210 The Great War

Voiceover: This program was sponsored by WTTW and the United States World War I 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*.
Clarke: Welcome to Pritzker Military Presents, with Rob Rapley, one of the directors of the PBS documentary *American Experience: The Great War.* I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago, and it's sponsored by WTTW and the United States World War I Centennial Commission. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. April 6, 2017 marks the one hundred-year anniversary of the United States' entry into WWI, known to those who lived through it as the Great War. The impact of us participation in this distant conflict cannot be understated. With American forces suffering 200,000 combat casualties, more than 53,000 combat-related deaths, and more than 63000 deaths due to accidents, disease and other causes. For the United states the war only lasted eighteen months, and the majority of the fighting occurred between the months of May and November of 1918, a mere six months. Life back in the United States was also transformed, and the fabric of society in political and cultural spheres changed permanently. Drawing on the latest scholarship including unpublished diaries, memoirs, and letters, the PBS documentary *American Experience: The Great War* tells the rich and complex story of WWI through the voices of nurses, journalists, aviators, and the American troops who came to be known as doughboys. The documentary explores the American experience of the war as a whole, from President Wilson's neutrality to doughboys fighting in some of the bloodiest battles ever to the crackdowns on civil liberties following the end of the war. *The Great War* is executive produced by Mark Samels and directed by award-winning filmmakers Stephen Ives, Amanda Pollak, and Rob Rapley. Rob Rapley has written and produced and directed a number of films for American Experience including most recently Murder of a President about the assassination of James Garfield. His other *American Experience* films include the Poisoner's Handbook, the Abolitionists, and Wyatt Earp. Rapley also produced the Greeley Expedition, Buffalo Bill, the Trail of Tears, and two episodes of PBS' acclaimed series on the Supreme Court. He was nominated for Emmy Awards for his work on Bill Moyer's *Becoming American: The Chinese Experience* and Loosely Mozart: The New Innovators of Classical Music. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Rob Rapley.
(Applause)
Clarke: Rob, thank you very much for being here today. I'm very much looking forward to talking about your work on the documentary *The Great War*.
Voiceover: In the summer of 1917 at docks up and down the eastern seaboard, thousands of American soldiers boarded ships bound for France. They were the vanguard of a new American army about to enter the most destructive war the world had ever known.
-It's a watershed in American history. The United States goes from being the country on the other side of the ocean to being the preeminent world power.
-For President Woodrow Wilson the war was a crusade to make the world safe for democracy, a chance to transform the international order into America's image.
-Woodrow Wilson himself said that it was of this that we dreamed at our birth, for which we were destined, leading the way for the world to a new order of peace.

-This is the birth of the ongoing debate over how involved America should be in the world.
Clarke: My first question is really kind of setting up a bit of the tone that this conversation I hope will take, but one thing that your documentary very much points out--it doesn't so much say it, but it points it out in very graphical ways--the war we fought over there during WWI was a very brief encounter, but that six months of combat, we lost almost as many men in combat as we did during the entire ten years of the Vietnam War, and then we lost more men to influenza and disease and accidents than we did during the entire Vietnam War--very brief period of time. So what inspired you to take on this project to tell the story of the Great War?
Rapley: Well, the Great War has really been eclipsed in popular memory, mostly by that Second World War, which was bigger, longer, had a clear villain. And also when we do think of the Great War we think mostly of the British experience or the French experience, and the fact is that as you say although our war was much shorter--really we were only in it with both feet for about six months, for that six months it was just as intense as--you know, as the Battle of the Somme or Verdun or anything else. The casualties were appalling and the conditions also were appalling. And so, you know, the--one of our characters, Ralph John, he's picked up off his farm in May of 1918; a few months later he's sent into the biggest battle in American history, a battle that most of us haven't heard of, and then less than six months after that he's dropped back home a traumatized shell of his former self. And there were countless men like Ralph John who really never left the war behind. And so the fact that it was a short war doesn't mean that it was insignificant or that it was easy.
Clarke: I heard a historian talk about WWI as basically WWII without nuclear bombs. And in the video that is in your documentary, you very much get a sense of that, the way the men are fighting, the way the men are advancing, the way that they're using their rifles. You have motorized vehicles. It was very much a war that nobody had ever seen anything like, whereas when you get to WWII there are still a lot of horses the planes were maybe faster, but really everything about the war seemed to be very similar, at least to that historian. What is your thoughts on that?
Rapley: In terms of the fighting itself there are a lot of similarities, and I guess the really striking thing is the difference between 1914 and 1918. That you could almost say that '18 is more similar to '39 than it was to '14. That the technological evolution was just astounding--you know, that airplanes were kind of balsa wood kites in the beginning, and at the end of the war they're very close to--you know, they're steel hulled monoplanes flying well over a hundred miles an hour--you know, the fastest and the best of them. And I guess more importantly they've discovered that everybody has been trying to figure out how to restore the war of movement, and the--we always think of especially the British generals and the French generals as well as being incompetent and stuff, but by this stage of the war the really bad ones are gone and they've actually mastered a lot of these things especially the coordination of different arms-- the air/ground coordination and so on. So--and tanks had been introduced, which was such a huge step. So they finally figured out how to restore the war of movement--the war of movement is restored in March with the German Offensive, and then from there on it is as you say very much a war like the Second World War, a war of movement with, you know, coordinated between the branches and so on. So I think it's a good point. As I say I think it's--the really striking thing for me is the difference between 1914 and 1918.
Clarke: What kind of research did you have to do to put this documentary together? I would imagine that you were in a lot of different places getting a lot of different information.

