The Principled Life of Margaret Chase Smith:

by Barb Howe

"My creed is that public service must be more than doing a job efficiently and honestly. It must be a complete dedication to the people and to the nation with full recognition that every human being is entitled to courtesy and consideration, that constructive criticism is not only to be expected but sought, that smears are not only to be expected but fought, that honor is to be earned, not bought."

When Margaret Chase Smith of Maine was first elected to the U.S. Senate in 1948 there were no women's restrooms near the chamber. Mrs. Smith had to wait in line to use the solitary ladies' room that was added to the main Capitol building in 1927 to accommodate the three women then serving in the House of Representatives. It was quite a hike since the U.S. Capitol, as we saw during the riots on January 6th, is a very large and expansive building with many corridors and chambers. In 1966, the Congressional Ladies Retiring Room was created in Statuary Hall, just south of the Rotunda, and it wasn't until 1993 that women were finally granted their own restroom near the Senate chamber. A world built by men, for men can be an uncomfortable place for the other half of the human population, but Margaret Chase Smith entered that world with grit, determination, and a heck of a lot of integrity.

"One of the basic causes for all the trouble in the world today is that people talk too much and think too little. They act impulsively without thinking. I always try to think before I talk."
—Margaret Chase Smith—

Photos Courtesy of the Maine State Library

Margaret Chase Smith (1897-1995), Republican congresswoman from Maine, the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress, and the first woman to seek the nomination of a major political party for the presidency of the United States.

Mrs. Smith was an old-fashioned New England conservative first elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1940 to fill the seat of her recently deceased husband. Elected to the Senate eight years later, she went on to become the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress.

In a 1958 interview by Howard Langer of *Scholastic* magazine, she claimed that she did not get any special privileges because she was a woman. On the contrary, she pointed out that she is barred from enjoying the many free services the men receive such as the use of the Congressional gym and free haircuts. "I am the most economical member of the Senate. I cost the taxpayers less than any of the [male] Senators."

She was modest, as women of the time were instructed to be, and adamant that she never sought out a position of power in society; it just happened to fall into her lap. She knew female politicians walked an impossible line between having a career, yet trying not to look as if she actually worked to get it. She had always been a hard worker, though, and a leader. She was the head of her high school basketball team, and, later, worked at a newspaper and in one of the fabric mills that dotted this small town of Skowhegan on the Kennebec River.

It was her involvement in women's clubs that got her into politics long before her husband died. Her husband, Clyde, was much older—about the same age as her mother—and he had begun his political career at the age of 21, the youngest member ever elected to the Maine House. Mrs. Smith used to work on his campaigns. She became Republican State committeewoman and helped organize local women for the Maine Republican Party.

"My whole history of public service was determination to show that I was a woman who could do what a man could do without apologizing," she said.

A New England moderate who abhorred extremism, Mrs. Smith found herself in a climate of fear and polarization not unlike our own. In 1950, Joe McCarthy was raging about Communists in the State Department on the floor of the Senate, and enjoyed high approval ratings for it. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg had been arrested and would be executed in 1953. Every politician was afraid of being accused of being "soft on Communism."

When McCarthy's rants became too unhinged, Democrats assumed his party would reign him in. They were wrong. The Republican party (besides enjoying that McCarthy's actions were very popular) assumed it was the Democrats' job to do that, with the result being that almost no one challenged the firebrand until Mrs. Smith did it on the floor of the Senate in 1950. She had listened to his speeches for weeks, and asked to see the papers he was waving around wildly for emphasis. He rarely had evidence. It didn't matter that McCarthy's victims were often innocent, in political theater it's the show that counts, and the show was immensely popular with most Americans who were terrified of a supposed enemy on the other side of the world who now had their own nuclear bombs. These voters enjoyed McCarthy's overblown drama that wrecked the lives of those caught in the crosshairs. He made fearful voters feel someone was doing something to keep them safe.

Smith knew some of the people McCarthy was accusing, such as Judge Dorothy Kenyon of New York, and his bullying of Kenyon rankled Smith's sense of justice. She saw the efforts of McCarthy and the complicity of his fellow Republicans as antithetical to conservative values, sacrificing an individual's life and reputation for selfish political gain. It was the ultimate government meddling in private affairs. She voted against establishing a permanent House Unamerican Activities Committee, and opposed funding it, arguing the FBI was already charged with investigating criminal behavior.

Yet no one stood up to Senator McCarthy. Everyone was afraid of him. He was immensely popular. Even Smith herself expressed her doubts about doing it: "In the first place, I was a freshman senator—and in those days, freshmen senators were to be seen and not heard, like good children . . . increasingly, it became evident that Joe had the Senate paralyzed with fear." If anyone was going to stand up to the populist demagogue, it would have to be Margaret Chase-Smith. She went home and drafted what would become the most important speech of her life. It was called, "A Declaration of Conscience."

"Sometimes," she said, "those of us who shout the loudest about Americanism . . . are all too frequently those who, by our own words and acts, ignore some of the basic principles of Americanism—the right to criticize; the right to hold unpopular beliefs; the right to protest, the right of independent thought." The Senate, she said, had become "debased to the level of a forum of hate and character assassination sheltered by the shield of congressional immunity . . . [and turned into] a rendezvous for vilification, for selfish political gain at the sacrifice of individual reputations and national unity.

McCarthy sat looking pale just two rows behind the diminutive woman from Maine. No thunderous applause broke out when she finished her speech, but her words made the newspapers and she became a symbol of integrity while today Senator Joe McCarthy is infamous.

Adults often tell children how they must resist peer pressure, but rarely acknowledge that it's something grown-ups have to deal with also. It's even more rare to admit how incredibly hard it is to go against the crowd, to be the lone figure speaking out against injustice, knowing it might well cost you your career, which even if you can't admit so publicly, you did work hard to get.

Margaret Chase-Smith wasn't afraid to challenge her own party. She lived by her principles until she died in 1995 at the age of 97.

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