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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 author Steven Rabalais and his book, *General Fox Conner: Pershing's Chief of Operations and Eisenhower's Mentor*. 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 the United States World War I Centennial Commission. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. In June 1917 General John J. Pershing selected Lieutenant Colonel Fox Conner as a member of the operations section for the American Expeditionary Forces staff in France. By August 1918, Conner was promoted to brigadier general, serving as Pershing's assistant chief of staff for operations. Conner returned from war with the Distinguished Service Medal and the Croix de Guerre and with General Pershing calling him, "One of the finest characters our army ever produced," and who was widely acknowledged as the brains behind the American Expeditionary Forces. Rabalais's book provides a unique insider's view into General Conner's life, from his humble beginnings to the operations of American high command during WWI. Conner would not only shape the outcome of WWI but also train the men who would lead America to victory in WWII. He would transform his young prodigy, a young Dwight Eisenhower, from a struggling officer on the verge of a court martial into one of the US army's rising stars. He would also influence other important US military officials like Patton and Marshall. Steven Rabalais's account of General Conner is the first complete biography of this significant but now forgotten figure in American military history and is Rabalais's first book. Steven Rabalais earned his Bachelor of Arts in journalism and his law degree from Louisiana State University. He has been a practicing attorney for thirty-two years and is a founding partner of Rabalais and Herbert of Lafayette, Louisiana. The book *General Fox Conner* recently won the Army Historical Society's Distinguished Writing Award for military biographies published in 2016. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Steven Rabalais.

(Applause)

Rabalais: Thank you very much. Well, good evening everyone. It's a pleasure to be here in Chicago this evening, and I want to especially thank the Pritzker organization for having me. You know, Pritzker's very involved in efforts to commemorate the First World War and our participation in it. And so I really appreciate the opportunity to be able to say a few words about General Fox Conner, who played an important role in our conduct of that war, albeit a role that was very much behind-the-scenes, as you'll see. But to touch briefly upon Conner's background, Fox Conner was born in 1874 in rural northern Mississippi. So he was born into the first generation of southerners who came along after the Civil War. Now the Civil War had been very, very devastating to northern Mississippi. Many of the scorched earth tactics that Sherman would employ later and more famously in the March to the Sea were first employed in northern Mississippi. Conner's father was a Confederate soldier who had been blinded fighting for the Confederacy. His uncle, for whom he was named, was a private who was killed at the Battle of Shiloh. So in one sense it's a bit surprising that a boy who grows up with a homeland devastated by the army of the United States, when that army had blinded his father and killed his uncle would nonetheless feel a calling to serve in the army of the United States. But that was what Fox Conner had. His wife said that he always thought

in terms of warfare, and Conner felt a calling to military service. He was also patriotic. Again, in the time that he came of age--the 1880s, the 1890s--the United States had been able to put the Civil War behind it, Reconstruction behind it, and was actually becoming reunited at that point. Conner was a devoted reader of a publication at that time called the Youth's Companion Magazine. And it's not a magazine that really has any living memory today. Very few if any people have heard of it. But it was a magazine that featured and focused what would later be known as American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States was that shining city on the hill--the idea that we were destined to be a leader among nations and a nation to show others the way. People have forgotten the Youth's Companion magazine, but I assure you, you have not forgotten the most enduring legacy of that magazine, which is the Pledge of Allegiance, which is said hundreds of times daily in the United States of America. The Pledge of Allegiance was written by the Youth's Companion magazine for its readers such as Fox Conner. And he took the concept of the United States of America very seriously. Fox Conner was also someone who learned at an early age the value of connections, the value of who you know. Fox's uncle was an up-and-coming Mississippi politician. His uncle was an ally of a Mississippi congressman at that time, a wonderfully named political figure named Congressman Money, was his name, and--true story. Well, Congressman Money had the opportunity to appoint someone to West Point. His ally Fuller Fox had a nephew that wanted to go, and Fox Conner got his first introduction to the value of connections. Conner did well at West Point. Conner