

Margaret Chase Smith

(1897–1995)

The first woman to win election to both houses of Congress, Margaret Chase Smith was known for her rugged political independence and the red rose she wore daily. Born in Skowhegan, Maine, in 1897, she attended local schools and worked as a grade school teacher, telephone operator, newspaper circulation manager, and business manager of a textile mill. In 1925 she became president of the Maine Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs. When she married Clyde H. Smith in 1930, she turned her attention to public service and became a member of the Republican state committee. When her husband was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1936 as a Republican, she became his secretary, office manager, and political confidante. After Congressman Smith died of a heart attack in 1940, Margaret Chase Smith won a special election to succeed him and remained in the House for four terms. During World War II, she introduced legislation to give women permanent status in the military.

Smith won a U.S. Senate seat in 1948. During her 24-year Senate career, she became an expert in military affairs and aeronautics and served as the ranking Republican on both the Armed Services Committee and the Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee. One NASA director commented that if it were not for Margaret Chase Smith, we never would have placed a man on the Moon.

Smith became the first woman elected to a leadership post in the Senate: chair of the Senate Republican Conference. She also set a record for casting the largest number of consecutive roll call votes—2,941—which ended when she missed a vote because of back surgery.

Despite these many achievements, Smith's most enduring legacy was her courageous "Declaration of Conscience" against the politics of "fear, ignorance, bigotry, and smear" that she attributed to Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy. "If I am to be remembered in history," she later

The decision to include a portrait of Margaret Chase Smith in the U.S. Senate Collection was a result of the efforts of Democratic Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota, Republican Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi, Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, and Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine.

Each of these senators had indicated concern over the limited number of women represented in the Capitol's artwork. Senator Snowe wrote to Senator Lott on June 24, 1999, that she could think of no better way to remedy this "unfortunate situation" than by displaying a portrait of Smith: "Senator Margaret Chase Smith served our nation with dignity and honor, and her life was a testimony to the possibilities that exist for women in America. What she proved is that it isn't necessarily gender which makes the difference in public service—it's dedication, energy, perseverance, competence, ability, and the will to get the job done." Lott responded: "The United States Capitol should reflect the diverse history of this nation, and we must ensure that all groups who have played a significant role in the development of the country are appropriately honored."

The Senate Commission on Art subsequently approved the commissioning of a portrait of Margaret Chase Smith. An advisory board was established, composed of historians, curators, and Smith's relatives, to review artists' submissions and provide recommendations to the commission. Artist Ronald Frontin of Maine was selected to paint Smith's portrait. Frontin received the commission in 2000. It was appropriate that a native paint this legendary daughter of Maine, who herself was so passionate about her home state and her constituents. Images were gathered from the Margaret Chase Smith Library Center at the Norwood Institute in Skowhegan, and the artist interviewed friends and colleagues of the senator to gain a better understanding of her and her many accomplishments. Frontin, particularly aware that the painting would hang among a gallery of her male counterparts, sought to portray a powerful image of Smith. She is depicted at the height of her Senate career, seen with her signature pearls and red rose.

Frontin, who studied at the Philadelphia College of Art and later apprenticed with artist Nelson Shanks, paints the Maine landscape. He often shows people in their daily activities, and he has become increasingly known for his portraits of prominent Maine business leaders, judges, and politicians.

Margaret Chase Smith

Ronald Frontin (born 1962)

Oil on canvas

Commissioned by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 2000

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(work in progress, 2002)



Artist Ronald Frontin working in his Maine studio on the Senate's portrait of Margaret Chase Smith, 2002.

declared, "it will not be because of legislative accomplishments but for an act I took as a legislator in the United States Senate when on June 1, 1950 I spoke in the Senate in condemnation of McCarthyism. . . ."¹

The rose that Smith wore daily in her lapel was emblematic of her long crusade to have the rose declared the official flower of the United States. Her efforts were initially thwarted by Senate Republican Leader Everett M. Dirksen, who supported the marigold. It was not until 1987, long after Senator Smith's retirement, that Congress finally designated the rose as the national flower.

In 1964 Smith declared her candidacy for the presidency. She entered several Republican primaries and became the first woman to have her name placed in nomination at a major party convention. Smith continued in the Senate until 1973 and having been defeated for reelection, retired to Skowhegan. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1989 and died in 1995 at the age of 98.