



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Congratulations to Williams

I would like to offer my heartfelt congratulations to Gary Williams with his appointment to the County Commission. Gary has been an outstanding leader in our community for many years and it has been my privilege to serve with him for most of those years. I am confident that Gary will be an excellent commissioner and he has my full support. I would also like to thank the County Commissioners and the County staff for the selection process. They handled a difficult process with fairness and professionalism.

Mike Fleck
Cottage Grove

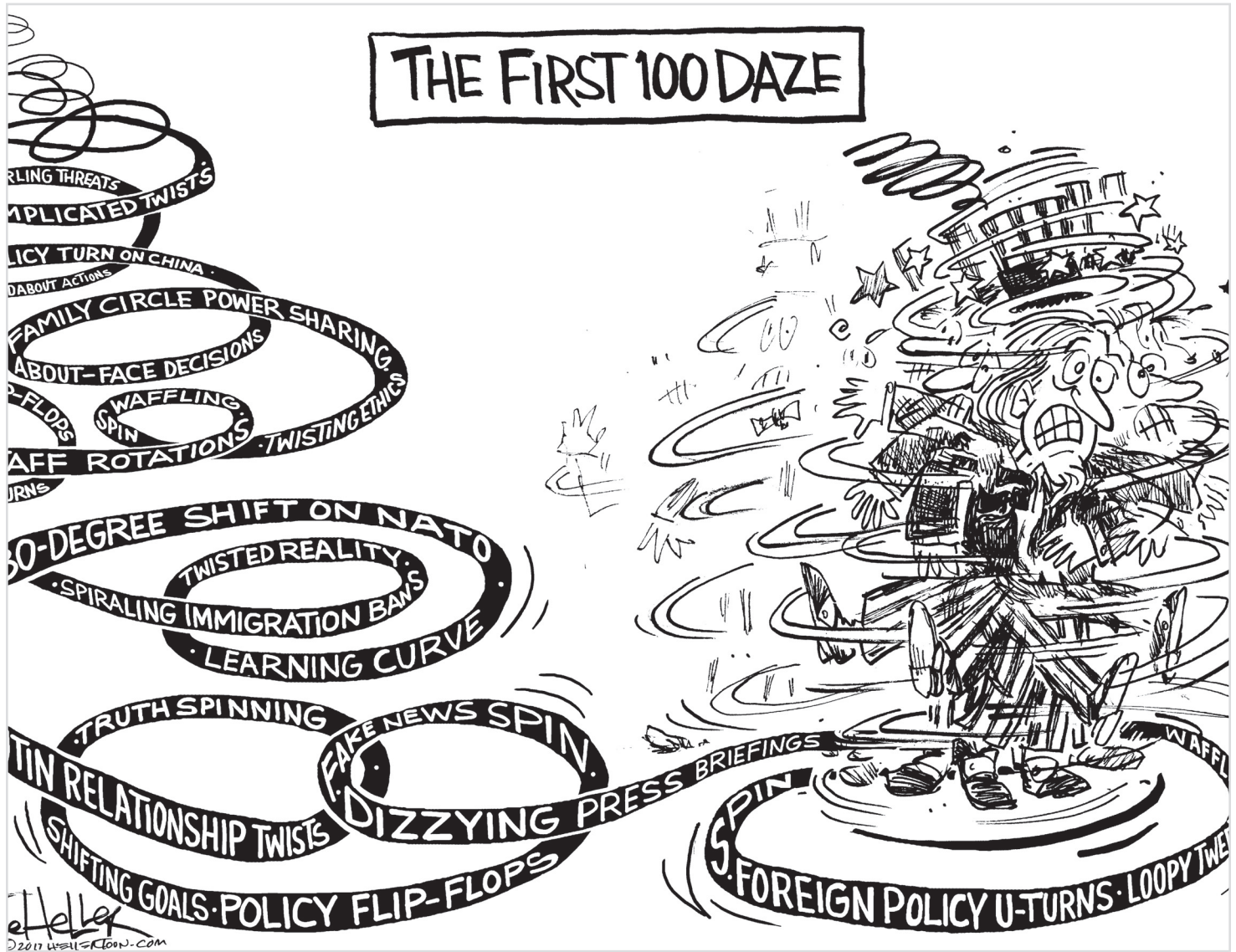
Honor flight

The veterans, volunteers and Board of Directors of South Willamette Valley Honor Flight would like to take a moment and thank Payne West Insurance for their financial donation in support of Honor Flight.

