Voiceover: This program is sponsored by the United States World War One Centennial Commission.
(Theme music)
Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.
(Applause)
Williams: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with author Kenneth Davis discussing his book *More Deadly Than War: The Hidden History of the Spanish Flu and the First World War.* I'm your host Jay Williams, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. It's sponsored by the United States World War One Centennial Commission. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. On the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918, Paris time, the Armistice signed in a train car in a secret location deep in a French forest took effect, effectively ending hostilities during WWI. Yet, as America and the world breathed a sigh of relief and looked forward to the coming peace, another more deadly force was already at work both on the battlefields of European and back on the home front. This was the global influenza outbreak of 1918. This is considered by many historians and public health analysts to be the worst outbreak of disease in modern history. Both the scope--over 500 million people infected across the globe--and the severity--a mortality rate of ten to twenty percent--qualified this pandemic as a worldwide disaster. The flu struck the world at a time of great upheaval brought on by the war, new technologies, and new global political powers. The impact of this deadly disease created even more anxiety at a time when civilians and soldiers alike simply wanted to return to a sense of normalcy. Yet this was not to be. An estimated 675,000 Americans died of the influenza during this pandemic, ten times as many as in the war itself. Amidst this chaos, many Americans sought to cling to whatever sense of normalcy they could and move on. And so the collective memory of the pandemic gradually grew dimmer or just became an unfortunate footnote to the broader more triumphant story of American victory in WWI. In his book *More Deadly Than War*, Kenneth C. Davis recovers this hidden history and weaves a dramatic narrative that centers on the stories of the people caught in this deadly pandemic. Davis explores how this vast global epidemic was intertwined with the horrors of WWI and how it could happen again. Complete with photographs, period documents, modern research, and first hand reports by medical professionals and survivors, Davis' book provides new critical insights into the catastrophe that transformed America in the early twentieth century. Kenneth C. Davis is the New York Times best selling author of *America's Hidden History* and the *Don't Know Much About...* book series. A frequent guest on national television and radio and a TED-Ed educator, Davis also coordinates discussions on history through video chat with middle and high school classrooms. Please join me in welcoming Kenneth Davis back to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.
(Applause)
Davis: Good evening. And first of all, thank you for the invitation back to Pritzker. I was here a few years ago. I don't know if any of you are back for a second visit. Maybe you're gluttons for punishment, I suppose. But it is a great pleasure to see you all here and have you all here tonight to talk about--it's a pleasure to be here. We're going to talk about something that's not so pleasant--the most deadly global pandemic in modern times, perhaps the second worse pandemic after the dreaded Black Death of Medieval times. Disease and war have always gone hand in hand throughout history. We tend to

