

Background on Margaret Chase Smith

(approx. 397 words)

Smith was born in 1897 in Skowhegan, Maine. She graduated from high school in 1916 and then worked as a teacher and in office jobs. She married Clyde Harold Smith in 1930 and in 1936 he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. When he died in 1940, Margaret Chase Smith won his seat in a special election and then won again in the general election.

She was re-elected three times and rose through the ranks to serve on the Armed Services Committee and Naval Affairs Committee. Smith was instrumental in the passage of the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act of 1948, which allowed women to serve as regular members of the armed forces. The bill was signed by President Harry Truman.

After serving in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1940 to 1948, Smith won election to the Senate. Smith was a Republican, as was her fellow Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin but their differences were greater than their similarities. In February 1950, McCarthy stated that members of the Communist party were employed in the State Department. Smith was not convinced by his evidence and she was disturbed by what she considered the "reckless abandon" with which politicians like McCarthy were attacking each other and members of the public. She was also concerned about how such attacks stifled free speech and political discussion.

This led to her "Declaration of Conscience" speech, in which she denounced the "selfish political exploitation of fear, bigotry, ignorance and intolerance." Her "Declaration" was supported by six other Republican senators. McCarthy referred to Smith and these senators as "Snow White and the Six Dwarfs." Later McCarthy attempted to destroy Smith's political career but it was his which came to an end in 1954, when he was censured by the Senate for his "red-baiting" activities.

In January 1964 Smith announced her candidacy for President and set out to win votes despite having little money and "few illusions," as she put it, that she would win. She became the first woman to be nominated for the presidency by a major party at their national convention. Barry Goldwater won the nomination but lost the election to Lyndon B. Johnson.

In 1972, Smith lost her first election in Maine. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George H.W. Bush in 1989. She died in 1995 in her hometown of Skowhegan, Maine.