Rapley: Yeah, it was interesting that almost every story except the big ones--except Pershing and Wilson--but every story really came up--it wasn't the story that we meant to tell when we started--that we found every character, and so--we see a nurse that dies of influenza, and really we just came across her obituary and then put it together from there. And so the sources varied enormously, and as much as possible we were going with original, you know, sources for our stories and so on and going back to families. And so it was --the research went on for years, and the production was a year-plus, but the research just went on forever.

Voiceover: With a parting word of warning from an officer to each man, up and over the top we went. It was an odd feeling. It didn't seem like fear, nor even dread, but just wonderment. Just five months before he jumped off with the first wave of the first wave of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, Private Ralph John had been working on his family's farm in Macintosh, South Dakota. His training consisted of two days practice with a rifle and a short stint driving a bayonet into a mannequin. Then he was shipped out, handed a gas mask, and sent into battle.

-Ralph John was barely trained, but he was a little more adept at handling a weapon because he had spent considerable time in the forests of South Dakota. So he was a little bit better off than some of them men were. Some of the men came to the front without complete uniforms. Others showed up without rifles, and sergeant asked, "Where's your rifles? Did you lose them?" And they said, "No, we were never given any." And he said, "Go over anyway. Pick up the first one that you see."

Clarke: Obviously when you're making a documentary you can't tell all the stories. Are there any stories you really would have wished you had had another six or eight or twenty hours to dig into?

Rapley: It's interesting. There were definitely stories that we left out that I wish we hadn't had to. But even more than that, the stories that we did follow were even bigger. The best example really is Ralph John the infantryman. He gets trapped and they get--his unit gets cut off in this lost battalion episode. Five days, and it's horrendous, appalling conditions. There's no food, no medicine. The wounded are just dying, you know, on the ground. And finally they're relieved, and that's where their story ends in our film. But to me the most shocking thing is they're given a day's rest, and then they're--they start marching again, and they assume--all the men assume that they're marching to the rear and that you know, they're being relieved. And they realize they're marching the wrong way, and in fact they're marched straight back to the front. And, you know, after this appalling, appalling thing, just the callousness of the American high command in some instances was just appalling.

Clarke: So the soldiers are fighting, the American soldiers are going over there; they're there in 1918. That's the moment when as you put it it's more like 1939 than it is 1914. And we're not really prepared to be over there at that point. Your documentary spends a bit of time on this topic. I'd like to talk a little bit more about what you discovered in that area.

