

Margaret Chase Smith

1897–1995



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Margaret Chase Smith was the first woman to serve in both the House and the Senate. She was the first senator to speak out against McCarthyism, and was also the first woman to have her name offered for nomination for president by a major political party.



As you read the biography below, think about how Margaret Chase Smith helped shape the political landscape of the twentieth century. Do you think she paved the way for other women to enter politics?



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With the Cold War in full swing, Americans were deeply afraid of the Soviet Union and concerned that communism would spread and become a threat to the nation. Republican senator Joseph McCarthy played off this paranoia, claiming that he had proof the American government was full of Communists. He led Senate hearings in which he wrongly accused dozens of Americans of being Communists. Margaret Chase Smith was the first senator to speak out against McCarthy's smear tactics, which came to be known as McCarthyism.

Margaret Chase was born in the small town of Skowhegan, Maine, in 1897. She could not afford to go to college when she graduated from high school, so to make ends meet, she worked for a number of businesses, including a mill, a telephone company, and a newspaper. She met Clyde Smith while working at the newspaper. Smith was co-owner of the paper and was a state highway commissioner. The couple was married in 1930.

Clyde Smith was elected by the state of Maine to the House of Representatives in 1936. His wife served as his secretary. After he suffered a massive heart attack in 1940, he encouraged his wife to run for his seat. He also urged voters to elect her. Two months later, Clyde Smith died. Margaret Chase Smith won her husband's seat in a special election.

During the eight years that Margaret Chase Smith served in the House, she focused on many issues that affected women, although she insisted she was not a feminist. She played a large role in the passage of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act, which gave women permanent status in the military.

The Cold War Begins

Biography

In 1948 Smith ran for a seat in the Senate and won, the first Republican woman to serve in the Senate, and the first woman elected to both houses of the legislature. Known for her fierce independence, she was a strong proponent of national security and defense, and was committed to intervention in foreign affairs.

In 1950, as Senator McCarthy accused government employees of being Communists and Soviet spies, she delivered a “Declaration of Conscience” speech on the floor of the Senate in which she accused McCarthy of going too far. Her criticism ultimately helped end McCarthy’s career.

Smith served four terms in the Senate, longer than any other woman. At the Republican National Convention in 1964, she realized another first, having her name offered for nomination as a candidate for president by a major political party. She finished second to Barry Goldwater.

Smith was an independent, outspoken legislator. In 32 years of service in Congress, she helped advance civil rights, women’s rights, and federal aid for education. She has been called one of the most influential women in the history of American politics, and in 1989 was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George H.W. Bush. She died at age 97 at her home in Skowhegan.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** Margaret Chase Smith was a woman of many political firsts. What were some of her accomplishments?

2. **Draw a Conclusion** Why did Margaret Chase Smith deliver her “Declaration of Conscience” speech?

ACTIVITY

Margaret Chase Smith criticized Senator Joseph McCarthy for accusing dozens of people of being Communists or Soviet spies. His tactics have been compared to tactics used in the Salem witch trials. Conduct some research on both events. Then write a list of similarities between the two events. Share your list with the class.