focus very often on the decisions of generals or kings or presidents or military leaders or maybe even a soldier in the field, and we leave out the true deadliest killer throughout all of history--the enemy we cannot see, the invisible enemy. This is a story that I was not even aware of except in the most passing way, and that's one of the reasons I decided to address this subject. My last book, when I was here last I spoke about the hidden history of America at war. I don't think there's been any piece of wartime history throughout our history that's been more hidden than the story of the Spanish flu and its close connection to WWI. And so that's what we will be talking about tonight. Thanks again to Pritzker for inviting me. Thanks also to the World War One Centennial Commission for its role in producing this programming. It is a hundred years since the end of the war to end all wars, that optimistic but futile saying that was given to us a hundred years ago. And that just makes it all the more important to understand the history of this war and the hidden history of the Spanish flu that went with it. Behind me you can see those words: "A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws and corrects them." That was President George Bush at the dedication of the Museum of African American History and Culture a couple of years ago in September 2016. He was obviously talking about the history of slavery and African Americans in this country. But it has been true throughout our history in many other ways, and perhaps there's no better example of it than this story, the story that I call *More Deadly Than War*, because certainly far more people died from the Spanish flu than died from the war itself, both civilians and soldiers. The number is in the United States 675,000 estimated. That is of course more than all of the soldiers who died in WWI, WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War combined. Another perspective: it is equal to about the number of deaths from HIV AIDS over thirty years, but this all happened in about he space of one year. Yet remarkably it was hidden. It was wiped out of the history books. It was wiped out of the schoolbooks. It was really left out of many of the memories of the people involved in the fighting this dread scourge that struck America and the rest of the world one hundred years ago. So I'd like to go back to that hundred years ago and tell you the story of the Spanish flu and the First World War. It was--I'm gonna start actually with an event here in Chicago. It was the late summer, early fall of 1918. America was already at war--had declared war, as you know, in April of 1917, spectacularly unprepared to go to war. Had a 100,000 men in the army, a navy that was meaningless. And with the declaration of war in April of 1917 President Wilson, Woodrow Wilson called for an enormous buildup, a mobilization. He wanted tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of troops prepared. All across America young men were seeing posters like this. I Want You for the Navy. A draft was established almost immediately. It was called the selective service. They didn't want to use the word draft or conscription, so they called it selective service, one of those government euphemisms that's so helpful. And of course the signs were out there. Don't wait for the draft. Volunteer. Well, here in Chicago two teenagers, a boy named Russell and his friend Walt wanted to enlist. They were desperate to get into uniform. Everybody who had a uniform on looked so good. The girls went for the guys in the uniforms. So they were hoping to get into their uniform and get over there, the words of the most popular song in America at the time by George M. Cohan, "Over There". Old Walt and Russell went down to the recruiting station and were turned away right away. They were only sixteen. They had to be eighteen to get into the army. Then they learned something interesting. The Red Cross accepted seventeen year olds for ambulance drivers, so they decided to instead become ambulance drivers, get into uniform, and go over to Europe because that's where all the action was. Walt's older brother was in the army and had written letters to him about exciting-- how exciting it was. Another brother was in the navy and he--right here at the Great Lakes Naval Station in fact and was writing letters back to say how great it was to be in this great crusade, and they were all

getting ready to go off and beat the Hun, as the Germans were called. So they tried to get into the Red Cross ambulance service, but then they found out that even for that they were too young. You had to be seventeen. So Walt went home and told his mother about it, and she signed the papers not knowing that he was still too young, and he being a pretty good artist managed to change his own birth certificate so that it looked like he was seventeen so he was old enough to enlist in the ambulance service, like another fellow from the neighborhood who had gone off the Italy a year before. Ernest Hemingway drove a Red Cross ambulance in Italy where he was wounded. So Walt and Russell got into their uniform. They had about a month's worth of training right here in Chicago. They were going to learn to drive ambulances. They were gonna learn how to handle a gun just in case. They were gonna learn some basics of car repair, but then Walt got sick--very sick. He was so sick they sent him home. He was on death's bed; mother nursed him back to health. By that time his unit had shipped off, and Walt missed his chance to go to Europe, although he went a little bit later on. He survived what by then had become a pandemic that was sweeping the country and the world. The name by the way is Walt Disney. That's why it's kind of interesting that he survived. Of course Walt was going off to fight in or serve in what was then called the Great War. It wasn't yet called World War I. That name wouldn't be applied to it for a very long time. It had of course started in Europe in 1914, kind of battle between feuding families, like Tsar Nicholas and King George, who were cousins, and their other rather difficult cousin Kaiser Wilhelm, the all-highest warlord of Germany. Just a year before in 1913 all three of these men had been together at a family wedding. A few years earlier they had been at a funeral of their mutual grandmother, Queen Victoria. So this war really begins as an extended family feud among the warring crowned heads of Europe, all of whom had been fired up by nationalism, a quest for the world's resources, certainly arms manufacturers that had told these men that their armies were going to be undefeatable, that they were invincible armies, that they would send their troops out, and they would all be home in a few months. In August the Kaiser in fact told the German people that the boys would be home before the leaves changed; in England they said they would be home by Christmas. Of course it had all started with a nineteen-year-old anarchist, nationalist—nationalism; such an important word that we have to talk about when we're talking about WWI. Gavrilo Princip, age nineteen. In June 1914 he shoots and kills the crown prince of Austria and his wife in this rather obscure town, a backwater called Sarajevo. An act that was deliberately done because of nationalist, the desire to break away his nation from the Austro Hungarian Empire. This incident set the fuse that soon had all of Europe in flames. By August 1914 the Germans had marched into Belgium, and they were relentless. They went through the university town of Louvain in Belgium burning books, burning libraries, burning people out of their homes. This is when the idea of the barbarous Germans who were bayonetting Belgian babies, came into the fore, and these were the stories that were soon splashed in newspapers around the world and in America. A few weeks later an enormous Battle at Tannenberg in what is now Poland--Russian prisoners taken by the hundreds of thousands in one of the great defeats of the early war, once again almost confirming the Kaiser's belief that this would be a swift war, over before anybody even had a chance to fight very much. But it lingered on. As the Germans moved towards Paris more than two million men fought in the first Battle of the Marne, not far from the heart of Paris. In fact the generals in Paris had to sue these famous taxis to transport more reinforcements out to the battle, and it was just a lucky moment that the German advance was stopped outside of Paris. The fighting went on to places like Flanders Field. I'm sure you've all heard the poem that begins, "In Flanders Field the poppies blow between the crosses row by row," written by a Canadian surgeon who went to the terrible battlefield at Flanders in search of his

