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Final Paper: Book Review

Dickson, Paul and Allen, Thomas. *The Bonus Army – An American Epic*. Walker and Company: New York, NY. 2004.

There seem to be two general categories most published history books over the past few years fall into. One is the traditional historical analysis, books written to reevaluate and reassess existing work in the wake of new interpretations and/or evidence. These often seem to be written more for historians and history students than for the general public, and carry with them the gravitas of “historical scholarship.” The other category is the “popular history”, the books written for the general public, often derided by university professors as cursory or “fluff”, and destined to become television miniseries. The pure story-telling quality of *The Bonus Army* would seem to land it in the latter category – however, the combined efforts of Dickson, a professional journalist, and Allen, a professional historian, have produced a book I consider to be remarkable work of historical scholarship. Combining social history and a traditionally underreported event with both contemporary and retrospective accounts, *The Bonus Army* tells an important story, so relevant to today, about a social and political movement, national in scope, that illustrates the alliance between government and business before, during and after the Great Depression.

The story of the Bonus Army reaches across social, ethnic, racial and political lines. Long before the civil rights movement united students and activists, black, white, young, old, male, female – the Bonus Army was a true national movement. Because of the nature of military

service during WW1, being a “veteran” meant many things – white soldiers in American military units, black soldiers who often served in French units, and individuals who served as farmers and workers in munitions factories at home. After the stock market crash, when American veterans of the Great War demanded their “adjusted compensation”, or bonus, due them, Dickson and Allen detail the massive Washington apparatus lined up against them. The diversity of the Bonus Expeditionary Force served to diversify their opposition as well. Some feared that African American veterans, should they get their bonus, would completely unbalance the economic and social balance in the south. Others feared that communist and social influences would corrupt the BEF into a leftist revolutionary force. Still others feared that, given unemployment levels across the country, this would be the spark that ignited a national furor of social unrest. The resulting alliance of southern congressmen, business leaders and lobbyists convinced Hoover to mobilize the military. When the BEF arrived in Washington, a combination of American military personnel and the forces of Washington DC Police Chief Pelham Glassford were ready for them.

There are great lessons for students in what ensued. The government response and the various motivations for it provide an excellent opportunity for point of view analysis. The crossing paths of military heroes past and present are entertaining, and they provide valuable examples of how historical timelines of various individuals and events can cross and intersect. The various congressional bills, both those passed and those that were tabled, provide a great case study illustrating the relationship between our legislative branch and special interests. The marchers themselves provide a case study into civil disobedience and grass roots political action. The power struggles between factions and the fascist rhetoric of BEF leader Walter Waters is fascinating as well, and can demonstrate to students how and why so many organizations that

form to achieve social and/or political change so often collapse in on themselves. The diverse backgrounds of the marchers, who came from all over the country, serve to demonstrate just how widespread social movements could be, even before the aid of technology and modern communication. Even the political maneuvering that went on behind the scenes – an example would be Huey Long’s phone call to FDR, assuring him that he’d only get the nomination if he supported the bonus – provides students great insight into the party nomination process.

I find this story a wide ranging and fascinating insight into the early years of the Great Depression. I think it