did not come from the educational opportunities that many of his classmates enjoyed. But he nonetheless graduated high in his class at West Point, found once he got there that he had a facility for foreign languages. Conner was fluent in both Spanish and French, could also read German. But he learned that about himself at West Point. Conner also made the acquaintance while at West Point of a young officer there, who was actually quite unpopular amongst the cadets, and his name was Captain John Pershing. But Conner graduates in 1898 and then spends about the next twenty years of his life really more as a scholar than as a soldier. His class graduated early in 1898 in the aftermath of the Maine explosion. His class graduated early to fight in the Spanish American War, but Conner did not. He did not seek service in either Cuba or the Philippines. He did not serve in the decades-long insurgency that the American army fought in the Philippines in the early part of the twentieth century. Instead the army had identified Conner as having the aptitude and the intellect necessary for service at a--what was an innovation for the army at that time--the general staff corps. And Fox Conner spent most of the next twenty years in a classroom, either as a student and then later as a teacher at the Army War College, which was the pinnacle of the army's educational society, or its educational structure. So that's a brief synopsis of where we stand with Fox Conner when the United States enters WWI. And many people are familiar with WWI, but not as many as should be. And so for the benefit of those who maybe need a little refresher on it, the First World War was waged from 1914 to 1918. It mostly involved a death clash of the old European world order. We had on the one hand an alliance formed from Great Britain, France, Italy, and Russia, known as the Allies. Against them were the Central Powers of Germany, Austria Hungary, and then the Turkish or Ottoman Empire. The war waged on. It was not a war that anyone thought would last for any length of time, but it wore on for three, eventually four years, and neither side could end it. And neither side could bring the other to a point of defeat. And few people recall this, but when the United States entered this war in April of 1917, we do so on the side that was veering toward defeat. A major component of that alliance was the Russian Empire of the czars. Well, the czar abdicated around the same time that the United States entered the war, and it was only a matter of time before the provisional government that took its place would have Russia entirely out of the war. The

French army itself, which had born bitter combat since 1914, sections and portions of it had begun to mutiny. There was a French general named Nivelle who envisioned this war-winning offensive in April of 1917. The French sustained 130,000 casualties for grounds of gain--for gain, ground that was measured in terms of yardage, not miles. And elements of the French army had had enough and had begun to simply go home. And so that was the background against which the United States enters this war. And Fox Conner affected WWI in at least three areas. And these are the three that I'll touch upon tonight. One is the formation of the American Expeditionary Forces, the AEF. So throughout this the AEF is the shorthand for basically the American army in France. So the first area was the formation of the AEF. Secondly was the strategy for how the AEF would be deployed in combat, and then thirdly would be the actual deployment of troops. Conner had a very important and behind-the-scenes role in each of these. As mentioned, France was in dire straits when we entered that war. The French nation viewed the United States as literally being saviors. And one of the first things that the French government did once the United States declared was, was to send a delegation over to the United States. This delegation was led by one of its early heroes, a man named Joffre. And General Joffre came over with the idea of consulting--really more controlling--what the United States' participation would be. Well, the army needed someone who could serve as a liaison between the American and the French armies. As I mentioned, Fox Conner was fluent in French. He had actually served a year with the French with the French army in 1911. He was knowledgeable in the theories and the structures of high command service. And so Conner was named as the liaison between Marshal Joffre's delegation and the Army War College, where America's plans for participation were being formed. So Joffre comes over with what seemed to be a pretty commonsense request. He said, "Look, we need your people over there now. So what I'd like you to do, United States, is just send us one division. Just send us one. We'll take your guys, and what we'll do is break them up into smaller units, and we'll disperse them all through our front. And everywhere where the towns can see the stars and stripes, you know, flying and the doughboys marching, the morale effect will be tremendous, not only upon our population but also upon our army. And by the same token when the Germans can see that the Americans are arriving at the front, this will have a concomitant depressing effect upon the German side. So just