

# Giant Killer

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

Joseph A. Sestak!

A household name across Pennsylvania he is not. Yet Congressman Sestak, who represents Pennsylvania's seventh congressional district (largely Delaware County), is set to challenge a veritable political legend, Arlen Specter, for the 2010 Democratic U.S. Senate nomination. In doing so he is also taking on the collective Democratic establishment including President Obama, Vice President Biden, Governor Ed Rendell, Senator Bob Casey, and state party Chair T.J. Rooney. And equally important he is going up against what is inarguably the most formidable money machine ever mobilized by the Pennsylvania Democratic Party.

Who is this guy? And is he crazy? Does he have any chance to beat Specter? And what if he does? These and many other questions occupy the minds of Pennsylvania's best politicians some 11 months from the 2010 primary election.

Is Sestak fated to play the role of Jack the Giant Killer? Or is he more likely to end up as little more than road kill himself, to be remembered only as the latest in a long line of challengers who tried but failed to topple Specter?

Sestak, it must be said, has an impressive resume. Described by *The Hill* newspaper as a "temperamental and demanding boss" he is a hard driving taskmaster. A retired rear admiral and career navy man with some 30 years in uniform, he is no stranger to challenges. Indeed, he seems to relish them. And he understands the daunting challenges of going against the establishment.

In 2006 he crushed the incumbent Curt Weldon by 12 points in a county infamous for its Republican rule - becoming only the second Democrat to win a Congressional seat there since the Civil War. In 2008 he easily won reelection by 10 points, and he would be expected to hold onto the seat for a very long time. His race against Specter, however, effectively ends his House career. He cannot run for both his House seat and against Specter.

Win, lose or draw, Sestak's senate candidacy will have far-reaching effects on both state and national politics. It will force Specter to provide more votes to the ambitious Obama agenda than previously thought. Increasingly, Specter will need to become a solid Obama Democrat to overcome the liability imposed by his more than 60 percent lifetime Republican voting record. Look, for example, for Specter to spearhead the Sotomayor nomination.

In Pennsylvania, the formidable Rendell organizational and financial network will be thrown into action, reprising the role played by the governor in helping to deliver the state to Hillary Clinton in the Democratic presidential primary last year. Furthermore, Obama has signaled his intentions to raise money and otherwise support the embattled Specter.

And it's likely to give state Republicans a break from the glaring spotlight fastened on their nasty family fight over the same 2010 nomination. It now appears likely that Pat Toomey - the man who drove Specter out of the Republican Party - will escape any serious primary opponent for the Republican nomination.

But can Sestak win and what if he does win? Let's take the second part of that question first.

If he can defeat Specter it scrambles the 2010 Senate race more than anyone could have imagined a month ago. Sestak is a true liberal in a state that rarely votes for true liberals. And he is likely to be running against a true conservative, Toomey, in a state that rarely votes for true conservatives. If this happens both of these guys can't lose, but it is far, very far, from clear who will win.

Plainly this is going to be one of the nation's most watched Senate races next year. The key question is whether Sestak can overcome the plethora of campaign advantages now held by Specter.

Sestak's campaign strategy is already apparent. He will run arguing that Specter is little more than an opportunist, a man with no real guiding principles, and not a "real Democrat." And that appeal will work with some. Moreover Sestak is a bona fide liberal with a 68 percent liberal voting record. Indeed, he has been encouraged to challenge Specter by many party liberals, including some of Obama's strongest supporters.

Some of Sestak's guns will be aimed at the Democrat establishment for too easily supporting Specter, the former Republican. And there is some history in the Keystone state going back to Governor Milton Shapp in the 1970's that the state Democratic Party has had trouble delivering its endorsements on Election Day.

Sestak is likely to run a take no prisoners, populist campaign that appeals to state Democrats buffeted by the state's sagging economy and wearied after eight years of Rendell's rule. Sestak after all, doesn't much care for the Democratic establishment. He's not a party guy, but a career naval man, whose independent streak gave him the moxie to take on a powerful incumbent (Weldon) and trounce him in 2006.

All this said, Sestak's task is a daunting one. Arlen Specter may be the smartest, savviest and luckiest politician in modern state history. Moreover he is absolutely relentless in his single minded pursuit of electoral success. And his political resources, elaborated earlier, would probably allow a much lesser politician to survive this challenge. Sestak, on the other hand, begins the race with no statewide organization and dismal name recognition (seven in ten voters know little about him). Moreover, he is a rookie statewide candidate in a state that is notoriously difficult to navigate electorally.

Lightning can strike in politics as well as real life. The economy is likely to dominate the 2010 electoral agenda and the political implications of that are anything but obvious at this point. And the election is still almost a year away. But today the Admiral, 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.

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