

Specter should switch parties

By Ross K. Baker

A singular piece of journalism appeared in the New York Times last week, when columnist Frank Rich, the Times' former drama critic and now social commentator-at-large, lavished 20 column inches of good gray newsprint on a Republican presidential hopeful. What makes this even more noteworthy is that Rich is the successor to Anna Quindlen, the high priestess of political correctness and every bit her inheritor in terms of the embrace of warm and fuzzy fringe causes, and that the object of his encomium was Pennsylvania's senior senator, Arlen Specter.

A little perspective is in order here. For any New York Times columnist other than William Safire to speak glowingly of a Republican presidential candidate is a little like President Clinton getting the endorsement of the American Rifleman. Even more remarkable is the fact that Specter has been so lately reviled for his snotty prosecutorial attacks on Professor Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings in 1991.

Rich portrayed Specter as the man on a mission to save the soul of the Republican Party from Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan and Mark the militiaman from Michigan; and he even advanced a scenario for Specter that envisions his capture of about 20 percent of the GOP primary vote. The presumed effect of this unlikely moral victory would be to demonstrate to the party leaders the strength of the pro-choice anti-pietistic faction of the GOP. Such expectations sound remarkably like those of the hopeful souls who urge us to strengthen the hand of the moderate faction in Iran.

The fact is that the Republicans' primary election voters are overwhelmingly right-wingers.

Among such people Specter is as welcome as a mongoose at the cobra's picnic. GOP liberals are anomalies at best, and at worst are painful reminders of a party that was once able to offer the nation candidates of the caliber of Wendell Willkie, Dwight Eisenhower and Tom Dewey. Although Specter is hardly of this stature, he probably irritates a lot of the right with his supercilious assertion that he is the

conscience of the GOP when it is empirically verifiable that the party has no conscience, nor does it particularly crave one. If it did, its first impulse would not be to seek Specter. (At a meeting of 5,000 Republicans in Denver Sunday, Specter received many boos and some scattered applause when he raised the abortion issue.)

In talking to people in Pennsylvania politics about Specter's campaign, the word that pops up with surprising regularity is "quixotic." Few seem to believe that Spec-

politics necessarily diverts his attention from tending to the needs of the state he represents in the Senate.

I have seen too many senators pursuing the dream of a major party nomination only to stagger back to the Senate a year later without the prize in hand but hopelessly behind the curve in terms of their representational and legislative responsibilities. Specter also does no favor to his junior colleague, Sen. Rick Santorum, who seems to have been boxed in by Specter's ambitions and compelled to back his colleague's candidacy when he would probably be happier on the bandwagon of Majority Leader Bob Dole or fellow-conservative Phil Gramm.

If Specter wants to make a real impact on national politics, let him leave the Republican Party to stew in its own right-wing juices and join the Democrats. That would send a message of unmistakable clarity that would have far greater resonance than this struggle from within that is doomed from the start. For Specter to become a Democrat would cause the GOP to stand up and take notice because all of the party-switches in the 104th Congress have been going their way.

I guarantee that Specter's political conversion would make the lead story on all of the network evening news shows. He would lose the chairmanship of the Select Committee on Intelligence, but that panel is not one of the powerhouses of the Senate. Specter's defection might even trigger switches among some other Northeastern GOP liberals. Were that to be the case, he would have made, far more eloquently, his case against the extremists than his unavailing effort to bring the light of moderation to a party that seems determined to place itself somewhere to the right of the Council of Trent.

Arlen Specter will probably be a happier man as a Democrat. In the party of free spirits, he may even lighten up a little and not come across looking like a man who's just eaten a bad meal. He began his career as a Democrat

and the prospect of returning home may be more fulfilling than playing the contrarian in a party that regards him and those who share his views as grotesque.

Ross K. Baker, a professor of political science at Rutgers University, is author of "House and Senate."



Arlen Specter

ter's quest will have much of an impact on the kinds of people who turn out to vote in GOP presidential primaries. More often you hear that this is a kind of last hurrah or simply an ego trip by someone who believes himself born to lead.

It might be argued that all of this is really quite harmless, but it seems inescapable that a senator's venture into presidential