

'Bonus Army' Examines Pivotal D.C. Protest

By MARK JENKINS
Special to The Washington Post

The drawing could be a panel from a Japanese monster comic: A family runs through a burning city, the woman clutching an infant. Flames, tanks and gas-masked soldiers can be seen in the background, but the hulking shape that towers above them is not Godzilla. It's the Capitol dome. Even stranger, this pulpy illustration is not fiction.

National political battles have been fought in Washington for two centuries, but unlike in the city's more storied European and Asian counterparts, the arguments have rarely spilled into the streets. One fascinating exception is the campaign to win pay for World War I veterans, which is documented in the Historical Society of Washington's new exhibition, "The Wages of War: Bonus Army to Baghdad." This 75-year-old event is little known, but some of its players are. When President Herbert Hoover ordered the U.S. Army to run the protesters out of downtown, the troops were commanded by Douglas MacArthur, and his subordinate officers included Dwight D. Eisenhower and George S. Patton.

During World War I, members of the American Expeditionary Force were paid \$1.25 a day, substantially less than the stateside workers who made the troops' materiel. When the soldiers returned home, they were given a \$60 discharge payment, and in 1924 Congress approved a cash bonus from pension funds, payable in 1945. But then the stock market crashed. By 1932, hundreds of thousands of veterans were unemployed, and one of them decided to organize their case for an immediate lump-sum payment. Laid-off Oregon cannery worker Walter Waters led a contingent eastward, and as word got around, "bonuseers" came from every direction.

Perhaps as many as 60,000 members of the "B.E.F." (the Bonus Expeditionary Force) took up residence in the District. Some squatted in partially demolished wartime residences near the current site of the National Gallery of Art, and the rest camped along the Anacostia River, just over the bridge.

Although few newspapers at the time acknowledged the phenomenon, the B.E.F. was racially integrated. Veterans congregated by their state of origin, and there was no color line. Nor was there when MacArthur — ignoring the objections of D.C. Police Chief Pelham Glassford and defying Hoover's order not to proceed across the Anacostia — attacked the bonuseers with full-strength tear gas and then burned their tents and shacks. Four people were killed.

There's much more to this chapter in American intramural conflict, which expanded to include a major hurricane, Ernest Hemingway and the congressional decision to treat the veterans of the next World War a whole lot better. The Historical Society's old-fashioned exhibition, whose most high-tech touch is a slide projector, is based in part on Paul Dickson and Thomas Allen's history, "The Bonus Army: An American Epic," and il-



"The Wages of War: Bonus Army to Baghdad" includes the story of thousands of World War I veterans (such as Joe Shanley, above) who took up residence in the District in 1932 to seek payment for their wartime services. The 1967 Central Park scene at right is part of "Counterculture," which examines artwork created between 1961 and 1971.

lustrated with photographs and documents from the group's archives. The show requires a little time and a lot of reading, but it's worth the effort.

The story is assembled from poems, cartoons, sheet music, a vintage tear-gas gun and pamphlets such as "The Washington Battleground: The Truth About the 'Battle Riots,'" which features the terrified-family drawing described above. The everyday items in one display case provide the context: a 1932 Washington in which Woodward and Lothrop was still in business, the Hechinger Co. was demolishing the 14 "wartime hotels" that provided shelter for the Bonuseers and liquor was available at dozens of downtown locations, in defiance of Prohibition.

As its title promises, "The Wages of War: Bonus Army to Baghdad" seeks to connect with today's veterans' issues. It includes the stories of several Iraq war veterans whose reminiscences are compelling, yet not especially pertinent to the show's primary subject. The world, and Washington, have changed substantially since July 28, 1932, the day MacArthur evicted the Bonuseers. The episode tells much about what the United States once was but doesn't offer any obvious lessons for the country now mired in Iraq.

Another sort of history is on display in "Counterculture," the current group show at District Fine Arts. Accompanied by an iPod soundtrack of late '60s and early '70s rock, the display includes paintings, drawings, sculpture and photographs made between

1961 and 1971. A few of the pieces have a confrontational attitude that now seems antique: A drawing depicts the U.S. flag in a toilet bowl, and a pair of photos feature the trunk of an African American man who's wearing nothing but a jock-strap and a holster with two six-guns. But the bulk of the work is photographic and documents its period rather than flaunting its outlook.

Gene Markowski, whose contributions include the soul-cowboy photo as well as paintings in both abstract and expressionist modes, is a D.C. art professor.

But the rest of the artists aren't local, and neither are the places and events they depict. Many of the photographs are of Lower Manhattan and capture a world of berets, guitar cases and young women aspiring to Joan Baez's hair. And while Karl Umlauf's fiberglass abstractions could have been made anywhere, their high-gloss finishes seem both very '60s and very California.

While Robert Otter's black-and-white images were mostly made in Washington Square Park, Richard Friedman worked in surprisingly vivid hues and moved on to Paris and Berkeley, Calif. His "Liberez Angela," Paris, 1971" and "Tompkins Square, Spring 1967," which are suites of ragged but bright posters, and "Berkeley, People's Park, 1967," certainly reflect their era. But they do



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so not just with their content but also with their hot reds, oranges and pinks and deep, deep blues.

THE WAGES OF WAR: BONUS ARMY TO BAGHDAD Through Nov. 12 at the Small/Alper Gallery, Historical Society of Washington, 801 K St. NW. 202-383-1950.
COUNTERCULTURE Through Sept. 8 at District Fine Arts, 1726 Wisconsin Ave. NW. 202-328-9100.