



Steve Lopez

The right place, the wrong man

Well it sure was interesting to see that while Waco was still burning and the guns and ammo in the red-hot compound were still exploding, one of our local heroes was among the first to stand in front of a TV camera and say there ought to be an investigation.

Myself, I'm not going to disagree. From day one, this thing looked like a Keystone Kops training film. So there's plenty to look into, all the way up to the U.S. Attorney's office and even the Oval Office.

It's just that I'm not sure if Philadelphia Sen. Arlen Specter was the most appropriate voice of righteous indignation.

For starters, you may recall that this thing began, on Feb. 28, when David Koresh and his heavily armed nut-case followers killed four federal agents and injured 16 in a wild shootout. Then, of course, the cult's frightening firepower kept an army of agents at bay for 51 days.

You may also recall that Arlen Specter isn't a mere friend of the gun lobby, he is someone they consider a champion in the fight against gun control. Specter is the Number Two recipient in Congress of support from the National Rifle Association.

But there are considerations besides hypocrisy. Let's not forget that the last time Specter stuck his nose into an infamous case in Texas — Dallas, to be specific — well, we all know what happened. Thirty years later, people still have questions about his work.

Senatorial giants

And yesterday, speaking into yet another TV camera, Specter said that he wants the Senate Judiciary Committee to conduct hearings on Waco.

My problem is, I'm not sure what would be worse for the American psyche: watching 80-some people go up in flames in a botched federal eviction, or watching another performance by this nose-picking panel

of senatorial giants.

I mean, do we need to hear Ted Kennedy on morality, or have Joe Biden tell us again what he learned from the story of Cock Robin?

What about Orrin Hatch? With David Koresh thinking he was Jesus, Hatch could go out of his mind this time with the *Exorcist* angle.

As for Arlen, I'm not sure I can watch him grill Janet Reno for two days just to catch her in a discrepancy about the color of her socks.

But all I ask, if it comes to pass, is that we get subtitles whenever Strom Thurmond opens his mouth.

Whatever happens, there has been an up side to all of Arlen's television appearances. They at least give Mayor Rendell a fighting chance of finding him. Is he with CNN? Fox? CBS? ABC? It's almost as if Arlen is making an early run for president.

Rendell has been trying to hunt him down to talk to him about President Clinton's \$16 billion emergency economic stimulation bill. You may have heard about the bill, since it would help pick Pennsylvania up off its back. To Philadelphia alone, it would bring \$70 million.

Arlen is against it

For housing. Transportation. Vocational training. Unemployment benefits. Early childhood education. Jobs for teenagers. Block grants.

Arlen is against it.

He and other Republicans say the bill is too expensive and loaded with pork-barrel projects. They are opposed to, among other things, the \$2.5 billion worth of community development block grants. Which is interesting because guess who invented such grants.

The Republicans. They saw them as a way to avoid having to bother with local affairs.

Specter couldn't be reached yesterday because (a) he was busy, and (b) this column doesn't run on television. On Monday, Specter told the Daily News that the majority of calls to his office support his position. He also said: "I think that we cannot have an emergency appropriation unless there is an emergency."

I'm not sure what, in Arlen's mind, constitutes an emergency. But it seems to me that if he were in touch with somebody besides the gun lobby and congressional Republicans, he might find one or two.

It doesn't take an investigation, and he'd barely have to leave his own neighborhood.

People are hurting.

Maybe, if he gets a minute between TV appearances, Arlen might take Mayor Rendell up on this offer:

"Arlen ought to get in a car with me and go around Philadelphia and see people who are desperate for jobs. They'll tell him it's an emergency."