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Margaret Chase Smith Essay

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Introduction

by David Richards

Every year since 1996, the Margaret Chase Smith Library has sponsored an essay contest. The program started in the wake of Senator Smith's death in 1995, when donations in her honor began to arrive. The library decided to dedicate a portion of these gifts to establish an essay competition for graduating Maine high school seniors. Today, cash prizes range from \$25 for honorable mentions to \$500 for first prize.

Initially, the contest asked participants to address "issues relating to public service and responsibilities of citizenship." For the first three competitions, the theme remained unchanged. Eventually tiring of the sameness of the essays and with an important anniversary approaching, a new topic was selected in 1999. Because 2000 marked 50 years since Senator Smith's famous "Declaration of Conscience" denouncing the excesses of McCarthyism, students were invited to write their own reflections on conscience. The topic struck a chord and submissions soared.

Since then, themes have continued to change, with the library staff picking a new, timely topic annually. They have included science and technology, the war

on terror, leadership, civic engagement, foreign affairs, civil rights, energy, and women in politics. For the 2008–2009 contest, the presidential election and incessant talk of change served as the inspiration for the essay prompt. Tying to a 1958 quote from Senator Smith not to fear the inevitability of change, the prompt asked: "What changes do you think the new administration will need to make, and we the people embrace, to reform American society?" The question, or more likely the enthusiasm generated by the campaigns, produced the greatest number of entries to date.

The three top entries in the 13th annual Margaret Chase Smith Essay contest follow. Interestingly, they represent the continuum of responses. One essay advocates change through more government intervention. Once calls for greater individual responsibility. The third is a blend of the two perspectives.

The first prize winner is Chelsea Bernard, a recent graduate of Dirigo High School in Dixfield. Placing second was Terrence Walsh of Acadia Christian School in Trenton. Third place went to Stacy Sullivan of Bonny Eagle High School in Standish.

Before reading the essays, a note on the contest timeline is necessary. Although the essay prompt was formulated in the run up to the November 2008 presidential vote, most students probably only became aware of the

competition well after the election.

This was not intended as a student referendum on the Obama administration, but for some essayists that was what it became. Others approached the topic more broadly, considering what reforms American society required, irrespective of who became president. Recently rereading the essays a year after judging the contest and a year and a half after the election, I am struck by how dated they already sound. It seems as though the enthusiasm of the historic moment has largely waned and the idealism greatly dissipated. Soaring talk of hope and change has already metastasized into partisanship and degenerated into gridlock.

In closing, the Margaret Chase Smith Library thanks the editors of the *Maine Policy Review* for once again sharing the views of Maine's newest young voters with its readers. It is our hope that by valuing their voices, we are affirming the rewards of active citizenship for a rising generation of future leaders. That is a legacy of which Senator Smith would be pleased.

David Richards is the assistant director of the Margaret Chase Smith Library in Skowhegan, Maine.

FIRST PLACE ESSAY

What Needs to Change, and What Will It Take?

By Chelsea Bernard

Tense with anticipation, I spent election night shirking homework in favor of snagging a front-row seat to the unfolding of history. After spending more than a year closely monitoring the election process, faithfully following the months of speeches and scandals, America was about to announce its decision.

In these final moments, my thoughts skipped over decades past. I considered the history of reform: sweeping changes that revolutionized the rights of women and minorities, implemented the public educational system, prevented private business from swallowing millions of average workers, and much more. I remembered Andrew Jackson's crusade for the "common man," expanding voting rights while protecting popular democracy and individual liberties. I imagined Abraham Lincoln's furrowed brow as he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, blazing the path to freedom for an oppressed people. I contemplated Theodore Roosevelt's commitment to trust busting, his dedication to dissolving monopolistic corporations after the pervasive corruption of the "Gilded Age."