Rapley: Yeah, it's interesting. The--when America declared war we had no idea what that meant, even though, you know, we had been watching it for three years. But people were still talking about sending a demonstration division over. You know, and it--we'd show the flag, and that would scare the Germans. Pershing goes over and accesses the situation. He sends back a telegram saying, "We may need a million men." And it sends, you know, an earthquake through the war department, through the government, and they realize what they've gotten into. And first they say, "Okay we're gonna start raising divisions, sending divisions over," and this takes forever. It takes, you know, months to get a division over and so on. And then in--so that's, you know, from April of '17 through the end of that year. There really weren't that many Americans in France at the end of

'17. What really changes everything is the German Offensive in March of 1918. And it becomes apparent that the--there may be no Allied rescue--no Allies left to rescue if they don't get in gear. And so they shift the emphasis, so instead of shipping divisions over they're just gonna ship as many men as they can--no gear, no nothing, just pack them onto the ships and move them over. And they also shorten the training dramatically, which is how you get situations like Ralph John's where a guy who's basically untrained, and in his case he was lucky; he get's handed a rifle. As you heard there were people--we think of that as something from the Russian army in the First War, being sent over the top without any weapons, but that happened to Americans, and it was because they--you know, it was all a consequence of this decision, A, to accelerate things wildly, and also to send them over without gear, and they'd get the gear over there from--the French and the British basically supplied most of the equipment, all of the planes, all of the artillery basically. There's another interesting problem here, is when we went to war, even though all our factories were already making weapons and munitions for the Allies--we could have just shifted into high gear and said, "Okay," but we said, "No, they have to have American-designed weapons." so they start the process all over, and they start shifting the factories over. Of course there are teething pains and all the rest of it with all of these weapons. And so really American weapons only make it to the front, you know, kind of in time to fire a victory salute at the end of the war.

Clarke: That's an interesting part of the war that, you know, Pershing and Wilson absolutely maintained that we were gonna fight as a unified army. We weren't just gonna supply, you know, men to the French army or the British army. And yet we were really relying on them for a lot of our gear.

Rapley: Absolutely. They--I think, you know, the reluctance--one can certainly understand the reluctance to just send our guys into their units given their record over the last three years. And given Wilson's real goal of putting an American stamp on the victory so that he would--you know, so that it would be an American peace, that was really, you know, the logic underneath al this. But as you say the--once things got desperate they started shipping our own units in as units, but you know, his original plan had been to keep the American army intact until the American army was ready to launch its own offensive. In fact things get accelerated again because of the March Offensive. So they do start sending American units in, but as you say there armed almost always with European weapons.

Voiceover: By the fall of 1918 Pershing believe the AEF was finally ready to fight a major offensive on its own. He chose the sector between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest for his show peace battle because it offered the best chance of ending the war in one blow.

-The master plan for the Meuse-Argonne Offensive was to push forward and cut the main railing between Germany and Northern France, the main supply route. It was part of a larger offensive that everybody was involved in to drive the Germans out once and for all.

-The Germans took Meuse-Argonne in 1914, and the French tried to take it back in '14 and '15 and '16 and '17, but the defenses in the Argonne were seen at that point as insurmountable.

-Pershing's plan called for his troops to cut through the German defenses in just three days. Instead of sitting in their trenches like European soldiers Pershing believed his doughboys would sweep across the battlefield overwhelming the enemy. In doing so they would avoid the horrendous casualties that Britain and France had suffered.

-Pershing's attitude is like they're all doing it wrong. You know, I mean, with American riflemen and can-do and our history, we're gonna go in there, and we're just gonna show the Europeans how it's done.

