



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Politics in America
Senator Arlen Specter at the National Press Club

Your On the Street Reporter Senator Arlen Specter at the National Press Club

September 25, 2006

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Today, your Reporter attended a luncheon speech at the National Press Club. Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) was the speaker.

As usual, the meal at the National Press Club was outstanding. I ate salmon with rice and asparagus, topped off with a fine pastry. As seen in Figure 1, the meal was so good Senator Specter's dining partners watched the Senator consume his meal, which he ate free of charge. The two people to his right forgot to purchase their meal ticket, so they're looking at Arlen's fish with a touch of envy. Even though they are hungry and covet his food, they are obligated to smile at his fish because he is a Senator.



Figure 1. Lunch mates.

Eleanor Cliff of *Newsweek* and columnist Robert Novak were in attendance. They paid little attention to Senator Specter's fish, so we can assume they had their meal ticket.

Next to me sat a woman whose firm was a lobbyist group for CEOs. I asked her how her lobby was dealing with the recent jailings of several prominent CEOs. She deflected my question by saying the mission of her group was not the betterment of any one CEO, but all CEOs. I asked her how her lobby placed this aspiration into practice. She said, "...through the promotion of America's economy."

You bet: Back-dated stock options, golden parachutes, secret trading in financial instruments that are valued more than the public stock market, insider trading, creation of financial packages having no social value. I asked her what was the stand of her lobbyist group on CEO

compensation in America's *public* corporations? She said her firm was in favor of it. At least she was honest.¹ Now to Senator Specter's speech.

Senator Specter is a long-term politician. He goes back to the Warren Commission, and he spoke of these early times when he was a Democrat, later switching to the Republican Party. He spoke of the confirmation battles in the Senate on Supreme Court Justices. Through his actions against Bork and Thomas, he said he was able to alienate an entire electorate with just two votes.

He mentioned how often he spoke in the Senate chamber when no one was really listening, "At the National Press Club, it's disturbing to know people are listening, even taking notes...but I'll do the best I can."

Much of his talk was about the impending bills before the Senate on terrorism. Wiretaps and detainees' rights occupied much of his time. Senator Specter expressed concern about the loss of America's international standing because of the manner in which we have conducted ourselves of late. Harsh words from a Republican.

Sidebar: Torture Technology.

By accepting torture as its national policy, a country faces a slippery slope. When to stop? What practice is acceptable? What practice is not? Once a threshold is crossed, it cannot be revisited. The damage has been done.

Our America? Naked males, bound with ropes. Females sitting astride their buttocks snapping Kodak pictures. A snarling dog two inches from the prisoner's lips. A hooded man with electrodes on his testicles. God help us. God give us the strength and wisdom to know we are a better people than to engage in this sickness.

A moral barrier has been breached, a violation which cannot be contravened. And the threshold is usually lowered, as one act leads to another. Drop the first gum wrapper on the clean floor of a subway station, and before long, the floor is littered with debris. That's human nature.

I favor sleep actions, which weaken the enemy's will. But only after I have spent a lot of time one-on-one with the prisoner. Even then, information obtained through *rapport* or *rack* is suspect. I watched interrogations of suspected Viet Cong whom our ship picked up along the coasts of the South China Sea. I became convinced these men said exactly what the interrogators wanted them to say----irrespective of the truth.

The Senator spoke about the importance of border security, yet he said he had empathy for immigrants. Both of Senator Specter's parents were immigrants and were in danger of being shipped to Siberia. He said this about his father, "He didn't want to go to Siberia. He wanted to go to Kansas...but it was a close call." I thought it was funny, but I'm not from Kansas.

¹ As stated in previous essays: For private companies: *The sky is the limit for CEO pay*. To the public companies' CEOs: Please return some of your mega-million dollars to the stockholders (me).

He mentioned he used to talk with Senator Kennedy a lot when they ran into each other in the Senate Gym. But not lately, "Senator Kennedy has not been in the gym, since the Johnson Administration...the Andrew Johnson administration: a long time between exercise sessions."

Speaking of the press, the Senator mentioned that it would be better, "To have government without newspapers than newspapers without government." I was scarfing down my dessert as he made this statement, and I may have written the saying backwards. He might have said it would be better "To have newspapers without government than government without newspapers." OK, we reporters must quote accurately, it's a hallmark of our professional integrity. He said one or the other. Take your pick.

Questions and Answers

Senator Specter spoke for only twenty minutes, so he has subjected to a long period of questions. The first pertained to his position as the Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman, "I've never had a litmus test..." for favoring or disfavoring candidates.

The next question was about the current issue before the Senate about *Habeas Corpus* rights for suspected terrorists. The Bush administration favors denying this right to any detainee suspected of terrorism. (This week, the Senate will decide on this part of the legislation.) If this part of the bill passes, I understand that anyone, even a U.S. citizen, can be denied the right to challenge his or her right to question the legality of his or her detention. I'm not talking just about people who speak English with an accent. I'm speaking of you and me.

Senator Specter was emphatic on this subject and said America should never suspend *Habeas Corpus* unless it was being invaded or insurrection was occurring---exactly what our Constitution says (Article I, Section 9). He also said he was introducing a bill in the Senate to restore judicial reviews of programs that Bush has made the domain of the executive branch.

He is not in favor of passing any of these bills on a "hurry-up" basis. They are too important and, "...we must do it right." On the other hand, he recognizes that he and his colleagues must "...utilize the pressure of the moment to get this done."

Several questions pertained to the border problem and how America handles undocumented immigrants. Arlen was a bit vague on some of his answers, but I wrote down this comment, "If undocumented immigrants can't find a job, they won't come." Super. The solution to our border problem is for the Senate to create a depression.

I wanted to ask my tablemate about the CEO lobbyist stand on immigration. I suspect its position is: *The more the better, keeps our overhead low*. But she had excused herself when the Q&A began.

Regarding Iraq, he said, "We are already in a civil war in Iraq."

Another person asked him what he would like to see changed about the Senate. He paused for a moment and replied, "I hope no one has anything to do the rest of this afternoon." Then he stated

that he would like the lobbyist situation changed. I wanted to ask my tablemate about this idea, but she was probably at her K Street office by then, coming up with ideas to cut off funds to Senator Specter.

He also said the work week of the Senate should be extended to three days!...and mentioned this comment was off the record. Too late, Senator.

Reporterette posed the question of what he thought about Bush adding "reservations" to the bills he signed. Senator Specter was adamant, "It's inappropriate....The President signs a bill, but then says he will not follow it... .The executive branch people follow the President....It's not right...." His response was followed by applause. I agree. But the Bush administration has said on several occasions that it has a mandate to create its own reality.

Question: Should the Republicans maintain control of Congress?

Answer, "Yes. Look at the alternatives!"

Question: Who is the most effective Democrat in Congress?

Answer: A pause... "Let me think...."

He closed out his talk with some personal thoughts. Senator Specter has had serious health problems the past few years. He said, "There are a lot of things you can't do physically, but lots of things you can do psychologically.... If you just do it!" Right on, Senator.

Postscript: On September 28, the Senate defeated Senator Specter's amendment to the "terrorism" legislation. The result is that the right of *Habeas Corpus* can be denied to a detainee.

Article 1, Section 9 of the Constitution states, "The Privilege of the Writ of *Habeas Corpus* shall not be suspended, unless when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it." Was 9/11 an invasion? Are those attackers in the plane now pillaging the populace and running amok in the countryside?