

# Famous Speeches: Margaret Chase Smith's Declaration of Conscience

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Sen. Margaret Chase Smith, R-Me., smiles Jan., 5, 1949, as she takes a break from looking over papers in her office in Washington D.C. She was a member of the new 81st Congress. (AP Photo)

*Editor's Note: In June 1950, Republican Senator Margaret Chase Smith delivered this speech on the floor of the Senate. She spoke during the Red Scare, an era in which many Americans were being accused of being communist, or in support of Russia's government. Though she never mentioned him by name, she was mainly talking about a fellow Republican named Joseph R. McCarthy. He had recently accused several Democratic leaders of being secretly in support of Russia, which was an enemy of the United States at the time.*

Mr. President:

I would like to speak briefly and simply about a serious national condition. It is a national feeling of fear and frustration that could result in national suicide. It could lead to the end of everything that we Americans hold dear. It is a condition that comes from the lack of effective leadership in either the Legislative Branch or the Executive Branch of our Government.

Because of the lack of leadership, serious and responsible proposals are being made for national advisory commissions to be created. These commissions will provide this critically needed leadership.

I will speak as briefly as possible. Too much harm has already been done with irresponsible words of bitterness and politicians trying to gain popularity. I speak as briefly as possible because the issue is too great to be covered up with flowery language. I speak simply and briefly in the hope that my words will be taken to heart.

I speak as a Republican. I speak as a woman. I speak as a United States Senator. I speak as an American.

The United States Senate has long enjoyed worldwide respect as the greatest place in the world to discuss and debate laws and ideas. But recently this American character has too often been debased. Our instinct to discuss and consider has sunk instead to displays of hatred and character attacks. And this terrible behavior is protected by working for the government.

It is ironic. We Senators can debate in the Senate and by any form of words, directly or indirectly, impute to any American who is not a Senator. We can say unfair and unkind words toward any action we find unworthy or unbecoming of an American. And we can do this without non-Senator Americans having any ability to defend themselves against us. Yet if we say the same thing in the Senate about our fellow Senators, we can be stopped on the grounds of being out of order.

It is strange that we can verbally attack anyone else with the full protection of the Senate. Yet we hold ourselves above the same type of criticism here on the Senate Floor. Surely the United States Senate is big enough to take self-criticism and self-appraisal. Surely we should be able to take the same kind of character attacks that we "dish out" to outsiders.

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

I think it is high time we remembered that we have sworn to uphold and defend the Constitution. I think it is high time we remembered that the Constitution, as amended, speaks not only of the freedom of speech but also of trial by jury. It does not speak of trial by claiming someone has done something wrong.

It doesn't matter if it is a criminal prosecution in court or a character prosecution in the Senate. There is little practical distinction for the person whose life has been ruined.

All too frequently too many of us ignore the basic principles that make us Americans by our own words and actions. All too frequently these are the ones who shout the loudest about Americanism by attacking the character of others.

The principals of Americanism include the right to criticize. They include the right to hold unpopular beliefs. They include the right to protest and the right to independent thought.

The exercise of these rights should not cost one single American citizen his reputation. The exercise of these right showed not cause a single American to lose his ability to make a living. They should not be in danger of ruining his reputation merely because he happens to know someone who holds unpopular beliefs. Who of us does not hold an unpopular belief? Otherwise none of us could call our souls our own. Otherwise thought control would have set in.

The American people are sick and tired of being afraid to speak their minds for fear of being politically smeared as "Communists" or "Fascists" by their opponents. Freedom of speech is not what it used to be in America. It has been so abused by some that it is not exercised by others.

The American people are sick and tired of seeing innocent people's reputations being ruined. They are sick and tired of seeing the guilty kept hidden. But there have been enough proved cases, such as the Amerasia case, the Hiss case, the Coplon case, the Gold case, to cause nationwide distrust. There is now strong suspicion that there may be something to the unproved, sensational attacks on people's character.

As a Republican, I say to my fellow Senators on this side of the aisle that the Republican Party faces a challenge today. It is not unlike the challenge that it faced back in Lincoln's day. The Republican Party so successfully met that challenge that it emerged from the Civil War as the champion of a united nation — in addition to being a Party that unrelentingly fought loose spending and loose programs.

Today our country is being psychologically divided. It is being split in two by the confusion and the suspicions that start in the United States Senate and spread like cancerous tentacles. It spreads "know nothing, suspect everything" attitudes. Today we have a Democratic Administration that has developed a kind of madness for loose spending and loose programs. History is repeating itself. Once again, the Republican Party has the opportunity to emerge as the champion of unity and prudence.

The record of the present Democratic Administration has provided us with sufficient campaign issues. We do not need to resort to political smears. America is rapidly losing its position as leader of the world simply because the Democratic Administration has pitifully failed to provide effective leadership.

The Democratic Administration has completely confused the American people by its daily contradictory grave warnings and optimistic assurances. All they show the people is that our Democratic Administration has no idea of where it is going.

The Democratic Administration has greatly lost the confidence of the American people. It has done this by its complacency to the threat of communism here at home. It has done this through the leak of vital secrets to Russia through key officials of the Democratic Administration. There are enough proved cases to make this point. There is no need to dilute our criticism with unproved charges.

Surely these are sufficient reasons to make it clear to the American people that it is time for a change. It is time to show them that a Republican victory is necessary to make this country safe. Surely it is clear that this nation will continue to suffer as long as it is governed by the present ineffective Democratic Administration.

