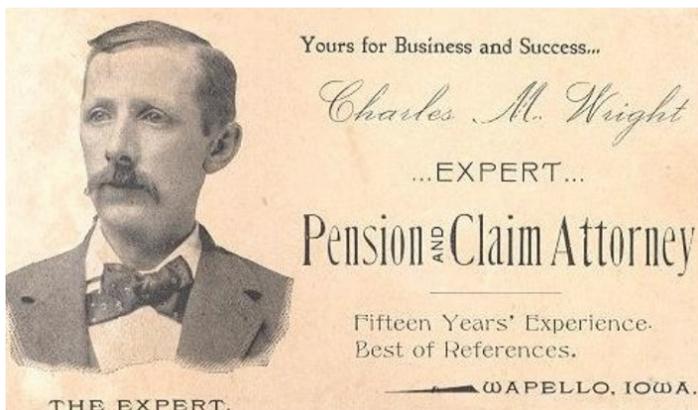


# THE VALUE OF SUFFERING

## American Civil War Pensions and Public Perceptions of the Morally Deserving

*Following the Civil War, the federal government instituted a pension system to relieve injured veterans and their widows. This was a large social welfare program without precedent in the United States, and when costs began to climb, and as the laws liberalized to include ever-more veterans and dependents, public and bureaucratic outrage around the pension system boiled over. Debate centered around what kind of pensioner was deserving of public aid. In these discussions, critics and government officials often reified gender norms and race stereotypes, identifying only those who followed these traditional mores as deserving of government pensions.*

By Michelle Shang  
University of Chicago



Civil War Pensions Business Card, 1895

Source: SSA Historical Archives.

In the decades following the Civil War, the federal government arbitrated the pension claims of hundreds of thousands of Union veterans and their dependents, usually widows and children. This task entangled the state in the intimate lives of its citizens to an unprecedented degree. Pensions required the federal government to define legitimate intimate relationships, and in doing so make decisions about who was deserving and who was not. As pension disbursement rose to all-time highs between 1890 and 1915, public debate about the pension system exploded. The alarming cost of the pension rolls occasioned much elite anxiety about individual fraud. After 1890, when the Dependent Pension Act severed the link between veterans' disability and their claim to a pension, the scope of the pension system became a form of generous old-age care for remaining veterans and their families. Debate after this point shifted to the apparently excessive generosity of the pension laws themselves, and to critiques of the pension system's purpose.

Ultimately, in these discussions about an unprecedented form of American government aid, American welfare was

established on the terrain of moral charity, with questions of the deserving against the undeserving dominating policy discussion. Government bureaucrats and elite critics came to see pensions as a form of aid that should be offered only to those American citizens who were morally deserving. Sociologist Theda Skocpol has observed that a key difference between Europe's welfare-state programs and "often equally extensive" Civil War pensions was the decision by the American government to couch its social benefits not in terms of relief for a class of needy citizens, but in the language of "earned aid" for a special group of morally deserving citizens. Unsurprisingly, in the public debate surrounding rising pension disbursement, the American public offered its own opinions about legitimate family relationships and gender roles. Newspaper stories, magazine articles, official reports, and legal statutes all suggest that the public and the state held mutually reinforcing concepts of legitimate gender roles and family relationships.

However, these definitions, especially when codified, failed to capture lived experiences of family and intimate life. The disjunction of legal statutes with social realities resulted in indignation among both pensioners and government officials, which was directed not only at fraudulent pensioners, but also towards what many considered an overly generous pension system. Public opinion and official government positions, via reports and law, reveal some common discourses defining who was a morally deserving pensioner. These views, as applied to veterans and their dependents, illustrate popularly received notions about traditional gender and family roles in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. This fixation on legitimate kinship roles reveals that pensions in the postwar United States were viewed as a form of generous aid for the morally worthy, not as an obligation of the government.

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Skocpol observes that “applications for widow’s pensions seem to have generated the greatest concern among Pension Bureau special examiners and reformist critics.”<sup>2</sup> Whether or not this special concern was warranted, it is true that government officials and critics alike paid great attention to the ways in which widows could and did make fraudulent pension claims.

