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"Declaration of Conscience": A Rhetorical Analysis

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Writing Process

First, I did thorough research on Margaret Chase Smith and her involvement and position in politics. I also researched the Cold War and McCarthyism so that I could accurately and clearly give a background on Chase's speech. I then decided what parts of rhetoric were most and least prominent in Chase's speech and based the format of paper on that. I looked into these parts of rhetorical at different parts of the speech and analyzed how she used the rhetoric in accordance with language choices, and the effect that it had (or was meant to have) on her audience.

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'Declaration of Conscience': A Rhetorical Analysis

Ashley Nihem

Margaret Chase Smith had a multitude of ambitions before she discovered that politics was her calling. She combined her interests in women's rights and leadership to take over her late husband's spot in the U.S. House of Representatives. There, she represented the Republican Party while she worked to earn a spot in the U.S. Senate. She earned this spot when she received a bid for the Senate in 1948. She became the first woman to serve in both chambers of Congress. Although loyal to her party, Smith tended to vote based on ethics ("Margaret Chase Smith Biography"). This attitude was apparent when she opposed fellow Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy because of his actions related to the Cold War with Russia and Communism within the United States. McCarthy investigated legal cases of communist activity within the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). He and other members of Congress used this committee to subpoena citizens and government workers who were suspected of supporting communism. His actions led to the "Red Scare" in the United States, which was a time of distrust and communist paranoia, ("Cold War History"; "HUAC"). McCarthy was primarily concerned with ridding the government of "loyalty risks" (i.e. left-wing liberals) ("Joseph R. McCarthy"). People were so afraid that he would attack them that no one challenged his actions until 1954 when he accused the entire military for being "soft on communism" ("1954: McCarthy Hunts 'Army Communists'"). His extreme condemnation of communism came to be known as McCarthyism. Smith could see how McCarthyism was harmful to the Republican Party, Congress, and America altogether. So she decided to use her position as a senator to voice her concerns about the McCarthyists. She asked them to behave in a morally responsible way—in a way that does not threaten American democracy. In her speech

“Declaration of Conscience,” she used pathos while making rhetorical decisions in her speech to the Senate during a session, but she mainly appealed to the logical aspect of rhetoric. She tended to avoid pairing her logical arguments with artful syntax as to keep her audience focused on the simplicity of the facts. Overall, her rhetorical choices were successful in invoking a feeling of shame to rethink their attitudes as Republicans and Americans.

Smith tended to augment her arguments with anaphora. This is a simple repetition scheme which is typically used for emphasis. This rhetorical device was apparent when Smith proclaimed:

I speak as briefly as possible because too much harm has already been done with irresponsible words of bitterness and selfish political opportunism. I speak as briefly as possible because the issue is too great to be obscured by eloquence. I speak simply and briefly in the hope that my words will be taken to heart.

Her repeated phrase, which is a variation of “I speak briefly,” works with the rhetorical appeal of pathos to underscore the urgency of the moment and her need to speak directly. She expected the audience to share a sense of immediacy with her at this point in her speech. Considering this rhetorical appeal starts at the beginning of her speech, this sense of urgency is employed to make her audience hear her out and to rid the stressor that causes the urgency. Ultimately, it worked as her hook.

Smith went on to emphasize the irony about which the Republican Party—her party—is handling Communism in America. Again, she utilized anaphora and the rhetorical appeal of pathos to appeal to her audience’s emotions. This time, the new emotion she attempted to conjure was *shame* as opposed to *urgency*. She asserted in an exasperated tone, “Surely the United States Senate is big enough to take self-criticism and self-appraisal. Surely we should be able to take the same kind of character attacks that we ‘dish out’ to outsiders.” When she repeated the word “surely,” she emphasized the hypocritical nature of the behavior of the Republican Party. Her accusatory tone was like that of a disappointed mother or teacher whose child has done something very ignorant and shameful. In this way, Smith took rhetorical advantage of the fact that she was a woman to psychologically manipulate her audience and evoke feelings of shame similar to what they might have felt if they were children being scolded. By moving her

audience to this emotional state, Smith designed her rhetoric to make them feel vulnerable and to take the rest of her speech to heart.

