

The Poor, Disrespected Arlen Specter

☒ A couple years ago, my family and I took a road trip to Eastern Kansas for a wedding. As we trekked along I-70, we began to see a number of proud, colorful billboards touting the upcoming turn-off to the city of Russell, Kansas. In large lettering, the billboards read, “Boyhood Home of Senator Bob Dole”. Below it, in a strikingly smaller font were the words, “and Senator Arlen Specter”. It made me laugh because the perception it left was that while the town laid claim to having two long-term U.S. senators once live there, they were really only proud of one of them. The other was a mere footnote who was barely worth the mention.

It seems to me that the billboards outside Russell are indicative of the lack of respect Specter seems to believe he’s unjustly endured over the past couple of years. In his new book, entitled “Life Among the Cannibals”, the former senator complains that President Obama left him high and dry after he cast the 60th and decisive vote in the U.S. Senate to pass the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare). As some might recall, Specter left the Republican party in 2009 and became a Democrat. Months later, he changed his original position from being opposed to Obamacare to a being strong supporter of it.

As a condition of his party switch and advocacy for the president’s agenda, Obama pledged his support in helping Specter’s re-election bid for a sixth term in office. That support never came. Once Specter’s usefulness had come to an end, Obama backed out of campaigning for him. Specter ended up not even making it past the Democratic primary, losing to fellow Democrat, Joe Sestak.

Months before the election, many of us remember the verbal

lambasting Specter took over his support of Obamacare from an angry room of Pennsylvania constituents at a town hall meeting. The scene was played repeatedly all over the national news. One of the things that struck me most about the incident was the dumbfounded expression that Specter had plastered across his face while fielding questions, as if he was offended and confused over why the people were upset with him. He looked absolutely appalled that he was being treated in such a manner.

Poor Arlen Specter. He was the Rodney Dangerfield of the U.S. Senate during the last two years of his political career. And if the excerpts released from his book are of any indication, it seems that he still doesn't claim any responsibility for earning that disrespect.

It's hard to look at the Specter debacle without identifying the core problems with our leaders in Washington D.C. We vote our representatives into power to represent us, and I do think a lot of them start out truly wanting to do the right thing for their constituents. But when someone stays in power for as long as Specter did, they somewhere along the way start advocating only for themselves. The decisions they make are no longer about their constituency, but rather their own self-interests, their political career, and the massaging of their own ego.

What made Specter a little different than most is that he outright admitted it. When he joined the Democratic party and was asked at a press conference the reason behind his decision, he stated the absolute truth. He essentially explained that after the impressive Democratic sweep in the 2008 elections, he felt that his best chance of winning another term in office was to jump on board the Democratic bandwagon. In other words, it wasn't about principles, ideology, or policy... It was about him. He acted as a *pilot fish*, swimming beneath the proud, fearless shark and collecting any scraps that fell from its razor-sharp teeth in

order to survive.

It's the same reason he did an about-face and latched onto Obamacare. It was merely the completion of a deal. When someone reverses their decision overnight on monumental changes to a sector that comprises 1/5 of our national economy, they can no longer make the case that they understand who they're working for.

Specter became his own greatest fan. And like many fans, he found it nearly impossible to see the flaws in his idol.

My strong suspicion is that Arlen Specter's memoir will be turning up in the bargain bin at your local Walmart soon after its release at the end of the month. Sure, there's some significance in his tenure as a public servant, including his work on the Warren Commission following the assassination of John F. Kennedy. But when people look at Specter today, they see someone without character and without principles. They see a man who shamelessly touted the extension of his own career as the primary argument for his re-election. Most importantly, they see a man that they cannot respect because he stopped respecting them.

If Specter understood any of that, he'd figure out why town-hall attendees excoriated him, Democratic primary voters rejected him, and the Obama administration discarded him.