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Margaret Chase Smith's 1950 Declaration of Conscience Senate Speech: A Stance Against the Exploitation of Fear

Margaret Chase Smith served as a representative to Maine in Congress from 1940 until 1973. During this time she became the first woman to serve in the Senate as a Republican, the first woman to be elected to both houses of Congress, and the first woman to be nominated for the presidency by a major party. Her reputation as a capable, intellectual human being gave her the credibility she needed to win a seat in the Senate during a time that we needed her most. As one of the first influential politicians to openly criticize Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt during the Cold War, Senator Margaret Chase Smith will go down in history for her bold and courageous speech of 1950, "Declaration of Conscience."

Margaret Chase Smith's political education started when she became involved in the women's clubs that were emerging in her home town of Skowhegan toward the beginning of the 20th century. Meant to empower women through opportunities to expand their knowledge in politics and charity work, these organizations were a perfect fit for Smith. She eventually became president of the Skowhegan Sorosis, the Maine Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (BPW), and the Maine State Federation. Smith attributed her training in political leadership to the BPW, where "she learned to negotiate, mediate, supervise, and compromise" (Sherman 21). Through her leadership roles, she acquired a reputation as an intelligent, capable woman. She soon became involved in party politics in her hometown, and "politics in Maine meant the Republican Party" (27). To pursue her newly found passion, she ran an intense campaign in 1930 to be elected Maine State Republican Committeewoman and won.

Around the same time she was elected State Republican Committeewoman, Margaret, then only Margaret Chase, announced her engagement to Clyde Harold Smith, a career

politician. She soon found that her marriage to Clyde Harold Smith would be the turning point in her political career, gaining valuable experience campaigning for her husband's ambitious pursuit of a position as U.S. Representative from the Second District. When his position was secured, they moved to Washington, D.C., where she found herself completely submerged in an atmosphere of politics. Smith strived to help her husband's political career flourish as his secretary and "attracted favorable press both at home and in the capital as one of the few congressional wives actively working for her husband" (Sherman 36). As a well-respected politician, Clyde Harold Smith was promptly elected to the House Labor Committee; however, succumbing to the stress of his career, he suffered from a heart attack in 1937. Margaret's true test of political aptitude began once she started assuming her husband's roles in office while he recovered. After his second heart attack in 1940, Mr. Smith realized he would not be able to compete for reelection that year. He then sent out a press release on April 7th, 1940 stating that his last wish for his supporters was to choose his wife as the candidate to take over his seat in the upcoming election: "I know of no one else who has the full knowledge of my ideas and plans or is as well qualified as she is, to carry on these ideas and my unfinished work for my district" (42). These were some of her husbands' last words and very literally his dying wish, since "that night, Clyde Smith suffered a third and fatal attack" (Morin). Reflective of her husband's compelling confidence in her abilities, in June 1940, Margaret Chase Smith won the election and took her seat in Congress as a Republican.

While her husband's advocacy helped Margaret Chase Smith with her nomination, it was of her own accord that she triumphed in the election. In 1940 the news that "Hitler's forces were moving quickly and relentlessly across Western Europe" dominated Chase's campaign (Sherman 45). Her position on war was one of preparation, differing vastly from her husband's policy of

nonintervention. This stance on war was the result of Margaret's background and childhood. Growing up in the midst of World War I, Margaret often saw young men her age sent off to war, many of them never to return. Her "adolescent experience with the pain and sacrifices of war had a profound effect on her attitudes toward peace and national security throughout her life" (15). Fully aware of the shock and overwhelming sadness war brings, she saw strength in developing a plan that could at least provide a sense of order and understanding in such a sensitive time. The people of Maine felt vulnerable to the threat of war, and Chase's policy of preparation comforted and united voters, winning her the election.

Once she was a member of Congress, she took her husband's place on the House Labor Committee and joined both the House Naval Affairs Committee and the House Armed Services Committee during World War II. According to Peter Wallenstein, "Smith played leading roles, both substantive and Symbolic, on military matters throughout her career" (*Margaret Chase Smith*). Her experience in military matters and her obvious competence as a capable Congresswoman are probably a couple of the reasons why "several of her friends... suggested her independence and rectitude made her 'the ideal person to speak out and challenge Joe McCarthy'" in what is probably her most well-known contribution to history, her "Declaration of Conscience" (Sherman 109).

