

*It was a turnabout for the senator. He pointed to the handling of the Ruby Ridge case.*

# Spec-ter asks hearings on Reno's performance

By Chris Mondics

INQUIRER WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — Sen. Arlen Specter, who a few months ago was praising Janet Reno for her work as attorney general, has now joined the ranks of her critics and is calling for hearings on her job performance.

In criticizing Reno, Specter cited the amount of time taken by the Justice Department in determining whether to prosecute any federal agents in connection with the 1992 shoot-out at Ruby Ridge, Idaho. Earlier this month, the department announced there would be no charges.

"I think it is a very serious case of dereliction of duty for the attorney general to let this case go on for two years," the Pennsylvania Republican said.

Specter also criticized Reno's reluctance to appoint a special prosecutor to look into allegations of fund-raising improprieties by the Democratic National Committee.

"I think there has been an abuse of discretion in this matter," Specter said of Reno.

Specter summarized: "I think what we have to do here is to look at her record in totality. I think it is a question of competence."

A Justice Department spokesman yesterday dismissed Specter's criticism, saying that the facts in the fund-raising case, to date, did not meet the legal threshold for appointment of a special prosecutor. The spokesman, Bert Brandenburg, added that the two-year Ruby Ridge investigation was time-consuming

because of the need to do a thorough job.

"I would point out that the Justice Department and the Congress have different standards for their investigations," Brandenburg said.

Some Justice Department officials expressed surprise yesterday at the intensity of Specter's attacks, particularly since Reno has acceded to Republican demands for the appointment of special prosecutors in four cases involving President Clinton and top White House officials.

His critique of Reno's performance is likely to carry some weight with colleagues, said Christopher Foreman, an expert at the Brookings Institution on congressional oversight.

Foreman said that Specter's background as a prosecutor and the expertise he has acquired in the Senate on intelligence and law enforcement matters give him standing.

"This is a guy who has a background as an interrogator and a prober," Foreman said. "He is in a good position to micromanage and second-guess everything that the Justice Department does."

Any hearings would only complicate matters for the embattled attorney general.

Republicans have harshly criticized Reno, not only for her reluctance to appoint a special prosecutor but also for a Justice Department decision last month to oppose grants of immunity to nuns who made political contributions during a Democratic Party fund-raising event at a Buddhist Temple in California in 1996 attended by Vice President Gore.

Congressional investigators have determined that the nuns were reimbursed for their contributions. Under federal election law, it is illegal to make contributions on behalf of someone else.

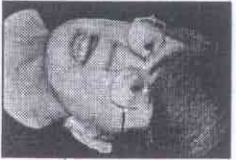
Specter's criticism seems all the more pronounced because he offered qualified praise of Reno during Senate Judiciary Committee hearings in May.

A spokeswoman for the Senate Judiciary Committee, which has responsibility for overseeing the Justice Department, said yesterday that no hearings had yet been scheduled but that the committee likely would discuss the issue when Congress returned from its recess in September. The decision, in the end, is up to Sen. Orrin G. Hatch, the Utah Republican who chairs the committee.

Specter has a long-demonstrated



**Sen. Arlen Specter** joins the critics of Attorney General Janet Reno.



Specter has a long-demonstrated

interest in the Ruby Ridge matter. In 1995, he chaired hearings into the shoot-out by the Senate subcommittee on terrorism, technology and government information.

The case stemmed from an attempt in 1992 by agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to arrest white separatist Randy Weaver at his remote Idaho cabin for the illegal sale of two sawed-off shotguns. The ensuing standoff, which occurred before Reno took office, resulted in the shooting deaths of a federal agent as well as Weaver's wife and 14-year-old son.

Specter's subcommittee issued a report in December 1995 that sharply criticized the Justice Department for lack of leadership and accountability in the siege on Weaver's cabin. The report also concluded that ATF agents virtually entrapped Weaver into selling the illegal shotguns.

Specter noted pointedly that the committee finished its work in under a year, but that the Justice Department took twice as long.

The Justice Department recently issued a report in which it concluded there was no reason to file charges against agents involved in the gun battle. A short time later, a local prosecutor in Idaho announced involuntary manslaughter charges against an FBI sniper in the killing of Weaver's wife.

One FBI agent had already pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice charges for destroying Ruby Ridge material.

PHILA. INQUIRER WEDNESDAY AUGUST 26, 1997