

Death by Public Works

BY BURTON W. FOLSOM, JR.



Almost all historians who write on the New Deal praise Franklin Roosevelt for using government to “solve” economic problems. Often, however, these historians only tell part of the story. One example is Roosevelt’s vast public-works program. Here most historians wax eloquent on the dams built by TVA, the roads built by WPA, and the bridges built by FERA and CCC.

What the historians omit are the high taxes levied for these projects, the sometimes inept construction, and the behind-the-scenes politics where votes were traded to bring projects to the districts of powerful congressmen.

In some cases, New Deal programs not only failed, they also had death rates along the way. For example, there’s the story of how Roosevelt sent World War I veterans to build bridges in the hurricane country of south Florida. At least 256 of these veterans died in FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration) camps in the Florida Keys, where they were sent in hurricane season with poor provisions and no plan of retreat or rescue.

The hurricane tragedy had its origin in a seemingly shrewd political decision by FDR. Unemployed veterans had been difficult to deal with. Ever since World War I they had campaigned in Congress for a special “bonus” for their service. In 1932 they put pressure on President Hoover by traveling to Washington, camping near the White House, and publicizing their demands for immediate payment for their wartime service. In a political blunder, Hoover decided to restore order among the rowdy veterans by sending Douglas MacArthur to confront them with cavalry, infantry, and six tanks. MacArthur decided to fire on them and disperse their

camp—and photos blanketed the country showing the fleeing vets under fire from their own government. It was an election year, and when Roosevelt, then the Democrat candidate, saw the pictures and news reports, he reportedly told Felix Frankfurter, “Well, Felix, this will elect me.”

Once in office, Roosevelt was determined not to repeat Hoover’s mistake. Protesting veterans were not allowed to camp in Washington. They were directed to Ft. Hunt, Virginia, where they received offers to work in CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) and FERA camps for \$1 day plus food and shelter. Thousands of veterans accepted this offer, and Roosevelt sent them far away from Washington to camps in South Carolina and Florida. In December 1934, over 400 veterans were specifically transferred to the Florida Keys, where they were told to build bridges and roads that would help connect the 90-mile area from Miami to Key West.

Roosevelt’s plan to export the contentious vets to Florida was clever, but Harry Hopkins and FERA officials in Washington tended to ignore the veterans once they were out of the capital. In Florida, Fred Ghent, the director in charge of the three camps of 400 veterans, had trouble, first, getting supplies and, second, enlisting help in preparing for hurricanes. The veterans were housed on low land, almost at sea level, in tents and flimsy barracks with poor food, inadequate supplies, and no water for bathing. They had no serious shelter to protect them from a hurricane or even high tides.



FERA camp in the Florida Keys before the 1935 hurricane

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In April, three months before hurricane season, Ghent became concerned about the possibility of storms. He wrote FERA in Washington that “this area is subject to hurricanes” and “it is our duty . . . to furnish a safe refuge during a storm.” Specifically, he requested that a solid two-story warehouse be built and arrangements be made with the Florida East Coast Railway to transport the men out of the Keys if a hurricane warning should occur. Ghent never received a response from Washington, and in the absence of instructions he took no action.

Trouble began in late August with weather reports of possible hurricanes coming toward Florida. On Sunday, September 1, at 10 a. m. a weather bulletin reached Key West warning of hurricane danger. Residents 20 miles west boarded their houses. The owner of the Hotel Matecumbe, who was within one mile of the veterans’ camps, boarded his hotel as well. Ghent was in Miami. The following day he finally sent a Florida East Coast Railway train to the veterans’ camps. The railroad was in receivership and many crewmen were unavailable because of the holiday weekend. That day a severe hurricane hit the Keys and knocked the train off the tracks before it ever made it to the FERA camps.

When the full force of the hurricane hit the camps the carnage began. First-hand accounts among the few survivors reveal part of the horror: “There was a big wall of water—15 feet high—20, maybe,” reported one veteran. It swept over those shacks and messed them up like they were match boxes.” Another reported, “I heard William Clark holler that the roof [of the canteen] was coming down. We all started away in the same direction and the roof came down on us. It must have hit every one of us. After the roof fell all I could hear was the grunting and groaning of the boys. I never saw any of them after that.”

After hours of the swirling hurricane one survivor said, “[B]odies were lying all over the roadway and lumber piled on them and some of them had holes in their heads.” In the aftermath another said, “I saw bodies with tree stumps smashed through their chests—heads blown off—twisted arms and legs torn off by flying timber that cut like big knives.” When the body parts were finally re-

assembled the total count was 256 veterans dead. As *Time* magazine reported, “[I]t was slaughter worse than war.”

Roosevelt Administration Takes Heat

When the news of the deadly hurricane reached Washington, many newspapers began criticizing the President and FERA. Hopkins denied responsibility, and his assistant, Aubrey Williams, called the tragedy an “act of God.” The *Washington Post*, however, disagreed. “In spite of Relief Administrator Hopkins’ denial that his organization was negligent in failing to evacuate the veterans on the Florida Keys, there is considerable evidence to support Governor [David] Sholtz’s conclusion that ‘gross carelessness somewhere’ was responsible.” D. W. Kennamer, whom the Veterans Administration assigned to investigate the deaths, concluded that “the only extenuating circumstance” for the failure to evacuate the veterans was Ghent’s regret “that his letters to the National Emergency Relief Administration regarding this matter were unanswered.”

In the search for responsibility, novelist Ernest Hemingway wrote an essay, “Who Murdered the Vets?” “[W]ho sent nearly a thousand war veterans . . . to live in frame shacks on the Florida Keys in hurricane months?” he asked.

“Why were the men not evacuated on

Sunday, or at latest, Monday morning, when . . . evacuation was their only possible protection?”

Neither President Roosevelt nor Harry Hopkins answered these questions.

The tragic deaths of America’s hard-working veterans have almost disappeared from historical memory. Gary Dean Best’s *FDR and the Bonus Marchers, 1933–1935*, is an excellent book, but it is the only one ever written on this tragedy. No U.S. history text I have ever seen even mentions the unnecessary deaths of these 256 men in a New Deal project.

This story needs to be remembered and retold. How can students make sound judgments on the proper role of government if they are sheltered from the negative unintended consequences of so many failed government programs?



Destruction of the Florida East Coast Railway in the aftermath of the storm