The Admiral Hits an Iceberg

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According to sage Yogi Berra, "it's tough to make predictions, especially about the future."

Nevertheless, we boldly made one about a year ago appraising incumbent Congressman Joe Sestak's primary race against born-again Democrat Arlen Specter. We ended the article this way: "Today the Admiral (Sestak), despite his many assets, looks less the prospective giant killer and more the kamikaze mission recruit. He might fool us all. But don't bet on it."

Well now you can bet on it! Sestak remains the longest of long shots to beat Specter. The kamikaze mission is cleared for takeoff. The surname on Pennsylvania's Democratic U.S. Senate ballot this fall will indeed start with an S. But the S will be for Specter, not Sestak.

This conclusion, however, is far from the conventional reasoning on this race. A recent boomlet in Sestak stock has been taking place thanks to some national media spinning a come-from-behind victory scenario—a script embraced enthusiastically by fervent Specter haters hoping against hope that the senator they love to hate will finally meet his just desserts.

Maybe someday! But it's not likely to happen in May.

Sestak, despite a compelling personal narrative, a take-no-prisoners campaign style, and some early success in fundraising, has struggled against the resilient Specter. Real Clear Politics' recent polls average tracks him running some 14 points behind Specter. And his most recent fundraising report shows the last quarter was his worst yet for raising new money.

Equally ominous, perhaps, is the tone of much state media coverage on the race. Emblematic was the Philadelphia Inquirer's recent front-page article concluding that the Sestak campaign "so far has all the traction of a car with four bald tires traversing an icy mountain road."

But why has Sestak's early promise against the embattled Specter now come a cropper, despite the real and serious vulnerabilities incurred by Specter in a record-breaking sixth run for U.S. Senate? Analysis suggests three compelling reasons why Sestak has been unable to exploit the opportunities once available to him, and why Pennsylvania's longest serving senator will live to fight another day after the dust clears on May 18.

- **Organizational Support:** Will Rodgers used to joke that he belonged to no organized political party because he was a Democrat. But the Pennsylvania Democratic Party has learned to present a united front when necessary. Just about every important Democrat from Obama to Biden to Casey to Rendell and down the line have jumped on or been pushed onto the Specter express. This is not surprising. A Sestak victory in the primary will be seen as a stunning rebuke for state Democrats. The White House and the state party have considerable credibility at stake.

- **Specter's Political Alchemy:** Clark Kent used to jump into a convenient phone booth to don his Superman cloak. Specter this year has reprised the trick politically by changing into a true-blue, 100%-pure Democrat faster than a speeding bullet. For 28 years Specter was an uncertain part-time Republican; now in a single election year he has become an unambiguous full-time Democrat. In
doing so he has effectively undercut Sestak's charges that he is not a real Democrat. In fact Specter has become the ultimate loyal Democrat, vigorously supporting his new party and its new president's agenda some 95 percent of the time. Specter has become more of an Obama Democrat than Obama himself, even recanting a few of his past Republican heresies-such as his recent suggestion that supporting John Roberts to the Supreme Court was a mistake.

- Sestak's Strategy: Sestak's plan to beat Specter in the final days of the race is essentially based on winning undecided voters with a shock-and-awe campaign while undercutting Specter's support. His campaign plans to accomplish this by holding their fire for a final push, flooding the airwaves with anti-Specter themes, and leaving Specter little time to react effectively. It's a strategy that might work in a crowded field of candidates or against a candidate not well known, not well financed, or just inexperienced. Specter, however, is none of these. In almost thirty years in office he has seen it all, confronted it all, and lived through it all. And he will live through the Sestak challenge.

To live to fight another day, however, is not to live forever. A Specter primary victory would be his first win as a Democrat. It could also be his last. Specter's political life expectancy beyond May looks dicey. His race with Sestak is going to get closer-maybe much closer. Sestak has some $5 million to spend and no rainy day to save it for. Sestak may lose, but in the process he is going to rough up a candidate already roughly treated. None of this is promising for Specter in November. And he will need all the help he can muster. Running against the formidable presumptive GOP nominee Pat Toomey in a year inauspicious for Democrats, Specter may be facing the toughest race of his political life. The Sestak challenge has wounded Specter in the general election race, forcing him leftward in support of an unpopular president's unpopular agenda. In the end, Specter, in winning the primary battle, may lose the general election war, becoming another causality of the widening polarization engulfing American politics.

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