In the middle of her speech, after recognizing that there were a few sincerely guilty cases pursued by HUAC, she used a powerful simile to evoke more empathy in her rhetoric. She stated, "Today our country is being psychologically divided by the confusion and suspicions that are bred in the United States Senate to spread like cancerous tentacles of 'know nothing, suspect everything' attitudes." The "cancerous tentacles" she referred to were in relation to the attitude of the McCarthyist senators; this had the effect of insinuating rapidly spreading danger—a danger being caused by people she contended should be protecting the American people instead of scaring them. This irony might have convinced certain people to reconsider their views on how they were handling Communism because Smith proved that in their attempt to be ultra-American by so condemning Communism, they were actually being un-American by limiting the freedom of speech of the many people who held unpopular beliefs. This might have moved her audience to a state of open-mindedness because with this argument, she proved the attitude to be wrong.

Smith also employed the rhetorical use of logos, or logical appeal, to attempt to unite the Republican Party by listing the faults of the Democrats: "Today we have a Democratic Administration that has developed a mania for loose spending and loose programs. History is repeating itself—and the Republican Party again had the opportunity to emerge as the champion of unity and prudence." Despite lacking more artful language, this logical appeal was compelling. Smith used extrinsic evidence of the faults of the opposing party to unite the Republicans. This logical argument reminded her audience of the sense of urgency that she invoked earlier in her speech. Essentially, her point was that if the Republicans didn't resolve the mess they had made with the paranoia and mistrust they created, the Democrats would likely take over. By reminding her Republican audience of the faults of the Democrats, she was hoping to motivate them to clean up the political and legal mess that they had made. This was likely to be effective, since Republican Senators were likely to care more about their political views being maintained in America more than anything else in their lives.

At the conclusion of her speech, Smith created a declaration of her own. This declaration laid out how the Senate should change its ways in order to eliminate the confusion that McCarthyism had caused. To make her grand point even simpler, she divided it into a list of five points. Her first sub-point stated that the

people of the Senate should act as Americans before acting as Republicans, and “as Americans, [they should] express [their] concern with the growing confusion that threatens the security and stability of [their] country.” Her second sub-point was also focused on the existing confusion and how it was created by the Democratic administration. According to Smith, Democrats were ultimately at fault because of their “lack of effective leadership ... contradictory grave warnings and optimistic assurances ... complacency to the threat of communism, ... oversensitiveness to rightful criticism, [and] by its petty bitterness against its critics.” With this, Smith was essentially blaming the Democrats for the initial confusion with a logical appeal using extrinsic evidence. The extrinsic evidence traced the cause of the current confusion back to the time when the Democrats were in charge. Smith turned her accusations onto the common enemy of the Republicans (to whom she was appealing). She was attempting to conclude the speech in a way that her fellow Republicans would feel compelled to fix what the Democrats have broken, so they could be left with a sense of pride instead of shame and a way to redeem themselves.

Smith’s last three sub-points were used to reinforce guilt in the Republicans because they had been supporting the confusion that the disdainful Democrats had created. By these points, she successfully conveyed that in the midst of the Cold War, Democrats as well as Republicans had ironically “played directly into the Communist design of ‘confuse, divide and conquer.’” This brought her speech full circle by debunking her audience’s beliefs that they were upholding American standards by “defending” the country against Communism. Her focus on these five points was confusion, where it came from, and why Congress should get rid of it. The use of the word “confusion” as opposed to some other harsher word was to take the focus off the “shame-on-you” tone and focus it more on the importance of fixing it. To fix it, the Congress must remember that holding unpopular beliefs shouldn’t result in one’s life being ruined; totalitarianism is just as dangerous, if not more so than communism.

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