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# Margaret Chase Smith Library 2014 Student Essay Contest: Changes in the United States over the Last 50 Years

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# Margaret Chase Smith Library 2014 Essay Contest

## SECOND PLACE ESSAY

### Changes in the United States over the Last 50 Years

by Jonah Abraham

*Each year, the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The 2014 essay prompt asked students to reflect on the changes the nation has undergone—politically, economically, technologically, and culturally—over the past 50 years since 1964, when Margaret Chase Smith announced her candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination. We are pleased to feature here the top two 2014 prize-winning essays.*

Over the last half-century, the United States has undergone a tremendous amount of change in the political, cultural, economic, and technological spheres. Politically, America has become increasingly divided, as the Republican and Democratic parties have changed drastically over the years. Culturally, the nation has become much more tolerant of different lifestyles, gay marriage being a particularly good example. Economically, the United States is rapidly losing its preeminence as the world's most powerful economy, although it still retains a significant edge over other contenders such as India and China. Technologically, computers and the Internet have radically altered everyday life. Overall, the United States is almost unrecognizably different from the nation it was 50 years ago.

Politically, America is far different from what it was during the days of Margaret Chase Smith and Barry Goldwater. In Goldwater's day, conservatism was confined mainly to economic ideas, although of course Goldwater stood for traditional family values as well. Today, the phrase "family values" has become inextricably linked with the politics of the Christian Right, the same lobby that Goldwater himself campaigned so vigorously against in his later career. Due to the surge in conservatism evidenced by the rise of the Tea Party, conservatives have regained the House of Representatives, and may retake the Senate in the November 2014 elections. The Republican

Party is radically different from its 1960s counterpart—that party focused primarily on economic issues, condemning President Lyndon B. Johnson's attempts at a Great Society. When it came to social issues, conservatives mainly stood for law and order, which appealed to many voters in that tumultuous era. Today's Republican Party focuses a great deal more on social issues although economic issues play a vital role in their campaigns as well. Hot-button issues such as gay marriage, abortion, and immigration dominate the thinking of the modern GOP, as well as how to deal with rapidly shifting attitudes on some of these topics. In terms of economics, the single most important issue in the Republican Party is health-care—specifically, their attempts to undermine and repeal the Affordable Care Act.

The Democrats, too, have shifted away from their predecessors in the 1960s. In that era, the New Left and the hippie movement played a vital role in shaping Democratic policies. Johnson's unpopular war in Vietnam split his own party, as young liberals, particularly on college campuses, rejected his decisions. A parallel might be drawn between Vietnam and the recent war in Iraq; though of course, the latter was initiated and waged by a Republican president. The Democrats under Johnson hoped to expand the welfare system and increase the extent of the safety net to aid America's poorest. Today's Democrats still embrace many of

the same values, but like the Republicans, they have gained an increased interest in social issues such as gay marriage. Of course, on most issues, the Democrats have tended to move to the left, while the GOP has moved to the right.

As the two parties drift towards opposite ends of the political spectrum, deadlock on a scale unprecedented in the last 50 years has gripped Congress.<sup>1</sup> Repeated failures to pass a budget have undermined the public's faith in their elected officials. With congressional approval ratings hovering at record lows, it is clear that a new lack of confidence in government is an unfortunate change from previous times.

Culturally, the United States is inconceivably different from the America of the 1960s, especially with the new attitude of tolerance that pervades the nation. This is especially true of the acceptance of homosexuals. As recently as the early 1970s, psychologists at the American Psychological Association classified homosexuality as a mental disorder. Today, doctors and psychologists acknowledge that homosexuality is a normal trait. The public has also accepted homosexuals on a scale unthinkable in the 1960s. The majority of the American public now finds homosexuality to be morally acceptable, which was not true even a decade ago.<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s, the gay rights movement was in its infancy. The Stonewall Riots would ultimately kick off the movement, but the fruits of its labor have only recently become apparent. The public acceptance of homosexuality is the clearest indicator that American culture has changed drastically since the sixties.

Economically, America is not the powerhouse that it once was. A nation that once held a favorable balance of trade with almost all of its trading partners is now sinking under trillions of dollars in debt. Billions of dollars are spent every

year in defense, while billions more go to mandatory entitlement programs such as Social Security. The aforementioned political deadlock makes it almost impossible for the debt to be significantly reduced, in turn making America less credible as a trading partner. Standard & Poor's much-publicized reduction of America's credit rating to AA is representative of America's decline in economic power. According to an article by Christopher Matthews on the website *Time Business* (January 8, 2014), populous countries such as China and India are quickly gaining on the United States and are poised to surpass America's economy in the relatively near future. Unless America does something drastic to regain its status as an innovative and productive nation, the economic decline from the 1960s will be irreversible.

Technologically, computers and the Internet have utterly changed the face of daily life. In the 1960s, long-distance communication was limited to the telephone and mail, and record-keeping and financial transactions were done on paper. Today, mail is a thing of the past, and phones are used more often for texting than for actual conversation. Newer technologies such as email and Skype have supplanted older methods of communication. E-commerce has come to dominate finances, and social networking has changed the way people interact with one another. It is now almost impossible to lose touch with anybody, something that was certainly not true 50 years ago. The most popular forms of media, such as radio and television, have also been replaced by the Internet—many television viewers have switched to using Netflix, for instance. The technological changes in the last 50 years have been fascinating, and it is exciting to imagine what the future holds.

Life has been altered significantly in the United States since the 1960s. The

political landscape has been changed drastically; neither Barry Goldwater nor Lyndon B. Johnson would recognize his own party today. In addition, the move away from the center by both parties has caused a dreadful gridlock in Washington, a fact that has frustrated many citizens. Culturally, American culture has relaxed significantly, with the acceptance of homosexuality as the most prominent example of this. Economically, the United States has lost its absolute superiority over other nations and must struggle tenaciously to retain its economic edge. Technologically, computers and Internet access have vastly changed modern life. If Margaret Chase Smith could see the nation today, it is doubtful that she could recognize it as the same one in which she launched her candidacy for president. 🐟

#### ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/165809/congressional-approval-sinks-record-low.aspx>
2. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/154634/acceptance-gay-lesbian-relations-new-normal.aspx>



**Jonah Abraham** graduated from Portsmouth Christian Academy in Waterboro where he was valedictorian of his

senior class. He maintained highest honors while at PCA and was a member of student government for three years. This fall he started attending the College of William and Mary, pursuing a degree in political science.