

# Exploring Different Perspectives on World War I through Two Responses to the Armistice

Stephen Wesson

A world-changing event can look very different depending on where the observer is standing—or writing.

By the autumn of 1918, the First World War had raged for four years, drawing more than 30 countries into its destructive vortex, redrawing national borders, and sowing the seeds of many of the conflicts of the century to follow. At the same time, this global conflict was fought and endured by individual people, each of whom had his or her own experience of the war, and each of whom had a unique perspective on its events.

In November, the Allies and the Central Powers negotiated an end to hostilities, and on the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month of 1918, the guns of Europe fell silent as an armistice between the combatants took effect, ending the major fighting of World War I. Shortly afterwards, two men with very different experiences of the war responded in writing to this long-awaited peace.

## The View from the White House

In the United States, President Woodrow Wilson took up a piece of White House stationery to draft a brief announcement about the end of combat. In the note, featured in this article, Wilson used fewer than 50 words to mark the end of

a long, bloody conflict, matter-of-factly stating that “The armistice was signed this morning.”

Nearly a year before, in January of 1918, Wilson had outlined 14 points that he believed would be necessary to ensure peace, and in the longest passage of his armistice note he similarly looked towards the postwar world. “It will now be our fortunate duty to assist by example by sober friendly counsel and by material aid in the establishment of just democracy throughout the world.”

## A Diarist in the Trenches

In the trenches of France, Private Harry Frieman expressed a more personal view of the armistice. A long-serving American infantryman who was born in Russia, Frieman had spent weeks on the front lines, and on the morning of November 11 had been ordered to prepare to attack in foggy conditions. He described the moment on page 56 of his diary, which is also featured here. “Our artillery was to open a barrage from 9.30 to 10.30AM and then we were supposed to go over the top.” In the last minutes before 11 am, however, an officer passed by and warned the men that a cease-fire was about to begin. “We could hardly believe it until we were told to stop firing at 11AM and not to fire unless they fire.

The last shot by both sides were fired exactly 11AM.”

After the fog lifted, Frieman’s comrades discovered that they had been surrounded on three sides by German troops. “We were caught in a trap with Huns on three sides of us and Co. A was only a few yards away from them. If the war would have kept up a few hours longer there wouldn’t be many of us left to tell about it.” For the next day’s entry, Frieman recorded only “Stopping at same place. Nothing unusual.”

Analyzing these two very different handwritten responses to the armistice can provide students with an opportunity to explore different perspectives on the war and its final moments.

To encourage students to explore the differences between these two documents, share Woodrow Wilson’s announcement and Harry Frieman’s diary with your students along with the Library’s primary source analysis tool. [[www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/guides.html](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/guides.html)] Select questions from the Analyzing Manuscripts Teacher’s Guide [[www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysourcesresources/Analyzing\\_Manuscripts.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysourcesresources/Analyzing_Manuscripts.pdf)] to encourage students to look closely at the documents and make inferences about the circumstances of, and reasons for, their creation.

MON. 11.

THIS MORNING AT 7.30 A.M. WE  
STARTED FOR CHAUMONT. OUR ARTILLERY  
WAS TO OPEN A BARRAGE FROM 9.30 TO  
10.30 A.M. AND THEN WE WERE  
SUPPOSED TO GO OVER THE TOP. ABOUT  
9 A.M. WE WERE CAUGHT IN HEAVY  
SMELL FIRE - WE ~~WOUND~~ TOOK OUR  
GUNS AND AMMUNITION OFF THE CARTS  
AND STARTED TO WALK IT WAS  
VERY FOGGY THIS MORNING AND  
COULDN'T SEE OVER 10 YDS IN FRONT  
OF US WE WERE CAUGHT IN A BARRAGE  
AND HAD TO HIDE BEHIND A SLOPE  
AT 3.00 P.M. ~~THE~~ THE SHELLS WERE  
BURSTING ALL AROUND US WE WERE

[Nov. 11, 1918]

THE WHITE HOUSE,  
WASHINGTON.

