rather, the Bonus would be awarded as a deferred interest-bearing certificate payable in 1945 or, at death, to the veteran’s beneficiaries. In 1945, veterans would receive an extra compensation of a dollar for every day in service, overseas veterans 1.25 dollars per day, plus the accumulated 4 percent interest. As part of the bill, after two years veterans would be allowed to take out a 22.5 percent loan from

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7 Daniels, The Bonus March, 28-37; Pencak, For God and Country, 200; and Weber and Scheckebier, The Veterans’ Administration, 231; and Keene, Doughboys, 173-174.
the Veterans Bureau on their certificates’ face value. Including interest, this total value could reach as high as sixteen hundred dollars. The American Legion leaders supported the insurance policy provisions. The VFW argued against the deferment, but lacking the size and lobbying stature of the Legion, relented, preferring the measure over no Bonus at all. Coolidge remained true to his word and vetoed the Bonus, declaring, “Patriotism which is bought and paid for is not patriotism …. There is no moral justification for it.” Congress barely overrode the Coolidge veto, making the Bonus law and handing veterans a long-sought victory. Yet, to the VFW, the victory proved woefully inadequate. The organization’s opposition to the “tombstone” Bonus would increase as the decade wore on.  

Between 1926 and 1928, the VFW leadership began to renege on the adjusted service certificates compromise. The leadership offered proposals that chipped away at the Bonus insurance policy by pushing for immediate payment to those rated permanently and totally disabled. In multiple national encampment resolutions, the VFW argued that the “permanent total” invariably suffered a shortened life span and, therefore, should “enjoy the benefits derived from the value of his adjusted compensation during the remaining months of his life.” Yet, the organization’s calls for any adjustments to the Bonus provisions went unheeded by both the Legion and veteran advocates in Congress. The VFW’s association with Spanish-American War veterans hindered the organization’s ability to speak for the World War veterans, even though many ex-doughboys counted

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themselves as members. More importantly, the VFW simply lacked the Legion’s size and corresponding political strength. The Legion maintained a membership in 1928 of nearly 800,000, while the VFW struggled to keep 70,000 dues-paying members between 1926 and 1928. As the Chairman of the House Committee on World War Veterans Legislation, Royal C. Johnson (a member of both the Legion and the VFW) explained, the VFW’s “membership is not sufficiently large to make it a vital factor in public sentiment.”

In 1929, the VFW embarked on a new course of action. As allowed by the Adjusted Compensation Act, veterans began to draw loans on their adjusted service certificates as soon as they were eligible to do so. Between 1927 and 1929, 1.65 million veterans borrowed 133.4 million dollars against their certificates at the Veterans’ Bureau and nearly 30 million dollars more at banks. Bolstered by the level of veterans’ loan activity, the VFW began to argue more forcefully that the federal government must uphold its obligations to veterans permanently disadvantaged by their war service. In a Foreign Service editorial deriding the “Grave Yard Bonus,” the national leader declared, “The large percentage of loans made on the compensation certificates, since the first of 1927, proves how seriously was—and still is—the need of the average world war veteran.” At the national encampment in St. Paul, Minnesota, the VFW delegates went on record endorsing the proposal by Iowa Senator Smith W. Brookhart to pay the Bonus immediately. The encampment resolution, "Resolution No. 88—Indorsing [sic] Brookhart Bill for Payment of Adjusted Compensation," ordered the VFW leadership to

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10 Legion membership totals in National Tribune, February 7, 1935 and VFW’s in Goldsmith, “The Veterans of Foreign Wars,” 194. Letter from Royal C. Johnson to Herbert Hoover, dated April 1, 1929, in “World War Veterans—Correspondence, 1929,” Box 371, Subject Files Herbert Hoover Presidential Library (Hereafter, SFHH).

11 Weber and Scheckebier, The Veterans’ Administration, 468.
"take appropriate action to further the passage and administration of the measure." Thus, prior to the stock market crash and the social dislocation of the Great Depression, the VFW made the government’s payment of the Bonus a signature issue, based on the rationale that wartime service severely disrupted the economic lives of veterans. As the Depression engulfed the nation, this position brought the VFW enormous support from veterans and found the organization in the middle of a swirling controversy over the proper relationship between citizens and the federal government.12

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The Depression did not trigger veterans’ call for immediate cash payment of the Bonus, but it imparted a new intensity to their demands. While veterans’ arguments for immediate payment hinged on the notion that wartime service unfairly disadvantaged them, they—like many Americans—began to bear the additional burdens brought on by the Depression. As early as November, 1929, the VFW national leadership witnessed the impact of the stock market crash on veterans’ economic livelihoods. In a telegram, the VFW’s national commander, Hezekiah N. Duff, asked President Hoover to employ the bully pulpit and urge business leaders to provide veterans’ additional assistance through preferential hiring programs. On veteran unemployment, the VFW Commander reported, “The local units of the VFW throughout the country are being besieged daily with appeals for help from veterans unable to secure employment.” Duff painted a grim picture, “Thousands are shuffling along the streets of our cities, thinly-clad and hunger-

12 Foreign Service, September, 1929: 4. Resolutions, Proceedings of the 30th Annual Encampment of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, 1929 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1930), 267. Daniels, 42. Interestingly, no mention of Wright Patman, the future Congressional Bonus leader and then freshman Congressman from Texas, can be found in the VFW encampment minutes. This is despite the fact that Patman proposed a Bonus bill in the House just days after Brookhart’s proposal.
driven, in futile search for employment and a chance to exist in the country for which they fought and were willing to die on the field of battle.” As evidence of the problem, over a nine-day period in January, 1930, 170,000 needy World War I veterans applied for first-time loans on their Bonus certificates. Indeed, the scant existing evidence suggests that the Depression disproportionately affected veterans. Veterans Administration studies in 1930 and 1931 found that veterans experienced a nearly 50 percent higher unemployment rate than non-veterans of the same age cohort. Another Depression-era VA report concluded that veterans experienced longer stretches of unemployment and more dire financial need compared to non-veterans.\textsuperscript{13}

As the Depression deepened in 1930, veteran demands for some form of relief intensified. VFW Commander Duff again wrote Hoover asking for federal assistance. Duff explained that the citizenry recognized the federal government’s obligation to veterans, noting “All these citizens know is that these veterans were hale and hearty before they went into service during the World War, and that they are physical and mental wrecks as well as industrial losses today.” Congress, eager to please this important constituency, sought to alleviate some of veterans’ problems. The 1930 Congressional session, however, focused on components of veteran legislation other than the Bonus. In the summer, Congress explored, and then passed, substantial legislation on veteran issues. Bills including the Veteran Relief Act granting 150,000 veterans disability pensions whom had been previously unable to prove service connection, several expanded pension adjustments, and the consolidation of the veteran-related federal agencies into the Veterans Administration, took up a considerable portion of the

Congressional docket. Many commentators suggested that the renewed interest in veteran affairs, although a typical election-year concern, could be seen as an attempt to curtail demands for the Bonus. Indeed, the expansion of disability pensions meant many desperate veterans would now receive some federal financial support. The Bonus remained tabled in Congress for the remainder of the year.¹⁴

At the 1930 national encampment in Baltimore, the VFW maintained the organization’s mandate to fight for immediate payment. Yet, the VFW’s relationship with Herbert Hoover proved amicable despite the organization’s demands for the Bonus. The organization supported Hoover’s opposition to a number of provisions in the veteran relief and pension bills, and welcomed the executive orders that restructured the unwieldy veteran bureaucracy. Many of the leadership believed Hoover had their best interests in heart despite his opposition to the Bonus. The national commander even told the national encampment delegates that Hoover offered “the best administration for the overseas veteran which the country has ever had.” Indeed, Hoover made the trip to Baltimore to review the VFW’s national encampment parade. Notwithstanding this relatively strong relationship between VFW leaders and Hoover, the VFW once again supported cash payment at the 1930 encampment. This cordial relationship shed light on the relative political strength of the VFW. Hoover declined an opportunity to speak to the VFW encampment, even though it was common knowledge that the VFW supported Bonus

payment. Hoover found no pressing political reasons to discourage the VFW from supporting the Bonus. The larger, more powerful Legion proved a different matter.\textsuperscript{15}

The American Legion met in Boston weeks after the VFW encampment. The Legion would have to deal with its most unruly member, the Congressional sponsor of immediate Bonus payment, Wright Patman of Texas. Patman openly planned to bring the question of the Bonus to the assembled Legion delegates. This so worried Administration officials and sympathetic members of the Legion leadership that they enlisted Hoover to speak to the delegates and sway them from changing the Legion’s position. With Calvin Coolidge also on the dais, Hoover gave the first presidential speech to the organization, a speech prepared by the Legion lobbyist, John Thomas Taylor. Hoover appealed to the Legionnaires’ patriotism and explained that the federal government had been very generous already to veterans, pointing to the summer of veteran legislation. Hoover’s successful address enabled supporters to withhold action on the Bonus question, but the dogged Patman wrangled a pro-Bonus minority report before the convention floor. Before a vote could be initiated, however, Hoover allies successfully moved to table the report by a 967-244 vote. Patman and Bonus supporters groused, but Legion leaders were successful in turning back the Bonus tide at the convention. The Legion national leadership’s victory over Patman—a Legionnaire but ineligible for VFW membership—changed the Congressman’s tactics and the fortunes of the VFW.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{16} Daniels, \textit{The Bonus March},42-43; Lisio, \textit{The President and Protest} 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 30-32; and Pencak, \textit{For God and Country}, 200-201.
In December, 1930, Patman made overtures to the VFW national leadership to join forces on the Bonus. By this point, the VFW had been supporting the issue for well over a year. Patman’s solicitation of the VFW resulted from his frustration with the intransigence of the Legion leadership. In December, as he wooed the VFW leadership, Patman berated the conservative element in the Legion, blaming “Mr. Mellon’s cohort” for applying the “gag rule to the extent that free discussion and a fair vote … were denied” at the past convention.17 Throughout December, Patman also spoke with Washington, D.C. area VFW posts, often debating with Hamilton Fish, Jr. over the respective merits of the Bonus bills they would submit at the beginning of the new Congressional session. Patman’s efforts bore fruit as District VFW posts began reporting their endorsement of the Patman plan in the weekly veterans’ section of the *Washington Post*. The Federal Post described its members’ support for Patman’s bill, even though they reported that not one of their members was in need of relief.18

In January, 1931, at the start of the Congressional session, some forty-seven Bonus-related proposals circulated through Congress. Among them, bills by the Democratic House leader John Nance Garner, Ham Fish, the Indiana congressman Louis Ludlow, and Patman competed for attention. Garner announced that of the forty-seven bill proposals, twenty-eight came from Democrats, eighteen from Republicans, and one from a Farm-Labor congressman. As this broad tri-partisan pressure mounted, Congress and the capital witnessed an explosive month of VFW activities. The VFW’s aggressive

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public lobbying tactics, official testimony before both houses of Congress, and even Bonus Marchers kept the organization in the spotlight.\textsuperscript{19}

On January 21, the VFW began to apply public pressure for the Bonus. A thousand VFW-led veterans rallied to the Capitol in a procession delivering petitions supporting immediate payment. The gathering of the petitions, itself, had been an issue in late December when Royal Johnson attacked Patman and the VFW for their signature gatherers’ practice of asking for dime contributions. Johnson claimed the petition process smelled like a racket and denied their validity. Nonetheless, the 124 members of Congress who openly supported the Bonus accepted the petitions on the Capitol steps, drawing cheers from the veteran assembly.\textsuperscript{20}

Three days after the Bonus rally, 200 veterans congregated in Philadelphia’s Independence Square claiming their intentions to march to Washington in support of immediate Bonus payment. After speeches by their leaders, VFW members John Alfieri and Terrance B. Cochran of the Cochran VFW post in Philadelphia, and music from the VFW Darby post band, the marchers began a walk to Washington carrying flags and a hand-made sign reading “Philadelphia to Washington.” Only twenty-six of the marchers made it to Washington, but the hungry and exhausted men managed to button-hole the Pennsylvania Congressional delegation and call on Bonus leader Wright Patman. Some of the marchers hoped to appear before the Ways and Means Committee meetings planned for that week. When asked if the march had been a failure, the veterans explained on the contrary, “the hike might serve as a motive to other veterans’ groups to

\textsuperscript{19} Washington Post, January 3, 1931.

actively back the pay bills with similar demonstrations.” Yet, ultimately, Legion actions would determine the course of legislative action on the Bonus.21

On January 25, bowing to internal pressure from fifteen State Legion Departments and the mounting public pressure for the Bonus, the American Legion National Executive Committee (NEC) met to review the Legion’s position. The Legion NEC made an unexpected reversal and endorsed the principle of immediate payment, noting in the resolution that the Bonus “would benefit immeasurably not only the veterans but the citizenry of the entire country.” The Legion did not endorse any specific measure, but the Legion’s decision imparted a new weight to the scheduled hearings in the Ways and Means Committee for the next week.22

The new Legion position turned the tide in Congress for some liberalization of the Bonus, be it full cash payment or some partial measure. The VFW, continued to voice its support for full and immediate payment. In testimony before both the Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Finance Committee, VFW Commander Paul Wolman argued that the Bonus would have three positive results. It would help relieve veterans’ suffering, prove a “marvelous” stimulant to business conditions, and relieve the federal government of an existing debt. Wolman explained, “The Government would simply transfer an obligation, already assumed, from the shoulders of the veterans—who can not carry the burden—into the strongboxes of bondholders.”23 When a proposal to increase the amount veterans could borrow against their certificates, from 22.5 to 50 percent,


22 Rumer, The American Legion, 190-191; Literary Digest, February 14, 1931: 5; and Washington Post January 25-26, 1931.

23 Wolman testimony to Senate Finance Committee in Literary Digest February 14, 1931: 5-6 and Washington Post, January 28, 1931.
received backing from the Legion’s chief lobbyist John Thomas Taylor, however, Congress jumped at the opportunity to satisfy veteran demands without fundamentally altering the established Bonus policy. This compromise legislation, like the original Adjusted Compensation Act, encountered intense opposition from the Administration and business groups. Secretary of the Treasury Mellon assumed the point again for the Administration, characterizing any Bonus loan or payments as fiscally ruinous. The Republican National Committee released a statement, with no apparent irony, that if the Bonus passed, “we can expect a business depression and a period of acute human suffering the like of which this country has never known.”

On February 12, 1931, Congress took action. After the Ways and Means committee reported favorably on the 50 percent loan bill, it easily passed both houses despite assurances from the Administration that it would be vetoed. Hoover’s promised veto message challenged the arguments for the Bonus loan and warned of the financial hardships upon the government. He derided the notion that the loans would stimulate business, calling the money veterans might spend from their loans “wasteful expenditure” and “no assistance in the return of real prosperity.” Hoover rejected the moral arguments for the Bonus, noting that “The patriotism of our people is not a material thing.” Moreover, he warned that paying the Bonus threatened the moral fiber of the country by eroding the virtues of “self-reliance and self-support.” Despite these arguments, Congress quickly overrode the veto. *Time* referred to the decisive vote to override as Hoover’s “most serious Congressional reversal.” Veterans gladly took advantage of the newly available loans. On the first day, 18,000 veterans applied for loans in the New

York City Veterans Bureau offices alone. By January, 1932, 2.5 million veterans had borrowed the full 50 percent. Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg later explained to Hoover that the loan liberalization was the only way to curtail the drive for full payment. Vandenberg wrote, “I shall always believe that if [Congress] had not embraced the loan plan … there would have been no escape from the full payment of these compensation certificates at that time.”

As it had in 1924, the VFW relented, accepting the compromise measure for practical reasons even though the organization continued to call for full payment. The VFW leadership still bemoaned “the injustice of the tombstone bonus” and favored immediate full payment but, they “accepted the compromise measure … because we realized this was the best we could hope for under existing conditions.” As it turned out, the 50 percent loan bill, and the political turmoil surrounding it, proffered the VFW leadership new ammunition in their fight for full payment. The Hoover Administration and business group’s overwrought concerns about the catastrophic financial impact of even the 50 percent provision gave the VFW leaders a sharp retort. One month later, the editors of *Foreign Service* heaped scorn on those arguments in an editorial titled “No Chaos Yet.” The editors dryly noted, “despite gloomy predictions of a terrible calamity, impending bankruptcy, industrial chaos, and a tumultuous financial crisis nothing has actually been exploded but the myths.”

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The VFW’s position on the Bonus brought the organization unparalleled success. In terms of membership growth, and the expansion of the organization into new communities, the Bonus struggle paid real dividends for the VFW. From 1929 to 1931, the VFW grew from just less than 70,000 to 138,620 dues-paying members, nearly doubling the membership. As impressively, the VFW expanded its organizational structure into new communities with the formation of 700 new posts, a 43 percent increase. Post growth began to increase dramatically in the late fall of 1930, coinciding with the respective decisions of the VFW and the Legion on the Bonus. In October and November, 1930, the VFW chartered fifty new posts each month—setting records for the organization. The growth in 1931 proved most remarkable with 350 new posts being established and seventy more regaining their charter after becoming defunct for non-payment of dues. By the end of 1931, the VFW’s institutional strength surpassed that of any other time in the organization’s previous history. To be sure, a recruiting drive by future Commander James E. Van Zandt propelled membership growth. To the upper echelons of the organization leadership, however, the position on the Bonus proved the difference-maker. The VFW Legislative Committee chairman noted in his annual report, “it is felt that our legislative stand on the bonus…provided the working tools for our recruiting drive. It certainly confirms the statement that the Veterans of Foreign Wars truly represent the veterans.”

The 1931 national encampment, organized by a VFW member from Independence, Missouri, Harry S. Truman, reflected the organization’s new standing.

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Republican VFW officials wrote to the Administration fearing the VFW encampment would turn into a “Democratic Rally” in the friendly confines of the Kansas City Pendergast regime. A VA official with ties to both the Administration and the VFW deemed some appearance by a high-ranking Administration figure “darn near essential” to stemming a Democratic veterans “promenade.” VA Director Frank T. Hines did attend and address the delegates, but his arguments against the Bonus proved futile.28

Hines’s remarks to the delegates underscored the changing fortunes of the VFW. He congratulated the VFW delegates on their recruiting success but cautioned them in thinly-veiled terms about demanding the Bonus. Hines remarked, “You have increased your membership greatly and with that increase comes a greater responsibility, because we must remember that before we were veterans we were citizens of this great country of ours and we are still citizens.” He advised the VFW delegates and leaders to tell the next Congress, “because we realize the situation existing in our country and because we are patriotic citizens of this country … that we are going to be exceedingly cautious in our demands, because we are not going to be put in the position of asking for something and then be blamed later on because we caused a greater depression or a greater problem in our Nation.” Commander Wolman immediately and sharply rebuked Hines in front of the delegates, “we do not think we have ever made any demands as an organization which were unfair, and we certainly pledge that we shall not make any demands that our members believe to be unfair, sir.” The encampment promptly, and unanimously, passed

28 Internal Memorandum to Walter H. Newton, August 8, 1931, in “VFW, 1931-1933,” Box 359, SFHH.
a resolution reaffirming the VFW’s commitment to immediate cash payment of the bonus.  

Weeks later, the American Legion convention met in Detroit. The NEC decision in January to reverse the official position against the Bonus complicated the matter for those trying to suppress the Patman forces in the Legion. Legion leaders feared the delegates might swing over to a cash payment position, reflecting the NEC decision. To undermine calls for the Bonus, the Legion enlisted a reluctant Hoover to speak to the convention yet again. Despite warnings from Royal Johnson that a riot might ensue during the convention over the Bonus, Hoover accepted the invitation and addressed the Legionnaires for the second consecutive year. Hoover appealed to the Legion’s “character and idealism” and history of service, asking for “determined opposition by you to additional demands upon the nation until we have won this war against world depression.” In response, the Legion delegates passed a resolution voicing almost identical language to Hoover’s request and beat back a Bonus vote, 902-507. The Legion resolution called upon “the able-bodied men of America, rich and poor, veteran, civilian, and statesmen, to refrain from placing unnecessary financial burdens upon National, State, or municipal governments.” Legion leaders attributed the defeat of the Bonus to Hoover’s address. One wrote the President’s secretary, “I firmly believe the Chief’s coming to Detroit changed the vote from two to one for to two to one against payment of the bonus.”

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29 Hines’ speech and Wolman retort in *Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Encampment of the Veterans of Foreign Wars*, 38-46.

30 Letter from Royal C. Johnson to J. Edgar Hoover, dated August 28, 1931, in “Trips—1931, September 21, Detroit, American Legion Convention,” Box 37, SFHH. Address of President Hoover to the Thirteenth Convention of the American Legion, September 21, 1931, in “Congratulatory Correspondence American Legion Address Detroit Sept. 21, 1931, A-D,” Box 47, President Personal File, Herbert Hoover Presidential
In late 1931, as the leadership realized the Legion would not join in the fight during the next Congressional session, the VFW started operating more independently, staking a more vigorous claim to the issue for themselves. Moreover, the VFW’s Bonus position took on a more edgy ideological cast as the issue began to be conflated with both inflationary economic thinking and the calls for increased “purchasing power” to defeat the Depression. In the process, the VFW made a prophet out of Baltimore’s resident cynic, H.L. Mencken, who predicted that the fight for the Bonus would turn ugly. In a December editorial, Mencken admitted that “the damage the heroes suffered by being thrust into the war is much under-estimated, and that the amount of compensation they have got since they came home is equally over-estimated.” He called the Hoover Legion speech, and the Legion national leadership’s response, a “spit in the eye” to veterans. Moreover, Mencken predicted that veterans would “pool their political strength” under “various altruistic leaders” who “already whoop them up to that end.” Between December, 1931 and May, 1932, the VFW would “whoop them up” even more, establishing the immediate context from which the Bonus March would emerge.31

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In late 1931, in response to the Legion leadership's success in squelching a favorable bonus resolution, the VFW national organization undertook a massive publicity campaign to demonstrate veterans’ support for the bonus. Cognizant still of the Legion's larger membership and stature, the VFW attempted to demonstrate that the Legion

Library (Hereafter, PPFHH). Daniels, The Bonus March, 51. Letter from Gilbert Bettman to Walter Richey, dated September 25, 1931 in “Congratulatory Correspondence American Legion Address Detroit Sept. 21, 1931, A-D,” Box 47, PPFHH.

leadership misrepresented the rank-and-file veteran on the bonus issue. The VFW national organization published veteran "bonus ballots" in 162 metropolitan newspapers, newspapers with a combined circulation of 23 million copies. The VFW received 254,324 ballots from veterans in favor of the bonus and only 596 against.32 *Foreign Service* candidly framed the disconnect between the Legion leadership and veterans’ views, “the heart of the American Legion is sound to the core—wit the rank and file of its membership wholly in sympathy with the problems of the great mass of veterans who are suffering from economic distress, due to widespread unemployment, and bureaucratic control of agencies that affect their welfare.” For proof of the wrong-headedness of the Legion’s official stance, the editorial staff pointed to the “thousands of individual Legion posts and members … working hand in hand with the VFW in the present crisis of the fight for immediate cash payment of the adjusted service certificates.” Thus, even while reaping the benefits of their position and moving aggressively out in front of the issue, VFW leaders needed to confront the perception that the Legion spoke for the average veteran in order to obtain legislative results in the upcoming Congressional session.33

While the VFW leadership solicited rank-and-file veterans’ feelings on the bonus, they did little to squelch veterans’ rumblings about a march to Washington to promote the issue. Even in late 1931, small groups of veterans moved on the city, precipitating a specific warning from the leadership in the pages of *Foreign Service*. The leadership did not oppose the lobbying technique, rather VFW leaders hoped to discourage insolvent


veterans from flocking to the District. The warning stated, “all VFW members are urged to refrain from going to Washington to lend their personal influence to the campaign in behalf of cash payment unless they are financially able to take care of themselves during the interim.” The VFW leadership discouraged less solvent members from making the trip because the District of Columbia posts already strained to provide relief for local unemployed veterans and for additional down-and-out veterans who journeyed to Washington in order to wrestle with the Veterans Administration bureaucracy. The Washington, D.C. posts told the national leadership they could provide no more assistance to homeless and hungry veterans. That inability determined VFW national policy toward veterans coming to Washington, not disapproval of the lobbying technique. Instead, the VFW steadfastly supported the veterans’ right to petition their government and continued to lead veterans in petitioning efforts themselves.34

In 1931-1932, the VFW’s mobilization for the Bonus intensified at both the national and local level. Wright Patman and the dynamic James Van Zandt began a series of speaking engagements across the country. The Bonus barnstorming tour touched off veteran rallies in cities from Providence, Rhode Island, to St. Paul, Minnesota. Foreign Service reported veteran audiences ranging up to 2,500 persons at some of these rallies. The VFW national organization also coordinated a grassroots push by holding four sectional conferences in Washington D.C., Chicago, Boston, and Kansas City to train Departmental and State leaders in publicity and lobbying tactics. The VFW leadership published petition blanks in Foreign Service, furthering the ongoing petition drive. VFW posts around the country reported to the national organization that they had amassed...

thousands of signatures for the Bonus. Members from Camp Bowie Post, No. 78 in Fort Worth, Texas, secured 55,000 signatures in just eighteen days. The national organization published reports highlighting local posts’ publicity and recruiting activities for others to emulate, activities including renting out small storefronts in depressed commercial districts where VFW members combined heavy recruitment of veterans with the aggressive signature drive. Moreover, VFW and Women’s Auxiliary national officers called upon members of the local posts and the auxiliaries to write their legislators demanding action on the Bonus. In short, the entire organization mobilized in the election year push for the Bonus.35

The VFW national organization also expanded its lobbying efforts into new media platforms. In January, the VFW planned a radio program for the NBC network that would combine lobbying for the Bonus, organizational recruiting, and patriotic entertainment. The “Hello America” broadcast featured an address by Wright Patman and a novel recruiting method in which the Commander would conduct the induction ceremony’s oath of obligation for new members over the radio. Heard in over fifty radio markets, Patman’s speech refuted Bonus opponents’ claims and cemented his public affiliation with the VFW. The VFW found the evening an enormous success as just over 21,000 new members joined the organization during the swearing-in ceremony. Twenty-one thousand new members equaled an over-night 15 percent increase in the existing membership. The VFW leadership found the radio an extraordinary publicity tool, one they would utilize at both the network level and in local broadcasts for years to come.36


From March to May, 1932, the VFW lobbied Congress aggressively for the Bonus. The VFW legislative committee offices served as the headquarters for Bonus Congressional supporters. The VFW legislative chairman, L.S. Ray, mailed letters to every Representative and Senator asking for their support. Those who wrote back declaring their intentions to vote for the bill went on a public list. Ray kept tabs on the list, periodically releasing it to the newspapers to maintain the pressure. On April 2, before the Committee meeting, Ray reported 166 “pledged” legislators for the Bonus, even though the VFW explained “in no instance had the organization threatened any member who refused to support the legislation.” The VFW hoped that the Ways and Means Committee would rule favorably on the Patman bill, but in case, the VFW also tracked the signatures on a discharge petition that would bring the bill to a House vote regardless of the recommendations in the Committee report.37

On April 8, 1932, in preparation of the House Ways and Means Committee proceedings on the Patman Bonus Bill, the VFW organized a large march and rally to the Capitol in support of the Bonus. Paul C. Wolman led the bonus procession with VFW posts from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia taking part. Defiant members of eight Legion posts joined the rally. In this important precursor to the Bonus March, between 1,500 and 2000 veterans marched in a “picturesque” parade up to the Capitol steps led by the VFW band from Clarksburg, W.V., and 200 flag-bearers. Members of the House and Senate, including Wright Patman and Elmer Thomas, the respective leaders of Bonus legislation, met with the leaders of the procession and drew loud cheers from the assembled veterans. The VFW leaders

37 Daniels, The Bonus March, 52, 61-64; Young, Wright Patman, 45-46; Foreign Service, May, 1932: 6-8; and NYT, April 2-11, 1932.
presented the members of Congress with twenty packing cases of petitions bearing over two million signatures—281,000 from ex-servicemen—supporting immediate cash payment. Newsreel cameras and photographers thronged around the ceremony on the Capitol steps. Veterans yelled, “Give us cash!” The *New York Times* noted, “Occasionally there was a shout of ‘to the White House’ but the mass meeting was an orderly one.” Five hundred policemen stood by in case.38

When the Ways Committee finally met in the first weeks of April, VFW national leaders placed the weight of the organization’s support behind the Bonus in Congressional testimony. VFW Commander Darold D. DeCoe explained to the Committee, “the Bonus will be the biggest and best payday this country has had in months.” Paul C. Wolman, past-VFW Commander and now the Chairman of the VFW’s Cash Payment Campaign Committee, testified that veterans needed the Bonus since they suffered disproportionately compared to the rest of the working population. The VFW and Patman also called on celebrities to bolster their arguments for the Bonus in testimony before Congress. The VFW solicited help from Sgt. Alvin York, the popular and highly decorated World War I hero, asking him to testify in person before the Committee. However, York, who joined the organization in April as a VFW post reached into the Tennessee hillside, wired a telegram supporting the Bonus instead of appearing in person. The recently-retired Marine General Smedley D. Butler testified in front of the House Committee at the behest of his VFW comrades. Father Charles E. Coughlin, the

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radio priest and supporter of Wright Patman, offered his opinions on the social and economic merits of the Bonus.39

Despite the intense VFW activism for the Bonus, on May 6, 1932, the Ways and Means Committee shelved the Patman Bonus bill with an adverse vote. Both Patman and the VFW vowed to discharge the bill through a petition and continued to press for the measure, even though the Congressional calendar afforded little time to complete the necessary parliamentary maneuvers before the end of the session. While the VFW failed in their Bonus push, the organization collected concrete benefits from their mobilization begun in December. The organization’s gains in stature and membership relative to the Legion became tangible assets. John A. Weeks, a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives wrote the White House about the differences in VFW and Legion fortunes. He wrote, Walter Newton, “A good many of the boys have lost their heads [about the Bonus] because the Legion membership has dropped 25%, while it is claimed that the VFW have doubled their membership.”40 In April, May, and June of 1932, the VFW mustered 71, 100, and 74 posts, respectively, shattering all organization records. In May alone, nearly three posts a day chartered into the organization. A May Foreign Service editorial touted the VFW’s new strength, “veterans throughout the country are awakening to the fact that they owe their support to a veteran organization that truly represents the rank and file of ex-servicemen.”41

39 NYT and Washington Post, April 2,6,8,11,14, and 16, 1932; Daniels, The Bonus March, 52, 61-64; and Memorandum from Raymond Benjamin to Larry Richey, dated April 13, 1932, in “World War Veterans, Bonus Correspondence, 1932, January-June,” Box 373, SFHH.

40 Daniels, The Bonus March, 52, 61-64. Letter from John A. Weeks to Walter H. Newton, dated January 9, 1932, in “World War Veterans, Bonus Correspondence, 1932, January-June,” Box 373, SFHH.

The VFW’s growth resulted from the organization’s more aggressive promotion of veterans’ demands compared to the Legion. Even the unsympathetic editors at *The Christian Century* framed the Bonus fight in terms of the rivalry between the Legion and VFW. The editors explained that the Legion opposed the Bonus, “but their position is made difficult by the knowledge that a rival body is supporting this proposal, that many local legion posts are in favor of it, and there is a possibility that if the legislation passes the rival body will take the credit for the act, and will be able to transfer to itself the allegiance of hosts of ex-service men who have previously been members of the legion.” The VFW found this transfer in membership already occurring. In a letter dated the day the VFW had marched on the Capitol, Tunis Benjamin from Watervleit, Michigan, wrote the White House demanding immediate payment. He noted, “I am a veteran and belong to the American Legion. I do not belong to the VFW but am changing to an honorable vets organization soon.” In this context of immense public pressure for the Bonus and a range of aggressive lobbying techniques including rallies and marches, the VFW grew precipitously and set the tone for veterans seeking the Bonus. 42

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In this spirited context of organized veteran political activism, 300 veterans in Portland, Oregon, set out for the capital, beginning what came to be known as the Bonus March. Leaving sometime in early May, the veterans road the rails across the country, encountering widely-publicized difficulties with railroad companies and various local authorities. By the time the Oregon contingent made it to Washington in late May, waves

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of veterans around the country had joined the trek. The veterans set up camps around the city and made daily walks to the Capitol to convince Congressmen to sign the Bonus discharge petition. The veterans appointed a hierarchy of leaders and laid out disciplinary structures, mimicking those of the military, and, incidentally, veteran organizations. W.W. Waters, an overseas veteran from the Oregon contingent, attained the title of Commander. Dubbed the Bonus Expeditionary Force (BEF) by the sympathetic District Superintendent of Police, Pelham D. Glassford, the veteran crowd grew at an astonishing rate. By June, over 20,000 veterans, including many with families in tow, had crowded into the capital. A group of communist veterans affiliated with the Worker’s Ex-Servicemen League also occupied the capital, but their attempts to recruit the other Marchers met with little success. BEF leaders denounced their revolutionary zeal and expelled them from the camps, occasionally with accompanying fists.43

As the BEF settled in Washington, Congressional Bonus supporters finally gathered enough discharge petition signatures to vault the Patman bill over the Ways and Means Committee and put it before a floor vote. On June 15, the House quickly passed the Patman Bonus measure despite the fact (or possibly because) the bill stood little chance in the Senate and faced a promised veto from Hoover. On June 17, with thousands of veterans awaiting news on the Capitol steps, the Senate decisively defeated the Patman Bonus Bill. Deflated by the loss, over 5,000 veterans took the government’s offer for transportation back home. The remaining veterans stayed in the various camps and other abandoned buildings around the city promising to stay until they got the Bonus, even if

that meant waiting until 1945. The Communist Party contingent stayed too, becoming a larger and louder percentage of the veterans in the city, but still making little inroads with the larger BEF. For over a month, the situation simmered as supplies became critically short and sanitation a major concern. Government officials grew increasingly anxious. One source described the situation as “a pile of dynamite on Washington’s doorstep.”

While the VFW provided an outlet for veterans’ Bonus agitation all spring and set the tone for the subsequent Bonus March, the VFW members also made their mark on the Bonus March itself. On May 18, before the Bonus Army from Oregon arrived in Washington, in fact while they were still in the East St. Louis train yards, twenty-five veterans from VFW Post No. 1289 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, already had arrived in Washington demanding the Bonus. The Chattanooga VFW members parked their truck with “We Want Our Bonus” painted on the side near the White House. One historian of the Bonus March postulates that Waters and the Portland group perhaps borrowed the idea that they would not leave the city until they got their money from a statement by the VFW members published in an A.P. report. A New York Times column described a contingent of 125 veterans leaving Hoboken, New Jersey, to join the BEF and bring relief supplies, half of whom belonged to the VFW’s Fred C. Hall Post in Jersey City. A group of 450 integrated veterans from the VFW’s post in Harlem, the Dorrence Brooks Post, No. 528, reported their plans to join the festivities in Washington. By June, local VFW leaders close to the situation claimed, much to the dismay of the national leadership, that “60 percent of the veterans in the Capital are members of the VFW waving the colors of

their respective posts.” While there is no way to ascertain whether the 60 percent figure is accurate, photographic evidence suggests the many of the BEF indeed came from VFW posts around the country (See figure 2-1). 45

Additional evidence suggests that overseas veterans—the membership pool of the VFW—comprised a disproportionately large percentage of the veterans coming to the capital. Using data from District Police officers who registered veterans as they came to town, the New York Times reported 83 percent of the veterans moving into Washington claimed to be overseas veterans. After the Bonus Bill’s defeat, when the federal government provided transportation to over five thousand veterans, the Veterans’ Administration records indicated that 66.5 percent of those accepting the offer served overseas during the war. Overall, only half of World War I veterans served overseas. Whether overseas veterans suffered disproportionately from the Depression or rallied more energetically to the VFW’s agitation is conjecture, but overseas veterans in Washington for the March far exceeded their proportion of the World War veteran population.46

Whatever the percentage of VFW members in the BEF may have been, local posts in Washington and around the country generously provided the Bonus Army with material and moral support. The District of Columbia, representing 14 local posts donated 500 dollars to help feed the Marchers. The VFW Front Line Post of Washington offered the use of a theater that the post had its disposal. The Frontline Post told a BEF assembly

45 Daniels, The Bonus March, 80; NYT, June 9 and 12, 1932; and Washington Post, June 19, 1932.

46 NYT, June 8, 1932. V.A. records in Frank T. Hines to Herbert Hoover, dated August 2, 1932, in “World War Veterans-Bonus Reports, Descriptions, and Statements, 1932, August,” Box 376, SFHH.
that the theater would be “turned over to the BEF for the purposes of collecting funds for the BEF treasury.” The BEF would only need to supply “the talent.” On June 7, when

Figure 2-1. Photograph of Bonus Marchers from Post 796, Port Huron, Michigan. Printed in Foreign Service, 1932. Reprinted by permission of the VFW.

some 7,000 Bonus Marchers paraded up Pennsylvania Avenue, a local VFW band led the procession. Posts from around the nation provided material assistance. One of many examples, VFW members in Asbury Park and Bradley Beach, New Jersey, solicited food and materials for the BEF from local merchants. The Jersey posts accumulated enough to fill two trucks headed toward Washington, supplemented with twelve veterans eager to join the March. Whether as members of the BEF or as sympathetic supporters, VFW members aligned themselves in solidarity with the Bonus Army.47

Adding to the linkages between the Bonus March and the VFW, key figures from the saga maintained extensive VFW ties. D.C. Chief of Police Glassford’s personal

rapport with the veterans and patient handling of the crisis made him immensely popular with the BEF, so popular that Glassford served as the treasurer of the BEF’s funds.

