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### VIEWS OF WASHINGTON

*The Hill: December, 1931*

Washington has a drowsy look in the early December sunlight. The Greco-Roman porticoes loom among the bare trees, as vaguely portentous as phrases about democracy in the mouth of a southern senator. The Monument, a finger of light cut against a lavender sky, punctuates the antiquated rhetoric of the Treasury and the White House. On the hill, above its tall foundation banked with magnolia trees, the dome of the Capitol bulges smugly. At nine o'clock groups of sleepy-looking cops in well brushed uniforms and shiny visored caps are straggling up the winding drives. At the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and John Marshall Place a few marchers stand round the trucks they came in. They look tired and frowzy from the long ride. Some of them are strolling up and down the avenue. That end of the avenue, with its gimcrack stores, boardedup burlesque shows, Chinese restaurants and flophouses, still has a little of the jerkwater, outinthesticks look it must have had when Lincoln drove up it in a barouche through the deep mud or Jefferson rode to his inauguration on his own quiet nag.

Two elderly laboring men are looking out of a cigar store door at a bunch of Reds, young Jewish boys from New York or Chicago, with the white armbands of the Hunger Marchers.

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"Won't get nutten thataway," one of them says. "Who's payin' for it anyway, hirin' them trucks and the gasoline. . . . Somebody's payin' for it," barks the clerk indignantly from behind the cash register. "Better'd spend it on grub or to buy 'emselves overcoats," says the older man. The man who first spoke shakes his head sadly. "Never won't get nutten thataway." Out along the avenue a few Washingtonians look at the trucks and old movingvans with *Daily Worker* cartoons pasted on their sides. They stand a good way off, as if they were afraid the trucks would explode; they are obviously swallowing their unfavorable comments for fear some of the marchers might hear them. Tough eggs, these Reds.

At ten o'clock the leaders start calling to their men to fall in. Some tall cops appear and bawl out drivers of cars that get into the streets reserved for the marchers to form up in. The marchers form in a column of fours. They don't look as if they'd had much of a night's rest. They look quiet and serious and anxious to do the right thing. Leaders, mostly bareheaded youngsters, run up and down, hoarse and nervous, keeping everybody in line. Most of them look like city dwellers, men and women from the needle trades, restaurant workers, bakery or laundry employees. There's a good sprinkling of Negroes among them. Here and there the thick shoulders and light hair of a truck driver or farmhand stand out. Motorcycle cops begin to cluster around the edges. The marchers are receiving as much attention as distinguished foreign officials.

Up on the hill cordons of cops are everywhere, making a fine showing in the late fall sunshine. There's a considerable crowd standing around; it's years since Washington has been so interested in the opening of Congress. They are roping off the route for the Hunger Marchers. They stop a taxicab that is discovered to contain a small whitehaired Senator. He curses the cops out roundly and is hurriedly escorted under the portals.

Inside the Capitol things are very different. The light is amber and greenish, as in an aquarium. Elderly clerks white as termites move sluggishly along the corridors, as if beginning to stir after a long hibernation. The elevator boy is very pale. "Here comes the army of the unfed," he says, pointing spitefully out of the window. "And they're carrying banners,

though Charlie Curtis said they couldn't." A sound of music comes faintly in.

Led by a band with silvery instruments like Christmas tree ornaments that look cheerful in the bright sunlight, the Hunger Marchers have started up Capitol Hill. Just time to peep down into the Senate Chamber where elderly parties and pasty-faced pages are beginning to gather. Ever seen a section of a termite nest under glass?

There's a big crowd in the square between the Capitol and Congressional Library. On the huge ramps of the steps that lead to the central portico the metropolitan police has placed some additional statuary: tastefully arranged groups of cops with rifles, riot guns and brandnew teargas pistols that look as if they'd just come from Sears, Roebuck. People whisper "machinegun nests" but nobody seems to know where they are. There's a crowd on the roof around the base of the dome, faces are packed in all the windows. Everybody looks cheerful, as if a circus had come to town, anxious to be shown. The marchers fill the broad semicircle in front of the Capitol, each group taking up its position in as perfect order as if the show had been rehearsed. The band, playing *Solidarity Forever* (which a newspaper woman beside me recognizes as *Onward, Christian Soldiers*), steps out in front. It is a curious little band, made up of martini-horns, drums, cymbals and a lyre that goes tinkle, tinkle. It plays cheerfully and well, led by a drum major with a red tasseled banner on the end of his staff, and repeats again and again. *The Red Flag*, *Solidarity*, and other tunes variously identified by people in the crowd. Above the heads of the marchers are banners with slogans printed out: IN THE LAST WAR WE FOUGHT FOR THE BOSSES: IN THE NEXT WAR WE'LL FIGHT FOR THE WORKERS . . . \$150 CASH . . . FULL PAY FOR UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF. The squad commanders stand out in front like cheerleaders at a football game and direct the chanting: We Demand—Unemployed Insurance, We Demand—Unemployed Insurance, WE DEMAND—UNEMPLOYED INSURANCE.