Yet to replace it with Republican leadership that believes in ideas that are politically or intellectually dishonest would prove equally terrible to this nation. The nation sorely needs a Republican victory. But I don't want to see the Republican Party ride to political victory on the Four Horsemen of Dishonesty – Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry, and Smear.

I doubt if the Republican Party could. I simply don't believe the American people will uphold any political party that puts political exploitation above national interest. Surely we Republicans aren't that desperate for victory.

I don't want to see the Republican Party win that way. While it might be a fleeting victory for the Republican Party, it would be a more lasting defeat for the American people. Surely it would ultimately be suicide for the Republican Party. I could very well mean the end of the two-party system that has protected our American liberties from the dictatorship of a one-party system.

As members of the Minority Party, we do not have the authority to create government policy. But we do have the responsibility of giving constructive criticism. We do have the responsibility of clarifying issues. We do have the responsibility of allaying fears by acting as responsible citizens.

As a woman, I wonder how the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters feel about the way in which members of their families have been politically mangled in the Senate debate. And I use the word "debate" advisedly.

As a United States Senator, I am not proud of the way in which the Senate has been made a publicity platform for irresponsible sensationalism. I am not proud of the reckless abandon in which unproved charges have been hurled from this side of the aisle. I am not proud of the obviously staged, undignified countercharges that have been attempted in retaliation from the other side of the aisle.

I don't like the way the Senate has been made a place for making people into villains. These selfish political gains come at the sacrifice of individual reputations and national unity. I am not proud of the way we ruin the reputations of outsiders while we're working as lawmakers in the Senate. After doing so, we hide behind the cloak of working in government, making us safe from any criticism ourselves.

As an American, I am shocked at the way Republicans and Democrats alike are playing directly into Communist hands. It is their design to "confuse, divide, and conquer" us. As an American, I don't want a Democratic Administration cover-up any more than I want a Republican smear or witch hunt.

As an American, I condemn a Republican "Fascist" just as much I condemn a Democratic "Communist." I condemn a Democrat "Fascist" just as much as I condemn a Republican "Communist." They are equally dangerous to you and me and to our country. 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.

It is with these thoughts that I have drafted what I call a "Declaration of Conscience." I am gratified that Senator Tobey, Senator Aiken, Senator Morse, Senator Ives, Senator Thye and Senator Hendrickson have agreed to that declaration. They have allowed me to announce their agreement.

The declaration reads as follows:

We are Republicans. But we are Americans first. It is as Americans that we express our concern with the growing confusion that threatens the safety of our country. Democrats and Republicans alike have contributed to that confusion.

The Democratic administration has initially created the confusion by its lack of effective leadership. It has created confusion by its contradictory grave warnings and unrealistically hopeful assurances. It has created confusion by its complacency to the threat of communism here at home. It has become oversensitive to rightful criticism. Finally, it has applied petty bitterness against its critics.

Certain elements of the Republican Party have added to this confusion. In the hopes of riding the Republican party to victory, they are exploiting fear, bigotry, ignorance and intolerance. There are enough mistakes of the Democrats for Republicans to criticize constructively without resorting to political smears.

To this extent, Democrats and Republicans alike have unwittingly, but undeniably, played directly into the Communist hands. It is after all their plan to "confuse, divide and conquer."

It is high time we stopped thinking politically as Republicans and Democrats about elections. It is time we started thinking patriotically as Americans. It is time we started thinking about national security based on individual freedom. It is high time we all stopped being tools and victims of totalitarian methods. These are techniques that, if continued here unchecked, will surely end what we have come to cherish as the American way of life.

**Quiz**

- 1 Read the following passage from the speech.

*I don't like the way the Senate has been made a place for making people into villains. These selfish political gains come at the sacrifice of individual reputations and national unity.*

Which of the following could BEST replace "come at the sacrifice of"?

- (A) use up
  - (B) destroy
  - (C) give up
  - (D) question
- 2 Read the following sentence from the third-to-last paragraph of the speech.

*In the hopes of riding the Republican party to victory, they are exploiting fear, bigotry, ignorance and intolerance. There are enough mistakes of the Democrats for Republicans to criticize constructively without resorting to political smears.*

Which option is the best definition of the word "smear" as used in the sentence?

- (A) trick
- (B) anger
- (C) attack
- (D) excitement

- 3 Read the introduction of the speech below.

*I would like to speak briefly and simply about a serious national condition. It is a national feeling of fear and frustration that could result in national suicide. It could lead to the end of everything that we Americans hold dear. It is a condition that comes from the lack of effective leadership in either the Legislative Branch or the Executive Branch of our Government.*

What purpose does the introduction serve in developing the main idea?

- (A) It gives details about how the Senate should improve.
  - (B) It hints at what could happen if changes are not made.
  - (C) It gives details about an important event in the speech.
  - (D) It provides background information about an important person described in the speech.
- 4 Read the following text from the speech.

*It is strange that we can verbally attack anyone else with the full protection of the Senate. Yet we hold ourselves above the same type of criticism here on the Senate Floor. Surely the United States Senate is big enough to take self-criticism and self-appraisal. Surely we should be able to take the same kind of character attacks that we "dish out" to outsiders.*

The text from the speech expresses anger about the actions of the Senate by...

- (A) showing how the Senate has ruined the lives of other people
- (B) explaining the awful words the Senate has used to describe other people
- (C) describing how the Senate has become a useless institution of government
- (D) calling into question some of the negative actions the Senate has taken part in