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Margaret Chase Smith and Me: The Importance of Leadership

by Vice Admiral Nora Tyson, Retired

First, a little about me. I retired from the United States Navy last September after a little over 38 years of service. My last job on active duty was Third Fleet commander headquartered in San Diego. Third Fleet is comprised of all the naval forces on the West Coast of the United States out to the International Date Line, except for the ballistic missile submarines, which belong to the strategic command out of Omaha, Nebraska. Third Fleet is made up of about 110 ships, 400 aircraft, 30 submarines, 5 carrier strike groups, an amphibious strike group, and around 60,000 people.

In preparation this speech, I did some research on Senator Smith and found that I owe her a huge debt of gratitude. I also found many similarities in our respective careers. The most obvious similarity is that we are both women and both served our fellow Americans most of our adult lives. We also both sort of fell into the professions to which we dedicated our lives, professions that, I think, we both felt we had been destined for.

Most likely, I wouldn't be giving this talk had it not been for the efforts and the "firm determination" of Senator Margaret Chase Smith. Her persistence in seeing the Women's Armed Services Integration Act passed in 1948 opened the door for me and thousands of other women to serve our country and paved the way for future legislation that opened even more opportunity for women in the military.

Senator Smith was a strong proponent of our Armed Services. She served for many years on the Naval Affairs

Committee and, subsequently, the Senate Armed Services Committee, and throughout her career, Senator Smith espoused "preparedness ensures peace." In fact, she reiterated throughout her career the message of her 1938 Navy Day speech that military weakness leads to war and preparedness ensures peace. She said, "the surest way to prevent war is to be ready to go to war." I couldn't agree more.

I wish I had had the opportunity to meet Senator Smith and thank her. In a sense, I feel we are somewhat soul mates. We both, through no design of our own, found ourselves blazing trails for women. Senator Smith blazed a trail because her husband, Clyde, died while in office. He knew his wife was the most qualified person for the job and asked his friends to support her in her run for Congress. As for me, because the combat aviation exclusion laws were repealed in 1991 and because I had applied myself, I found myself eligible for assignments that previously had not been open to women.

I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and went to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. I was a decent student, an English major who was thinking about going to law school. After

graduation, I returned home to Memphis, and a few weeks later, I got a call from a Navy recruiter. He asked me in for a chat, and since I didn't have anything better to do at the time, I went to the recruiting office to see what it was all about.

The recruiter asked me to take an aptitude test, so I took the test and did pretty well. He told me that I could go into cryptology, supply, intelligence, and a few other things, but never said a word about ships or airplanes. This was long before the laws were changed to allow women to serve on ships and aircraft in combat. Ultimately, after a few more discussions, I thought, "Why not? If I don't, I'll always wonder what would have happened if I had and what's four years?"

At the time of my commissioning, not many occupations were open to



Always a strong proponent of women in the military, here Margaret Chase Smith is pictured with President Harry S. Truman as he signed the Army-Navy Nurses Act of 1947. The Women's Armed Services Integration Act was passed the following year. Photo courtesy of the Margaret Chase Smith Library.

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women in the Navy, and I ended up in Washington, D.C., in an administrative job, which I quickly realized wasn't for me. I worked for a couple of senior male aviators who realized I probably wouldn't stay in the Navy if I were relegated to administrative jobs, and they steered me toward flight school and a career in naval aviation. That decision eventually opened up opportunities that I had never dreamed of because many of those opportunities had not been an option when I joined the Navy. I had some amazing experiences, and I was thrilled with the level of responsibility I was afforded as a junior officer.

Over the years, I kept making the most of whatever opportunities presented themselves, and the Navy found new and challenging jobs for me. Laws and policies changed, and I was fortunate enough to have command of a squadron, an amphibious assault ship, and to serve with outstanding leaders and be promoted to admiral. And I loved what I did! I believe that it is important for leaders to love what they do.

I found success by being humble and accepting challenges, sometimes turning adversity into opportunity, by staying smart on my craft, and truly valuing the contributions of everyone who worked for me at any time. I learned when to lead from the front, and when to step back and let others step up. Experience is one of the best contributions to being a good leader.

