Arlen Specter's Perfect Storm
May 19, 2010

by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

The political world watched almost stupefied as the national melodrama played itself out. The pre-primary polls told the startling story while the astonished pols read the increasingly clear tea leaves: Arlen Specter, Pennsylvania's longest serving U.S. Senator, arguably the state's most skilled and luckiest politician, was losing. And he was losing to an opponent few had heard of just about a month earlier, losing despite substantial advantages in money and party endorsements, losing despite support from the president, the vice president, and the state's governor. Specter was losing despite anything he or anyone else could do to stop it.

Now, in the aftermath of the still shocking Specter defeat, the questions abound. Two in particular seem important to answer: Why did Specter lose? And what does it mean for the state and for the country?

The first question seems easier to answer. Specter simply sailed into the perfect political storm. He was caught in a convergence of forces and factors over which he had minimal control.

Everything went wrong for him: he was running for re-election against a tide of virulent anti-incumbency; he was the quintessential moderate in an era given over to the politics of polarization; he drew a younger, vigorous primary opponent not experienced enough to know he couldn't win; his age and many medical problems appeared to enfeeble him; and his five terms in office weighed him down with too many votes that had angered too many people.

And then there was that party switch, for him the proverbial straw. But even that was beyond his control. Yes, he could have stayed a Republican, but he would have lost that primary too—and decisively as well.

Specter throughout his political career almost has seemed a force of nature. He always found a way to win and always survived whatever challenge was thrown against him. This year, however, the challenges collectively overwhelmed him. Like many incumbents who preceded him, he ran one time too many.

What Specter's loss means is harder to answer. For starters it means that Pennsylvania, once one of the more moderate of the mega states, now features a U.S. Senate contest between two polar opposites on the political spectrum—a Republican at least as conservative as former arch-conservative Senator Rick Santorum and a Democrat as liberal as any nominated in modern times. Neither party has nominated Senate candidates as ideologically opposite since 1994 when Democrats nominated Harris Wofford and Republicans Rick Santorum.

Certainly it's unclear which candidate enters the general election better situated to emerge victorious. Pat Toomey may find Sestak harder to beat than Specter. Sestak does not carry the burden of a long incumbency or a lengthy congressional voting record. Nor does he inherit most of Specter's other lethal liabilities. The admiral turned congressman is also an indefatigable and ruthless campaigner. And despite a nasty primary, state Democrats will quickly endorse and rally around his candidacy.
Nevertheless, Sestak has his work cut out for him. He must run as a Democrat in a state that clocks the president's job performance at new lows, hovering in the mid 30s range. The ravages of the recession and the unpopularity of many features of Obama's agenda, notably energy and healthcare, have made the political environment challenging for Democratic candidates. Moreover, Sestak has never run a general election statewide campaign before. And he's running in a state often unfriendly to rookie statewide candidates. One thing is certain-neither candidate will give any quarter, nor expect any.

Nationally, the stakes are high. With Democrats likely to lose between three and five Senate seats, the Pennsylvania seat looms crucial. Much of Obama's presidency now rides on the outcome of a half dozen Senate contests, including the Pennsylvania race.

Beyond that, Specter's defeat removes another centrist political leader from the American political stage-providing further evidence that the center of American politics is collapsing. Not everyone will be unhappy about that. The advocates of ideological purity have long railed against the politics of compromise and consensus, arguing that accommodation has been the root of the nation's problems.

They might well be correct. Yet for over 200 years the nation has largely done it Specter's way-with compromise, bargaining, and moderation. Common belief has long held that America's complicated federal system of checks and balances functions best in an environment of consensus and moderate politics. Indeed, some believe it only functions in such an environment.

Whether that conventional wisdom remains true, we are about to discover. Specter is now gone. The moderate politics he epitomized seems not far behind.

__________________

Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2010 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.