

Study Guide

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About the Play

The world premiere of *Conscience* was produced by George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on March 6, 2020, and was cut short due to the pandemic. *Conscience* is a historical drama revealing and celebrating the courage of Senator Margaret Chase Smith as she goes head-to-head with fellow Republican Senator, Joseph McCarthy, during the Second Red Scare. At their sides are William "Bill" Lewis Jr., Smith's executive assistant, close confidant, and friend; and Jean Kerr, political aide, and future wife of McCarthy. While McCarthy used his power to create anti-Communist hysteria and attempted to ruin the lives of those who opposed him, Smith was the first woman elected to both the House and the Senate and became the first senator to stand on the Senate floor and publicly rebuke McCarthyism through her "Declaration of Conscience". The play is set in Washington D.C. during the 1950s, grounded by two important dates: February 9, 1950 (McCarthy's Wheeling Speech) and June 1, 1950 (Smith's Declaration of Conscience).

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Conscience serves as a timely comparison to contemporary politics and compels the audience to hone their own consciences and convictions. At the heart of our production, this is a story about the damage inflicted when cruelty is used to silence, shame, and overpower others, and about the courage it takes to stand up and speak out against it.

About Joe DiPietro and Writing a Historical Drama

Joe DiPietro, born in 1961, grew up in New Jersey as an annual attendee of Broadway plays. He started writing in high school and went on to get an English degree from Rutgers University. Since then, he has become quite the acclaimed dramatist and lyricist. His first produced work, *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*, premiered in 1996 and became the longest-running musical revue in off-Broadway history, spanning 12 years and 5,003 performances.



Joe DiPietro, joedipietrowriter.com

During an interview with [BroadwayWorld](#), DiPietro shared the process balancing the creation of dramatized, compelling story with the grounded truth of historical realities.

"Our lives aren't laid out perfectly—we have ups and downs, and we don't always get the ending we deserve. So what you have to do with life? I always go back to the great Pablo Picasso quote that, 'Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.' I think that's really true—you have to get what the truth of the matter is, what you're saying, and then take the basic truth of the story and create it around that. And in this instance, I found that, like other bio musical and bio plays I've written, not everything was documented like it is today, so a lot of it is hearsay. A lot of it is just quotes from journalists or rumors. There's different perspectives from everyone on these stories."

Read more about how DiPietro wrote *Conscience* [here](#).

DiPietro used archival footage and primary sources from this period to understand the historical figures' dynamics and idiosyncrasies to create a historically accurate container for imagined conversations. We know certain things to be recorded truths:

- Senator Chase Smith ran into McCarthy before delivering her Declaration of Conscience.
- Bill Lewis and Chase Smith lived together for years.
- Jean Kerr was one of McCarthy's staffers before marrying him.

Certain things are speculation:

- There was no audio or video recording of McCarthy's Wheeling Speech, so the number of names McCarthy said he was in possession of varies, although scholars maintain the number was most likely 205.
- Due to the political climate of the time, Bill Lewis' sexuality was never confirmed in primary sources. He is described in many articles as a "confirmed bachelor."

Cast and Characters



Margaret Chase Smith

Born in Skowhegan, Maine, and raised in a working-class family, Smith never attended college and self-identified as an “ordinary citizen” rather than a “member of the elite”—unlike many politicians of her generation.



Alyssa Keene

Margaret entered into politics after marrying Clyde Harold Smith. She was his closest adviser, campaign manager, and congressional secretary after his election to the House of Representatives in 1936. Clyde soon fell ill and was unable to continue his congressional campaign for re-election (1941–1943). Clyde urged voters to support his wife to succeed him. When he died in 1940, many assumed Margaret would simply complete his term. Instead, voters elected her in her own right, beginning an impactful congressional career that would last 32 years.

She was the first woman elected to both the US House of Representatives and the US Senate, the first woman to have her name placed in nomination for the presidency by a major political party, and one of the first politicians to publicly challenge Senator Joseph McCarthy. During a time when the typical senator was expected to be: male, married, middle-aged or older, a lawyer or businessman, or a military veteran (especially after World War II); she repeatedly shattered political barriers for women.

More about Margaret

While serving in the House during World War II, she introduced legislation to give women permanent status in the military. She fought for increased funding for childcare in war-time factories and for improved status of women serving their country in uniform. On various occasions between 1945 and 1972, she co-sponsored and voted for the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution.