send us one division." But Conner understood that there was a fundamental problem with that request, which was that the United States had no combat divisions at that point in time. The American government committed the United States to a war with the European titans, and we lacked any combat divisions. We had none. And for those of you who are not familiar, a division is the fundamental unit around which large-scale military planning and operations are conducted. So Fox's first major contribution was to design an American combat division. And he designed one--he was the primary architect along with another figure named Hugh Drum. Generals Conner and Drum designed a different type of divisional structure. A typical German division by that point in the war was anywhere from twelve to fifteen thousand men. As Germany had, you know, begun to experience depletion of its manpower reserves, there were usually about ten to thirteen thousand men. Conner designed a division structure that would be 28,000 men strong. And this was designed to do a few different things. First, it was designed to take advantage of the fact that the United States had ample manpower. We had people. The American population rallied to the cause, a draft was instituted, and the United States was able to supply men. But what we lacked were officers. The United States frankly did not have enough officers, period, much less enough trained and experienced officers. So by making a division size that was twice as large as the norm, the theory was that they would need about half as many officers to control them. But what those large divisions were really designed to do,

the specific point of them was this: Conner conducted studies of why neither side had been able to prevail against the other in that war. He concluded that, you know, we weren't doing this with boiling oil and rock catapults anymore, but this had basically become as siege. This was siege warfare as they used to do in the Dark Ages. And what he decided to do, and what was done, was to devise a division that would be large enough and powerful enough to dislodge the enemy from its position. It would be large enough to inflict massive casualties upon its opponent while simultaneously absorbing. Conner understood the ugly truth was that this war had become a war of attrition. It was a war of who would run out of people first. And by making our divisions twice as large as what they would face in the German divisions, it was hoped that this division structure would bring that fundamental result about. So that's the first point. Now the second point is strategy. Conner did a very fine job in his dealings as a liaison. And General John Pershing, the AEF commander in chief--known now as Blackjack Pershing--General Pershing selected Conner to accompany him to France as a member of his initial staff. And one of the tasks assigned to Conner and two other officers was to devise the plan. What's the battle plan? You know, Pershing had written sort of colorfully in his memoir. He said that, "You know, when we looked in the cubbyhole for where the plan should have been for how to wage a war against all these European powers at the same time, there was no plan in existence." Again, it's another indication of how unprepared the United States was to get into this war. So Conner was one of the three officers who formulated the plan. By that point Russia had surrendered. The German army was bringing, estimates range, but anywhere from to eight hundred thousand to a million troops, who had been on its eastern front. They were moving them over to the western front. All understood, everyone understood, including the United States Army, that the Germans would launch a massive offensive as early as possible in 1918 for the purpose of breaking the French and British before American troops could arrive in sufficient number to really affect the outcome. So Conner looked at the situation, and he concluded that the French and the British would be able to successfully contain Germany's 1918 offensives. He believed that if the French and British would properly coordinate their combat activities--if they would operate under a unified command, which were two things that those Allies had struggled to do in the previous three years of the war-- Conner's studies showed that the British and the French could successfully defend these without insertion of American troops before they were ready. And what he favored was a strategy under which the British and the French would shield the AEF as it grew. Conner believed that the AEF should be deployed into the Lorraine area of France, which if you can imagine where France, Germany, and Switzerland all come together, that area is generally the Alsace-Lorraine area of France. And Conner believed the United States should form in 1918 a million-man force sufficient to invade Germany in 1919 for the purpose of capturing some vital coal and iron mines. His thought process was without coal and iron, you can't make steel; without steel you cannot wage this war. And he believed that that was the most direct and quickest and least costly, in terms of casualties, way to bring the war to an end. Well, as you might expect the French and British had no intention of adopting such a strategy. Their view of the war was that they were running out of men, they were running out fast, they were not nearly as sanguine as was Fox Conner as to their abilities to successfully defend these offensives that everyone knew was coming. And their argument was simply this. We do not have time, United States. We do not have time to wait while you learn how to form an army. So the French and British advocated that as our troops came over--platoon by platoon, company by company, battalion by battalion--that they be plugged directly in. That some be given to the French army, some be given to the British army, and that our men would be used to fill the gaps that would come up as the German offensive was waged and as