As 200 years worth of American history flooded my brain, the overarching

necessity for change grounded itself in an abundance of examples. I began to draw parallels between the turbulent 1960s and the current state of our country, a country poised for new direction in the midst of an approaching chaos. Just as the 1960s uprooted the complacency inherent in the era of poodle skirts and jukeboxes, America now faces the challenge of renewing promise after a period of counterfeit ease. Curled up on my couch, I anticipated the changes that the new presidential administration would need to initiate in matters of education, the economy, and the environment.

A common adage claims that "education is the great equalizer." But does this assertion ring true when education itself isn't equal? In theory, every American child receives an education; that is, each is granted the opportunity to attend a state-funded public school. Unfortunately, many of these schools fail to provide adequate teaching and resources in order for students to flourish, especially in the depths of the inner cities, where income and teacher performance tend to be low. And every year, more than one million students abandon their education. High school drop-outs are twice as likely to fall below the poverty line (thereby stressing welfare resources) than high school graduates and eight times as likely to be incarcerated as high school graduates (AYPF n.d.; Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison 2006).

These alarming statistics mandate government action. Though No Child Left Behind attempted to remedy the problem by enacting nationwide education standards, the program needs to be reevaluated and reformed. As of now, the legislation ignores individual needs of students, basing the definition of success on the results of standardized testing in only two

subjects—math and reading. Focusing on only two areas drains funding and energy from worthy study of the humanities, the sciences, and the arts—areas that enrich humanity and society. Also, the punishments inflicted on school districts that fail to meet their progress goals merely encourage schools with lower-income and lower-performing students to set low standards for achievement ([www.nochildleftbehind.com/education-articles/\(-Claims-Made-in-Opposition-to-NCLB\)](http://www.nochildleftbehind.com/education-articles/(-Claims-Made-in-Opposition-to-NCLB))).

A more holistic approach would encompass students of all incomes, abilities, and interests. The severe need for competent educators can be remedied by implementing performance-based pay, creating a national scholarship fund for aspiring teachers, and rewarding those who choose to tackle the most disadvantaged schools in need of quality instruction (Leigh and Mead 2005). Alternative education programs for students whose interests and abilities lie outside of the traditional academic spectrum should be provided. This would give these students the opportunity to learn a trade or at a decelerated, hands-on pace. Education should not be approached as if "one size-fits-all."

However, school districts can only do so much. Where the public school system fails, parents need to rise to the occasion. Parents must take an active role in their children's education. Enforcing homework and resisting the technological lures ranging from video games to the Internet are important for student success. And not a single government policy can replace the love and support of a parental figure.

The education of today directly influences the economy of tomorrow. Our minds are our capital. But before education can affect the economy, our current crisis needs to be resolved. Although no

easy solution exists, a number of political steps can be taken in order to decrease subsequent damage.

The deregulation enacted by the Bush administration must be reversed. The wanton actions of business executives exploited the economy in order to fill their coffers: facilitating the mortgage/lending crisis, allowing unlimited spending on borrowed dollars, and abusing conflicted interests (basing executive bonuses on the price of stocks that can be easily manipulated by those who receive the bonuses, for example). Essential reforms will guarantee regulation of financial institutions, limit speculation, and monitor potential conflicts of interest (Kutner 2008).

Unfortunately, the economy does require bailout money. In a case of “pay now, or pay more later” some key markets need government funding, especially housing. Although many deplore the idea of handing out money to the same people who created the situation, the cost of inaction is far too great. If the housing market collapses, the nation will be under even more financial strain than the bailout required. Again, regulation needs to ensure that stimulus money reaches the intended destination—to be reinvested in the economy, not put into the pockets of AIG executives. Any company that desires bailout money should be required to sign a contract stating the intended use of national funds and also be subject to investigation of use after the money has been given.

But once again, all responsibility cannot fall on the government’s shoulders. The American people need to get friendlier with the concept of saving rather than spending, of frugality rather than extravagance, of pinching pennies rather than swiping credit cards.