-From the moment the doughboys went over the top nothing went according to plan. As Pershing could see, his own supply lines had seized up. Casualties were soaring. With every passing hour the Germans were bringing up more reinforcements. Soon Pershing's army would be locked in a war of attrition. It was exactly the outcome he had sworn to avoid.
-Pershing believe that American riflemen would go in with the mobile tactics, swarming around pillboxes, knocking them out, moving on to the next line of entrenchments. And they couldn't get through the first line.
-US troops were audacious and brave, reckless. Some Germans called them...because they ran right into machinegun fire, and they assaulted things head-on. Kind of casualties we suffered were unprecedented in US history.
-By the time Pershing reached his forward command post his famous temper was well lost. Every commander was put on notice. Anyone who did not measure up would be relieved. "When men run away in front of the enemy," Pershing ordered, "officers should stop them to the point of shooting men down." There could be no hesitation, no weakness.
-Americans had to accustom themselves to the reality that it didn't matter how great the American rifleman was; there wasn't gonna be any quick victory.
-The kind of warfare on the western front that the United States thought that it was going to find, it didn't find. It was the same war, the same bloodbath.
Clarke: Let's talk a little bit about the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.
Rapley: Yeah.
Clarke: This is a particularly interesting point of historical fact because it is one of the most epic, if no the most epic battle, Americans ever fought in. it dwarfs Gettysburg. It dwarfs D-Day. It dwarfs just about anything that we have in any kind of comprehension of our--what we've been taught in school and what you find in history books about certain battles. And yet it's not something that is on the tip of tongues of Americans. And I kind of want to probe a little bit of why you think that is the case, that we don't know about this offensive, and then talk about some of the realities of the offensive.
Rapley: I think it's--as you say the Meuse-Argonne Offensive is the biggest and bloodiest conflict, battle, in American history. And the fact that it has been largely forgotten--it's really of a piece with the war as a whole. And I think that part of that--obviously it's eclipsed by the Second World War, but I think even before the Second World War people, Americans, felt so conflicted about the war. In the 1930s there was a series of hearings, congressional hearing led by Senator Nye that concluded really that we'd been duped. That we'd been duped into going into war by weapons merchants of deaths and for British Plutocrats and to preserve the British Empire. And that--this illusion coupled with--the British and the French, they never repay their war debts, and a lot of people felt that that contributed to the Great Depression. So through the 1930s Americans really change their minds completely about the war, that--they feel that they were taken advantage of. And so along comes the Second World War where you have a real villain and a good and a bad, and we win. And so I think it really just completely eclipsed it as a result. It's just kind of natural. We can't remember more than one thing. So.
Clarke: Well, you've been over there, and when you're in France and you talk to people who lived there, they remain incredibly thankful to Americans to this day to a level that is surprising, that is seemingly out of character for what an American imagines a French person to be when you think of stereotypes and, you know, don't say that French word wrong, and things like that. There's just an effusive, emotional thanks a hundred years later when visiting.
Rapley: I think that is certainly--I was struck by the difference when you're near the old battlefields--you know, near the old western front, especially when it's apparent that

you're there, you know, to see that, then as you say people are very effusive with their thanks, and it was very striking. It was striking in fact in pat because when you leave that area it's not quite so effusive. (Chuckling) You know? But certainly the--they haven't forgotten about it. You know, it is--
Clarke: It doesn't really change. It's like going to Gettysburg. There's the battlefield.
Rapley: Yeah, exactly, and the landscape is so scarred of course, and you can't walk ten feet without stepping on a--seeing some relic of the war. You know, it was just so intensely plowed up and destroyed. So there is no forgetting it. And of course in their national experience it's really the turning point. And they—they're army was destroyed by, what, May of '17 or something when the mutiny started, and so the American entry to the war really comes at a time when it was just about lost. The submarine offensive, the--had started I think the very begging of February. Jellicoe had concluded by the time America declared war that it was lost, that they were losing the war. Russia had just blown up in revolution so they know that that whole army is gonna come over. The French army is in mutiny just a few weeks later. So the American entry to the war was greeted with, as I say, hysterical relief. And I think that you still--it was so profound that you still see vestiges of that when you go over.
Voiceover: Eighteen months after Wilson had taken his country to war, the United States was finally ready to unleash its full might. The biggest army in American history stood silent and ready along a twenty-mile section of the western front known as the Meuse-Argonne. Suddenly the sky overhead seemed to explode as thousands of artillery pieces opened up at once. The men had never seen anything like it.
-The US artillery alone fired more shells, more weight of firepower, into the German lines in that first four hours than the entire Union army had fired during the entire civil war.
-Three hours later the bombardment lifted. Hundreds of thousands of American soldiers clambered up the sides of their trenches and stumbled forward into the milky fog. They carried with them President Wilson's dream of a bright and peaceful future.
Clarke: In trying to capture what it might have been like from the video, if you will, the film of the time, it's difficult to really capture what it might have been like. I think you do a really good job in the documentary in grabbing some of those things that might have been the common experience of the common soldier. How did you make sure that you captured that particular feeling of the every-soldier in the making of this, and what they might have experienced in say the Meuse-Argonne Offensive?
Rapley: Yeah, I mean some of it is actually--I think one of the big impediments to feeling that experience is that the frame rate is always wrong. You know, that it was filmed at a different frame rate; we always show it too fast. So when people are moving around in that fast, jerky motion they seem far less human. So we, you know, we just made everything not only real speed but often a little slower so that you actually kind of get into the image--you know. You're balancing how slow you can make it before you stop really seeing it as step frames. That is a big thing, and we were very careful about cleaning up the film and so on. And so some of it is really technical. The film, it was of a piece with the American propaganda which is of course so extensive and so good that they sent over a lot of guys from the signal corps, and there were a lot of cameras, and so there's a lot of film to choose from by the time of the Meuse-Argonne. And pretty good film. Camera technology improved dramatically during the war. So there's a lot of stuff to chose from. It's actually pretty good quality if you clean it up and take care of it and slow it down. And then there's a lot to be said for sound design. You know, all of that film is silent. And of course music is the most effective--you know, I think when people say, oh, they feel like-- that a film made them feel emotional or something, I think they're really talking about the music because music bypasses the rational mind and all its corruptions and really goes straight to your emotions. And so we did everything we could to drop you