the French and British continued to suffer casualties. And as you might expect Conner and Pershing had no intention of accepting that strategy. So for most of the latter part of 1917 and going into early 1918 and then really proceeding forward for the rest of the war, Fox Conner fought what he called the "war within the war," this constant pull and tug with America's allies as to how our forces would be used. In memo after memo and study after study and conference and conference and argument after argument, Fox Conner supplied Pershing with the data, with the argument, with the--you know, with the information he needed to withstand the substantial pressure that was placed upon the United States to effectively surrender our troops over to the French and British armies. And they were largely successful. What resulted were a series of compromises that no one really--no one really liked, but they worked. For example, as I mentioned one of our assets was we had a lot of people, okay, in the United States, but the war is in France, and we lacked adequate shipping to bring a million people over on boats in waters controlled by the German navy. So one of the things Conner was able to do, for example, and there are many examples of this. Conner worked out a deal with the British to acquire some of their shipping resources. He would bring--the British would bring six divisions over at a time. These men would serve as a reserve for the British army. In the case of an emergency they would go in, but only in the case of an emergency, and then they would be transferred after a finite period of time down into the Lorraine area of France. And it worked. And so by the spring of 1918 the United States had compiled a force of, you know, more than a half million men grouped into several divisions, each commanded by an American division commander. And it was time for these men to fight. And that's where Fox Conner made his third most significant contribution, and that's as Pershing's chief of operations. You know, John Pershing wore many different hats in France. In addition to having to oversee the assembly of an army from zero, from nothing, into a million-man force in a foreign country during a war with allies who are competing for your resources, Pershing was also heavily involved in diplomatic and political discussions. Pershing spent a lot of time dealing with the French and the British governments. And Pershing was good at delegation. he was good at identifying the people that he wanted in control of various aspects of his operation, conferring upon them the authority that they needed to do their job and letting them do it, whether it was building up the supply network, the intelligence services, or--in Fox Conner's case--operations. As Pershing's chief of operations, Conner had a significant amount of autonomy and discretion, to decide which division would be deployed where, how long it would stay in, even who its commander would be. Fox Conner exercised that authority skillfully. Initially our troops participated as components of the French army, meaning our divisions were under independent American division command, but our divisions served within French and British corps and army units. And as Germany made its efforts in early 1918 to break the western front, initially we participated very little. The Germans tried five times. There were five offensives that went on between March of 1918 and July of 1918. They tried five times. The first two, our guys did not participate at all. But by the third one we were ready, and in some battles that you may have heard of. You may have heard of Belleau Wood for example. You may have heard of the Second Battle of the Marne. I think Pritzker's doing an excellent job of trying to make sure we all remember battles such as Belleau Wood and the Second Battle of the Marne. Our divisions made their presence felt in a very effective manner in repelling these German invasions. In July of 1918 after their fifth attempt to break the western front had failed, the Allied commander in chief, who was a Frenchman by the name of Marshal Ferdinand Foch--Marshal Foch decided to launch a counteroffensive at a place called Soissons in France. And two of the United States divisions led that counteroffensive, which was highly successful. One German governmental official, believe he was their premier, had