Glassford not only belonged to a local VFW post, he had been a chief recruiter for the VFW in 1931 just prior to taking the police position. Joseph Heffernan, the former mayor of Youngstown, Ohio, and prominent VFW state leader, moved to Washington to begin the publication of *The BEF News*, a weekly newspaper published for the Bonus Army veterans. Heffernan’s publication, with its scathing editorials, became the officially sanctioned publication of the BEF, ending its publication run in August at 75,000 copies.

Rice Means, publisher of the only national veteran publication unaffiliated with the veteran organizations, the *National Tribune*, supported the Bonus March from the start in print and with coin. Means, a former Senator from Colorado, worked extensively with a number of veteran organizations, but retained his stature as the VFW’s first National Commander and continuing member of the VFW’s legislative committee. Smedley Butler, the popular Marine Corp General who came to Camp Marks to cheer on the men and actually bivouacked overnight in one of the dwellings, belonged to the VFW and would go on in 1933 through 1936 to be the VFW’s main recruiting speaker. This is not to say that all of these prominent VFW figures gave the Bonus March VFW sanctioning. But all of these high-profile men publicly supporting the Bonus Army linked the VFW to the episode in visible and important ways.48

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Given the level of VFW involvement, the disproportionate number of overseas veterans involved in the Bonus March, and the prominent figures in the March with ties to the organization, it is easy to see how the organization that supported the Bonus since 1929 would be associated with the episode. Statements from the VFW leadership reflected the concerns that the March was being viewed as a VFW-sanctioned event. Worried about the political backlash from such a perception, the VFW national organization felt compelled to deny any official connection with the demonstrations. Moreover, as the BEF grew to close to 20,000 members, the national leadership sent communiqués to every post discouraging, and then prohibiting, members from taking part in the March. The VFW adjutant general in Kansas City, R.B. Handy, Jr., denounced the Communist agitation in the March as an effort “to capitalize upon the unrest and discontent of unemployed veterans.” Handy argued that this could only prove counterproductive to the organization’s Bonus strategy, “embarrassing existing efforts on the part of our legislative committee and those individual members of Congress who are advocating immediate cash payment.” Handy also noted, however, that the goals of most of the Marchers coincided with the VFW’s call for immediate payment. Handy explained, “without doubt, the groups of former service men marching on Washington are inspired by patriotic motives and have no other purpose than assisting in the campaign for cash payment of the Bonus.” Handy and the VFW leadership feared those men would set the Bonus drive back, not advance it.49

While the VFW national leaders failed to back the Bonus March for pragmatic reasons, VFW officials in close proximity to the veteran encampments blasted the

49 NYT, June 3, 7-9, 1932. Washington Post, June 3-12, 1932.
leadership for failing to lead a March they had instigated. In the heat of the Bonus March, the Maryland Department of the VFW met to elect state officers and national encampment delegates. The Maryland delegates became embroiled in a passionate debate over the Bonus March and the failures of the national leadership. The State encampment passed a resolution denouncing the national leadership and requesting an explanation for the national headquarters’ actions. Claiming that the VFW had initiated the March as evidenced by the “60 percent” VFW participation, the Maryland VFW decried that “when the big throng moved on Washington nothing was done by way of leadership.” Why, they asked, were “no officials sent to lead the 20,000 or more veterans in their fight to urge passage of the Bonus Bill in Congress?” These state leaders suggested that instead of leading the March, the VFW abdicated responsibility for the BEF, giving the Communists the opportunity to commandeer what the VFW had started. Had the VFW appointed leaders to the Bonus Army, the Maryland delegates proclaimed, “the great body of veterans in this country would not be branded radicals.” The following day, after VFW Chief of Staff Joseph Ranken addressed the delegates, cooler and more politic heads prevailed and the delegates withdrew the resolution. The resolution, however, exposed both the belief that the VFW caused the March, and the more troubling proposition that the VFW played into the hands of the Communists by not leading the BEF.\(^{50}\)

Others echoed the Maryland VFW delegates in making this accusation. An intelligence memorandum circulated to the FBI and the White House explained that the VFW bore responsibility, even though the March was becoming a Communist rally. The

\(^{50}\) *Washington Post*, June 19-20, 1932.
memorandum described the situation in terms almost identical to the Maryland accusations. It began, “The present march on Washington is the direct result of Communist agitation, pure and simple.” The memo continued, however, “The Communists have taken advantage of Veterans of Foreign Wars internal politics and the urging of the Bonus by the leaders and are trying to turn this agitation to their, the Communists’ advantage.” Accusations blaming the VFW and the VFW national leadership for causing the Bonus March resounded through other private and public channels that summer.\(^5\)

Prominent figures in veteran circles attributed the descent of the Marchers on the city to the VFW’s Bonus agitation. In a private letter, South Dakota Representative Royal C. Johnson cautioned President Hoover that the Bonus Army might reach 100,000. He explained that perhaps any veteran “who thought [he] had a bonus due would join with them, particularly when they have been excited to such a move by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, members of Congress, newspapers, and even the clergy.” Johnson explained that he thought the VFW had recognized its mistake, claiming, “I feel certain that by this time the Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars would also urge them to leave.” Johnson made similar public statements in Congress the following day, placing the blame for the Bonus March at the feet of the VFW leadership and the Bonus discharge signers whom they had convinced. As Chairman of the House Veterans’

\(^5\) Letter from Francis Ralston Welsh to J. Edgar Hoover and Lawrence Richey, dated June 13, 1932, in “World War Veterans, Bonus Correspondence, 1932, January-June,” Box 373, SFHH.
Committee and a former Judge Advocate of the VFW national organization, few were in as good of position as Johnson to cast blame for the Bonus March. 52

Accusations over the veteran organizations’ role in causing the Bonus March pervaded newspaper coverage, even though many misunderstood the differences between the VFW and Legion over the Bonus. An unsympathetic description blamed “demagogs [sic] who have led the veterans to believe that if they howl loud enough Congress would pass the Bonus measure.” The editors of The Christian Century cast blame at the Legion and “other organizations,” for “the descent of veterans on the capital.” The editors explained that “it is a short step” from veteran lobbying “to the idea that veterans would fare even more profitably should they make their demands in person.” The editors got the story wrong. In 1932, the Legion had not been lobbying for the Bonus at all, only “other organizations” made these efforts.53

Another factor aligning the BEF and the VFW centered on the twin ideological components of the Bonus issue. First, the Bonus issue, from its inception, reflected a fundamental critique of the World War I political economy. After the Depression, veterans amplified their critiques of the Big Business’s decaying influence on the national political and moral economy. Indeed, veterans believed that the wartime economy not only disadvantaged them in favor of “stay-at-home” profiteers, but also that it led to the extreme concentration of wealth and economic conditions that caused the Depression. On this point, The BEF News and Foreign Service exhorted veteran readers in visceral terms

52 Letter from Royal C. Johnson to The President, dated June 10, 1932, in “World War Veterans, Bonus Correspondence, 1932, January-June,” Box 373, SFHH. Washington Post June 12, 1932.

that winning the Bonus would correct some of these wrongs, balancing the playing field for veterans against Big Business. In the process, the fight for the Bonus converged with the larger battle over the need to reshape the relationship between the federal government and ordinary citizens. To many, the Bonus, dramatized by the Bonus March, came to symbolize the government’s unmet obligations to its citizen during the Depression era.54

The second component hinged on veterans’ recognition of the power of collective protest and electoral action. An ideological legacy of the Great War and the historical precedent of the Grand Army of the Republic, veterans recognized they would continually need to organize themselves in order to defeat the business lobby and fiscal conservatives in government. The formation of the National Economy League during the 1932 Bonus struggle, an organization of prominent financiers and business leaders that denounced the Bonus and called for dramatic reductions in veteran benefits, proved what lengths these groups would go to oppose veterans. Veterans of the BEF and the VFW believed organized grassroots activism and veterans’ electoral strength could—and should—trump the political and economic might of their adversaries.55

The official VFW reaction to the defeat of the Bonus in the Senate reflected both of these ideological components. In a series of editorials, the VFW leadership denounced the Senate for “ruthless disregard for the principles involved” and “stubborn allegiance to the dictates of political leaders and the moneyed powers.” The VFW concluded that Washington was in need of a purgative, “in the form of a flood a ballots.” The VFW

54 Keene, Doughboys, passim and Daniels, The Bonus March, 41-64.

leaders lamented that “any nation that lives to see the day when its veterans are forced by conditions to mobilize as supplicants at the seats of the mighty—pleading for justice—is in need of a prescription.” In the Bonus struggle, even in decisive defeat, the VFW aligned the organization with the common veteran against the powers of concentrated wealth and looked to the 1932 election as the ultimate battle.  

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On July 28, 1932, the U.S. Government moved to expel the Bonus Marchers from the city. After riots broke out leaving two veterans dead and several police wounded when the police tried to disperse the BEF, Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur exceeded his orders and deployed Army troops, including tanks and cavalry, to drive the veterans out of their encampments. In the process, the Army leveled the veteran camps, setting torches to the dwellings. When he heard of the Bonus rout, Democratic presidential candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt, reportedly declared to Felix Frankfurter, “Well, Felix, this will elect me.” The Hoover Administration, though infuriated by MacArthur’s breach of authority, claimed Communists had taken over the camps and needed to be removed by force. Although the D.C. Police Chief Glassford contradicted those declarations, Hoover and Administration officials maintained the line of defense. In the days following the rout, the Administration’s shrill denunciation of the Bonus Marchers as Communists and criminals alienated even those veterans who agreed with Hoover that the BEF needed to be dispersed. While the VFW spared the Administration

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overt abuse before the removal of the veterans, acrimonious denunciations came bellowing out of the national organization and local posts after the rout.\textsuperscript{57}

The official VFW reaction in \textit{Foreign Service} to the removal of the veterans reproached the officials involved in no uncertain terms. Calling the episode “a national disgrace,” the leadership defended the rights of the BEF to assemble in Washington. The editorial explained, “those men who assembled with the belief that their presence would win recognition of their demands, were sincere in their conviction that their cause was just and their methods proper.” If others disagreed with their methods, the editorial continued, “the fact remains that as citizens of a free country these veterans had the right to their personal opinions.” Moreover, even if the BEF exercised poor judgment and needed to be disbanded, the editorial argued, “there were dozens of effective methods … that could have been used in this evacuation in preference to tear bombs, sabers, tanks, and machine guns.” As a result, the leadership predicted “evacuation orders will be heard again in Washington when the ballots are counted next November.” The VFW issued this threat aimed at both Hoover and Congressional opponents. The leadership argued that the veterans’ cause demanded non-partisanship, that “party lines must be ignored and ballots cast for those who are the allies of the veterans.” \textit{Foreign Service} published lists of the Congressional vote on the Bonus to assist veteran voters in ascertaining friend from foe.\textsuperscript{58}

VFW members needed no primer on the presidential election. Hostile letters and telegrams poured into the White House from dozens of VFW posts, joining a chorus of condemnation from veterans around the country. After the first round of regular post

\textsuperscript{57} Lisio, \textit{President and Protest}, 139-278; FDR quote, 285.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Foreign Service}, September, 1932: 4-5.
meetings, dozens of VFW posts sent copies of their resolutions condemning Hoover. Whereas the national leadership spoke somewhat euphemistically about government officials, enraged posts condemned Hoover in vituperative language. The Argonne Post of Flatbush, New York, protested the “inhumane and brutal treatment of the veterans” and commented, “certainly bread is cheaper than tear bombs, Mr. President.” The Glendon Post, of Philadelphia, described the rout as the “most cruel and shameful act of ingratitude towards its defenders as ever perpetrated by the constituted authorities of a civilized nation.” The Herbert Dunlavy Post of Houston, Texas, explained that lobbying was lawful and “this foul act reflects only class discrimination, for had these unfortunate veterans the power of millions of dollars, they would have been welcomed with outstretched arms.”59 Buckeye Post, of Columbus, Ohio, “emphatically” protested and “vigorously” denounced the actions of the government, decrying the “exercise of despotic power wholly unauthorized, unprecedented, and unconstitutional.” The James Mackenzie Post of Gary, Indiana, mocked the Hoover Administration’s claims that the BEF had been mostly Communists by claiming, “there is no surer way of making Reds and Communists than to have the Government drive on its own citizens.”60

The VFW gathered at the annual encampment in Sacramento barely one month after the rout, basking in the organization’s membership success and ready to take the

59 Argonne Post, No. 107 to Herbert Hoover, dated August 6, 1932; Pvt. Martin Glendon Post, No. 298 to Herbert Hoover, dated August 8, 1932; Pvt. Martin Glendon Post, No. 298 to Herbert Hoover, dated August 8, 1932; and Herbert Dunlavy Post, No. 581 to Herbert Hoover, undated; in “World War Veterans—Bonus, Public Comment on Presidential Action, Protest, 1932, Aug 6-10,” Box 375, SFHH.

fight to Hoover and Bonus opponents. The organization had a right to boast. Indeed, in 1932, the VFW grew at an amazing clip. Fifty thousand new members joined, raising the membership total to 187,479 overseas veterans. This put the organization at three times the 1927 size and reflected a 35 percent increase in one year. Moreover, post growth broke records just set in 1931. The VFW gained 442 new posts in 1932, by all accounts the most dire year of the Depression and a horrible year for voluntary association membership. One hundred and eighty-six more posts re-chartered after being dropped for non-payment of dues. For the year, the growth averaged 52.3 posts chartered per month, an average that bested the all-time highs for any one month in the organization’s history. In other words, in 1932, the VFW membership and distribution throughout the country simply sky-rocketed (See Table 2-1).

The VFW encampment became a spirited political rally. The delegates and speakers attacked the veterans’ enemies, issuing stinging indictments of the Hoover Administration, Congressional Bonus opponents, and the arch-enemy National Economy League. The VFW delegates passed a resolution “seriously censuring those Government officials … responsible for the un-humanitarian and un-American manner that was used in clearing the camps occupied by the so-called marchers.” Angry resolutions promoting a non-partisan campaign against Congressional opponents and condemning the National Economy League’s plans to cut veteran benefits, bellowed from the encampment delegates. Moreover, the VFW delegates swore continued vigilance on the Bonus, demanding from the leadership that the Bonus campaign not only continue but “be intensified and extended in every way possible as far as finances and facilities permit.” Wright Patman traveled to California to address the delegates, drawing boisterous and
prolonged applause for his attacks against Mellon, the National Economy League, and other Bonus opponents. 61

Table 2-1. VFW Membership and Post Growth, 1929-1932. 62

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<th>1929</th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>1931</th>
<th>1932</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Membership</strong></td>
<td>76,669</td>
<td>95,167</td>
<td>138,620</td>
<td>187,469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Membership gained in year</strong></td>
<td>6,693</td>
<td>18,498</td>
<td>43,453</td>
<td>48,849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Posts</strong></td>
<td>1767</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>2313</td>
<td>2757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posts gained in year</strong></td>
<td>154</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>444</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The VFW encampment clearly looked to the November election to rectify some pressing matters. VFW members wanted to punish the Hoover Administration for the rout but also for the manner in which officials tarred veterans with the same brush as Communists and criminals. The delegates passed an extraordinary resolution decrying the “criminally brutal, and uncalled for, and morally indefensible” “action of the President of the United States with the BEF.” The delegates described the ballot as “the veterans strongest weapon of defense” against such Presidential misdeeds. Then, so that the American people would be aware of the organization’s attitude, the VFW delegates commanded that posts should “be urged to mount sandbags and post a military guard from now on until November so that the Washington evacuation begun in July may be fully completed in November.” A Foreign Service drawing by the VFW’s editorial artist.


62 VFW membership data in Goldsmith, “The Veterans of Foreign Wars,” 194; post data obtained from Foreign Service, January, 1929 to December, 1932.
Herbert Lake, graphically depicted this militancy veterans felt toward the coming election (Figure 2-2). 63

![Figure 2-2. “Another Zero Hour—November 8,” by Herbert Lake in Foreign Service, September, 1932. Reprinted by permission of the VFW.]

Even though the Senate had killed the Bonus for 1932, by keeping the issue alive against the odds, the VFW forced Congress and the Hoover Administration to grapple with the question of what the federal government’s obligations to its citizens should be. Yet, in 1932, it remained uncertain whether the electoral process would provide a definitive answer to that question. In September, the VFW hoped a Democratic Administration might serve their purposes better, even though FDR had already stated his disagreement with the Bonus. Then, on October 29, the verge of the election, FDR made an address in Pittsburgh re-stating his opposition, remarking that balancing the federal budget should be the first priority. Both prospects—no Bonus and a balanced budget—sounded ominous to veterans. Roosevelt’s address echoed the sentiments of the National

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Economy League’s plans calling for a balanced budget through drastic cuts in veteran benefits. A vote against Hoover, however satisfying, did not assure veterans of a sympathetic White House occupant.64

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Between 1929 and 1932, the VFW played a crucial role in the Bonus saga, a saga that culminated in the Bonus March. Based on the Legion national leadership’s opposition to both the Bonus and the March, scholars have contended that veteran organizations abdicated their roles as leaders of veteran political activism during the period. Yet, throughout the 1931-1932 period, the VFW led the Bonus struggle, keeping the contentious issue alive for desperate veterans and reaping the institutional rewards—and opponents’ abuse—that came with their aggressive stance. In the late spring of 1932, as veterans flocked to the capital, they also flocked to the VFW. Indeed, the VFW national organization employed intensive lobbying and marching to the capital as tactics themselves. To be sure, VFW leaders distanced the organization from the Bonus March and tried to dissuade members from joining it, but for very pragmatic, tactical reasons. The VFW leaders feared that the BEF would become counterproductive to their Congressional struggle and that Communist Party members would sully the cause for their own goals. Nonetheless, the VFW always supported the Marchers’ right to assemble and the justice of their cause. In this, the VFW put its imprint on the Bonus March, to the extent that the organization drew blame for instigating the whole affair.

After the Bonus March, the VFW stood ready to challenge the American Legion as spokesmen for veterans’ concerns. The years that the VFW maintained a secondary

64 *Literary Digest* October 29, 1932: 5-6.
status actually helped the organization develop more aggressive lobbying strategies involving radio and direct citizen participation. As the VFW grew in response to its demands and Legion recalcitrance, it raised the organization’s public profile even further, creating a positive feedback loop for agitation. In the Bonus fight, the VFW became the leader in grassroots veteran activism, emerging as an alternative to the Legion for more ideologically driven rank-and-file veterans. For, in the summer of 1932, the Bonus became an ideologically explosive issue, converging with questions about the political economy of the United States and the proper role of the federal government in the maintenance of its citizens. Although these questions resounded from the veteran organizations immediately following the war, the Depression imparted a new urgency to finding appropriate answers. The VFW’s political and ideological positions on the Bonus located the organization in the middle of these controversies. Veterans’ movement into the organization and flow out of the American Legion demonstrated how veterans sought political organizations that would demand the federal government live up to its obligations to its citizens. Indeed, the level of organized political activism by the VFW underscored how profoundly military experience in the Great War politicized veterans and placed them at the center of these Depression-era ideological debates.

Grassroots veteran political activism during the Depression era included the Bonus March on Washington, but was not necessarily defined by it. Yet, by not recognizing the complete extent of veteran activism in the Bonus March saga, historians have created an additional legacy. The Bonus March, viewed as the *sine qua non* of veteran political activism, also casts a long shadow over veterans’ organized political efforts after the event, rendering anything short of mass protest insignificant. As the
following chapters explore, while the attempts to organize additional Bonus Marches in 
the New Deal period proved futile, veteran political activism did not subside. On the 
contrary, veterans’ relationships with the New Deal soured from the start, and the VFW’s 
political activism would be a potent force throughout the Roosevelt presidency.
CHAPTER 3
“THE ‘NEW DEAL’ FOR VETERANS”: THE ECONOMY ACT AND THE ORIGINS OF NEW DEAL DISSENT

In the flurry of legislative activity known as “the Hundred Days,” the Roosevelt Administration initiated the relief and recovery program of the New Deal. Historians of the New Deal correctly emphasize the significance of the structural reforms in banking, securities, and agriculture, and the relief measures establishing—among others—the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration that emerged in those “Hundred Days.” 1 Remarkably, though, the second piece of legislation pushed through the 73rd Congress, the “Bill To Maintain the Credit of the United States Government,” draws little sustained interest from historians. More popularly known as the Economy Act, this bill drastically cut federal expenditures by reducing veteran benefits by over 400 million dollars. Although FDR made balancing the federal budget an Administration priority, the Economy Act remains one of the most under-examined pieces of New Deal legislation. 2 The significance of the Economy Act to the New Deal,

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however, transcends discussions of FDR’s fiscal conservatism. More importantly, the Economy Act triggered a wave of political mobilization that laid the foundations of organized New Deal dissent. The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) played a crucial role in this mobilization against the Economy Act and served as an important early meeting ground for those critical of the “first” New Deal.3

The VFW initially offered FDR enthusiastic support. After passage of the Economy Act, however, the VFW denounced Roosevelt’s Administration for not acting more decidedly in the favor of ordinary citizens and decried the continuing influence of “Big Business” and “Wall Street” on the political economy. Voicing a pronounced cynicism over the Roosevelt Administration’s ability to remember “the forgotten man,” the VFW turned on the Roosevelt Administration less than two weeks after FDR’s inauguration. The VFW’s sophisticated organizational structure, annual encampments, and national publications provided a far-reaching network for political mobilization. Moreover, the VFW’s political activism benefited from high-profile spokesmen, powerful Congressional allies, and open access to national print and radio media outlets. The VFW’s vehement response to the Economy Act situated the organization in the vanguard of “New Deal Dissidents,” a group which, by 1934, would include Huey P. Long, Father

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Charles E. Coughlin, and their reported millions of supporters. With the Economy Act as the catalyst, the VFW became one of the original “voices of protest” against the New Deal.

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The drive for reductions in federal expenditures began in the waning months of the Hoover Administration. In November, 1932, Hoover proposed budget cuts of 500 to 700 million dollars to remedy the burgeoning federal budget deficits. The Joint Congressional Committee on Veteran Affairs met throughout the winter of 1932-33 to investigate the feasibility of the National Economy League’s (NEL) plan to cut veteran benefits by nearly 50 percent, over 400 million dollars. After forestalling the Bonus initiative in the Summer of 1932, the NEL dedicated its efforts toward the continued pursuit of fiscal conservatism, a pursuit that included opposition to the supposed extravagance of veteran benefits. Unsurprisingly, the Hoover Administration, Congress, and the NEL encountered stiff resistance from veteran organizations bent on tabling any legislation detrimental to veteran compensation.

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4 I employ this phrase borrowing heavily from Alan Brinkley’s discussion of “dissident ideology” in Voices of Protest, 143-168. Other terms such as progressives, insurgents, native radicals, and populists lack the specificity, both historical and historiographical, of New Deal Dissidents. For more on New Deal Dissidents, see also Schlesinger, The Age of Roosevelt, vol. 3; David H. Bennett, Demagogues in the Depression: American Radicals and the Union Part, 1932-1936 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1969) and The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and David Horowitz, Beyond Left and Right: Insurgency and the Establishment (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

5 Organized veteran participation in this movement remains largely unexplored. Alan Brinkley’s seminal study of Long and Coughlin offers anecdotal evidence that suggests veterans actively participated in Long and Coughlin’s organizations due to each man’s support for the immediate cash payment of the Bonus. Brinkley does not, however, examine veteran organizations or veteran political activism.

The VFW quickly mobilized to counter plans for reductions in veteran benefits. VFW legislative representatives lobbied Congress intensively, attended the Committee’s meetings, and testified against the proposed reductions. In February, VFW National Legislative Vice-Chairman, L.S. Ray, refuted the “anti-veteran testimony” of the National Economy League, United States Chamber of Commerce, and the National Association of Manufacturers before the joint committee. The VFW’s determined lobbying appeared to work; no legislation resulted from the committee’s work. However, *Foreign Service* warned that while the NEL plan stood defeated and discredited, “the cause of the veteran is by no means out of danger.” On the contrary, “organized veteranandom must continue to follow the VFW in combating the activities of those who would pounce upon the issue of economy as a means of wiping out existing veteran legislation.” Commander-in-Chief Admiral R.E. Coontz called the VFW legislative committee “very successful in fighting off legislation inimical to the VFW and will keep it up until March 4.” Coontz hoped “that in the coming Congress every question regarding veterans will be considered with the care is due it [sic].”

Coontz and the VFW clearly believed the incoming Administration and Congress would handle the issue of veteran benefits differently. Indeed, the March issue of *Foreign Service* ran a glowing article on Roosevelt, entitled “Franklin D. –the Fighter.” This uncritically positive treatment detailed FDR’s actions as Assistant Secretary of the Navy during the World War and attempted to convince VFW members of FDR’s frustrated intentions to enlist in the Navy. The article claimed that “except for the scourge of influenza … he would now be eligible to membership in the VFW.” Following this logic,

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the article urged VFW members “regardless of political differences” to “hail Franklin D.
Roosevelt … as a comrade—a comrade in spirit truly!” The article highlighted the
following statement from FDR laying the differences between Roosevelt and Hoover in
sharp relief: “I shall ceaselessly endeavor to bring government back to a more intimate
understanding of and relation to human problems.”

The optimism accompanying the Roosevelt presidency pervaded the VFW. In the
first weeks of March, 1933, VFW posts poured congratulatory telegrams and letters into
the White House. Neponset, Massachusetts, Post 2235 wrote Roosevelt with barely
contained zeal, “It’s zero hour. We are ready to go over the top with you and drive old
man depression out of his trenches by X-mas.” Raymond Price, the commander of Post
518 in Camden, New Jersey, thanked Roosevelt noting, “It is gratifying to know we have
at last a president that all the people can look to for leadership. The prayers of the
American people have been answered.” Comrade W.E. Dowling of Post 1941, Irvington,
New Jersey, offered Roosevelt a less giddy welcome and enunciated a common veteran
understanding of the 1932 election. Dowling wrote, “The War Veterans who secured
your election beg to have you beware of the Republican treachery.”

The VFW soon realized that treachery had come to pass, but not of the Republican
variety. Indeed, March 20, 1933, marks the beginning of organized New Deal dissent.
Less than two weeks after his inauguration, FDR’s signing of the Economy Act forced
the VFW to re-evaluate their confidence in the Roosevelt Administration. Unknown to

9 VFW Post 2235, Neponset, Mass., to FDR, Mar. 3, 1933; Raymond G. Price, Corp. Matthews-Purnell
Post 518, Camden, N.J., to FDR, Mar. 10, 1933; and Comrade W.E. Dowling of Corp. John McGotty Post
1941, Irvington, N.J., to FDR, Feb. 18, 1933 in “Veterans of Foreign Wars, 1933-1936,” President’s
Personal File (Hereafter, PPF) 87, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library (Hereafter, FDRL).
the VFW, Roosevelt and his Budget Director appointee, Lewis Douglas, also had been working throughout the interregnum on legislation to balance the budget through sharp reductions in veteran benefits. FDR made this issue an Administration priority. Only the worsening banking crisis derailed FDR’s plans to offer the bill as the Administration’s first piece of legislation. Introduced on March 9, 1933, and steamrolled through an unprepared Congress, the Economy Act gave the Executive discretionary powers over veteran benefits. By delegating those powers to Budget Director Douglas, a decorated World War veteran and strong proponent of fiscal austerity, FDR simultaneously attempted to remove veteran benefits from Congressional oversight and to distance himself from this politically sensitive issue.10

FDR, however, failed at both. Instead, the Roosevelt Administration provoked a confrontation with disgruntled veterans and a bipartisan coalition of Congressional dissenters vowing to repeal the bill. The VFW mobilized immediately against the Economy Act. VFW national officers and posts throughout the nation vehemently protested passage of the bill and the new regulations. VFW officials and members, once warm to the Administration, disparaged the New Deal in blistering attacks. Aghast at the drastic cuts in pensions—460 million dollars in cuts almost precisely as laid out by the NEL—and new stringent guidelines for proving service-related disabilities, the VFW assaulted the plan immediately.

The VFW’s leadership began the offensive against the Economy Act. Foreign Service editorialized, “the so-called economy bill virtually destroys the basic structure of

10 On the fundamental fiscal conservatism of FDR, Douglas’s instructions to work on cuts in veteran benefits, and the importance of balancing the budget to the early New Deal, see Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal, 237-254; Sargent, Roosevelt and the Hundred Days, 68-74; and Zelizer, “Forgotten Legacy.”
veteran legislation created during the past fifteen years.” In an editorial titled “Blood Money,” the VFW national leadership explained the veteran case against the Economy Act. The VFW leadership argued that veterans would gladly agree to cuts in benefits for the sake of economy if Congress had first considered “wiping out useless bureaus and commissions, putting a stop to huge subsidies, and striking at the root of the tremendous extravagance created by a bureaucratic government.” But Congress’s Economy Act only considered economies in veteran benefits, thus reflecting the agenda of “Big Business.”

The editorial continued, “The obvious fact that the Economy Bill reflects the very language that featured [sic] the propaganda of the National Economy League indicates that this new legislation achieves the objectives of those who found it profitable to sponsor and finance that organization—those who control the wealth of the nation.”

The VFW’s critique of the Economy Act folded into a larger indictment of the political and economic system. Cuts in benefits alone would have touched off heated criticism, but the VFW argument against the reductions enumerated in the Economy Act employed veteran understandings of the World War, the causes of the Depression, and the prevailing political economy. Veterans widely considered corporate avarice and greed, the concentration of wealth, and the corruption of the political system by “Wall Street” and “Big Business” to be the causes of both the Great War and the Depression. Thus, the VFW leadership concluded the editorial, “It is apparent that the veteran has been forced to bear the burden of a depression that was actually caused by his enemies—

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11 Foreign Service, April, 1933: 4.
the predatory interests that have their hands in the public till. The money that will be withheld from the disabled veteran … can only be regarded as blood money.”

Drawings by the VFW’s artist, Herbert E. Lake, augmented the vitriol from the editorial pages of *Foreign Service*. Lake graphically depicted VFW sentiment regarding the Economy Act. In the panel titled, “Some Call This Economy” (Figure 3-1), Lake portrayed the proponents of the Economy Act as executioners. Figures wearing top hat and tails labeled “National Economy League” and “U.S. Chamber of Commerce” lined the firing squad while three veterans—one each from the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and the World War—calmly but sternly faced their executioners. In “The First Casualty of America’s ‘War on Depression’” (Figure 3-2), Lake continued to express the VFW’s reaction to the Economy Act. In this drawing, a World War veteran lay prostrate and bleeding from a vicious bayonet wound in the back. The rifle to which the bayonet was affixed read “economy.” As the caption suggests, the “War on Depression” that Roosevelt intended to wage produced dire and unexpected consequences for veterans.

The VFW national leadership began to assail the New Deal specifically, not just the rapacity of the Economy Act. By April, 1933, VFW leadership recognized that Roosevelt had not been duped into the passage of the Economy Act. On the contrary, the Roosevelt Administration openly sided with the business community on veteran issues and continued the conservative fiscal policies that had characterized the vilified Hoover Administration. And, despite Administration assurances that the cuts would be handled

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12 Ibid.

13 *Foreign Service*, April, 1933:5-6.
justly and humanely, reductions proved even more draconian than the VFW originally feared. The VFW leaders concluded, therefore, that the New Deal’s policies threatened to undermine irrevocably the social and economic footing of veterans and the country. From this point, the VFW leadership began referring to the Roosevelt Administration’s relief and recovery efforts with ironic quotation marks around the phrase “new deal.” One characteristic editorial began, “the tragic consequences of the ‘new deal’ in veteran legislation become more and more apparent,” while an article outlining the specifics of veteran benefit reductions was entitled, “An Analysis of the ‘New Deal’ for Disabled Veterans.” The VFW also communicated this message through the very effective use of critical humor. *Foreign Service* always ended with a list of jokes and comic drawings

![Image](image-url)

Figure 3-1. “Some Call This Economy,” *Foreign Service*, April, 1933. Reprinted by permission of the VFW.
known as “Jest-A-Minute.” This section began to include jokes critical of the Roosevelt Administration. In the following jokes, veterans lampooned the New Deal:

**Dealer’s Choice**
A gagster in Judge says the new deal started with the jack left out.
The veteran apparently sat at the dealer’s right because he got the cut!

**Jeers or Cheers?**
Cheer Leader: Three cheers for the New Deal!
Veteran Rooters: Raw! Raw! Raw! 14

VFW editorials began to hone in on the well-known “forgotten man” theme of the Roosevelt election campaign. In a May editorial, the VFW remarked that while “legislation is being enacted for the relief of agriculture; the railroads, banks, and other financial institutions,” the veteran absorbed “a reduction in income amounting to

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$460,000,000.” The VFW warned, “If the present session of Congress ignores the plight of these former defenders of the nation then truly history will record the veteran as the real ‘forgotten man’ of the depression and democracy will have failed its saviors.” Once again Lake rendered the VFW’s position into visceral drawings. The drawing “The Forgotten Man” (figure 3-3) depicted the numerous grabs at the Federal Treasury that the New Deal had come to signify to the VFW. The hands clutching at the Treasury gold glistened with jeweled rings while Congress, characterized by a portly well-dressed figure, shunted the veteran in puttees, knocking him off his feet. The veteran “forgotten man” was not so much forgotten as pushed aside by the New Deal legislation.15

The VFW leadership urged members and local posts to express their outrage over the Economy Act by writing to their elected officials. Many VFW posts and members voiced their complaints directly to the White House in letters and telegrams. The L.M.

Figure 3-3. “The Forgotten Man,” Foreign Service, May, 1933. Reprinted by permission of the VFW.

15 Foreign Service, May, 1933: 4-7.
Tate post 39 of St. Petersburg, Florida wired FDR that the members were “ready to do our part in the interests of economy” but suggested that cuts should not be made “at the expense of the private in the rear rank.” The Huntington Park (California) Post 952 forwarded to the White House a resolution passed by the Los Angeles County Council of the VFW reversing their decision to participate in a Roosevelt Day program. The Los Angeles County VFW council explained their refusal to participate, “in view of the fact of the arbitrary assumption of dictatorial and unconstitutional powers, especially in veterans affairs.” Minnesota VFW officers informed FDR by telegram that “delegates of all posts, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Minnesota … voted unanimously—oppose granting of dictatorial powers to President and are absolutely opposed cutting veterans benefits—emphatically demanding our Government that its defenders be not betrayed.” Harry Hoffman, commander of City of Detroit Post 334, ominously warned FDR’s personal secretary that “the sober thinking veteran is getting tired of sitting idly by, he is thinking and some of these days you’re going to have a real Bonus Army in Washington, men who served overseas.”

The VFW clearly tapped into a deep vein of veteran resentment over the Economy Act. A steady stream of letters and telegrams sent to the White House expressed veterans’ disappointment. E. Burns of Rochester, N.Y., voiced the disillusionment of veteran FDR supporters confronted by the Administration’s veteran policy. In a telegram to FDR, Burns proclaimed that “Every veteran voted for you and

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16 L.M. Tate post 39 to FDR in “Economy Program, 1933, T”, PPF 200f, Box 159, FDRL; Harry S. Roberts, Huntington Park post 952, to Colonel Howe, July 7, 1933, in “Veterans of Foreign Wars, 1933-1934”, Official File (Hereafter, OF) 84, FDRL; Kenneth A. Bixler and W.R. Ambrose to FDR, March 10, 1933, in “Economy Program, 1933, U-V”, PPF 200f, Box 159, FDRL; and Harry C. Hoffman, City of Detroit Post 334, to Sec. Howe, undated, in “World War Veterans, June 5-June 13, 1933,” OF 95, FDRL.
stands back of you but the whole of us will consider it rank injustice to tamper in any way with the pension of any veteran between the age of 60 or over [sic].” Likewise, after wishing FDR success, L. Cole of Chicago decried FDR’s decision to side with the National Economy League. Cole pointedly announced that “The men of the service in nineteen seventeen and eighteen protest your contemplated action and we regret that you have listened to politicians and the Economy League rather than to stand upon fundamentals of Americanism.”

More hostile letters mimicked the rhetorical strategies and imagery employed by the VFW. In a letter pleading with FDR to rescind the Economy Act, a disabled veteran expressed the frustration of a disappointed supporter in the “New Deal” who “never expected [it] to become a raw deal.” Floyd O. Jellison of South Bend, Indiana, telegrammed FDR, “Your forgotten man campaign followed by the assumption of dictatorial powers wherein the veteran becomes the forgotten man will cause the President’s memory to be cherished with the high esteem as is that of Benedict Arnold.” Recalling the imagery of “Some Call this Economy, (Figure 3-1),” Carrell S. Huston of Illinois asked FDR, “Why not send Baruch out with his men to gather us all in and let us dig a ditch, line us up, backs to Baruch and let his men drop us all in the ditch?”

Reports from allies in the field confirmed for the White House that the deluge of outraged veteran letters corresponded to the new reality of veteran activism protesting the

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17 E. Burns telegram to FDR, March 12, 1933 in “Economy Program, 1933,” PPF 200F, Box 156, FDRL. L. Cole telegram to FDR, April 25, 1933 in “Veterans Administration, Federal Hospital Board, April-July, 1933,” OF 86, Box 4, FDRL.

