

# Revolutionary thinking: Filmmaker Ken Burns explores the past and future of American democracy at ASU event

**Burns discussed his latest PBS series, 'The American Revolution,' with ASU President Michael Crow**

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News  
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The history of the American Revolution that most Americans think they know is not the whole story.

That was a major talking point during a Feb. 23 discussion at Arizona State University, where filmmaker Ken Burns and ASU President Michael Crow explored the war's harsher realities — divided loyalties, staggering violence and a fragile experiment in self-governance and democracy that nearly failed but endures today.

Burns is widely regarded as the rock star of American storytelling and one of the leading documentary filmmakers of our time. He made a virtual appearance at ASU for "[Revolutionary Thinking: A Conversation Between Ken Burns and Michael Crow](#)," held at the [Rob and Melani Walton Center for Planetary Health](#).

Centered around clips from Burns' latest PBS miniseries, "[The American Revolution](#)," the hourlong event offered attendees a rare opportunity to listen in on a candid conversation with the filmmaker whose work has helped shape how Americans understand their past.

"He's one of these American genius heroes that rise up from somewhere and figure out how to tell or do those things most important to the core of the country so that we can understand where we

came from and how we got here,” Crow said before introducing Burns, who joined from London via Zoom.

This event was part of Arizona PBS's participation in [America250](#), an initiative to engage and educate Americans on the 250th anniversary of the U.S. It was sponsored by Bank of America, a longtime partner of Burns and Florentine Films in bringing landmark PBS documentaries such as “The Civil War” and “The Vietnamese War” to national audiences.

Chris Howard, ASU executive vice president and chief operating officer, introduced the guests and said the conversation could not have been more timely.

“Ken Burns has spent a career helping this country see itself more clearly,” Howard said. “This story and this discussion are part of that effort.”

The event explored what inspired the American Revolution, how it was ultimately won and the realities of a war that was far bloodier and more complex than the version often taught in classrooms.

The discussion also explored leadership, sacrifice and the enduring work of democracy.

“I have long been obsessed with the fact that we don't very well understand the American Revolution,” Crow said.

Burns said, “It has to do with the sort of sentimentality and nostalgia, the barnacles of which have encrusted the story of the American Revolution for too long, as you know.”

He explained how the revolution was not a tidy revolt but a civil war marked by divided loyalties — Americans fighting for the British and neighbors turning on one another.

“And it's also a bloody global story,” Burns said. “Perhaps the fifth global war over the prize of North America. And I think that we don't understand the violence. We don't accept the violence.

“We do acknowledge the Civil War's violence and the 20th century wars' violence. But the revolution seems bloodless and gall to us. I think we're worried that it might diminish those big ideas. Those big ideas are actually enlarged by our understanding that this is a bloody revolution, a bloody civil war and a bloody world war.”

One clip from the series featured Thomas Paine and his bestselling pamphlet “Common Sense.” Paine's declaration — “We have it in our power to begin the world over again” — helped rally support for independence.

Another clip depicted the brutal winter at Valley Forge and the military setbacks at Germantown and elsewhere, underscoring the fragility of the American cause and dispelling simplified myths about George Washington.

“In the 19th century, they sort of deified him with the cherry tree and the coin,” Burns said. “We forget that George Washington didn't know that he was George Washington. ... He didn't know he'd be on a dollar bill or a quarter. He didn't know he'd have a big sharp pointy monument in the national capital, which would be named for him. That ... there'd be a state with his name on it in the upper left-hand corner.”

Burns and Crow emphasized Washington's singular importance to the survival of the American experiment.

"There is only one person responsible for our country, for the success of our country," Burns said. "And that is George Washington. Without him we have no country."

"I agree with that," Crow said. "One thousand percent."

But it wasn't his success on the battlefield that made him great.

"The reality at the time was that George Washington can't seem to win a battle," Crow said.

But he had a keen understanding of the task that was before him and his ability to take on that task.

"Washington's not a great field commander, but he's resilient and he understands the kind of war he's fighting," Burns said. "At some point, he reaches ... a basic insight. He doesn't have to win. The British have to win. He only has not to lose."

At the end of the hour, the conversation turned from history to the ongoing work of democracy in America today.

"The revolution isn't over," Crow said. "The revolution is a process that will take ... many, many, many more generations. Yet we somehow think it's all over and we're just supposed to just sit around and just be OK. ... We're going to be going through things forever until we get it right."

Burns agreed, stating that democracy is an active principle, and quoted Founding Father Benjamin Rush: "The American war is over, but the American Revolution is always going on."

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



ASU President Michael Crow speaks with documentary filmmaker Ken Burns (on screen) during the “Revolutionary Thinking” event held at the Walton Center for Planetary Health on the Tempe campus on Feb. 23. Photo by Emma Fitzgerald/Arizona State University

**Text image(s)**





Filmmaker Ken Burns (on screen) discussed his latest PBS series, "[The American Revolution](#)," with ASU President Michael Crow during the ASU event on Feb. 23. Photo by Emma Fitzgerald/Arizona State University