According to Janann Sherman, "Never had the threat of worldwide communism loomed larger than it did in the five years since the conclusion of World War II" (105). This period of time marked the beginning of a struggle between the two states that emerged from the war as the leading powers: the democratic United States and the communist Soviet Union. Seeing communism as a threat to our freedom, Americans grew weary of the Soviet government's "[determination] to establish a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe" (Foner 897). An

atmosphere of fear developed as an anticommunist crusade spread throughout the United States, and “convinced that Stalin could not be trusted and that the United States had a responsibility to provide leadership to a world that he tended to view in stark, black and white terms, [President] Truman soon determined to put the policy of containment into effect” (899). This was meant to keep the Soviet Union from spreading its communist ideologies to other parts of the world by establishing democracy as the symbol of freedom and the United States as the heroic force defending this freedom at all costs. However, President Harry S. Truman’s policy of containment did not only take place abroad but at home as well. On March 21st, 1947, he signed Executive Order 9835, the “Loyalty Order,” requiring screenings and investigations of employees of the government that were meant to prove their loyalty to democracy and expose those who presented a threat. The Loyalty Order "led to the conviction and sentencing of communist spies but also threatened innocent people with unfashionable political affiliations” (Tuttle). It was a decision that led to an era of distrust among citizens who were now convinced their government could be infiltrated by communist spies. Exploiting the fear and vulnerability the American people felt during the Cold War, politicians began to accuse their competitors of being associated with communism. These allegations served to increase these political forces’ publicity, which helped them in elections by persuading voters of their commitment to the fight against communism. The most notable of these corrupt politicians was the Republican senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy.

Joseph McCarthy is best known for his infamous “witch hunt,” where he accused countless individuals of being communists or having connections with communist organizations. Like many, Margaret Chase Smith was initially impressed by McCarthy’s endeavor because she thought his accusations were meant as a security measure to protect the government; however,

after a speech he gave to the Women's Republican Club in Wheeling, West Virginia, she began to question his honesty. His speech, "designed to destroy the Democratic hegemony in Washington," accused two hundred and five members of the State Department of being affiliated with communism (Sherman 104). When Margaret Chase Smith requested to examine the resources he got this number from, she found that he was falsely accusing people without any evidence to support his claims. This is when she, "supported by six other senators," decided that something must be said to stop his destructive, falsified claims that were ruining the lives and reputations of many innocent people (Jarrell).

On June 1, 1950, Smith delivered her "Declaration of Conscience" on the Senate floor in front of a blindsided audience with McCarthy just two rows behind her. The only expectant audience members were the six colleagues Smith addressed directly during her speech: "Senator Tobey, Senator Aiken, Senator Morse, Senator Ives, Senator Thye and Senator Hendrickson" (Smith "Declaration of Conscience"). This factor of mystery worked to her advantage because the subject matter of her statement was directed not only at McCarthy but at the Senate as a whole. If her audience had known that Smith was about to give a speech ridiculing their behavior, they could have immediately dismissed her words as a personal attack. Instead of feeling defensive and closing their minds to her intentions, they could go into the speech with curiosity and interest. This especially worked to her advantage when it came to McCarthy himself, who probably would have left instead of hearing what she had to say.

Although she never mentions McCarthy by name, she clearly addresses his witch hunt multiple times in her speech. For example, when she says, "I think that it is high time that we remembered; that the Constitution, as amended, speaks not only of the freedom of speech but also of trial by jury instead of trial by accusation" (Smith "Declaration of Conscience"). Here she

uses antithesis, a rhetorical device using opposing ideas in a parallel structure, to emphasize how unconstitutional it is to accuse someone of something that will ruin their lives and reputation without seeing to it that they have a fair trial. The right to a “trial by jury” is contrasted with the idea of a “trial by accusation” in order to draw the audience members’ attention to the fact that an accusation is not the same as a guilty sentence. It is our constitutional rights as Americans to be given the opportunity to prove our innocence before we are declared guilty, but McCarthy was recklessly slandering people’s names without any evidence for his claims. By not using McCarthy’s name, Smith exemplifies a sort of grace and maturity to her audience without seeming aggressive and overly focused on one character in particular. Instead of directly denouncing an individual, she is denouncing an action she believes to be unacceptable regardless of who is at fault. However, she still holds those who are guilty of such slanderous crimes accountable for their actions, and McCarthy had to sit through the entire speech knowing that everyone was aware of who she was referring to.

Smith does not only mean to address McCarthy, though. She chose to give her speech in front of her fellow Congressmen in the Senate, Democrats and Republicans alike, because she had a message for all of them. Margaret Chase Smith believed that it was a part of their duty as representatives to the people to ensure that Americans were not being lied to and falsely accused of actions they took no part in:

I think that it is high time for the United States Senate and its members to do some soul-searching -- for us to weigh our consciences -- on the manner in which we are performing our duty to the people of America -- on the manner in which we are using or abusing our individual powers and privileges. (Smith “Declaration of Conscience”)

She appealed to her fellow senators' emotions in order to exemplify that the "manner in which [they were] performing" their responsibilities was not only unconstitutional but immoral. They might have been gaining an advantage politically, but they were hurting themselves in the long run. Their "individual powers and privileges" were meant to serve as a medium through which citizens could feel their voices were being heard, but these senators, who by definition were supposed to be for the people, were instead "abusing" their powers for their own good and allowing their fellow colleagues to baselessly smear one another without consequence. Smith was imploring these senators to take a step back to explore their humanity and search their "consciences." If they took the time to think about the way they were "performing their duties," they would see that in the pursuit of self-interest, they somehow lost the part of themselves that mattered most: their morality. By disgracing the positions of privilege they were in, they were dishonoring not only the American people but themselves, too.