18 Disabled Veteran to FDR, Sept. 8, 1933 in “Veterans Administration, August-Sept., 1933,” OF 8, Box 1, FDRL. Floyd O. Jellison telegram to FDR, March 14, 1933 in “Economy Program, 1933,” PPF 200F, Box 157, FDRL. Carrell S. Huston to FDR, June 11, 1933, in “World War Veterans, June 5-June 13, 1933”, OF 95, Box 1, FDRL.
New Deal. Democratic operatives and friends of key FDR Administration staff gathered evidence of the growing storm and passed it to the White House. A letter forwarded to FDR’s secretary Marvin H. McIntyre from Dallas described the uproar in Texas. The letter emanated from the “‘papa’ of the ex-servicemen” in Dallas, W.E. Talbot. Talbot, a Republican yet a “great admirer of Mr. Roosevelt,” warned that the Economy Act was “causing a restlessness and feeling of antagonism that I have never before seen in ex-servicemen.” Talbot claimed to have controlled veteran passions in the past but, was “powerless to even discuss the matter calmly with them, as they are not open to reason. They feel they have been done a great injustice.” An unsolicited report from Kansas City, home of VFW national headquarters, echoed those impressions. In a letter to FDR’s personal secretary Steve Early, Roy Roberts, one of Early’s newspaper contacts at the *Kansas City Star*, passed along his impressions of veteran sentiment accompanied by an internal memorandum outlining the specifics of veteran grievances. In Roberts’ letter, he expressed “amazement at the amount of furor that has been stirred up in the veterans by the cuts made on the service connected disabilities.” Roberts continued, “I am afraid there is a great revulsion in feeling on the part of veteran organizations toward the Administration because of the cuts on service connected disabilities.” He added, “It gives the Communists and Reds material to work on.”

Democratic allies within the VFW had even more direct admonitions for the new Administration. Democratic Party Chairman, James Farley, received a letter from Joseph Heffernan written from the Ohio state convention of the VFW where there was “a strong

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19 Letter from Lorry A. Jacobs to Marvin H. MacIntire, May 5, 1933 in “World War Veterans, Jan.-May, 1933,” OF 95, Box 1, FDRL. Letter from Roy Roberts to Steve Early, May 9, 1933, in “World War Veterans, Jan.-May, 1933”, OF 95, Box 1, FDRL.
undercurrent for open censure of President Roosevelt because of the Economy Act.” Heffernan—a VFW member, Democratic ex-mayor of Youngstown, and the former editor of the *BEF News*—claimed he was able to keep the issue off of the convention floor and prevented “a direct expression.” Nonetheless, he urged Farley, “Please do not underestimate the dynamite in the veteran situation.” Heffernan put the controversy in the strict electoral terms that Farley understood, “They feel that they were a great influence in the defeat of Hoover, and, frankly, I should not like to see them turn en masse against Roosevelt.” He reiterated, “They can cause trouble, so do not underestimate such a concerted opposition.”

Despite the reports of general veteran resentment toward the Roosevelt Administration, and in contrast to the VFW’s position, the American Legion national leadership appeared to side with the Administration on the Economy Act. FDR’s March 5th appearance on a national Legion radio broadcast in which he asked for the support of men “who know the meaning of sacrifice” gave the impression that the Legion leadership knew and tacitly approved of the legislation. Legion Commander Louis Johnson’s cozy relationship with the Administration only fueled suspicions. Johnson, while opposed to the severity of the cuts, did everything possible to squelch the uproar. Johnson told FDR that Legion leadership had started a “publicity” campaign in *American Legion News* to convince veterans to “Support the President.” Indeed, Johnson issued a “battle order” that

20 Copy of letter from Joe Heffernan to James Farley, July 1, 1933, in “Veterans of Foreign Wars, 1933-1934,” OF 84, FDRL.
legionnaires support FDR because the “the Legion has every faith in the discretion, firmness, and justice with which the President will deal with this problem.”

The American Legion quietly began efforts to repeal the most glaring injustices of the Economy Act. However, American Legion posts, State Departments, and even the national executive committee repudiated their Commander’s stand. The Newark, Ohio Legion post proclaimed, “We disapprove of the attitude of National Commander Johnson in so completely surrendering the Legion to the victories of the National Economy League and for promising Legion support for policies and doctrines … contrary to its views and aims.” The Dennis-Butler Legion Post of Stillwater, Oklahoma called for Johnson’s resignation. Despite the rumbling from the ranks of the Legion, the perception remained that the Legion acquiesced to the President.

The differences between the VFW’s militant protest and the Legion’s perceived acquiescence on the Economy Act effected the institutional vitality of the two veteran organizations. The American Legion suffered a nearly 20 percent loss of membership in 1933; some 160,000 veterans did not renew their Legion membership. This loss would be certainly understandable given the economic crisis; membership dues from three to four dollars were luxuries many could not afford after three years of the Depression. Indeed, the overall VFW membership also declined slightly, just over 6 percent. Yet, in 1933, the VFW signed over 40,000 new recruits, including twenty-one thousand first-time

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21 FDR Address in American Legion National Broadcast, March 5, 1933, in “American Legion, Jan.-June, 1933,” OF 64, Box 1, FDRL. Johnson was a Democratic party stalwart from West Virginia, later appointed Assistant Secretary of War by FDR, who carried on a voluminous secret correspondence with the Administration on veteran issues. On Louis Johnson’s ties to the FDR Administration and Legion response to the Economy Act, see Pencak, 192-197. Louis Johnson to FDR, March 28, 1933, in “American Legion, January-June, 1933,” OF 64, Box 1, FDRL. “Battle Orders” quotation in Pencak, 192.

22 National Tribune, May 11, 1933.
members inducted during the “Hello America” broadcast over the NBC radio network. The VFW also continued a rapid post expansion begun in 1931. The VFW experienced a net growth of 165 new posts, with 74 more posts regaining their charter by paying their overdue fees. This information led the VFW leadership to the following conclusions: the VFW continued to flourish at the expense of the American Legion as a direct result of their respective stances on the Economy Act.23

The VFW clearly gained a competitive advantage over the Legion by leading the charge against the Economy Act. In the middle of the uproar, the VFW national headquarters proclaimed in a statement circulated in the National Tribune that the VFW was “rapidly forging to the forefront in veteran circles.” After mentioning the membership difficulties of an un-named veteran organization, the VFW statement claimed that “The continued growth of the VFW, despite economic handicaps, indicates that the rank and file of veterans are in thorough accord with the militant and unselfish policies of our organization.” Highlighting the perceived betrayal by Legion Commander Johnson, the statement coolly added, “Our leaders have remained loyal to the mandates of our membership.” In case the reference was missed, the statement continued, “[Our leaders] refused to accede to the wishes of political leaders and they have spurned every compromise that would in any way betray the cause of the disabled veteran.”24

The VFW’s more militant reaction can also be explained, in part, by the VFW’s membership requirements. The VFW membership included veterans of the Great War,

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24 July 1, 1933 announcement by VFW National Headquarters, quoted in National Tribune, July 27, 1933.
the Spanish-American War, the Philippines Insurrection, and any other conflict for which overseas campaign badges were assigned. While World War I veterans constituted the largest cohort of potential members, they were certainly not the only ones. Indeed, the Spanish-American War veterans who had banded together smaller groups to form the VFW in 1913 retained leadership positions and significant influence within the organization.\(^{25}\) To this group of men in particular, the stipulations of the Economy Act proved much more onerous in two ways. First, the Economy Act raised the burden of proof for service-connected disabilities while eliminating almost entirely non-service-connected disability pensions. Spanish-American War veterans found the burden of proof thrust upon them to keep their pension payments. This proved nearly impossible given the length of time transpired since their service, the dearth of bureaucratic records, and the death and dispersal of essential witnesses. Both *Foreign Service* and the veteran newspaper *National Tribune* published lengthy lists of desperate Spanish-American War veterans seeking comrades from their service days in order to prove their disabilities were service-connected. Second, the economic vulnerability of men the age of Spanish-American War veterans was even greater than that of World War I veterans. Reductions or discontinuation of disability pensions to men approximately 55 to 65 and on the margins of employment translated into extraordinary anxiety and privation for these veterans and their families. United Spanish War Veteran Joseph F. Markley’s informed FDR, “To indiscriminately deprive the Veterans of the Spanish American War of their present emoluments, will inflict untold hardship on the nation’s warriors.” Another

\(^{25}\) For example, past Commander of the VFW, Rice W. Means, held the same position in the United Spanish War Veterans and remained a powerful voice within both organizations. Although it is impossible to gauge the percentage of Spanish-American War veteran in the VFW, the United Spanish War Veterans had a membership of 118,000 in 1934 (See *National Tribune*, September 19, 1935).
Spanish-American veteran put it more succinctly, “As simple justice please … save half
our comrades and widows from the poor house.”

A second issue relating to the composition of VFW membership hinged on the
organization’s membership requirements. Major reductions in service-connected
disabilities would disproportionately affect VFW members compared to Legion members
since the Legion granted membership to all World War veteran regardless of stationing.
Half of those eligible for Legion membership never left the United States—men VFW
veterans often derisively called “training camp veterans.” Therefore, VFW members by
virtue of their “overseas status” were simply more likely to have recognized service-
connected disabilities. And, VFW members who were World War I veterans were much
more likely than Legion members to lose disability payments for neurological and
pulmonary disabilities contracted as a result of combat but undocumented or undetected
during the war. The inability to produce service records for these disabilities meant the
elimination of compensation and, as one would suspect, dire consequences for afflicted
veterans. The number of veterans dropped for this was staggering. Approximately
100,000 veterans suffering from tuberculosis were removed from the compensation rolls,
unable to prove the disease was contracted during their time in the service. These
economic effects of the Economy Act, therefore, were felt disproportionately among both
the Spanish-American and World War I members of the VFW. This partly explains the
VFW’s militant reaction to the Economy Act and the organization’s attempts to overturn

26 See *FS*, May, 1933 to February, 1934, and *National Tribune*, March, 1933 to February, 1934. Joseph F.
Markley, Commander of United Spanish War Veterans Camp No. 39, Camden, N.J., to FDR, March 18,
1933 in “Economy Program, 1933, N-O,” PPF 200f, Box 158, FDRL and Commander Frank D. Souder,
Camp Thomas Mahaffey War Veterans, Clearfield, Penn., telegram to FDR, March 13, 1933 in “Economy
Program, 1933, S,” PPF 200f, Box 158, FDRL.
it. It does not, however, adequately explain the ways in which the Economy Act was subsumed into a larger critique of the political and economic system. For this, one must explore the contours of veteran political ideology.²⁷

Historical memory shaped the political ideology informing the VFW’s reactions to the Economy Act and the New Deal. The veterans of the VFW expressed an understanding of the wars, particularly the Great War, that emphasized the role of the political economy in generating them. Spurred on by a wave of revisionist history throughout the 1920s and 1930s, veterans increasingly viewed the war as a conflict originating out of the financial ties between the United States’ financial institutions and those of Great Britain. According to this interpretation, American involvement in the Great War secured the House of Morgan’s loans and created thousands of new millionaires in the economic boom while veterans risked life and limb for little over a dollar a day. While no friend of revolution, the VFW echoed socialists’ critique of the Great War: it was a war fought by the masses of soldiers but, brought on by capitalists and industrialists for their own selfish gain.²⁸

For this reason, J.P. Morgan, Bernard Baruch, and Andrew Mellon, the three figures that personified the influence of wealth and power on the American political and economic system, received a disproportionate share of veteran vituperation. More importantly, these enemies and the organizations that they spoke through—the National


Economy League, the United States Chamber of Commerce, and the National Association of Manufacturers—outspokenly supported the reductions in veteran benefits effected by the Economy Act. The VFW enemies were often euphemistically labeled “Big Business” and “Wall Street” but, the ambiguity of those terms should not obscure the consistent pattern of opposition to veteran demands that emerged from conservative business and financial leaders. Veterans pinpointed their opposition and honed their political beliefs in contradistinction to those who were their enemies. If the episode of the Economy Act showed veterans anything, it was that they had correctly targeted the opposition. Whether FDR realized it or not, he had tied his Administration to this cast of villains.

Led by the VFW national organization, the political mobilization of veterans against the Economy Act quickly produced legislative results. Congress passed the Independent Offices Appropriation Act on June 16, 1933, rolling back some 100 million dollars in cuts, limiting reductions for those disabled in war to 25 percent, and creating ninety review boards for veterans to appeal their new classifications. Although FDR grudgingly signed the legislation, only his threat of a nationally broadcast veto message capped the restored benefits at 100 million dollars. Several considered amendments pushed for significantly greater restorations. Budget Director Douglas privately commented, “This veteran uprising is an outrage …. To think that a small group can intimidate Congress and what’s more FDR [sic] is discouraging.” VFW member, Senator Frederick Steiwer, a Senate leader for more generous restorations wrote an Oregon veteran, “we raised so much hell that I am reasonably hopeful that the President will further liberalize his regulations.” Literary Digest noted that the “Roosevelt
‘Honeymoon’ had ended, adding that “only in deference to veterans … did Congress interrupt its willingness to accept White House leadership.” Still, despite the attainment of these more amenable terms, veterans absorbed nearly 360 million in benefit reductions. The Independent Offices Appropriation Act only temporarily placated veteran unrest.29

For the VFW, the continuing fight over the Economy Act came to a climax at the 1933 VFW national encampment in Milwaukee. Proclaiming veteran legislation the number one priority, the VFW held a raucous national convention with a roster of speakers openly hostile to the Economy Act. As the list of invited speakers suggested, and the boisterous reception of the speeches confirmed, the veterans of the VFW agreed with the sentiments of Rep. Everett Dirksen when he noted that the Economy Act had become such a watershed in the relationship between veteran and the federal government that veterans would mark events in the future “as something that happened before the twentieth of March, on the twentieth of March, or after the twentieth of March.”30

The roster of guest speakers to the 1933 VFW encampment reflected the VFW's new position in the vanguard of veteran political activism. Prior to 1933, with the exception of Representative Wright Patman's address to the 1932 encampment during the height of the Bonus March uproar, local dignitaries and leaders of smaller veteran organizations dominated the podium of VFW national encampments. In 1933, however,


the VFW received a wide range of national figures who had opposed the Economy Act and were to become prominent during the 73rd and 74th Congresses. In 1933, the VFW encampment attendees heard addresses from Senators Elmer Thomas, Arthur R. Robinson, and Huey P. Long, and Representatives Gerald J. Boileau and Everett M. Dirksen. All opposed the Economy Act even if continued support for FDR varied. Robinson, Boileau, and Dirksen were VFW members; Boileau sat on the encampment’s Committee on Legislation. Moreover, the speakers at the VFW encampment ran the gamut of partisan politics: Republicans, Democrats, Farm-Laborites, and Progressives. Unsurprisingly, President Roosevelt declined an obligatory invitation to address the hostile encampment.31

The call for political mobilization against the Administration’s policies echoed throughout the 1933 encampment. The 10,000 veterans in attendance—some 2,000 official delegates alone—roared approval at the lengthy denunciations of the Economy Act resounding from the speakers’ platform. In numerous addresses, the call was militant, expressed in the well-worn rhetoric of the Great War and in thinly-veiled gender and class terms. Senator, and VFW member, Arthur Robinson proclaimed, “There is no time for mollycoddling, no time for silk stockings, but the moment has arrived … when the veterans of all wars must put on their shining armor and go forth to battle once again … and when this war is won, no one will dare again attempt to stab the veterans in the back.” Robinson denounced “the so-called ‘economy bill’” as the “most cruel, brutal, and

utterly indefensible act ever passed by a cowardly Congress.” Rice W. Means, past national commander of the VFW, ex-Senator from Colorado, and publisher of the national veteran publication, *National Tribune*, continued the assault in a ferocious attack on the FDR Administration. In response to American Legion Commander Johnson’s call for supporting the President, Means proclaimed, “I want to say to you I will never uphold the hand of the one who struck that cruel blow. We must not pussyfoot!” Means whipped the veterans into thunderous applause, exclaiming, “this economy act was conceived by income-tax dodgers. It was born of a result of ruthless, vicious propaganda….It is a stain upon the honor of the United States.” Major General Smedley D. Butler exhorted the crowd, “You’ve got to get mad. It’s time you woke up—it’s time you realized there’s another war on.”

Even some ostensible Administration allies urged VFW members to mobilize against the Economy Act. Recognizing the level of antagonism toward the Administration, Democratic Senator Elmer Thomas pleaded with the veterans not to give up on the Roosevelt Administration despite the admission that “a mistake was made.” While the bulk of Thomas’s address proposed to increase the purchasing power of ordinary Americans with an inflationary economic agenda including cash payment of the Bonus—all positions FDR opposed, Thomas’s comments drew the liveliest applause when he challenged the VFW members to continued political activism. Thomas exhorted the nominally apolitical, non-partisan VFW, “My friends, when everyone else in is in politics, this organization and no other can afford not to be in politics.” Thomas,

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continued, “I do not mean partisan politics….I mean patriotic politics. I mean economic politics.” Thomas concluded with the reason veterans needed to remain active, “So long as the [National] Economy League stays in politics, I want you to get in politics and stay there.” Thomas failed to mention FDR’s fundamental agreement with the National Economy League on this issue.33

The VFW furthered its standing as a center of New Deal dissent by inviting one of the most outspoken and controversial critics of the New Deal to address the encampment: Senator Huey P. Long. Long obliged by denigrating the Roosevelt Administration in a rancorous ninety-minute address.34 He repeated an oft-cited claim that he was responsible for FDR’s nomination at the 1932 Democratic convention and expressed hope that Roosevelt would get “back on the right track.” But he spent the majority of his speech to the VFW railing against the concentration of wealth and the FDR Administration’s reneged campaign promises to address that issue. Long attacked the Administration’s missteps such as the Economy Act and mocked the New Deal as ineffective. In an allegory criticizing the New Deal for not addressing the concentration of wealth, Long described a poker game in which the winner walks away from the table with 95 percent of the money, prompting the remaining players to ask for a “new deal.” Long responded, “Well what are you going to deal with? It isn’t going to do any good to break open a new deck of cards and deal another hand. The man has gone home with all the money!” Long proposed to redistribute wealth through sharp income and estate taxes,

33 Address of Senator Elmer Thomas, August 28, 1933, in 34th National Encampment of the VFW, 1933: 15-21.

34 Long’s appearance at the VFW Encampment came within a day of a much-publicized altercation at a Long Island country club in which Long received a probably well-deserved black eye. Dogged by reporters over the incident, Long addressed the encampment in what Brinkley calls “one of the surliest and most vituperative speeches he had ever made.” See Brinkley, Voices of Protest, 65-66 for story and quote.
and came out for immediate payment of the Bonus—all as measures to increase the purchasing power of ordinary Americans. Long told the assembled veterans that the Bonus “would do ten times the good the ‘sapling bill’ and the Recovery Act put together are doing.”

Long’s anti-New Deal diatribe found a receptive audience in the VFW members. The VFW veterans handed multiple questions to the stage for Long to answer and begged him to continue with cries of “Go ahead!” when Long began his concluding remarks. *Foreign Service* reported to the VFW membership that Long’s speech was “vociferously applauded” and his “wit” and “droll anecdotes” elicited “long laughter.” Moreover, the VFW members in attendance provided Long with more physical measures of approval. Rep. Everett Dirksen reminisced that after Long asked the VFW audience, “Fellows, do I have to put up with this?,” VFW members man-handled the reporters who were crowding in on the dais, smashing photographers’ cameras as the newspapermen were bum-rushed from the stage apron in a “real scuffle.” The *New York Times* summed up Long’s appearance with the headline, “Long Amid Bedlam Denounces Foes.”

Aside from applause and the donnybrook (no doubt intensified by the recently legalized beverage for which Milwaukee was famous), the VFW’s frustration with the limitations of the New Deal and agreement with Long’s dissenting political agenda can be measured in a more profound way. The 1933 VFW national encampment went on

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35 Address of Senator Huey Long, August 29, 1933, in *34th National Encampment of the VFW, 1933*: 31-39. The “sapling bill” was Long’s dismissive term for the Reforestation Act that created the Civilian Conservation Corps.

record with a spate of resolutions concerning the political economy of the country. The repeal of the Economy Act proved a popular resolution with numerous state delegations offering versions for consideration. The VFW actually endorsed the National Industrial Recovery Act and the National Recovery Administration (NRA) but, in a rather backhanded way. In the resolution, the VFW declared their loyalty to the United States Government and made it veterans’ patriotic duty to “respond to the national program” due to the severity of economic conditions. The bulk of the resolution, however, criticized the President and NRA for failing to “establish a definite relationship between price increase and payroll increase.” To the VFW members, the NRA failed to live up to its billing as an agency that would put money back into wage-earners pockets, not those of the industries it coordinated. The assembled delegates also passed resolutions reiterating their insistence on cash payment of the Bonus, calling for the reduction of interest on existing tax-exempt securities, and demanding the “universal draft” of industry and capital during times of war. However indirectly, these resolutions addressed the issue of concentrated wealth and its corollary, lack of purchasing power, and demonstrated a very consistent understanding of the existing political economy.37

Most notably, the encampment passed Resolution No. 64, stating the VFW’s position "heartily endorsing" a proposed constitutional amendment providing for the limitation of wealth. The VFW pledged “every effort possible to secure [the] enactment … of this humanitarian proposal.” According to the resolution, the amendment would "benefit the entire Nation and all out people [sic] by distributing wealth, limiting income, and making spending power more equitable than is possible at present." Seamlessly, the

37 34th National Encampment of the VFW, 1933: 253-269.
VFW wove the problems of the Depression, the concentration of wealth, and popular veteran understandings of the causes of wars into the language of the resolution. According to the veteran delegates, the amendment would “through the elimination of huge fortunes, with their attending greed and selfishness, serve to limit the possibilities of future wars.”

The debate on, and passage of, this resolution proved contentious and demonstrated the controversial nature of such a declaration. The Committee on Resolutions initially rejected the resolution after a sharp exchange between the delegates. The exchange underscored tensions felt by veterans committed to “stamping out” Communism yet, considering a constitutional amendment limiting wealth. Comrade Cullen from Prairie Du Chein, Wisconsin, Post 1945, pointed out the VFW members’ oath to uphold the Constitution, including the protection of “life, liberty, and property.” Cullen continued, “Whenever this Government undertakes to limit anything of that kind, it is the first step toward bolshevism.” Cullen contended the resolution should be thrown out even though he was “in favor of the poor man all the way through”. In defense of the resolution, Comrade Thomson exhibited a fervor that showed the effects of Long’s address to the encampment. At times employing Long’s rhetoric and even exact phrases, Thomson exhorted the committee, “Let’s get organized; let’s get hot; let’s go places; let’s can this idea of two percent of the country owning ninety-five percent of the wealth!” Thomson concluded that with the limitation of wealth, the “fellow who lost his leg in France gets $100 and no 10 percent cut from now on.” Despite Thomson’s spirit, the committee disapproved of the resolution since it referred to the specific Congressman

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38 34th National Encampment of the VFW, 1933: 255.
who proposed the constitutional amendment. However, the encampment ultimately approved of the resolution as written, passing the measure over the Resolutions committee’s objections. This and the other resolutions challenged the VFW leaderships’ claims that there was “little or no tendency toward radical thought or action” and that “a spirit of conservatism, coupled with aggressive determination, seemed to prevail” during the encampment.39

On September 22, 1933, newly-elected Commander James E. Van Zandt brought the VFW’s agenda directly to the White House. In a brief meeting with FDR, Van Zandt “described the wide-spread suffering that has been caused among disabled veterans” including the “vicious penalties upon the more than 175,000 veterans of the War with Spain” and the “plight of more than 400,000 disabled World War veterans … thrust upon local community charities.” Van Zandt issued an “emphatic plea for the President’s cooperation and tolerant consideration of policies” adopted by the Milwaukee encampment. Reiterating the encampment’s mandate—opposition to the Economy Act and continued support for immediate cash payment of the Bonus, Van Zandt garnered little sympathy from FDR on either issue. Moreover, Van Zandt described the organization’s expansive view of the federal responsibility for veterans, enumerating three “fundamental” principles of veteran legislation: adequate relief for veterans with service-connected disabilities, relief to veterans “suffering from disabilities due either to injury, disease, or old age, who are unable to carry on,” and relief to widows and orphans “regardless of the cause of the veteran’s death.” The VFW’s articulation of these

principles, in direct opposition to the very basis of the Economy Act, possibly crystallized plans for FDR to address the upcoming American Legion national convention in Chicago.\footnote{Commander James E. Van Zandt to the President, Sept. 22, 1933, in “VFW, 1933-1936,” PPF 87, FDRL and Foreign Service, November, 1933: 12.}

While the VFW’s militancy throughout 1933 undoubtedly influenced FDR’s decision to decline the pro forma invitation to address the organization, FDR chose to address the more hospitable Legion convention as a way to undermine veteran unrest. An internal White House memoranda describing why FDR should attend this gathering of veterans indicated the depth of veteran resentment and the political stakes at risk. The writer, John C. Fischer of the Board of Veteran Appeals, described the political calculations of the veteran situation. He argued, “Someone must speak” to pacify the angry veterans and only the President with his “magnificent personality” could “escape unscathed.” The political clout associated with the voting bloc of veterans and their relatives represented “one sixth of our citizenry” and this was a necessary engagement to insure the future “success of the Administration’s programs.” Fischer also pointed to the short-term legislative concerns, noting that only FDR’s presence could “forestall legislation calculated to emasculate the Economy Act and will mollify the radicals and disarm a thoroughly aroused and recalcitrant Congress … deluged with veterans’ appeals.” Legion Commander Johnson promised FDR “the greatest reception of your life.”\footnote{John C. Fischer to Stephen F. Early, Sept. 15, 1933 in “American Legion, July-Dec., 1933,” OF 64, Box 1, FDRL. Johnson quoted in Pencak, For God and Country, 194.}
On October, 2, 1933, in an effort to undercut veteran resentment, FDR addressed the Legion national convention. In his speech, FDR acknowledged the Government’s responsibility to care for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the dependents of those killed in action. Yet, FDR bluntly rebuffed further demands by veterans, and specifically, the VFW, claiming, “no person, because he wore a uniform must thereafter be placed in a special class of beneficiaries over and above all other citizens.” FDR continued, “the fact of wearing a uniform does not mean that he can demand and receive from his Government a benefit which no other citizen receives.” Afterward, Commander Johnson wrote FDR and assured the him that only his presence allowed the Legion leaders to reverse the mandate of the 1932 Legion convention supporting immediate payment of the bonus and quieted the clamor to rescind the Economy Act. The New York Times called the convention “a victory for the conservative element,” leaving “little doubt of the ability of the Legion’s leadership to hold its members in line … with the Administration.” Despite FDR’s success in pacifying the Legion convention, his words further inflamed the VFW.42

The VFW issued sharp rebuttals to FDR’s remarks. Many VFW members agreed that the wearing of a uniform did not entitle veterans to benefits, but found it incomprehensible that this would apply to overseas and combat veterans, too. Frank O. Gangwish, commander of Post 12 in Pittsburgh, informed FDR, “We are writing you, Mr. President, to let you know that we do not agree with you. We believe that the man who donned a uniform in time of war is entitled to special benefits not enjoyed by the

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42 FDR speech to American Legion Convention, October 2, 1933, in PPF: Speeches, Box 15, FDRL.

Louis A. Johnson to FDR, October 9, 1933, in “American Legion, 1933,” PPF 350, FDRL. NYT, October 3and 7, 1933.
man who stayed home and earned from fifteen to fifty dollars a day while we were fighting at the front.” Commander Van Zandt issued a statement reiterating the VFW’s liberal position on veteran benefits, claiming that the veteran’s “welfare today is exclusively a federal responsibility.” The *Foreign Service* editorial page assaulted FDR’s speech as an abrupt departure from long-held American views concerning veterans. In an editorial entitled “Ideals Ignored,” the VFW pointed out “the radicalism of the ‘new deal’ Administration on veteran issues.” Moreover, the VFW leadership predicted, “If Franklin D. Roosevelt believes for one moment that his drastic theories on the problem of veteran welfare reflect the wishes of the American people, he is indeed due for a sad awakening at the hands of an aroused Congress.” VFW artist Lake penned the scornful accompanying drawing. In “Old Ideals vs. ‘New Deals’”(Figure 3-4), statements from Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt concerning the federal obligation to veterans contrasted with FDR’s “new deal” departure. The imagery rendered the drawing an especially harsh condemnation of FDR. Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt stood sternly and statesman-like while FDR, cigarette holder prominently displayed, was drawn with an effeminate, whimsical visage.43

In October, 1933, the VFW initiated an intense publicity drive to bring attention to the plight of veterans and to galvanize opposition to the Economy Act. VFW legislative chairman, George Brobeck instituted a “nine point program” to utilize the network of VFW local posts, radio broadcasts, and VFW national publications in the effort. The VFW leadership launched a recruiting drive on Armistice Day, calling it the “Veterans’ Defense Rally, (figure 3-5).” With the goal of bringing 100,000 new members

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43 Emphasis added, Commander Frank O. Gangwisch to FDR, in “Soldier’s Bonus, 1933,” OF 95c, Box 2, FDRL. *Foreign Service*, November, 1933: 12 and December, 1933: 4-5.
into the fold (‘up to ‘war strength’,” according to the announcement), the VFW leadership dubbed the recruiting drive “a counter-attack against the Economy Act.” In support of the “Veterans’ Defense Rally,” Commander Van Zandt was a dynamo. Speaking on nationally broadcast radio programs almost weekly with addresses such as “The VFW Legislative Policy for the Coming Year,” Van Zandt called for the total repeal of the Economy Act and immediate cash payment of the Bonus over the NBC and CBS national networks. Throughout the winter of 1933-34, Van Zandt continually traveled the country to address and recruit veterans for the VFW and win public support for the VFW agenda. Throughout his travels, Van Zandt called on veterans to write their Congressmen and Senators demanding action on the repeal of the Economy Act.44

In December, 1933, a national speaking tour headed by Van Zandt and the extremely popular Marine Maj. Gen. Smedley D. Butler drew national media attention to the VFW’s mobilization efforts. Butler, recently retired to the lecture circuit, commanded huge veteran audiences everywhere he spoke. For recruiting purposes, the VFW published Butler’s “You Got to Get Mad” address to the 1933 encampment in Foreign Service.

The VFW also realized that Butler was a real asset for obtaining national media attention. Van Zandt and Butler’s tour, spanning ten cities across the Mid-west and South in eleven days, garnered reporting from the New York Times even when they were in the Deep South. A Roosevelt supporter in 1932, Butler now decried the Administration’s cozy alliance with “Big Business.” His animated harangues against “Wall Street” and

44 National Tribune, October 26, 1933 and November 2, 1933; and Foreign Service, December, 1933: 16-17. NYT, September 28, 1933 and October 29, 1933. See Foreign Service, October, 1933 to April, 1934 for Van Zandt’s breakneck tour of VFW posts across the nation and radio addresses.
calls for veteran political activism energized veteran audiences. Veterans—and reporters—loved Butler’s salty language and colorful analogies. In Omaha, Nebraska, Butler “launched a stormy attack against capitalists, blaming them for the National Economy Act.” In New Orleans, Butler shared the dais with Huey Long at a VFW rally and told the veterans, ”I believe in making Wall Street pay for it—taking Wall Street by the throat and shaking it up.” In Atlanta, he explained, “Jimmie [Van Zandt] and I are going around the country trying to educate the soldiers out of the sucker class.”

45 National Tribune, December, 14, 1933; NYT, Dec. 10, 1933; and Atlanta Constitution, Dec. 11, 1933.
The VFW leadership recognized the importance of continued, militant veteran political activism to the forthcoming Congressional session. Accordingly, the VFW’s mobilization efforts picked up intensity. In the January, 1934 issue of *Foreign Service*, VFW legislative representative Brobeck notified members that “‘Fire at Will’ is the command to veterans as Congress convenes.” Brobeck explained to VFW members that the organization’s militancy was the only way to affect the repeal of the Economy Act. He proclaimed, “the time has passed when the veterans of this country should come with their hands outstretched, humbly begging their pittance.” In the new era of veteran political activism sparked by the Economy Act, Brobeck announced, “all over the country former service men under the leadership of the VFW are awakening to their responsibility as ‘soldier-citizens.’” With this inversion, “soldier-citizen” from “citizen-soldier,” Brobeck stressed the level of veteran militancy sought by VFW leadership.
Commander Van Zandt reaffirmed the organization’s stance, “The time for politeness and modesty is past. We have reached the stage where fighting—and fighting only—will convince our enemies that we mean business.”

Echoing the “nine-point program” instituted the previous fall, the VFW leadership called on its members to write their elected officials demanding repeal of the Economy Act. Brobeck exhorted his comrades, “Keep up your letters to the Congressmen and Senators …. Fire at will!” Major-General Butler advised the VFW members, “What you’ve got to do now, beginning this minute, is to make this battle a personal battle. You’ve got to tell your Senators and Congressmen what you want and why you want it.”

The February *Foreign Service* issue ran a special announcement from the VFW leadership urging members—and non-veterans alike—to “Write Those Letters!” The leadership pressed veterans, “Don’t worry about the spelling—don’t worry about the grammar! Write these letters in your own words, telling just how you feel about these matters.” Even though the announcement said veterans should write in their “own words,” it also included detailed instructions on how to address their Representatives and Senators: “Make your letters firm and militant. Let them know you and your relatives and your friends are prepared to vote against them at the next election if they play traitor to the veteran cause. This is no time to be courteous and polite!”

The statement also demonstrated how effective the organizational structure of the VFW could be in mobilizing national protest. The leadership requested that Post commanders distribute “a printed list of the names and addresses of all members of Congress from their respective

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districts” and “call a special meeting of your Post immediately and conduct a ‘letter writing bee.’”

Once again, editorial artist Lake graphically depicted the VFW viewpoint, this time on the power of veteran political activism. As the drawing “Happy New Year(?)” (Figure 3-6) showed, the veteran protest stirred up by the VFW would be the basis for a Congressional revolt against the injustice of the Economy Act. Lake characterized the growing clamor for the repeal of the Economy Act as a tornado with “veteran protest” kicking up the funnel cloud of an “Approaching Session of Congress.” As the twister heads toward the White House, tiny Administration officials scurried inside for safety, powerless to avert the coming tempest. This message conveyed by this image became prophetic as the 1934 Congressional session undertook the repeal of the Economy Act.

The power of veteran political activism over a Congress facing re-election proved too forceful for the Administration to suppress. In March of 1934, the passage of a second Independent Offices Bill all but repealed the Economy Act. Once the Roosevelt Administration recognized the likelihood of major revisions to the Economy Act, multiple attempts ensued to water down the restorations in cuts. The VFW Legislative Committee, however, asked Congressional allies to reject any compromise proposal floated by the Administration limiting the restoration of benefits even if it meant a Presidential veto. Foreign Service glorified the decision, the “leaders of the VFW, inspired by the knowledge that they were fighting for a cause that was just and honest, declined to be a party to this type of treason.” FDR indeed vetoed the resulting bill but,

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48 Foreign Service, January, 1934: 5.
on March 29, 1934, both houses of Congress handily overrode the veto. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes complained in his diary that the members of the House “man after man, like so many scared rabbits, ran to cover out of fear of the soldier vote.”

Figure 3-6. “Happy New Year(?)” Foreign Service, January, 1934. Reprinted by permission of the VFW.

The Independent Offices bill handed FDR his first significant Congressional defeat. Ickes confided that the veto override dealt FDR “his first serious political setback” and “a serious blow to his economy program.” Arthur Krock, the New York Times’ political commentator called the veto override “the President’s first Manassas,” pointing out that FDR’s “supreme control of the parliamentary arm lasted a year and twenty-four days.” The Boston Herald noted that the veto override offered “a grim warning that the veterans are in the saddle again and they have always ridden hard.” The editors of

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Foreign Service gloated, “the potency of organized veteran pressure was ably demonstrated … when Congress rode roughshod over a Presidential veto.” Commander Van Zandt issued a victory statement claiming, “Congress has demonstrated it will no longer tolerate dictatorship.”

Emboldened by the triumph, the VFW redoubled its energy toward the immediate cash payment of the Bonus and continued to voice dissatisfaction with Administration policy. Meanwhile, on February 23, 1934, somewhat lost in the hullabaloo over the second Independent Offices Act, Huey Long delivered a nationally broadcast speech touting his new political organization, the Share Our Wealth Society. In this speech outlining the organization’s platform and purpose, Long asserted, “We ought to take care of the veterans of the wars in this program … Every man that wore the uniform of this country is entitled to be taken care of.” On February 25, 1934, Father Coughlin, who in 1933 had endorsed FDR’s positions on both the Economy Act and the Bonus, reversed course by calling for the immediate payment of the Bonus on his weekly broadcast. The battle for the Bonus would keep the VFW in the vanguard of New Deal dissent.