A depthroated echo comes back from the Capitol façades a few beats later than each shout. It's as if the statues and the classical revival republican ornaments in the pediment were shouting too.

A small group leaves the ranks and advances across the open space toward the Senate side. All the tall cops drawn up in such fine order stick out their chests. Now it's coming. A tremor goes over the groups of statuary so tastefully arranged on the steps. The teargas pistols glint in the sun. The marchers stand in absolute silence.

Under the portal at the Senate entrance the swinging doors are protected by two solid walls of blue serge. Cameramen and reporters converge with a run. Three men are advancing with the demands of the Hunger Marchers written out. They are the center of a big group of inspectors, sergeants, gold and silver braid of the Capitol and metropolitan police. A young fellow with a camera is hanging from the wall by the door. "Move the officer out of the way," he yells. "Thank you. . . . A little back, please, lady, I can't see his face. . . . Now hand him the petition."

"We're not handing petitions, we're making demands," says the leader of the Hunger Marchers.

Considerable waiting around. The Sergeant-at-Arms sends word they can't be let in. Somebody starts to jostle, the cops get tough, cop voices snarl. The committee goes back to report while the band plays the *Internationale* on martini-horns and lyre.

Meanwhile in the Senate Chamber everybody stands while the chaplain asks Almighty God to instill into the hearts of the Senators "a Christlike tenderness for the overborne and heavy-laden." The Senators' heads are bowed over their desks, their faces are, as they used to say in oldtime magazine stories, a study. A thin yellow mantislike Senator, to the obvious disgust of many of his colleagues, starts reading a report of the committee on elections to the effect that no conclusion has been reached in regard to the two contested seats. As for Senator Heflin, he seems to be sitting in his seat in spite of the contest, large as life in a white vest, a patent medicine salesman if I ever saw one. He has a look of placid doggedness on his face. The other termites will have trouble ejecting him from the hill.

Over in the House, things are more animated. The representatives are electing their speaker. On the Democratic side they are licking their chops. Every new vote for John Nance Garner (they say he squirms whenever he hears his middle

name) brings the fleshpots nearer. The lean years are over. When he's elected the Democrats break out in whoops. "The rebel yell," giggles a newspaper man. "Don't cheer, men, the poor devils are dying," cries a reporter with a breath like a distillery. In the press gallery they are laughing. Down on the floor the Republicans are taking the gentlemanly attitude. At length, amid cheering and applause, a stocky whitehaired fresh-faced man, who looks like a prosperous wheatfarmer, is led down the center aisle by four of his colleagues. The gentleman from Texas has a determined, mean mouth, set in a countenance strikingly devoid of warmth, generosity, intelligence, feeling, whatever it is that makes the human features better to look at than a paving stone. From the press gallery you can see the faces of the representatives all too clearly. Except for a few women and a couple of little girls brought by their papas, there are not more than a dozen faces you can look at with pleasure out of almost five hundred; everywhere the closeset eyes full of lawyer's chicanery, the pursed, selfrighteous mouth drawn down at the corners, the flabby selfsatisfied jowl.

After the representatives of the sovereign wardheelers, even the ladies of the W.C.T.U., who are holding "exercises" among the frightened statuary downstairs, look charming and warmhearted. They are hanging a wreath on a large white lady in a flowing gown modeled in castilesoap, whose name I believe was Willard. They are in Washington to make a last stand against the demon rum.

### *A. F. of L. Building*

Out of the termite hill, the Washington streets are unusually cheery. People seem to have gotten a sort of release out of the parade of the Hunger Marchers and the toodletinkle of the lyre and the martini-horns. It's a magnificent cloudless day. We follow the parade in a taxi. The taxidriver said they'd already been to the White House and had yelled their demands at President Hoover through a megaphone. The Washingtonians seem to feel about it like children in class when somebody from outside has come in and sassed the teacher. Even the cops are smiling.

