

Primary Source

Margaret Chase Smith, Declaration of Conscience, June 1, 1950 (in the Senate)

- I can explain the importance of the civic virtue of courage in a constitutional republic.
- I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.

Full text:

<https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/SmithDeclaration.pdf>

Building Context:

After the end of World War II, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union began. Each country competed to see which country's vision for the post-war world would be supreme: a world based on democracy and constitutional principles, or a world based on communism. Fighting communism abroad and within the United States became a priority and fear of communism became palpable. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin took advantage of this fear to begin an anti-communist crusade in February 1950. In a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, McCarthy claimed he had a list of 250 known members of the Communist Party that had infiltrated the State Department. Given such serious charges, the Senate began investigating McCarthy's accusations. Though he could provide no substantial evidence, McCarthy found that making these accusations kept him in the news for the next four years. Americans could lose their jobs, their reputations, and their liberty because of alleged ideas or connections to communism. Whenever critics condemned McCarthy's rudeness and extremism or questioned his sources, he branded them "liars, crooks, or traitors." In 1950, Margaret Chase Smith was serving as a junior senator from Maine. Smith was skeptical of McCarthy's claims when he failed to provide evidence to back up his accusations. Smith delivered the following speech to the U.S. Senate on June 1, 1950.

Essential Vocabulary

Debased	Lowered in standards
Impute	Assign
Redress	A remedy or means of setting right an undesirable situation

Margaret Chase Smith, Declaration of Conscience, June 1, 1950 (in the Senate)

<p>“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 and the end of everything that we Americans hold dear. It is a condition that comes from the lack of effective leadership either in the legislative branch or the executive branch of our government...</p> <p>I speak as briefly as possible because too much harm has already been done with irresponsible words of bitterness and selfish political opportunism. I speak as simply as possible because the issue is too great to be obscured by eloquence. I speak simply and briefly in the hope that my words will be taken to heart.</p> <p>Mr. President, I speak as a Republican. I speak as a woman. I speak as a United States senator. I speak as an American.</p> <p>The United States Senate has long enjoyed worldwide respect as the greatest deliberative body in the world. But recently that deliberative character has too often been debased to the level of a forum of hate and character assassination sheltered by the shield of congressional immunity.</p> <p>It is ironical that we senators can in debate in the Senate, directly or indirectly, by any form of words, impute to any American who is not a senator any conduct or motive unworthy or unbecoming an American—and without that non-senator American having any legal redress against us—yet if we say the same thing in the Senate about our colleagues we can be stopped on the grounds of being out of order.</p> <p>It is strange that we can verbally attack anyone else without restraint and with full protection, and 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.</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p>
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I think that it is high time for the United States Senate and its members to do some real soul searching and to weigh our consciences as to the manner in which we are performing our duty to the people of America and the manner in which we are using or abusing our individual powers and privileges.

I think that it is high time that we remembered that we have sworn to uphold and defend the Constitution. 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.

Whether it be a criminal prosecution in court or a character prosecution in the Senate, there is little practical distinction when the life of a person has been ruined.

Those of us who shout the loudest about Americanism in making character assassinations 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 exercise of these rights should not cost one single American citizen his reputation or his right to a livelihood nor should he be in danger of losing his reputation or livelihood merely because he happens to know someone who holds unpopular beliefs. Who of us does not? Otherwise none of us could call our souls our own. Otherwise thought control would have set in...

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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions:

1. What phrases in the passage demonstrate Smith's critique of McCarthy's methods?

2. What phrases in the passage demonstrate the seriousness of an accusation from Joseph McCarthy?

3. Only six of Smith's fellow senators signed this document, leading McCarthy to refer to Smith and her fellow (all-male) signatories as "Snow White and the Six Dwarfs." What does this reveal about the power of McCarthy's accusations?

4. How does Margaret Smith Chases' speech illustrate that the senator had the civic virtue of courage? Why is this virtue essential in a healthy political system and civil society?