into that experience given that it's a purely archival film. There's no tricks beyond that. But here is the film presented in a way, you know, with all the other things that we do to convey an emotional experience in film.
Clarke: So as the director of this piece of the Great War, what is your takeaway with what the American soldier experienced? I mean, what did you feel?
Rapley: It was awful. You know, as they say, some men--I don't speak from experience. I never served. But from reading a lot of history, some men seem to be made by war. You know, Rickenbacker is a case and point. But he was in the air force. You know, for the infantrymen it was just an awful experience. And I--the people who were made by that experience in a positive way are few and far between. That from my understanding that the 1920s here and of course more in Britain and France just because of the numbers of people who were serving, but the numbers of traumatized, shell-shocked, and the guys who had just a bit of a cough because of the gas--you know, you get exposed to gas once--Ralph John, every time he had a cold every time the weather changed, he'd be coughing up blood. And when he wrote his memoir in 1941, and he was described in a little annotation in one of the things by a friend as a mental case, which is, you know, their term then. And this is what happened to him. He went into battle on September 25th, and he came out probably in late October. He was gassed. And in that time his life was destroyed, and he never left it behind. And he left a very--you know, he want that educated or that well spoken, but his memoir just tears your heart out. It's just, it's so hard, and so little thought was given to, in those days, what soldiers went through. And the idea of shell shock not being weakness was still, you know, very new if it was accepted at all.
Clarke: We still deal with a little bit of that today.
Rapley: Yeah.
Clarke: Lets' talk a little bit about communication because your documentary has one testimony of going into the fog and losing all communication with their flanks and forward and back, and then also the lost battalion, you know, going in and just becoming completely surrounded by the Germans. That must have been an incredible experience to be a soldier in such a dangerous environment to be completely cut off from everything.
Rapley: And completely cut off. You know, they--there was a guy in the unit, and his job was to carry a box of pigeons on his back to carry messages. That's the radioman, right? And so he--they get cut off and, you know, they have, I forget how many, you know, four pigeons or something left, and that's it. You can send four messages. And they--after several days, according to Ralph John it was the worst experience of the whole thing. They're shelled by their own artillery, by the American artillery. And they're trying to get this one pigeon that they got left to fly back to send this message to stop shelling their own men, and the--it was a famous story at the time. The pigeon's name was Cher Ami. And the pigeon, if I remember correctly, kind of flew up and disappeared into the branches. They thought--because of course the Germans were trying to shoot the pigeons as they try to launch them of. Cher Ami did make it back with several bullet wounds and was rewarded for his service and got the message back. I believe that the shelling had already stopped by that point. But that was it. Once story that we did leave on the cutting room floor was the airmen that were trying to drop-- resupply the lost battalion, and they were flying of course this heavily wooded area and trying to find them, and the guys would try and run out and put up white sheets so that they could be recognized, but of course the Germans would machine gun them as soon as they tried to do that. So they never found--they dropped the supplies where they thought they would be, but the guys just watched them drop supplies to the Germans, you know, and it was--it must have just been awful. But as you say there's just nothing. Cut off meant