Understandably, careful spending can only go so far when faced with un-

employment. One way to increase job availability lies in national, government-subsidized projects (such as repair of the Interstate Highway System). Another involves rewarding businesses that employ Americans with lower taxes rates than those that outsource job opportunities to foreign countries. And renewable energy offers a long-term solution to the unemployment rates along with benefiting the environment.

The prospects of our environmental future loom menacingly. The U.S. is the number one source of pollution in the world, yet America’s congressmen have failed to pass a single bill that combats global warming pollutants. The failure to act imperils not just the United States, but the planet. According to the Environmental Defense Fund’s Web site (www.edf.org/article.cfm?contentID=4981), 15 to 34 percent of plants and animals could disappear by 2050; the U.S. Geological Survey predicts that Glacier National Park will be devoid of glaciers by 2030; and there has been a 100 percent increase in the intensity and duration of hurricanes.

Investing in renewable energy promises many levels of employment in both research and applied fields. Reliance on foreign oil would also proportionally decrease with the popularity of “green” power. The U.S. should tax businesses that produce excessive levels of pollutants and/or fail to dispose of them properly; prevent the drilling of oil and establishment of falsely titled “clean coal;” and encourage the development of an entirely new power grid that runs on renewable resources. Tax breaks for private use of alternative energy provide incentives for everyday citizens to participate in the global effort (www.nrdc.org/globalWarming/default.asp).

On an individual level Americans need to increase their eco-consciousness. We all have a civic duty to investigate the wealth of information available online (or elsewhere), and incorporate that information into our everyday lives, striving to negatively affect the environment as little as possible. Recycling newspapers, biking to work, and conserving power at home exemplify common tips for reducing environmental harm. Many actions yield other benefits, such as increased fitness from increased exercise and decreased energy bills from decreased consumption.

But then, suddenly jolted from my train of thought, a booming announcement blares from my television set—Barack Obama will be the next president of the United States. My family erupted into a frenzy of excitement, tears glistening on our cheeks. Though I recognized the magnitude of the journey ahead, I eagerly anticipated the change to come. Reflecting on my wishes for the next administration, I felt confident about the ability for America to achieve them. And I still do. 🐟

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SECOND PLACE ESSAY

A Call to Change

By Terrence H. Walsh

The way we view change is like boiling water. Boiling water proceeds slowly and predictably. The water warms, and then it boils. However, most change is dramatic. It differs from what came before.

Consider a few analogies. Water can be gradually lowered below its freezing point, and it remains a liquid. But touch this water with anything, and it instantly turns to ice. It is liquid one second and a solid the next second. Or consider two chunks of uranium. Together they are harmless. But rearrange the uranium atoms, and you create a critical mass and conceivably an atomic bomb. Life is not always water coining to a boil. Sometimes it is a critical mass starting a radical change.

Before the presidential campaign and during the campaign, Americans volunteered words like "confused," "discouraged," and "worried" about America. They were concerned about the future, and no one uttered those famous American words, "Don't worry—it (America) will fix itself." But Barack Obama's campaign inspired a wave of enthusiasm that had not been seen in the United States in many, many years. Really, there is no period in history with which to compare this period. The campaign brought the exhilarating awareness that change is actually possible, and things do not have to stay the same. Ideally, a presidential campaign is a time of reassessing where we are as a people.

Candidate Obama spoke often of radical change in America. He spoke of America turning to a new script and throwing the old script away. His speeches sketched a vision for America, that Americans can find solutions for America's and the world's biggest problems—poverty, hunger, disease, and the environment.

Obama's vision of change has America shedding a warlike attitude around the world and focusing on diplomacy and greater equality and freedoms. This certainly excited American voters. Millions of American voters, old and new, decided that politics is important, and that they are part of the political process. These people are strong proof of this movement's energy and passion. These people believe that they can cancel the forces of money and established power that are fighting against those seeking change in America.

Change is not an impossible dream. The last 50 years of history have witnessed great changes. For examples, there are the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, and the movement to end the nuclear arms race. Ideas have changed America and the world, and change for the better is possible, but it requires commitment, hard work, and sacrifice.