Like Senator Smith, I was fortunate to be the first woman to do several things: the first woman to command an aircraft carrier strike group, our Task Force in Singapore, the largest maritime exercise in the world, and a numbered fleet. Many times in my career, I looked around the room and found that I was the only woman, and many of those times, I was the commander or the senior person. I learned early on that it

wasn't about gender. It was about mission, getting the job done, solving the problem. I am proud of all those firsts, but I'm even more proud that those milestones are now behind us. Someone had to be first, and I feel extraordinarily fortunate that I was in the right place at the right time.

Margaret Chase Smith said, "I truly believe that one's sex should not be a determinant in the selection of public officials." Our military has opened virtually every occupation to anyone who meets the requirements. There are many people—both male and female—who don't meet the requirements for many reasons. That's why it is critical that we make the effort to understand what is required—mentally, physically, emotionally—to do a specific job. If we don't make the effort to understand the requirements, we may be forfeiting the opportunity to have the best person in the job.

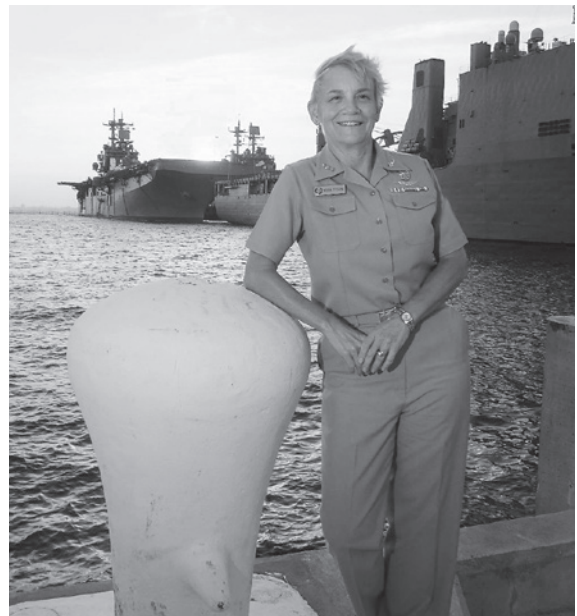
Again, I quote Margaret Chase Smith: "ability and proved performance, rather than sex, are the best standards for political selection." The way I see it, when a woman is the best qualified candidate, she should get the job; when she isn't the best qualified, she shouldn't get the job. But gone are the days of female service members never knowing if they could have qualified.

Leadership isn't defined by how we look, it is defined by our thoughts and our actions.

Leadership is about solving problems and making a difference. It is about opening doors to

opportunity for those you lead and helping them reach their potential. It is about communicating and collaborating to solve problems. It is about listening to others, valuing their input, and caring about and respecting them as people. It is about putting yourself in others' shoes and looking at things through their perspectives. That is how to build a cohesive, functional team that can solve complex problems.

I believe the key to being a successful leader is understanding two things: yourself and your team. If you don't have the *you* part right, it will be hard to lead others. I have learned through personal experience and observation of others that you must be true to yourself and not try to be something that you are not. From my observations, many women feel they must be more masculine, less emotional, less empathetic to succeed, particularly in the job.



*Vice Admiral Tyson on the Naval Station Norfolk (Virginia) waterfront with several of the US Navy's amphibious ships in the background.
Photo courtesy of Nora Tyson.*

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historically male-dominated professions. I disagree, however, for two reasons. One, it is hard to continually put on a show and still be effective in whatever it is you are trying to do. And two, I found that being myself and being emotional and empathetic was appreciated and often admired by the team. Being oneself certainly makes it easier to concentrate on the job at hand without having to worry about pretensions. It enables one to be transparent, sincere, and honest, which are all important traits in a leader.

I have other tips for being a good leader. Remember your roots and who helped you succeed. Thank those who helped you along the way and seek to give others what those individuals gave you. Be passionate about what you do. If you don't love what you do, be the best at whatever it is you are currently doing, then figure out what your passion is and go for it! Passion is infectious. If it is apparent that you love what you do, those around you will feel that passion and want to be on your team.

