

## A 53-year-old lesson from Margaret Chase Smith

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Half a century ago, this country was mired in fear and distrust. As the power and influence of the Communist world grew, Sen. Joseph McCarthy and others in Congress led a crusade to identify, ostracize and punish Americans who allegedly had contributed to this changing world order. Their campaign, however, soon degenerated into a witch hunt. People were ruined solely because of beliefs they held or people they knew decades earlier. It became dangerous even to defend these victims.

This was not the finest hour for America's political leaders, most of whom did nothing to quell the flames of anti-Communist hysteria. Maine's Sen. Margaret Chase Smith, however, was different. On June 1, 1950, she stood in the well of the U.S. Senate and delivered a "Declaration of Conscience":

*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*

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*holds unpopular beliefs.*

*Who of us doesn't? Otherwise, none of us could call our souls our own.*

I will soon introduce a House resolution commemorating the anniversary of Sen. Smith's declaration, and to state that her principles remain relevant and important today.

History might be repeating itself. Just as the Cold War ignited McCarthyism, the war in Iraq and war against terrorism have sparked a growing hostility in this country to views out of sync with the President's policies. Not long ago, for example, a 5th grade teacher spoke at a community meeting I held in southern Maine. He was distraught because he feared that he could not express his opposition to the impending war in Iraq without paying a heavy price. In an earlier poem, he wrote, in part:

*I had my class write the troops.  
I asked for a kids' support group.  
Can I talk of peace?*

*I am told:*

*Say the pledge; sing the anthem; skip the question*

*Americans, of course, can dissent.*

*Yet we must be patriotic.*

*Can a good American dissent?*

*I am told:*

*Say the pledge; sing the anthem; skip the question.*

This intrepid Maine teacher joins the ranks of Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, Sen. John Kerry, actors Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon, the Dixie Chicks, a hapless N.Y. shopper sporting a peace message on his T-shirt and countless others who have been chastised, arrested, banned, disinvited or intimidated by accusations that dissent is "unpatriotic."

The stifling of dissent has been encouraged by statements and policies coming from the White House and Republican congressional leaders. As Attorney General John Ashcroft told a Senate Committee: "To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve."

Sadly, the erosion of liberty is now a phantom. Attorney General

Ashcroft is its major architect. He has, for example, banned public and media access to deportation hearings in federal court, and ordered U.S. citizens to be treated as "military combatants" held without charge and tried without access to counsel or meaningful judicial review. He issued guidelines (rejected by the secret intelligence court) that would have allowed prosecutors to direct searches without the law's requirement of probable cause.

Likewise, he rewrote guidelines allowing the FBI to attend every worship service, political demonstration, and public gathering, enter every Internet chat room, and look at commercial records that reveal an individual's buying preferences and travel and Internet records. All this information can now be gathered by the government whether or not there is any evidence of criminal behavior by the individual.

Under proposed legislation Ashcroft is drafting — the so-called Patriot Act II — a host of sweeping new powers would be authorized, including allowing the secret detention of American citizens held in connection with a terror investigation, obtaining credit card and library records without a warrant, and repealing limits on local police spying on religious and political activity.

Americans define ourselves by our freedom to question and criticize. If we surrender those rights, through the force of law, by intimidation, or as a result of ignorance, we compromise our very identity and the cause for which we fight.

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