She became an expert in military affairs and aeronautics and served as the ranking Republican on both the Armed Services Committee and the Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee. One NASA director commented that if it were not for Margaret Chase Smith, we never would have placed a man on the Moon.

She even became the first woman in Congress to break the sound barrier, flying in military jet aircraft and reportedly volunteering for aerobatic maneuvers (including barrel rolls) to demonstrate her confidence in American military aviation... in heels, of course.



Did you know?

In November 1992, an unprecedented number of women won election to the Senate, tripling their numbers from two to six. This growing presence of women in the senate resulted in the first women's restroom just off the Senate floor ([senate.gov](https://www.senate.gov)).



William Lewis Jr.

Born and raised in Oklahoma, Lewis received a bachelor's degree in geology from the University of Oklahoma, a master's in business administration from Harvard University, and a master's of law from Southeastern University. He worked as a government lawyer in Washington before serving in the United States Air Force, eventually achieving the rank of Brigadier General during World War II.



Christopher Clark

Lewis joined Margaret Chase Smith's Senate staff during the 1950s and became far more than an aide. He served as her legislative adviser, campaign manager, political strategist, speech editor, administrative director, and trusted confidant and friend.



Jean Kerr

Kerr was born into a politically connected Washington, D.C., family. Her father, Dr. James Kerr, was a respected physician, and Jean grew up in an environment that valued education and public service. She attended George Washington University and worked as a writer and researcher for former Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes. After graduating from Northwestern University in 1948, she joined the staff of Sen. Joseph. McCarthy and worked there until her marriage to the senator in 1953. She generally appeared as a supportive spouse who accompanied her husband to official events. Her relative silence has made it difficult for historians to determine precisely how much she shared or questioned Joseph McCarthy's political convictions.



Kelly Karcher



Senator Joe McCarthy

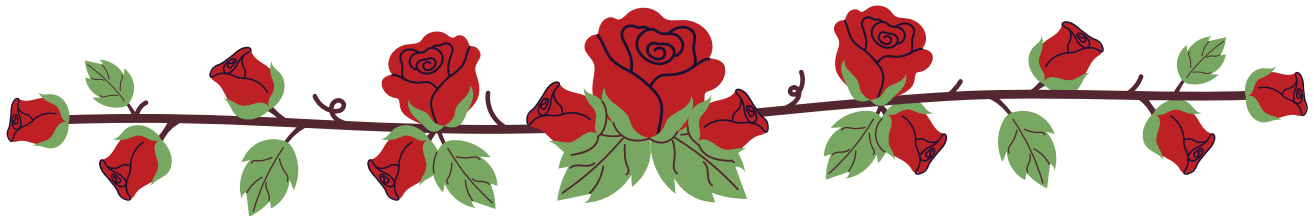
McCarthy was born in Grand Chute, Wisconsin to Irish Catholic farming parents. The fifth of nine children, he spent his youth working on the family farm before returning to complete high school at a late age in only one year before attending Marquette University, where he earned a law degree. During World War II, McCarthy enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. While he did fly on combat missions, historians note that his campaign claims exaggerated the extent of his combat experience.



Jonathan Swindle

His first years in Washington were relatively undistinguished. He struggled to gain national attention and had few major legislative accomplishments. Seeking an issue that would define his career, McCarthy increasingly focused on anti-communism, which had become a growing concern among his constituents following WWII. McCarthy recognized that confrontation attracted viewers. His hearings became national events, and he mastered the art of dominating news cycles. However, his accusations (particularly of the U.S. Army in 1954) would result in the United States Senate formally censuring McCarthy for conduct considered contrary to senatorial traditions and ethics, essentially ending his political influence.

Censure: a formal public condemnation of a senator for conduct deemed inappropriate or damaging to Congress. It does not remove the senator from office but serves as an official statement of disapproval by fellow senators.



Understudies



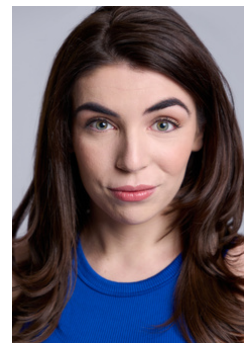
Betsy Mugavero



Noah Fletcher



Joey Sponseller



Rebecca Cort

Important Dates in Understanding *Conscience's*

Cold War

1945

World War II ends; the United States and Soviet Union emerge as rival superpowers.