Now for the team: In most things you do in life, you are part of a team, whether it is a sports team, a project team, a family, a church congregation, a board of directors. And for a team to be successful, there must be mutual respect and diversity.

Let's talk a little bit about diversity and why it is important to a team. For many years in our military, diversity was somewhat of a buzzword. Our leadership was expected to have a diverse staff, but that diversity at times could be superficial. I believe diversity is critical in every organization

and at every level, but it isn't just gender or ethnic diversity. We need diversity of thought, opinions, and perspectives, diversity in how we look at the problems we need to solve. Diversity of thought, built from our different backgrounds and experiences, allows us to view challenges from new angles and find new solutions.

And once we have a diverse team, it is imperative that we respect that diversity and genuinely listen to and learn from others on the team. So good communication and honesty are critical. I think that is true anywhere, whether you are in a combat situation, a training situation, an office setting, on the playing field, or at home. The team needs to understand the vision, the mission. The team members want to buy into that something that is bigger than themselves, but they need the leader to communicate that purpose, that vision.

I would venture to say nobody has done that as well as Margaret Chase

Smith did. Whether it was answering every piece of mail from her constituents the same day she received it, or putting out her weekly newsletter "Washington and Me," or taking the time to travel the state of Maine to find out what she could do for the people she represented, she believed that you couldn't communicate enough.

I'll give you an example from my own career. Near the end of my tour as the commanding officer of *USS Bataan*, one of our amphibious assault ships, we were on the way back to Norfolk, Virginia, after doing an exercise off the Panama Canal. We had pulled into Corpus Christi, Texas, to drop off some helicopters and equipment. As we were clearing the channel heading into the Gulf of Mexico, I got a call from my boss asking me if I could take the helicopters we had just dropped off back on board and, as the seas allowed, make our way to New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina was bearing down on the Gulf Coast.



Vice Admiral Tyson reviewing charts with crewmembers in USS Chancellorsville's Combat Information Center. USS Chancellorsville is a US Navy cruiser forward deployed to Japan. Photo courtesy of Nora Tyson.

If you recall, the hurricane passed over New Orleans, and they breathed a sigh of relief. They thought they had weathered the storm and were in the clear when the levees broke.

At that point, we were off the coast of Louisiana, and when asked to respond, we jumped in feet first. I could write a whole book on that experience, but the bottom line is that throughout that entire tour, I communicated continually with the crew. I got on our ship-wide public address system nearly every day and sometimes more often than that. I told them what I knew and what I didn't know about our mission and our tasks, which could change at a moment's notice and often did. I told them if they weren't ready and weren't flexible, they were in the wrong business. And I have to tell you, they rose to the occasion and performed the mission superbly. They knew what was expected of them, and they gave it their all. As their commanding officer, I learned that successful leadership was about honesty, sincerity, empathy, and communication. It was about walking around the ship as much as I could, getting to know the ship's crew and the marines who made up the blue-green team. Visiting them in their workspaces, on the hangar bay, on the flight deck, in the engineering plant. Building relationships and building trust.

I truly believe leadership isn't about sitting in a big office, having privileges, and giving orders; it is about solving problems and making the world a better place. It's about inspiring those who will follow in your footsteps. It's about those followers wanting to grow up to be you.

I want to leave you with one thought. As I prepared for this talk, I thought about what leadership traits were common among the leaders I have admired. I thought long and hard about it, only to arrive at a simple common denominator. Effective leaders define

and embrace a set of steadfast principles that guide them in the way they lead. Those principles are integrity, honor, and courage. Margaret Chase Smith certainly embodied all of those principles; she lived them every day. She might not have been the most popular person among her colleagues every day of her career, but, without question, she always held true to her principles. 🌊



Nora Tyson

served over 38 years on active duty in the US Navy, retiring as a vice admiral. An aviator by specialty, Tyson's last active duty

assignment was Commander, US Third Fleet, from July 2015 to September 2017, commanding all Naval Forces on the West Coast to the International Date Line. Her military awards include Navy Distinguished Service Medal, Defense Superior Service Medal, Legion of Merit, Meritorious Service Medal, Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal, Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal, and various unit awards.