Discussions about women in general centered on widows whose remarriages and delayed arrearage claims seemingly eroded their moral standing as deserving pensioners. Widows who could not offer concrete documentation of their marriages, as well as those who remarried or asked for large pension payments in arrear were thus especially liable to bureaucratic suspicion. Such women, who may not have made claims to a pension until long after their husbands’ deaths, were granted large lump sum awards which became illustrations of the pension system’s apparently excessive generosity. Yet, from the perspective of the claimants, ultimately the need for financial support necessitated weathering the public and bureaucratic suspicion that they often faced.

relationship eroded her moral standing as a wife and thus her eligibility as a pensioner.

Though Evans’ strongly personal anger towards fraudulent pension claims seems strange, it is by no means unique among those in his position. In fact, he spends a considerable portion of his report offering a laundry list of commissioners who have preceded him, citing lengthy quotes illustrating their similar outrage against pension frauds and apparently lax laws. These Commissioners, as the individuals ultimately responsible for the increasingly alarming costs attached to the pension roll, had reason to take the disbursement of pensions as a reflection of their personal ability. Their frustration at being unable to keep pension costs low may have led them to harp on the apparently unstoppable pension cheats the system was letting slip through.

Though second marriages were a cause of great concern to Evans and the Pension Bureau, first marriages were not exempt from scrutiny. “Young pullets,” or young women who had married aged veterans presumably for the sake of secur-

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Remarriage too was an issue of some contention, especially in cases where the widow made a retroactive claim to her ex-husband’s pension after a second marriage fell through. In his 1901 annual report, the Commissioner of Pensions, Henry Clay Evans, cited eight individual cases in which widows made claims suspected or known to be fraudulent. Among these, three involved widows who entered into relationships with another man, and only afterwards made claims to pension payment in arrears. One such case, described in Commissioner Evans’ ever indignant tone, involved a woman who, twenty-two years after a second marriage, “filed a claim for restoration of pension as widow alleging that she lived with her second husband for nearly six years when she discovered that he had a wife and children then living, and that said marriage was illegal and void...the arrearage payment in this case was \$2,700” (about \$72,000 in 2016).<sup>3</sup> This claim appears to be justified – the illegality of bigamy meant that the pensioner’s second marriage was in fact invalid. Given the loss of her second husband’s support, it seems natural for her to turn to her first husband’s yet unclaimed pension. The Commissioner, however, bemoaned his circumstances, in which he was “powerless [to deny the claim] though he believes the case to be fraudulent.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the seemingly reasonable grounds for annulment offered by the pensioner, Evans’ undisguised suspicion towards her claim clearly represents his feeling that any widow who entered into a second

ing their pensions, stirred considerable public and official outrage. The *Congregationalist*, the official magazine of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, in 1898 decried the “many instances...of the marriage of young women to old soldiers, long after the Civil War, for the sake of the widow’s pension certain to be soon obtainable.”<sup>5</sup> The magazine *Forum* similarly, though more colorfully, wrote of the phenomenon “where designing girls have yoked themselves to decrepitude to secure public support for the rest of their lives, or where irregular life is afterward preferred to marriage.”<sup>6</sup> These young women, if they indeed married for pension money, were thus made not only into pension cheats, but in fact were painted as clever enough to compel the government to support their promiscuous lifestyles after their husbands passed.

This controversy did not die with the majority of Union veterans, however. In 1911, when the remaining veterans would have been in their last years, the *Washington Post* detailed the indignant protests that followed after Congressman Isaac Sherwood of Ohio suggested that “young girls, characterized as ‘spring pullets,’ frequently marry old soldiers who ‘are on their last legs,’ so they may continue to draw their pension money after they die.”<sup>7</sup> Veterans rebuked the congressman, and retorted that “there is no record that ‘spring pullets’ drag aged veterans to the altar and capture their pen-

sions,” and counsel for the Grand Army of the Republic repudiated the claim as a baseless “stock charge...intended to alarm the people by making them believe that young girls, who have entrapped old soldiers into marriage, are swindling the country out of large sums of money.”<sup>8</sup> Doubtless, even if the claim were true, elderly veterans would take umbrage at this characterization of their wives’ motivations, but the lack of any broad evidence or even exemplar cases suggests the claim was in fact a stock political charge designed to outrage.

