

Still relentless, Specter raring to take next step

He's after a 4th term and a better Senate post.

By Tom Infield
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Arlen Specter always wanted it the most.

"That's right, that's right," he says with a mouthful of ham-and-cheese sandwich. "Wanted it the most, and was willing to work the hardest."

He says this from the leather-cushioned backseat of a Lincoln Town Car rolling through Doylestown on a recent, frenetic day of campaign stops in Bucks County.

Now in his 17th year in the U.S. Senate, Arlen Specter wants it again.

Always a bit of an outsider in state politics — a moderate Republican in a right-leaning party, a Philadel-

phian in a state that loves to despise Philadelphia — Specter stands a good chance of achieving in 1998 what no Pennsylvania senator has ever achieved.

That is to be elected four times.

"John Heinz was elected three times," he says, referring to his friend and fellow Republican, killed in a 1991 air crash.

"Hugh Scott was elected three times," he says, naming one of "three wise men" among Republican senators who went to President Richard Nixon amid the Watergate scandal in 1974 and urged him to resign.

"But that's it," Specter says. "No

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one four times."

The same determination that drove Specter not to quit politics after three straight election failures nearly a generation ago appears to drive him still.

Twenty months before his next election date, Specter is off and running — relentless as ever on the brink of his 67th birthday, fully recovered, he says, from a noncancerous brain tumor that had to be excised over the summer.

Already the most powerful Keystone State senator since Scott, two decades ago, Specter is chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, overseeing a Senate probe into the Pentagon's handling of gulf war syndrome, the medical condition reported by some war veterans.

As a four-term senator, he would be in line to become chairman of perhaps the most important Senate panel: the Appropriations Committee.

But he would have to get elected again for that. And for Specter, getting elected has often been a struggle.

"It's never been easy for him," said Ed Howard, a former GOP state senator from Bucks County and longtime friend of Specter's. "I don't think he expects it will be this time, either."

Specter himself wistfully brought up the names of two former senators from Mississippi — John Stennis and James Eastland — who served in Washington for 41 and 36 years, respectively, while rarely having to fight a battle back home.

"Stennis and Eastland," he said, "had the job for life."

Though he'll surely face a well-funded Democrat — and though he may even get a conservative challenge from within his party — Specter looks a good bet to win. But it's early.

No serious opposition loomed at the same stage of his 1992 campaign, either. Then came the Supreme Court confirmation hearing for

Clarence Thomas.

Despite an abortive run for president in '96, Specter is probably best known for his questioning of Anita Hill — the Oklahoma law professor who accused Thomas of sexually harassing her when she worked for him as an aide.

The toughness of the questions — at one point, the former Philadelphia district attorney accused Hill of perjury — stirred outrage among women who, Specter realized later, imagined themselves in her position.

"I came within an eyelash — 2.6 percent, exactly — of losing my seat," he recalled.

But that was five years ago. Anita Hill is behind him.

Or so he hopes.

Which is why he took great interest when, at Central Bucks West High School in Doylestown, a student inquired about the "political fallout" of the Thomas hearings.

"How many of you have heard of Justice Thomas?" he asked 75 students gathered in a double classroom to hear him speak.

About 40 percent raised a hand.

"How many of you have heard of Professor Hill?"

All but one or two raised a hand.

Later, in the Town Car, Specter reflected on his poll.

"What do I make of it? ... That [even though] Justice Thomas is on the Supreme Court, she remains a more dominant public figure."

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Six days after taking questions from the students at C.B. West, Specter is making inquiries of his own in a dark-wood hearing chamber in the modernist Hart Senate Office Building.

Besides heading the veterans panel, Specter is chairman of the subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee that oversees billions of dollars in federal spending for labor, health and human services, and education.

As chairman, Specter can call a hearing any time he wants. Today,



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U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter reviews material on gulf war syndrome submitted by Anthony Stevenson of Camp Hill (right).

he has chosen to inject the Senate into a hot education controversy. This is the decision of the Oakland, Calif., school district to have its teachers employ Ebonics — the vernacular of many African Americans — in teaching black students to read and speak standard English.

Invited to testify for five minutes each, five officials from the Oakland schools have traveled 3,000 miles at their district's expense. "It's one of those things you can't say no to," said Jean Quan, the school board president.