said that the history of the world was played out in the three days of the Soissons counteroffensive. And the American troops distinguished themselves in battle. So by that point we're in August of 1918. General Pershing, General Conner, had never stopped pushing the Allies and Foch in particular to establish an independent American army under Pershing's command, and Foch finally agreed in August. He agreed that the United States could assemble its divisions into its own army under Pershing's command and essentially be made an equal in the partnership here. You know, America had been very much the junior partner in this arrangement. So Conner gets to work. Marshal Foch had approved an offensive that Conner had long favored. It was an offensive against a place called the St. Mihiel Salient. Essentially this would have been the first step towards the Lorraine offensive that Conner had envisioned for 1919. And Marshal Foch approved it. Conner and his staff get to work on the plans. Prominent among those staff members by the way was George Marshall who would go on to of course fame in WWII and afterwards. Marshall was one of the staff officers who served under Conner in the AEF headquarters. But then in August, in late August, Marshal Foch meets again with Pershing, and he says, "Well, General, I've changed my mind." Foch, who had really done a fine job of managing the Allied coalition, and said, "Look, I know I approved this offensive here against the St. Mihiel Salient in the Lorraine, but I want to adopt a different strategy." Foch believed that by this point in the war, by August of 1918, Germany had tried five times to crack the western front. They couldn't. They had been thrown on the defensive at Soissons. They were running low on men; they were running low on material. And Marshal Foch wanted to finish them off before the winter. He did not want the Germans to have a winter to regroup, to replenish, to restock. So he advocated a different type of attack. What he wanted to do was a continuous front offensive. Everywhere where the Allies had troops--whether it was the British and the Belgians up against the English Channel to the French that were arrayed before Paris and down to Verdun, or the Americans further to the east in Lorraine--he wanted all forces to attack at the same time. And in particular he wanted the Americans to attack in this one particular sector of the western front. It was bordered on one side by the Meuse River and it was bordered on the other by the Argonne Forest. Very, very difficult terrain. The objective of that attack was to capture a particular rail line. There was a rail line that connected the cities of Sedan and Mezieres in France. This rail line was critical. If that rail line could be captured or severed, this would do two things. It would cripple Germany's ability to reinforce its troops along the western front, and as importantly it would prevent Germany from withdrawing those troops in a general retreat. So Marshal Foch decided that was the strategy he wished to pursue. But what really cut Pershing was he went to him and said, "And I know that I told you we could form an American army, but General, I just don't think that your commanders and your staff are up to the challenge of managing an 800--900,000 strong force in this difficult terrain. And so I'm gonna call upon you to surrender your divisions to me. We're gonna disperse them throughout the French army, and your divisions are going to continue to fight under French corps and army commanders. Look how successful we were at Soissons doing it that way. Look how successful we were at Belleau Wood and the Battle of the Marne doing it that way." He says, "Pershing, we've hit the ticket, man. We use your guys and our know-how." And Pershing said, "No." Pershing summoned Conner. Pershing's memoirs are full of detail on how he summoned Conner and another officer by the name of James McAndrew to come to his headquarters and to devise the strategy for how the United States would keep its army and its plan together. And for three days Pershing, Conner, and McAndrew battled Foch and Marshal Petain, who you may recall from WWII fame, and other French figures. And again another compromise was arrived at. Marshal Foch agreed that the United States could keep its divisions intact and in whole

as an American army under Pershing's command. He further agreed that if the American army insisted it could attack the St. Mihiel Salient in Lorraine but with fewer forces. What Marshal Foch wanted was for twelve to fourteen American divisions to attack into this area between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest. Pershing agreed. And it's interesting to step back and just see exactly what Pershing and his two top lieutenants McAndrew and Conner had just agreed to do. As I said, the American army by that point was about 900,000 strong. It had never functioned in battle before. It had never functioned as a cohesive unit. Many of these divisions had seen no combat. But the American high command committed it to participate in two different offensives that would take place two weeks apart and on fronts sixty miles apart. Some historians have suggested that Foch was setting them up to fail. But Conner and Pershing didn't see it that way. That same strain that I mentioned in the beginning about American exceptionalism and the Youth's Companion magazine and this idea that the United States offered a different and a better way of doing things than its European uncles had done--that