Senator Margaret Chase Smith: The Way DOGE Should Be

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Abstract:

The United States established the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1958. NASA was established in direct response to the launch of "Sputnik" by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1957. The organization was created to compete with the technological development of the Soviet Union, particularly in space and nuclear technology. Congress established the Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee (ASSC) in conjunction with the creation of NASA as a formal Congressional body tasked with oversight of NASA and US space activities. US Senator Margaret Chase Smith was a key figure on the ASSC. She served on the committee for 14 years, and she served as ranking member during 8 of those years. This research focuses on her involvement in the hearings held by the ASSC after the Apollo 1 incident in 1967. Analyzing the Senator's role on the ASSC provides insight into the role of congressional oversight in shaping space policy and curtailing the power of the executive branch. Congress uses the power of the purse to establish oversight over programs and organizations that require government spending, allowing them to hold the executive branch accountable as well as influence policy, both foreign and domestic.

Project Objective:

NASA's first administrator, James Webb, once remarked that the United States would not have placed a man on the Moon if it were not for Senator Margaret Chase Smith. The primary objective of this project was to explore the role of Margaret Chase Smith in the founding of NASA. That being said, my interest in Margaret Chase Smith stemmed from a few different places, so some of my objectives for this project were as much exploratory as they were concrete.

I was curious to learn more about the role of congress in the operations of NASA and the ways in which congressional oversight impacted space diplomacy/shaped the priorities of the space program. The role of the ASSC over NASA fits into a larger question about the role of congress to oversee federal agencies. Another lens from which I approached the project was my interest in adding to the chronicle of stories about powerful women involved in the space program. Through my research, I aimed to explore why there are so few stories about specific women who played a role in the history of scientific development. The last objective of the project was to explore the practice of space diplomacy and how the space program contributed to and coincided with the Cold War.

Methodology:

I began my project by studying the life of Margaret Chase Smith. I collected secondary sources about her life including newspaper articles, biographies, and journal articles to learn about her childhood and her career in congress. I was interested in studying the Senator's childhood to better understand why she was interested in the space program and how she approached her work as a Senator. While learning about her career, I focused on mentions of her involvement in anything related to the Cold War, national security and the military, and space. While researching Senator Smith, I also researched the development of the space program, including how NASA was formed and the role of Congress during this process.

After analyzing secondary sources, I began reaching out to archives and historians with information about Margaret Chase Smith and/or NASA to discover connections between the two. I

visited three different archives: The Margaret Chase Smith Library; NASA Headquarters History Archive; and the National Archives in DC. At these archives I analyzed congressional hearing records, photographs from the Senator's time working on the ASSC, and the Senator's personal correspondence with both government executives and members of the American public.

In addition to reviewing archive materials, I reached out to former colleagues and friends of the Senator's, including Secretary William Cohen, Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, and former Director of the Margaret Chase Smith Library David Richards to gain a better understanding of her interest in the space program. These interviews were particularly interesting because they contributed to my exploration of women in STEM and women in space.

After gathering data from secondary sources, primary sources archives, and primary source interviews I sat down with my research advisor to analyse the material and figure out which of my initial objectives it was most closely aligned with.

Discussion Section:

There is very little written about Senator Margaret Chase Smith's involvement in the founding of NASA. At most, books or articles mention that she was part of the Senate committee on Aeronautical and Space Sciences. However, there is more written about Senator Smith's involvement in national defense. She served on the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, where she was involved in science and technology policy, the military, and nuclear development. Analyzing Senator Smith's involvement in the military and national security work connects to her work for the space program.

According to Dave Richards, the former Director of the Margaret Chase Smith Library, the Senator's interest in space began during her childhood. Senator Smith came of age during the birth of aviation. Her 6th birthday was December 14th 1903, which was the same day that the Wright Brothers first attempted flight. Senator Smith took her first plane ride only 22 years later in 1925 when she was working for her first newspaper. As Dr. Richards remarks, she took the chance to fly as soon as it was offered to her. Margaret Chase Smith grew up with aviation and flight was the technological innovation of her childhood. Dr. Richard speculates that this could have been a significant reason for her eventual interest in space. Furthermore, he posits that Senator Smith might have been interested in the ASSC because of the Cold War.

Understanding Senator Smith is key to understanding her impact on the space program. Her work on the special committee investigating the disaster of Apollo 1 highlights not only her interest in the space program, but also her technical knowledge of different space procedures and equipment. She was not any less informed about the technical details of the space program than any of her counterparts. Furthermore, every question she asked, whether it related to a mistake that was made during Apollo 1 or an inquiry regarding next steps for the Apollo program revolved around NASA's budget and the idea of fiscal conservatism. Margaret Chase Smith was NASA's ultimate accountability holder. This pattern becomes increasingly clear after discovering her efforts to combat wasteful spending at NASA, particularly in regard to consultants and lunchroom spending by NASA executives.

Senator Smith played a crucial role in the success of NASA and the Apollo program. She wielded her role on the ASSC to hold NASA accountable for its mistakes, and to make sure taxpayer money was well spent. Despite her fiscal conservatism and sometimes difficult lines of questioning for NASA administrators, she was a fierce advocate for the space program and a key individual behind the organization's success. Senator Smith's role on the ASSC demonstrates the power of Congress to hold federal agencies accountable, and emphasizes the importance of the power of the purse.

Acknowledgements and References:

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