Now, candidate Barack Obama has become President Barack Obama, but he must continue to listen to the voices of the American people. The president is now the head of a movement that believes deeply in the change that he claimed as the theme of his presidential campaign. But with this presidency, there have been some troubling signs that Obama is moving away from his commitment to change. At times, the president's decisions seem too cautious.

People understand that compromise is necessary and especially needed in a democracy, and there are many pressures with America's most important

position of presidency. But the withdrawal from important principles weakens the movement of change that the president has promised to deliver.

To sustain the movement of change, President Barack Obama must continue to support:

- A withdrawal timetable for troops in Iraq.
- Response to the economic crisis.
- Jobs.
- Healthcare.
- Immigration.
- Environmental policy.
- Alternative energy sources.
- America's infrastructure.

These are changes that are needed. On other positions, I will work to support the president when I agree with him and challenge him when I do not. But still my prayer and hope is that he may succeed in making America the country he has encouraged Americans to believe is possible.

America and Americans can no longer live a worldview that life is just made up of routines. We can no longer take so much for granted. We are traveling along a road our country has not traveled before and probably would not choose. Now America is responding to change with fear. Fear claims our hearts when we think of change, but change is necessary for life and growth. And the change can not be in parts, and it can not be cosmetic. With "true change," comfort, security, and familiarity will be left behind so America can begin its greatest adventure and truest direction.

However, it would be wrong to say that change should only be on a political

level. Politics will not fundamentally change America or bring it back to a position where it needs to be. If only it were that simple. We should remember abolitionist Fredrick Douglass's admonition that "the life of the nation is secure, only while the nation is honest, truthful, and virtuous."

Just as medical researchers seek ways to build up the cells in the body to prevent infectious diseases from attacking the body, so, too, must we rebuild America's immune system. This means we must become a people of virtue. We need to get out of our easy-chair recliners and love and discipline children, be involved in schools, be faithful to God's call in our lives, be ethical in business, and be involved in our communities. Doing these things is the only way to change America.

When we look back on major changes in American history, they were started by one person or a small group of people. Even the birth of our great nation had its beginnings with a small band of patriots who believed in the principles of freedom. Actually, throughout almost all of history, people who have proposed change have been a minority who have met hostility, death, or persecution, or at best neglect as a reward for their efforts. Yet the changes that have been made in human life have depended, and must always depend, on some person or group.

The effort to change is not for the weak or timid. Real change can only come from the transformed hearts and souls of individuals. Time changes nothing—only people change things. Today, there is a great danger that Americans will once again be lulled into thinking that our only part is voting for the right people, and now we can sit back and watch these people write new laws and find solutions for all of America's problems. President

John F. Kennedy's famous challenge to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country" should still be our motto for today.

More than 200 years ago, our founding fathers wrestled with the idea of federalism as they began what we call the "American Experiment." Although they realized the need for local and even national government, they also wanted to create a system of government that valued individual rights and guaranteed that government interference would be minimized. But since President Kennedy's challenge, most Americans have not considered what they could do for their country besides supporting national defense efforts and paying taxes. Instead, the federal government has told us over and over again what it would do for us.

Today, we must not surrender any more of our responsibilities to the federal government. Despite the best intentions of those in government who created these policies, the government can not do everything. The government cannot be parents, cannot teach character and responsibility, and cannot regulate individual behavior. We must continue to be watchful in our homes and communities. We must continue to support and work for candidates who share our values, we must state our opinions, and we must vote. All of these things are necessary to change America.

But this is only in the political realm. We must not wait for government. We must renew individual obligations for American society. A change in the individual will be a change in society. For example, Americans, not the government, must take care of our neighbors. We must give of our time and money. We must take full responsibility for our actions and not surrender to the weakness of transferring

blame to others. As Tuskegee Institute founder Booker T. Washington stated, “It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges.” It is time that we embrace freedom and the responsible behavior it demands. Change is never quickly or easily achieved. Sometimes it can only be measured in generations. But it must begin today. While the cost is high, the result will be real change in America.

