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Specter upbeat despite Ridge support of Dole

The governor prefers the candidate from Kansas to one from his own state. Specter shrugged it off.

By Joseph A. Slobodzian
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

To U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, it must be a bitter political irony that everyone wanted to know when Colin Powell, a noncandidate, would get into the presidential race while at the same time wondering when Specter, a candidate for eight months, would get out.

But yesterday, stepping off the train from Washington, D.C., Specter was upbeat and unbowed after a week that began with his wife Joan's loss of her City Council seat and ended yesterday with Gov. Ridge's endorsement of U.S. Sen. Robert Dole for the GOP presidential nomination.

Ridge endorsed the Senate majority leader from Kansas instead of Specter, the Republican candidate from the governor's home state. Ridge praised Dole's courage, character and leadership. But both Ridge and Dole insisted that the endorsement was not a call for Specter to drop out of the race.

If it was, Specter obviously did not hear it. "It's a long way to the convention, and this campaign has been filled with surprises," Specter told a group of reporters at Amtrak's 30th Street Station.

"Who would have thought that Jack Kemp or Cheney would not have gotten in or that Pete Wilson would be out in a couple of weeks? ... And who knows what will happen if Gingrich decides to get into the race?" Specter said. Kemp is a former congressman and federal housing secretary; Dick Cheney is a former defense secretary, and Wilson is governor of California. House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R., Ga.) reportedly is again weighing whether to run.

Specter, 65, in his third Senate term, said Ridge told him "some time ago" that he would endorse Dole. "I respect the governor's decision to

make any choice he chooses," he said.

Specter discounted the impact of Ridge's endorsement, noting that he had the backing of his Pennsylvania Republican colleague, U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, and the state's two Republican national committee people, Elsie Hillman and Herbert Barnes.

"The governor is respected, but it's very hard to say what the impact will be," Specter added. "It's very, very early in the process."

Specter said he regularly evaluates his campaign but would not say when he might decide whether to leave. He did say that he would not roll up a large campaign debt in his quest, citing U.S. Sen. John Glenn (D., Ohio), who is still paying the debt from his unsuccessful 1984 presidential campaign.

Specter said he is more optimistic following Colin Powell's decision this week not to run for president. He said Powell's seven weeks of highly publicized meditation over the race "literally dried up all the fund-raising. Now we want to take a look around and see if there's anything out there."

The senator said he spoke with the retired general by telephone for 30 minutes yesterday and was encouraged that there is public support for a moderate, pro-choice Republican candidate, although he said Powell told him he would not endorse any of the GOP primary candidates.

"But he was very supportive of what I'm doing," Specter added. "He brought up the similarities in our positions."

Specter said he feels many Republicans support his positions on abortion — he was instrumental this week in sending back to committee a bill that would ban one form of late-term abortion. And he said the recent Senate hearings on the 1992 FBI shootout at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and on the CIA's supplying misinformation to the president will bring him added visibility.

"But tell the people that if they want me to stay in the race," Specter added, "send cash."