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Books

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Sen. Specter STATES HIS CASE

He investigated JFK's murder, he interrogated Anita Hill.

Now this smart, ambitious prosecutor and politician tells his story — letting some warts show.



The senator at 70. He has spent half his life running for political office, often unsuccessfully.

PASSION *for* TRUTH



FROM FINDING JFK'S SINGLE BULLET
TO QUESTIONING ANITA HILL
TO IMPEACHING CLINTON

ARLEN SPECTER
WITH CHARLES ROBBINS

Passion for Truth

By Arlen Specter,
with Charles Robbins
William Morrow, 542 pp. \$26

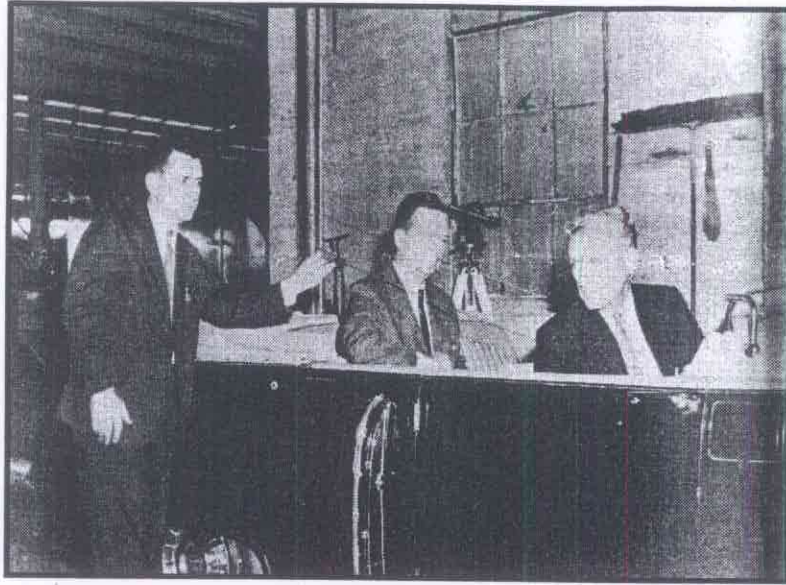
Reviewed by Tom Ferrick Jr.

There is a wonderful Yiddish word that encapsulates a fundamental of Arlen Specter's personality: *shpilkes*.

Pronounce it SHPILL-kiss.

It suffers in translation, but the nearest equivalent in English is "ants in your pants."

To be *shpilkes* is to be possessed by intense anticipatory nervousness, a fretfulness so relentless it makes you jiggle your feet and rub



As a lawyer with the Warren Commission, Arlen Specter, at left above, helped stage a 1964 reenactment of John F. Kennedy's assassination. As a young politician, right, he celebrated his election as Philadelphia D.A. with Sen. Hugh Scott in 1965.



your hands red.

The word appears nowhere in Specter's political autobiography, written with the able assistance of Charles Robbins. In *Passion for Truth*, Specter draws a more stately self-portrait: Arlen Specter, the steely-eyed prosecutor. Arlen Specter, the magisterial senator.

But the *shpilkes* Specter keeps poking his nose into the proceedings.

For instance, there is the time in the early 1960s, when Specter — then a lowly assistant district attorney — is summoned to Washington to meet with U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

Specter had impressed Kennedy by successfully prosecuting some Teamster bad guys in Philly who were allies of Kennedy's bete noire, Jimmy Hoffa.

Specter is now 70. He has had a heart bypass operation and two operations for brain tumors. But I bow in admiration before his astonishing memory. My theory is, he has kept a diary. How else could he remember events in such detail?

Minute by minute, Specter re-creates in his book his meeting with Kennedy. He even recalls the name and the price of the motel where he and his wife, Joan, stayed in D.C. For the record, it was the International Inn. Rooms were \$12 a night. They swam in the pool. This is a book written in 1999, recalling an overnight stay in 1963.

Specter was a Democrat then, a 33-year-old committeeman in his Center City ward, enamored of the Kennedy brothers. And now, here he was in the A.G.'s private office. Meeting with the great man himself. You can almost feel the young prosecutor thrumming like a

See **SPECTER** on K3

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SPECTER from K1 string on a violin. And what is that high, sharp sound? Ambition.

Pure, raw, unrefined. Hot as a furnace, bright as the sun. Ambition.

There's another word not used in the *Passion for Truth*, but a touchstone to understanding Arlen Specter.

The senator, matter-of-factly, portrays himself as a serial seeker of public office. He has run for district attorney (three times), mayor of Philadelphia (once), governor of Pennsylvania (once), U.S. senator (four times), and president of the United States (once). His electoral failures outnumber his successes.

Yet, he rarely mentions political considerations in his narrative. Here is a man who has spent half his life as a pol, yet mere politics is hardly portrayed as a motivating force. It's like retelling *Hamlet* without vengeance.

Let me tell you that Specter was and is a remarkably adept politician. He makes his decisions based not on Olympian divination of the truth, but with the same practical considerations of every pol: How will this vote advance or diminish my chances for reelection? His mastery of this political calculus is one reason he endures.

Another is his keen intellect. If you gave the 100 members of the U. S. Senate an IQ test, I suspect Pennsylvania's senior senator would score in the top 5 percent. He is more than merely smart — he is bright in a lawyerly way. He can ingest dense, obtuse pleadings in a single gulp. He can cite obscure precedents with a wave of the hand. Dress that man in a robe, put him on the U.S. Supreme Court (as President Nixon — apparently, fleetingly — considered doing) and you get a tiger of a jurist.

But that wasn't his playing field.

