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From the President

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Among my favorite spots in the President's House is the study. It is an undersized replica of my office in Eustis, with floor-to-ceiling wood paneling and ample bookcases. On one shelf sits a framed photo of my great-great Aunt Georgie, a resident of Madison, Maine, with the legendary Margaret Chase Smith. Taken at a garden party, the image has long been a source of pride for Georgie's extended family.

Margaret Chase Smith's story seems to be fading with time, despite its relevance to today's challenges. She was a teacher and journalist who became active in politics and ultimately succeeded her husband in the U.S. House of Representatives. She was elected to the House four times before running successfully for the Senate, where she spent time as the only woman in that chamber (and was the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress). At the 1964 Republican National Convention she became the first woman to have her name placed in nomination for president of a major party. Although she posed no real risk to unseating Senator Barry Goldwater, this smart, courageous woman from Skowhegan changed the nation's understanding of what modern leadership could look like.

Smith had earned the respect of her colleagues in Congress long before that historic convention. On June 1, 1950, she delivered her famous "Declaration of Conscience" speech on the Senate floor. It was a direct rebuke to the fear mongering and discriminatory practices led by Senator Joseph McCarthy and supported in the Senate, in what Smith described as "a forum of hate and character assassination." She excoriated both parties for their behavior and reminded them of American ideals. "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 threats to these values persist in the nation's capital and, unfortunately, on our country's college and university campuses. Recent studies have shown that young people are increasingly unlikely to see free speech as a primary value. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that we have seen so many invited speakers shouted down and invitations to speak rescinded after campus uprisings. There is a growing sentiment on many campuses that the moral failing is not speech prohibition but providing a platform for a speaker who espouses unwelcome views, especially if they are viewed as discriminatory or intolerant.

I abhor hate-filled rhetoric and the thoughtless noisemakers seeking publicity and disruption without serious content or evidence. But I worry even more about the future of our democracy and our great

centers of learning when we shun unpopular beliefs, constrain speech and expression, and create disincentives for the evolution of radical, independent thought and ideas.

There is a cost, and some clearly share the burden more than others, for being a place that is open to free thought and expression and that privileges this value over many other competing and important values. But Colby, and the rest of America's higher education system, must have its own declaration of conscience that, as Smith told her Senate colleagues, fights the "exploitation of fear, bigotry, ignorance, and intolerance." Standing by quietly or working to silence McCarthy and those who followed his dangerous, unfounded claims could not have stopped the scourge of McCarthyism. It demanded a principled argument and the courage of individuals like Margaret Chase Smith, who closed her remarks on that day in 1950 by saying, "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."

The photo of Smith I see from my desk has dulled a bit over the years, but her message, now 77 years old, is as sharp and relevant as ever. "Freedom of speech is not what it used to be in America," she said. "It has been so abused by some that it is not exercised by others."

At Colby, where we celebrate the free press and courage in reporting through an annual award named for Elijah Parish Lovejoy, Class of 1826, we remain steadfast in our commitment to free expression. Lovejoy was silenced by a murderous mob for speaking against slavery. His words held great power, frightening and offending those who disagreed with him and ultimately led to his death.

We can never forget the high price of devaluing the right of others to express their beliefs. That is a lesson I take from both Lovejoy and Smith, two Mainers who understood that a free society and the progress of humankind depend on our capacity to listen to one another, to argue with evidence and conviction, and to take seriously (and use judiciously) the right we all enjoy to free speech.

David A. Greene