

THE PENSION SYSTEM OF THE UNITED STATES MILITARY

At the close of the Revolutionary War, the United States government began administering a limited pension system to soldiers wounded during active military service or veterans and their widows pleading dire poverty. It was not until the 1830's and the advent of universal voting rights for white males, however, that military pensions became available to all veterans or their widows. Despite these initial expansions, the early U.S. military pension system was minuscule compared to what it became as a result of the Civil War. Also, prior to the Civil War, "pensions" were not necessarily monetary as we understand the word today. As previously cited James HC Rodgers was awarded a "pension" as a result of Congressional legislation enacted during the Mexican War that consisted of one hundred acres of land. Pensions could also be in materials, animals, or farm implements, and of course, cash. Pensions though, were not a foregone conclusion for veterans in those early days. They were actually invented as an inducement to serving in the military so that a man could feel comfortable that if he was severely injured or killed his family would be provided for. Early on, unless a man was disabled or killed a pension might not be awarded at all. There are even some conflicting stories that higher ranking officers would "negotiate" a pension before signing up to serve, much as a professional athlete might today.¹

Beginning in 1861, the U.S. government generously attended to the needs of its soldiers and sailors or their dependents. Because the federal government did not implement conscription (the draft) until 1863, the first Civil War benefits from 1861 to 1863 in many ways were an attempt to induce men to volunteer or to re-volunteer. Although altered somewhat over the years, the 1862 statute remained the foundation of

¹ Blanck, et al

the federal pension system until the 1890s. It stipulated that only those soldiers whose disability was "incurred as a direct consequence of . . . military duty" or developed after combat "from causes which can be directly traced to injuries received or diseases contracted while in military service" could collect pension benefits. The amount of each pension depended upon the veteran's military rank and level of disability. Pensions given to widows, orphans, and other dependents of deceased soldiers were always figured at the rate of total disability according to the military rank of their deceased husband or father. By 1873 widows could also receive extra benefits for each dependent child in their care.

In 1890 the most notable revision in the federal pension law occurred: the Dependent Pension Act. A result of the intense lobbying effort of the veterans' organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, this statute removed the link between pensions and service-related injuries, allowing any veteran (or heir) who had served honorably to qualify for a pension if at some time he became disabled for manual labor. By 1906 old age alone became sufficient justification to receive a pension.²

Interestingly, this pension act was one of the most crucial issues of the presidential election of 1888 that allowed Benjamin Harrison to defeat Grover Cleveland because Harrison supported the pension act and Cleveland did not.³

The pension program for Union veterans of the Civil War was so different, from its origins to its expansion into a massive old age support system, that some social scientists argue it had important implications for social insurance in the twentieth century. What originally began as a limited regime of protections for soldiers, widows, and orphans, eventually morphed into a system of old age pensions for almost one third

² Heidler, et al

³ Giese, James R. Pg 236-237

of the elderly population. The various pension acts for veterans of the Civil War also affected a range of social, economic, and political institutions, including the institution of marriage, the ascendancy of the Republican Party as the dominant political party for half a century, the size of the peacetime federal government, and in some ways the beginnings of a modern regulatory state. The pension system also reflected national issues of race and class.

The 1890 Congress enacted a new law that paid pensions to any Union veteran of the Civil War who served for at least ninety days, was honorably discharged, and suffered from a disability, even if not war-related. In 1904 Theodore Roosevelt ruled that old age itself was a disability, basically transforming the system into a government pension system for all Civil War veterans. Three years later, in 1907, Congress legislatively endorsed this position in the Service and Age Act. Congress, in subsequent legislation during the first quarter of the twentieth century, increased pensions and tied the amount of the pension to the period of military service.

For example, the last Civil War pensioner, Albert Woolson, who joined the Union Army as a seventeen-year-old in 1864, was collecting a monthly pension of \$135.45 at the time of his death in 1956. And perhaps more remarkably, there were still nineteen dependents of Civil War veterans receiving benefits in the last years of the twentieth century. At its peak, the Civil War pension system consumed approximately 45 percent of all federal revenue and was the largest department of the federal government (other than the armed services). In addition, state pension systems were developed in the former Confederate states to provide pension and disability benefits to Confederate veterans. Another interesting current parallel to the social security and Medicare systems of today

as our current baby boomers begin to retire, the level of federal expenditures will approach these levels.⁴ (See bibliography for further sources.)

⁴ Civil War Pensions.