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Don't Count Specter Out

Arlen Specter, the 62-year old Republican senator from Pennsylvania, is engaged in the fight of his life. He's trying to hang on to his seat in the face of a fierce challenge mounted by Democrat Lynn Yeakel.

Women's groups targeted Specter, a two-term incumbent, after he aggressively quizzed Anita Hill during the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court. But the women's groups may have erred in tackling Specter—he is one of the Senate's hardest-working members and also happens to be a consummate politician.

Foes and admirers agree that Specter has run a "textbook campaign"—overcoming what appeared to be insurmountable odds: angry women's groups; widespread anti-incumbent sentiment and even hostility aroused by Oliver Stone's popular film "JFK." In his effort to discredit the Warren Commission, Stone makes Specter—a relatively junior staff attorney—a particular target of his conspiracy-oriented movie.

During the hard-fought campaign, Specter has managed to neutralize union support for Yeakel, cut into the traditionally Democratic black vote and raise doubts about his opponent's character: revelations that Yeakel belongs to a restricted country club and that her father, an ex-congressman, voted against civil rights legislation, undercut her ostensibly pristine liberal credentials.

If Anita Hill was Specter's initial problem, today—like many Republican incumbents—he confronts a far more ominous circumstance: the declining fortunes of George Bush. Indeed, Specter now seems likely to win reelection unless Yeakel is swept to victory on Gov. Bill Clinton's coattails. As things stand, Clinton is expected to carry Pennsylvania by as many as 15 points.

During a recent bus tour of the Philadelphia suburbs, Specter stressed his independence from both Ronald Reagan and from Bush—noting that he voted with the White House only 60 percent of the time: "My opponent [he never mentions her name] always tries to link me with President Bush. But my record is clear. I've been independent. I've voted to override President Bush's vetoes of civil rights legislation, and I disagreed with President Reagan on the MX missile. I have not hesitated to disagree with the president and the party when I thought Pennsylvania's interest required it." Reagan Republicans, to be sure, always knew Specter wasn't one of them—after all, he even voted against confirming Robert Bork. But his moderation may well stand him in good stead now. The word "Republican" is nowhere to be seen on the campaign trail. Specter's placards read: "They don't know his party. They only know he cares."

Dressed in a khaki suit, his neatly attired wife at his side (she happens to be a member of

the Philadelphia city council), Specter starts the day by denouncing Yeakel for suggesting that the U.S. send troops into Bosnia as part of a multinational force: "That is really out of the question," says the senator. "It would be another Vietnam." Both Bush and Clinton share his position, Specter notes, intimating that his opponent is too inexperienced to grasp the issue's implications.

"You want change?" asks Specter, seizing the Democrats' rallying cry. He, not Yeakel, will deliver it: "You talk about change? I'm for a constitutional amendment for a balanced budget; she is not. I'm for the line-item veto; she is not. I'm for changing the federal laws to impose the death penalty on drug kingpins; she's not." Specter emphasizes that both Clinton and Bush—but not Yeakel—also favor the death penalty.

"I think her failure to pay her taxes has had a profound effect," says Specter, pointing to the news that Yeakel hadn't paid Philadelphia city taxes for 10 years—until the day before she announced her candidacy for the Senate.

As for incumbency? In his case, Specter argues, it's an advantage: "I think my seniority is important to my state. . . . I think my position on the appropriations committee is important. . . . My senior position on the health and human services [sub]committee brought a "Healthy Start" unit here to help low birth-weight babies. That's something to talk about. I have been a leader in bringing Pennsylvania extra dollars for mass transit and for highways. She can't get the key committee assignments."

As for the fallout from his tough questioning of Anita Hill, Specter says bluntly that no other senator can match his record on women's issues. He points out he is pro-choice and favors federal funding for abortion. He charges that Yeakel, when all is said and done, is endeavoring to exploit a single issue: her gender.

Specter scored something of a coup when Teresa Heinz, widow of popular Pennsylvania Senator John Heinz, endorsed him in TV spots, explaining that she differed with Specter on Anita Hill but nevertheless supports his candidacy due to his overall record.

"I know the state like the back of my hand," says Arlen Specter. He spends four days a week in Pennsylvania and never moved to Washington.

Specter isn't known for his warmth. "Very few people would throw themselves on a hand grenade for Arlen," says one Pennsylvania political veteran. Nevertheless, Republican strategist Rick Robb predicts: "He'll win a narrow election, not because people like him but because they respect him." In a normal year, Specter would likely be sailing home free. But this year, with the Northeast in a recession, rising anti-incumbent sentiment, the fallout from the Thomas hearings and Bush threatening to sink Republican candidates, it's a fight to the finish.