Such a baseless claim, made countless times, reveals more than concern about government fraud. It also suggests anxiety about changing women’s roles and agency in a time of social and political turmoil. Women who allegedly married for government money offended mainstream moral as well as political sensibilities. Such women represented in bold relief the risk of fraud that pension policies allowed. Though a veteran who exaggerated or even fabricated an illness to receive a pension also risked running afoul of masculine expectations as a lazy, cowardly, or emasculated man, the possibility of women defying gender roles for the sake of monetary gain was a source not just of condescension, but of moral outrage. A “spring pullet” was assumed to have married not for love or familial obligations but for money – this was the key focus of anger directed at the supposed phenomenon of “spring pullets.” There was no question raised about the technical legality or documentation of such marriages. Critics then did not just desire to better police false claims, but in fact to regulate the more intangible aspects of pensioners’ marriages. Authenticity of emotion and true wifely devotion became important arbiters above and beyond legal documentation.

The bugbear of supposedly reprobate women who did not meet these criteria undergirded alarmist claims like the one published in *Forum* in 1901, stating that “in the adjudication of claims...widows have in more than one instance been discovered to have been accessories before the fact in the murder of their husbands.”<sup>9</sup> Such a woman, if in fact she existed, violated every criterion of wifehood and womanhood by lying, cheating, and even perhaps killing to obtain support without having performed any feminine labor to earn it. Fears about women who married veterans in anticipation of their deaths, or even went so far as to murder them, illustrate the expectation that women earn the support of their husbands, and in their absence, of the state. If a good wife was one who through feminine labor, domestic and sexual, earned stable protection, pension cheats not only unfairly drained public funds but also violated this normative marital contract.

If this is the portrait of the undeserving widow, then what does the deserving widow look like? An 1898 *Forum* article on “Some Weak Places in Our Pension System” grants that there are in fact widows who deserve pensions:

The woman who was the wife of a soldier in the field during the Civil War suffered untold anxiety; and in many

cases, her life was one of constant struggle for existence, - especially if she had small children. If her husband lost his life in the service, or subsequently incurred disabilities therein, or died, her burden was made still heavier. The intent of the lawmakers, in granting pensions to soldiers’ widows, was to recompense them in some degree for the anxieties, suffering, and privations they had been called upon to endure.<sup>10</sup>

This account highlights that pensions were a form of moral repayment – courageous and country-loving citizens, men and women alike, had suffered much to preserve the Union, and in return deserved the nation’s recompense for what they lost and endured due to the war. Such a romantic portrayal of the truly morally deserving widow pensioner stands as a foil against the supposed others who were merely out to exploit government coffers. This wife, with just claims to support, was strong enough to weather the hardships of wartime life, and dutifully cared for her children throughout. Wives such as these, compared to the “young pullets,” suffered directly from the effects of the war, just as their husbands did. They were married prior to the war and because of the conflict lost their only source of support, and thus required the aid of the state in its stead.

As could be expected following the Civil War, race, in addition to gender, presented a problematic dimension of perceived pension system failures. African American widows especially were often portrayed as undeserving pension claimants. A combination of white supremacist stereotypes and social realities resulted in common public expressions of doubt towards black women claimants. The vague pre-war status of marriages between slaves in the South made it particularly difficult for widows to obtain acceptable documentary evidence of marriage. Pension laws eventually took this into account by setting a lower evidentiary bar for black widows compared to others. Historian Megan McClintock observes that “after 1866, whether or not they had been enslaved, black claimants for widows’ pensions could submit proof of cohabitation without providing evidence that formal documentation was unattainable, as white applicants had to.”<sup>11</sup> In the absence of documentary evidence, the testimony of neighbors and family became the main avenue for black widows to substantiate their claims.