cut off. They had no idea whether relief was near or whether it was three weeks away. And as it happened on the fifth to sixth night the relieving force manages to make it as far as them, and just out of the blue these guys just show up and--must have been a hell of a feeling.
Clarke: Must have been an amazing feeling.
Voiceover: We had orders to advance straight north but we run into fierce machine gun fire in thick woods. Major Whittlesey commanded us to dig in for the night. Early the next morning he sent men back to get orders, but they quickly return saying they couldn't get through. We knew then that we were entirely cut off from all support, surrounded by the Germans. There was something over five hundred men who would become known as the lost battalion.
-Creel couldn't hide the war's cost. Casualty lists began filling whole pages in the newspaper day after day. As the losses mounted the CPI redoubled its efforts to enlist civilians in the war effort.
Clarke: Your documentary goes into the casualties that we suffered, but no just we but also all of the belligerent nations suffered incredibly. It's mind boggling how many people were killed by the war and not even talking about the disease. I guess my question to you in light of all of this is what do you think compelled these men to fight? I mean, you talk about the French mutinying and basically not wanting to be put out there for basically for cannon fodder anymore. So what compelled the Americans to fight in the first lace after hearing all this stuff?
Rapley: It's a really good question. And I think--you know, my understanding is that once they were in it they're fighting for the guy next to them. They don't--they completely lose sight of the big picture. They don't even know what's happening on other parts of the front let alone what's happening to the battle for democracy. But I think they were moved by genuine idealism. I think that Wilson even before America declared war had already become a world hero. Everybody was looking around for somebody to make this war about something. And Wilson kind of did that. He stood up and said all the right things. And people I think went to war for that. And it's one of the things that I hope comes out of this thing is that people recognize and appreciate the sacrifice that people went to war to make a better future for us, for their descendants, and the fact that their leaders let them down so badly in no way negates that sacrifice. But I do believe that they were moved by idealism, by a genuine desire to make a better world, and they were told that they could do that.
Clarke: So the Germans were fighting for land, the French were fighting to keep the Germans off their territory, and the Americans are fighting for ideals. It's a very interesting combination.
Rapley: I think that's right. And the--one thing that gets lost--the kind of common take on it is that the Germans--that there really wasn't that much difference between the two sides. But when you read what--the German plan for the occupation of France was with the crucial important distinction that there was no insane racial component--you know, it want the Holocaust, but in every other respect it was pretty much like the plan in the Second World War. And the German war was a very bad one. And so I thin tat whether or not they fought the war to end all wars, the Allies almost certainly would have lost without American help, and I think that turning back that German tide was good thing. That it was a good thing that they helped the British and the French win the war.
Voiceover: 2 a.m., September 26, 1918. Already the Great War was by far the most destructive conflict in human history. Nine million soldiers were dead and six million civilians. President Woodrow Wilson had committed his country to this struggle in the belief that the Unites States could lead the world to a better future. But if Wilson was to shape the peace American troops would have to play a decisive role in winning the war.