friends and allies and other men he knew and found only crosses. He wrote the famous poem Flanders Field, which inspired the poppy as the symbol of loss and death and sacrifice that it still is for us today. And of course there were the casualties. Casualties of a war that was now being fought on an industrial level. What had once been a battle that had begun on horseback with men with lances was now being fought by steamships like the Dreadnought. Tremendous battleships and of course the introduction of more fearsome twentieth century weapons--the gas of the trenches. This is John Singer Sargent's famous painting from 1919 called "Gassed". And it wreaked such havoc on these men, as you know. These are the words of Vera Brittain, and Englishwoman who went to the front to nurse some of those men and she writes later on, "I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a holy war could see a case to say nothing of ten cases of mustard gas in its early stages could see the poor things burnt and blistered all over with great mustard-colored suppurating blisters with blind eyes and always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper saying that their throats are closing and they know they will choke." Vera Brittain, Testament of Youth, written in 1933. Of course it wasn't over quickly. It lingered on year after year. The western front became 400 miles of trenches, fighting back and forth endlessly. Verdun in 1916, another one of the horrific battlefields. Poet Robert Graves went there, and he called these trenches "the sausage machine". But still in 1916 the United States was not involved. President Wilson ran for reelection in 1916 on a platform of peace and prosperity. He said he kept us out of war. He campaigned as a peace president. But things were going to change. This was in spite of the sinking of the Lusitania. I know many people will say that the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 enraged the American people and got us into the war, but it was nearly two years before the United States declared war, and Wilson in that time had run as a peace candidate. But in April 1917 after Germany did continue its attacks on American shipping, and of course the famous Zimmermann Telegram in which it was revealed that the Germans were trying to create a secret alliance with Mexico to take back Mexican territory that the United States had taken out of the Mexican War in the previous century. The United States finally declares war against Germany and enters as an ally of the French, Great Britain, and Russia. Soon half a million men are crowded into army training camps spread all across the country. They were known as cantonments, and it was in one of these cantonments--Camp Funston in Kansas--that the first hints of the influenza plague started to hit. It started on the morning of March 4, 1918. The young man, a cook, slinging hash for hundreds of other men, came in complaining of cold symptoms. A doctor took a look at him right away--quarantined him. A few minutes later, another man came in. A few minutes after that, it was another and another and another. By the end of the day seventy-five men were in the infirmary quarantined. By the end of the week it was up to hundreds. And this was no ordinary cold or flu or grip that doctors had ever seen before. Otherwise-healthy young men who had come into camp and been recruits were falling flat on their backs. They were gasping for air as their lungs filled with liquid. They were turning blue as their bodies lacked the oxygen it needed. That's one of the reasons this strange new disease was first called the Purple Death. They were bleeding from their nostrils and their ears. No doctor had ever seen anything like it. They were wondering if it was some completely new disease, perhaps a new plague. The only clue that this as coming had come form a doctor in Kansas who had been noticing an outbreak of this very, very serious flu among his patients in rural Kansas early in 1918. And he was worried because he knew that young men who were passing through this part of Kansas were going to Camp Funston. At Camp Funston there were 50,000 men crowded into barracks--hastily built barracks. There was not room for all of them. They had to be put into tents. It was a cold winter. They were huddling together around fire pits and fires in trashcans looking for warmth. And of course as they huddled together,

