At the end he was ridiculed by some, disliked by many, and ignored by most. But at his prime and in his time, he was among the most powerful politicians in America, widely respected, frequently feared, and always a presence. His term in the Senate--some 30 years--encompassed six presidents and some of the most remarkable times in American history.

Arlen Specter was a player in much of it--from his earlier controversial service on the Warren Commission in the 1960’s to his precedent-setting party switch in 2009. As much as any modern politician, Specter has left his mark on the big issues of his time.

He has also been durable--on the ballot an astonishing 26 elections during his career. He is the longest serving U.S. Senator in Pennsylvania history. Indeed, he may be the longest-lived politician in state history going back almost a half century.

All of this is now firmly inscribed in the history books guaranteeing that Specter will be remembered for a long time. But how will he be remembered? What will be the Specter legacy?

Specter himself has publicly dashed talk of his legacy asserting it “too early...to think about legacy.” Perhaps so but it seems clear there are six major themes running through Specter’s career that will come to define him.

- **Emphasis on Judicial Politics** - Almost certainly Specter’s role in judicial politics will loom large upon his exit from public life. Specter’s often controversial performance in Supreme Court nominations is now the stuff of legend. He has participated in the confirmation of fourteen justices. His influence in two of them--Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas--was dispositive: in the case of Bork leading the charge to defeat him while in Thomas’s case to confirm him. Less well known has been Specter’s enormous influence in the lower federal judiciary. During his Senate tenure, he has virtually dominated the selection of 99 federal trial judges as well as 26 appellate judges. Specter’s life-long interest in the judiciary has marked every phase of his public life.

- **Consistent Centrism** — Throughout his career, Specter exhibited centrist leanings. Neither really conservative nor really liberal, he consistently occupied the middle of the political spectrum. Until his primary defeat earlier this year, he was perhaps the most accomplished practitioner of moderate politics on the national stage today. Inevitably, the increasing polarization of American political life made Specter the proverbial man in the middle, a politician without a political home in either party, and a moderate in an increasingly immoderate world.

- **Pragmatic Idealism** – Specter mixed pragmatism with idealism in a way that often mystified his friends while confounding his enemies. Specter the pragmatist was reflexively responsive to the needs of local public officials of both parties, bringing home a record level of congressional pork to the state. He also spent an enormous amount of time staying in touch with his constituents. Most pragmatic of all, he switched parties when it became clear he could not win another Republican nomination. But his idealism often got him in trouble, too. Leading the charge against Bork’s Supreme Court nomination helped make him anathema in the GOP; yet, Specter deemed it worth doing. And no better example of idealism trumping pragmatism was Specter’s crucial vote for the Obama stimulus package. Arguably, Specter the pragmatist lost his office for that vote.
- **Political Eccentrism** – Specter cultivated an image as a supremely cerebral politician, but he had his moments. Two of them are permanently embedded in national memory. The first of these grew out of Specter’s work on the Warren Commission when he loudly and persistently propounded his famous “single bullet” theory. More recently, he cemented his reputation for quirkiness during the Clinton impeachment trial when he cited Scottish law to vote “not proved.” Thereby confounding both sides and sending legal scholars scurrying to esoteric legal references to figure out what Specter meant.

- **Respected But Not Liked** - Hard working and smart are two adjectives often used to describe Specter. No one ever doubted his political aptitude. But he also could be testy, tactless, and impatient. He suffered fools badly and drove his staff so hard the *Washington Monthly* routinely voted him one of the worst bosses in the Congress. Specter was widely respected, but not necessarily loved. Specter himself never seemed to care. Warm and cuddly are not words that leap to the tongue describing him. A sample of the Specter treatment will suffice. When asked at a recent editorial board meeting if Obama was vulnerable in 2012, Specter replied: "Republicans would have to find somebody sensible to run (and)…there is nobody sensible on the scene and if there were, the Republicans wouldn't nominate him.”

- **A Workhorse & A Show Horse** – The Senate, someone once quipped, is made up of “work horses” and “show horses.” Specter was both. He loved the limelight, never shrank from publicity, and rarely missed a chance to make a headline. But he was also one of the hardest working senators. Well known is the work he did on the Patriot Act, FISA, numerous constitutional issues, the senate filibuster rule, and stem cell research. Less well known is his energetic record on immigration and foreign affairs. Specter’s frequent visits and expertise on the Middle East has made him one of the nation’s most knowledgeable authorities on the region.

Now an octogenarian, twice a cancer survivor, and a veteran of open heart surgery, Specter leaves the Senate but maybe not political life. He talks of a book underway, possibly some media work, and a stint in the classroom. He has said he has no interest in a cabinet appointment. But he has left the door open for a diplomatic post. Might he try a political comeback, too? At 80, with few electoral opportunities, that seems unlikely. But then, very few things in Specter’s long career have seemed likely.