The case of Hester Lancaster of Jacksonville, Florida, the presumptive widow of Abram Lancaster, offers an instructive example. Her 1908 claims to a pension were obstructed by the discovery that Abram Lancaster had a recently deceased wife in nearby St. Augustine. The first wife, Jane Nattiel, and her social circle never knew of his second wife, whereas Abram’s relations in Jacksonville recognized only Hester Lancaster as his wife. In order to arbitrate the claim, the special examiner had to take depositions from relations on both sides, with each side claiming that one and not the other was the legitimate wife.<sup>12</sup> In this case, claimants had to rely solely on conflicting testimony to establish their applica-

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tions, thereby placing the Pension Bureau and the broader state it represented in the uncomfortable position of arbitrating individual testimonies and relationships.

African American widows' reliance on testimony, and the flexibility which came with the use of testimony, may perhaps have offered greater opportunity for fraud. Whether or not they committed such fraud at a higher rate than white women who faced a higher evidentiary bar is not known, but white public opinion fixated on black women as pension cheats. The author of the aforementioned 1898 Forum article laments the widespread use of testimony to establish a widow's claim. He notes a recent investigation that exposed a whole slate of pensioners had used notary clerks as witnesses to their case. These witnesses testified that they were familiar with the claimant and her circumstances, yet further investigation revealed that in fact many of the witnesses in question were in fact the clerks working at the notary office where the depositions were taken, and had no connection whatsoever to the widow. "The widows – most of them colored women... testified that they were not acquainted with this witness, and that the witnesses were always furnished by the [claims attorney]."<sup>13</sup> That the author finds it important to mention the women's race denotes that race prejudice further fanned anxiety around fraudulent widows.

This added racial dimension was reinforced not just on a legal level in pension laws, but in official instructions for special examiners in arbitrating individual cases. Historian Brandi Brimmer writes that

freedwomen were singled out in the sixtieth item of the General Instructions to Special Examiners of the United States Pension Office... a section of the handbook devoted to 'Colored Claimants' explained that some black female applicants adopted children 'not their own' to enhance their monthly stipend. Bureau officials directed examiners to 'see all the children for whom the pension is claimed; their color may sometimes indicate whether they are the children of the soldier and the claimant.'<sup>14</sup>

These instructions indicate the power of ideas about race and sex in forming official ideas about legitimate intimate relationships. The reality of interracial marriages between black women and Union soldiers, implied in the instructions, resulted in children of mixed race who defied easy categorization. Examiners' insistence on using outward race markers to arbitrate pension claims emphasizes more general anxieties about maintaining strict racial categorization during this period.

The instructions further illustrate the historical formation of enduring stereotypes about black mothers on welfare. Black widows were singled out as especially willing to violate traditional nuclear family bonds to enhance their own gain, and as needing extra policing to keep them from deceit. At the same time, the reality that black women's experience of matrimony and family was different from white women's

necessitated lower bars of evidentiary documentation. The African American family under slavery, when slaves could not legally marry and children were often sold far away from parents, was perpetually unstable, often dictated not by family bonds but by owners' financial needs. This reality, resulting in lower standards of documentation and greater reliance on testimonial evidence for widows of formerly enslaved Union soldiers, heightened racially colored concerns about black women's veracity. Greater wariness and suspicion, it seemed, was just as necessary as a lower evidentiary bar.

Fear of pension fraud by women in general and black women in particular reflected general anxieties about the state's Sisyphian task of delineating proper family relationships. The state's definition of family relationships was not limited to that between husband and wife. Legally only one dependent could receive a veteran's pension at a time; the order of claims is telling of how the state defined family life at large.<sup>15</sup> First in line was the veteran himself. Upon his death the widow had first rights. Then came minor children, then finally orphaned minor siblings or financially dependent parents.

