

H. R. McMaster calls on George Washington's leadership example in ASU lecture

The retired lieutenant general, who served as the 25th United States national security advisor, spoke about the role of the military in preserving American democracy

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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One of America's best-known veterans said there's a fine line between advice and advocacy, and military leaders would do well to heed this guidance, especially in today's deeply partisan political climate.

Retired Lt. Gen. [H. R. McMaster](#) underscored that point during an April 28 lecture at Arizona State University's Tempe campus, warning that crossing that line risks undermining the very foundation of American democracy.

"Washington knew that he owed Congress his best advice, his frank assessments, but he also knew not to cross the line between advice and advocacy or agitation," McMaster said, pointing to the nation's first commander-in-chief as the enduring model.

The lecture, titled "George Washington and the Role of the Military in Our Democracy," was hosted by ASU's [Lincoln Center for Applied Ethics](#) as part of its [Founding Values: 250 Years Later](#) series.

[Joan McGregor](#), director of the Lincoln Center, said the event, which received funding support¹ from the [Jack Miller Center](#), also reflects a broader effort to bring people together in a time of division.

"The Lincoln Center designed the Founding Values event series because we are interested in finding and building common ground in polarizing times," McGregor said, emphasizing the importance of engaging differing viewpoints rather than retreating into ideological silos. "We see the Declaration of Independence as something we can use to build common ground: all people are created equal, endowed with inalienable rights, and governments should be accountable to its

citizens.”

Event organizer Ryan P. Sheldon, an Army ROTC cadet, junior fellow at the [Leadership, Diplomacy and National Security Lab](#), an [Intelligence Community Fellow](#) and a fourth-year student at ASU, said bringing McMaster to campus was about both education and unity.

“H. R. McMaster is one of the most respected military officers in this nation. Known for his apolitical approach to service, he is a proven leader on the battlefield and one of the most impactful national security advisors we have had,” said Sheldon, a dual major in international relations and civic and economic thought and leadership. “Our goal is to educate both cadets and the broader public about the role of the military in our democracy while also bringing people together around shared values and principles necessary to lessen the political divide that is harming our country.”

After McMaster’s lecture, Sheldon joined D. Micah Stark and Alia Conner for a lively student-led panel moderated by [Paul Carrese](#), director of the [Center for American Civics](#) and professor in the [School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership](#).

McMaster, a Distinguished University Fellow at ASU, served 34 years in the U.S. Army, and later served as national security adviser. He framed his lecture around the example set by George Washington during the Revolutionary War and its aftermath.

Washington’s leadership, he argued, established a professional military ethic that continues to guide U.S. officers today. Central to that ethic is the principle that the military must remain subordinate to civilian authority and separate from partisan politics.

To illustrate that point, McMaster shared a personal anecdote that drew both surprise and laughter from the audience. Over nearly four decades of military service, he said, he never voted. The decision was inspired by Gen. George C. Marshall’s example and rooted in a desire to maintain a clear boundary between military service and political activity. While McMaster noted he does not expect others to follow that path, he stressed the importance of preserving what he called a “bold line” between the armed forces and partisan politics.

Throughout the lecture, McMaster returned repeatedly to Washington’s example as a guide for navigating modern challenges.

One of the most striking moments McMaster described was the Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783, when discontented officers considered pressuring Congress over unpaid wages. Washington defused the crisis not through force, but through an appeal to duty and discipline. His actions, McMaster said, helped cement the principle of civilian control and prevented a dangerous precedent.

Equally significant was Washington’s resignation of his commission later that year, a gesture McMaster described as a “concrete demonstration” that the military answers to elected leaders. That act, he argued, set a standard that has endured for nearly 250 years.

Still, McMaster acknowledged that the tradition has not always been perfectly upheld. He cited historical examples such as the Civil War, when some officers broke their oaths, and more modern instances where military leaders blurred the line between professional advice and political advocacy. Each case, he said, offers lessons in the importance of maintaining the military’s apolitical stance.

As the nation approaches its 250th anniversary, McMaster urged reflection on the principles that have sustained the republic.

“Let us all do what we can to preserve the trust,” McMaster said, “the trust that is foundational to military effectiveness, and the covenant that binds our military to those in whose name we fight and serve.”

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

¹ Additional support for this lecture was also offered by Sun Devil Cadet Leadership Society, Student Assembly at School of Economic Thought and Leadership, the Melikian Center and Next Generation Service Corp.

Main image



Retired Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster delivers a lecture titled “George Washington and the Role of the Military in our Democracy” as part of the Lincoln Center for Applied Ethics’ Founding Values: 250 Years Later series on April 28 at ASU’s Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Following his speech, retired Lt. General H. R. McMaster (right) joins ASU Professor Paul Carrese (second from right) and (from left) ASU students Ryan Sheldon, Micah Stark and Aila Conner for a panel discussion. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News