coursed through Fox Conner's blood. It really did. And they believed they would do it. So on September 12, 1918 the United States begins this two-headed offensive with an attack against the St. Mihiel Salient. Prior to the attack the American high command--Pershing, Conner, and three other officers--engaged in a highly successful ruse to mislead the Germans as to where this attack would fall. When we attacked, Germans were not in prepared defense positions. They were moving. We had misled them essentially to believe that the attack would come through what was known as the Belfort gap, which was right along the Swiss border. German divisions were on the move, and in two days in a war in which success was often measured by how many yards of territory you gained in a week of fighting--in two days the AEF captured two hundred square miles of territory, thousands of German prisoners, scores of artillery and other material that the dwindling German army badly needed. After the war Ludendorff, who was the German's prime field commander expressed shock that the United States had caught Germany so off guard but had not exploited that victory to drive further into Germany in the type of offensive that Conner had envisioned. But that was not the deal that we made. The deal that the United States made with the supreme Allied commander was to terminate this offensive and to begin transferring our troops sixty miles away to the Meuse Argonne front. Basically the divisions--and Marshall, George Marshall was the person who fundamentally developed this logistics plan of how to have your--how to have these divisions be reserve divisions for the St. Mihiel attack and simultaneously move them into position to spearhead the Meuse Argonne attack. But it worked. And on September 26 of 1918 the United States launches its offensive between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest. I have a little map that may give you some idea as to the difficulty of this task. On the--you can see where there were several lines. Everywhere where you see those jagged lines right there, those were prepared defense positions. These are enforced--you know, concrete reinforced machine gun positions, countless artillery. This entire sector here was miles deep in barbed wire. You can see in the center of the map there an area called Montfalcon. It means the mount of the falcons in French. Montfalcon was a mountain in the center of this battlefield that the Germans had already sighted in artillery. No matter where American troops attacked within these defensive formations, whether it was in front of Montfalcon, the side of Montfalcon, or behind, German artillery would just cut them to ribbons. And the divisions that we had in the Meuse Argonne attack were not our best ones. Conner and Pershing, neither one of them believed that Marshal Foch's offensive was going to succeed. Conner and Pershing believed that the St. Mihiel attack would be the more significant of the offensives because they continued to believe that the war would not be won until 1919. So we did not have our better divisions at the Meuse Argonne front, and those divisions

were mauled. The attack was begun September 26. Hardly any advances were made. Any experienced division commanders continued to send troops against the wire rather than waiting for the wire to be cut, and this German artillery from Montfalcon and other high areas in that Meuse Argonne front butchered them. But we kept pushing forward, and gradually what Conner, George Marshall, and other staff officers were able to do was to take the more experienced divisions who had done so well at St. Mihiel and to gradually replace them into that Meuse Argonne front. And we continued to grind forward and push forward. And all the while, while we're struggling and we're mired down in this Meuse Argonne fight, the French and the British in their sectors of the continuous front offensive were making much, much greater headway. You know, and then the French began with--well, first it was a whisper campaign. You know, we tried to tell them. We tried to tell Pershing that they weren't ready for this. We tried to tell them that their staff wasn't up to this. These Americans are being butchered by the thousands in this barbed wire, and so needless. If they would just turn them over to us. And that whisper campaign became a shouting campaign. The French premier Clemenceau publicly called for Woodrow Wilson to sack Pershing. Get rid of him. Clean house. Put some people who will do it our way. So in late October Pershing decides to deal with the problem. He sent Fox Conner to do what we would call today a bit of spin control. You know, press conferences today are a dime a dozen. I don't know if anybody even pays attention to one anymore when they are held. But that was quite a remarkable thing for the American army to send one of its leading generals to sit down with a room full of journalists and to basically tell our side of the story. That's what Pershing sent Conner to do, and that's what Conner did effectively. Conner brought maps not unlike this map into that room. He called upon his prior experiences as a teacher, and he explained. He says, "You know, you're right. We are having a tough go of this." But he explained exactly how difficult