1949

NATO is formed. The Soviet Union detonates its first atomic bomb.
Mao Zedong establishes the People's Republic of China.

- The term "Cold War" was first used by George Orwell in 1945 to describe a world dominated by the ever-present threat of nuclear destruction that would never erupt into outright war. By 1950, Americans felt that the presence of communism posed imminent danger, no longer a distant possibility.

February 1950

Senator Joseph McCarthy delivers his Wheeling Speech, claiming to possess a list of communists working in the State Department and becomes the face of the anti-communism movement.

June 1, 1950

Margaret Chase Smith delivers her Declaration of Conscience on the Senate floor.

- One of McCarthy's tactics was to publicly accuse a fellow politician or public figure of being a Communist without even the slightest bit of proof. The proof didn't matter, because a simple accusation was enough to ruin that person's reputation. Smith refused to go along with this and declared in her "Declaration of Conscience" that Americans have the right to independent thought, to criticize, to hold unpopular beliefs, and to protest. She warned against political movements based on fear, hatred, and smear tactics, arguing that both parties were damaging American democracy by exploiting public fear. Although she remained firmly anti-communist, she believed constitutional freedoms were more important than partisan advantage.
- All but one of the Republican senators who co-signed Smith's Declaration withdrew their endorsement after the speech. When McCarthy gained control of the Permanent Investigating Subcommittee of the Senate Expenditures Committee, he removed Smith and replaced her with then-Senator Richard Nixon. Talks of her as a potential vice-presidential candidate evaporated, but despite being briefly sidelined, her political career outlasted McCarthy's by more than 20 years.

June 25, 1950
The Korean War begins.

- The Korean War is considered the first military action of the Cold War, as the Soviet-backed North Korea crossed the 38th parallel into the pro-Western South Korea. By July, American troops were involved on South Korea's behalf.

1954
Televised Army-McCarthy Hearings expose
McCarthy's tactics to the American public.

- McCarthy accused the United States Army of being soft on communism and harboring dangerous subversives. This led to one of the most famous series of congressional hearings in American history and to Joseph McCarthy's censure. The Army-McCarthy Hearings were televised live spanning 36 days. The defining moment came when Army attorney Joseph Welch challenged McCarthy after another baseless claim, asking: "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?" This marked a turning point in public opinion. McCarthy's confrontational style, once seen by many frightened American voters as fearless, now appeared as reckless and a form of bullying. The Senate formally censured McCarthy on December 2.

For a more complete timeline refer to: [Truman Library's Timeline of the Cold War](#).



Alyssa Keene as Senator Margaret Chase Smith and Jonathan Swindle as Senator Joseph McCarthy.
Photo by Robert Wade.

United States Government in 1950

Washington, D.C., particularly the United States Senate, became the arena where national debates about communism, civil liberties, and patriotism played out before the country.

Harry S. Truman, a Democrat, unexpectedly became president in April 1945 following the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had led the nation through most of the Great Depression and World War II. Truman inherited enormous responsibilities, including the final months of World War II, the beginning of the Cold War, and growing tensions with the Soviet Union.

In 1950, Democrats controlled both Congress and the White House. Republicans were the minority party in the Senate. Republicans were campaigning against The New Deal, excessive government spending, and lax attitude towards national defense in the face of a mounting cold war.

The New Deal: A domestic program during the Roosevelt administration which expanded the scope of federal government activity by taking action to bring immediate economic relief and reforms in industry, agriculture, finance, waterpower, labor, and housing.

The Committee System

Most of the Senate's work happens outside the Senate chamber. As the U.S. Senate explains, "Committees are essential to the effective operation of the Senate. Through investigations and hearings, committees gather information on national and international problems within their jurisdiction in order to draft, consider, and recommend legislation to the full membership of the Senate. Only a small percentage of bills considered by committees reach the Senate floor" (senate.gov).

Committees will hold hearings to investigate government agencies, expose corruption, question witnesses under oath, recommend new legislation and more. These hearings are not criminal trials. Instead, they are fact-finding proceedings conducted by Congress. The committees referenced in *Conscience* include:

The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)

Established in 1938, this committee of the U.S. House of Representatives investigated alleged subversive activities and communist influence in the United States. During the Second Red Scare (late 1940s–1957), HUAC held highly publicized hearings that questioned the political loyalties of federal employees, labor organizers, educators, and artists. Critics argued that HUAC's tactics violated First Amendment protections and encouraged guilt by association. As public opinion shifted, the committee's influence declined. It was renamed the House Internal Security Committee in 1969 and abolished in 1975.