My fellow countrymen, The armistice  
was signed this morning. Everything  
for which America fought has been  
accomplished. It will now be  
our foremost duty to assist by  
example <sup>by</sup> ~~and~~ sober counsel and by  
material aid in the establishment  
of just democracy throughout  
the world.

Woodrow Wilson

[Dec. No. 15, 1917]

## Consider the following teaching ideas:

- Ask students to explain the differences between these two documents and how they describe the end of the war. Urge students to think of other individuals affected by the war—a parent, a prisoner of war, a disabled veteran—and to consider what their perspectives on the armistice might have been.
- Ask students to identify the changes Wilson made to his announcement of the armistice. Discuss: Why did he make these changes, and how would the document have been different if he had written it differently?
- Point out to students that in his armistice announcement, Wilson declared that “Everything for which America fought has been accomplished.” Encourage students to speculate about what Wilson meant by “everything,” and to decide whether this statement was true.
- Tell students that 84 pages of Frieman’s war diary are available online at: <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhpstories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.23600/pageturner?ID=pm0003001&page=1>. Invite

them to read it and write a response. This could be in the form of a list of things learned, a letter to Frieman, a synopsis, or other.

Introduce other firsthand accounts from the Library’s Veterans History Project, which can be found online at [www.loc.gov/vets/stories/wwi-home.html](http://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/wwi-home.html), and artifacts from the Library’s exhibition “Echoes of the Great War: American Experiences of World War I” at [www.loc.gov/exhibitions/world-war-i-american-experiences/about-this-exhibition](http://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/world-war-i-american-experiences/about-this-exhibition). These items document a wide range of events and debates surrounding the war, both at home and abroad, and provide insights into many different perspectives on the conflict for students to explore.

### Library of Congress Blog

If you try these suggestions, or a variation of them, with your students, tell us about your experience! During the last week of October, the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at [blogs.loc.gov/teachers/](http://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/) will feature a post tied to this article and we invite you to comment and share your teaching strategies.

## About the Featured Sources

Woodrow Wilson’s note about the Armistice, November 11, 1918, on White House Stationery is part of the Woodrow Wilson Papers in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. It is available online at: [http://ipoproc.loc.gov/processing/ipo/jpegs/world\\_war\\_i/wio16\\_3.jpg](http://ipoproc.loc.gov/processing/ipo/jpegs/world_war_i/wio16_3.jpg).

The diary entry of Harry Frieman, for November 11, 1918, is part of the Harry Frieman collection of the Veteran’s History Project in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. It is available online at: <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc200101.23600/pageturner?ID=pm0003001&page=56>. His entire collection is online at: <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.23600/>.

**STEPHEN WESSON** is an Educational Resources Specialist at the Library of Congress. For more information on the education programs of the Library of Congress, please visit [www.loc.gov/teachers/](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/).

## World War I on Loc.gov

With its unparalleled World War I collections, the Library of Congress is uniquely prepared to tell the story of the United States’ participation in the Great War. The Library of Congress is commemorating the 100th anniversary of U.S. entry into the war with exhibitions, lectures, symposia, film programs, recordings, publications, veterans’ stories, educational tools, and research guides to the Library’s remarkable World War I resources.

As part of the commemoration, the Library launched a World War I web portal, providing comprehensive access to the Library’s World War I resources and programming. Featured content includes digitized collections, such as World War I Posters; Maps of Military Battles and Campaigns; World War I Sheet Music; The Stars and Stripes Newspaper; and the Veterans History Project. Resources for K-12 teachers, blog posts, guidance for researchers, exhibitions, lectures, symposia and other events are listed. Please visit [loc.gov/wwi/](http://loc.gov/wwi/).

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C-SPAN Classroom.....	back cover
The Choices Program/Brown University.....	284
Kesa Kivel (Road to Racial Justice) .....	271
National Constitution Center .....	321