each one of those little zigzag jagged lines was. You know, it's just a little line on the map to us right now, but he was able to explain how much difficulty was entailed for any army to break one of these lines, much less four of them. Because he explained the importance of that rail system. He said that the Germans understood it as well as anybody else did. That if the Americans broke through those lines and that if that railway was captured, that Germany was done. And he commended the French and British on how well they were doing in their offensives to the west. But he said, "Make no mistake. That's in part because Germany understands the significance of this rail line, and they're withdrawing their troops from the French and British sectors to pile them up in front of this railroad so that we don't capture it." And then he took head-on what was essentially the subtext of all of this. He says, "We understand. We understand that this is different. We understand we're not doing it France's way. But we didn't come over here to do it France's way. We came over here to do it our way. I believe in our troops, I believe in our officers, I believe in our mission, and I believe we will succeed." And they kept grinding forward, and eventually those large divisions that we talked about at the beginning of the talk--those divisions that were designed basically to dislodge the opponent--worked. The German army broke around the second of November 1918. On November sixth the American army captures that railway running between Sedan and Mezieres. That day the German government approaches Marshal Foch for an armistice. Fox Conner would go to his grave saying that those two were no mere coincidences. He believed that the American strategy, the American officer corps, and the American high command had been vindicated by the capture of that railroad. But, boy, it came at a cost. To put these casualty figures in perspective for you. You know, in the Vietnam War, which again Pritzker's done an excellent job of programming on, estimates are that the United States lost about 58,000 troops killed in the approximately seven years of the Vietnam war. That's a lot of people. 58,000, seven years. Well, in the Meuse Argonne

fight we lost 26,000 killed in six weeks. Imagine those casualty figures today. Those 26,000 killed were part of a total casualty figure of around 100,000. And Conner was asked about these and about the casualty figures and what he thought. And he said, "Well, when you consider that we had nearly a million men deployed, when you consider that we were clearly given the more difficult--the most difficult sector of this front, when you look at the result, the bottom line result, of what happened from our operations,"--his word, or his words--"the casualties were remarkably light." As you might expect, that didn't set well with everyone, as Conner would find out after the war. Almost as soon as WWI had ended, the United States began a reappraisal of whether or not this had been a good idea or not. You know, I mentioned the casualty figures in the Meuse Argonne fight. Well, total casualty figures for the United States were more like a quarter million killed and wounded in a little less than six months of fighting. One government publication estimated that the United States had spent as much money on WWII as it had spent in its entire history up to WWI. And people ask the fundamental question, "For what?" What did we get out of this? Very rapidly the United States concluded that the bargain that was struck was not a good one. The United States retreated into isolationism. The army was viewed at best as an expensive nuisance and at worst as a danger. The army contracted radically in size. To give you an idea, in the Treaty of Versailles Germany was limited to an army of 100,000 troops. So it was thought that 100,000 was so small of a military force that it would neuter a nation the size of Germany. But for the next twenty years Fox Conner served in an army that was about a hundred and fifteen to 150,000 men for a much larger country. It got to the point where in the 1920s and 30s, army officers on duty in Washington wouldn't go to work in their uniforms. They would wear business suits that they had to buy. And so you might think that the 20s were not really a time when any army officer would really shine, but it was in the early 1920s that Conner made his other fundamental contribution to the American war effort. And here just to give you an idea, that's how it looked when they all got home. You can see Blackjack Pershing, and over Pershing's right shoulder is Fox Conner, and in front of Conner is the secretary of war Newton Baker. But all the hoopla soon ended, and Conner is assigned to take command of an infantry brigade guarding the Panama Canal Zone. Now the Panama Canal Zone was not under any great military threat at that time. Conner's career had been spent in general staff service or in the artillery. He knew nothing about the infantry. So he sought out the services of a young infantry officer to go with him to Panama as an executive officer. Now Conner was friends as well with George Patton. Conner and Patton had been friends before the war. He and Patton had served together on Pershing's staff. And so he asks his pal Patton--he