Expenditures committee

Predecessors to the modern Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committees, they oversaw federal accounting, administrative processes, and the reorganization of the executive branch. The committee investigated military contract mismanagement, the disposal of wartime surplus property, subversives in government, and labor racketeering.

Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations

A powerful panel originally formed to audit government efficiency and corruption. It became the main stage for Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist crusade. The subcommittee is responsible for studying and investigating the efficiency and economy of operations relating to all branches of the government. It originally formed in 1941 to investigate waste and profiteering in the World War II defense effort. Over the decades, it has held highly publicized hearings on organized crime and communist subversion (the McCarthy hearings).

Naval Affairs Investigation Committee

The House Committee on Naval Affairs was a standing committee in the United States House of Representatives from 1822 to 1946. It was responsible for drafting legislation, funding, and overseeing the United States Navy and Marine Corps.

Did you know?

To quote the [United States Senate website](#):

"For much of 1949 and 1950, senators were forced to work in the Old Senate Chamber while the current chamber underwent renovation. Ninety-six senators were jammed into a space built for half that number. Only floor leaders got desks. Other senators squeezed into uncomfortable chairs and crowded into corners, at times forced to climb over each other just to find an empty seat. Under such circumstances, as Jack Anderson concluded, is it any wonder that 'senators were discarding their courtly manners and snapping at each other?'"

Appointment vs. Election

Most senators are elected directly by voters for six-year terms. However, if a senator died or resigned before completing a term, many states allow the governor to appoint a temporary replacement until a special election or the next scheduled election. Currently, Kentucky, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Oregon, and Wisconsin require Senate vacancies to be filled only by special election.

After Margaret Chase Smith's husband, Congressman Clyde Smith, died in 1940, she won a special election to complete his term rather than being appointed.

The Second Red Scare and Its Effect on Marginalized Communities

The political backdrop of *Conscience* is steeped in fear, taking place in the midst of The Second Red Scare—often referred to as McCarthyism—which cost 12,000 Americans their jobs and thousands more unable to work because they had been blacklisted. Minority groups, particularly the LGBTQ+, Jewish, and Black communities, were unduly viewed as inherently suspect of communism by the government. Each faced prejudice based on the belief that certain groups were inherently dangerous, disloyal, or un-American.

As the American civil rights movement against racial segregation and discrimination came to prominence in the mid-1950s, civil rights leaders and labor organizers were frequently accused of communist sympathies. The Jewish American community continued to work against post-World War II antisemitism. The Black American community continued anti-racist advocacy living under Jim Crow laws. Civil rights activists agreed that America could not champion freedom overseas while denying equal rights to its own citizens—an idea in alignment with the subject of Cold War Soviet propaganda. As anti-communist investigations intensified, many Black and Jewish Americans had been active in labor organizing, civil rights advocacy, and progressive political movements throughout the first half of the twentieth century. While these activities were entirely legal, they increasingly attracted suspicion during the late 1940s and 1950s.



Demonstrators marching in the street holding signs during the March on Washington, 1963. Source: Library of Congress

The Lavender Scare: A period of time amid the Second Red Scare when the U.S. government systematically targeted and removed thousands of employees suspected of being homosexual.

In 1947, the U.S. Park Police launched a "Sex Perversion Elimination Program" in Washington, D.C., specifically targeting gay men through arrests, intimidation, and entrapment. The following year, Congress passed legislation allowing the detention and treatment of so-called "sexual psychopaths" in the nation's capital. This reinforced the belief that homosexuality was not only criminal (illegal in every state) but also a form of mental illness. As McCarthyistic fears of Communist infiltration intensified, homosexuality was increasingly framed as a national security threat. President Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10450 in 1953, stating that individuals could be removed from government employment if they were considered a security risk. Although the order did not explicitly use the word "homosexuality," federal agencies interpreted "sexual perversion" as including homosexuality. This allowed agencies to investigate and dismiss employees based on suspected sexual orientation. The order remained the foundation of federal anti-gay employment policies for decades.