As such, difficulties in defining family relationships were not limited to spousal relationships. McClintock writes of the many struggles by parents of Civil War soldiers to obtain state aid. Their claims were often made decades after their son's death, when old age rendered them less productive, at which point proving that they had been financially dependent upon their son at the time of his death was often all but impossible. Even when the laws were liberalized to allow parents whose sons had intended to support them, documentary evidence, such as letters or diary entries, was hard to come by. As with black widows, the difficulty of obtaining documentation resulted ultimately in a lowering of evidentiary standards, when finally in 1890 the circle was widened to include any parents who had lost a son as a result of the war.

This chain of events captures the way the country viewed pensions – as a repayment of debt for service rendered or income lost, with the deserving identified by their adherence to mainstream gender and family roles. Though Skocpol argues that the United States viewed its pensions in moral terms as opposed to the socioeconomic terms of European welfare states, this may be too romantic an interpretation. In fact, the case of dependent parents highlights the state's vision of pension payments in terms of tangible economic loss. Parents, like widows, had to prove somehow that in losing their son to the Union cause, they had lost a tangible source of income. To prove this, though, they needed physical documentation of their son's filial dedication. By 1890 though, the state simply assumed that the nation's sons would have supported their parents in their old age. Such an assumption was also embedded in widows' pensions: the state assumed without question that women were economically dependent on their husbands. The cascading chain of claims and the

government's response to them articulate broad ideas about dependency within the ideal family: men rely on physical health to earn a living, and in turn care for their wives, who care for children, and elder siblings for younger siblings, and when parents reach infirmity, children care for them as well.

This clear delineation of proper family relationships floundered when it came into contact with the fuzzy reality of social relationships in day-to-day arbitrations. The failure of legal statutes to capture family life often left both claimant and government unsatisfied. Precisely because the nuclear family under slavery often did not follow the typecast set by the government, black widows in particular struggled to gain pensions. Brimmer details the persistent efforts of black women like Mary Lee to maintain or increase their pensions, resulting in cases open for years or decades. The process, she notes, "allowed women like Mary Lee to keep their cases over long stretches of time," constantly appealing unfavorable decisions over decades.<sup>16</sup>

Yet on the government's side, there was equal frustration. In his annual reports on the Bureau of Pensions activities, Commissioner of Pensions Henry Clay Evans consistently begged Congress to restrict pension access and grant him



Commissioner Henry Clay Evans, 1901  
Source: *The World's Work*

greater surveillance powers. In reference to the law granting widows back pay from the date of their husband's death, he lamented that "the law is bad," and gave many cases that together showed "your Commissioner is powerless though he believes the case to be fraudulent."<sup>17</sup> Further he complained that claimants were "seldom willing to accept" rejected cases as final: "claimants lack confidence in the decisions of this Bureau in determining the real merits of claims, and it therefore often happens that rejected cases are reopened and appealed again and again."<sup>18</sup> On both the side of the claimant and the government, there existed great discontentment with claims decisions. The crux of this struggle was born of the clash between a clear-cut legal definition of family and more free-flowing social realities.

The difficulties of adjudicating claims, and the outrage these complications produced, were not, however, limited to widows or dependents. Civil War veterans, as the main beneficiaries of generous pension policies, were subject to equal if not more scrutiny. Government officials and the public alike professed skepticism about veterans' disability claims. After the passage of the 1890 Dependent Pension Act, which extended coverage to all surviving veterans regardless of whether or not they sustained a war-related injury, this skepticism grew into frustration towards an increasingly generous pension system.

Similar to distrust of widows' claims to legitimate wifehood, both government and public critics voiced great skepticism about the severity of veterans' injuries. Reputed journalist Eugene Smalley published a piece in the popular periodical *Century Magazine* innocuously titled "The United States Pension Office" in 1884. In the article Smalley speculated that "a man who served in the army and has no disease, wound or other serious hurt, was toughened by the rough life of the camp and actually benefited physically, and given a probable longer lease of life."<sup>19</sup> Clearly veterans were expected to fulfill a certain vision of virile manhood similar to the womanly expectations placed on widows. The ideal Civil War veteran came out of the Civil War not only having avoided injury, but stronger overall from the masculine exercise of warfare. Though Smalley's view on the healthful effects of soldiering unduly glorifies warfare, it represents a more general feeling that there was a suspiciously high number of veterans claiming disability.