After serving two terms as Philadelphia's D.A., after being defeated for a third by F. Emmett Fitzpatrick in the Watergate year of 1973, Specter was a man without an office. Without a purpose.

Fortunately for him, Pete Flaherty came along.

Flaherty, a Democrat and former mayor of Pittsburgh, almost single-handedly revived the Republican Party statewide in Pennsylvania. Inept as a campaigner, clueless as a pol, Flaherty began every statewide race with a big lead — and proceeded to squander it. He simply was no match for smart, driven, focused Republican opponents. When he ran against Flaherty for the U.S. Senate in 1980, Specter won 51 to 49 percent.

Specter's book is divided almost evenly between his years pre- and post- election to the Senate. I like the pre-Senate period best.

There is a charm and verve to the tale of the young lawyer who — against all odds — was elected D.A. in 1965, at age 35. As a Republican no less, even though he didn't change his registration from "D" to "R" until after the election.

Specter says he was wooed by Democrats to stay in the party after he was elected. He switched out of loyalty to Billy Meehan, the city's GOP boss, who had recruited him to run for D.A. I have to wonder, though, whether his political life would have been easier — and Specter himself more comfortable — as a Democrat.

By disposition, Specter is a prosecutor. He loves to pursue bad guys. He loves the Rubik's Cube of complicated legal cases. He loves being on the center stage of the courtroom. And he loved running the D.A.'s office as a meritocracy, modeled on a private law firm — only better because there was but one senior partner: the demanding and brilliant Mr. Specter.

Specter's prosecutor period includes his stint as a lead lawyer with the Warren Commission, where he was the author of the Single-Bullet Theory. Excuse me, *Single-Bullet Conclusion*, as Specter calls it in this book, because — he says defiantly — it has been proven as fact.



JILL ANNA GREENBERG / Inquirer Suburban Staff

Fifth graders were Specter's audience last year. The students from East Goshen and Exton schools visited Washington to urge preservation of the Paoli Battlefield.

The 75 pages on his Warren Commission experience are vintage Specter: part political gossip, part telling detail, part brief for the defense (i.e., it was one bullet, fired by a single gunman, that killed President John F. Kennedy). It is also not for the squeamish. I've gone nearly 40 years without knowing details of the Kennedy autopsy. I could have gone another 40.

I applaud Specter and Robbins for not only relating what happened in the past, but for going to other participants for their recollections. There are examples throughout the book, but in the case of the Warren Commission, it includes former President Gerald Ford, who was a member, and the Dallas physician who conducted the Kennedy autopsy.

(The doctor answers for Specter and Robbins a lingering question about the results of that autopsy, of-

ten cited by conspiracy theorists: Why did he burn the notes he took during the procedure? Because, the physician explains, they were splattered with Kennedy's blood and he didn't want them to become a macabre collectible. He thought it would demean the slain president.)

His work with the Warren Commission displays another side of Specter's forceful personality. I retreat to Yiddish again. He can be a *nudnik*. A pest.

Specter freely admits that he often set Chief Justice Earl Warren's eyes rolling and fingers drumming, as Warren sat through the young attorney's lengthy and relentless questioning of witnesses. (Just as, 30 years later, Specter set the nation's eyes rolling over his relentless questioning of Anita Hill.)

Specter is proud of being a *nudnik* — with Hill, with Robert Bork, with

reluctant witnesses (from the CIA, FBI, the White House) trying to stop the senator from unearthing the truth. But it is clear that in the get-along-go-along world of the U.S. Senate, being a *nudnik* is not seen as an endearing quality.

Specter is a centrist Republican and proud of it. But, since he arrived in the Senate in 1981, most of his fellow GOP moderates have died or been defeated. Being marginalized in his own caucus, especially as it moved from minority to majority, is not where he wants to be. The *shpilkes* Specter has always craved the spotlight. (In *Passion for Truth*, he seems to recount every moment on national TV, every mention in the national press — even the unflattering ones. Here is a man who has tattooed his clippings to his psyche.)

In the Senate, Specter often is unwilling to go along with the clubby

rules. He is the senior partner set down in a frat house.

So, here is Specter being wooed by Presidents Reagan and Clinton and Bush for "the" vote on some bill or veto override. But they do not twist his arm. They do not demand. They inquire. They ask. They ascertain immediately that he is a "no" vote — and then they give up. Specter wonders why. My guess is: (a) they knew Specter would never change his mind and, (b) they didn't want to hear the 45-minute, lawyerly exposition on why not.

Reagan especially flummoxed the senator. Whenever they talked about their disagreements, the President would open with an anecdote or a joke. Then Specter would give his point of view. Then Reagan would stare through him, shrug or sometimes just walk away.

I sat down with Specter's book expecting not to like it. But I did.

At times, he is surprisingly self-effacing. He regularly quotes friends and colleagues whose principal message to him is: *Arlen, you are very exasperating!* I love his tales of the old days in Philly politics. And I can't resist repeating one of my favorites:

After his success as an assistant prosecutor, he was wooed over the phone by U.S. Sen. Hugh Scott to run for the top job as a Republican. On the day of his announcement, he spotted Scott in the hallway of the Bellevue Stratford, heading toward him. Specter held out his hand, but Scott ignored him. He didn't know Specter from Adam. Minutes later, at the announcement, Scott hugged Specter and pronounced him his old and good friend.

I also liked Specter's deep respect for his roots as — how's this for an oxymoron? — a Jew from Kansas. His reverence for his father and his family. His acute understanding of being the outsider. That alone goes a long way toward explaining the infernal engines that drive Arlen Specter. *A Passion for Truth?* Not exactly the right title. *A Passion to Succeed.* Now that's more like it.