virus loves crowds, and it started to spread. What hit Camp Funston soon spread to other army bases throughout the United States. Those men then got onto troops transports because they were getting ready to head over there. They were going off to Europe. They got onto trains and then onto ships, and they started landing in France by the hundreds of thousands. And there's no question that the arrival of nearly one million American servicemen, the doughboys, in France in the spring of 1918 was what led to the explosive spread of this flu virus. As I mentioned, doctors were mystified by this. They had never seen any flu like this before. Healthy young men--usually the flu as we know it today affects the elderly or the very young. But this was striking at very young men and knocking them down with suddenness that no one had ever seen before. Doctors were asking if this was a new plague. Finally it made its way as it reached Europe from one country to the next. France was hit, England was hit, Spain was hit. In Spain it got its name. The Spanish actually called it first The Naples Soldier, which was the name of a very popular song in Spain at the time. It's not that they were blaming anybody in Italy for the flu. That comes later when they started blaming everyone else. But it was called the Naples Soldier. The song was so popular, it would spread so quickly, it was like the flu, so that's why they called it The Naples Soldier. Very soon the king of Spain was sick, and so many people in Madrid were sick that they actually shut down the streetcar system. And Spain again the connection to the war is important here--Spain was a neutral country. Didn't censor its newspapers as the United States and Germany and France and Great Britain did. So newspaper reports started to come out of Spain about this epidemic that had struck the king. Very soon this flu, this new plague, had its name. It was called the Spanish flu. Certainly didn't start there, certainly can't be blamed on them, but that is how history now knows this deadly epidemic, the Spanish flu. Soldiers called it the Flanders Flu or the Flanders Fever or the Three-Day Fever, which was very optimistic because it usually did not last for three days. At one point early in the spring of 1918 so many British sailors were sick that the Royal Navy couldn't sail. Just around the same time the Germans began a major push, a major offensive. They knew the Americans were coming, and they knew they were coming in large numbers. They wanted to try and push the British and the French into the sea before the Americans could arrive. That offensive floundered. It floundered in late May into June, and it's clear that one of the reasons it failed was that so many German soldiers were sick with the flu. There's no question that the flu had some impact on the course of the war in the spring of 1918. Then surprisingly it seemed to go into a lull, or perhaps not surprisingly. We think of flu season--went through this rip into Europe, then quieted down a bit. But by the end of the summer it had begun to rear its head again. And it began to rear its head more violently, more viciously, more virulently, and once again it found a home in army bases. The first reported cases came into Boston at what was called Commonwealth Pier, where a few sailors reported sick with the flu. Quickly spread. Fort Devens or Camp Devens near Boston about thirty miles was hit really, really hard. And four doctors, the best medical researchers in the world perhaps--certainly in America at the time--were sent up to Fort Devens to try and figure it out. Red Cross nurses who were supposed to be rolling bandages had to instead stop and make flu masks. They thought that having masks might prevent the spread of this flu. The doctors who came to Fort Devens could not believe what they were seeing. Lines of men dragging themselves into the infirmary, sometimes carrying other men, falling sick. There was blood, there was body fluid everywhere, and the dead just kept piling up. Time and time again the doctors would say the same thing: the dead are stacked like cordwood. Very, very quickly this went from a military problem to a civilian problem. The flu was spreading from the military into the civilian population. It got so bad in the military however that in October of 1918, even though General Pershing, commander of the American