Margaret Chase Smith also takes a powerful, unbiased position by identifying herself, not only "as a Republican," but "as a woman," "as a United States Senator," and ultimately "as an American" (Smith "Declaration of Conscience"). Her use of repetition was meant to show that her intentions were not to isolate one group based on their ideologies, it was meant to create a sense of unity among her fellow colleagues who were all different but needed to remember what made them the same. She begins by appealing to all Republicans to come together and face the difficulties of the time in the same way that "it emerged from the Civil War as the champion of a united nation." She then identifies herself "as a woman" to address the disrespectful way in which Republicans and Democrats treated each other during "Senate debate," which was a time meant to find solutions to problems, not to have personal conflicts. She asked her fellow senators if the way they acted during their Senate debates was the way they would like their "mothers,

wives, sisters, and daughters” to see them behave or to be treated. This was meant to make them reevaluate the way they were conducting themselves by indicating that their behavior was shameful and unprofessional. She then stated that “as a United States Senator” she was “not proud of the way in which the Senate [had] been made a publicity platform for irresponsible sensationalism.” By identifying herself as a Senator, not a Republican senator or a Democratic senator, but a United States Senator, Smith is creating common ground with her audience members. They are all senators, and they are all contributing to the degradation of their title by allowing their positions to be used as a “publicity platform” to gain popularity. No one in the audience should be “proud” of their positions in the Senate if it is being used for such selfish means. The final and most unifying characteristic she identifies herself as was an American. She tells her audiences, “As an American, I am shocked at the way Republicans and Democrats alike are playing directly into the Communist design of ‘confuse, divide, and conquer.’” She employs irony to reveal to her audience the reason why their actions were so destructive in nature. These politicians were running their campaigns by trying to prove how anti-communist they were, yet by slandering one another in the process, they were “playing directly into the Communist design.” To complete her thoughts, she announces, “As an American, I want to see our nation recapture the strength and unity it once had when we fought the enemy instead of ourselves.” In a powerful appeal to their emotions, Senator Margaret Chase Smith paints a picture of a nation at war, not with another nation, but with itself. A nation that is no longer held together by one identity but divided among the competing interests of party politics. The American people were caught in a battle their representatives created for them. By characterizing herself as all of these things, Smith urges her audience to remember that, regardless of their differences, their

responsibility as representatives to a great nation meant embodying “the strength and unity” she was referring to.

After she gave her speech, Senator Joseph McCarthy stood up and left without saying a word. She had a few people come up to her, praising her for her bravery, but many were still scared of McCarthy because he had smeared so many people’s names and did not want to draw unnecessary attention to themselves. His supporters came to his defense, but most of the feedback Smith received was positive: “Newspaper editorials endorsed her position, and numerous organizations awarded her recognitions for her courageous stand in favor of civil liberties against the politics of fear” (“Margaret Chase Smith: A Declaration of Conscience”). She earned a powerful enemy out of McCarthy, but she also gained a powerful friend. President Truman invited Smith to join him for lunch in the Capitol and told her, ““Your Declaration of Conscience was one of the finest things that has happened here in Washington in all my years in the Senate and the White House.””

After studying the courage and bravery of Senator Margaret Chase Smith, who looked to unity for strength in such a time of division, it is easy to recognize that her message is one that will always resonate. The United States is still a two party system, and there are still stark differences between those who identify as Republicans and those who identify as Democrats. However, Americans are Americans, and we all share the same principles of justice our Constitution stands for. It is people like Margaret Chase Smith who remind us what it means to be a true American, standing up for what is right and fighting against what we know is wrong. There is so much power in the freedom of speech and so much strength behind the words we choose. Senator Smith’s “Declaration of Conscience” is not timeless because it was a speech given on the Senate floor, it is timeless because of its ability to force its audience to reevaluate

what it truly means to honor one's self and what it truly means to honor one's country. There will always be the corrupt few who exploit the fears of Americans in order to advance their political careers, but as long as we have people who are committed to their duties as representatives of this nation, we can trust that morality will triumph over corruption.

The Cold War was a time of tension between two powerful nations that could erupt at any moment. This division among the democratic United States and the communist Soviet Union, however, was transforming into a division among the American people during an era in which we needed the strength of a united nation. Recognizing the privilege her position as a United States Senator gave her, Margaret Chase Smith gave her speech, "Declaration of Conscience," on the Senate floor for all her fellow senators to hear. In her speech she revealed the deep corruption of Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt and the slanderous, unconstitutional practices of other politicians who were using the threat of communism to smear their opponents' names in order to gain political favor. These tactics, along with the ignorance of others, ruined many innocent people's lives. Senator Margaret Chase Smith spoke up when no one else would, and because of this, her "Declaration of Conscience" will go down in history as one of the bravest speeches ever given on the Senate floor.

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