



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on October 15, 2012

Former Senate Maverick Arlen Specter Dead at 82

Arlen Specter, the former Philadelphia prosecutor who played a key role in the Warren Commission report on the assassination of President Kennedy and went on to become Pennsylvania's longest-serving member of the U.S. Senate, died at his Philadelphia home Sunday. His death at 82 followed a years-long fight with cancer.

Often a controversial figure during his five terms in the Senate (1981-2011), Specter was, for most of those years, a maverick Republican and self-styled "moderate" who saw himself as a defender of the middle ground between the "intolerant right" and the "incompetent left." His ardent defense of "abortion rights" and his role in torpedoing the Supreme Court nomination of Judge Robert Bork in 1987 earned him the wrath of the party's conservatives. Four years later, he earned the scorn of liberals and women's rights organizations when he played an equally pivotal role in supporting the nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas and rigorously cross-examining the key witness against Thomas, Anita Hill, who claimed Thomas sexually harassed her when she worked for him years earlier in the U.S. Department of Justice.



Though he balanced his stance as a liberal on social issues by claiming the mantle of fiscal conservatism, his support for President Obama's \$797-billion economic stimulus bill and healthcare reform further alienated him from party conservatives. Preparing to run for a sixth term in 2010, Specter anticipated defeat in a Republican primary battle with his conservative challenger, former U.S. Rep. Pat Toomey. He switched his party affiliation to Democrat in 2009, but lost in the Democratic primary the next year to Rep. Joe Sestak. Sestak then lost to Toomey, now the state's junior U.S. senator.

A native of Wichita, Kansas, Specter was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants. He grew up in the rural Russell, Kansas, the hometown of former Republican Senate leader and 1996 presidential nominee Robert Dole. He graduated as a Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Pennsylvania in 1951 and, after two years in the Air Force, entered Yale Law School, where he edited the law journal. He received his law degree in 1956 and went into private practice for three years before his appointment as assistant district attorney.



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He first achieved national attention as a staff lawyer on the commission, headed by then-Chief Justice Earl Warren, that President Lyndon Johnson appointed to investigate the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas. Lee Harvey Oswald, an employee at the Texas School Book Depository Building, was arrested within an hour of the assassination and charged the next day with the murder of the president. The following day Oswald was shot to death in the basement of the Dallas police station by local saloon-keeper and fringe underworld figure Jack Ruby.

While known for his sharp questioning of witnesses, Specter's notoriety on the Warren Commission resulted from the solution he offered to the puzzle of how Oswald, using a manual bolt-action rifle, could have fired all the shots at the president's limousine within the time span indicated by a film of the event. Specter's theory, adopted by the commission in its report, was that the same bullet that caused the non-fatal injuries to President Kennedy exited the president's throat and went on to cause the shoulder, chest, wrist, and thigh wounds to Texas Governor John Connally, who was seated in the front of the president. The controversial "single-bullet theory" was soon derided as the "magic-bullet theory" by the growing legion of skeptics and was disputed by Connally himself.

With his work on the commission completed in 1964, Specter returned to Philadelphia and began his pursuit of a political career. A registered Democrat, he sought the party's nomination for city district attorney in 1965, but lost to incumbent James. C. Crumlish, Jr. He then joined the Republican Party and, running as a reform candidate, defeated Crumlish, his former boss.

Specter gained a reputation as a tough, combative prosecutor and achieved notoriety with a number of high-profile investigations. He ran as a Republican for mayor of Philadelphia in 1967 and lost in a close race. He was voted out as district attorney in 1973, the year the Watergate scandal broke and the beginning of hard times for Republicans. He lost in bids for the U.S. Senate and governor later in the decade. Ironically, it was in 1980, the year a conservative tide carried Ronald Reagan to the White House and Republicans captured control of the Senate for the first time in 28 years, that liberal Republican Arlen Specter captured the Senate seat he held for 30 years.

A Republican in the mold of former New York Governor and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, Specter supported affirmative action policies to benefit minority groups, another position that put him at odds with many of his party's conservatives. He voted for the Patriot Act, but later criticized the Bush administration over denial of habeas corpus to imprisoned terror suspects. His defense of legalized abortion and support for embryonic stem-cell research drew opposition from pro-life groups and put him at odds with the party platform and the policies of Republican President George W. Bush. Yet in 2004, when he faced a formidable primary challenge from the conservative, pro-life Toomey, virtually the entire Republican establishment, including Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, actively supported Specter. Rick Santorum, then the state's junior senator and a champion of the pro-life movement, also endorsed Specter and appeared in campaign ads for him.

Santorum, who lost his bid for reelection in 2006, was frequently questioned about that endorsement when he sought the party's presidential nomination this year. He claimed to have received a private pledge from Specter, who would become chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee during Bush's second term, that he would support the president's judicial nominees. Specter denied having ever made such a pledge. He did support the nominations of Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justice Samuel Alito, Bush's two appointees to the Supreme Court. During his long Senate career, Specter often drew opposition from both the Left and the Right, but managed to survive often close primary and general elections by highlighting stands that appealed to Pennsylvania voters, and by developing a



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reputation for being responsive to his constituents.

He was known as a tireless, aggressive campaigner. The *Washington Post* [cited](#) a tribute to the late senator's work ethic and political skills from political scientist G. Terry Madonna of Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania: "He won't be outworked, he won't be out hustled and he understands his state better than any other politician in modern history," Madonna said. Despite the serious health issues that plagued him during the latter part of his career, he never missed a Senate session. He is co-author of the 2008 book, *Never Give In: Battling Cancer in the Senate*.

After leaving the Senate, Specter joined the University of Pennsylvania Law School as an adjunct professor. He had acquired admirers and critics in both parties during a political career in which he went from Democrat to Republican and back again. He was frequently accused of political opportunism, as when he joined the Democrats in support of the stimulus bill.

"I believe that my duty is to follow my conscience and vote what I think is in the best interest of the country, and the political risks will have to abide," he said at the time. He is survived by Joan Specter, his wife of 59 years, and their two sons and four grandchildren.

Photo of Arlen Specter: AP Images



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