This suspicion was expressed in the more explicit accusation that many veterans were exaggerating or fabricating their injuries. A *Chicago Tribune* writer opined in 1915 that most of "the 'old boys' have lived useful and prosperous lives since the war and are now surrounded by comfort and protected by the care of sons and grandsons."<sup>20</sup> Veterans who applied for pensions twenty or more years after the war risked being stereotyped as a lazy and exploitative of government generosity.

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A notable crux of the public debate was the supposed inability of disabled veterans to perform manual labor. Smalley criticized pension policies for assuming that applicants were “honest ex-soldier[s], actually disabled...from earning a living by manual labor,” and pointed out that plenty of veterans, even if “crippled quite seriously,” must have been “just as able as ever to follow [their] business calling” if it did not require bodily toil.<sup>21</sup> Forum offered its readers a slate of amusing stories about pensioned veterans who had lied about their disabilities and been caught red-handed. One man “pensioned for total blindness...was encountered in a jewelry shop, engaged in delicate mechanical tasks with a magnifying-glass stuck in his eye.”<sup>22</sup> Another “pensioner, ‘totally disabled,’... was met by a special agent walking down the street with a lawn-mower over his shoulder, carrying it as easily as most men carry a fowling-piece.”<sup>23</sup> Upon medical re-examination, doctors found he suffered “from nothing but the habitual use of opium.”<sup>24</sup> This image of a dissipated derelict is a powerful evocation of the undeserving pensioner. These lazy opportunists violated popular ideals of honest, industrious manhood, thus eroding their moral claim to pension support.

The deserving veteran pensioner before 1890 was, then, a seriously injured, self-dependent manual laborer whose ability to support himself was robbed by his patriotic commitment to the Union cause. Critics alarmed at the rising cost of Civil War pensions in the decade following the war clearly believed that, for some reason or another, there were far more pensioned veterans than should be expected. In response, they fixated on fraudulent veterans, pinning public blame on opportunists. Yet, in reality, by 1875 only 43% of men wounded in the Civil War had signed up for disability pensions.<sup>25</sup> Pundits’ indignant observation that not all injured men should be in need or want of a pension was thus actually borne out by the number of veterans who applied for government assistance. Anxieties about rising costs had less to do with true fraud or excess than with the unprecedented scope of the pension welfare program.

After 1875, as disabled veterans who required pensions applied and were accepted, pension claims plateaued. But after the 1890 passage of the Dependent Pension Act, pensions essentially became a broad form of old-age care for any surviving veterans and their families. As pension claims climbed ever higher in the decades following, public outrage about the pension system grew louder. Critics’ view of deserving versus undeserving pensioners remained much the same, and they continued to harp on exemplar cases of fraud, but now their focus shifted from individual pension frauds to anger at what they considered an overly generous pension system. After 1890, the billions of dollars being spent on pensions could not be pinned only on fraud. Laws that allowed any veteran to claim pension regardless of health, gave large lump sum payments in arrears, and permitted friends, family, and local doctors to serve as supporting witnesses became the more obvious problem.

In this setting, excessive government largesse simply stood as too large a temptation for eligible veterans. Forum in 1901 mocked the government for essentially “station[ing] a servant at the door of its vaults to shout: ‘Come in and get your share. God help the surplus!’ to every passer-by who wears any remnant of the federal uniform.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the bureaucrats adjudicating claims could also be forgiven as victims of a broken system. Smalley wrote that “for this condition of affairs the Pension Office at Washington cannot be held responsible...it is methodical, careful, and vigilant within the limitations...the system itself is at fault.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, critics and Pension bureaucracy were often aligned together, with each supporting the legitimacy of the other. Commissioner Evans similarly claimed that “fault lies...not with the soldier claimant or his widow; but the system is so faulty that it offers a most inviting field for the enterprising and adventurous...those that are willingly persuaded to be dishonest.”<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, commissioners beginning with the first decade of pension disbursement bemoaned what they saw as the neglectful generosity of the pension laws. Commissioner J.A. Bentley in his 1876 Annual Report to Congress urgently suggested a complete restructuring of the pension adjudication system, which “will give to the office an opportunity to closely question both the claimant and his principal witnesses.”<sup>29</sup> He proposed a detailed plan of dividing the country into districts and sending pairs of government-employed medical officials and clerks to each in order to closely examine each pension applicant’s health status and supporting testimonial evidence. Bentley urged passage of these reforms to Congress throughout his tenure as Commissioner, to no avail.