The Payne West Insurance donation means that more veterans of World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War will be able to experience their memorials. They will also get to experience the love and appreciation the citizens of the USA have for them as they are thanked, have their hands shook and more than a few of them will get hugs and kisses.

The entire Cottage Grove community has been supportive of South Willamette Valley Honor Flight and we appreciate that. Please keep sending your veterans to experience their own personal Honor Flight.

Ed Bock
Director
SWV Honor Flight



Offbeat Oregon History

The state of Oregon had a remarkably outsized impact on the life and career of President Herbert Hoover. It gave him his start, from age 9 until he went away to college at Stanford; and, 40 years later, it gave him the movement that ended his hopes for re-election.

That movement was called The Bonus Expeditionary Force. It got its start as the brainchild of a charismatic down-on-his-luck Army veteran named Walter Waters.

Waters was born and raised in Burns — a frontier community that, in the pre-First-World-War years, was something of a cultural hot-spot and the home of the “Sagebrush Symphony.” Waters, though, was drawn to the military, and he joined the National Guard at a very young age (one source claims he was 12) for action against Poncho Villa in Mexico.

In 1917, of course, he was off to France to fight the Great War. By the time he mustered out at war’s end, Waters had been promoted to the rank of Sergeant. Then he set about trying to make a living in the postwar civilian world.

Throughout the 1920s, Waters did OK. He had a winning personality and a strong work ethic. But when the Great Depression hit, it took him down, along with millions of others. By the early 1930s he was working as a “fruit tramp,” a migrant worker traveling from place to place picking fruits and vegetables when each came into season.

The winter of 1931-1932 found Waters in Portland, there being no fruit in season to pick. And it’s there that he developed the plan for the Bonus Army march to Washington.

The Bonus Army came into being out of thousands of unemployed veterans of the First World War who wanted to be able to draw on their service bonus. The service bonus had been given them at the end of the war by Congress, which was eager to get political credit for doing something nice for veterans without having to actually pay for it. So, in the grand tradition of modern politicians in America and around the world, they sent the bill into the future for their successors to worry about paying: They voted to give the veterans a service bonus payable in 25 years, in roughly 1945.

By early 1932, tens of thousands of unemployed and increasingly desperate veterans were eager to cash that bonus out early, in their greatest hour of need. But the federal government — which was, of course, having some cash-flow problems of its own — wouldn’t hear of it.

Waters got to thinking: Special-interest groups got results by going to Washington and lobbying Congress to help them out. Why not put all those unemployed veterans to work as lobbyists, and bring them all to Washington to petition the government for a redress of grievances?

By March, Waters was no longer just thinking about it. Proudly wearing his 15-year-old Army uniform, he was marching out of Portland in good military order at the head of an actual military company — hundreds of veterans embarking on a 3,000-mile march to Washington.

Along the way, Waters and his crew got plenty of press coverage, and almost all of it was favorable. The Bonus Army was — at that time at least — respectful, disciplined and patriotic. Waters strictly forbade drinking, begging, and anti-government talk, and enforced these rules with a paramilitary court system that sentenced offenders to lashings and sometimes expulsion from the group.

Most of the country was in support. Businesses brought the marchers food and supplies, railroads made empty boxcars available for them to ride on, and toll-bridge operators stood by and saluted as they marched across for free.

It being the early 1930s, representatives of the various communist and socialist organizations joined the march and tried to swing it in their direction. They did not get far with this. Under Waters’ command, they were arrested, tried in the paramilitary court, and sentenced — usually to 15 lashes and expulsion from the group.