Expeditionary Force and President Wilson were calling for more troops, they shut down the draft. They stopped the draft for two months. They couldn't handle the number of sick men in the army camps, but still Pershing called for more men. The Germans were ready to be pushed. He wanted more troops. Even though the killing and the death in those trenches was so horrible, it was just at that point that he felt that the Germans would really go over if pushed hard enough. So he would not relent. More men kept coming over. More infected men. And as one historian put it, those troop transports bringing those men to Europe were floating caskets. One of the issues that came up was that no one knew quite what this was yet. Even the best doctors sent to Camp Devens had no idea what they were looking at. It seemed to be the flu, and it was leading to a kind of pneumonia, but they didn't really know, and that's when they started to ask if it was some kind of new plague. Around the streets of Boston and soon around the rest of the country there was another question: was it the Kaiser? Were the Germans responsible for this? Was this some kind of new chemical poison that U-boats had delivered and put into the American water supply? There was even the suggestion it was Bayer, the German drug company. They had introduced their wonder drug aspirin early in the century, and in April 1918 they actually had to take out advertisements in the United States paper that Bayer was made by Americans in America on the banks of the Hudson River. That's how much the fear and even the propaganda entered into this question of where this horrific disease had come from. One of the chief ways that this traveled back and forth around the world--and it soon traveled around the world because supply ships and troops ships were traveling all over the world--and you can see how just one ship landing with a sick crew in a place like Mumbai, Bombay, or Sierra Leone in Africa or Odessa in Russia would be like setting a match to dry kindling. The flu just spread and spread quickly. It got onto trains and moved around the rest of India and Africa. There was really no place in the world that was untouched by this. In fact India, the estimates are eighteen-and-a-half to twenty million people died of the flu just in India. This is one example of these kind of ships. It's a captured German passenger ship that had been converted to a troop carrier called the Leviathan. And there would be between nine and eleven thousand soldiers crowded onto this ship. And the reports that later came about some of the passages of the Leviathan are actually the stuff of horror movies. This is like something out of The Walking Dead or a zombie movie when you hear the doctors describe what they were seeing and the death and destruction from this disease spreading through these troops who were absolutely helpless. And the doctors were helpless. This was a virus, a virus at the time when they did not know what a virus actually was. Doctors had seen bacteria. Scientists had seen bacteria. They were more easily seen under a microscope of that time. There were vaccines for some bacterial disease. There were treatments for some bacterial diseases, but for this influenza virus there was nothing. The virus wouldn't be seen in fact for nearly twenty years after the pandemic until there were electron microscopes powerful enough to detect a virus. So people still didn't quite understand what they were dealing with. I mentioned the Leviathan because we have very clear records of how awful, accounts of how awful that trip was, but I bring it up also because it carried passengers back as well to the United States, some of them sick when they left Europe, some who got sick on the way over. One of those passengers was a young undersecretary of the navy who was who was touring trenches in France and came back to New York and gotten deathly sick while he was on the trip back on the Leviathan. He was taken by ambulance when he arrived in New York, taken to his mother's home and nursed back to health very, very slowly, and again, on death's door. His name was Franklin D. Roosevelt. Imagine how history might have changed if Franklin D. Roosevelt had not survived the Spanish Flu. Part of the problem also was that a massive propaganda campaign was begun to sell war bonds to