-A fundamental point is how do you get to a position of dominance at the peace treaty, and the answer is through the barrel of a gun.
Clarke: So Wilson ran on the campaign promise to keep us out of the war.
Rapley: Yeah.
Clarke: And yet we went to war. There were things like the National Defense Act of 1916 that you can look back to and say he probably knew something was going on. There's lots of things that were twenty-twenty hindsight. The other things that are twenty-twenty hindsight about Wilson is some of the things that you bring up in the documentary about the tactics that were used to compel people to serve. And that is not something that people talk an awful lot about.
Rapley: It's a really awful story. I think there are two--well, three big knocks on Wilson. One is that he didn't--he kind of tanked the Treaty of Versailles when it came to it, and his record on his treatment of the African American soldiers is so poor. But his disregard for liberties, American civil liberties, is so astounding especially coming--given his previous record. Once we go to war that's--victory is all that matters to him, and he becomes a very hard-fisted president. There's one story that we tell later in the film about some Hutterite conscientious objectors who are picked up in 1918, and they're kind of the hardcore conscientious objector who won't wear the uniform, they wont just do noncombat work or anything. They just will do nothing to aid a military out of religious conviction. They are taken to Leavenworth and tortured to death. There's just absolutely no other way of saying it. They're tortured to death after the war ends. The feelings the government stirred up such feeling s about loyalty and sedition and so on that--and nobody in the chain of command really saw anything wrong with this. And nobody thought there'd be any price to pay, and there wasn't.
Clarke: And yet his Fourteen Points were very inspiring throughout the entire world.
Rapley: The gulf between the aspirations and the reality is astounding.
Clarke: Couldn't you have somebody argue that that is what war is, and that if you're in a war like WWI or even WWI it is a national fight?
Rapley: There's always--we always have to trade, you know, some civil liberties in order to be an effective combatant. It's a matter of degrees, and although the nation was divided over the war in large part because we'd drawn immigrants from different places, and so their loyalties were a little confused, and nobody was that much--not many Americans were in love with Great Britain, and so, you know there was a problem in terms of fostering a unified approach to the war. But the--it's really, it's a matter of degrees, and Wilson really--it's not just my opinion; I think a lot of people feel that he really went too far.
Clarke: He's definitely getting a review these days.
Rapley: Yes.
Clarke: Yes. You brought in the 369th Infantry Regiment into your documentary, and here in Chicago their companion regiment is the 370th. They came form Chicago's south side known as the Black Devils versus the Harlem Rattlers. The story of their decision to serve, much like the story of black soldiers who served during the Civil War for freedom--in WWI is for equal rights-- again it's that aspiration toward an ideal or a cause that inspires them to serve, and yet they didn't come home exactly to that world after the war, which you point out. Which--what is it that you thought was the most profound thing you found about that particular subject?
Rapley: I think the betrayal is so shocking. And to come back to Wilson, he explicitly said, you know, "You--out of this conflict you can expect the same rights as any other American," basically, you're gonna come back and you will have changed American society by your participation in this war. By the time he came back from negotiating the Versailles Treaty, he had seen Europe in--obviously Russia--in revolution. Revolution's

breaking out in Germany and so on. And he told his doctor that the gravest danger facing America was the transmission of the communist virus. And he said the most likely vessel for that occurrence is the American Negro returning from abroad.
Voiceover: African American men joined in a war for freedom abroad while being denied it at home.
-The war galvanizes African Americans not just to fight for their country but to fight for their rights as American citizens.
-It had been a long journey from the Mississippi delta to a field hospital in France. In November 1917 Leroy Johnston had made his way from Phillips County, Arkansas to New York City to join the fabled New York 15th known as the Harlem Hell Fighters. He was drawn to a cause every bit as captivating as world peace.
-Young black men had been given reason to hope that some good would come of the war. The language of the war itself, the framing of it as a war for democracy, already makes it a powerful and meaningful moment in the history of African Americans. There's also the example of the Civil war not long before, which was a very different war, but it's a war that African American involvement and African American agitation had turned into a war literally for freedom.
-Johnston had been with the Hell Fighters throughout their incredible odyssey. They had spent 191 days under fire and suffered more casualties than any other American regiment. 1,300 of the original 2,000 men had died or been wounded. The regiment had been shattered in the opening days of the Meuse-Argonne offensive.
-At one they're cut off. They're way ahead of their supports. They lose roughly two thirds of their combat strength. They just have not got the numbers anymore to get anywhere. They can't even cover the German line in front of them.
-They're basically shredded. They're no longer able to fight as an offensive unit. They're, you know, reduced beyond the level that they can be an effective fighting force.
-The hell fighters were finally relieved on the 1st of October, but not before Johnston was severely wounded. He survived long enough to reach an aid station. Now for the first time since he had landed in France, Leroy Johnston knew that he would make it back to Arkansas someday. But he couldn't know what he would find there. The war had changed him--changed everything.
-One of the major themes in the black press had been from the start the notion that black soldiers gonna prove the race's manhood in war, and when we come back from war we're gonna prove it here in the United States.
-There's that great editorial by W.E.B. Dubois in the Crisis where he says, "Make way for democracy. We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah we will save it in the US or know the reason why."
Rapley: So in the space of year and a half he'd gone from saying you're gonna have gained equal citizenship to, you know, just dropping them entirely, because what of course happens as they come back is that all too often the sight of a black man in uniform, especially in the south, triggers violence. Men are lynched, shot, burned alive, and then this starts--as more and more troops are coming home it's getting bigger and bigger. And there are huge riots in every city including in Washington about a week after he gets back from Versailles. There's running battles in the streets outside his office, and of course Chicago goes up terribly. Wilson never said a word. Nothing. And these are the men that he had pledged to, you know, gain them equal citizenship, and he just dropped them completely.
Clarke: We've got to point out that the 370th, 369th, and the other infantry regiments of African Americans--they fought under the French. There were plenty of African American doughboys as well, but they weren't in combat roles. And so there was a distinction there. So I just want to make clear for the audience, so that those who subjected

