

TEACHER'S GUIDE
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MISSION 5: "Up from the Dust"

Bonus Army Memoir

In the following memoir, World War I veteran W.W. Waters recalls the high unemployment and low morale he witnessed on the streets of Portland, Oregon, during the first years of the Great Depression. Facing a similar situation himself, Waters was a founding member of the Bonus Expeditionary Force, a collective of veterans who marched from Oregon to Washington D.C. in the spring of 1932 demanding immediate payment of their war bonuses.

In my ceaseless beating about the city I found family after family in the same general condition or worse. I saw men half clad, in threadbare clothing, pacing the streets in soleless shoes. On their faces was the same look, part of hope, part of bewilderment, as they searched for a chance to earn a few dollars at honest work. I talked with hundreds of these men and found that, with few exceptions, they wanted not charity but work that would enable them to lives and to regain their self-respect...

These men did think and talk a great deal about the so-called Bonus. The name "Bonus" is unfortunate. It is not a gift, as the word implies. It is a payment of money to *compensate* those men who served in the Army for the difference in pay between that of service men and non-service men in 1918. The bill, asking payment in full of the adjusted compensation for wartime service, was introduced by Representative Patman of Texas and, during the early winter of 1931, was pending in Congress. The majority of veterans were hoping that it would pass.

These men had fallen far down into the valley of despair. Some push was necessary to start them out and up over the hill. Jobs would have provided the best sort of impetus but there were no jobs. The Bonus, a lump sum of money, could act in the same fashion. Debts could be met, doctors' bills paid, a fast fraying credit renewed, and one man could look another in the eye once more...

The point, continually forgotten, is that the Bonus in these men's minds became a substitute or a symbol for that long dreamt of new start, a job. These men had nothing to which to look forward except to the shiny shoulders of the man in front of them in the breadline. Whenever I asked these men which they would rather have, the Bonus or a job, the replay was nearly always the same: "A job, of course. But where's a job coming from? I've looked every day for over a year and haven't found one."

Source: W.W. Waters and William C. White, *B.E.F. The Whole Story of The Bonus Army* (New York: The John Day Company, 1933), pgs. 6-10. <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001874081>

