

This Day in History... December 14, 1897

Birth of Margaret C. Smith

Margaret Madeline Chase Smith was born on December 14, 1897, in Skowhegan, Maine. She began working at a local variety store when she was 12 years old. In high school, Smith worked as an operator at a telephone company where she met her future husband, Clyde Smith, who was 21 years her senior.

After high school Smith worked a variety of jobs. She taught, coached basketball, and worked for the telephone company and a newspaper. She also joined and co-founded some women's organizations. When Smith's husband was elected to the US House of Representatives in 1936, she joined him in Washington. She worked as his secretary, managing his office, helping to write his speeches, and more.

In 1940, Smith's husband suffered a heart attack and his health declined. He asked Margaret to run for his seat that September. Clyde died that April and a special election was held in June to fill his seat for the rest of the term. There was no challenger, so Smith won the seat, becoming the first woman from Maine to be elected to Congress. Later that year, she was elected to the first of four full two-year terms. In each election, she received at least 60% of the vote.



Smith was considered the "Mother of the WAVES."

During her eight years in the House, Smith became known as a moderate Republican. She supported some Democratic policies, including Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. She also voted for the Selective Service Act. During World War II, Smith served on the House Naval Affairs Committee. In this role she traveled 25,000 miles around the South Pacific visiting bases. She was also the first and only civilian woman to sail on a US Navy ship during World War II. During the war, she also introduced legislation to create the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). After the war, Smith supported legislation that gave women permanent status in the military, with the Women's Armed Services Integration Act.

In 1948, Smith ran for the US Senate. She won more votes than all three of her opponents combined in the primary; and went on to win 71% of the vote in the general election. With this, she became the first female Senator from Maine and the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress.

In the Senate, Smith became the first member of Congress to condemn Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist witch-hunt. On June 1, 1950, she delivered her 15-minute speech, the "Declaration of Conscience." While she didn't mention McCarthy by name, she denounced "the reckless abandon in which unproved charges have been hurled." She later voted for McCarthy's censure in 1954.

In July 1950, Smith was made a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Reserve. In 1960, she successfully ran against Lucia Cormier for her seat, marking the first time two women ran against each other for the same Senate seat. Then in 1964, she ran for president. Smith received 27 votes from delegates at the Republican nominating convention. She was the first woman to be placed in nomination for president at a major party convention.

During her later years in office, Smith supported the Vietnam War and was a member of the Senate Aeronautical and Space Committee. One NASA official said that the US wouldn't have placed a man on the moon if it hadn't been for Smith. She also voted for the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, 1964, and 1968. Until 1981, she held a Senate record of 2,941 consecutive roll call votes. She lost her only election in 1972, after which she worked as a teacher at several colleges. Smith received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1989. She died on May 29, 1995.



This stamp was issued in 2007 as part of the Distinguished Americans Series.



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