Commissioner Evans in his 1901 report cited a laundry list of his predecessors who complained of lax laws. He argued that conditions of fraud and excess spending “have existed ever since the war, and able and conscientious Commissioners of both of the great political parties, have in their annual reports strongly protested against them.”<sup>30</sup> For him, political divisiveness prevented the thoroughgoing reform he believed necessary, griping that “when attention is called to the defects which are responsible for these conditions, a howl goes up in certain quarters.”<sup>31</sup> His pointed observation that Commissioners of both of the “great political parties” have made the same complaints about the pension system hints at the party politics that fueled pension policymaking.<sup>32</sup> This supports Skocpol’s argument that passing generous pension laws was one form of “patronage democracy” after 1880 when the Republican Party used pensions to capture the soldier vote.<sup>33</sup>

Though popular critics placed blame for high pension spending on the federal government, their contention ultimately was that generous pension laws allowed for far too many undeserving applicants to claim a place on the rolls. Pundits believed that the laws drew far too narrow a line between deserving pensioners and undeserving ones. After 1890, when pensions effectively became a form of old age se-

curity for all surviving veterans and their dependents, this criticism reached a peak. These critics believed that a contractual obligation existed between the state and the veterans who had suffered to serve it. Though Skocpol is right to argue that such a view of pensions was more couched in moralistic language than it was in European welfare states, Americans' view of pensions revolved around a moral currency of patriotism and rightful suffering in return for government support. Those veterans and dependents who failed to gain enough moral currency were labeled as undeserving pensioners. Smalley in fact lambasted the system because "the pension is given as a right, not as an act of charity."<sup>34</sup> This contention reveals the view that pensions should be a form of government beneficence, bestowed as a token of appreciation for veterans' service. In this view, pensions were not necessarily a duty of the government to its soldiers.

Ultimately though, it is important to remember that even if there was outrage at the level of government bureaucrats or political pundits, there obviously were great numbers of regular American citizens who either relied on generous pensions or sought to gain them. By 1910, there were almost one million registered pensioners, not to mention far more who had applied up to that time.<sup>35</sup> These American citizens likely would not have shared elite concerns about excessive gener-

osity. No matter how much haranguing in higher-up circles occurred around pension system failures, it should not be forgotten that this system of aid was relevant and valuable to a great part of the American citizenry. Though their voices have been elided somewhat in this discussion, the ultimate persistence of the pension system reflects this basic social fact.

But though these Americans, cutting across gender and race, benefited from the pension system, to gain its benefits they frequently had to fulfill elite notions of acceptable lifestyles and relationships. Pension laws in this way both concretized and newly articulated gender as well as race relations. By positing the primary deserving pensioner as a veteran who relied on manual labor, and the deserving dependent widow as a dutiful, chaste wife, the American pension system reissued old notions of gender roles in the family. Yet, the particular debates that coalesced around the pension issue, concerning masculine and feminine labor and patriotic sacrifice as the basis for morally earned aid, reflected new anxieties occasioned by an unprecedentedly large welfare program. In arbitrating claims, the federal government and a large class of political critics each reified concepts of gender, race, and family, setting the stage for discourse on welfare policy well into the twentieth century. 

## Endnotes

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- [31] *Ibid.*
- [32] *Ibid.*
- [33] Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*.
- [34] Smalley, "The United States Pension Office."
- [35] Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 145.