

# Sen. Specter, Running Against the Grain

## *Jewish, Northeastern, Abortion-Rights Supporter Seeks the GOP Nomination*

By Thomas B. Edsall

Washington Post Staff Writer

On a December night in 1991, Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) began his comeback from the most damaging episode of his political career before a room full of angry voters in a Philadelphia hotel. As the crowd chanted "Shame, shame, shame," and questioners demanded to know why Specter had accused Anita Hill of perjury during his relentless cross-examination of Clarence Thomas's chief accuser before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Specter stood his ground.

Hill's statements had "established perjury, whether you like it or not," Specter declared. But, he vowed, whenever there was a move to undercut a woman's right to abortion he would "lead the fight against it."

Specter survived a tough challenge the next year, winning reelection by a 3-percentage-point margin in a Democratic "Year of the Woman" that he had done so much to create. For some senators, such a near-death experience usually results in extra caution, but in 1993, when Sen. Bob Packwood (R-Ore.) faced charges of sexual harassment and the Senate debated whether the Ethics Committee could subpoena Packwood's diaries, Specter was at his side. This week Specter will go against the

grain yet again when he announces he's running for president—a Jewish, northeastern, supporter of abortion rights seeking the nomination of a party whose base support can be found among Christian conservatives, abortion opponents and people who live in the South and West. And with California Gov. Pete Wilson signaling last week that he will become a candidate, the fundamental premise of the Specter campaign—that he would be the only one carrying the banner for Republican primary voters who support abortion rights and are concerned about the ascendancy of the Christian Right—is threatened from the start.

But in three decades in politics Specter, 65, has never been one to do the predictable thing or to fit into easy categorization. His image has gyrated back and forth from principled reformer to calculating opportunist, from proponent of women's rights to anti-feminist hatchet man, from liberal dissenter to conservative front man.

In recent years, the issues of minority rights, privacy and, most importantly, women's rights, have played a crucial role in defining him. In the cultural war between Democratic liberalism and Republican conservatism, Specter, who is a Democrat turned Republican, has staked out virtually unique territory by defending abortion rights, standing with Packwood and Thom-

as, and taking a leadership role in the defeat of Robert H. Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court.

These stands have placed him on both the left and right, but if there is an underlying consistency, he has aligned himself with the right to privacy—both for women who assert authority over reproduction, and in the case of Packwood, for someone he feels was "very badly abused" by the Senate.

Asked in a recent interview if he felt that way about Packwood even in light of his experience in the Thomas hearings, he replied: "Damn right, damn right. I'm not running away."

While still defensive about his role in Thomas's confirmation to the Supreme Court, Specter has said he stands by his vote for Thomas, though he believes he made a mistake in accusing Hill of perjury. He has said the experience made him much more aware of the issue of sexual harassment.

There is, in addition, a deeply ingrained sense of defiance within Specter, who takes pride in his repeated refusals to bend to pressure from the Republican Senate caucus, and who has shaped his presidential bid as a challenge to the cultural conservatism within his own party. He has not been reluctant to

See SPECTER, A7, Col. 1

tant to take that challenge directly to his adversaries—at a speech at the Iowa state Republican convention last summer he was booed by delegates who were members of the Christian Coalition.

### A Sense of Defiance

"I'm not around here to fall in line," he said in a recent interview. "I'm just not going to do it. I'm the only guy who will take on [Pat] Robertson, [Patrick J.] Buchanan, and [Christian Coalition executive director Ralph] Reed. . . . I opposed Oliver North [in his 1994 Senate bid]. I wanted to be a chairman, but not badly enough to have him be the fifty-first" Republican, to give the GOP a majority.

If Specter's ideological track record has veered from left to right, he brings to the contest a resiliency and tenacity that is hard to match.

"If you take a look at my campaigns, and I've studied all my opponents, I have had, by far, more tough campaigns than anybody around," he said. ". . . I have run four times in Philadelphia, which is a graveyard for Republican candidates, and I ran in three primaries statewide to win [his first] Republican primary. I really wore them out in Pennsylvania. I've been in eleven tough races, and I'm seven and four."

His ability to pick himself up off the mat and go another round has won him the respect of friends and foes in Pennsylvania politics. "He is a heavyweight," conceded Neil Oxman, the Democratic consultant who handled media for Specter's 1992 opponent, Lynn Yeakel.

### Son of an Immigrant

Born in Wichita, Kan., Specter spent much of his adolescence in Russell, Kan., hometown of Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.), who is now a competitor for the GOP nomination. Specter's father, Harry, immigrated from Batchkurina, Russia, first to Philadelphia, where he worked for a tailor, and then to the Midwest.

"He was a peddler," Specter told the Senate in 1992, the year that would be his father's 100th birthday. "He sold blankets to the farmers in the winter and cantaloupes on the streets of small Midwestern towns in the summer."

In Wichita there was a substantial Jewish community, but in the small town of Russell, the Specters were the only Jewish family. Specter said that in those days, schools started

the day with a prayer "with Jesus Christ in it. It was an isolating factor. It affected me in a number of ways. One way was to really let me know I was Jewish, and to bring out a pride in being Jewish. That was what I was, and I was proud of it. It sort of told me who I was."

Today Specter still has strong feelings about his father and his father's experiences, and these mesh with his concerns about current trends in the Republican Party:

"I wouldn't call it [some of the positions taken by the Christian right] antisemitism," he said. "I would call it a pretty strong insensitivity to how Jewish people feel about separation of church and state and religious freedom, and how we think separation of church and state is a central part of religious freedom."

