

“Snarlin’ Arlen” Specter—the ugly face of American big business politics

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With his defeat in the Pennsylvania Democratic primary Tuesday, Arlen Specter will leave the US Senate next January after 30 years in office, ending a political career in which he played important roles in some of the most sordid and controversial episodes in American political history.

Specter was a young, up-and-coming assistant district attorney in Philadelphia in 1963 when he was named by Republican House Minority Leader Gerald Ford to serve on the Warren Commission, the official whitewash of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

One of a handful of members of the commission with law enforcement associations, Specter gained notoriety as the author of the “magic bullet” theory. This hypothesized that wounds to Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connally had been caused by the ricocheting of a single bullet—a supposition that was necessary to sustain the claim that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone assassin and that only one weapon had been used in the assassination.

Although a registered Democrat at the time, Specter ran for District Attorney of Philadelphia in 1965 as the Republican candidate, winning two terms in office before being defeated for reelection in 1973. He lost subsequent statewide Republican primary contests in 1976 for US Senate and in 1978 for governor, before winning the Republican nomination and the general election in 1980, when Republican Ronald Reagan carried the state in the presidential campaign.

His five terms in office, a total of 30 years, are the longest tenure of any US senator from Pennsylvania. Given the nickname “Snarlin’ Arlen,” Specter was widely regarded as one of the most arrogant and loathsome denizens of the US Senate—and that is saying something. But his seniority allowed him to rise to

leadership positions in key committees, particularly the Senate Judiciary Committee, where he played a prominent part for more than two decades.

In 1987, he was the most important Republican to oppose Reagan’s nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court. But four years later, he played the key role in securing the nomination of Clarence Thomas, an equally right-wing figure, acting as the most aggressive questioner of Anita Hill, who testified under oath that Thomas had sexually harassed her when they worked at the federal Office of Economic Opportunity.

His bullying of Hill was so provocative that Specter became the principal target of feminist groups and barely survived his closest reelection contest in 1994, against Democrat Lynn Yeakel. Four months later, in March 1995, he announced himself as a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, positioning himself as the least right-wing of the Republican hopefuls, and denouncing equally what he called “the intolerant right” (Christian fundamentalists like Pat Robertson) and the “incompetent left” (i.e., Democrat Bill Clinton).

He failed to attract either organizational or significant financial support, the key elements in winnowing out the presidential field. Eight months later, before a single primary vote had been cast, Specter folded up his campaign and endorsed the eventual Republican nominee Robert Dole.

While expressing occasional differences with the growing ultra-right influence in the Republican Party, Specter was a loyal supporter of the Bush administration and, as chairman of the Judiciary Committee, shepherded the nominations of two right-wing Supreme Court justices, John Roberts and Samuel Alito. He also backed the USA Patriot Act and other anti-democratic legislation that passed through his

committee.

The shift to the Democratic Party came rather suddenly, in March-April 2009. Specter was one of three Senate Republicans to vote for the Obama stimulus bill. Having barely survived a Republican primary challenge in 2004, he faced certain defeat in a similar contest this year. After back-room discussions led by Vice President Joseph Biden, a Senate colleague for nearly 30 years, Specter announced he was switching parties.

This final episode in Specter's long career speaks volumes about the nature of the two-party system. Neither the Republican Party nor the Democratic Party is a "party" in the sense that is understood in most of the rest of the world—an organization based, however loosely, on a common political program and outlook.

The two parties are rather officially recognized and state-funded conduits to political office. They serve as political gatekeepers, excluding from the officially recognized political discussion anything that smacks of opposition to the capitalist financial aristocracy, whose campaign contributions (a quasi-legal form of bribery) underwrite the enormously expensive media campaigns required to win elections.

In 2004, Specter was hard-pressed in the Republican primary campaign by a challenger. He called upon the Republican president, George W. Bush, who made campaign appearances on his behalf and praised the incumbent as "a man I can rely on."

In 2010, Specter was hard-pressed in the Democratic primary campaign by a challenger. He called upon the Democratic president, Barack Obama, who made campaign appearances on his behalf and praised the incumbent for supplying critical votes on the stimulus and healthcare bills.

That the same individual could play virtually identical roles, first in one party and then the other, testifies to the complete absence of any fundamental or principled difference between the Democrats and the Republicans. Both are big business parties, unalterably committed to the defense of the profit system and the ruling elite of multi-millionaires.

There was one constant in Specter's political evolution: he formed a relationship with the right-wing AFL-CIO bureaucracy in Philadelphia and statewide, particularly with the building trades unions, which he maintained throughout his career. He was one of the

few Senate Republicans to get regular endorsement and financial contributions from the unions, and to support their pet legislative initiatives, like the Employee Free Choice Act, albeit while ensuring that none of these bills were actually passed.

Specter's political demise demonstrates the increasingly hollow and unreal character of the official political structures in the United States. In his campaign for the Democratic primary nomination, he had the backing of President Obama, Vice President Biden, Governor Ed Rendell, Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter, the entire trade union apparatus, the black Democratic Party politicians of Philadelphia and the black church leaders. But he lost 80 of 83 counties, and made his concession speech to an audience of barely 100 demoralized supporters.



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