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5 on 45:

On H.R. McMaster as national security adviser

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

O'HANLON: Greetings, this is Mike O'Hanlon in the Foreign Policy program at Brookings, and I want to talk a little bit about H.R. McMaster – Lt. Gen. McMaster, still in uniform, as you know, an army general who is now going to be Donald Trump's national security adviser. And there is precedent for an active-duty military officer having that job, Colin Powell did that in the last year of Ronald Reagan's administration – at that time I think Powell was already a four-star general. But in any event, not unprecedented, and of course Brent Scowcroft, once he was a retired general, was probably one of the best national security advisers we ever had for George H.W. Bush.

So, H.R. is in a strong tradition, and I think he will be outstanding. I've known him for about ten years. I first learned about him when reading about the battle of 73 Easting in Operation Desert Storm in 1991, and he was a tank platoon commander as I recall, very, very successful in some open desert engagements with Iraqi forces during some of the decisive movements of that four-day ground war. So he established an early, well-deserved reputation for combat excellence.

Of course, Desert Storm was sort of a classic maneuver operation of the type the army prepares for routinely, and excels at normally. And H.R., therefore, wasn't content to just think about those kinds of wars that we were particularly well-suited for. He thought a lot about the uglier, messier kind, and of course wrote a famous book, *Dereliction of Duty*, somewhere in his mid-career period in the 1990s, in which he went back and examined the Vietnam disaster for the United States. And he really unleashed

his primary criticism at the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other military officers, who in that time went along with a military campaign that they pretty much should have known, and did know, wasn't working. And yet they sort of reinforced failure, intensified the use of firepower, didn't really have a good sense of what might be needed to do the job right. We all know the history of Vietnam, but H.R.'s particular angle was to say that the military really should have taken it upon itself not to be complicit in a failing strategy just because civilians were demanding that, but instead to go back to the drawing board and force a debate – quietly and within the government if possible but maybe even publicly if necessary – on how we needed to change our approach in Vietnam or at least recognize we were losing. And that really set him apart as a student of counterinsurgency and also a bit of a maverick – and a very brave guy within the army, because he was criticizing, among others, army leaders, some of whom were still alive at that time and whose associates are still around.

So that sets up H.R., and I've taken most of my five minutes here already just to talk about the history because I think that's the best way to understand him. Then, we fast-forward to the Iraq war of 2003, and in the early years when most of the U.S. military was focused more on combat operations or on killing residual Saddam supporters, H.R., up in a town called Tal Afar in northern Iraq – I think one of the oldest continuous human civilizations on Earth, in fact – he was already using counterinsurgency tactics that foreshadowed what the Marines did in Anbar Province in 2006, foreshadowed what Dave Petraeus brought to the entire fight by 2007, with the surge and the change in tactics that went along with that – the focus on population protection, the focus on rebuilding the community, on creating political bodies that were

representative of all different groups so they'd all work together – H.R. was already onto that.

I then encountered him a number of other times: in Afghanistan, where he was asked by Dave Petraeus to focus on fighting corruption in the Afghan government; I had dinner with him at Ashraf Ghani's house, who as you know is the president of Afghanistan – at that time he was an adviser to President Karzai. H.R. was very engaged in those kinds of discussions, which were also about politics and economics, not just about military operations. I saw him in action in dealing with the embassy and other officials from various countries, and H.R. could be quite forceful about how we needed to change our ways, improve our approach, but he always did it with a friendliness and a respect. And I just think of the guy as passionate, but also sort of ebullient – just positive, a positive sort of force of nature, as I think General Petraeus once called him. And those are the words that go along with H.R. McMaster in my mind. He's been more recently involved in helping the army prepare for that full range of possible future battlefields and scenarios that could be encountered in the future, again reminding us that we may prefer a certain kind of war, but we don't always get to choose. And he thinks a lot about the politics in combat, not just the military operations themselves.

So for all these reasons, I think he's going to be an excellent national security adviser for President Trump and the United States.