As Franklin Roosevelt said at an earlier Democratic national convention in Philadelphia, “This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny.” Maybe that rendezvous is today. 🐼

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College and Seminary in Bangor, where he is studying to become a pastor.



THIRD PLACE ESSAY

A Restoration of Faith

By Stacy Sullivan

In the time leading up to and immediately after the inauguration of Barack Obama, the new president and his staff emphasized the importance of moving forward, rather than looking back and becoming preoccupied with the errors of the past. This was a difficult task in and of itself. With the majority of the American public still angry over the blunders of the past eight years, using the early period of his presidency as an indictment of the previous administration would have been tempting with the allure of public approval. While a multitude of problems face America, forming an almost perfect storm just as Obama assumed the leadership of the nation, he chose not to lay blame on anyone, but to look to the future. While this was an admirable decision, there is no denying that mistakes have been made that need correction and bridges have been burned that need to be rebuilt.

America is in rough shape; our economy, like economies all over the world, is faltering; we are engaged in not one, but two overseas wars; our population is deeply divided along ideological lines as the last few national elections have shown; and among the international community, America has slowly lost respect and ground as the leader of the world. Over the past decade or so a distinct lack of faith in the government developed. Whereas once it was expected that the federal government

of the United States would make the right decisions, now its citizens almost expect it to fail. Partisanship and bickering have become the hallmarks of Congress instead of progress and unity. Now, with a change in leadership and the country unusually united after the election of Barack Obama, it is time to “pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.”

That enormous task includes not only correcting past mistakes, but leading America into the future, while restoring the public’s faith in government. Such a gigantic task requires a gigantic federal program. Just as Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Johnson created all-encompassing federal programs to effect the change that they wished to see in domestic and international issues, so should Obama to set the country to rights. With such an intricate series of problems plaguing America right now, ranging from the economy to flagrant abuses of human rights like the situation in the Sudan, only a great government initiative to tackle the hard issues and make the difficult choices can see Americans through this crisis. It is now, in this time of crisis, that Americans need their government to solve the fundamental problems and to prove to its people that it can be trusted.

As America faced the Great Depression with Roosevelt’s New Deal and the civil rights era with Kennedy’s New Frontier and Johnson’s Great Society, so should we face our current issues with Obama’s unifying restoration. While national crises are horrible things, they afford the president the possibility to do progressive things he would otherwise not have the opportunity to do. Now, just when the American public is looking for a break from the past and actual progress from our government, the opportunity

presents itself to make the changes that politicians often discuss but rarely make. Obama, the perfect man to exact those changes with his talent for bringing people together and great oratory skill, can bring the sweeping change of progress to the early twenty-first century that Roosevelt brought to the early twentieth and Johnson and Kennedy brought to the mid-twentieth century.

The American public demands, first and foremost, that the economy be fixed. The current fiasco is the result of a period of deregulation, just as the Great Depression was the result of the wild financial innovation of the 1920s. The Glass-Steagall Act, a legacy of the New Deal that regulated the banking industry and separated the securities and commercial banking industries, was gradually repealed by Republican-controlled Congresses through the 1980s and 1990s. Large financial corporations grew more and more irresponsible, with no federal regulations to stop them. Eventually, the implausibility of their schemes caught up with them and dragged the rest of the economy, along with the life savings of average Americans, down with them.

Obama and Congress are now in the position to re-regulate Wall Street and to ensure that banks will not give out loans to people who cannot repay them and that allow people to purchase homes they really cannot afford. Those firms that are “too big to fail,” like American International Group, are only in a position to threaten the entire American financial system with their demise because of the repeal of regulations such as the Glass-Steagall Act. A New Deal-like re-regulation of the economy would simultaneously repair and reform the economy.

Government organizations in charge of the federal bailout need to ensure that

the companies receiving the loans spend the money wisely and pay the money back.