finance the military buildup. There was no tolerance for slackers in America at that time. Anti German sentiment was sweeping the country as I mentioned about fearing that the Germans had brought this disease on, or that Bayer had done something to its aspirin. Frankfurters were actually called Liberty Dogs. I don't know if you remember a few years ago when we went through the period where we couldn't call French Fries French Fries. We had to call them freedom fries. Same thing back in 1918. There were concerts and conductors who refused to play German music at their concerts. And there were a couple fairly significant German composers whose music couldn't be played anymore because they were German. But one thing that those liberty bond parades did was bring large crowds into the street. In Philadelphia in September of 1918, late in--this is when the flu is really in its most explosive phase, the autumn of 1918. 200,000 people go out to the streets of Philadelphia to see this parade to promote liberty bonds. The health commission in Philadelphia knew it was a bad idea, but there was such tremendous pressure to sell these bonds and to keep up the idea of pride and patriotism and to keep morale up that he agreed to allow the parade to go on. Within days Philadelphia was the absolute ground zero for the contagion. Churches were closed, theaters were closed, bars were closed in an attempt to slow this down, but there was no slowing it down. The death toll was extraordinary. In a matter of days and weeks, tens of thousands of people dying of the flu and dying horribly. This was not just falling asleep with the flu and not waking up. This was gagging on your own body fluids. This was falling down in the streets, high fevers, excruciating pain. As I mentioned, blood falling from the nose--it was an apocalyptic vision in many respects. This is the Philadelphia naval yards, and you can see how it is completely connected to the war and the war effort. The sign says, "Spanish influenza has endangered the prosecution of the war in Europe." There are so many cases in the navy yard, spitting spreads Spanish influenza. Don't spit. In many cities across the country spitting became a finable offense, including New York City. There were shortages of coffins and undertakers. Of course there was price gouging. There are always stories like that, as well as the stories of people who were producing all of the quack cures and phony medicines that were supposed to help with this, none of which did any good. Spit spreads death. That's what the streetcars said around the country. It's remarkable to me to go back and look at these photographs and see what this flu meant to this country on an everyday basis. I mentioned the nurses making flu masks. That's a baseball player and a catcher--a batter, a catcher, and an umpire--all wearing gauze masks while they're at the game playing the game. In the background in the stands you can see people in the bleachers wearing flu masks. In New York City where I'm from we see an occasional person walking around with a flu mask, but in 1918 everyone was wearing flu masks. They did almost no good. Finally of course the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the announcement of the Armistice. This is Philadelphia once again filled with people. Again there was an explosion of flu right after this announcement. People were deliriously happy that the war was over, and they went out to the streets. But in some cases it was a death sentence. Long after the war ended and the guns fell silent the flu kept going. This is again an image of policemen in Seattle in December of 1918. It would be hard for us to imagine how this disease factored into everyday life in America. And perhaps more important, it factored into the peace as well as factoring into the war. In Versailles for the peace talks Woodrow Wilson fell ill. It was April of 1919. His doctor actually thought he had been poisoned, which was not an outlandish idea. There were certainly people who would have been happy to get rid of Woodrow Wilson for a number of reasons. But he wasn't poisoned; he didn't have food poisoning. He had the flu. He was flat on his back for a number of days out of the talks. His lieutenant spoke in his stead, perhaps not well prepared, and finally Wilson rejoins the talks. It is thought that Woodrow Wilson