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The Economy Act of 1933 precipitated a groundswell of political mobilization by the VFW. As a result, the VFW formed the vanguard of a slowly coalescing group of New Deal Dissidents. While the vilification of the Economy Act emerged as a unifying theme, veterans quickly subsumed the Economy Act into a larger indictment of the

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50 Ickes, ibid; NYT, March 30, 1934; Boston Herald, March 29, 1934; Foreign Service, May, 1934: 5; and NYT, March 30, 1934.

existing political economy. By weaving the causes and results of the Great War, the causes of the Depression, and the corrosive influence of “Big Business” on the political and legislative processes, the VFW extended a seamless critique of the American political and economic system. With the Economy Act and the loss of substantial veteran benefits as the pretext, the VFW issued a very clear renunciation of the Roosevelt Administration, decrying the New Deal’s failure to reshape the political economy as many veterans had hoped. Predating both Long and Coughlin’s organizations, VFW veterans became founding members, and the VFW national organization, an early meeting ground, of an otherwise loosely organized Depression-era movement. The VFW’s sophisticated organizational network, energized national leadership, national publications and meetings, high-profile spokesmen, and ready access to print and radio media provided the early organizational structure and the means of national conveyance for New Deal dissent. Indeed, the VFW articulated early and crucial “voices of protest.”
A showdown between veterans and the Administration in the near future seems inevitable.  
VFW editorial, Foreign Service, March, 1934.\(^1\)

Although the spotlight shifted away from the Bonus after its Senate defeat in 1932, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Congressional allies never wavered in their call for the immediate cash payment of veterans’ adjusted service certificates. From the start of the 73rd Congress in 1933 until the spring of 1934, however, the rearguard battle to restore veteran benefits cut by the Economy Act sidetracked supporters of the Patman Bonus Bill. Moreover, FDR’s adamant opposition to the Bonus and the concerted efforts of the Administration’s powerful Congressional allies succeeded in scuttling any attempted Bonus legislation. In February, 1934, though, concurrent with the dismantling of the Economy Act, House Bonus supporters secured the necessary petition signatures to discharge the Patman Bonus Bill onto the Congressional docket. As a result, the Bonus reemerged on the national political scene with a vengeance, commanding daily front-page newspaper attention and wide-spread commentary.

Although under-appreciated in the historical literature of the New Deal, from 1934 to 1936 the Bonus became one of the most emotionally-charged political issues of the Depression era. The Bonus provoked this contentious political mobilization because the issue transcended the very limited aims of an immediate cash payment to veterans.

\(^1\) Foreign Service, March, 1934: 27.
Indeed, the Bonus developed into a political litmus test. Bonus opponents feared that cash payment would be the final nail in the coffin of fiscal responsibility and would prove that governmental largesse had reached pathological proportions. Bonus supporters, including the VFW, protested that the New Deal had not yet gone far enough in recalibrating the economic system to the advantage of ordinary citizens. They argued that immediate payment to suffering veterans and their families would provide an economic stimulus in every community and would help lift the nation out of the Depression. Considering the array of conservatives and business groups allied against them, supporters believed that the fight over the Bonus was a zero-sum contest pitting Wall Street against Main Street.²

The Congressional session beginning in January, 1934, pitted a newly energized insurgent faction in Congress against the Roosevelt Administration. The insurgents, described by one national periodical as “the veterans’ bloc,” clamored for the resolution of two issues in direct and open opposition to Administration policy: the dismantling of the Economy Act and the immediate cash payment of the Bonus.³ Indeed, in the early months of 1934, these two veterans’ issues dominated national political debate. While Chapter 3 discussed the VFW’s antipathy to the Economy Act and the organization’s massive political mobilization in the winter of 1933-1934 for its repeal, this chapter focuses on the organization’s fight for the Bonus. For the purpose of analysis, the two

² To date, little dialogue exists between scholars who study the political history of the New Deal and the handful of scholars who have investigated veteran political activism for the Bonus. While quick to discuss the Bonus March of 1932 and to contrast it with FDR’s humane treatment of subsequent Bonus Marchers, historians of New Deal politics dismiss the fight for the Bonus from 1934 to 1936 as a minor episode, insignificant to the larger New Deal political narrative. Arthur M. Schlesinger’s classic narrative of the period, for example, devotes two perfunctory paragraphs separated by nearly 500 pages of text to the Bonus fight and its ultimate passage. See Schlesinger, The Politics of Upheaval, 10, 504. Meanwhile, scholars such as Roger Daniels, William Pencak, and Jennifer Keene who have studied veteran activism for the Bonus, either do so through the lens of the Bonus March or do not link the 1934-1936 battle to the larger political milieu.

³ NYT, March 10, 1934.
issues are disentangled. In early 1934, however, the Congressional revolt against the Economy Act and the re-emergence of the Bonus were inextricably linked. The VFW and the “veteran bloc” in Congress continually coupled the issues. Political reporting on the Congressional revolt also connected the issues, attributing the success of veteran lobbying to the upcoming mid-term elections. New York Times political columnist Arthur Krock called the veteran protests “skillful and forceful” and observed that the importance of “the activity of the veterans’ lobbies in the nominating primaries” had “frightened many Representatives and a large percentage of the Senate into voting against the White House.” Thus, led by the VFW’s political mobilization begun in 1933 on the Economy Act, veterans put their collective imprint on the 1934 legislative session.4

In 1934, the Veterans of Foreign Wars continued its high-profile political activism in this renewed battle for the Bonus. The VFW faced extraordinary obstacles: the opposition of a popular president, powerful administration allies in Congress who sought to suppress the legislation, and a recalcitrant American Legion unwilling to cross the Administration on this issue. Despite these steep odds, the VFW championed the push for Bonus payment. During the intense campaign, the VFW gained prominent allies in national political figures Senator Huey P. Long and Father Charles E. Coughlin. Moreover, in the spring of 1934, by tenaciously bringing the Bonus onto the Congressional docket, the VFW’s political activism precipitated a Congressional revolt against the FDR Administration. Although Bonus opponents in the Senate did eventually succeed in temporarily derailing the Patman Bonus Bill, veteran political activism sparked by the VFW became a powerful and divisive force in the New Deal political

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4 NYT, February 28 and March 29, 1934.
arena. Openly critical of the FDR Administration’s reluctance to stand up for ordinary citizens against Wall Street, the VFW became the vanguard of New Deal dissent.

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In 1934, the Veterans of Foreign Wars orchestrated veteran protests in support of the Bonus and led the lobbying effort against Administration policy. Even during the VFW campaign for repeal of the Economy Act, the VFW leadership never shied away from expressing the organization’s support for the Bonus. National Commander Van Zandt and spokesperson Maj. Gen. Smedley D. Butler always mentioned the VFW’s fight for immediate payment in the continual rounds of rallies, radio addresses, and meetings they headlined. The Foreign Service editorial page featuring the drawing of the “veteran protest” tempest (Figure 3-6) explained that the Economy Act battle did not derail the organization’s demands for the Bonus. An editorial proclaimed, “With Congress about to convene, the demand for an increased amount of currency in circulation will be pushed more vigorously than ever by the VFW in its fight for cash payment.” The American Legion’s refusal to endorse cash payment of the Bonus at its 1933 national gathering complicated the campaign but did not deter it. As the new Congressional session began, the VFW leadership pledged to veterans, “Although this cause has been definitely deserted by other veteran groups, the VFW is clinging to this objective in its program with characteristic tenacity.”

Throughout 1933, the Patman Bonus Bill (H.R. 1) wallowed in the Ways and Means Committee, stifled by the Roosevelt Administration’s powerful Congressional allies who served on the committee. In December, 1933, however, the VFW pinned its

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hopes on a discharge petition started earlier in the year by their Farm-Laborite, and Spanish-American War veteran, ally Rep. Ernest Lundeen (Farm-Labor, Min.). Lundeen and the VFW needed 145 signatures on the petition to bypass the recalcitrant Ways and Means committee and send the Patman Bonus Bill to the House floor for a vote. Ironically, Rep. Wright Patman (Dem., Tex.), author of the bill, initially did not sign the petition in deference to the Administration. Indeed, signing the petition proved no small matter for Democrats, as it rested on House Speaker (and staunch FDR ally) Rainey’s desk, an obvious but effective form of political intimidation. Therefore, Lundeen and the legislative committee of the VFW worked “side by side” to collect petition signatures even though the bill’s author did not aid in the effort.6

In late 1933, fewer than sixty signatures adorned the Lundeen petition. But, in January and February of 1934, with the Congressional revolt on veteran issues well underway, Lundeen’s petition quickly filled with names. On February 18, the Lundeen petition reached 113 signatures. Two days later, Lundeen and the VFW picked up the signature of the Patman Bill’s author, quickly followed by the remainder of the necessary signatures. Just before the last signature was collected, Speaker of the House Rainey returned from a White House meeting and proclaimed, “I am authorized by the President to say this is not the time to pay the bonus and he cannot approve any legislation to that effect.” The threat did not work. The New York Times noted, “advocates of the bonus broke loose in the House today in the face of a warning of a veto by President Roosevelt.” In all, ninety-seven Democrats split with the White House in signing the

petition. Forty-three Republicans and the entire Farm-Laborite delegation joined them. By discharging the Patman Bonus Bill, Bonus supporters secured a House vote on the bill scheduled for March 12, 1934.7

The VFW instantly mobilized to lobby Congress on the Bonus vote, challenging the White House’s opposition to immediate payment. Commander Van Zandt quickly issued a statement to the press claiming sole credit for the organization in the successful petition campaign. Van Zandt recognized the VFW stood alone but noted, “we know that we have the support of the rank and file of all ex-servicemen and all clear thinking citizens.” He explained that the Bonus would be an important additional measure in the President’s economic recovery plan and predicted the Bonus bill would pass both the House and Senate. Van Zandt expressed hope that it would pass by wide enough margin to discourage the “defiant challenge” of a White House veto. Yet, the VFW leadership bluntly predicted “a showdown between veterans and the Administration in the near future seems inevitable.”8

VFW commander Van Zandt provoked the showdown by badgering the Administration over the Bonus. On February 28, hours after yet another FDR threat of veto, Van Zandt fired off a sharply worded telegram to FDR. Van Zandt demanded that FDR “make public your objections to immediate cash payment.” After listing the litany of reasons for supporting the Bonus in the telegram, Van Zandt told FDR, “we are honestly convinced that our recommendations are justified by your desire to increase the

7 Foreign Service, March, 1934: 9, 27. For Rainey quotation, NYT, February 21, 1934. For extensive coverage of the Lundeen discharge, see NYT and WSJ, February 19-22, 1934; and Daniels, The Bonus March, 228-229.

8 Foreign Service, March, 1934: 22, 27.
purchasing power of the masses.” Van Zandt requested an explanation for the veterans of the nation since, “in asking [them] to abandon all hope of your favor on this issue, [they are] at least entitled to a statement that will make clear your views on this subject and why it fails to warrant your approval.” A hand-written margin note from the President’s clerical secretary to his personal assistant Marvin H. McIntyre revealed the frustration elicited by this telegram, “Mac: President says ‘How ----- do you answer it?’” VFW headquarters released a copy of the telegram to the national press wires to pressure the Administration, but the Administration ultimately ignored it rather than cave to such an aggressive demand.9

In the weeks between the discharge and the vote on the Bonus, Van Zandt rallied veterans to lobby Congress in multiple radio addresses and countless personal appearances across the country. On March 9, 1934, Van Zandt and discharge petition sponsor Lundeen spoke on a nation-wide VFW program broadcast over the NBC network. They emphasized the importance of swamping Congress with personal letters demanding a favorable vote on the Patman Bonus Bill. The national headquarters also issued “battle orders” to all Post commanders and individual members for “a bombardment of both the House and Senate with continued demands for support of pending legislation.” The VFW leadership instructed veterans to threaten House members that the vote “will be watched back home by thousands of voters.” The leadership hoped

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that with enough lobbying pressure, a decisive victory might change the Administration’s attitude. Van Zandt exhorted members, “Let’s get wise and mobilize!”

Even before the Bonus measure came to a vote, the VFW garnered the rewards of its position as veterans rushed to the VFW banner. From November, 1933, to March, 1934, the VFW initiated 164 new posts. In February and March alone, the organization added well over a post a day, including four in Chicago, three in Cleveland, and four in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, as well as posts in Centralia, Washington, and in more rural locales of Oklahoma, Montana, and Nebraska. The widespread growth of the organization indicated the support veterans were giving to the Bonus push despite the Legion’s opposition. In the spring of 1934, VFW leadership gloated over the institutional gains. National Adjutant General, R.B. Handy, Jr., issued an announcement in a national veteran publication proclaiming, “the Veterans of Foreign Wars is still the fastest growing veterans organization in the country.” Handy emphasized the VFW’s fight for the bonus as the key to its growth noting, “the majority of veterans agree with us and wish to cooperate in our efforts” as proven by the “large numbers by which they are joining the VFW.” On the gains in membership, Commander Van Zandt wryly observed, “All over the country the overseas men are flocking to our standard. I guess they like the way we fight.”

Bonus opponents in the National Economy League attempted to minimize the VFW’s importance in veteran affairs. Yet, in a letter sent to all Congressional members, the National Economy League inadvertently highlighted the VFW’s role in procuring the

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10 Foreign Service, April, 1934: 22, 27.

11 Post totals in Foreign Service, December, 1933 to April, 1934. Handy quote in National Tribune, May 17, 1934. Van Zandt quote in NYT, April 7, 1934 and National Tribune, April 19, 1934.
discharge petition by noting, “the ‘bonus act’ does not even come from a representative
group of veterans.” The statement continued, “it comes from a single organization whose
membership only represents an insignificant percentage of the veterans of the World
War.” In a letter to the editor of the New York Times, VFW commander Van Zandt
blasted the idea that the VFW represented only a minority view of World War veterans as
“absurd” pointing out that 3 million of the 3.5 million veterans holding adjusted service
certificates had already borrowed up to 50 percent against them. Van Zandt claimed that
these veterans were “naturally in favor of immediate cash payment of the balance due
which they stand in danger of losing because of compound interest charges on the money
they have borrowed.” Whether the majority of veterans supported immediate payment or
not, the VFW and Bonus supporters soon picked up key endorsements from two of the
most recognizable political figures of the era.12

After the reappearance of the Patman Bonus Bill, the VFW received continued
backing from Senator Huey P. Long in the battle for payment of the Bonus. In fact,
Long’s unqualified support for veterans became an important plank in the agenda of his
new national political organization. On February 23, 1934, just three days after the
Patman Bonus Bill discharge, Long addressed a national radio audience on the creation of
his Share Our Wealth Society (SOWS). In this speech outlining the organization’s
platform and purpose, Long asserted, “We ought to take care of the veterans of the wars
in this program …. Every man that wore the uniform of this country is entitled to be

12 National Economy League statement in NYT, March 5, 1934.
taken care of.” Of course the limitation of wealth formed the centerpiece of the SOWS, a measure the VFW national organization already endorsed in the 1933 encampment.\textsuperscript{13}

Long’s cooperation with the VFW extended to the Senate floor. In the debate over the Independent Offices Bill, Long offered an amendment that would pay the Bonus in terms identical to the VFW-endorsed Patman Bonus Bill. In the cantankerous debate, Administration Senate allies read aloud a message from FDR to Speaker of the House Rainey that put FDR’s opposition to the bill in unmistakable terms. FDR’s message read, “I [will] veto the bill, and I don’t care who you tell this to.” The Long amendment fell in a 64-24 vote. In the spring of 1934, Long took to wearing a VFW lapel pin while on the Senate floor even though he was not a veteran, much less an overseas veteran. Long’s display of the VFW lapel pin drew contemptuous jeers from other Senators, particularly the veteran (and American Legion founding member) Senator Bennett C. Clark. When pressed on the matter, Long jauntily responded that he had received honorary membership in the organization.\textsuperscript{14}

The re-emergence of the Bonus issue also provoked commentary from the Radio Priest, Father Charles E. Coughlin. In one of the first public signs of strains in the Coughlin-Roosevelt relationship, Coughlin returned to the issue that he had promoted throughout the Hoover Administration but had been silent on in deference to FDR’s position. On February 25, 1934, the first Sunday following the Bonus discharge, Coughlin used his weekly radio address to advance his banking and monetary policies. In

\textsuperscript{13} Long’s “Every Man A King” address, reprinted in Henry M. Christman, ed. Kingfish to America: Share Our Wealth (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 44. See VFW resolution No. 64, 34\textsuperscript{th} National Encampment of the VFW, 1933: 255.

\textsuperscript{14} NYT, February 28 and April 6, 1934.
the address, however, Coughlin turned to the ‘vexed question’ of the Bonus and reversed course significantly from his initial cooperation with the FDR administration.\(^\text{15}\)

Noting that the Bonus “comes again to our national attention,” Coughlin emphatically placed himself in favor of immediate payment and, therefore, in open opposition to the Roosevelt Administration’s determined policy. He asserted that he supported the payment but not if it were paid in “banker’s money.” “Banker’s money,” to Coughlin, referred to the floating of governmental bonds to pay the bonus, bonds which would end up in the hands of bankers collecting tax-exempt interest. Coughlin also viewed the Patman Bill’s method of payment, the printing of money against revaluated gold, with suspicion, asking, “Why should we help to restore a bankers’ prosperity employing this method of payment?” Instead, Coughlin called on ex-soldiers to support the “nationalization of credit” as the means to secure immediate payment of the Bonus. He exhorted, “Veterans—your bonus must be paid not with borrowed money, not with banker’s money—but with nationalized credit money. Get this first—the bonus will follow!” Coughlin addressed ex-soldiers directly in his radio talk, “Do you realize that you did not fight in vain to save the world for democracy? I do not mean the political democracy … I mean the financial democracy which now has the kings and princes of finance whining for mercy.” Coughlin exhorted the veterans to political action, “Do you realize that if one or two million of you ex-servicemen raise your voices in unison you

can finish this cruel capitalism that caused the war through its mad policy of production for profit?"\textsuperscript{16}

The differences between the Patman Bonus Bill and Coughlin’s plan of national credit were minor. Both plans supported the Bonus as a means of inflation and as an economic stimulus, spreading 2.5 billion dollars across the entire nation. Both Patman and Coughlin regarded the use of bonds to pay the Bonus as anathema. Indeed, Wright Patman and Coughlin had long shared common goals and a working relationship in support of their monetary plans. Both Patman and Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas, the House and Senate sponsors of inflationary Bonus legislation, openly aligned themselves with the Radio Priest. Likewise, Patman and Thomas united with the VFW on the Bonus issue. In fact, the differences between the Patman Bill and Coughlin’s plan for the Bonus were so negligible that the VFW organization considered the Coughlin speech an important endorsement.\textsuperscript{17}

VFW National Commander James E. Van Zandt quickly seized upon Coughlin’s renewed interest in Bonus payment. In a statement issued from VFW National Headquarters, Van Zandt pointed out that Coughlin’s call for immediate cash payment signaled a change of direction. Fully aware of Coughlin’s vocal defense of the Administration’s position on the Economy Act and the Bonus during the previous year, Van Zandt used the speech as evidence that public opinion was beginning to shift on the issue. In the statement, Van Zandt repeatedly tied the organization to Coughlin’s position and reputation as a monetary specialist. Van Zandt noted, “The VFW agrees with Father

\textsuperscript{16} Coughlin, \textit{Eight Lectures on Labor, Capital, and Justice}, 95-98 and \textit{NYT}, February 26, 1934.

\textsuperscript{17} For Patman and Coughlin relationship, see Young, \textit{Wright Patman}, 38, 55, 64-65. For Thomas and Coughlin, see Brinkley, \textit{Voices of Protest}, 121, 138.
Coughlin that to finance the payment of the bonus through bankers would retard recovery and neutralize the benefits that otherwise would be shared by industries and commerce.” Van Zandt proclaimed that Coughlin “very ably describes the process by which all the benefits of inflation may be obtained without the usual aftermath of inflationary experiments by simply paying an acknowledged debt.” Thus, the VFW had gained another important, albeit controversial, ally.18

On March 12, 1934, the House took up the Patman Bonus Bill. First, the House needed to vote on whether to discharge the bill from the Ways and Means Committee. Only then could the Patman Bill be voted upon. With the galleries filled beyond capacity, Bonus supporters routed the opposition by tallies of 313-104 and 295-125 on the respective votes. Two hundred and thirty-five Democrats defied their party leadership by voting for the measure, reaching the two-thirds majority necessary to over-ride a veto. The House debate over these votes bordered on bedlam. In a scene described as “disorder at point of chaos,” Bonus supporters shouted down Democratic Administration allies and conservative Republicans with equal disregard. Long-serving House members called the episode “the most disorderly” they had ever witnessed. The New York Times editorial page ridiculed the Congressional revolt against the Administration, noting a grave error in political calculus. The editors scoffed at the “scattered, intangible, and largely non-existent ‘soldier vote’” courted by Representatives. Columnist Arthur Krock blamed the “wild and unseasoned quality” of some of the Democrats and the “radicals of all stripes” that were voted into the House in 1932. Regardless, the Congressional revolt against the Administration over the Bonus dominated the news. Moreover, the revolt succeeded with

18 National Tribune, March 8, 1934.
no support from the American Legion; among veteran organizations, only the VFW could take credit for the House victory. With the President still adamantly opposed to the legislation, the House sent the Patman Bonus Bill to the Senate for consideration.19

After the House Bonus vote, the VFW kicked the mobilization efforts into high gear. The VFW aggressively challenged FDR in the organization’s publications and veterans’ periodicals, augmenting the organization’s reputation as a leading voice of New Deal dissent. The issue of *Foreign Service* released after the House vote contained numerous examples of direct confrontation. The editorial page, in reference to Van Zandt’s telegram to FDR, claimed FDR had “failed to justify his threat of a veto with a logical explanation.” The VFW editors regarded the “vast expenditures” and budget deficits of the New Deal as proof that the Administration did not take fiscal responsibility too seriously. The editorial sardonically noted that FDR “is hardly in a position to charge that [Bonus] payment … will bring financial ruin.” The editorials suggested FDR might be poorly served by his advisors on the issue. Regardless of whether FDR received poor advice or honestly stuck to principle, the VFW threw down the gauntlet. The editorial warned, “If the VFW is unable to convert President Roosevelt, then this organization will do everything in its power to override his veto.” Commander Van Zandt added with typical bravado, “The VFW refuses to lay down its arms. Vetoes have been overridden by Congress in the past.”20

An editorial drawing by artist, Herbert E. Lake, accompanied the challenging rhetoric. Lake’s “A ‘New Deal’ Decoration” (Figure 4-1), resembled his earlier drawings

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19 *NYT*, March 13, and March 15, 1934.

20 *Foreign Service*, April, 1934: 4-5, 27.
of FDR in which Lake portrayed the President as an affable, effeminate opponent. (For an earlier example, see Figure 3-4.) In this drawing, a laughing FDR pins a military decoration on the Bonus Bill that simply reads, “No.” Once again, the artist placed New Deal in sardonic quotation marks in the title, signaling the organization’s contempt for New Deal policies on veterans. Even though the Patman Bonus Bill sat in the Senate Finance Committee awaiting action, the VFW did not flinch from challenging what it perceived to be the critical source of Bonus opposition: FDR.21

The VFW also used the organization’s two greatest publicity assets to pressure the Senate after the Bonus Bill passed the House: Commander Van Zandt and Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler. As soon as the Bonus passed, the VFW contracted Butler for another tour of speaking engagements. On March 15, Butler’s tour kicked off in a rally at the Baltimore War Memorial attended by 1500 VFW members and friends. Accompanied by VFW Legislative chairman George Brobeck and discharge petition author Lundeen, Butler assailed “the lousy Economy League” and the “hoggish interests” for their opposition to the Bonus. Proclaiming that “this damned fight’s nearly won,” Butler exhorted the crowd to write “letters, telegrams, postcards, anything” to their legislators demanding the bonus. His sixteen city tour included a swing through nine southern cities and ended in Des Moines, Iowa, less than three weeks later. The VFW reported that Butler’s appearances drew “large crowds to receive him at every point and a noticeable stimulation of recruiting.” Van Zandt continued his breakneck traveling to VFW posts and ceremonies touting the VFW legislative program. In March and April, for example,

21 Ibid, 4.
Van Zandt spoke to an audience of 1,500 in Scottsbluff, Nebraska; 800 in Emeryville, California; and another 2,500 in Topeka, Kansas. On his visits, Van Zandt spoke with business and fraternal organizations and made local radio addresses. In 1933-34, Van Zandt appeared on over 300 local radio broadcasts.²²

Aside from the Van Zandt publicity machine, the VFW relied on the two related methods of political activism: intensive grass-roots lobbying by veterans and their families, and electoral participation. In each case, the VFW issued very explicit

instructions to members. After the House vote, VFW headquarters issued bulletins to all Posts with instructions to concentrate the letter-writing campaign for the Bonus on the U.S. Senate. While the Bonus bogged down in the Senate, Van Zandt reminded veterans that they represented “between twelve and fifteen million citizens and future citizens” and “a potential force of tremendous power.” He explained that “Members of Congress will vote as they are instructed to vote by their constituents.” Thus, Van Zandt exhorted VFW members, “Let’s lay down a barrage of communications that will strike terror to the heart of every Senator who can even contemplate a ‘nay’ vote.” A Herbert E. Lake drawing, “A Barrage of Letters (Figure 4-2),” graphically depicted the VFW strategy and the hopeful results. A dismayed Senator awash in mail sits next to an opened letter from a veteran that reads, “There are eight voters in our family …. [who] want to know how you intend to vote on the bonus.” Both Lake’s drawing and Van Zandt’s exhortations revealed the organization’s ultimate weapon against recalcitrant legislators: the vote.23

The VFW encouraged veterans to use their vote, and their alleged influence on their family members’ votes, to further veteran causes in a non-partisan manner. The national organization’s constitution and by-laws forbade partisan politics and the endorsement of political candidates. The organization, however, encouraged veterans to screen candidates with questionnaires on veteran issues and to participate actively as individuals in local primaries and elections. Legislative Chairman Brobeck urged VFW members to “militantly protect those … steadfast friends of the overseas veterans of America” in the upcoming state primaries. VFW leadership discouraged veterans from partisan affiliation, particularly given the two major parties’ internal divisions between conservatives and

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23 *Foreign Service*, April, 1934: 13, 27 and June, 1934: 25.
progressives. The VFW leadership explained, “Party lines must be ignored by the veteran voter when he casts his ballot.” The VFW legislative office offered to send VFW members voting records of their legislators to help in this process. In response to the charge that veterans risked becoming sullied by over-involvement in politics, Brobeck responded, “It is the advice of the legislation division of the VFW that we cannot get into politics too far.”

In 1934, the VFW leadership made one significant exception when it came to political activism: another Bonus March. Much as they had during the 1932 Bonus March, the national leadership informed all VFW posts that the organization was “vigorously opposed” to members’ participation. Commander Van Zandt and the organization’s leadership believed that another march on Washington would ruin any chance that the Bonus had of passing the Senate. Van Zandt objected to the 1934 Bonus March for a number of reasons. First, the Communist Party’s leadership of the proposed march made it untouchable to the staunchly anti-communist VFW. Second, the VFW believed that it would undermine the extensive groundwork already laid by the Legislative committee. Last, Van Zandt claimed that the VFW leadership had reason to believe that the proposed Bonus March was “a deliberate attempt to discredit the veteran …. financed by anti-bonus forces who feel certain that such an undertaking will prove a fatal boomerang to the cause itself.” Fewer than 1,500 veterans participated in the march, which took place between May 12 and May 27, 1934.

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From March 12, 1934 into June, Democratic allies of the Administration mired the Patman Bonus Bill in the Senate Finance Committee. Under the able direction of Sen. Pat Harrison (Dem., Miss.), the bill languished in committee until Senate Bonus supporter Sen. Henrik Shipstead (Farm-Labor, Minn.) threatened to initiate a discharge movement. Fearing this loss of control, Harrison arranged a committee vote on the measure for June 5, 1934. The Senate Finance Committee returned an unfavorable report on the bill in a narrow vote, the details of which were withheld from the public. VFW allies in the Senate, such as Shipstead, Robert LaFollette, Jr. (Progress., Wis.), Bronson Cutting (Rep., N.M.), Arthur Robinson (Rep., Ind.), and Huey Long, repeatedly tried to bring up the bill under a unanimous consent rule, only to be continually thwarted by the Administration’s floor leader, Joseph T. Robinson (Dem., Ark.). Bonus supporters finally
succeeded in making senators go on the record with a vote by proposing an amendment to the Silver Bill that would immediately pay the Bonus. The hastily arranged Shipstead Silver Bill amendment lost without debate 51-31, with many Bonus supporters casting a confused vote against it. Thus, on June 18, the second session of the 73rd Congress adjourned with no action on the Bonus. The VFW served notice that the organization considered this only a temporary setback. Commander Van Zandt warned the Administration and its Democratic allies that “the representatives of the VFW will again be on the firing line demanding immediate cash payment of the adjusted service certificates on the first day of the next session of Congress.” The next Congressional session would be a lively one.  

On August 22, 1934, the formation of the American Liberty League gave the VFW a new enemy and further proof that changing the political and economic system would be an uphill battle. The American Liberty League formed with the expressed goal of “monitoring” the FDR Administration and New Deal for signs of radicalism and threats to private property and individual liberties. Although the Liberty League did not mention the Bonus or veterans in its manifesto, the VFW treated the organization, especially the list of prominent founders, with the same bile it reserved for the National Economy League, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and National Association of Manufacturers. Calling the Liberty League “a new menace,” the VFW leadership worried that it would promote a new Economy Act and attempt to reduce veteran expenditures in addition to

26 NYT, June 6 and 20, 1934; Foreign Service, July, 1934: 12, 29; and Report of G.K. Brobeck, Legislative Representative, in 35th National Encampment of the VFW, 1934: 242-247. The VFW published a list of 10 Senators who had perfect voting records on veteran affairs. Cutting and Robinson, both VFW members, made the list. So did Huey Long.
opposing the Bonus. A VFW editorial proclaimed, “the founders of the American Liberty League worship gold as their only God, and they preach but one creed—the gospel of a reduction in federal expenditures.” In a clear measure of the VFW’s mistrust of the Administration, the VFW leadership worried that the American Liberty League would continue to direct the FDR Administration toward fiscal conservatism and alliances with the wealthy. Ironically, the Administration also viewed the Liberty League as a reactionary threat.27

From September 30 to October 5, 1934, VFW members convened at their annual encampment in Louisville, Kentucky, to elect national officers and to discuss the organization’s agenda for the coming year. In a validation of the VFW’s controversial and aggressive fight for the Bonus and the repeal of the Economy Act, VFW delegates unanimously re-elected James Van Zandt as national commander. The delegates included representatives from the 340 new posts gained since the 1933 encampment, an astonishing growth rate. The 1934 national encampment also endorsed a legislative agenda called the “Seven Point Program,” evoking comparisons with Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points. The seven points reiterated many long-standing VFW demands such as the conscription of wealth in time of war and the immediate payment of the Bonus (See Figure, 4-4.). On the Bonus, the VFW delegates ignored the thinly-veiled request by FDR in his message to the encampment that suggested the VFW focus on the “welfare of the country” rather than “lesser things.” Significantly, the VFW’s renewed demand for the Bonus neither named the Patman Bill specifically nor listed a preferred method of paying

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it. Although Rep. Wright Patman spoke to the encampment garnering overwhelmingly enthusiastic applause, the VFW’s refusal to endorse any particular method of payment raised the possibility that the organization would consider less controversial proposals for immediate Bonus payment. The encampment also endorsed the nationalization of munitions manufacture, a series of veteran pension reforms, sharp raises in inheritance taxes, and the recall of tax-exempt securities.28

While the encampment promoted the seven point agenda and re-elected Van Zandt with little disagreement, the delegates became embroiled in a heated debate as they entertained a change in the organization’s prohibition against direct political involvement. The Nebraska delegation proposed changes in the “political code” that would allow the organization, at the national level, to become involved in the 1934 election. Although the Committee on Resolutions disapproved of the proposal, the debate carried onto the encampment floor. Van Zandt explained that the resolution originated in the leadership’s confusion over the politics issue during the primary season. The VFW judge advocate general had rendered an opinion that VFW endorsements were acceptable at the national level because the by-laws allowed participation in “legislation for veteran welfare.” This ruling did nothing but throw the national leadership into further confusion. Van Zandt and Brobeck refused to break the prohibition against direct political involvement until the national encampment could vote on the issue.29

In the debate, Van Zandt explained his support for the measure. He told the delegates, “Our participation in politics should be in national politics, and the national

28 NYT, October 2, 1934 and Foreign Service, November, 1934: 16-17.

29 NYT, Sept. 30, 1934 and 35th National Encampment of the VFW, 1934 : 113-117.
organization should say whether a Member of Congress has been a friend of ours; and if you want to endorse him, that is your privilege.” Van Zandt provided examples as to why the VFW should leap into the political fray. He cited the cases of Rep. William Connery (Dem., Mass) and Rep. Gerald Boileau (Rep., Wisc.) who, in voting against the President and with the VFW, suffered from the lash of the Administration and Administration allies with lost patronage and reduced committee assignments. Van Zandt explained that the VFW should be able to help these veteran supporters in more concrete ways.30

The floor debate over the issue grew tense. Supporters of the measure ridiculed those who opposed it as naïve. National Council member Skillman roared, “Who in hell gave you what you have? Politics.” He admonished the delegates, “we haven’t had the

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30 Ibid.
guts to get out and support the men that have supported you and me.” Skillman “hoped and prayed” the delegates would override the committee’s recommendation because, “How in hell are you going to get anywhere unless you endorse your friends?” The Department Commander of North And South Carolina, A.W. Hamilton, declared that his department already endorsed candidates with a great deal of success despite the prohibition. He proclaimed, “the whole veteran body of the States of North and South Carolina is determined that we shall act in unison and in harmony in endorsing specific political candidates for national office.” Comrade Bowe announced that if the encampment refused to change the by-law, “we hamstring ourselves in our fight.” Bowe followed this by conjuring the image of the veteran’s enemies, noting that if the VFW did not explicitly get into politics, “Those national racketeers, the National Economy League, who try to disrupt us, will laugh from now until election day.”

Opponents of political involvement relied on tradition and the logistical difficulties of political involvement. Many opponents worried that political participation would be a dangerous precedent, leading down a slippery slope to total co-optation by the political parties. Comrade Cohen of Illinois put it succinctly, “Politics, without question is the dirtiest game in the world. I know; I’m in it.” He added, “you can’t play dirty politics without getting dirtied up by it.” Cohen pleaded with his fellow veterans to reject the idea, noting “we have come along all these years because … we were not political, because we have been able to keep our skirts clean.” Comrade Haley agreed with Cohen, adding the logistical problem of getting the six VFW posts in his Congressional district to agree on a candidate. Comrade Smith from Albany voiced his opinion against the

31 25th National Encampment of the VFW, 1934 : 115-121.
proposal, caustically noting, “if we want to form a political organization like the American Legion, let us get out and join the American Legion and to hell with the VFW!”

The dispute over the overt politicization of the VFW reflected an ambivalence on the part of VFW members over what such a move might mean. The VFW’s political mobilization in 1933 and 1934 placed the organization in the vanguard of New Deal dissent but also on the brink of open partisan political participation. VFW members ultimately decided that this irreversible step would place the organization in unknown and potentially hostile waters. The political code measure failed on two floor votes. Comrade Hamilton, who had supported the resolution, proclaimed that the VFW just “furnished the occasion for a hallelujah dinner for the National Economy League.” The prohibition, however, did not stop veterans from actively participating in the 1934 election. It simply disallowed the organization from giving institutional approval. The national leadership reiterated the call for veteran political activism in the 1934 election, calling the veteran vote “the only solution.” Moreover, Van Zandt, the outspoken leader of the VFW and thorn in FDR’s side, won unanimous re-election from the same delegates who voted down explicit partisan politics. In his second term as commander, Van Zandt continued to confront the Administration at every opportunity.

