

Our legislators' silence is a failure of moral courage

Margaret Chase Smith and Abraham Lincoln modeled a better way.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [November 6, 2019](#) issue



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Margaret Chase Smith (1897–1995) is remembered for many firsts. She was the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress, the first woman to represent Maine in either chamber, and the first woman to be placed in nomination for US president at a major party's convention. But when speaking one time about how others would remember her best, she indicated that it would be for “an act I took as a legislator in the US Senate when on June 1, 1950, I spoke . . . in condemnation of McCarthyism, when the junior senator from Wisconsin had the Senate paralyzed with fear that he would purge any senator who disagreed with him.”

Smith's 1950 speech on the Senate floor, “Declaration of Conscience,” was a searing reprimand of both her Republican colleagues and Democratic counterparts for their moral cowardice in not speaking up. Sitting in silence for fear of retaliation or criticism is dangerous to the country, she reflected some years later. “The right way is not always the popular and easy way. Standing for right when it is unpopular is a

true test of moral character.” Moral courage always shuns the easy wrong in favor of the difficult right.

Abraham Lincoln chose the difficult right when he delivered his second inaugural address. The nation was reeling from the bitter wounds of a long civil war not yet over. His bold plea for reconciliation and healing—“with malice toward none; with charity for all”—shocked the audience. The speech was met with only scattered applause. The idea that all Americans should share responsibility for peace since all were responsible for the war infuriated plenty of Northerners and Southerners alike. Writing later to a friend, Lincoln acknowledged that the speech was “not immediately popular . . . [but that] it is a truth which I thought needed to be told.”

In their very different contexts, Smith and Lincoln showed moral courage. Moral courage is not a complicated concept. It doesn’t require special perception or logical skill. It demands integrity, strength of character, and a willingness to stand up for the truth. People who exercise such courage lean on their conscience. They willingly act on fundamental values regardless of personal risk or danger. They look fear in the face and decide to endure whatever hardship or discomfort may come barreling toward them.

Current political analysts seem united in explaining the near total silence of the legislators who refuse to publicly condemn the bullying, lying, and narcissism of which President Trump often seems proud. Pundits across the political spectrum surmise that self-preservation drives the silence. For these legislators, criticizing the president would jeopardize their political fortunes in the next election. Exercising moral courage in this case could be career ending.

Yet evading moral courage can easily warp integrity and lead to a life not worth living. How curious, Mark Twain once noted, “that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare.”

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