says, "Look, can you recommend a good infantry officer to go with me down there to Panama?" And Patton says, "Well, as a matter of fact, I've got a friend here who I think would fit the bill nicely. A young captain by the name of Eisenhower, Dwight Eisenhower." You know, when we think of Eisenhower today, we all--the mental image that comes to most people's mind is of this distinguished looking gentleman who just exudes competence. You know, we see the Eisenhower of the 40s and the 50s. But the Eisenhower of the 1920s was a very different figure. Ike was on the ropes. He had missed combat in France in WWI, and he distinctly felt that that put him on the wrong side of the list of officers that would advance. He decided to make his mark by being an innovator in tank doctrine. That's what he and Patton were doing together as they served together. But the army's chief of infantry called him in and severely rebuked him for publishing articles that did not adhere to the chief of infantry's view on how a tank should be used. Ike was struggling personally. He and his wife had lost a child while they served at Camp Meade, Maryland. His wife Mamie had come from a well-to-do family. They had not been married that long, and she was just having a hard time adjusting to army life. But most

ominously Eisenhower was under significant legal problems at the time. Army regulations allowed an officer to do one of two things. You could either live in government-supplied housing or you could accept reimbursement for living off base, but you couldn't do both. Well, Eisenhower and his wife Mamie lived at Camp Meade, Maryland. They did. His son lived with relatives in Denver, Colorado. And so Ike drew 250 dollars in expense reimbursement for his son's care in Denver, Colorado. A lot of money back in 1921. When he drew the money, he signed a piece of paper under penalty of perjury that he was not accepting money from the--or he was not living in government housing. That was patently false. When the error was discovered, when Ike got caught basically, he offered to pay the money back, which he did. His immediate superiors were all more than willing to simply administer reprimands, maybe even a reduction in rank. But the army's inspector general at that time considered it an appalling thing that an American officer and a West Point graduate at that would sign a piece of paper that he knew to be false. And this general, this inspector general Eli Helmick wanted Eisenhower out of the army. He went to the level that Inspector General Helmick went to the army's adjutant general, a man named Harris, and had General Harris order that court martial proceedings begin against Captain Dwight Eisenhower. So when Patton recommended his pal Eisenhower he knew that not only did General Conner need a bright young officer to help him function in an infantry regiment, but he also knew that his friend Eisenhower needed a break. So they hit it off, Conner asks Eisenhower to go with him to Panama, Eisenhower was of course delighted, but there was the problem of the charges. So Eisenhower, you know, asks Conner, you know, about the difficulties. Conner writes back and says, "I just don't expect any problem with this." He says, "I'm gonna have Colonel Marshall steer this through the war department." And Colonel Marshall was George Marshall. And he steered it right through to the desk of the man who ran the army at that time, a guy named John Pershing. Again, that value of connections. You know, I think it's safe to say that there would have been no General Eisenhower, much less a President Eisenhower, had not a Captain Eisenhower had the great fortune to encounter a mentor, someone who could see potential in him, someone who did not think that the entire course of his life should thereafter be dictated by a single mistake. And Eisenhower agreed. For the rest of his life--you know, I did a good bit of research for this book, and I read countless Eisenhower interviews, starting from when regular media outlets began to be aware of him in the Second World War all the way to a memoir that he published in 1968, about a year before his death. Eisenhower never failed to try to draw attention to the good that Fox Conner had done for him. Eisenhower called Conner the greatest soldier that he ever knew. He called him the one more or less invisible figure to whom he owed an incalculable debt. And I hope our little talk tonight has done something to bring this invisible figure out of history's shadows and into a place of prominence where I believe he fits. So thank you very much for having me. Again, thanks Pritzker for having me, and I wish you all a good evening.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you to Steven Rabalais for an outstanding discussion and to the United States World War 1 Centennial Commission for sponsoring this program. The book is *General Fox Conner: Pershing's Chief of Operations and Eisenhower's Mentor*, published by Casemate. To learn more about the World War One Centennial Commission, visit WorldWar1Centennial.org. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit 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)

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(Theme music)

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