By the time the Bonus Army arrived in Washington, it was 20,000 strong, and it wasn’t just a lobbying effort. It was also the beginnings of a challenge to the social order. It would not have taken much to turn the Bonus Army into something like one of the Freikorps, the paramilitary gangs of war vets that formed in Germany after the war, out of one of which Hitler’s “Sturm Abteilung” militia developed.

So it’s understandable that the government would have wanted to handle the Bonus Army very carefully when it arrived. President Hoover, in particular, knew very well what nascent fascism looks like, and chances are good that the Bonus Army made him very, very nervous.

Maybe that’s why, when they arrived, Hoover refused to meet with Waters. He may have been concerned that doing so would encourage the next charismatic populist to do what Waters had done, with less benign intent.

This decision backfired badly, and almost certainly cost Hoover the election. Had Hoover met with Waters, something probably could have been worked out, and the Bonus Army would have dispersed; even if Waters had wanted to be America’s Mussolini (which, at that stage, he clearly did not) he wouldn’t have been able to keep the Bonus Army together without its raison d’être, and it would have instantly ceased to be a threat.

But that’s not what happened. Denied a chance to give their

message directly, the Bonus Army was forced to choose indirect means. So they started holding daily demonstrations, requesting payment of the bonuses they felt they were owed.

Matters settled into a stalemate as the B.E.F. camped there near the White House in a ramshackle array of knocked-up shacks and tattered tents. Congress showed no sign of giving in. And as time went by, the Bonus Army’s morale suffered, and they became noticeably less diligent about policing their movement. Radical groups’ infiltration efforts started bearing fruit.

At the same time, the power at Waters’ command seems to have started to work its legendary magic on him. He started talking about forming a movement of American “Khaki-shirts,” in the spirit of Italy’s Blackshirts and Germany’s Brownshirts — a paramilitary organization dedicated to getting America back on its feet — in other words, an American Freikorps. Given what had happened to the leaders of the Blackshirts and Brownshirts — one was dictator of Italy and the other was well on track to taking over similar power in Germany — this was very alarming.

So at last, in July, Hoover made his second big mistake: He called upon the U.S. Army to get the bonus marchers out of town. And in giving the order, he essentially gave General Douglas MacArthur a blank check to get it done.

MacArthur, who had convinced himself that the Bonus Army was composed almost exclusively of communists and radicals, didn’t have to be told twice.

The resulting scene, covered breathlessly by the press, shocked and outraged the entire country. Grizzled middle-aged men in ill-fitting Doughboy uniforms carrying American flags were chased and pounded with the flats of soldiers’ swords, cursed at and blasted with tear gas. Meanwhile MacArthur, in full dress uniform with medals and riding crop, rode around barking orders and preening.

When Hoover saw how things were shaping up, he ordered MacArthur to stand down. MacArthur ignored the order and proceeded with the sweep. Somehow the Bonus Army’s shantytown caught fire during the action, and the flames quickly spread. One Bonus Army soldier’s wife and baby were not able to escape in time, and the baby died.

A strong case can be made that this sweep had to be done. The longer the Bonus Army camped in Washington, the more it acted as a lure to disaffected radicals, who infiltrated its ranks and guided it in their own devious directions. But, of course, it only got like that because Hoover refused to meet with its leader when he first arrived at the head of 20,000 respectful, well-intentioned petitioners.

In the aftermath of this crackdown, the nation’s initial shock was hardened into outrage by MacArthur’s smug statements to the media, congratulating himself on a great victory over the forces of communism and anarchy. The marchers had come from all over the country, and many Americans knew one or more of them. They weren’t buying the “bunch of communists” spin that MacArthur was trying to sell.

Hoover had no choice but to issue statements in support of his loose-cannon Army Chief of Staff and hope for the best.

But July 28, 1932, is generally accepted as the day Hoover’s last hope for re-election was demolished. It may also have been his last hope to be remembered fondly as an ex-president, for the majority of Americans alive at the time.

“I voted for Hoover in 1928,” one woman wrote to the Washington Daily News in response to the situation. “God forgive me and keep me alive at least ‘til the polls open next November!”

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