

Jon Meacham's America is still becoming

At ASU's 'America at 250' conversation, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian urged hope without complacency and patriotism rooted in an idea

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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At a moment when Americans are asking what kind of country they will hand to the next generation, [Jon Meacham](#) came to Tempe with a historian's long view and a citizen's sense of urgency.

"I'm just amazed we've made it 250 years," Meacham told the crowd. "Really. The numbers don't always work out when you run it."

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author, presidential biographer and chronicler of the American experiment joined Arizona State University President Michael M. Crow on Sept. 30 at Mullett Arena for "[America at 250: Past, Present, Possible](#)," a wide-ranging conversation about democracy, history and the choices ahead. The event, sponsored by the [ASU Institute of Politics](#), was part of the [Dialogues for Democracy](#) 2026–27 season.

Ambassador [Jeff Flake](#), founding director of the [ASU Institute of Politics](#), introduced the evening by framing the stakes of the national anniversary.

"As we mark the 250th anniversary of the United States, I can't think of two people better suited for this conversation than the two we have today," Flake said.

For Meacham, the anniversary is not only a birthday party for the republic — it is an examination.

Meacham said even though American democracy has survived, it has never survived automatically. The fact that the country has endured civil war, the Great Depression, assassinations, world wars, McCarthyism and profound division should not lull anyone into believing the next test will resolve itself.

"What sets us apart," Meacham said, "is that enough of us have in fact decided that we would rather live up to that declaration as opposed to falling short."

Yet his message was not despairing. Meacham's version of hope is demanding, rooted less in optimism than in obligation. He described democracy as a daily contest between human appetite and the "better angels of our nature," borrowing President Abraham Lincoln's phrase to explain both the nation and the individual.

"If the better angels pull it out 51% of the time, I'm good," Meacham said. "Why would the country be any different? Democracy's the fullest expression of all of us."

Crow pressed Meacham on the country's contradictions, from slavery and Dred Scott to the Civil War and Reconstruction. Meacham answered by arguing that the American story begins not with innocence, but with a promise the nation has spent centuries struggling to honor. The Declaration of Independence, he said, is the country's "mission statement," while the Constitution is its operating guide.

That distinction matters as the United States hits its 250th year, Meacham said, because the anniversary marks the Declaration of Independence, not the Constitution. The central question is whether the country will move closer to the ideal that all are created equal, or retreat from it.

"We did not live up to it then," he said. "I think we're doing a hell of a lot better today."

Meacham also warned against teaching a simplified version of the past. Honest history, he said, does not weaken patriotism. It makes real patriotism possible.

"How can we celebrate what we've gotten right without knowing what we've gotten wrong?" he asked. "It's a logical problem."

The evening drew heavily on Meacham's new anthology, ["American Struggle: Democracy, Dissent, and the Pursuit of a More Perfect Union, 1619-2026,"](#) which gathers voices from across the nation's conflicts and breakthroughs. Crow described the book as a collection that shows "the American struggle as endless, not because the country is doomed, but because the prize is so easily diminished."

Meacham agreed that Americans often want to believe the work is finished. But history, he said, shows that progress has usually come when "just enough" citizens stopped rewarding leaders who fed division, caricature and fear.

The future, in Meacham's telling, will not be saved by nostalgia. When people ask why the country cannot return to the way it was, he said, the answer depends on who is asking. For many Americans, the past was not a safer or freer place.

Instead, Meacham offered a civic test for the years ahead. When making political decisions, he said, he asks whether the choice fulfills the Declaration of Independence's aspirational goal or leads away from it.

He closed with one of the night's central themes.

"There's a difference between nationalism and patriotism," Meacham said. "Nationalism is an allegiance to your own kind. Patriotism is allegiance to an idea."

That idea, he argued, has carried the country from the founding through Reconstruction, from Seneca Falls to Selma. It remains worth defending, not because America has always lived up to it, but because generations have insisted that it must.

That, he said, is what America's 250th anniversary should summon — not nostalgia, but responsibility. The country's democratic promise has endured because people before us were

willing to risk comfort, safety and sometimes their lives to move it closer to its own ideals.

“As difficult as this moment seems, we’re not John Lewis standing at the top of the (Selma) bridge looking down at the state troopers,” he said. “There are metaphorical similarities, but the courage that took those folks across that bridge, the courage that put young American men on Omaha Beach, gives us an obligation to make good on their sacrifice.”

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

Main image



Jon Meacham — Pulitzer Prize-winning author and presidential biographer — speaks about democracy, history and the choices ahead during a conversation with ASU President Michael M. Crow at Mullett Arena on Sept. 30. Photo by Deanna Dent/ASU

Gallery



Historian Jon Meacham (left) smiles as ASU President Michael M. Crow speaks Sept. 30 at Mullett Arena in Tempe as part of the America at 250: Past, Present, Possible event, sponsored by the ASU Institute of Politics and part of the Dialogues for Democracy 2026–27 season.



Ambassador Jeff Flake (blue jacket); Sybil Francis (pink jacket), president and CEO of Center for the Future of Arizona; Nancy Gonzales (next to Francis), ASU executive vice president and university provost, and other guests laugh at Meacham commentary Wednesday evening.



Crow (here enjoying Meacham's commentary) also pressed him on the country's contradictions, from slavery and Dred Scott to the Civil War and Reconstruction. Meacham answered by arguing that the American story begins not with innocence, but with a promise the nation has spent centuries struggling to honor.



An audience listens to the conversation Wednesday evening between Meacham and Crow at Mullett Arena on the Tempe campus.



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