On October 22, 1934, Commander Van Zandt picked up where he left off, presenting the platform of the encampment to the White House in a gesture the New York Times described as “a challenge” to President Roosevelt. The meeting came at a crucial

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32 Ibid, 119, 121.

moment. On October 19, 1934, FDR made a speech at a Veterans’ Administration hospital dedication ceremony in Roanoke, Va., in which he told veterans that they were better off, on average, than most citizens and that the Bonus would have to wait until federal money had first gone to improving the lot of destitute Americans. In this speech, FDR took the advice of ex-Legion commander Louis Johnson who told the Administration that some expression of this nature would be necessary to inhibit the American Legion delegates from passing a Bonus measure at their upcoming national convention in Miami. Van Zandt arrived with the Seven Point Program just three days after the Roanoke speech and two days before the Legion convention. By demanding the Bonus, the VFW showed what it thought of the Roanoke speech. In interviews with reporters outside of the White House, Van Zandt claimed he did not mention the speech in his conversation with FDR but scoffed at the Roanoke speech’s message to veterans. Van Zandt reminded the reporters that 62 percent of World War veterans were unemployed or underemployed and hardly better off than average citizens. Van Zandt repeated claims made the day after the Roanoke speech that FDR’s opposition to the Bonus would be “futile” in the upcoming Congressional session.34

FDR’s Roanoke speech failed and the VFW gained an important convert to the Bonus cause when the American Legion passed a resolution in favor of the Bonus at the organization’s national convention in Miami. The pressure building within the Legion for the Bonus could no longer be suppressed. The VFW’s leadership on the Bonus issue gave Legion Bonus supporters the courage—and strength—to defy the “kingmakers” in the Legion. Morris A. Beale, publisher of Plain Talk magazine, told FDR assistant Louis

34 NYT, October 21 and 23, 1934. Louis Johnson to Stephen B. Early, telegram dated October 16, 1934, in “American Legion, 1934,” OF 64, box 1, FDRL.
Howe, that none of “the most potent leaders of the Legion put together…could have stopped the ‘Bonus’ resolution from passing the Miami convention any more than they could have single-handedly stopped the Johnstown flood.” The VFW’s successful political mobilization convinced veterans that the Bonus might be won even in the face of Administration, Congressional, and Legion opposition. The VFW’s stubborn refusal to give up on the Bonus forced the Legion to contend with the issue yet again. Although the VFW had lost the Bonus battle in 1934, the organization looked to 1935 with hope as the Legion joined the fray.35

The Democratic landslide in the 1934 elections presumably changed the political landscape favorably for the FDR Administration. Yet, Democrats already exhibited a willingness to cross the Administration on veterans’ issues, and 78 percent of the Democrats elected to serve in the 74th Congress were incumbents. Of the 235 House Democrats who had defied the Administration and voted for the Bonus, 75 percent were returned by their constituents.36 Moreover, Associated Press surveys of the incoming Congress and the results of VFW Congressional candidate questionnaires, while incomplete, suggested that the 74th Congress would be more amenable to the immediate payment of the Bonus than its predecessor. As a result, the VFW read the 1934 election somewhat differently than most political commentators. The VFW proclaimed, “Although the Democratic landslide eliminated from Congress a few loyal champions of veteran welfare legislation, a larger number of those who represent our bitterest foes were

35 NYT, October 24, 1934 and Pencak, For God and Country, 204. Morris A. Beale to Louis W. Howe, November 9, 1934, in “Veterans’ Administration, 1934-35 (misc.),” OF 8, box 3, FDRL.

emphatically repudiated by the voters.” The VFW leadership insisted that the 1934 election “be recognized by the Administration as a protest against the anti-veteran policies that have been invoked during the past two years” rather than a great partisan victory. Indeed, the VFW announced that the election gave the organization “new impetus to fight for cash payment of the so-called Bonus.” Shortly after the 1934 election, Father Coughlin also offered a different interpretation and, in announcing the creation of a new political organization, openly courted disaffected veterans to his cause.37

On Armistice Day, November 11, 1934, in his first radio address following the mid-term elections, Coughlin added an institutional player to the New Deal political arena: the National Union for Social Justice (NUSJ). Coughlin first acknowledged “the signal political victory of the New Deal.” He cautioned, however, that despite the apparent success of the Democrats, the party stood “on trial.” Coughlin warned, “Two years hence it will leave the courtroom of public opinion vindicated … or it will be condemned to political death if it fails to answer the question of why there is want in the midst of plenty.” Then Coughlin announced the formation of the NUSJ as a pressure group to keep the newly-elected Congress and the Administration on the right track toward social justice. He enumerated sixteen principles that the new organization would promote and called upon “every one of you who is weary of drinking the bitter vinegar of sordid capitalism and … fearsome of being nailed to the cross of communism to join this Union.” Coughlin exhorted his listening audience to transform into “a vibrant, united,

active organization, superior to politics and politicians in principle, and independent of
them in power.”

In politics, like good comedy, timing is everything. For both pragmatic and
ideological reasons, an address on Armistice Day offered Coughlin a marvelous
opportunity to parlay veteran political unrest into support for his nascent organization. By
choosing Armistice Day, Coughlin clearly maximized the veteran audience for his
announcement. Just prior to Coughlin’s afternoon lecture, both the VFW and American
Legion national organizations aired hour-long Armistice day programs on the NBC
national network. On November 11, 1934, veteran-oriented programming filled the radio
airwaves. More importantly, Coughlin articulated the shared, central premise of veteran
political ideology: the Great War, “instead of making the world safe for democracy,” was
“fought to make the world safe for Wall Street and for the international bankers.”

Coughlin courted veterans with rhetoric ubiquitous in veterans’ political struggles.
He laid out the ostensible purposes of the war, the patriotic and democratic principles of
those who fought, and then he moved to the cynical reality. Coughlin pointed to the gains
in productive capacity made during the war years as the watershed in American economic
life. He proclaimed Armistice Day was “the day when there was born from the womb of
war, the new problem of distribution.” He explained how the 4.5 million returning
soldiers bore the brunt of this new economic system first, returning to find “young girls

38 Charles E. Coughlin, “The National Union for Social Justice, Nov. 11, 1934” in A Series of Lectures on
Social Justice (Royal Oak, Michigan: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1935), 8, 17. Brinkley, Voices of
Protest, 133-134.

Coughlin, “The National Union for Social Justice, November 11, 1934” in A Series of Lectures on Social
Justice, 7, 11. While the launch of Coughlin’s National Union drew widespread commentary from
contemporary chroniclers and subsequent generations of historians, no account of Coughlin or the National
Union for Social Justice investigates this matter of timing.
and married women occupying positions in office and in factory” and to chronic
unemployment. While the Bonus did not make the list of sixteen principles outlined by
Coughlin, he had supported immediate payment (off-and-on) since 1931. Moreover,
Coughlin’s new organization advocated the abolition of tax-exempt bonds and “a
conscription of wealth as well as a conscription of men” in event of war, issues endorsed
by the VFW at the 1933 and 1934 encampments. By advocating measures already
endorsed by veteran organizations, proposing a new organization premised on a
interpretation of World War I shared by many veterans, and launching it on Armistice
Day, Coughlin attempted to tap into the existing structures of veteran political activism.
He ended the address with a fairly explicit appeal to veterans, “This is a new call to
arms—not to become cannon fodder for the greedy system of an outworn capitalism nor
factory fodder for the slave whip of communism. This is the new call to arms for the
establishment of social justice!” With the formation of the National Union, the VFW had
gained yet another important ally for the Bonus fight that loomed over the upcoming
Congressional session.40

With Coughlin’s appeal to veterans, coupled with the American Legion’s changed
position on immediate Bonus payment, the Administration recognized that public support
for the Bonus had gained in quarters that the it recently influenced or controlled. In early
November, however, an opportunity arose to combat veteran political activism in the
guise of a letter to the President from Garland R. Farmer, the editor and publisher of the
Henderson (Texas) Times and commander of the local American Legion Post. In his
letter, Farmer appealed to FDR for information to find his way out of the “dilemma over

40 Coughlin, “The National Union for Social Justice, November 11, 1934” in A Series of Lectures on Social
Justice, 11, 18-19.
the Bonus question.” Although Farmer personally “believed the time was not ripe” for Bonus payment, he enumerated Bonus supporters’ claims as to why the Bonus should and could be paid. Farmer requested FDR’s “side of the question, for I’m confident you have what you believe is justifiable reasons [sic] for your opposition to the present payment of the bonus.” Nearly two months lapsed before the Administration responded.41

Prior to the start of the 1935 Congressional session, the Roosevelt Administration attempted to undercut the new drive for the Bonus before it could even get underway. In a letter dated December 27, 1934, just days prior to his State of the Union Address and the beginning of the 74th Congress, FDR replied to the Farmer letter. FDR thanked Farmer for the occasion to educate veterans, noting that Farmer’s confusion “confirms an impression that I have had for some time … that the bonus question is not well understood even among veterans themselves.” FDR explained to Farmer he was opposed to any payment at face-value of the adjusted service certificates since that figure included interest through 1945. Moreover, FDR rejected the Bonus supporters key claim that payment would spur economic recovery, noting that the loans given to veterans on their certificates in 1931 had failed to yield any appreciable results. On this point, FDR betrayed a real lack of understanding of the central role consumer spending played in the American economy. FDR told Farmer that “indebtedness created by the veterans prior to the payment was liquidated, and the money advanced to clear that indebtedness rather than to create new business.” He also added a curious rationale as to why veterans should wait for payment, noting that “of the veterans who die, approximately 85% of them leave no other asset to their family but the Adjusted Service Certificates or the balance due on

41 Garland R. Farmer, Henderson, Texas, October 31, 1934, letter to FDR, in “Soldiers’ Bonus, 1934,” OF 95c, Box 3, FDRL.
the Certificates.” In other words, veterans and their families were too impoverished to warrant immediate Bonus payment.42

By enumerating his objections to Farmer, FDR sought to accomplish more than convince a Texas legionnaire of the reasonableness of the Administration’s position. FDR exploited the opportunity offered by the Farmer letter to impress both veterans and Congressional supporters with his resolve on the Bonus issue at a critical juncture. FDR’s secretary, Stephen Early, mailed the FDR letter and telegrammed Farmer that he “wished very much you would wire me when the President’s letter is received so that with your permission I may release it here to the press.” Early’s eagerness for Farmer’s confirmation telegram betrayed the Administration’s plan: the publicity of the exchange needed to occur prior to the State of the Union Address and the start of the Congressional session in order to maximize its impact. On December 31, the press received a copy of FDR’s response to Farmer, but not of the original letter which would have revealed the amount of time passed since its receipt.43

On New Year’s Day, the story and the text of the President’s letter ran on the front page of all of the major U.S. newspapers. The Washington Post reporting described the President’s letter as an attempt “to dispel the storm clouds gathering on Capitol Hill” over the Bonus. Calling attention to the timing of the President’s response, the Post accounts and analysis explained that the letter’s release was “shrewdly timed to rally sentiment against the bonus on the eve of Congress’ convening,” a time “when it might do the most

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42 Copy of FDR letter to Garland R. Farmer, dated December 27, 1934, in “Soldiers’ Bonus, 1934,” OF 95c, Box 3, FDRL and NYT, January 1, 1935.

43 Stephen Early to Garland R. Farmer, telegram dated December 27, 1934, in “Soldiers’ Bonus, 1934,” OF 95c, Box 3, FDRL.
good.” Moreover, the reporting noted that the letter reflected a continued “militant attitude at the White House” concerning the Bonus and that FDR’s letter effectively “carried the fight to the proponents of bonus inflation.”

Indeed, the evidence suggests that the Administration contrived this entire episode for just these reasons. On January 18, Farmer wrote an intimate letter to Steve Early, addressing him as “My Dear Steve.” Farmer sent samples of letters that he had received about the well-publicized incident, including one that told him, “your KING in the White House is just making a CATSPAW out of you.” More importantly though, Farmer told Early he was “very happy to have again been able to be of some little service” and signed “with continued best personal wishes.” Whether contrived or merely adroitly manipulated, the Farmer exchange drew quick and dismissive responses from the veteran organizations.

The VFW leadership responded to the President’s letter and its release to the press with withering comments. Commander Van Zandt, who had publicly predicted just prior to the release of Farmer letter that the President would sign a Bonus Bill, skewered FDR’s reasoning in the letter in a press statement. Calling the President’s message a “keen disappointment to the vast majority of World War veterans,” Van Zandt refuted the President’s grounds for opposing the Bonus. Van Zandt began by stating, “There is no lack of understanding of this issue among the 3,700,000 veterans who hold adjusted service certificates …. There seems to be some misunderstanding of it on the part of the


President.” Van Zandt pointed to the Veterans Administration numbers showing that 3,038,500 veterans borrowed on their certificates, over 80 percent of holders. Ninety percent of the those veterans borrowing against their Bonus used the money for “absolute necessities” and 62 percent were unemployed. Van Zandt thought this sufficient proof of the “dire need of these men and their families.” In reference to FDR’s understanding of the Bonus as a life insurance policy, Van Zandt reiterated the organization’s opposition to the “tombstone bonus.” Citing V.A. estimates, he claimed that the approximately 500,000 World War veterans would be dead by 1945 when the certificates matured and thus “cheated out of their adjusted service pay.”

Van Zandt openly questioned the authenticity of the Farmer exchange and downplayed the potential political impact. Van Zandt voiced his suspicions about the Farmer exchange while denigrating Farmer as an atypical veteran. Van Zandt coolly noted, “It is unfortunate that President Roosevelt, either by accident or design, should have selected Garland R. Farmer as the addressee of a letter in opposition to the immediate payment of the adjusted service certificates.” Van Zandt explained, “Mr. Farmer may hold an official position in a veterans’ organization, but he is by no means representative of the World War veterans.” Van Zandt noted that Farmer’s military service consisted of less than two months in training camp and did not make him eligible for an adjusted service certificate. Emphasizing the VFW’s position as “true” veterans, Van Zandt added, “It is this type of stay-at-home ‘soldier’ who always has attempted to embarrass the men who faced the enemy guns, thousands of whom are disabled and many other thousands are destitute and need money now to feed, clothe, and shelter their

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46 For Van Zandt prediction that FDR would sign a Bonus Bill in the coming session, see National Tribune, January 3, 1935. The rest of the paragraph is from National Tribune, January 10, 1935.
families.” Van Zandt downplayed the ultimate political importance of the episode. Van Zandt explained, “While we respect the views of the President, Congress will be the final arbiter of this issue.”  

With the Farmer episode, the Administration also failed to diminish the resolve of the American Legion national leadership. The American Legion’s national commander, Frank N. Belgrano, Jr., issued a statement that the President’s letter would not sway the organization from its mandate for immediate payment as established by the 1934 convention. Belgrano pointed out the weakness of FDR’s economic thinking, stating that payment of debts by veterans in arrears would be a tremendous economic stimulus. Belgrano noted that bonus payment would “benefit that very element of business men who are most in need of help—the average citizen, the vast bulk of merchants, and middle-class business and professional people.” For the moment, the VFW and the American Legion stood unified. The President’s Farmer letter failed to suppress the gathering momentum of the Bonus issue.  

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Heading into the Congressional session, the 1935 drive for the Bonus would feature an alignment of the veteran organizations, Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and their new organizations against the FDR Administration—a far cry from the VFW’s lone voice of dissent in January, 1934. Indeed, by the end of 1934, the VFW had consolidated its position in the vanguard of both veteran political activism and New Deal dissent.

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48 *NYT*, January 2, 1935.
organization’s mobilization for immediate payment of the Bonus intensified the antagonistic relationship with FDR that developed in the first days of the New Deal. When the most ardent of Congressional supporters could only muster sixty signatures for the Bonus discharge position, the VFW’s militant lobbying campaign resulted in the re-emergence of the Bonus. Despite Administration and Congressional opposition and no support from the American Legion national organization, the Patman Bill championed by the VFW resurrected the legislation in what amounted to a revolt against an extremely popular President. While the VFW lost this battle, and struggled with what political mobilization might ultimately set in motion for the organization, the VFW’s alliance with the nascent Long and Coughlin organizations would become even more pronounced in 1935. As the chapter 5 explores in more detail, in 1935, the VFW received more than support from Long, Coughlin, and their organizations. During the battle over the Bonus, the VFW joined with the Long and Coughlin organizations to form the structural core of the New Deal Dissidents, a coalition that would fundamentally shape New Deal politics.
Yes, dear President, We will fight you in every possible manner and to the last breath if you veto the Patman Bill.
Joseph Eugene Dash, veteran from Chicago, on the pending Patman Bonus Bill.¹

Throughout 1934, the Veterans of Foreign Wars carried out the high intensity campaign for the immediate cash payment of the Bonus. Despite opposition from the Roosevelt Administration, powerful Congressional leaders, and the national leadership of the America Legion, the VFW managed to reintroduce the Bonus into the political arena, nearly securing its passage. After October, 1934, however, the VFW continued to lead the campaign, but with new allies in the American Legion national leadership. The demand for immediate Bonus payment echoed throughout veteran circles. Moreover, in the aftermath of the 1934 election, Father Charles E. Coughlin deliberately courted veterans during the announcement of his new political organization, the National Union for Social Justice. Yet, the Roosevelt Administration remained steadfast in its opposition to Bonus payment and used both open and surreptitious means to counter veteran political activism. In this tense atmosphere, the 74th Congress convened the session from which the most important social welfare legislation of the New Deal would eventually emerge. At the top of the legislative agenda, however, sat the Patman Bonus Bill (H.R.1).

In 1935, the VFW allied with Senator Huey P. Long, Father Coughlin, and their nascent organizations during the campaign for the Bonus. While Long and Coughlin had advocated Bonus payment in 1934, and both had appealed to veterans’ support for their newly-formed organizations, this coalition took shape in earnest when the controversy over two competing plans for payment intensified the ideological dimensions of the Bonus issue. Long, Coughlin, and the VFW supported the openly inflationary Patman Bill, while deriding the American Legion-sponsored Vinson Bill as a boon to “the Bankers.” The eventual legislative victory of the Patman Bill over the Vinson Bill came as a result of astute parliamentary maneuvering on the part of Patman Bill supporters and the groundswell of grassroots activism. The VFW once again ratcheted up the lobbying efforts under the leadership of Commander James E. Van Zandt. But critical support also came directly from Coughlin, Long, and their supporters.

Between February and May, 1935, the forces of VFW-led veterans, Huey Long, and Father Coughlin converged around the Bonus, becoming a potent oppositional political force in the process. FDR’s persistent opposition to the Bonus spurred New Deal dissent by signaling to the VFW, Long, and Coughlin that the Administration continued its alliance with “Wall Street” and “the Bankers.” During the national mobilization in support of the Bonus, both the VFW and the New Deal Dissidents reached their zenith of organizational strength. By the late spring of 1935, the battle over the Bonus placed enormous political pressure on the Roosevelt Administration. Indeed, the coalition that formed in the struggle to pass the Patman Bonus Bill created a political crisis for the Roosevelt Administration, raising the specter of a new party consisting of Long and
Coughlin supporters, buttressed by the veteran vote. More than any other single issue, the Bonus united the New Deal Dissidents, fueling their rise to political prominence.2

The Bonus played a significant role in the political origins of the “second” New Deal, supplying the point of convergence for the New Deal Dissidents. But the Bonus also preoccupied Congress to such an extent in the spring of 1935 that it bottled up the President’s more progressive policy initiatives until after the issue ran its course. On May 22, 1935, in an unprecedented action, FDR personally delivered his veto message on the Patman Bonus Bill to a joint session of Congress and a riveted national radio audience. Immediately following the Bonus veto, FDR began his “turn to the left” by demanding action on the wide-ranging legislation of the “second” New Deal.3

Convinced of the likelihood of Bonus passage in the upcoming Congressional session and wooed by Administration officials, the VFW leadership ultimately reached a rapprochement with the Roosevelt Administration. On January 27, 1936, Bonus supporters claimed victory by easily overriding a second, less forceful, presidential veto. FDR’s political “defeat” on the Bonus not only eliminated the one remaining issue that

2 Alan Brinkley’s seminal study of Long and Coughlin offers anecdotal evidence that suggests veterans actively participated in Long and Coughlin's organizations due to each man’s support for the immediate cash payment of the Bonus. Yet Brinkley accepts the Bonus as simply a matter of interest group politics, not the ideologically divisive issue it was to become. As a result, Brinkley overlooks the importance of the Bonus, veteran organizations, and veteran political activism to the Long and Coughlin movements. See Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), especially 182, 194-198.

could effectively mobilize veterans, but also a key organizational component of New Deal dissent: the VFW. In 1936, when Father Coughlin, Dr. Francis Townsend, and Long’s successor, Gerald L.K. Smith, organized the Union Party, their presidential candidate, William Lemke, received less than a one million votes nationally. Therefore, by examining the political mobilization for the Bonus between 1935 and 1936, the political origins and the political triumph of the “second” New Deal come more clearly into focus, with the VFW and the Bonus at the center of New Deal politics.4

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At the start of the 1935 Congressional session, the Bonus dominated a legislative agenda that would include the most far-reaching social legislation of the twentieth-century. New House Speaker Joseph W. Byrns declared the Bonus would be taken up immediately to get the issue “behind him” as soon as possible. The Patman Bill resumed its position at the top of the House docket (H.R.1), but the 1935 version of the bill varied from previous versions by linking the payment of the Bonus to commodity prices instead of gold revaluation as the means to achieve currency expansion. Yet, currency inflation, and Patman’s method for attaining it, drew criticism from the American Legion leadership. After Patman refused to remove the inflationary aspects of the bill, the Legion asked Rep. Fred Vinson (Dem., Ky.) to sponsor legislation that would pay the Bonus in negotiable bonds. Although Vinson had supported the Patman Bill in 1934, he agreed to sponsor the Legion bill for pragmatic reasons. By divorcing the Bonus from the inflationary agenda, it stood a better chance of passing with a veto-proof majority.

Vinson’s influence on the House Ways and Means Committee would not hurt the bill’s chances either. Vinson pinpointed the ideological nature of the Patman Bill, claiming “I am not willing for the World War Veterans to be made a pack horse for the inflationists.”

The united front formed in 1934 between the Legion and the VFW on Bonus legislation showed immediate strain. The VFW initially refused to endorse either of the Bonus plans based on the 1934 encampment’s mandate that the organization support the immediate payment of the Bonus regardless of the method of payment. The VFW claimed it would not be dragged into the fight, leaving the organization “free to support the piece of legislation … that has the best prospects of surviving White House opposition.” However, both the VFW and Patman voiced suspicions that the Legion had instigated the Vinson Bill to divide the veteran bloc in Congress and undermine the Bonus’s ultimate passage. In an editorial on the competing bills, the VFW leadership commented, “It would not be the first time that members of Congress have avoided direct responsibility for defeat of this proposal through clever maneuvers designed to place the blame elsewhere.” The editorial archly noted, “There are those who suspect this apparent split was deliberately created as a loophole of escape.” Patman blasted the Vinson Bill as the “Banker’s Bonus,” due to the bonds feature. He accused the Legion’s Commander Belgrano, who happened to be a vice-president at the Bank of America, of financial self-interest. Moreover, Patman suspected that the Legion, backed by New York Bankers and

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5 The 1935 Congressional session ultimately produced the signature social legislation of the New Deal: the Social Security Act, the Wagner Act, and the Work’s Progress Administration. Byrns in NYT, January 3, 1935; Vinson quote in Young, Wright Patman, 57; and Daniels, The Bonus March, 235.
Wall Street, offered the Vinson counter-measure as an obstructionist ruse. Patman declared, “This thing will smell to high Heaven when it is exposed.”

When the divisions among Bonus supporters left House members confused and delayed action on the Bonus, the VFW sided with the Patman version. A month into the Congressional session, the united front on the Bonus cracked. On February 8, 1935, pressed by Congressional Bonus supporters and the rank and file of the organization to take a definitive stand, the VFW leadership announced the organization’s endorsement of the Patman Bonus Bill. The VFW leadership made the declaration after polling State commanders whether the organization should take a position or stay neutral. When all forty-eight commanders decided to “Stand Pat with Patman,” Van Zandt issued a statement from VFW headquarters announcing the organization’s intentions. Van Zandt called the Patman Bill “the soundest method of paying the bill” and denounced the Vinson Bill as the “bankers’ bonus bill to give bankers millions of dollars in interest profits.” He scoffed at the “bankers’ bugaboo of inflation” raised against the Patman bill. Indeed, the VFW leadership considered statements from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Liberty League, and the National Economy League deriding the inflationary Patman Bill and calling the Vinson Bill “the lesser of two evils,” as concrete proof of the Patman Bill’s merits. As VFW artist Herbert Lake depicted it, the Patman Bill was the “obvious” decision for VFW members (See Figure, 5-1).

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By choosing the Patman Bill, the VFW re-affirmed the organization’s ideological commitments to battle Wall Street, bankers, and concentrated wealth. Had pure economic self-interest been the prevailing concern, the VFW would have either supported the less controversial Vinson Bill or stayed on the sidelines until a method of payment emerged from House debate. By jumping into the ideological contest over the Bonus, the VFW joined with the core of New Deal Dissidents in promoting the measure and deriding FDR for opposing it. Indeed, as the Bonus emerged as a central issue in the spring of 1935, both veteran political activism and New Deal dissent raised to a crescendo.

In the spring of 1935, the Congressional battles over the Bonus raged. A three-way battle among Vinson supporters, Patman forces, and Bonus opponents, took place first in the House where there existed broad support for some form of Bonus payment. On March

![THE OBVIOUS VERDICT](image)

**Figure 5-1. “The Obvious Verdict,” Foreign Service, March, 1935. Reprinted by permission of the VFW.**
6, the Ways and Means Committee, after intense infighting, recommended the Vinson bill to the House over the Patman version in a very close 16-14 vote. The Committee left the door open for the Patman version, however, by voting 14 to 9 requesting the House Rules Committee allow the Patman Bill be offered to the whole House membership as an alternative. On March 14, as a result of some virtuoso lobbying by the Bonus Steering Committee led by Wright Patman and the VFW canvassers, the House Rules Committee allowed both bills to be brought to the floor instead of only an up-or-down vote on the Vinson Bill. The influential American Legion lobbyist, John Taylor Thomas, fought this measure tooth and nail trying to make the Legion version of the Bonus the only one brought up for consideration. However, broad support among progressives and inflationists in the House gave the “Patmanites” a victory in this first round, despite the official committee recommendation and tremendous Legion opposition.8

On March 21, the Patman Bill emerged victorious over the Vinson plan. After ten hours of bitter debate and the beating back of various compromise measures, the House voted 204-201 to replace the Vinson bill with the Patman version. News reports that FDR would certainly veto the measure or raise taxes to pay the Bonus carried little weight in the deliberations. According to the Washington Post, “party lines were smashed” in the voting. Once the Patman bill had prevailed, Patman supporters shouted for a final vote in order to kill the Vinson version once and for all but House leaders delayed the vote until the following day.9

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8 For good summaries of the House Committee and Floor battles, see Daniels, *The Bonus March*, 234-235; Rumer, *The American Legion*, 219-220; Pencak, *For God and Country*, 204; and Young, *Wright Patman*, 57-60. See also, NYT, March 7-14, 1935, Washington Post, March 7-14, 1935, and National Tribune, March 14, 1935.

On March 22, 1935, the Patman Bonus Bill passed the House over Legion and Administration opposition. The House passed the Patman Bonus Bill 318 to 90 despite the best efforts of the Vinson supporters to recommit the Patman Bill and substitute back to the Vinson plan. Vinson derided the Patman forces, “I say to you, that unless you divorce currency expansion from cash payment you will have to go back and tell the boys, ‘Well we fought a good fight, we did the best we could, but you haven’t got the money yet.’” As the House “thundered defiance to the President,” the Administration suffered a blow in prestige as the veto threats proved inconsequential. Yet, arguably, the Administration favored the Patman Bill to the Vinson Bill. Indeed, some Administration stalwarts voted for the Patman version with an understanding that it would have a greater chance of defeat in a veto override vote. The Administration, while opposed to the Bonus, preferred its chances of defeating the “greenback” Patman Bonus Bill. Nonetheless, the House voted overwhelmingly for the Bonus once the question of the bill’s funding had been settled.¹⁰

The Patman-Vinson debate in the House revealed what an ideologically freighted issue the Bonus had become. *Washington Post* political commentator Raymond Clapper intoned after the Patman Bill’s substitution, “If paying the veterans were the only object, the Vinson Bill would do just as well …. But inflationist sentiment tipped the balance in favor of Patman’s greenback plan.” As a measure of the Bonus’s ideological nature, the vote to enact the Patman Bonus Bill was the only vote in the 74th Congress in which every member of both the Liberal Bloc and the Wisconsin-Minnesota Progressive Group caucuses voted in complete unanimity. According to one analysis, the Progressive Group

became “most visible” in the Bonus fight and joined with the Liberal Bloc to become “decisive factors” in the victory of the Patman over the Vinson plan. Cash payments to veterans clearly merged with inflationist and progressive politics in the 74th Congress.\textsuperscript{11}

In late April, the Senate took up the Bonus issue with equal vigor. The Senate Patman forces led by Huey Long, Fred Steiwer, and Elmer Thomas fought back a compromise measure introduced by Mississippi Senator Pat Harrison, chair of the Senate Finance Committee, that would pay the veterans in baby bonds but without the accrued interest through 1945. The Patman forces in the Senate also derailed the drive spearheaded by the American Legion and sponsored by ex-Legion national commander, Sen. Bennett Champ Clark, to substitute some version of the Vinson plan. Indeed, the Legion leadership and lobbyists spent the month between the House vote and Senate deliberations attempting to convince Senators of the Vinson Plan’s merits. In response, the VFW leadership and Patman camped out in Senate office buildings, a constant source of lobbying pressure. Thanks to the parliamentary efforts of Long, Thomas, and Steiwer, the Senate passed the Patman Bill on May 7, 1935 by a vote of 55 to 33. While the Patman forces emerged victorious, they lacked the crucial two-thirds majority. Yet, the importance of Long and Coughlin-ally Thomas to the victory cannot be over-emphasized. The \textit{Washington Post} declared, “Louisiana’s “Kingfish,” Huey Long, assumed the four stars of the Patman floor plan general in the march toward passage, working hand-in-hand with Senator Elmer Thomas of Oklahoma, Senate inflationist leader.”\textsuperscript{12}


\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Washington Post}, May 3-12, 1935, quotation May 8, 1935.
In early May, Patman supporters mobilized an all-out campaign to pass the Bonus over the all-but-certain FDR veto. Senate Bonus supporters managed to keep the bill from being delivered to the White House for over a week as they attempted to persuade enough Senators to ensure an override victory. Long, Van Zandt, and Coughlin took to the airwaves, begging their followers to send Senators and the President urgent letters and telegrams demanding support of the Patman Bonus Bill. Finally, on May 14, Congress sent the Patman Bonus Bill to the White House. The Patman Bill already commanded a veto-proof majority in the House and appeared on the verge of attaining the same in the Senate. The passage of the Bonus Bill despite immense White House opposition suggested the movement of Congress into much more progressive waters. But the significance of the Bonus transcended this. Between February and May, as the supporters of the competing bills battled in Congress and in the national political arena, three proponents of the Patman Bonus Bill rose to the forefront of the New Deal political arena.13

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The forces of VFW-led veterans, Huey Long, and Father Coughlin converged around the Bonus, becoming a potent oppositional political force. Among the veteran organizations, the VFW led the fight for the Patman Bill. After the split with the American Legion, the VFW sponsored the legislation and resumed the aggressive lobbying tactics that had propelled the Bonus into the legislative arena the previous year. VFW officials such as James Van Zandt, George Brobeck, and past-Commander Paul Wolman participated in the Patman Bonus Steering Committee. The New York Times

described the VFW as “the extreme bonus-seekers” and the “real fighters in the Bonus movement … the infantry, so to speak.” The Legion, while on the record for immediate payment, never warmed up to supporting the Patman Bill, fighting it at every stage of the legislative process. Even after the Patman Bill emerged from Congress, the Legion only half-heartedly gave the Bonus its support. Inter-organizational rivalry played an important role in this. After the Patman Bill’s defeat, the American Legion blamed “the bull-headedness of the VFW” in demanding the Patman version for the Bonus’s ultimate defeat. 14

Commander Van Zandt continued to be a highly visible New Deal Dissident. He made innumerable appearances at state and local VFW gatherings across the nation, touting the organization’s support for the Patman Bill. Van Zandt debated with Bonus opponents on the radio and delivered radio addresses to national audiences and countless local communities. His testimony before the House Ways and Means, and Senate Finance Committees in support of the Patman Bill always proved lively. Before the Senate Finance Committee, Van Zandt called the worries over the Patman Bill financing “tommyrot.” As part of Patman’s Steering group, Van Zandt prowled the Congressional hallways and chambers applying pressure to legislators. The New York Times described Van Zandt as the “generalissimo of the huge ‘lobby’ that fought the Patman Bill through.” Literary Digest depicted him as “chockfull of energy, obviously sincere and highly vocal.” After the Patman Bill passed the Senate, Van Zandt appealed to the

14 NYT, April 23 and June 9, 1935. Literary Digest, May 4, 1935: 4-5 In 1936, a flyer in support of FDR’s re-election secretly circulated amongst Legionnaires touting FDR’s Bonus veto as an organizational boon to the American Legion. The flyer described the veto of the Patman Bill as a relief to the Legion since the VFW would have become the most important political player among veteran organizations if their advocacy of the Patman bill had paid dividends. “Two Records: Hoover Vs. Roosevelt” in “American Legion, 1936,” OF 64, Box 2, FDRL.
American people, asking them to send a million messages to FDR urging him to sign the measure. When the Bonus Bill passed the Senate, the front page of major newspapers ran a photograph of the Bill’s most noteworthy advocates shaking hands in victory: Van Zandt, Patman, and Elmer Thomas (See Figure 5-2).  

As in 1932 and 1934, the VFW found its outspoken support for the Bonus paid institutional dividends for the organization. From January to June, 1935, the VFW grew by 221 posts nationally. In the heat of the Bonus push, the organization gained well over a post a day. In the fourth annual “Hello America” broadcast, the VFW gained another twenty thousand new members. By May, the VFW extended to over 3,300 posts across the nation with approximately 250,000 members. The VFW continually linked new member recruitment and post growth to legislative gains and increased national prestige.

Figure, 5-2. Reprint of Patman Forces Photograph in Foreign Service, June, 1935. Reprinted by permission of the VFW.

accumulated in the Bonus fight. Not only did the VFW’s successes drive membership
totals upward, but increased membership gave the organization even more lobbying
clout. The VFW’s rapid growth during the 1935 Bonus campaign was matched in
intensity by two other organizations supportive of the Bonus: Father Coughlin’s National
Union for Social Justice and Huey Long’s Share Our Wealth Society.16

From February until May, 1935, Father Coughlin dedicated frequent Sunday
sermons and National Union for Social Justice rallies to trumpeting the virtues of the
Patman Bonus Bill, making support of it a cornerstone of the organization’s agenda. On
February 3, 1935, he addressed his radio listeners, lauding the recent Senate defeat of the
World Court.17 Coughlin used his weekly forum to promote the National Union, at this
time, an organization in name only. He urged his listeners to join the organization and
contribute money to further its cause. He derided the Vinson plan, reminding his listeners
of his opposition to any Bonus bill paid through bonds. Coughlin explained that bonds
merely “permit the favored few to profit while the veterans who served in the World War
are denied the pittance of a just debt we recognize as their due.” In the following months,
as the Patman Bonus was touted as a primary issue in the fight for social justice, the
National Union grew to a reported 8.5 million members. In the process, Coughlin found
himself more and more at odds with the Roosevelt Administration.18

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National Tribune May 9, 1935.

17 For more on the role of Coughlin, Long, and the VFW in the defeat of the World Court, see Chapter 6.

18 Charles E. Coughlin, “The Future of the National Union, February 3, 1935” in A Series of Lectures on
Social Justice (Royal Oak, Michigan: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1935), 137-152. NUSJ estimate in
Brinkley, Voices of Protest, 179.
On April 25, Coughlin opened a membership drive for the National Union that highlighted the importance of the Bonus to the organization’s agenda. The Radio Priest’s push for ten million members coincided with his renewed efforts on behalf of the Patman Bonus Bill. In Detroit, 17,000 people crowded into Olympia Auditorium to attend a rally initiating the Michigan chapter of the NUSJ. Coughlin invited Senator Elmer Thomas, the Patman Bill sponsor in the Senate, Gerald Nye, and a number of Congressmen (including William Lemke, future Union Party presidential candidate) to join him on the dais. All championed the Patman Bonus Bill. On May 8, in Cleveland, 30,000 members gathered to hear their leader speak. Coughlin thrilled the crowd, spreading the message of the National Union and threatening both Roosevelt and the Ohio Senator who had opposed the Patman Bonus Bill in the previous day’s vote. He exclaimed, “The New Deal Administration will commit suicide if it follows through with a veto of the Patman soldiers’ bonus.” Commentators viewed this as a threat against the imminent FDR Bonus veto, signaling Coughlin “would walk off the Roosevelt Reservation, taking the members of the huge National Union for Social Justice with him.” While holding the membership rallies, he continued to address his radio followers on the merits of the Patman Bonus Bill.19

The organizational build-up of the National Union became inextricably linked with the Bonus issue. Coughlin’s triumphant Cleveland meeting came between two of his most passionate radio addresses concerning the Patman Bill. Once the Bonus moved into Senate deliberations, he gave two national addresses almost entirely devoted to the importance of the Patman Bonus to the goals of social justice. On May 5, 1935, the night

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before the Senate would deliberate and vote on the Bonus question, the Radio Priest used
the issue as the first “lesson on solidarity” for his fledgling NUSJ. In a lecture entitled
“Solidarity and Justice,” He appealed to his weekly listeners to initiate an intense
lobbying campaign aimed at the Senate in support of the Patman Bonus Bill. Once again,
Coughlin outlined the ideological differences that lay at the heart of the competing
versions of the Bonus bills, focusing on World War I as the great watershed moment in
the concentration of wealth and rise of plutocracy. He ridiculed the stated war aims,
claiming the conflict “to keep the world safe for democracy” had only produced “a
democracy out of which was born the red Bolshevism of Russia, the dictatorships of
Germany and Italy, and want amidst plenty in America.” Moreover, Coughlin reiterated
the view that the war only “created the billions of bloody bonds to make millionaires out
of the stay-at-home profiteers and paupers out of the American laborer and farmer.” As
for the veterans, he explained, the “heroes returned home to find wealth concentrated in
the hands of a few … and stood in factory lines seeking their old jobs only to discover
that mass production machinery had forced them into the bread lines.”

Coughlin argued that the Vinson proposal merely perpetuated the concentration of
wealth since any Bonus payment funded by bonds would further aggrandize the bankers
and Wall Street. He explained, “The banker waxed fat on war bonds; tomorrow he wishes
to wax fatter on veteran bonds.” Coughlin summed up the differences between the two
bills succinctly, “The Patman Plan wants Justice. The Vinson Plan wants graft—graft for
the banker … still racketeering on the broken limbs and broken hearts of the American
public.” He described the National Union’s interest in the Bonus as an easy means for the

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expansion of purchasing power. Therefore, in this first lesson on solidarity, Coughlin summoned his supporters to lobby their Senators in support of the Patman Plan. He issued a “call to arms” beseeching his listeners “in the name of social justice, I ask everyone in the audience to cast aside all lethargy, all selfishness and stand shoulder to shoulder tonight and tomorrow behind the Patman Plan.” He ended with the rhetorical question, “Here is a sudden call to arms … Is it solidarity or individualism?” After the Radio Priest’s address, a Washington Post political commentator reported that the telegraph companies handled “the heaviest floods in their history,” with 97,000 telegrams pouring into the Senate chambers from one telegraph office alone.  