We catch up outside the A. F. of L. building. The band is there and the marchers are lined up chanting and singing. A

delegation has gone in to beard Green in his den. Marchers shout for the key of Billy Green's cellar, somebody starts the chant, "WE DON'T WANT BOOZE, WE WANT BREAD." One man keeps yelling, "Down with William Green, the lady miscellaneous." Everybody feels that the serious part of the show is over, now for the comedy relief. The motorcycle cops and the big shots in gold braid want their dinner, but they're smiling. Everybody's out for a good time, although the wind's beginning to blow up cold. Finally the delegation comes out, announces that William Green was sore as a pup, bawled them out for a lot of dirty communists with their pockets full of Moscow gold, and told them to get the hell out. The marchers boo and march on.

### *Washington Auditorium*

A meeting in the Washington Auditorium. A good many Negroes. The marchers have huddled into their seats tired, many of them have fallen asleep where they sit. Out in the lobby Brigadier-General Glassford, who handled the police end of the program, stands around beaming. On the platform the marchers' leaders looked pleased too. When the band plays the *Internationale* all the newspapermen get to their feet. Speeches go on and on, though the speakers are hoarse from days of riding in springless trucks and much shouting of slogans. For the first time, in the faces of the men and women sitting drowsily in the dimly lit auditorium, you can see something that reaches out of the curious neverneverland of Washington, D.C. It is hope, hunger, despair, the mills, the mines, the train yards, the brokers' offices back where these people have come from, that are real, not this antiquated mirage of a Greco-Roman republic set among the fine lawns and the magnolia trees of the Washington parks. When I left the hall to catch a train, the Brigadier-General was sitting in the audience in mufti, placidly smoking his pipe, while Weinstone thundered a *Daily Worker* editorial into the mike.

Downstairs in the auditorium a dance marathon was going on. Surrounded by empty seats a few puttyfaced boys and girls were feebly jiggling their feet to lethargic jazz played by a discouraged orchestra. They'd been at it for ninety hours. A young man in a white sweater bearing the letters NATIONAL PRODUCTS

COMPANY had keeled over onto his platinumblonde partner's neck. She was holding him up as she danced and trying to revive him with an occasional pecking kiss. A boy in a green sweater was held up to the microphone and crooned breathlessly into it for a while, his feet still moving. The announcer announced a bargain matinée next day, when between eight and four two ladies would be admitted for the price of one. A girl got the mike next and sang a little, while the announcer put his arm around her enthusiastically. Then the faint gyrations of the couples started up again. Anyway the jazz age is dead.

*Anacostia Flats, June, 1932*

"Home, boys, it's home we want to be," we sang in all the demobilization camps. This was God's country. And we ran for the train with the flags waving and a new army outfit on and our discharge papers and the crisp bills of our last pay in our pockets. The world was safe for democracy and America was the land of opportunity.

They signed you up in the American Legion and jollied you into voting for Harding and the G.O.P. Beaucoup parades, beaucoup speeches, run the slackers and the pacifists and the knockers out of the country, lynch them Wobblies, tell the Reds to go back where they came from. The G.O.P. took care of the Civil War vets and the Spanish War vets, didn't it? Well, it'll take care of youse boys.

You went to work if you could get a job; some kinds of jobs you made big money on, on others the bosses gyped you, but anyway you could eat, you could save up a little, get married, start payments on a home; boom times ahead.

When things slackened and you began to look a little democratic around the gills, they handed you the bonus. The G.O.P. and the nation are behind youse boys. Well, we got some of it and we spent it and we didn't reckon on cyclic depression No. 8b. And now look at us.

A bunch of outofwork ex-service men in Portland, Oregon, figured they needed their bonus right now; 1945 would be too late, only buy wreaths for their tombstones. They figured out, too, that the bonus paid now would liven up business, particularly the retail business in small towns; might be just enough to tide them over until things picked up. Anyway, everybody

else was getting a bonus; the moratorium was a bonus to European nations, the R.F.C. was handing out bonuses to railroads and banks, how about the men who'd made the world safe for democracy getting their bonus, too? God knows we're the guys who need it worst. Every other interest has got lobbyists in Washington. It's up to us to go to Washington and be our own lobbyists. Park benches can't be any harder in Washington than they are back home.