underwent some physiological or psychological or neurological change from this flu that affected--may have affected, I should say--his judgment, his reasoning, his will, because many of the principles that he took to Versailles he abandoned.it is suspected that his decision-making at Versailles may have been influenced by his illness. No one can prove that, but there are a number of on-the-scene witnesses, people who were on his staff, people who knew him well that just say he was not the same afterwards. Of course much later on he would suffer the stroke for which he is perhaps more famous, but certainly the flu may have had an impact, just as it had an impact on the war, on the peace. This flu then continued. It seems less significant in the lofty sense when considering Versailles. But there's no Stanley Cup champion for 1919. They had to cancel the games. They were tied at two apiece. One player Joe Hall of the Montreal team actually died right in the midst of what would have been the Stanley Cup playoffs. So this affected presidents and players and athletes and soldiers and civilians and generals and kings and average people and Africans and Alaskans and Americans and Germans. No place on earth was not affected by this flu. And then it slowly, slowly disappeared, burning itself out. I mentioned some of the survivors--Walt Disney. Gustav Klimt, the famous artist survived and painted this self-portrait, which is described as a portrait of the Spanish flu. I mentioned Franklin D. Roosevelt surviving of course and then going on to lead the country not only through the Great Depression but the Second World War. In Alaska the flu had been extremely deadly and dangerous perhaps because these people had never been exposed to any viruses like this before. There were villages of eighty people where seventy people died in two or three days. Enormous numbers of Native Alaskan children left orphaned by the flu. I raise this because as an interesting footnote to the story of the flu, in one of the villages in Alaska, I tell this story in *More Deadly Than War*, some of the people who died were put into a mass grave. That mass grave was then filled in, and because of Alaska's permafrost, the fact that the ground never thaws, someone went back many, many years later--fifty years later, to exhume some of those bodies to try and see if they could find live Spanish flu virus. Ultimately that was successful, and a few years ago the Spanish flu virus was recreated, replicated from live virus strain in a laboratory under the auspices of the United States Army. So this very, very deadly flu has been identified. It is an avian-type flu, probably from Asia. We don't know where it originated. There are still many mysteries about the Spanish flu. What is not a mystery is how devastating it was not only to America, but to the whole world. I close with this line from Albert Camus, *The Plague*. He says, "What is true of all the evils in the world is true of the plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves." And in many cases it did. The flu brought out some of the best in Americans and certainly people elsewhere around the world. Women who had been at home flocked to join the Red Cross nursing service, the Salvation Army service, to go to the trenches of Europe. It was a transformational moment in that way, because just as we think of WWII and women taking jobs in the factories in WWII, that all happened during WWI a hundred years ago, and it happened because of the flu as well as the war. So this was a society-changing moment. And I think it's no coincidence that shortly after the flu is gone and the war is over, America changes its constitution to allow women to vote. They had been to the war. They had been to the front lines. They had been the nurses. They were not going to go back and accept the world as it was before. So these are the extraordinary changes that sometimes we don’t always connect with things like war and certainly with disease. A long time ago I wrote a book called *Don't Know Much About History*, which is a series of questions and answers about American history. And my favorite part of a presentation like this is always getting to this moment where I get to ask if you have any questions for me. This is a fascinating subject. It’s a subject that I should really emphasis how extraordinary it is that most

people in this country, many people in this country to this day have still never heard of the Spanish flu and how dreadful and deadly it was. There are no great novels of the Spanish flu. There's no movie, no play, no poems written. AIDS has of course produced a number of notable artistic achievements inspiring them. Nothing about the Spanish flu, even though some of our greatest writers were alive. There's one short story by Katherine Anne Porter called "Pale Horse, Pale Rider". I highly recommend it. It's a brief story. It really captures the essence of not only what the flu was like--Katherine Ann Porter survived it herself--but what the mood in the country was like one hundred years ago as the country was battling both the barbaric Huns and this inexplicable disease. Thank you very much, and now I would like to take your questions.
(Applause)
1: Do you think that the flu somehow reached Kansas from Asia, or did it mutate in place?
Davis: This is, the question is, how did the flu get to Kansas. We really don't know that. There are reports, there were reports at the time, of outbreaks of a similar disease at San Quentin Prison for instance where a quarter of the prisoners were down with this flu. A Detroit auto plant--a Ford motor plant--completely shut down because so many of its workers were sick on the line. So there were pockets of this elsewhere in the country. There are quite a few theories. No one can say with certainty where this flu originated and how it made its way to the United States. Perhaps an avian flu--it is an avian flu, but perhaps migratory birds carried it and made that leap. We're terribly frightened of this, when viruses make the leap from the animal world to the human world. Did someone ingest something from one of these birds? Was a bird captured, killed, eaten, and that might have been the source? Was someone bitten? There are many theories of how a virus makes that leap. No one can say with any certainty, but it was clearly in Kansas in that early part of January of 1918. And this one doctor who noticed it among his patients actually reported it to the public health service. At that time the Public Health Service was the government's body for taking care of the country. Their primary goal and role at that time was checking immigrants coming into the country. So when you see photos from Ellis Island of men uniform looking in people's mouth, that's the Public Health Service. This doctor wrote to the Public Health Service. They didn't pay much attention to a doctor in rural Kansas saying he was seeing an unusual flu. It would not be until the following fall that they actually began to really try and record the flu. So the actual first appearance no one is certain of. There is a suggestion for instance that--this is an interesting one, again connected to the war. And there are so many aspects of this flu pandemic that connect to the war. Chinese laborers were brought to western Canada and put on trains, crowded trains, taken across Canada, and sent to Europe to do manual labor behind the lines in WWI, to dig trenches and build latrines and build buildings. It is suggested that those Chinese laborers might--that this flu originated in Asia as many flus have, and as many virus have, and those laborers may have brought it. There's no way to check that. There's no way of going back and examining that. So this is one of the mysteries of the Spanish flu--where exactly it originated and why it mutated to become this very virulent virus that had this unusual impact on young people--younger, healthier people rather than the elderly and the very young.
2: The last point you made about the troop transports--did doctors at the time have a sense of how long a person was contagious, and were they knowingly putting soldiers on these troops transports who were obviously sick, or did they rationalize in some way--oh, they're over the contagious period?
Davis: That's a really good question, and there are certainly some reports from some army doctors. There's an account again of this Leviathan, where people were--I think there were troops from Vermont marched all the way down to New Jersey to get on the