After the Senate passed the Patman Bill, Coughlin directly challenged the President to sign the Bonus. On May 12, he dedicated the conclusion of his weekly broadcast to a personal appeal to the President. After assigning credit to the National Union and his listeners for the Senate passage of the Patman Bill, he addressed FDR, explaining the reasons he should not veto the Bonus. Coughlin implored FDR to sign the bill pointing to the 1934 elections as a gauge of the people’s wishes. He proclaimed, “The responsive House of Representatives, freshly elected by the people in 1934, has passed the bonus by a tremendous majority.” He continued, “I cannot believe you will prevent the soldier from receiving his just dollar of dues simply because the banker is not to receive his unjust 81 cents of bonus.” In an emotional appeal, Coughlin beseeched FDR to sign the Bonus in reminiscent terms, “You have told the people you would drive the money-changers from the temple. You have told them of a new deal, a new deal for the forgotten man. May I ask you then, Mr. President, in the name of the millions who joined the

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National Union … in the name of social justice, to pay fully the soldiers according to the provisions of the Patman Bill.” The Radio Priest concluded his address by pleading to his former ally, “Before your God and your country, sign on the side of justice! You cannot forget the common man!”

Coughlin’s appropriation of the Bonus as a symbol of New Deal dissent matched that of the other main dissenter, Senator Huey P. Long. Long continued his support for the Bonus, publicly joining with the VFW in the process. His biographer explains that he initiated a broad offensive on the Roosevelt Administration “by becoming one of the floor managers” for the VFW-sponsored Patman Bill. He led the Patman Bonus Bill through very rugged and hostile territory in the Senate. Long, with Elmer Thomas, beat back the parliamentary maneuvers of Vinson and Harrison plan supporters. Moreover, in the Senate debate on the three competing Bonus measures, he attacked the President with impunity. The Senator used the Patman Bill to symbolize the failed promise of the Roosevelt Administration to address the distribution of wealth. He derided the President’s promised veto as “a political monstrosity that no party can defend, and no man can defend, either in his own conscience or in a political campaign.” The VFW national organization recognized both Long’s contributions to the Patman Bill on the Senate floor and his rising political influence, enlisting him to help sway national public opinion on the issue.

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On May 11, 1935, Long and the VFW publicly joined forces in the Bonus push. Long delivered a radio address on the NBC national network sponsored by the VFW entitled “A Fair Deal for the Veterans.” The VFW and Long, attempting to drum up enough extra votes to salvage the Patman Bonus Bill from the certain FDR veto, intended to instigate a massive public lobbying campaign aimed at the United States Senate. The Senator explained the VFW positions on the Bonus very carefully: the adjusted service certificates paid back “wages” not a “Bonus;” Bonus payment would stimulate business everywhere, and that the inflationary means of paying for it were financially sound. Long recognized that the lobbying campaign aimed at the President would not change his mind on the veto. He explained to his listeners, “We hear the President is being urged to turn a deaf ear to the people’s plea.” Therefore, Long exhorted, “Wire your United States Senators now .... Ask them to do the same justice by the soldiers as has been done by the captains of finance.”

Long also dedicated the Bonus address to advance a line of attack on FDR as out of touch with veterans and common people. He assailed Roosevelt for opposing “this obligation which the Government now owes the soldiers” while “the bankers have been given everything for which they have asked.” Long ridiculed the President’s claims of being a veteran. Roosevelt’s entitlement to veteran status played an important role in his objections to the Bonus. As Long described it, FDR asserted his veteran status to tell veterans that “he understands [the Bonus issue] somewhat better than we may think.” Long admitted that FDR was a veteran but noted that as Assistant Secretary of the Navy,

FDR “stayed up here on Pennsylvania Avenue in the daytime, and in a very fine home during the nighttime, and drew $10,000 a year for his services …. 3,000 miles from the gunfire.” Long criticized Roosevelt for not understanding the real veteran, “the man that did not stay on Pennsylvania Avenue, who did not stay in a luxurious home … and who not only went through the fourteen kinds of carnage worse than the fires of hell itself but who, when he came back, found his occupation destroyed, and the job which he had held gone.” Long, who had received criticism from Legion allies in the Senate for opposing the war and not volunteering his services, admitted he, too, had not been in the war and was in the same position as FDR. But, Long wryly commented, “the only difference is that I didn’t receive $10,000 a year not to go.”

The Senator contended that the President’s lack of shared perspective with veterans matched his lack of sympathy for the common people. He claimed he understood why FDR might have these misconceptions of popular opinion on the Bonus, blasting the President for a comment stating that when he needed to “get a better conception of the American people,” he went fishing. Referring to the recent Roosevelt fishing trip on Vincent Astor’s yacht, Long snorted, “I am afraid that his sailing that $5,000,000 yacht into the British waters with the Duke and Duchess of Kent … has distorted the viewpoint of the President, rather than giving him the common perspective of the common people of this country.” He remarked, “I hope he will pay attention to the letters and telegrams [in support of the Bonus] he is receiving and judge that as being nearer the impression of

25 Ibid.
the American people.” To Long, supporting the veterans in the Bonus struggle was supporting the common people against the Banks and Wall Street.26

As with Coughlin’s National Union, the spring of 1935 marked the first great wave of recruitment for the Share Our Wealth Society. In the spring of 1935, Long’s political movement and influence spread nationally. The best estimates placed the membership in the seven to eight million range. Long made six national radio addresses between January and March and planned personal appearances across the nation, most notably an appearance in Des Moines at Milo Reno’s National Farmers’ Holiday Association convention where third party politics filled the air. At every chance, the central tenets of Share Our Wealth were read, including number six which called on the government to “pay the veterans of our wars what we owe them and to care for their disabled.” Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests veterans played an important part in the growth of the Share the Wealth movement. In some areas, Share Our Wealth clubs became “little more than extensions of existing veterans’ organizations.” While the Long movement spread outside of the South and among veterans, Long and Coughlin began to merge in the public mind in the late spring of 1935.27

The Bonus, the symbolically freighted issue revealing the failures of the New Deal, provided the point of convergence for the Long, Coughlin, and veteran coalition. The fusion of the Long and Coughlin movements with VFW-led veteran political activism took place in April and May, as the intensity of the debates over the Patman Bill reached its zenith. Simultaneously, Long and Coughlin began to merge in the public mind as their

26 Ibid.

critics and countless political commentators remarked on the convergence of their followers into a protean third party movement. Even Van Zandt warned that the “threat of a third political party in the field for the next election, makes the friendship of the veteran vote a definite asset.” To be sure, in 1935, Long and Coughlin moved closer to each other’s central economic proposals. Likewise, both shared the same villains and the “broader set of symbols, images, and values” of “the dissident ideology.” Yet, the Bonus gave the men and their followers a common goal. On May 14, while the Bonus awaited a FDR veto, political analyst Arthur Krock discussed the possibility of a “pro-bonus party” forming to challenge FDR in the next election.28

More shrill commentators suggested that something worse may be afoot. From March, 1935 through May of 1935, Long and Coughlin began to be lumped together as an emerging threat to constitutional government. On March 4, 1935, the former director of the National Recovery Administration, General Hugh S. Johnson, told an audience, “You can laugh at Father Coughlin, you can snort at Huey Long—but this country was never under a greater menace.” On May 12, 1935, the day after a Coughlin Bonus address, the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale warned in a well-publicized sermon, “unless something is done to stop it, this country will become a dictatorship. The dictator will be either Coughlin or Long or a combination of the two.” Peale, no friend to FDR, placed the specter of this “sinister power” in the context of the Bonus. Peale continued his sermon, “the President is right should he veto the Patman Bonus Bill and sensible citizens should support him against this mad priest and his attempts to coerce the lawful government of the United States by threats and intimidation.” In 1935, Raymond Gram

Swing released a book collected from a series of Nation articles describing Long and Coughlin entitled, The Forerunners of American Fascism. Also in 1935, Sinclair Lewis published the best-selling It Can’t Happen Here, a novel in which figures based on Long and Coughlin created a dictatorship supported by a paramilitary organization called “the Minute Men,” a thinly-veiled reference to the uniform-wearing veteran organizations. Lewis’s dictator, Buzz Windrip, promised veterans’ Bonuses would be paid in cash, in full, and, to those making less than 5,000 dollars, doubled.29

In April, 1935, the Administration, too, became concerned about this coalition of forces. In one of the earliest uses of political polling, DNC chairman Farley asked Emil Hurja to conduct a secret poll measuring Long’s strength. On April 30, in the middle of Senate debate on the Bonus, Hurja mailed out 150,000 ballots from the fabricated periodical, National Inquirer, asking for voters’ preferences among FDR, Long, and a hypothetical Republican candidate. The DNC received almost 31,000 returned ballots, ballots containing some troubling results. While Roosevelt garnered the plurality of votes, Long received 10.9 percent and Coughlin received nearly one percent in write-in votes. Most troubling, Long’s strength in a number of key electoral states such as New York, Minnesota, and Michigan, might throw the election to a Republican candidate. As Jim Farley later explained the startling results to the Administration, “[Long’s] third party might constitute a balance of power in the 1936 election.” Long and Coughlin’s popularity proved no small threat to the Administration. Within days of mailing out the poll, the Administration received an early confirmation of the significant oppositional

coalition under formation in a deluge of correspondence concerning the Patman Bonus Bill.\textsuperscript{30}

Following the passage of the Bonus Bill, the political activism of veterans and Long and Coughlin followers supporting the Bonus reached a fever pitch as all focused their attention on persuading FDR. Long, Coughlin, and the VFW impressed upon veterans and the ordinary citizens who comprised the NUSJ and SOWS constituencies to flood the White House voicing support for the Bonus. In May, 1935, the correspondence to the White House over the Bonus reached massive proportions, becoming a roar of New Deal dissent. The collected correspondence on the proposed Bonus Bill veto formed one the largest outpourings of correspondence to FDR on any single issue. While the majority of letters by veterans described the desperation of their circumstances and their hopes that FDR would sign the Patman Bill, the letters also exposed the centrality of the Bonus issue to the New Deal Dissident movement.\textsuperscript{31}

In letter after letter, veterans chastised the President for his position on the Bonus. Richard Demmary of Englewood, N.J. asked the President, “What have you got against the veterans that makes you discriminate against them?” Frank Anderson warned FDR, “if you want to stay where you are I would at least give us what you gave the bankers and


\textsuperscript{31} According to archivist Bob Clark of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum, the public reaction mail regarding the Bonus Bill Veto is “one of the largest single issue reactions that the White House received. PPF 200 L: Public Reaction: Bonus Bill Veto (Containers 164-210) totals 47 boxes, approximately 37,600 pages. By comparison, the reaction mail to the Court Packing Plan (located in Official File 41: Judiciary Reorganization Act of 1937) totals 47 boxes. Reaction mail to the Third Term issue (OF 2526: Third Term) totals 50 boxes.” This tally does not include the substantial reaction mail in OF 95c: “In Favor of the Bonus.” Quotation from email message, Bob Clark to author, July 29, 2002, in author’s possession.
the railroad,” adding, “I thought the President was the head of the U.S.A. and not the Wall St. Bankers.” Edwin A. Lake of Brooklyn also expressed his disdain for the President. Lake rhetorically asked FDR, “May I take the liberty as an overseas veteran … to express my contempt for your attitude on the Soldiers’ Bonus Bill.” He continued, “the people of this land will prove their resentment at the coming election” Not to be outdone, Joseph Eugene Dash opened his letter to the President with scorn. Dash told FDR, “in the eyes of the ex-serviceman, his family, and his friends, you are pictured not [as] the man we thought you would be when you entered the White House; but a low-flung coyote.” He added, “yes, dear President, we will fight you in every possible manner and to the last breath if you veto the Patman Bill.” 32

The White House received many letters, from veterans and non-veterans alike, proclaiming support for Coughlin and Long and urging FDR to allow the Bonus to pass. Joseph Nash of Cleveland began his letter urging FDR to pay the Bonus, “As a member of the National Union of Social Justice and as an ex-serviceman, I appeal to you.” Winfield Phelps of Minneapolis explained to FDR that only the bankers were opposed to the Patman Bill. Phelps, a VFW member, also gave his reasons for supporting Coughlin, “I joined the National Union for Social Justice because we have been fed up with the banking group of this country.” Robert L. Turner fired off a letter to FDR that blasted Bonus opponents in Congress and the President’s position. Turner called it “plain un-American for anyone who directs attacks upon the War veterans, as the present national

Administration has practiced.” Turner boldly claimed he could “whip” certain Congressional Bonus opponents “any day in the week for Senator Huey P. Long,” with his right hand tied behind him no less. John O’Connell wrote FDR a letter approving of the Bonus on “Huey P. Long for President Club” stationary.  

Correspondence reaching the White House on the Bonus revealed the confluence of veteran activism and the Long and Coughlin movements during the spring of 1935. Veteran James O. Sabin wrote a letter to Wright Patman, with a copy sent to the White House, proclaiming, “with men like Father Coughlin, Huey P. Long, and yourself [Patman], the American people are awakening.” Veteran political strength and the convergence of Long, Coughlin, and veteran supporters featured prominently in the Bonus letter deluge. R.S. Appleton warned FDR, “If you are the shrewd politician they credit you with being, you will think twice before you go against the veterans and the National Union for Social Justice.” Another veteran and NUSJ member reminded FDR that “there are more votes in middle class than there are in Wall Street class” and that his five family members were “against you if you vote against the Vets bonus bill.” A self-proclaimed “Democrat, veteran, and a great admirer of Father Coughlin” informed FDR that a veto of the Patman Bill might thwart his re-election since the “Republican party will surely line up the veteran like they did with G.A.R.”


Correspondents to FDR put the possibility of a third-party development—or worse—involving Long, Coughlin, and veterans in explicit terms. E.J. Hawes wired FDR, “Remember it was the service vote and Father Coughlin that put your party in.” Hawes warned the President, “veto of the Patman Bill means only one thing, Huey Long next.” John Allen of Jersey City alerted FDR to the possibility of more ominous developments, “if this [Patman] bill is beaten, this country will see a dictator in the White House in 1936, [a] veteran of the World War, backed by the veteran vote, Father Coughlin, and Huey Long.” An insurance broker from Englewood, New Jersey, Frederick E. Rieger, compared the situation to that of Germany “a few years back,” casting the blame for the present circumstances on “Father Coughlin, Huey Long, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and other payroll patriots.”

Even letters from Roosevelt supporters depicted the turbulent political climate that rendered the Bonus coalition of Long, Coughlin, and veterans a gathering political threat. Roosevelt supporters in favor of the Bonus, veterans and non-veterans alike, felt the need to distance themselves from the Long and Coughlin movement. Harry Bowen from Troup, Texas, pleaded with FDR to not veto the Bonus Bill. Yet, Bowen told Roosevelt, “I am your friend and not a friend of Huey P. Long or the Radio Priest.” E.L. Westbrook from Meridian, Mississippi, lectured Roosevelt on the economic stimulus the Bonus would provide across the country and put that economic gain in stark political terms. Westbrook claimed, “It will tend to turn many ‘deaf ears’ to those preaching ‘Share Our Wealth societies” and other Bolsheviki Demagogism [sic] which I am afraid is going to

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cause plenty of trouble in 1936 in spite of all our efforts to subdue them.” New York’s E.
Harry Schiome felt obliged to post-script a respectful letter asking FDR not to veto the
Bonus by saying, “Please do not misunderstand me as being a follower of the Rev.
Charles E. Coughlin, I am not.” Writing from a ritzier Manhattan address, E.F. Hackett
begged the President’s secretary, Marvin McIntyre, to pass along his advice regarding the
Bonus. Hackett explained that FDR, by allowing the Bonus to pass, had an opportunity
“for scuttling the work by Long Talmadge Coughlin [sic].” These political calculations in
which Roosevelt would allow the Bonus to pass in order to undermine dissent, rumored
to be the favored strategy of Vice President Garner and Democratic party chairman James
Farley, were ignored.36

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On May 22, 1935, FDR challenged the Bonus coalition and took the political
initiative that would mark the “second” New Deal. He took the unprecedented step of
delivering a veto message in person before a joint session of Congress. Never before had
a President presented objections before a joint session nor had a President done so on
live radio hookup. The veto of the Patman Bonus Bill became a Washington spectacle.
The radio networks transmitted the speech live and newsreel crews filmed the address.
Five thousand people rushed to obtain 553 gallery seats. Newspaper photographers hung
backwards over the balcony rails in the Capitol to snap photographs of Eleanor Roosevelt
and Administration cabinet members and staffers. The Washington Post style editor

36 Harry R. Bowen, Troup, Texas, letter to FDR, May 17, 1935, in “Bonus Bill Veto, Against,” PPF 200L,
Cont. 174, folder 3, FDRL, emphasis in original; E.L. Westbrook, Meridian, Miss., letter to FDR, March
27, 1935, in “In Favor of Bonus, V-Z, Feb.-July, 1935,” OF 95c, box 5, FDRL; E. Harry Schiome, New
York, NY, letter to FDR, May 13, 1935, in “Bonus Bill Veto, Against,” PPF 200L, Cont. 171, folder 1,
FDRL; and E.F. Hackett, New York, NY, telegram to Marvin H. McIntyre, May 11, 1935, in “In Favor of
Bonus, H-K, May, 1935,” OF 95c, box 4, FDRL. For Garner and Farley rumors, see Washington Post, May
14, 1935.
analyzed the fashion wear of the prominent women in the audience, including Eleanor Roosevelt and countless wives of Congressmen, Senators, and diplomats. The event dominated the newspapers the following day with mammoth headlines.37

Speaking to Congress, described by the *Washington Post* as “a grim-faced cold audience” and a “hostile atmosphere,” FDR presented a forceful and thorough refutation of all of the Bonus supporters claims. While he offered no new objections, FDR restated the objections to the bill he had been giving since coming to office. Roosevelt first laid out the benefits veterans already received from the federal government such as health care, civil service preference, employment services through the Department of Labor, and pensions. He then argued that veterans also received extra consideration as part of the New Deal’s public works projects. After explaining the diligent care the federal government already provided veterans, Roosevelt attacked the central premises of the Patman Bill. Roosevelt conceded that immediate payment might slightly stimulate retail trade, but he argued it would have no effect on the expansion of industry. He also rejected the call for extra veteran relief noting that the existing New Deal’s programs, and ones under Congressional consideration such as Social Security and the Work Progress Administration, already addressed the issue of relief and unemployment. Roosevelt claimed that the Bonus supporters’ argument that the Bonus would spur economic recovery was “so ill considered that little comment is necessary.” After attacking the central premises for immediate payment, FDR moved to the bill’s specifics.38

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Roosevelt argued that the specifics of the bill, even disregarding the larger goals sought by Bonus supporters, made it impossible to defend. Roosevelt claimed that since the bill called for cash payment at the Bonus certificates’ face value, it included the interest on the certificates until 1945. The ten years of interest meant that veterans would receive much more than the additional $1.00 or $1.25 a day for services rendered. FDR claimed the 1945 provision made the certificates worth “two and one-half times the original grant” and amounted to “a new straight gratuity or bounty to the amount of 1,600,000,00 dollars.” Moreover, FDR claimed that the extra expenditures of 2.2 billion dollars without any additional taxes or bonds to pay for it rendered the Bill indefensible. FDR maintained, “solely from the point of view of the good credit of the United States, the failure of the Congress to provide additional taxes for an additional expenditure of this magnitude would in itself and by itself alone warrant disapproval of this measure.” With no apparent irony, FDR continued to hold fiscal austerity in high regard despite the deficits the New Deal had been running. Indeed, the American Liberty League referred to the veto as a “strong, sound document.”

FDR employed the Bonus Bill veto to reiterate his position against broadly defined veteran prerogatives. First, he contended that currency expansion and inflation would disproportionately harm those disabled veterans on a fixed income, in effect pitting veterans against one another. As Roosevelt explained, the Patman Bonus Bill would favor “the able-bodied veteran at the expense of the disabled veteran.” He also restated his principles from the 1933 Chicago Legion speech that able-bodied veterans held no

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special claims over the rest of the citizenry. FDR argued that the “great majority [of veterans] are today in the prime of life, are today in full bodily vigor,” and needed no additional help outside of the New Deal programs. Notably, in giving his address, FDR omitted an almost verbatim line from the Legion speech that had created such a stir amongst veterans opposed to FDR. His written text published in the next-day’s newspapers stated, “the able-bodied citizen, because he wore a uniform and for no other reason, should be accorded no treatment different from that accorded to other citizens who did not wear a uniform during the World War.” The omission of this passage suggests that the chastening the Administration received over this politically sensitive issue made him slightly more circumspect about unnecessarily alienating veterans.40

FDR also used the Bonus Bill veto to initiate a spirited offensive against those who argued for currency inflation and the redistribution of wealth, namely, the coalition of New Deal dissidents. After all, Literary Digest proclaimed, “in the popular mind … the Patman bill got through the Senate, not merely because it was supported by many veterans, but because it was supported by the Hearst press, by senator Huey P. Long, and most notably, by the Rev. Charles E. Coughlin of Detroit.” FDR addressed the distribution of wealth claiming that with the inflationary Bonus, “wealth is not created nor is it more equitably distributed by this method.” The Washington Post reported that Roosevelt aimed the comment “in response to the Huey Long school of thought.” Coughlin’s insistent call to his listeners to apply pressure for the Patman Bonus in the weeks leading up to the veto made him an undeniable presence in the episode. As one prominent political analyst observed about the veto message spectacle, “Floating around

40 Ibid.
in the shadow like a fish in the sea was the spirit of Father Coughlin intoning, ‘What a mighty thing am I.’” Although not named in any way, FDR’s speech refuted Coughlin’s arguments in a systematic way. FDR’s veto ultimately changed few minds in Congress, but it was impressively delivered to the captivated national radio audience and signaled FDR’s vigorous return to the political fray following a long dormant period. *Time* magazine claimed that Roosevelt’s “mood had changed” and that “the President of the two years past, taking the political initiative, breaking precedent with verve and satisfaction” had returned. FDR’s veto fired the opening salvo of what would become the “second” New Deal.41

FDR’s veto message did little to suppress Congressional enthusiasm for the Bonus. Before FDR had even left the Capitol, rowdier members of the House began to chant “Vote! Vote!” Within forty-five minutes, with what one analyst deemed “contemptuous celerity,” the House delivered an overwhelming rebuke of the President’s message, voting 322-98 to override. James Van Zandt explained to the press that the House had given the President a “decisive answer.” Van Zandt pointed to the over-ride as “conclusive proof” that “80 percent of the American people favored enactment of the Patman Bill.” The Senate chose to take up the veto the following day. Before the Senate

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41 *Washington Post* May 23, 1935. *Literary Digest*, May 18, 1935: 6. Conspicuously, Long absented himself from the proceedings. After Long and Steiwer held up the vote allowing FDR to address the joint session with a failed filibuster, both of these Bonus champions in the Senate boycotted the session. *Time* May 27, 1935, quoted in Friedel, *FDR: The New Deal Years*, 514. Arthur Schlesinger’s account of the “breakthrough” of the second New Deal cites Roosevelt saying to Secretary of the Treasury Morgenthau on the veto message, “My God! If I win, I will be on the crest of the wave.” Schlesinger begins his account of the second New Deal with this anecdote of FDR’s resurgence. Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*, 10-11, 290. Friedel pinpoints Roosevelt’s new initiative a few days earlier to a secret May 14 meeting with Congressional Progressives on the very day the Bonus Bill was delivered to the White House. However, Friedel also views the veto message as the first public manifestation of this change in attitude. Friedel, *FDR: The New Deal Years*, 493, 510-11.
met, however, the New Deal Dissident coalition would experience one of its defining moments in response to the Roosevelt veto.42

In the highpoint of Father Charles E. Coughlin’s political career, the National Union for Social Justice held a raucous rally at New York’s Madison Square Garden that emphasized the importance of the Bonus to the organization. Just hours after FDR vetoed the Patman Bonus Bill, the Bonus veto served as the subtext for the entire spectacle. In his “most stunning triumph,” Coughlin delivered a speech to the 23,000 people assembled that many compared to William Jennings Bryan’s ‘Cross of Gold’ speech. Coughlin denounced “plutocratic capitalism” in all of its manifestations, including opposition to the Bonus. Regarding those opposed to the Bonus, Coughlin decried, “they who regarded money as their god and their fellow beings as their cannon fodder still hold sway.” Coughlin rebuked FDR’s veto message, “No later than this afternoon, you heard the President of the United States condemn class legislation, as he called it, while for years he and his predecessors in office have been upholding this very class legislation for the benefit of the bankers, the money creators.” He decried FDR’s veto as a “money-changer’s feeble argument, pronounced by the same person who promised to drive the money-changers from the temple.” Each time Coughlin mentioned FDR, the crowd booed. The New York Congressional members who voted to override the veto shared in the glory on the dais.43


Demonstrating the foundations of the dissident coalition, veterans and the VFW played conspicuous roles in Coughlin’s NUSJ rally. Coughlin entered the jammed arena surrounded by uniformed veteran flag-bearers. VFW National Commander Van Zandt, the most visible veteran activist in the Bonus saga, addressed the crowd immediately prior to Coughlin’s speech. *The New York Times* reported that Van Zandt’s address was “frequently punctuated with cheers for his assault on the Bonus veto message of President Roosevelt or boos for points made by the President in his address.” Van Zandt called FDR’s arguments against the Bonus “familiar and overworked” and exhorted the crowd to write or wire their Senators to over-ride the veto, claiming Bonus advocates were “standing on the threshold of success.” The reporter remarked, “at the close of his address, Mr. Van Zandt aroused the crowd to howling enthusiasm.” This event at the Garden demonstrated most clearly the primacy of the Bonus as a galvanizing force in the convergence of veteran political activism and the Coughlin movement. While the VFW national organization and Coughlin agreed on a slew of issues, the Patman Bonus fused them together politically.44

Veterans held out hope that the Senate would also override the veto. On May 23, in a testy five-hour session, Senate Bonus leaders Thomas, Long, and Steiwer took to the floor, condemning the veto. Thomas called a vote against the Bonus “political suicide,” noting that 50 percent of the Senators who had voted against the Bonus in 1932, not to mention the then-President, no longer maintained Washington addresses. Long complained that the Administration felt no compunction granting banks currency in exchange for bonds as designed by the Glass-Borah Amendment of the Home Owner

Loan Bill. Long asked, “If it’s fair for the Bankers, why isn’t it fair for veterans to give them currency on the obligation they hold?” At the close of his speech, Long asked to have two documents entered into the *Congressional Record*: a transcript of his “A Fair Deal for the Veterans” May 11 VFW radio address and a pamphlet touting the “Share Our Wealth Principles.” Steiwer found the President’s assertions that veterans are on the same plane as other citizens impossible to accept. Steiwer also argued that to deny the Bonus translated into a victory for the war profiteers. Steiwer asserted, “We can never win back the affections of the common people if we accord privilege to this class, and deny the debt due to the veterans.” Nonetheless, the Senate override vote came up nine votes short. In defeat, however, forty-one Democrats voted to override the President, joining eleven Republicans and each Progressive and Farm-Laborite Senator. With the final vote tallying 54-40, one wag claimed the Bonus bloc would revise the rallying cry from the 1844 election, “Fifty-four forty and fight!” Indeed, no one believed the issue permanently dead.45

Acknowledging the setback, the VFW vowed to keep fighting for the Bonus. James E. Van Zandt stood outside the Senate chambers with a sheath of type-written statements stating with typical bravado, “the fight for full and immediate payment of the adjusted claims certificates will be renewed at once with redoubled vigor.” Van Zandt also wired the American Legion commander, “The Veterans of Foreign Wars has just begun to fight. What is the American Legion going to do?” After the defeat, however, it became clear that probably no successful action could be taken on the Bonus in the remainder of the

legislative session. Instead, Van Zandt and the VFW national leadership carried the fight to the President immediately and ferociously in the VFW’s monthly publication. 46

The official VFW reaction to the defeat of the Bonus proved fierce and more directly confrontational than ever before. The VFW published a two-page editorial on the Bonus veto in *Foreign Service* excoriating FDR. The VFW editorial began, “Defeat of the Patman Bill … as a direct result of the Presidential veto, proves conclusively that America is now in the same class with Germany and Italy. Franklin D. Roosevelt has plainly taken unto himself the same dictatorship powers that characterize the regimes of Hitler and Mussolini.” Regarding the message itself, the VFW leadership declared it “a masterpiece of evasion—a symphony of sophistry—an opus of discordant notes.” The VFW detested most thoroughly the abandonment of the long-standing philosophy toward veterans, “that service to the flag of our country, in time of war, endows a citizen with an honor and distinction.” By not upholding this principle, FDR placed veterans on equal footing with “stay-at-home profiteers, draft dodgers, weak-kneed slackers, the mentally unfit, and the morally incapable.” 47

According to the VFW leadership, the FDR Administration’s command of the WPA budget rendered opposition particularly difficult. The editorial claimed that “Roosevelt, Farley, & Co.” controlled an enormous source of patronage. The accompanying drawing, “You Can’t Lick Five Billion Dollars (Figure 5-3),” depicted this in stark imagery. Veterans lost out to FDR, a bruising “Kid Patronage,” and plutocrats in top hats. The VFW leadership summarized the conclusions reached on the nature of the

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47 *Foreign Service*, June, 1935: 4-5.
New Deal very succinctly. The editorial ended, “in no uncertain terms, Franklin D. Roosevelt has told the veteran that patriotic service to the nation, in time of war, carries no significance as far as his Administration is concerned …. and public monies will be spent only to win elections and build up political machines.”

May, 1935, marked a decisive shift in the FDR Administration’s policies, emphasis, and, especially, tone. FDR retooled his Administration’s strategy by wresting the political initiative from the New Deal Dissidents and a conservative opposition energized by the Supreme Court’s overturning of the National Industrial Recovery Act. As the Administration moved into the summer of 1935, the signal social legislation of the “second” New Deal emerged. In the process, the Administration staked an increasingly aggressive “anti-capitalist” position as a means of co-opting the mobilization on the left. FDR’s political “turn to the left” as a strategy for undermining the New Deal Dissident’s support proved successful, effectively “stealing Huey Long’s thunder.” Even so, in August, Long had all but confirmed his intentions to run for President in 1936. Yet, his death by assassination on September 10, 1935, coupled with the popularity of the “second” New Deal’s legislation, placed the third party movement in severe jeopardy.

The Bonus was a significant factor in the political origins of the “second” New Deal, supplying the point of convergence for the New Deal Dissidents. But the Bonus also preoccupied Congress to such an extent in the spring of 1935 that it bottled up the President’s more progressive policy initiatives until after the issue ran its course. Only after the May 22 veto could legislators concentrate on the progressive legislation that

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48 Ibid.

49 See footnote 3 for complete citation of the literature on the Second New Deal.
ultimately passed in the “second hundred days.” Patman and the VFW attempted to reintroduce the Bonus in a number of different bills and as riders to the President’s legislation. Yet, with the President’s plan underway, Bonus advocates ultimately opted to forgo bonus legislation until the next January session in an “informal agreement between Administration forces and strong veteran factions.” Some suggested the Administration settled for this with a wink and a nod, signaling their intent to let the measure pass in 1936 in exchange for removing the Bonus irritant from the crucial summer session.

Regardless, while Congressional Bonus supporters waited for the 1936 session to take up the issue yet again, FDR had undercut both the Coughlin and Long political movements and began working on the main source of veteran political activism, the VFW, at the first opportunity.  

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50 For an example of the Bonus’s effect on other legislation, see NYT, March 10 and 20, 1935 and June 9, 1935. For the Administration deal on the Bonus, see Washington Post, August 7, 1935.
In September of 1935, remembrances of Huey Long cast a long shadow over the VFW national encampment held in New Orleans less than a week after Long’s death. Long’s assassination in the Baton Rouge state capitol building by a physician seeking vengeance for a smear of his father still reverberated throughout the state. Before the start of the encampment, Commander Van Zandt represented the VFW at Long’s funeral services in Baton Rouge. Careful to distance the VFW from any overt partisanship, *Foreign Service* described the offering of condolences to the Long family as a token of respect for the departed Senator’s “100 percent record in the upper house on veteran legislation, and in appreciation of his loyalty to the veteran cause.” Groups of VFW members, including two hundred officers and delegates of the VFW’s fun-loving “Cooties” community service club, made the pilgrimage to Baton Rouge to pay their respects and place wreaths at Long’s tomb.\(^5\)

During the New Orleans encampment meetings, Long’s presence remained keenly felt. The presumed new leader of the Share Our Wealth movement, Rev. Gerald L.K. Smith, delivered a five minute eulogy of Long to the veteran delegates. Although Smith had initially been asked to take Long’s place as an invited guest speaker, Administration allies succeeded in scuttling a formal address by Smith. According to the *New York Times*, “foes had tipped off James E. Van Zandt that he might be involving his organization in some rather controversial matters if he turned his convention into a forum for the Share Our Wealth Crusade.” Even with the constraints of a eulogy, however, Smith unleashed a stirring political tribute to the fallen Long. He also gave the VFW delegates his assurances that Long’s followers would continue to support the veteran

\(^{5\text{1}}\) *Foreign Service*, October, 1935: 8-9, 28, 30.
cause. The melodramatic Smith went so far as to communicate Long’s alleged deathbed words, claiming Long had told him, ‘there is only one thing that we must commit ourselves to without any opposition, and that is the honest compensation due the men who defended the United States in that one hellish conflict of the World War.’ The supposedly non-political eulogy concluded “May no surrender ever be offered you… until the total wealth of this great Nation has been put at the disposal of all of its total population.”

While Van Zandt bowed to the pressure within the organization by limiting Smith to a short eulogy, a chief VFW spokesperson and other invited guests explicitly invoked Long’s name and causes. Gen. Smedley Butler, still the VFW’s most popular speaker and recruiter, commented on the death of Long in his address to the encampment. Butler bemoaned the fact that Long “could have put a spike in [FDR’s] wheel.” Instead, Butler explained to the assembled veterans, the death of Long made a second Roosevelt term inevitable. Butler proclaimed, “Roosevelt is going to be reelected, and you can’t help it for the simple reason that the best friend the soldier ever had, and the one magnificent human being in America, Huey Long, is dead.” Butler also pointed out that Roosevelt controlled five billion dollars in WPA funding, a key source of patronage and political support. As Butler described it, “You can elect a Chinaman President of the United States for $5,000,000,000!” Moreover, Eugene Talmadge, Governor of Georgia and no friend of the New Deal, expressed regrets that Long, the man he “learned to love,” would no

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longer be with them. Talmadge called the “share our wealth” plan Long’s “great idea” and hoped Rev. Smith would explain it to the veterans in his then-scheduled address.\(^5^3\)

The VFW’s encampment solidified the organization’s position in the forefront of New Deal dissent. The 2500 delegates voted to support “the Coughlin bill providing establishment of a government controlled bank to issue and have supreme control over all monetary and banking matters.” Wright Patman commended the VFW for its work on behalf of the Bonus, claiming “no other organization has so persistently, consistently, and effectively sponsored this cause as the Veterans of Foreign Wars.” The VFW’s resolution on the Bonus vowed to “work militantly, aggressively, and uncompromisingly” for the Bonus. Reverting to 1934 position, the VFW chose to remain flexible regarding method of payment. Additional resolutions continued to voice the VFW’s support for controversial issues: the taxation of all “federal, state, and municipal bonds, current and future,” the conscription of capital and labor in time of war, and an amendment to the Constitution for a “permanent neutrality policy.” The VFW also expressed outrage at the deaths of 256 veterans—ex-bonus marchers—in the Labor Day hurricane that decimated several FERA work camps in the Florida keys. The VFW demanded a Congressional investigation despite White House statements exculpating the federal officials in charge of the annihilated veteran camps.\(^5^4\)

The 1935 VFW encampment was also notable for what did not happen. Given the outrage at the President for the Bonus veto, many VFW delegates were pushing for a

\(^{5^3}\) Butler and Talmadge addresses in 36th National Encampment of the VFW, 1935, 33-37 and 355-360.

resolution censuring or condemning FDR. Minnesota delegate David Lundeen even cited FDR’s Bonus veto as the cause of the hurricane deaths in his proposed censure resolution. Yet, no such resolution passed and the President avoided political embarrassment. However, this possibility so concerned the FDR Administration that it sent a key Democratic veteran operative to the encampment in New Orleans to undermine any such activity. On September 10, 1935, the White House received an urgent message from Frank M. Kirwin, a Democrat and state VFW officer from Ohio. Kirwin telegrammed Steve Early requesting Joe Heffernan, an attorney working in the Federal Communications Commission on the ATT trust case, accompany them on their trip to the 1935 VFW encampment in New Orleans. Kirwin told Early that he had “an important assignment for Joe Heffernan” and the Heffernan’s presence “would be of mutual benefit to Administration and to our organization.” Kirwin asked Early to “prevail upon Communication’s Commission to permit his going.” The next day, Early called Anning Prall, the chairman of the F.C.C. and told him he thought this should be done. On September 14, the secretary to Anning Prall sent a memorandum to the White House stating, “Mr. Heffernan called on Mr. Prall and has started for the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in New Orleans.”

