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[Off Campus: To move forward, Washington may have to take a look back](#)

Margaret Chase Smith's courageous actions in 1950 suggest how to handle current political dysfunction.

By Joseph McDonnell, dean of the USM College of Management and Human Service

PORTLAND — How has politics changed in Maine and the nation in the last 60 years? What can today's public officials learn from the past to manage the deep divisions in the state and nation and make our political institutions work again?

These are just some of the questions that the lecture series [“Politics Then and Now, in Maine and the Nation.”](#) sponsored by the Muskie School of Public Service and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Southern Maine, is seeking to answer.

It is fitting that Maine's past and present public officials address these issues, as Maine has produced an extraordinary number of bipartisan national leaders considering the state's small population. Sens. Margaret Chase Smith, Edmund S. Muskie, William Cohen, George Mitchell, Olympia Snowe, Susan Collins and Angus King, while from different political orientations, share a characteristic absent in Washington today – a readiness to reach across the aisle to find common ground.

Today's elected officials could take a lesson from Sen. Smith. At the height of the Cold War, she rebuked a fellow Republican senator, Joseph McCarthy, for his tactics to rid the country of communist sympathizers. In a courageous “Declaration of Conscience,” Smith chastised McCarthy for creating a culture of fear, bigotry and smear that threatened citizens of conscience and jeopardized the reputation of Congress.

Smith challenged the prevailing ideology of her time, insisting that all Americans had the right to criticize, to protest and to hold unpopular beliefs. “These rights (of conscience),” she insisted, “should not cost one single American his reputation or his right for livelihood.”

Sen. Smith also chastised her political party for putting partisan exploitation ahead of the national interest. She pointed to many legitimate issues for which the Republicans could criticize the Democratic administration, but insisted that the party did not have to resort to divisive tactics to do so. As the party out of power, she argued, the Republican Party had the “responsibility of rendering constructive criticism, of clarifying issues, of allaying fears by acting as responsible citizens.”

Smith's staunch Republican credentials gave her the credibility to stand against her party's extreme drift. She argued to her fellow Republicans that McCarthy appealed to a partisan segment of the party, rather than to its broader support. She feared that his tactics jeopardized the two party system and might doom the Republicans to permanent minority status.

Today, candidates for elected office increasingly come from the extreme wings of our political parties. State legislatures nationally have drawn congressional districts to ensure that most districts will not be contested, ensuring little incentive for representatives from those districts to find a middle ground.

Elimination of congressional “earmarks” – the special projects our representatives have traditionally brought home for their constituencies – has had the unintended consequence of reducing a key motivation for lawmakers to compromise on legislation.

The increased power of money in politics and negative political advertising have contributed to a less collegial atmosphere in the Congress. Elected officials increasingly must have allegiance not only to their constituents but also to their financial backers. Congressional contests are expensive, and candidates must raise an inordinate amount of money to run a competitive race.

Is there a remedy for our current dysfunction in Washington? It will take public officials in the Maine tradition to forge a path along what former Sen. Snowe termed the “sensible center.”

It will take a public weary of the dysfunction in our cherished political institutions to make changes to our practice of financing elections; to reverse extremist drawing of congressional districts; and to halt giving special interests priority over the common good of all Americans.

It might also take the courage of elected officials like Margaret Chase Smith to criticize members of their own parties for taking narrow approaches without appeal to a wider public.

After 60 years, Smith’s concerns echo still in Washington, as centrist Republicans worry that a minority within the party, while appealing to narrow constituents, alienates the wider American public.

Is it time today to make a new “Declaration of Conscience”?

— Special to the Press Herald

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