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EDITORIALS

Forlorn Specter

*The Don Quixote of the GOP discovered
that maybe the tent wasn't so big after all.*

If a candidacy falls in a forest and no one mourns, did it make a sound?

Arlen Specter's quest for the presidency (to which the modifiers "quixotic" and "long-shot" always seemed to adhere) is officially "suspended."

The senator from East Falls blames lack of money, but in the hardheaded world of presidential politics, lack of money is just another phrase for lack of success.

Mr. Specter entered the crowded Republican jousts to champion what he saw as authentic GOP principles of inclusion, tolerance and freedom of choice. To him, and (he presumed) many others, those ideals seem under siege by divisive, intolerant and moralistic shock troops of the Christian right.

Republicans who agree with him (come on, raise your hands now) might have preferred a different knight to take on this quest. Besides the senator's lingering "Anita Hill" problem, there was, as he freely and winningly acknowledged, the matter of his Jewishness. It would be better to have the standard of moderate Republicanism raised by someone who could quote First Corinthians right back at the Christian Coalition, but no one else (not even four-star generals) raised a hand.

Beyond that, Mr. Specter, for all his metaphors about the GOP as a roomy Big Tent, is a secular and pragmatic spirit who lacks a feel for the rightful place of the moral and religious impulse in public life.

This odd knight errant also broke his lance against another stone fact

of primary politics: It's a season ruled by the ideologically pure. Very early on, a field house full of conservative-evangelical-revolutionary Republicans in Ames, Iowa, jeered Mr. Specter. He wears the memory of that abuse as a proud badge, as evidence that he was noticed.

Problem was, hardly anyone in Ames, or in the long months afterward, stood up beside Mr. Specter to say, "Stop it. He's right. He's our guy. Listen to him."

Was it that like-minded folks were put off by the senator's baggage? Or transfixed by the long-running drama called *Waiting for Colin*? Or are they waiting until the calendar says 1996 to pay attention? If they are dozing, are they in for a nasty surprise when they see what their party has become by the time they awaken? Or will the impulses Mr. Specter tried to stress reassert themselves once winning the White House becomes an imminent prospect?

In politics, there's no predicting such things, which is why we spend so much time predicting them.

As for the senator, he vows to fight the good fight from the place where he still has some firepower — the Senate. He's done helpful work to moderate House zealotry in the areas of environment and education. He promises to do more. Given that the Senate's reasonable center seems to be eroding rapidly through exhausted resignation and expedient defection, that seems a more useful place for Arlen Specter to be than the grimy slush of New Hampshire.