On September 18, 1935, ironically writing from The Roosevelt Hotel—Huey Long’s old headquarters—in New Orleans, Joe Heffernan informed Steve Early of his actions at the VFW encampment. In a letter marked “confidential,” Heffernan, who had

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55 Lundeen resolution in Washington Post, September 20, 1935. It is unknown if Lundeen was related to the Farm-Labor Congressman, Ernst Lundeen. Frank M. Kirwin, Department Adjutant, to Stephen Early, telegram dated September 10, 1935; memo on copy of Kirwin telegram sent to Anning Prall, dated September 11, 1935; and memorandum from Edna M Savord, Secretary to Anning S. Prall to White House, September 14, 1935, in “Veterans of Foreign Wars, 1935-1937,” OF 84, FDRL.
worked with Early on *Stars and Stripes* in France, detailed the proceedings of the Americanism and Resolutions committees. Heffernan relayed to Early the strong feelings against the Administration that emerged in the Resolution committee’s meetings. Heffernan noted, “there were at least fifty proposals clearly of political import.”

Heffernan then proceeded to enumerate the openly hostile resolutions, “One of these was intended to provide for the adoption of a slogan: ‘Remember the Veto!’ Another was headed: ‘Broken Political Promises.’ A third was ‘Unconstitutional Usurpation by the President.’ A fourth demanded that the organization go on record as opposed to the re-election of the President and that support be offered to any opponent.” Heffernan informed Early that “All such clearly antagonistic resolutions I was able to have disapproved.” He did not explain further, though in committee sessions he and Democratic allies probably pointed to the VFW’s prohibition against partisan politics and played to the VFW member’s patriotism to defuse the explosive and potentially politically costly situation. Heffernan told Early, “it was prudent in you to have me come here.”

Heffernan proved immediately useful to the Administration by undermining some of the more hostile expressions against FDR, but his letter also very ably explained the current situation with the Bonus and the VFW’s position as a leading voice of New Deal

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56 Confidential letter from Joe Heffernan to Steve Early, September 18, 1935, in “Veterans of Foreign Wars, 1935-1937,” OF 84, FDRL. Heffernan is a fascinating character. A self-proclaimed “broken-down vet” who worked with Early on *Stars and Stripes*, Heffernan rose to prominence in Ohio Democratic circles during the 1920s, ultimately becoming mayor of Youngstown. Yet, in the summer of 1932, Heffernan led a group of 100 Youngstown veterans to Washington, D.C. to join in the Bonus March. In fact, Heffernan edited and printed the official news organ of the Bonus March, *The BEF News*. By 1935, Heffernan had been appointed to his FCC attorney post. For Heffernan’s life, see obituary in *Youngstown Vindicator*, April 21, 1977. For roster of *Stars and Stripes* employees, see the Library of Congress American Memory Website dedicated to *The Stars and Stripes*, especially the special section, A Closer Look at *The Stars and Stripes* found at the following URL: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/sgphtml/sashtml/sp.html.
dissent. Heffernan attempted to convince Commander Van Zandt that there was a good chance that the Bonus would be passed in the January Congressional session which meant “veterans now have nothing to gain by a provocative utterance which would only arouse the President.” Heffernan correctly speculated that the VFW would back off of the inflationary demands in the Patman Bill and withhold support for any particular bill, choosing instead to put immediate payment over the ideological demands inherent in the Patman Bill. Heffernan also related to Early why the VFW became such an embittered critic of the New Deal. Heffernan explained, “There is a feeling that in his Chicago speech, [FDR] went further than any other President in rebuffing the veterans.” He added that “in insisting that veterans, no matter what their service, are entitled to no special consideration, he went contrary to our school book stories and thus disturbed the underlying sentiment of the people.” Heffernan gave this reason special weight since even the “more thoughtful and deliberative men” expressed this view. In a telling ending, Heffernan described the difficult position he and his “personal friends and political allies” were in. Although all were diehard Democrats and would support the President in the 1936 election, they were “somewhat saddened by what appears to be his broad philosophy and in their hearts wish that he could see his way clear to reassert the historic outlook on veterans.”

Heffernan’s work for the Administration attempted to do more than just undermine critical expressions. Heffernan acted to mend the rift between the Administration and VFW Commander Van Zandt. Van Zandt’s outspoken criticism of the Administration

57 FDR’s Chicago speech to the American Legion, October 2, 1933, in which FDR said, “No person, because he wore a uniform must thereafter be placed in a special class of beneficiaries over and above all other citizens.” See chapter 3 for details. Joe Heffernan to Steve Early, September 18, 1935, in “Veterans of Foreign Wars, 1935-1937,” OF 84, FDRL.
had been unending from the time of his first appointment in September, 1933. Moreover, his tireless recruiting work, speaking tours promoting cash payment of the Bonus, and the alliance with the Long and Coughlin forces made him a highly visible New Deal Dissident in his own right. After the convention, however, Heffernan wired Early that “Everything personally critical of the President has been stopped. Van Zandt gave us personal support. I promised appreciation and suggest that you arrange social contact.” Heffernan enthused, “foresee prospect of better feeling if we handle situation adroitly.” Kirwin, the Ohio VFW leader who had requested Heffernan, also wired Early “a thousand thanks for sending Joe Heffernan …. Am confident his actions will bring Van Zandt and Administration closer.”

One of Heffernan’s actions involved personally nominating Van Zandt for his third term as Commander-in-Chief, a move that Kirwin claimed “threw [the] convention into panic.” Given the battles between the VFW and the Roosevelt Administration during Van Zandt’s leadership, and the common knowledge of Heffernan’s ties to the Administration, Kirwin probably did not exaggerate in his description. Heffernan’s rousing and, by VFW standards, lengthy nominating speech for Van Zandt masterfully alluded to FDR’s principled position with the veterans on the Bonus. In a passage ostensibly referring to Van Zandt, Heffernan told the encampment, “The Nation of ours today is in a great crisis …. In this crisis we must look for a man who is firm in his purpose and resolved in his principle, and a man who will not hedge from momentary rebuff or retreat in the face of vilification and misrepresentation.” Heffernan added, “We must have a man who will stand like a pillar in the temple of state.”

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encampment unanimously elected Van Zandt for a third term and looked to the 1936 Congressional session as the final chapter in the Bonus saga.59

In January, 1936, the Bonus forces in Congress could point to the newly unified veteran organizations as a source of support in the ongoing legislative battle. The recently-elected commander of the American Legion, Ray Murphy, and Van Zandt had met secretly in November to reconcile their organizations’ differences on the Bonus. After this meeting, Congressional Bonus leaders could count on a consistent, united veteran voice. Moreover, prior to the 1936 Congressional session, a survey conducted by the newly created Gallup public opinion poll found that 55 percent of Americans now supported the Bonus. Patman temporarily held out hope for his inflationary version of the Bonus. Coughlin, too, continued to support Patman’s version of the bill, delivering a sermon on the eve of the Congressional session railing against any compromise. Indeed, Patman kept Coughlin informed of the parliamentary maneuvering underway with telegram updates but, with the VFW and American Legion in agreement on a compromise plan, even Patman finally gave in on the currency inflation issue. Ultimately, all parties involved decided to compromise in order to get the Bonus paid. With currency inflation decoupled from immediate Bonus payment, veterans and Congressional supporters believed a veto-proof majority was assured.60


As expected, the resulting “united front” Vinson-McCormick-Patman Bonus bill easily passed both the House and Senate. This version of the bill paid for the Bonus in the more orthodox manner of small denomination bonds. Yet, it forgave interest on the loans veterans made against the certificates since 1931, a stipulation that raised the cost to the federal government by approximately 250 million dollars. The lone veteran organization leader in the Capitol for the vote, Van Zandt basked in spotlight. After the bill had already been sent to the White House, VFW Commander Van Zandt and Speaker of the House Byrns, surrounded by newsreel cameras, performed a mock signing ceremony in which Van Zandt announced for the sound films, “Thank you, Mr. Speaker. By your actions, you have made 3,500,000 veterans very happy.”

FDR once again vetoed the Bonus bill, voicing identical reservations to those espoused in his 1935 veto message. Yet, the 1936 message, a two hundred word handwritten note, arrived without the hoopla of the 1935 version. Some Administration officials lamented that the President’s attitude concerning the Bonus seemed to have changed. Harold Ickes complained in his diary that the President’s veto “was totally lacking in vigor or argument of any sort.” He continued, “If the President was against it, he ought to have fought it …. I do not like this playful attitude on such an important measure.” The Washington Post political commentator, Franklyn Waltman, Jr., called FDR’s veto message “feeble resistance” and “a milk toast document,” adding “one can visualize Mr. Roosevelt winking one of his eyes at Congress as he solemnly asserted he

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For copies of telegrams and Coughlin-Patman correspondence, see the “Rev. Charles E. Coughlin” file, Box 122c in the Papers of Wright Patman (WPP), Lyndon B. Johnson Library (LBJL). Daniels, Bonus March, 240-241.

61 Daniels, Bonus March, 240. NYT, January 23, 1936.
meant every word he said on the bonus subject last May.” Indeed, the Administration
anticipated Bonus passage and initiated the mechanisms for immediate payment. The
Veterans Administration began printing and distributing the necessary forms before the
bill had even passed. In a political sense, the Bonus was the last piece of “second” New
Deal legislation.62

On January 27, 1936, veterans in the Senate galleries rejoiced as Bonus supporters
followed 326 House members in voting to override FDR’s veto. Only twelve Democratic
Senators voted to sustain the President, while fifty-seven Democrats voted to override.
The leaders of the three major veteran organizations called on the White House where
they issued a joint statement asking veterans to only cash the “baby bonds” if in dire need
or “for some permanently useful purpose.” FDR issued a statement declaring that the
Congressional “mandate” would be carried out “as expeditiously as accuracy will permit”
and announced that three thousand new Civil Service employees would be needed to help
expedite the Bonus application process and to meet the June 15 payment date.63

Veterans responded to the program by redeeming and cashing their adjusted service
certificates in overwhelming numbers. By May, of the approximately 3,500,000 veterans
holding certificates, all but 200,000 applied for immediate payment. The veteran
organizations helped with the disbursement and collection of the necessary application
forms. VFW posts set up tables to help veterans with the applications and Foreign
Service printed instructions on cashing the bonds. Bonus money, in the form of “baby
bonds,” quickly filtered throughout the nation. Between June 15 and June 20 alone, the

January 25, 1936.

Post Office reported 523,932,200 dollars worth of baby bonds had been redeemed. The summer of 1936 was one of the most prosperous in years, thanks in part to the 2.4 billion dollars put into circulation through the payment of the Bonus. Unemployment fell from 20.1 to 16.9 percent in 1936 and the GNP rose at a then record rate of 14.1 percent. By November, 1936, only 138,131 out of the 3.5 million Bonus certificates remained uncollected.64

After the Bonus’s prompt payment, the VFW, an organization that had led a steady campaign against Administration policy since March, 1933, reached a rapprochement with FDR. The VFW began to focus more intently on foreign policy issues, specifically neutrality legislation. Indeed, the day that the Senate overrode FDR’s veto, the three major veteran organizations issued another statement under the title, “No More Wars, No More Bonus,” advocating “honest and realistic neutrality laws,” universal service, and “adequate” defense spending. In the release, the veteran organizations challenged Bonus opponents that if they “will join us in this [neutrality] fight they need fear no more bonuses.” On these issues, the VFW and the FDR Administration ostensibly agreed.65

More importantly, after 1935, FDR moved noticeably closer to the Depression-era VFW’s ideological position. With the “second” New Deal, FDR reached out to common citizens in a more tangible manner and took a more antagonistic attitude toward the


business community and “economic royalists.” The WPA appropriated approximately five billion dollars for public projects that gave work to millions of unemployed, including a sizeable contingent of veterans. During 1935, the VA sent thirty veterans a day from their offices to either a WPA project or a VA hospital. The Wagner Act served as an organizational boon to labor unions and helped working people across the nation. The Social Security Act established a system of old-age pensions and unemployment insurance. FDR’s “soak-the-rich” tax bill of 1935, whether one considers it merely a symbolic reform or a real progressive tax measure, mimicked the Share the Wealth Society’s concern with the concentration of wealth and sought to recalibrate the tax structure. Last, the tone of FDR’s 1936 campaign began to match the vituperative anti-capitalist rhetoric that the VFW had been employing since the late 1920s.66

After the spring of 1936, the VFW no longer voiced militant opposition to New Deal policy, spending the 1936 election season in relative quiet. In 1934-1935, the Bonus provided the ideological touchstone for the New Deal Dissidents and the impetus behind their impressive mobilization. With the resolution of the Bonus not only did this visceral manifestation of the Wall Street vs. Main Street contest get resolved but, as importantly, payment of the Bonus placated one of the key structural components of the New Deal Dissident coalition. As the summer campaigns heated up, Commander Van Zandt issued a sharply worded directive against partisan politics. Threatening VFW members with expulsion, Van Zandt exclaimed “no politics will be allowed in our ranks.”67

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66 Veteran Administration information in Keene, *Doughboys*, 201. See note 3 on the Second New Deal.

67 Van Zandt quote in *National Tribune*, June 11, 1936.
The mended rift between FDR and veterans severely hampered the viability of the third-party movement that seemed so portentous in 1935. In the summer of 1936, Father Coughlin, Rev. Gerald L.K. Smith, and Dr. Francis Townshend banded together to form the Union Party, nominating Rep. William Lemke as its standard-bearer in the 1936 presidential election. Yet, despite the amalgamation of these groups reporting millions, if not tens of millions, of members, Lemke received only 850,000 votes. FDR blasted his way to an electoral landslide in the November election. The death of Huey Long, Roosevelt’s “turn to the left” in 1935 and 1936, the inadequacies of William Lemke as a candidate, and the poorly matched egomaniacs who served as the party’s triumvirate all played a part in the Union Party’s woeful electoral results. But the resolution of the Bonus issue significantly contributed in the defeat. The Union Party lost both the Bonus as a galvanizing, coalition-building issue, and the backbone of veteran political activism that had made the New Deal Dissidents such a potent force in 1935.

For their part, the Republican Party nominated two WWI veterans for the 1936 presidential ticket in an effort to siphon off veterans disaffected by the New Deal. But by nominating the moderate Kansas Governor Alf Landon and the more conservative Col. Frank Knox, the Republican Party misunderstood the ideological position that had sparked veteran political activism against the New Deal. In May, 1936, the veteran newspaper with long ties to the party of Lincoln, the National Tribune, publicly endorsed VFW member, Senate Bonus leader, and progressive Oregon Senator Fred Steiwer for the Republican presidential campaign. When the Landon-Knox ticket won the Party’s endorsement in June, the editorial board of the National Tribune declined to support any candidate, claiming neutrality as did many other Republican progressives. The silence
was deafening, and, indeed, very much appreciated by Democratic stalwarts. Ex-Legion Commander and Chairman of the Veterans’ Advisory Committee of the Democratic National Party, Louis Johnson, telegrammed the Tribune’s editor after the 1936 electoral landslide thanking him for the paper’s “fair and impartial attitude.” The Republican Party failed to translate the earlier veteran political activism into broad support for an all-veteran presidential ticket. The veterans’ critique of the New Deal had been from the left, not the right.68

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By examining the political mobilization for the Bonus between 1935 and 1936, the political origins and the political triumph of the “second” New Deal come more clearly into focus. The Bonus aroused veterans against the FDR Administration, precipitating wide-spread veteran political activism. But it was also the point of convergence for a politically threatening coalition of Long, Coughlin, and VFW-led veterans, a coalition whose activities built to a crescendo in the late spring of 1935. After the resolution of the intensely-ideological Bonus issue, no other single issue existed that could so effectively mobilize the remaining New Deal Dissidents. And, after the implementation of the “second” New Deal, veterans longer viewed the Administration as a tool of Wall Street. In exploring the struggle for the Bonus, then, one finds the VFW and veteran political activism at the epicenter of New Deal politics.69

68 National Tribune, May 7, June 18, November 12, 1936. For Republican progressive’s stances in the 1936 election, see Ronald L. Feinman, Twilight of Progressivism: The Western Republican Senators and the New Deal (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 91-117.

CHAPTER 6
CONTINUALLY FIGHTING THE GREAT WAR: VETERANS, HISTORICAL MEMORY, AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY, 1934-1941

Remember the songs we sang and the propaganda we believed. The childish faith we cherished, pumped into us by war-mongers, about making the world safe for democracy, and all that blah and phooey!

*Foreign Service*, November, 1935.

No clear-thinking A.E.F. veteran truly believes he went to France in 1917-18 just to risk his life in a war for material profits or imperialistic gain. Ask the average A.E.F. veteran today why he went to war in 1917 and nearly every one will give you the same answer: “We joined the Allies in 1917 because America’s security was menaced by a European combination of autocratic powers seeking world domination.”

*Foreign Service*, May, 1941.

The U.S. foreign policy debates of the 1930s, often reduced to a conflict between “isolationists” and “interventionists,” reverberated throughout the twentieth century. In the post-World War II repudiation of isolationism, the differences among those opposed to American intervention in the conflict tended to be blurred as critics lambasted the naiveté, or worse, complicity, of the position.¹ Yet, as work less critical of the isolationists’ position has described in great detail, Depression-era isolationists ran the political spectrum: from progressives to conservatives, pacifists to extreme nationalists, fascist sympathizers to Communist Party members.² One isolationist group, however, has

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thus far eluded close scrutiny. No studies of isolationism make special reference to veterans as a foreign policy pressure group. Likewise, recent accounts of veteran political activism do not delve very deeply into veterans’ foreign policy attitudes. But veteran organizations routinely weighed in on matters of war and peace, and played an active role in the foreign policy debates of the 1930s. Before Congress, in their national and local encampments, and in other public fora, veterans announced their foreign policy agenda for the country, pointing to their wartime experience as unique insight into the issues. Indeed, an examination of veteran foreign policy attitudes before American belligerency in World War II reveals the dynamics of the shift in American public opinion from stridently isolationist to actively interventionist.3

In 1934-5, but increasingly after the resolution of the Bonus, the Veterans of Foreign Wars began to focus on U.S. foreign policy in the organization’s major initiatives. Yet, the VFW’s foreign policy goals were formulated as an extension of veterans’ interest in reshaping the American political economy. As much as the understanding of the causes and consequences of American involvement in the Great War shaped the organization’s struggles for the Bonus, the historical memory of the war translated into a broad range of policy recommendations by veteran organizations to transfigure the parameters within which American foreign policy could be made and

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3 Jennifer Keene’s recent work, Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America, does not investigate the 1930s foreign policy positions of veterans. William Pencak’s For God and Country touches on the topic briefly, 304-310. One older study exists that discusses veteran foreign policy at length but downplays the importance of veterans in shaping the public debates of the 1930s, Roscoe Baker, The American Legion and American Foreign Policy (New York: Bookman Associates, 1954), especially 155-187.

implemented. In their arguments advocating a strict neutrality, the nationalization of armaments industries, and the conscription of wealth and capital during war through sharp income taxes, veterans and their Congressional allies continued the struggle over the political economy associated with the domestic politics of the New Deal. In the battle over U.S. entry into the World Court, for example, the VFW united with Father Coughlin and Senator Huey P. Long in mobilizing for its Senate defeat. Furthermore, the VFW framed the debate over the Neutrality Act, long thought of as the highpoint of isolationism in the United States, as an broadening of its goal to diminish the ability of commercial interests to dominate U.S. policy. In many ways, the Neutrality Act can be seen as the foreign policy component of the “second” New Deal.4

Between 1938 and 1939, the VFW broke with the most recalcitrant of the isolationists over the proposed Ludlow amendment and the “cash-and-carry” proposal of the 1939 neutrality legislation. The proposed Ludlow amendment, a plan to take the power to declare war out of the hands of Congress and put it to a national referendum, split the isolationists. The VFW opposed the Ludlow Amendment, but the VFW still argued against the measure from the perspective of their World War I experiences. Fearful that foreign propaganda would once again drive public opinion in the event of a referendum, and convinced that it would encourage belligerent behavior by aggressor nations, the VFW national organization voiced opposition to the idea. After the defeat of the Ludlow Amendment, and throughout the turmoil of the late 1930s in Europe and

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Asia, the VFW began to stake a more aggressive claim for U.S. foreign policy, following the Roosevelt Administration in its move away from neutrality. After the beginning of the European war, the VFW became an advocate for supplying the British war material on a “cash-and-carry” basis. As it moved away from isolationism, however, the VFW also stepped up its efforts to avoid a repeat of the Great War’s effects on the political economy, committing the organization to an assertive campaign for a “universal” draft that would curb profiteering through steep taxation on wartime profits.

After 1940, the VFW ratcheted up its support for Britain as a measure of support for democracy. The organization heartily endorsed the Roosevelt Administration’s initiation of the Selective Service Act, huge increases in defense spending, and aid to the British and the Soviet Union through Lend-Lease agreements. Some VFW members, including influential past-commander James Van Zandt, joined the staunch isolationist group, the America First Committee. The majority of VFW members rejected the American First appeals, however, at a heated 1941 annual encampment and sided with the Administration on foreign policy. Well before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the VFW advocated material support for the soon-to-be Allies and recognized the prospects of a new American war effort against the Axis powers.

Between 1934 and 1941, then, the VFW’s foreign policy objectives underwent a striking reorientation. The organization began the period as a committed advocate for American neutrality and member of the isolationist coalition. After 1937, however, the VFW outpaced public opinion by embracing the Roosevelt Administration’s more aggressive foreign policy decisions and staking an increasingly interventionist position. Throughout the shifting foreign policy agenda, the VFW repeatedly employed the
historical memory of the Great War and the lessons derived from it, but those lessons dramatically changed. Throughout the mid-1930s, veterans expressed an outraged cynicism over the way financial and industrial interests duped soldiers into believing they were fighting a war to “save democracy.” While the mid-decade foreign policy agenda constituted a re-fighting of the Great War, so too did the new interventionist policy agenda. After 1939, the cynicism and resentment caused by the last war-time political economy gave way to a renewed idealism in VFW foreign policy pronouncements. By 1941, veterans were once again ready to believe that they had a special role in supporting democracy, even if they now called it “the American way of life.”

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Before 1934, the VFW legislative agenda included issues of foreign policy and national defense but they were not a priority. The organization did not mobilize for foreign policy concerns as it did for veteran welfare issues. From 1926 to 1934, the motivating principle behind the VFW’s foreign policy agenda was that a strong national defense best served national interest. To that end, the VFW promoted the strengthening and modernization of the American military, including a large navy and a modern air force, and preparedness through Civilian Military Training Camps and the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps. Starting in 1927, however, the VFW began to sponsor the “universal draft,” a policy that would draft capital and men in the event of war. While

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most of the VFW agenda dealt with national security, the VFW did not oppose any of the attempts at international cooperation associated with the late 1920s, even the Kellogg-Briand Treaty outlawing war. Only in 1933 would the VFW go on record against “entangling alliances” and any vestiges of the League of Nations.6

In 1934, VFW members, like much of the country, came under the sway of new interpretations of the Great War that called into question the reasons for U.S. involvement. New “revisionist” histories of the Great War published in the late 1920s and early 1930s by Harry Elmer Barnes, Charles Tansill, and Charles Beard offered economic explanations for the war’s causes and the United States’ involvement that undermined all of the idealistic wartime appeals. In 1934-35, these revisionist histories merged with popular exposés such as *Merchants of Death* that emphasized the responsibility of munitions makers for provoking the conflict. Reacting to this wave of popular reinterpretation, the VFW began to give additional weight to economic interpretations of the causes of the War and to the role munitions makers played in inciting war. One month after a special Senate committee led by Senator Gerald P. Nye (Rep., N.D.) met to investigate munitions makers, the VFW voiced their own policy recommendations. At the 1934 encampment, after listening to Rep. Martin Sweeney, a Coughlin ally, and Senator Patrick McCarran blast the armaments industry, the national delegates endorsed a resolution condemning “the insidious activities of the internationally associated makers

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of munitions.” The VFW resolution offered the nationalization of the armaments industries as a remedy if no other means of limiting their behavior could be found.7

In the 1935 Congressional session, the VFW joined with the isolationists in the Senate battle over the World Court and in the debates over neutrality legislation. In January, the Senate, at the instigation of the FDR Administration, initiated proceedings on whether the United States would adhere to the protocols of the Permanent Court on International Justice, more popularly known as the World Court. The VFW had voiced its opposition to the Court as early as September, 1933, in a resolution placing the organization against United States’ involvement in “the World Court and the League of Nations and any entangling alliances.” In 1935, the organization reiterated its opposition, calling on members to voice their disapproval to their Senators and challenging the FDR Administration for having the temerity to revisit Wilsonian internationalism.8

The VFW national leadership joined with Father Coughlin, Huey Long, and the Hearst press in denouncing the World Court. On January 14, five days after the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported favorably on the Court bill, the VFW national organization sent a missive to every Senator expressing the sentiments of the overseas veterans. Commander James E. Van Zandt wrote to the Senators voicing “unalterable opposition” to the “dangerous resolution” and denying “the moral right [of] Congress to place the future destiny of the United States in the hands of foreign politicians.”

7 For the most thorough discussion of “the revisionist” historians and popularizing writers, see Cohen, The American Revisionists, 120-159; for an example, see H.C. Engelbrecht and F.C. Hanighan, Merchants of Death (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1934). For the best discussion of the Nye committee, Cole, Gerald P. Nye, 60-97. VFW Resolution No. 456 in 35th National Encampment of the VFW, 1934, 309.

8 The best overview of the World Court battle, see Cole, Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 113-127 and Brinkley, Voices of Protest, 134-137, 152. Resolution No. 19 in 34th National Encampment of the VFW, 1933, 253.
Moreover, the VFW mobilized members, as did Coughlin in an infamous radio sermon on the verge of the vote, to send letters and telegrams to their Senators, applying pressure to those who might follow the Administration’s lead. In a blistering editorial published prior to the World Court vote, the VFW leadership condemned the “back door” entry into the League of Nations, noting “every overseas veteran was an eyewitness to the futility of treaties as a means of preserving world peace and harmony.” The editorial contended, “men who have fought our wars … have reached a definite conclusion that a policy of strict neutrality is the only force that can keep America out of the next European conflict.” On the Administration’s rush to force through the treaty, the VFW declared the citizens should directly decide whether the United States participated in the Court. The VFW leadership challenged the FDR Administration in language reminiscent of the Economy Act and Bonus battles, claiming “any step that officially identifies the United States with the World Court will constitute an act of rank despotism and ruthless dictatorship.”

After the Senate failed to ratify the World Court, the VFW continued to oppose any internationalist foreign policy positions based on the lessons learned from World War I. The narrow defeat of the protocols, due in no small measure to the public outcry prompted by Coughlin, the Hearst newspapers, and organizations such as the VFW, merged with the continuing Nye Munitions Committee proceedings to set a high water mark for Congressional isolationism. VFW commander James Van Zandt expressed the organization’s “profound appreciation” to the “thirty-six sturdy American statesmen” who had defeated the ratification treaty and hoped “no more measures involving foreign

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entanglements” would be introduced in Congress. On March 14, 1935, Van Zandt appeared before the Nye Munitions committee to voice the veteran organization’s opinions on the nationalization of the armaments industries and neutrality. Moreover, after FDR surprised the members of the Nye Committee (and his own Secretary of State) by tapping them to help formulate neutrality legislation, the VFW wholeheartedly supported the resultant bills submitted by Senators Nye and Bennett Champ Clark. A VFW editorial on the neutrality bills explained, an “absolute policy of isolation for the United States in the present crisis in Europe is the unanimous demand of the America’s overseas veterans.”

The Neutrality Act signed by FDR on August 31, 1935, signaled a victory for supporters of isolationism. The 1935 version of the bill, re-passed and strengthened in 1936, called for a mandatory arms embargo, a ban on travel by Americans on belligerent ships, and a national munitions control board to supervise munitions makers in the event of foreign hostilities. The 1936 legislation added a ban on loans to belligerents, completing the goals of the bill’s supporters by curtailing the ability of commercial and financial interests to influence U.S. foreign policy as they supposedly had in World War I. Throughout the summer of 1935, the Roosevelt Administration had pushed for a tabling of neutrality legislation and fought for Presidential discretion to be built into the bill once it became clear that some form of neutrality measures would pass. Yet, FDR chose political expediency over a protracted battle. Americans overwhelmingly supported neutrality. Moreover, most of the Neutrality Act supporters

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in Congress were staunch Administration allies on domestic policy issues. Roosevelt feared antagonizing them would hinder his domestic legislative agenda, not to mention his chances in the 1936 election. In tone and in its political origins, the Neutrality Act constituted the foreign policy equivalent of the Second New Deal.

In the autumn of 1935, the delegates to the VFW encampment in New Orleans matched their enthusiasm for the then raging Bonus issue with dedication to neutrality. VFW delegates applauded the passage of the Neutrality Act and invited a delegation of Japanese veterans to exchange vows of peace and neutrality. As a measure of the VFW’s isolationist credentials, the organization invited the architect of the Munitions Committee and the resulting neutrality legislation, Sen. Gerald P. Nye, to discuss these matters with the assembled veterans. Nye thanked the VFW delegates and their leaders for supporting the Munitions Committee’s work. He denounced munitions makers as “a kind of racketeer” that needed to be “stamped out.” Nye then outlined his agenda to avoid war: a bill to de-profitize war, strict neutrality, and the governmental control of the armaments industry. Nye could have found a no more sympathetic audience; the VFW delegates passed an eight point program that included those identical policies. (See figure 6-1).

In 1936-7, international events including the Spanish Civil War and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese conflict made foreign relations even more relevant to the VFW. After the resolution of the Bonus issue, the VFW made the passing of permanent neutrality legislation the organization’s top priority. When the 1936 Neutrality Act passed within

11 For the intricacies of the legislative battle over the neutrality bills, see Divine, Reluctant Belligerent, 14-41; Cole, FDR and the Isolationists, 163-185; and Dallek, FDR and American Foreign Policy, 101-121.

days of the Bonus victory, the VFW leadership linked the issues. The VFW joined with the other major veteran organizations in issuing a statement titled, “No More Wars, No More Bonus,” advocating “honest and realistic neutrality laws,” the universal draft, and “adequate” defense spending. At the 1936 and 1937 encampments, the VFW delegates expressed the organization’s advocacy of neutrality in increasingly militant language. Moreover, the leadership invited key isolationist political figures such as the Munitions Committee members and drafters of the neutrality bills, the Senators Vandenberg, Bone, and Clark, to give addresses.\(^{13}\)

\(^{13}\) Veteran organizations’ statement in \textit{NYT} and \textit{Washington Post}, January 28, 1936. For 1936-37 VFW resolutions see, \textit{Proceedings} from 37\textsuperscript{th} and 38\textsuperscript{th} National Encampments.
In 1937, the VFW leadership communicated the organization’s concerns about neutrality directly to the President. Commander Scott P. Squyres telegrammed FDR on September 12, 1937 applauding his decision to keep the U.S. neutral in the Sino-Japanese conflict. Squyres explained to the President that the VFW stood ready to support him for invoking the specific measures of the neutrality legislation: warnings to US nationals in the war zone and withdrawal of protection from those involved in shipping to both of the belligerents. The VFW urged the President to invoke the neutrality policies “to the very limit …. without further delay and before some belligerent power makes neutrality no longer possible.” The White House took the VFW opinion seriously enough to forward the telegram to Secretary of State Cordell Hull in order for a response to be formulated. Hull drafted a letter, later sent by the White House under strict supervision by the President, that explained to Squyres the Administration view. The response assured the VFW commander that “to avoid being again entangled in hostilities is a cardinal principle of our foreign relations and one which is never lost sight of.” At least in theory, the VFW and the Administration agreed on American neutrality.14

Three days after sending the letter to the VFW commander, FDR gave his “Quarantine” speech in which he edged U.S. foreign policy toward a less isolationist position. By comparing the German, Italian, and Japanese aggression in Spain and China to a disease that required a collective quarantine, FDR expressed serious doubts about the prudence of the U.S. neutrality legislation. Indeed, by late 1937, international events

14 Telegram from Scott P. Squyres to FDR, September 12, 1937; Cordell Hull to Marvin H. McIntyre, September 21, 1937; Marvin H. McIntyre memorandum to the President, September 27, 1937; and Marvin McIntyre to Scott P. Squyres, October, 2, 1937 in “VFW, 1935-1937,” OF 84, FDRL. For a discussion of the Spanish Civil War and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, see Dallek, *FDR and American Foreign Policy*, 122-151.
intruded on the New Deal domestic political order and the Roosevelt Administration made a slow but inexorable move away from the politically expedient isolationist policies adopted in 1935-36. During this repositioning, the FDR Administration found unlikely supporters in the VFW national organization. In the battles over the Nye Munitions Committee, the World Court, and neutrality, the VFW had joined with the progressive wing of the isolationists to protest entangling alliances but more importantly, the role of financial and industrial interests in provoking war. After 1937, the organization began to gradually turn away from isolationism.\(^{15}\)

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Between late 1937 and the outbreak of war in Europe on September 1, 1939, the VFW split with the most ardent isolationists and followed the Administration on two key issues: the proposed Ludlow Amendment and the “Cash-and-Carry” program. Yet, the VFW adamantly maintained its position on questions of defense, neutrality, the universal draft, and government control of the armaments industries. This middle position continued to expose the centrality of the VFW critique of the political economy to the organization’s foreign policy agenda. At the same time, international events, and the growing perception that real threats existed for democratic nations, began to change the organization’s foreign policy views incrementally. In each step, the VFW employed their World War I memories to guide their thinking.

In the autumn of 1937, the Ludlow Amendment, a proposed constitutional amendment to change the method of declaring war from a Congressional vote to a national referendum, gained wide currency. On October 9, 1937, the Institute of Public

Opinion announced that 73 percent of the Americans polled favored a national referendum as the method to declare war. Rep. Louis Ludlow (Dem., Indiana) had been promoting a version of his bill in the House since 1935. In 1934 and 1935, Sen. Gerald P. Nye and Sen. Robert M. La Follette, Jr., respectively, submitted Senate versions of the war referendum amendment bill. Until the fall of 1937, however, no bill could make it out of hostile Senate and House judiciary committees. Ludlow’s continual attempt to bypass the House committee with a discharge petition also failed, as the petition never acquired the necessary number of signatures. In December, 1937, two days after the Japanese attack on the U.S. gunboat Panay, though, Ludlow and his Congressional supporters reached the 218 signatures necessary to force a vote on discharging the Ludlow bill from the House Judiciary Committee. A concerted effort by the Roosevelt Administration and their Congressional allies pressured Congress into voting down the discharge petition with limited debate, but the proposal separated the extreme isolationists from moderates.  

The VFW’s position on the Ludlow Amendment reflected the organization’s changing perspective on foreign policy. In 1935, the VFW had supported La Follette’s proposed Senate bill for the war referendum. In the editorial announcing their support, VFW leaders explained that Americans recognized that the Great War “was a complete failure as a step toward universal peace and the preservation of world democracy” because “nations are mere puppets in the hands of powerful individuals motivated by an insatiable lust for power and wealth.” Accordingly, the VFW gave the La Follette amendment qualified support; it had to be accomplished with “no handicaps on …

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national defense.” In 1938, as the Ludlow bill came up for consideration, the VFW national leadership reversed its position.17

In January, 1938, after requesting opinions from National officers, Council members, and State commanders, the VFW leadership announced the organization’s opposition to the Ludlow plan. In the replies from officers across the nation, only three of the seventy-five respondents favored the war referendum. To publicize this grassroots poll, the leadership delivered letters to every member of Congress stating the VFW’s hostility to the Ludlow plan. The letter listed six points of disagreement but focused on the problems veterans had witnessed in the Great War. In particular, the VFW alluded to the German and British actions during the Great War that had helped incite the United States’ involvement. The letter warned that the Ludlow bill would “invite aggressor nations … to violate the rights of the United States … and thus lead to wars otherwise avoidable, rather than being any assurance of peace.” Moreover, it cautioned that the plan would “subject the people of the United States to conflicting intensive propaganda campaigns, designed to inflame a majority to vote for war, and to arouse the bitter resistance of the minority, in various parts of the country, against the effective conduct of any such unavoidable war.” For these reasons, the VFW urged Congressional members to defeat this resolution. In a jibe at the Roosevelt Administration, however, the VFW urged the bill’s defeat in open deliberations and chastised the closure of full debate that the defeat of the discharge petition represented. The VFW leaders believed these issues of war and peace were in need of a good public airing.18


If the official position on the Ludlow Amendment reflected a change in policy, the VFW remained faithful to its understanding of why the United States entered World War I. In late 1937, simultaneous with the ascension of the Ludlow amendment to the Congressional docket, the VFW mobilized a new drive on the scale of the Bonus crusade called the “Peace for America” campaign. The VFW announced the campaign would put “a crimp in the secret ambitions of those who believe America’s foreign trade markets are more valuable than American lives, and that eventually America will have to participate in another World War to retain, or regain world markets profits [sic].” To accomplish this goal the VFW offered a foreign policy vision consistent with the previous years’ pronouncements: increased national spending on defense, neutrality, the universal draft, and government control of the munitions manufacture.19

The VFW employed the same methods in the “Peace for America” campaign as in the successful Bonus drive. The national headquarters printed and distributed petitions to be circulated by VFW members to “Keep America out of War” and convinced 500 newspapers to publish a “Keep America out of War” ballot. The VFW leadership announced the organizational goal of gathering twenty-five million petition signatures to persuade Congress of Americans’ resolve to stay neutral. The VFW national headquarters also published a pamphlet for distribution to all local, county, and state officers. The VFW pamphlets mobilized members at the grassroots level with “a complete outline of VFW policies on subjects identified with national defense, neutrality, proposals to de-profitize war, and control of munitions.” The pamphlets contained five prepared talks and

19 *Foreign Service*, January, 1938: 5.
a sample five minute radio interview for members across the country to utilize in their local communities.  