themselves to things like the Meuse-Argonne Offensive and things like that, they were doing something that wasn't common.
Rapley: Yeah, the 92nd fought under French command 'cause Pershing--they just didn't know what to do with the whole problem of African American troops. Like would they have white officers? Would there be any situation in which a black man would be on par with a white man? So they send them off to the French. There was an African American division in the American army that fought at the Meuse-Argonne offensive, and they were kind of set up for failure and they got bogged down. You know, they had no wire cutters. They're sent into these acres of barbed wire with no wire cutters. Everybody else of course had wire cutters. They didn't have maps, they didn't have wire cutters, they didn't have all these things. They bogged down. They're still--they're pulled off the line and kind of demoted basically. And so that was the only experience of black troops fighting under American command. It didn't work out too happily.
Clarke: The war was also a period of great patriotic feelings for America. it was very intense. And in Chicago there was the War Exposition, which was just epic. And you get into that in the documentary.
Voiceover: In the fall of 1918 the CPI put on a traveling war exposition. It was an attempt to bring the war home, emphasizing the sacrifices that soldiers were making for their countrymen. In Chicago two million visitors lined up to see artifacts ranging from zeppelin wreckage to an iron cross nail brush. The highlight was a staged reenactment of trench warfare complete with a working tank. The truly dedicated could visit the army mess kitchen where it was promised, "meals are served in the same manner and using the same grub as is the fare of the doughboys in France". "Do your part to win the war" was the theme of the exposition, and George Creel was doing his best to make it the theme of American life.
Clarke: I'd like to ask you, what do you think inspired so many people to come to the War Expo in Chicago?
Rapley: People were fascinated. This is the biggest story of their time, and their young men were going off, and here it is; we're bringing it to you. This is--see what they're like. And especially if you had a son or a brother in the service, it would have been absolutely irresistible to see what this was like. And it must have--I wish I could go, you know? (Laughs) It looks absolutely fascinating. And again, you know, I've been hammering--we kind of got off on Wilson, and I've been hammering him all night. I don't want to undercut the basic message which I think is that the people who fought--the men, and women who served in various capacities, they did so out of an idealism. They did it for us. And I really--the thing that I most want of this is that people recognize and appreciate that sacrifice, and I think--I just don't want to undercut my own point there.
Clarke: Well, thank you very much for putting up with my questions.
Rapley: Thank you very much.
(Applause)
Clarke: Thank you to Rob Rapley for this outstanding discussion about his work on *American Experience: The Great War*, and to WTTW and the United States World War I Centennial Commission for sponsoring this program. To learn more about *American Experience: The Great War* visit wttw.com. To learn more about WWI and the Museum and Library, visit in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.
Voiceover: Visit the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. Explore original exhibits on military history, or be a part of a live studio audience. Watch other episodes of *Pritzker Military Presents*, find out What's On, at PritzkerMilitary.org.
(Theme music)

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(Theme music)
Voiceover: The preceding program was produced by the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.