It turns out, the hearing is basically for Specter's benefit. For most of the two-hour session, he sits alone at the senators' podium, flanked by 16 empty chairs. One other senator appears at the outset and denounces Ebonics as "political correctness gone out of control." Then he leaves. A second arrives late, stays 20 minutes or so, and leaves.

But Specter is intently interested, all the way.

To his son Shanin, a medical-malpractice lawyer in Philadelphia, it illustrated Specter's intellectual joy in trampling through a difficult issue. One thing his father loves about being a senator, he said, is that "every problem in the United

States eventually finds its way to the United States Senate."

Before the hearing, Specter had made himself available to CNN for a coffee-time interview, broadcast nationally. The hearing itself has gone out nationally on C-Span. The press tables were crowded. For one day, aside from the continuing furor over Newt Gingrich's leadership in the House, Specter's hearing dominated news attention on Capitol Hill.

In Washington, as in Pennsylvania — where he has been tearing about of late, doing school appearances and meeting with editorial boards — Specter is trying to raise his profile as he heads into next year's campaign. Last week, he again drew national attention by calling — and chairing — a veterans committee hearing at which Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf denied ever having knowingly exposed American soldiers to poison gas during the gulf war.

Specter believes, he said, that after veering right in recent years, U.S. politics is moving back toward the center — the position where he judges himself to be. That includes firm support for education and for some health-care reform — al-

though not the original plan of President Clinton, which Specter attacked as a bureaucratic nightmare.

Specter's ill-starred presidential campaign, in which he was the GOP candidate identified as being most "pro-choice" in terms of abortion, failed to gain him much leverage.

In fact, he said, it may have made as many enemies in his conservative party as it did friends. Ed Howard, his longtime friend, remembered "fearing for his safety" at political rallies in Iowa.

"He never backed away from any of those rallies. I admire his guts, his courage. He took the message into some places where he may have been the only one in the room who wanted to hear it. . . . I think it was very wearing on him."

In the Senate, too, Specter has sometimes been a bit of a loner.

Said Howard: "The Senate is a very clubby institution, and I don't think he's part of the club. . . . I think people look on him with a measure of awe and respect. I *don't* think they look on him with admiration. . . . He doesn't win points because he is warm and fuzzy. He wins points because he knows the material, and is relentless."

An earnest competitor in his morning squash matches at a Center City club, Specter puts in a long workday, and demands much of his staff, too.

As all senators do, Specter runs a small federal employment service. He controls 51 jobs and a \$1.9 million budget for his Washington and Pennsylvania offices, which include outposts in Allentown, Erie, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Scranton and Wilkes-Barre.

As veterans committee chairman, he also controls that panel's \$743,000 budget and nine staffers.

Craig Snyder, his chief of staff, nodded when asked if working for Specter was like being in the Army — *You're glad you did it, but might never want to do it again.*

"He's a demanding guy, a demanding boss," Snyder said. "But I think

he feels, 'There's work to be done.'"

Arlen Specter's father, Harry, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, was in the First World War.

"He was inducted in Nebraska in April 1918," Specter said. "Twenty-nine days later, they shipped him overseas. And he was cannon fodder. He didn't know how to shoot his gun. . . . He was badly wounded. Shrapnel in his legs."

Years later, during the Depression, Harry Specter was among veterans who marched on Washington demanding a bonus they believed had been promised to them. Federal troops dispersed them at gunpoint.

The experience seared not only the old veteran, but also the son, who only heard about it. It provided one of the major motivations that drove him into politics.

"They fired on 'em," Arlen Specter said in disbelief. "They shot 'em. And I say with real seriousness that I have been on my way to Washington ever since to get my father's bonus."

Anyone who wishes to take away his Senate seat next year will have to contend with that mind-set.

Former Lt. Gov. Mark Singel, the state Democratic chairman, who himself has been rumored to be interested in the challenge, said in an interview that his party "will have to do its homework" to unseat Specter.

"There is no question [Specter] is going to be tough to beat," he said. "But there is no such thing as a safe seat in Pennsylvania. . . . Anything can happen."

Counting losses in bids for governor and senator before he finally was elected senator in 1980, Specter next year will be making his sixth run for office since 1976.

"I don't know anybody else who has done that," said Vito Canuso, chairman of the Philadelphia GOP.

"He's one of the best campaigners I've ever seen. He would climb down a manhole if he thought there was a voter down there he could shake hands with."