Leviathan to go to Europe in the fall of 1918. And there were men dying as they were marching to New Jersey. So the doctors were clearly aware that there was something wrong. Did they--they just didn't have the wherewithal to stop it, and they certainly didn't have the power to stop the transport of troops. The president and the supreme commander were calling for more troops, so you did what you were told to do. And I'm sure there were cases of people saying this is madness, but that's exactly what I'm referring to when I say that sound medical advice was clearly ignored in the interest of a policy decision, which was to continue to press the war effort.

3: I'm curious about demographics because if you can separate this from the war, can you kind of tell me gender wise who was dying and how long it took the world population to recover from the whole thing?

Davis: The second part I'm not sure I'm going to be able to help you with, the world population recovering, but it obviously took some time. Gender is an interesting one. Obviously this hit army bases, which were largely young men at first but then spread to the general population, and there was really no gender, racial, ethnic difference. It was really everywhere. In fact like Alaska, it was much worse there, so the demographics there. Same thing in the South Pacific. There are reports of a ship landing in the South Pacific, and within days an entire population on an island practically being wiped out. So once it got into the general population it was not discriminating by any kind of gender or--but the thing I will come back to is the age issue, because that's one of the most fascinating parts of this and still not completely understood. The thinking, the principle thinking now is that this mutation of this virus was so virulent that the healthier your immune system was, the more it attacked it. And it was really your immune system filling up your lungs with fluid to fight off this infection that was often the cause of death. And that would lead to either pneumonia or asphyxiation. These people were turning blue. It's called cyanosis. And as I mentioned earlier, before they called it the Spanish flu many people called it the Purple Death. There's a doctor in New York who talks about thousands of people--I think he was at Bellevue--thousands of people coming in, and he says, "They are spitting blood, and they're blue as huckleberries." It's a pretty remarkable image, and again you get this notion that bodies are stacked like cordwood. We can't even imagine it today because nothing like this has happened in our lifetimes, and very few people obviously are alive anymore who did experience it. But I do hear more and more stories of the person who said, "Oh, my grandmother told me my uncle died," or, "My uncle died in camp. He never even made it to Europe." It was--it really affected the entire country in a remarkable way. But I conclude all of my lectures, whether it's a group like you or a group of students, with these words: wash your hands.

(Laughter)

Davis: Thank you.

(Applause)

Williams: Thank you to Kenneth Davis for an outstanding discussion, and to the United States World War One Centennial Commission for sponsoring this program. The book is *More Deadly Than War: The Hidden History of the Spanish Flu and The First World War*, and it is published by Henry Holt and Company. To learn more about the United States World War One Centennial Commission, visit WorldWar1Centennial.org. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents.*

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(Theme music)

Voiceover: The preceding program was produced by the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.