For further publicity, the VFW once again organized rallies at the Capitol steps. On April 27, 1938, the VFW national commander Squyres delivered petitions containing four million signatures to a gathering of sympathetic Senators and Representatives at the Capitol. The gathering included many of the most ardent of the isolationists on Capitol Hill, not to mention numerous members of the print and radio media. Senator Key Pittman, Foreign Relations Committee chairman, flanked by Senators Arthur Vandenberg, Bob La Follette, Ernest Lundeen, and Homer T. Bone, received the petitions from the VFW commander and spoke to the rally of veterans. The Senators involved in the rally joined with the VFW efforts by co-authoring S. 3912, the Senate version of the bill to de-profitize war. Twenty-seven Senators—Democrats, Republicans, Farm-Laborites, and Progressives—signed as co-authors on the war profits bill.

The VFW received help in their legislative efforts to de-profitize war from their fellow veteran comrades in Congress. Rep. Maury Maverick (Dem., Texas), a former VFW post commander in San Antonio, submitted the VFW version of the universal draft bill in the House. The Maverick Bill, officially known as H.R. 9525, offered a steep schedule of taxation the moment the United States declared war. A competing bill to take the profits out of war, the May Bill, gave authority to the President to fix prices and profits in the event of belligerency. Maverick denounced the May Bill as an unwelcome aggrandizement of executive power, explaining, “We don’t want our boys to fight a war

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at all—but if they do, we want to know that they have a democratic government back home.” The VFW derided the May bill as “an instrument of Fascism and a menace to Democracy.” With opposition from the White House, Administration allies in Congress succeeded in keeping the Maverick bill tabled for the 1938 Congressional session.22

Between 1938 and 1939, the VFW’s “Peace for America” campaign dominated the organization’s agenda. The VFW continued to voice skepticism about calls for protecting democracy abroad as a guarantor of democratic freedoms at home. In September, 1938, the VFW leadership ran an editorial deriding this internationalist view. The editorial ridiculed those Americans who “cling to the belief it is Uncle Sam’s duty to protect democracies in all sections of the globe” and “sincerely believe a dictatorship victory in Europe will subsequently lead to an invasion of the United States and the downfall of our own democracy.” The VFW leadership explained that those “self-anointed idealists … secretly nurse visions of a wartime boom that will make them personally wealthy.” For this reason, the VFW described its war-profits taxation measure as “America’s greatest neutrality guarantee.” The VFW leadership appealed to its members’ penchant for political activism, claiming it was “the moral duty … to fight for those objectives which will keep America from becoming involved in a new World War.” In 1939, while the VFW supported the Administration’s requests for increases in defense spending, the organization once again called for the universal draft. With pithy slogans such as “take the pay out of ‘pay-patriotism’” and “put dollars on the same level as doughboys,” the VFW continued to try to pass the pet measure. On March 21, 1939, a week after the German

22 VFW attitudes and Maury Maverick article in Foreign Service, May, 1938: 5, 8, 32.
invasion of Czechoslovakia, fifty Senators co-authored a VFW-sponsored universal draft bill. 23

In the summer of 1939, events in Europe changed the VFW’s perspective. In June, Foreign Service warned against renewed calls for a war referendum, calling the idea “a brand of pacifism that only encourages Europe’s war-mongering dictators fired with ambitions for world conquest.” The following month, the VFW leaders began a rehabilitation of veterans’ wartime idealism. In a remarkable turn-around, the VFW proclaimed that the veterans of the Spanish American War and Great War, now faced with “totalitarian terrorism,” were “clinging to a deeper appreciation of those ideals for which they made their sacrifices in the past.” Indeed, the VFW averred that “the phrase to ‘save the world for democracy’ is no longer an empty slogan” when faced with dangers “too real to be laughed off or ignored.” This rehabilitation of idealism signaled a shift in the expressed foreign policy perspective. Neutrality, while still a goal, became a problematic position. Foreign Service explained the re-thinking of neutrality to VFW members, “events of the past year have uncovered serious weaknesses in this method of avoiding participation in international disputes.” The VFW leadership argued, “America’s neutrality regulations have undeniably strengthened the dictatorships in their struggle for the balance of power in Europe” and “made the United States an ally of Japan in its efforts to destroy China.” The VFW sought a new course even prior to the beginning of the European war.24

23 Foreign Service, September, 1938: 5; April, 1939: 8; and May, 1939: 4.

At the 1939 VFW national encampment in Boston, meeting simultaneously with the commencement of hostilities in Europe, the delegates strove to find the best course of action for the United States. After the invasion of Poland and the declarations of war by Britain and France, the VFW reiterated the importance of neutrality and preparedness. The VFW’s call for “Security for America” included long-sought goals such as a massive defense buildup, the mobilization of manpower, and the equalization of the profits and burdens of any potential war. Yet, the VFW sought to redefine neutrality, appealing for an “actual” neutrality in foreign wars. With the concept of actual neutrality, the VFW requested that the President “recognize the existence of war regardless of its formal declaration by any belligerent” and end the arms embargo to belligerents in favor of the “cash-and-carry” arms policy. A disclaimer that restated the VFW’s cynicism about the Great War accompanied the new neutrality policy. Despite their new position, VFW delegates made sure everyone remembered that “the World War did not end all wars, did not advance the ideals of democracy and did not restrain the spread of autocratic, dictatorial and totalitarian forms of government, as per hopes held out in the slogans used by American citizens during the period of the World War.” But the “cash-and-carry” arms sales and recognition of belligerency provisos signaled important shifts in policy aimed at containing Germany and Japan. 25

In supporting changes in U.S. neutrality legislation from outright embargo to the “cash-and-carry” basis for arms sales, the VFW broke with the hardliner isolationists. When, on September 21, 1939, FDR assembled a special session of Congress to revise

American neutrality legislation, the VFW’s former isolationist allies, Senators Nye, La Follette, and Lundeen, rejected “cash-and-carry” as an emphatically pro-British policy. The VFW, however, repeated the organization’s support for changing to the “cash-and-carry” basis. In a letter addressed to every Congressman and Senator, National Commander Otis N. Brown called for the special session to maintain most of the neutrality legislation as previously drafted. The VFW would brook no change in the measures that circumscribed financial interests from putting their property or personnel in harm’s way. Yet, the VFW argued in a news release trumpeting the letters to Congress that the organization was “trying to take a realistic view of the world situation as it exists today.” The news release claimed that the “cash-and-carry” system would be an improvement over the current laws because the “arms embargo really violates our desire to be neutral.” It continued, “Our present neutrality laws … has [sic] encouraged aggression and made Uncle Sam a partner with Hitler in his rape of helpless nations.”

The leadership then blasted the hardliner isolationists in a way that would have been inconceivable two years earlier. The news release pugnaciously derided the isolationists for “closing their eyes to conditions that threaten the welfare and security of the United States.” In reference to claims from the hardliners that “cash-and-carry” favored France and Britain, the VFW scornfully asked, “let the isolationists tell us why we should stick to an arms embargo that makes us allies with Germany and Soviet Russia.”

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26 For best discussion of the “cash-and-carry” debate and passage, see Divine, Reluctant Belligerent, 67-78 and Dallek, FDR and American Foreign Policy, 199-208. VFW open letter to Congress and news release September 20, 1939, in “VFW, 1938-1940,” OF 84, FDRL.
In 1940, even before the “phony war” heated up and Germany blitzed through Denmark, the Low Countries, and France, the VFW criticized neutrality as untenable and endorsed a more confrontational foreign policy. A *Foreign Service* editorial heaped scorn on the most stridently isolationist position. The leadership declared, “the opium of neutrality talk, and wishful thinking on the subject of peace, has drugged our sense of reality on the subject of national defense.” The more aggressively pro-Administration VFW leadership condemned the indifference that “permitted isolationists to sell us the idea that we are beyond striking distance from any other power.” The VFW pointed to the “Rome-Moscow-Berlin alliance” and admonished that “this is no time for the American people to play ostrich with their collective heads in the sand.” The VFW leaders fully embraced arguments about the future of democracy that they had previously derided. An editorial announced, “Despite the skeptics who scoff at the suggestion world democracy is at stake—Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini frankly boast of ambitions to humble every nation that respects the individual liberties of its peoples.” By late June, after the defeat of France by the Germans, the VFW leadership recognized the impending “showdown between Uncle Sam and the dictators of Europe.” The VFW’s change in policy anticipated the shift in public opinion during the summer of 1940. While the majority of Americans still favored neutrality until August, and were evenly split on aid to Britain until October, 1940, the VFW had already come to the conclusion that the United States would enter a war on the side of the British against the dictators.27

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27 For the end of the “phony war” and the shifting perceptions in the spring and summer of 1940, see Dallek, *FDR and American Foreign Policy*, 212-323. *Foreign Service*, February, 1940: 5; May, 1940: 5; and July, 1940: 4. For American public opinion on the potential European war see, Cole, *FDR and the Isolationists*, 364-365.
In the autumn of 1940, the VFW completed the organization’s move into alignment with the Roosevelt Administration. A report completed in the summer found that the U.S. Army could field only five combat divisions totaling 80,000 men, compared to Germany’s 180 divisions and two million men. In September, breaking with the most fervent Senate isolationists such as Nye, Vandenberg, and La Follette, the VFW endorsed FDR’s call for military conscription, realized in the passage of the Select Service Act. The VFW also praised the Administration and Congress for the massive defense spending increases, another issue that infuriated the isolationists. At the VFW national encampment in Los Angeles, the delegates endorsed all aid to Britain short of declaring war. Moreover, after the encampment, Foreign Service editorials became increasingly outspoken about the declining international situation and the probabilities of U.S. belligerency. The leadership explained to VFW members, “whether we like it or not, the United States is already engaged in an undeclared war of defense against the forces which menace America’s security.” To those who hoped for rapprochement with the Axis powers, the leadership emphatically disagreed, “We know that democracy and dictatorship have no common ground on which to meet.”

In December, 1940, FDR advocated a more substantive measure of material support for Britain and the Soviet Union—all aid short of war—and counted the VFW among his vocal supporters. In a fireside chat, FDR articulated the principles behind the Lend Lease Act, describing the U.S. obligation to serve as the “great arsenal of democracy.” Even before Administration allies in Congress submitted the Lend Lease

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bill, the VFW offered a line of reasoning consistent with the Administration. *Foreign Service* exclaimed, “If we should suddenly be faced with a declaration of war by the Axis powers, the only thing that would save this country from a crushing defeat would be our enforced alliance with Great Britain.” The VFW embraced the idea that Britain was the first line of American defense against the aggressor dictatorships proclaiming, “As 1941 dawns, the siege of Great Britain has reached the point that forces America to act quickly and intelligently. It becomes clearer with each report …that we must rush to our own defense by giving Great Britain the help it needs.” In a statement that could have been written by the Administration, the VFW pleaded with Congress, “If democracy is to be saved for America—Congress must concentrate upon one paramount issue—the problem of keeping war out of America by giving Great Britain the type of assistance that will spell certain defeat for the Axis aggressors.”

In 1941, the unreserved support for Lend Lease and the pro-Administration pronouncements of VFW national commander Joseph C. Menendez exposed a rift within the organization over foreign policy. Although Menendez’s election demonstrated that the majority of delegates favored the interventionist position, not all of the VFW members were persuaded. When the commander reiterated his effusive support for the President’s policies and chastised the “isolationists, the No Foreign War Committee, the America First Committee, and all those who oppose American aid to Britain,” it caused a backlash within the organization. Menendez explained that he was merely affirming the mandates of the delegates to the 1940 national encampment. *Foreign Service* defended the commander and the interventionist editorial positions, claiming, “no individual has

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the authority, or the privilege to use [the] editorial page to express his personal convictions …. The Editor’s duty [is] to simply interpret and analyze those principles to which the VFW is officially committed.” To those members disgruntled with the new direction of the VFW’s foreign policy pronouncements, the pro-interventionist leadership coolly challenged their opponents to gather enough strength to overturn the policy at the next encampment.30

When the VFW met in Philadelphia for the 1941 national encampment, the cleavage in the organization between the national leadership and those who opposed the FDR Administration’s foreign policy broke out into the open. Past-commander Van Zandt, now one of the most critical members of the Administration in the House of Representatives and a member in the staunchly isolationist America First Committee, joined VFW members from the isolationist Illinois Department in seeking to overturn the organization’s endorsement of Administration policy. Moreover, a bitter factional dispute over the dishonorable discharge of the Illinois State commander, Earl Southard, enmeshed the proceedings in a bitter foreign policy debate. Southard, who was secretary of the Chicago-based Citizen’s Keep America Out of War committee, had distributed a handbill attacking the Lend Lease bill as “viciously unconstitutional” and “tyrannical,” advocating the nullification of the act by “free men and women.” At an unruly organizational meeting in Chicago just days before the national encampment, the Illinois leader received a reprimand and suspension from the VFW for advocating disobedience

30 Foreign Service, February, 1941: 5, 8-9, 37. For more on the America First committee and Keep America Out of War committee, see Cole, America First, and Donoecke, Storm on the Horizon, 40-228, and Schneider, Should America Go to War?: The Debate over Foreign Policy in Chicago, 1939-1941 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).
to the laws of the U.S. Government. In Philadelphia, a long encampment debate over Southard’s discharge ended in the upholding of the verdict, and subsequently, the VFW’s foreign policy position. The newly-elected National Judge Advocate, Philip O. Solon, acting as an informal and unsolicited informant to the Administration, reported to Steve Early that “the ‘America First’ group appeared but made no impression.” Solon also informed Early that the President had “the unified support of the VFW except for a small group, now discredited.” The debate had revealed strong differences of opinion but isolationists were unable to change the direction of the VFW foreign policy agenda. 31

After the defeat of the isolationist faction, the 1941 VFW encampment delegates fervently endorsed the full range of the FDR Administration’s policies. If the isolationist faction believed a new national commander would be less enthusiastic about the Administration’s policies, they were mistaken. In a resolution sent to the White House by newly-elected National Commander, Max Singer, the VFW praised the Government for recognizing “the imminent and growing danger to our own liberties and institutions from totalitarian aggression” and supported those measures “to defend and perpetuate the American way of life from any and all aggressors.” The anti-interventionists showed some signs of strength, however, by tabling and defeating proposals that would have condemned any dissent against Administration policies. Wartime attempts by patriotic associations to suppress dissent, another bitter legacy of the Great War, commenced even before American involvement in World War II.32


32 Copy of Resolution in Max Singer to the President, October 29, 1941, in “VFW, 1941-1942,” OF 84, FDRL. On dissent, see *42nd National Encampment of the VFW, 1941*, 52-55.
In a special Armistice Day column, *Foreign Service* editors reflected on the end of the Great War with very different memories than those expressed during the mid-1930s. No longer cynical about the struggle for freedom and democracy, the VFW leaders explained veterans’ chastened perspective, noting “in the present world conflict America again finds itself aligned at the side of those nations which have the courage to resist autocratic aggression.” Despite the Axis threat, the VFW contended, “our democracy will endure as long as we are prepared to defend it with our lives if necessary.” Fully anticipating renewed, perhaps even greater sacrifices, the VFW leadership called on members to remember “the World War dead did not die in vain and America’s Unknown Soldier did not give his life on the altar of democracy without purpose.”

At the VFW national encampment in September, 1942, the VFW completed its break with the mid-1930s foreign policy agenda. In the first encampment after the U.S. entry into the Second World War, the delegates passed a resolution opposing “isolationist policy.” But the resolution transcended the promotion of narrowly-defined American national security interests. In recognition of the “Declaration of United Nations” published on January 1, 1942, the VFW recommended that “the leaders of our Nation immediately pursue a policy which will preserve the freedom and independence of all nations and that we, in the future, will lend our power and prestige to the organization of all nations.” Reversing their opposition to both the World Court and any relinquishing of U.S. sovereignty, the VFW delegates advocated that establishment of “a tribunal set up to judge the grievances of nations and whose mandates shall be enforced by the armed

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33 *Foreign Service*, November, 1941: 5.
might of these United Nations.” By 1942, the VFW stood poised to lead the internationalists in the creation of an expansive collective security arrangement, a remarkable trajectory for an organization that had been so vocal against entangling alliances and involvement in international disputes during the 1930s.\textsuperscript{34}

From 1934 to 1937, Depression-era domestic concerns over the political economy created the foundations of veteran foreign policy, not international events. After 1937, international events inexorably chipped away at the bases of veteran policy attitudes. As veteran foreign policy shifted, so did veterans’ historical memory of the Great War. While VFW members never foreswore their motives for fighting in World War I, they bitterly resented being played for suckers by bankers, munitions makers, and profiteers. Their cynicism masked a frustrated idealism. As the international situation turned grim, VFW began a rehabilitation of their previous wartime idealism. Before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the VFW recognized the need to battle aggressive totalitarian regimes and tapped an ideological wellspring that had laid untapped throughout the 1930s. Veterans redefined and re-fought the Great War from 1934 to 1941. As self-appointed executors of the nation’s memory of the Great War, veterans continually battled over its memory and how that memory would define contemporary foreign policy debates. In the process, they sought to restore the meaning of their war-time experience.

Some accomplished this restoration by volunteering for service in World War II. Representative James Van Zandt, the three-time VFW national commander who spearheaded many of the VFW’s most successful campaigns and had joined the America First Committee in 1940 to oppose U.S. involvement in Europe, returned to active naval

duty. Eight days after the United States entered the war against the Axis powers, Van Zandt joined the *U.S.S. Plunkett* for dangerous convoy escort duty in the North Atlantic. In December, 1943, he resigned from Congress to be appointed to a Navy Amphibious Force in the South Pacific. Most, however, took up civil defense positions and welcomed the millions of new eligible members into the fold. By 1944, the VFW had nearly 500,000 members; by 1946, over 1.5 million. With the new membership base, the VFW focused on the problem of returning veterans, a problem that would lead to the most wide-ranging piece of social welfare legislation ever passed in the United States, the 1944 GI Bill.³⁵

³⁵ Van Zandt military information in “Profile of James E. Van Zandt,” Veterans of Foreign Wars National Headquarters. For VFW member totals, see Goldsmith, “The Veterans of Foreign Wars,” 194-5.
CHAPTER 7

We talk much of comradeship in the coming civilian life. Like mystics we are conscious of an association that will bind us into a passionate group different and superior, as we think, to all others.

Cpl. Will Judy, Diary Entry, January 18, 1919.¹

In 1944, as a result of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, more popularly known as the GI Bill, sixteen million World War II servicemen learned that their military obligation would accrue them social and economic benefits of unparalleled proportions. The material benefits offered by the GI Bill created the largest welfare service in the history of the country and helped shape the post-war era. Thanks to the GI Bill, veterans enjoyed vocational training and education benefits, a generous unemployment policy, easy access to home mortgages, and an expansive healthcare entitlement, all at the expense of the federal government. Exclusions based on race, gender, and sexuality in the implementation of the GI Bill meant that veterans profited unequally but, the social and economic ramifications of the GI Bill were enormous. Millions of veterans took advantage of the entitlements to enhance their economic standing, providing the basis for a postwar economic boom that created a broad middle class and a more equal distribution of wealth.²


² On the GI Bill, see Davis R. B. Ross, Preparing for Ulysses: Politics and Veterans during World War II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); Michael J. Bennett, When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, 1996); Jennifer Keene, Doughboys, the
The political origins of the GI Bill lay in the concerns over the social and economic reintegration of veterans and the political consequences if that reintegration failed. The fear of rampant unemployment and the potential for attendant political unrest played a major role in the deliberations. The Bonus March, of course, symbolized the dangers of not easing veterans’ readjustment into civilian life. Yet, veteran political activism persisted after the Bonus March and helped shape the debate, too. Veterans’ uprising against the Economy Act and alignment with the Long and Coughlin movement equally demonstrated the dangers associated with disaffected and politicized veterans. After all, veterans angrily forced the repeal of the Economy Act and early payment of the Bonus despite intense opposition from a popular President whose party controlled both houses of Congress. Moreover, it bears mentioning that the expansive GI Bill provisions uncannily replicated the material benefits prescribed by Long’s Share Our Wealth Society.3

The Veterans of Foreign Wars’ role in the passage of the GI Bill reflected these Depression-era battles. The VFW’s political struggles both against the Economy Act and for the Bonus left them skeptical of the country’s resolve to fulfill the obligations to veterans. While the VFW ultimately supported it, the organization initially offered an alternative, less expansive plan, fearing that the GI Bill would be gutted by a new

3 The political motivations for the GI Bill are best described in Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 34-124. No study of the GI Bill mentions the Long, Coughlin, and veterans political coalition in relation to the bill.
Economy Act once wartime patriotism inevitably faded from view. Before joining with the Legion in support of the GI Bill, the VFW wanted some form of settlement up front, trusting neither the attention span of the country nor the business community’s dedication to alleviating veterans’ readjustment to civilian life. The history of veteran political activism during the Depression framed the VFW’s deliberations on the GI Bill. Yet, the cultural underpinnings of veteran politics contributed substantially to the passing of this momentous legislation.4

The GI Bill reflected a long political struggle by veterans to change the relationship between citizens and the state during the interwar period. To be sure, the economic and political crisis of the Depression forced all Americans to reconsider their relationship with the federal government.5 However, veterans’ attempts to refashion the state exposed an ideological and cultural nexus involving veterans’ collective identity and their attendant conceptions of masculinity and citizenship. As the VFW developed into a powerful political force, the organization’s political struggles offered members ample opportunity to identify the cultural underpinnings of their battles. Repeatedly the VFW articulated a definition of citizenship, a decidedly gendered one based on military service and personal sacrifice, that challenged the hegemony of an economic-based citizenship. In doing so, veterans challenged the gendered basis of the liberal state and presented the cultural formulations that the passage of the GI Bill hinged upon. In organizational

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4 The VFW role is best described in Ross, Preparing for Ulysses, 34-124 and Bennett, When Dreams Came True, 82-153.

rituals, rhetoric, and imagery, the convergence of veterans’ identity, and conceptions of
gender and citizenship, forged the cultural foundations of the “martial” welfare state.6

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During the interwar period, the VFW’s membership requirement fostered the
expression of a collective veteran identity. The VFW accepted only honorably discharged
veterans who served “on foreign shores or in hostile waters in any war, campaign or
expedition recognized by Congress with a campaign badge or service clasp.” With its
membership requirement, the VFW cultivated a strong sense of collective identity based
on shared experiences, making explicit efforts to set themselves apart not only from those
who did not enter military service but also from the large group of men they often
derisively called “stay-at-home” or “training camp” veterans. VFW leader George
Brobeck explained the difference, “the man who was sent to a foreign land to undergo the
hardships of life overseas was under a greater strain, endured greater dangers, and
suffered more privations than the man who enjoyed the facilities of a well established
cantonment at home.” As early as 1919, the VFW resisted the urge to enlist all veterans
regardless of service by claiming, “our eligibility clause makes us an exclusive
association ... and a great attraction to the veteran who would rather associate himself

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with his kind than otherwise.” As this comment suggested, these shared experiences forged social bonds but also developed into a source of social distinction.\(^7\)

The VFW argued that overseas veterans’ collective experience in defense of democracy and freedom gave them lofty social standing. One *Foreign Service* editorial called the organization’s membership criteria, “a sign of distinction and separation which marks us in a class by ourselves.” VFW members remembered overseas service in intensely ideological terms. The overwhelming percentage of VFW members in the Depression era experienced military service in the Spanish American War and World War I. These veterans took quite seriously the rhetoric of the wars to “free Cuba” and “save the world for democracy.”\(^8\) The VFW accentuated the moral importance of overseas service by linking the organization with the crusading knights of the Middle Ages. The VFW appropriated the insignia of the Knights of Malta, the Cross of Malta, as the organization’s emblem. The rituals of the VFW’s induction ceremony, made the links plain: “the beautiful emblem selected by the founders of our organization [is] symbolic of the justice and rectitude which has sent us as crusaders in modern times to foreign shores.” The inducting officers explained to new recruits that they had become a “member of America’s True Knighthood, bound together by ties of comradeship formed through ninety years of campaigning in foreign lands and waters.”\(^9\)

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\(^9\) This strong Christian iconography did not preclude non-Christians’ participation. In 1931, VFW members elected the past-national commander of the Jewish War Veterans Association as their national commander.
The VFW promoted veteran identity as a source of political and cultural status, one that superceded more traditional forms of association based on class, ethnicity, and race. The nationalism advocated by the VFW, typically referred to by the over-worked term, “Americanism,” attempted to minimize the importance of racial, ethnic, and class cleavages. The VFW made the most unambiguous statements about class.\textsuperscript{10} New recruits learned in their VFW induction ritual that, “neither wealth, rank nor social distinction can gain you entrance. Only your loyal service … during time of war, on Foreign Soil or in Hostile Waters will admit you to our Fraternal Circle.” In the induction ceremony, VFW members explained to new recruits, “the Cross of Malta glorifies the tattered shirt of the poorest working man and beautifies the coat worn by those highest in the land, binding all with that same spirit of comradeship which existed among the veterans of the old crusades.” As veterans advocated a form of nationalist identity that crossed boundaries of class, race, and ethnicity, the wealthy and powerful Americans who profited from wars and denigrated veterans’ sense of entitlement served as foils in veterans’ political culture.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Ritual of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States} (Kansas City, Mo.: VFW National Headquarters, 1938), 52, 55.

\textsuperscript{10} The VFW allowed posts to form on both ethnic and racial bases. Since posts formed at the community level, many urban posts maintained a de facto ethnic membership and became a source of ethnic pride. African-American posts existed in both northern and southern states, and also were a source of community pride. While there was no official policy of segregation and African-American veterans were welcome in the organization, it is difficult to ascertain the racial practices of local and state organizations. One suspects that the racial mores of the early twentieth century took precedence over veteran solidarity but I have found insufficient evidence to support or refute this.

Depression-era veterans expressed veteran identity in contradistinction to the mores of the moneyed class. Veterans understood American society to be divided between the very wealthy and ordinary, classless citizens. Invoking economic interpretations of American involvement in World War I, veterans derided the wealthy for abdicating the responsibility of military service, apathy towards the common good, and even for fomenting war for personal profit. Veterans’ understanding of the war’s narrative, and of the villains that populated the narrative, constituted a crucial component of veteran political culture. Those financiers and industrialists who supposedly instigated wars for their own selfish gain and personified the influence of wealth and power on the American political and economic system, men such as J.P. Morgan, Bernard Baruch, and Andrew Mellon, received a disproportionate share of veteran vituperation. Retired Marine Maj. Gen. Smedley D. Butler expressed these sentiments repeatedly at VFW rallies. To thunderous applause, Butler explained to the 1933 VFW encampment, “We are divided, in America, into two classes, the Tories on one side, a class of our citizens who were bred and raised to believe that the whole of this country was created for their benefit only; and on the other side, the other 99 percent of us, the soldier class, the class from which all of you soldiers came.” Ordinary citizens, veterans argued, bore the brunt of war while the wealthy first profited and then, opposed efforts to redress veterans’ war-related hardships.12

This sense of veteran identity intensified during the Depression era as an assault on veteran prerogatives led by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of

Manufacturers, the National Economy League, and the American Liberty League pitted conservative business groups and the wealthy against veterans and their families. Outspoken advocates for reducing veteran benefits and violently opposed to the cash payment of the Bonus, these groups—some created only for the purpose of defeating veteran-backed measures—convinced veterans that the class of citizens that profited most from wars, refused to help shoulder the personal and financial costs. Depression-era veterans often euphemistically labeled their enemies “Big Business” and “Wall Street,” but the ambiguity of those terms should not obscure the consistent pattern of opposition to veteran demands that emerged from conservative business and financial leaders. Veterans correctly pinpointed their opposition and forged a collective identity in contradistinction to those who were their enemies.\(^{13}\)

Veterans constructed a sense of identity out of collective personal experience, and common ideological and historical references. Yet, veteran identity found its firmest cultural grounding in normative masculinity. While soldiering traditionally has formed the basis of masculine norms, VFW members could extol their manhood by virtue of their overseas experience, a claim that Legionnaires could not all make. Overseas service made men in a way state-side soldiering could not. *Foreign Service* noted in unmistakably gendered terms the shared transformative effects of war: “one’s manhood is put in the crucible and from that refining process comes that comradeship, loyalty, and fidelity of which the VFW is so justly proud.” VFW members’ war-zone combat badges cut short discussions about the relative rigors of soldiers’ experiences and proved their manliness. As Smedley Butler told a VFW convention, “There aren’t any fellows in this

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\(^{13}\) See Chapters 2-4 on the formation of the National Economy League and the American Liberty League.
outfit who have ruffles on their drawers; this is a real outfit.” Moreover, for many Depression-era veterans, veteran identity served as the last masculine refuge. While the Depression’s economic dislocation undermined the normative male roles of breadwinner and head of household, emphasizing one’s martial past could prove an effective way to retain claims to one’s masculinity for veterans affected by the crisis.\(^{14}\)

Veteran identity’s grounding in normative masculinity carried with it important political dimensions as well. The VFW’s overseas membership requirement served to insulate veterans from a very powerful strategy of interwar anti-radicalism: the feminization of dissenting groups. Indeed, overseas veteran status proved a “gender tether” for VFW veterans, tethering them in the widely shared masculine norm of military experience and thereby circumscribing the gendered red-baiting assaults that proved so effective in marginalizing other progressive and radical groups. The VFW’s sterling anti-communist credentials and the grounding to normative masculinity proved to be effective bulwarks against critics even when the VFW proposed such measures as the limitation of wealth. Moreover, unlike veteran organizations that associated on the basis of disability, the VFW avoided the feminizing effects of disability, even while maintaining a significant disabled membership. The organization heralded the “Men of Action” for defending the interests of the disabled, widows, and orphans, describing VFW activists as a “two-fisted, hard-hitting group of patriotic Americans.” The implicit message of “two-fisted” needed no elaboration in an era where disabled veterans were often depicted as

missing limbs. But the gendered differences between able-bodied and disabled veterans also aroused some of the fiercest resistance to veteran policies. When the VFW sought policies beneficial to all veterans not just the disabled, as in the Bonus, opponents cast their opposition in the traditional political principle that able-bodied men should not become wards of the state. These arguments against able-bodied benefits exposed the different constructions of masculinity that lay behind different conceptions of the political economy and the state.\textsuperscript{15}

Issues of masculinity served as an important subtext to veterans’ critique of the political economy and the limited state. Veteran’s supposedly selfless service for the common good ran counter to both the concept of rugged economic individualism and the liberal state that it sustained. VFW members emphasized this selflessness in a burial service ceremony by proclaiming, “When the call of our country was heard this comrade answered. Self was forgotten in the cause of the greater good.”\textsuperscript{16} In a theatrical membership induction ceremony, VFW members dramatized new recruits’ obligation to care for the disabled, an obligation spurned by the federal government and an indifferent populace. A “wounded comrade” lamented to the new recruits, “I have served well my Country and Flag, but I have been left alone to die by the wayside, because \textit{unsympathetic} and \textit{untried} men can make no use of me, I being sick and wounded and unable to help them in their \textit{selfish} pursuits.” Those unsympathetic, untried, and selfish

\textsuperscript{15}Foreign Service, December, 1937: 5.

\textsuperscript{16}Ritual of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (Kansas City, Mo.: VFW National Headquarters, 1938): 87.
men happened to correspond to those who wielded political and economic power in the United States and fought veteran benefits in the Depression era tooth and nail.  

By positing the ex-soldiers as the virtuous citizenry of the Republic, the VFW falls squarely in the category of American oppositional groups who employed the language and ideas of republicanism to challenge liberal capitalism and the liberal state. The VFW contrasted images of strong, protective veterans with feminized images of wealth, greed, and moral corruption. An image of a VFW veteran rescuing “veteran welfare legislation” from the bejeweled figure in evening dress demonstrated this sentiment graphically (Figure 7-1). The emphasis on a moral, communally-based definition of masculinity situated veteran political culture in this gendered republican political tradition. To a profound degree, the competition between understandings of citizenship in the New Deal era reflected a contest over gender.  

During the Depression era, the VFW’s interest in challenging the hegemonic construction of masculinity led the organization to promote proper masculine socialization for the youth of America. For one, the VFW attempted to influence the direction of American manhood by maintaining a strong association with the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). The VFW established national ties to BSA leadership, funded scholarships honoring community service, and some 80 local VFW posts sponsored local

17 Burial ceremony in Ritual of theVeterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (Kansas City, Mo.: VFW National Headquarters, 1938), 87; Induction ceremony, 27, 45-46, (emphasis added).

scout units. At the 1935 VFW encampment, Dr. Ray O. Wyland of the BSA explained that VFW members could offer their leadership to scouts “which will socialize a generation of youth who have the American way of wanting to do as they please, and who have majored in the rights and privileges of free-born citizens with out due regard to their duties and responsibilities.” The VFW also sponsored youth drill teams, drum corps, baseball and basketball teams. These VFW-sponsored youth programs fostered a collective ethos to combat the individualism the VFW found so pervasive in American culture. Moreover, in 1934, the VFW initiated an auxiliary organization named the Sons of the VFW. Open to both biological sons and stepsons of overseas veterans, the Sons of the VFW institutionalized and incorporated this emphasis on socializing male youth.

Figure 7-1. “Untitled,” by Herbert E. Lake in Foreign Service, October, 1934. Reprinted by permission of the VFW.
Promoting youth involvement combined civic and moral training. To a great degree, civic
and moral training were masculinity training.\(^\text{19}\)

VFW members went further in their support of Republican ideals, holding military
service as the social foundation of citizenship and the model for participatory politics.
The ideal republican citizen is formulated as a “citizen-soldier.” During a period of
intense veteran political activism, however, VFW legislative director Brobeck
announced, “all over the country former service men under the leadership of the VFW are
awakening to their responsibility as ‘soldier-citizens.’” With this inversion, “soldier-
citizen” from “citizen-soldier,” Brobeck expressed the basis of “martial” citizenship.
“Soldier-citizen” described both the basis of citizenship—military service—and a style of
citizenship—energetic and strident activism in defense of the common weal. As a
member from Philadelphia Post 333 wrote in \textit{Foreign Service}, “We are not ex-
servicemen by any means. We are veterans of one or more of the foreign wars in which
our country has been involved, but we are still in the service of the United States, sworn
to maintain and extend the institutions of American freedom.” Commander in Chief
Darold D. De Coe proclaimed to the 1932 Encampment, "It is up to us, as servicemen, to
demonstrate to the people of these United States that we are today just as patriotic and
willing to fight again for our country because we know what the principles for which this
country stands means to us, having fought for them." For the VFW, the wars did not end;
citizenship was worth fighting over. The VFW induction ceremony for new members put

\(^{19}\) For more on scouting and character development, see David I. Macleod, \textit{Building Character in the
American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870-1920}. (Madison: University of
it plainly. VFW officers encouraged newly inducted veterans to wage “the new and greater war of American citizenship.”

This formulation of martial citizenship—its basis and its exercise—carried additional weight in the Depression since Franklin D. Roosevelt continually employed the analogy of war to describe his efforts to end the economic and social crisis. A characteristic statement by FDR included his inaugural address on March 4, 1933. FDR proclaimed, “If we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline …. The larger purposes will bind upon us all as a sacred obligation with a unity of duty hitherto evoked only in time of armed strife. I assume unhesitatingly the leadership of this great army of our people dedicated to a disciplined attack upon our common problems.” By rhetorically defining social and economic crises as martial crises, necessitating discipline and self-sacrifice, FDR inadvertently tapped into the wellsprings of veteran political culture. While the VFW clashed repeatedly with FDR in his first Administration, it did so only when veteran members believed FDR had not lived up to the rhetoric. As analogies of war gave way to the real thing in the late 1930s, the VFW drew even closer to the Roosevelt Administration.

During the Depression era, overseas military service defined veteran conceptions of masculinity and citizenship, and served as the basis for veteran political culture. So equipped, veterans attempted to refashion the state, mounting significant challenges to

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20 FS, January, 1934: 12 and August, 1934: 3; Comments of Commander in Chief De Coe, 33rd Encampment (1932), 12; and Ritual of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (Kansas City, Mo.: VFW National Headquarters, 1938), 29.

both the individualistic basis of economic citizenship and the political economy that sustained it. In 1944, these veterans’ previous political and economic experiences shaped the content of the GI Bill, but their dedication to martial citizenship permeated the cultural fabric of the bill. While the Depression had opened up the possibility that veterans would promote a more broadly-conceived welfare state, the GI Bill satisfied veterans’ immediate economic needs and veteran entitlements reinforced a gendered understanding of the state. As such, Depression-era veteran political culture served as a foundation for the GI Bill and the gender-specific “martial” welfare state that it created.

To mark the passing of the GI Bill, the VFW national organization that had accepted a small number women veterans into its ranks after World War I, passed new requirements explicitly prohibiting women from membership. Not until 1978, after the Vietnam War, would women again be allowed membership into the organization, transforming the gendered meaning of “soldier-citizens” and the martial welfare state.\footnote{Herbert Molloy Mason, Jr., \textit{VFW: Or First Century, 1899-1999} (Lenexa, KS: Addax Publishing Group, 1999), 149.}
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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