So three hundred of them started east in old cars and trucks, hitchhiking, riding on freight trains. (Maybe the words "direct action" still hovered on the air of the Pacific slope, left over from the days of the Wobblies.) By the time they reached Council Bluffs they found that other groups all over the country were rebelling against their veterans' organizations and getting the same idea. It was an army. They organized it as such and nicknamed it the B.E.F.

Now they are camped on Anacostia Flats in the southeast corner of Washington. Nearly twenty thousand of them altogether. Everywhere you meet new ragged troops straggling in. A few have gone home discouraged, but very few. Anacostia Flats is the recruiting center; from there they are sent to new camps scattered around the outskirts of Washington. Anacostia Flats is the ghost of an army camp from the days of the big parade, with its bugle calls, its messlines, greasy K.P.'s, M.P.'s, headquarters, liaison officers, medical officer. Instead of the tents and the long tarpaper barracks of those days, the men are sleeping in little leantos built out of old newspapers, cardboard boxes, packing crates, bits of tin or tarpaper roofing, old shutters, every kind of cockeyed makeshift shelter from the rain scraped together out of the city dump.

The doughboys have changed, too, as well as their uniforms and their housing, in these fifteen years. There's the same goulash of faces and dialects, foreigners' pidgin English, lingoes from industrial towns and farming towns, East, Northeast, Middle West, Southwest, South; but we were all youngsters then; now we are getting on into middle life, sunken eyes, hollow cheeks off breadlines, palelooking knotted hands of men who've worked hard with them, and then for a long time have not worked. In these men's faces, as in Pharaoh's dream, the lean years have eaten up the fat years already.

General Glassford again has played the perfect host; his entertainment committee of motorcycle cops has furnished iodine and CC pills, helped lay out the camps, given advice on digging latrines (the men call them Hoover Villas), and recently set out some tents and bedding. One of the strangest sights Pennsylvania Avenue has ever seen was a long line of ex-service men, hunched under their bedticking full of straw, filling up a long iron stairway in the middle of a partly demolished fourstory garage that the police department had turned over to them. The cops and the ex-service men play baseball together in the afternoon; they are buddies together.

In the middle of the Anacostia camp is a big platform with a wooden object sticking up from one corner that looks like an oldfashioned gallows. Speaking goes on from this platform all morning and all afternoon. The day I saw it, there were a couple of members of the bonus army's congressional committee on the platform, a Negro in an overseas cap and a tall red Indian in buckskin and beads, wearing a tengallon hat. The audience, white men and Negroes, is packed in among the tents and shelters. A tall scrawny man with deeply sunken cheeks is talking. He's trying to talk about the bonus but he can't stick to it; before he knows it he's talking about the general economic condition of the country:

"Here's a plant that can turn out everything every man, woman and child in this country needs, from potatoes to washing machines, and it's broken down because it can't give the fellow who does the work enough money to buy what he needs with. Give us the money and we'll buy their bread and their corn and beans and their electric iceboxes and their washing machines and their radios. We ain't holdin' out on 'em because we don't want those things. Can't get a job to make enough money to buy 'em, that's all."

When he was through speaking a congressman was hoisted up on the platform, a stout representative from Connecticut with that special politician's profile that's as definite in its way as the standardized face of a dick. He announced that the bonus bill had passed the House and that he was the only congressman from Connecticut that had voted for it. Everybody cheered. He added that he thought it would pass the Senate, but he doubted if the Lord Himself knew what the

distinguished gentleman in the White House was going to do about it.

“Now I’m not a Red, God damn it,” said somebody near me, “but . . .”

The arrival of the bonus army seems to be the first event to give the inhabitants of Washington any inkling that something is happening in the world outside of their drowsy sun-parlor. Maybe it’s the federal pay cuts that have made them take notice. In the Anacostia streetcar two mail carriers and the conductor started to talk about it. “Well, they say they’ll stay here till they get the bonus if they have to stay here till 1945. . . . I guess they ought to get it all right, but how’ll that help all the others out of work? . . . Terrible to think of men, women and children starvin’ and havin’ to beg charity relief with all the stuff there is going to waste in this country. Why up home . . .” Then began the stock conversation of this year 1932 about farmers not shipping apples, cabbage, potatoes, because they couldn’t get any price, about loads of fresh fish dumped overboard, trainloads of milk poured out and babies crying for it. One of the mail carriers was from Texas and had just come back from a trip home. He’d seen them plowing under last year’s unharvested cotton. “We got the food, we got the clothing, we got the man power, we got the brains,” he said. “There must be some remedy.”