Additional Terms and Cultural References

Alger Hiss

A former U.S. State Department official (he attended the Yalta Conference as an adviser to President FDR) whose case became one of the most consequential espionage scandals of the early Cold War. In 1948, Whittaker Chambers, a former communist courier, testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that Hiss had belonged to a Soviet espionage network in Washington during the 1930s. Hiss vehemently denied the allegations. Because the statute of limitations had expired, he was not tried for espionage but was convicted of perjury in January 1950 for lying under oath about his relationship with Chambers. His conviction appeared to validate growing fears that Soviet spies had infiltrated the highest levels of the U.S. government and lent credibility to Senator Joseph McCarthy's subsequent claims of communist infiltration within the State Department. Hiss maintained his innocence until his death, and his case remains one of the most debated episodes of the Cold War.



Alger Hiss, Encyclopædia Britannica

Armaments Race

When two or more nations rapidly and competitively increase the size, quality, and technological sophistication of their militaries.

Bluster

Talk loudly and aggressively with empty threat.

Chief Counsel

A lead attorney for a specific congressional committee, responsible for overseeing investigations, drafting legislation, managing hearings, and providing legal interpretations.

Demagogue

A political leader who gains power by exploiting the emotions, prejudices, and fears of the common people.

Four Horsemen of Calumny

Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry, Smear, an allusion to the bible's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Conquest, War, Famine, and Death). Calumny, meaning the act of making false, malicious statements with the deliberate intent to damage someone's reputation.

Submit their concurrence

To officially provide agreement, approval, or consent for a proposed action or decision. This ensures that all necessary parties have signed off and are in alignment before a project, budget, or legal action moves forward.

Pre-show Discussion Questions and Activity

1. History review! Brainstorm anything you remember about what was happening in the 1950s. What comes to mind when you hear about the Cold War and Red Scare? What happened in the years leading up to these events?
2. Margaret Chase Smith is recognized as the first woman elected to both the House and the Senate. What does it mean to be “the first” to do something? What are the challenges? Have you ever set precedent? What did it mean for you?
3. Read Margaret’s “Declaration of Conscience” and McCarthy’s “Wheeling Speech” [here](#). Note the bolded passages included in *Conscience*. Why might the playwright have chosen to include these passages and exclude others?
4. Joe DiPietro is a specialist in adapting historical dramas for the stage (*Diana*, *Conscience*, *Sinatra*). Think of a historical figure or event in history that you think would make an interesting play. Brainstorm ideas for what it would like: the characters, the setting, the story. Can you tell this story in two hours? What other limitations could you come across if you were producing this show? What if it was made into a film instead of a play?
 - a. With your idea, choose two characters and try writing a page of dialogue between them. Think about what they want and how they are willing to get it. If your characters are based real people, try to include at least one direct quote they have said.

Post-show Discussion Questions

1. Why did so few senators choose to back Senator Smith publicly when so many more agreed with her privately? If you were among the 96 senators in the 1950s, how would you have responded?
2. Thinking about when this play was written (premiering in March 2020), what political events might this play be corresponding with? How do the events in this 1950s play relate to our world in 2026?
3. The world premiere of *Conscience* was produced by George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on March 6, 2020, and was cut short due to the pandemic. Thinking about the political climate pre-pandemic, how would audience perceptions change between the play’s world premier and now?
4. Thinking back on your response to pre-show question 2 (What does it mean to be “the first?”). Does your opinion change after seeing the play unfold? If so, how?
5. In the published script for *Conscience*, the stage directions suggest that all the actors to be on stage the entire time, even when they are not part of the action. Does this production follow that stage direction or did the director make different choices? Why do you think the director made the staging choices they did? What does the production gain (or lose) by having non-speaking actors viewing the action on stage?

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Taproot Theatre Company's Education Programs



Camps & Classes

Taproot Theatre Company's Acting Studio offers year-round instructional programs for theatre artists of all ages and experience levels. We are devoted to creating a nurturing environment to help students develop their unique gifts.

In addition to acting classes for adults, we offer improv classes for seniors experiencing early-stage memory loss.



School Touring Productions

Taproot's Road Company uses research-backed strategies from the Committee for Children's Second Step curriculum to help students build empathy, manage emotions, and stand up for themselves and others. Since 1985, the Road Company has brought professional theatre to schools across Washington State, reaching more than 70,000 K-12 students each year with our dynamic bullying-prevention plays that educate and inspire.



In-School Residencies & Workshops

From drama games to acting classes to putting on a production, Taproot Theatre's residencies bring educational theatre directly to schools. Our theatre arts professionals visit classrooms for workshops that excite students. Students develop basic acting skills and explore non-theatre curriculum using theatre as a medium.