

# Specter in spotlight again amid

By Peter Nicholas

INQUIRER WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — If a national crisis is brewing, if Americans are riveted by the O.J. Simpson case, Elian or some other media-driven spectacle, can Arlen Specter be far behind — with a bill, a call for hearings, a suggested way out of the muddle?

Since the inconclusive presidential election, Sen. Specter (R., Pa.) has already weighed in twice. He introduced a bill last week to create a commission that would explore ways to achieve more accurate and speedier reporting of election results.

And in a news conference the day after the Nov. 7 election, he said he would offer a constitutional amendment that would abolish the Electoral College. Specter has since backtracked, but not before his call for electing presidents by direct popular vote was picked up by the Associated Press, USA Today and newspapers in his home state and Florida.

People can agree or not about the efficiency with which the nation elects presidents. But one thing is certain: At a time when Americans are focu

terfly ballots," "pregnant chads" and other minutiae of U.S. voting procedure, Specter's commission will inevitably draw attention.

For that matter, so will Specter.

In the span of a 20-year Senate career, Specter has been a magnet for publicity of all sorts. He ran for president last time around.

He helped scuttle Robert Bork's Supreme Court nomination in 1987. He infuriated women with his tough questioning of Anita Hill during confirmation hearings on Clarence Thomas' nomination to the court in 1991.

Earlier, as an attorney to the Warren Commission, Specter advanced the "single-bullet" theory, the crux of what many say is the shaky conclusion that John F. Kennedy was killed by a lone gunman.

Specter is no Forrest Gump, stumbling into historic roles by chance. He courts attention. His ideas may take hold; they may go nowhere. Whatever the outcome, the senator's profile is fed.

"He's always had a good nose for

what's hot in the media and capitalizing on it," said a Washington lobbyist. "Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But in the Senate, you have to do something to separate yourself from the pack."

Specter said his methods are part of what he calls "the art of legislating."

If he were thinking only about image, he said, he wouldn't act when situations are so fluid or before a national consensus has emerged.

"When you stick your head above the trench line you don't know how it's going to come out," he said in an interview.

"But the art of legislating is to come up with an idea that is sound on policy and get it moving at a time when there's public demand."

And when demand is hot, it's a safe bet that you will find Specter in the Senate's radio and TV gallery.

O.J. Simpson? In 1995, Specter asked Senate staff to look into the racially charged closing argument of Simpson's defense attorney, Johnnie Cochran. Specter also raised

**After the Kennedy assassination, during hearings on Clarence Thomas — he was there.**

# election controversy

questions about the wisdom of allowing TV cameras in the courtroom. Ironically, Specter is now taking the opposite position when it comes to Supreme Court proceedings. He introduced a bill in September that would compel TV coverage of arguments before the high court.

Elián Gonzalez? After the boy was seized by U.S. agents, Specter, along with other GOP colleagues, called for hearings into the raid. None was ever held.

Firestone tires? At the height of the crisis, Specter appeared at a news conference in the Capitol to press for criminal penalties for executives who knowingly withhold information about defective products that prove lethal. That language was folded into a bill sponsored by Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.) that did not pass.

Specter isn't intent on being popular. But he won't be ignored.

In the presidential race, he didn't command nearly the attention of another Pennsylvania Republican, Gov. Ridge. But Specter made a cannonball-sized plunge into Campaign 2000 nonetheless, disclosing in June that a federal prosecutor wanted an independent counsel to look into Gore's campaign fund-raising

practices in the 1996 election.

It was national news, and the backlash was fierce. Gore's campaign accused Specter of partisan motives, likening his tactics to those of Joseph McCarthy, the communist-baiting 1950s senator from Wisconsin.

Democratic senators were furious that someone within the Justice Department had leaked word to Specter, who chairs a special Senate task force looking into Justice's handling of campaign-finance abuses, Waco and Chinese espionage cases.

Investigating a major presidential candidate in the heat of a campaign is tricky business, inviting accusations of partisanship. Specter never apologized for the disclosure, saying the public had a right to know, but he ultimately put off his investigation until after the election.

On Capitol Hill, some say Specter's methods speak to a stubborn reality of governing: If the public doesn't much care, it's hard to get much done.

"You could introduce bills to reform voting practices in this country for 30 years, and they wouldn't go anywhere because there's no



DAN LOH / Associated Press

**Sen. Arlen Specter** wants to achieve more accurate reporting of election results with a planned commission.

public interest and it would be a low priority to fund an electronic voting apparatus," said U.S. Rep. James C. Greenwood (R., Pa.). "It's wise to strike when the iron is hot. It's wise to use the lever of public interest."

Or, as Specter himself puts it: "The attention span in Washington is very limited."

Peter Nicholas' e-mail address is [pnicholas@krwashington.com](mailto:pnicholas@krwashington.com)