"There are very deep scars in the world Jewish community which occurred in our lifetime, and I feel very keenly about that," he added. "The Cossacks rode down the streets of my father's hometown scaring them, brandishing their swords. They beat up the Jews and people carried scars for a long time. . . . And when Pat Robertson says there is no separation of church and state, he says it in 1993, and I challenge him on it and he says he means it, that is serious stuff."

Politics is part of the lifeblood of

Specter's family. Specter's son, Shanin, has emerged in Pennsylvania as a key strategist not only in his father's campaigns, but in other Republican contests, including the successful 1994 campaigns of Rick Santorum for the Senate and Tom Ridge for governor. Specter's wife, Joan Levy Specter, is a member of the Philadelphia city council.

### Early Success, Then Defeat

Specter first won political office 30 years ago, running as a liberal reformer for district attorney of Philadelphia on the Republican ticket. A rising star in Philadelphia politics, Specter had the backing of both the GOP, despite the fact that he remained a registered Democrat until after winning office, and the then-influential Americans for Democratic Action.

He nearly became mayor in 1967, losing by a slim margin to Democrat James Tate. Specter's defeat resulted in large part from his refusal to say whether he would appoint the popular Frank Rizzo as police commissioner and from his declaration that legislation providing state aid to parochial schools was unconstitutional—two stands that cost him heavily in the ethnic and Catholic wards of the city.

In his first term as city prosecu-



UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

Specter announcing opposition to the Supreme Court nomination of Robert H. Bork in 1987, left, and at the celebration for his 1992 comeback reelection.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

tor, Specter junked patronage control over the selection of assistant district attorneys, attacked municipal corruption, sought to establish higher standards for the city's prisons and oversaw a generation of young lawyers that included the city's current mayor, Edward G. Rendell, the incumbent district attorney, Lynn Abraham, and two who went on to become U.S. attorneys, Mike Baylson and Michael Rotko.

Alan J. Davis, a Democrat who later became city solicitor, worked for Specter from 1966 to 1968. "In the period I knew him, he was a bright, shining knight. They were good years," Davis said.

In 1969, Specter won reelection on a Republican ticket with Tom Gola, the basketball star running for comptroller, with a slogan still considered to be among the best of any campaign in Philadelphia history: "They are young, they are tough, and nobody owns them."

But in 1973, as the Watergate scandal turned allegiance to the Republican Party into a liability, and after the Philadelphia Inquirer produced stories questioning the success of the prosecutor's office in winning convictions, Specter was defeated. It was the first of three defeats—the others were for the Senate in 1976 and for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 1978

—that kept him out of office the rest of the decade.

Specter's refusal to quit prompts a number of politicians and political strategists to compare him to Richard M. Nixon. "The guy is tenacious, he believes in himself," said Democratic consultant Saul Shorr.

In 1980, after the series of three defeats, Specter finally won his seat in the Senate, beating Pittsburgh Mayor Pete Flaherty. In 1986, he decisively defeated his Democratic challenger, former Rep. Bob Edgar, and in 1992, he beat Yeakel, 49 to 46 percent, with a conservative third party candidate getting 5 percent. In statewide contests, the liberal, big-city edge to Specter's public image has been moderated by his support of the death penalty and his opposition to gun control.

### In the Senate

Over the years, Specter has also been adept at attracting press coverage—in a 1988 survey of congressional administrative assistants by Washingtonian magazine, he tied with Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato (R-N.Y.) and Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) for the title of "camera hog."

His tenacity, ambition and ability to marshal a legal argument have, for some who worked with him, ex-

ceeded his capacity for readily accessible friendship. "If I were in trouble, I would want Arlen Specter to be my lawyer. If I died, I would want Arlen Specter to handle my estate. If I was looking for someone to go to a Redskins-Cowboys game, he would not be my first choice," said Pennsylvania Republican political consultant Rick Robb.

Before Wilson's announcement last week that he felt he had a "duty" to run for president, Specter's strategy was clear.

"In a race with at least six candidates running to the right (Dole, Texas Sen. Phil Gramm, former Tennessee governor Lamar Alexander, Rep. Bob Dornan [Calif.], Sen. Richard [G.] Lugar [Ind.] and Buchanan), a sole moderate candidate could win the Iowa caucus, now slated as the first delegate contest, with as little as 17 percent of the vote," Roger Stone, the Washington lobbyist-operative who is the principle strategist of the Specter campaign, argued in a recent memo.

In New Hampshire, Stone noted, former Sen. Warren B. Rudman won his 1980 primary victory "with just 30 percent of the vote in a field with four other candidates running to the right."

Whatever the outcome of the 1996 presidential contest, Shorr noted that even if Specter is "marginalized nationally," his pro-abortion-rights bid should help him restore support among a key constituency in Pennsylvania: well-educated, centrist to liberal women, especially suburbanites, who have become key swing voters in general election contests.

### Ambivalent Supporters

Kate Michelman, president of the National Abortion Rights Action League, whose family lives in Pennsylvania, reflects the view of many of those voters in her ambivalence about Specter.

"I have very strong, very strong feelings about the treatment of Anita Hill, and Senator Specter's vote for Clarence Thomas. It was unjustified treatment, punitive," she said.

But, she added, "We think he is doing something very important here, he is taking on one of the most important fights within the Republican Party."