In this time of economic hardship, average Americans feel the strain just as much as multinational corporations. Federal grassroots programs are necessary to help to create jobs for Americans, as the unemployment rate stands at an incredibly high 8.1 percent as of February 2009 [9.7 percent as of February 2010, Editor’s note]. Programs are also needed to allow people and to stay in their homes until the current recession passes. A possibility for creating jobs would be finally completing the needed reworking of America’s infrastructure system. As it currently stands, not only is it run down, but it places heavy emphasis on car and air transportation, thus increasing America’s dependence on oil. America lags significantly behind many other countries in terms of modern, environmentally friendly transportation. According to the Energy Information Administration’s Web site (www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/topworldtables1_2.htm), America consumes more oil than any other nation, at 20 million barrels a day, and oil is a commodity that we can no longer afford to use recklessly. A regeneration of America’s infrastructure and modes of transportation would not only create blue-collar construction jobs, but also high-tech engineering jobs that would encourage higher education.

While the economy is in dire need of reform and repair, so, too is the American health care system. As it currently stands, Americans must obtain their own health insurance, whether through job benefits or independently. Those who cannot afford health insurance are left out in the cold because they often are denied the needed treatments for their maladies because of their uninsured status. A universal health care system, such as those in Canada,

the United Kingdom, and France, would eliminate the discrepancies in health care between the haves and the have nots. The lack of a universal health care system more or less amounts to discrimination based on class; denying a life-saving treatment for the lack of health insurance is the same as denying life, one of the “inalienable rights” cited in the Declaration of Independence. The federal government has a responsibility to provide equal access to all necessary health care. Approximately 50 million Americans go without health insurance, and according to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, the United States “is the only wealthy, industrialized nation that does not ensure that all citizens have coverage” (Institute of Medicine 2004). Although then First Lady Hillary Clinton attempted to enact universal health care in 1993 and failed, a universal health care bill needs to be introduced again to Congress. The United States cannot expect to lead the world into the future if it does not even provide basic health coverage for all of its citizens.

As part of the change Obama’s new administration should initiate, our foreign policy should be reevaluated. For the past eight years the U.S. has been more of a bully on the international stage than a good neighbor. The U.S. has continually bent the rules of the Geneva Convention regarding the humanitarian treatment of prisoners. The American treatment of so-called enemy combatants from the War on Terror has drawn fire from various human rights watchdog groups. Obama has taken steps in the right direction by pledging to close down the American detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba where enemy combatants were held without any legal representation and without being charged, and ending the practice of water boarding on his first day in office.

However, there is still more the U.S. can do for human rights abroad. In Sudan's Darfur region, an ethnic genocide has been going on for six years, the worst mass killing the world has seen since Rwanda, and perhaps even the Holocaust, and no one has stepped in to stop it. America, as a world leader, has a responsibility to act as a protector of human rights around the globe. Part of that would be making the tough decisions about American involvement with the foreign countries with less than clean records on human rights. The United States imported \$340 billion worth of goods from China in 2008 and conveniently ignores that China has almost no freedom of speech and religion, represses the Tibetans, and sends dissidents to labor camps without a trial. Saudi Arabia, too, has a questionable human rights record, often cited for its oppression of women, but the U.S. still imported \$50 billion dollars worth of oil in 2008 from Saudi Arabia (Wallechinsky 2009). Because of our reliance on Saudi oil and Chinese goods, the U.S. effectively condones human rights abuses.

Now, at a time when America is in desperate need of change, President Obama has the opportunity to create that change and alter not only America but the world for the better with government initiatives. By repairing and reforming the economy, creating jobs, providing equal health care for all, and taking a strong stand for human rights, Obama would rescue America from its current low point and reestablish it at the pinnacle of the world. Once America starts making the tough, right decisions again, it will restore its glory and remove some of the tarnish. And making those tough decisions, ones that perhaps not everyone will like at first, will legitimize the American government, make it something to be respected again.

American's faith in our own government would be restored. 🐼

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