

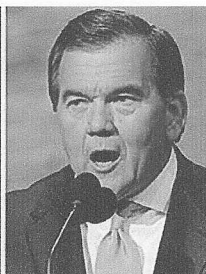
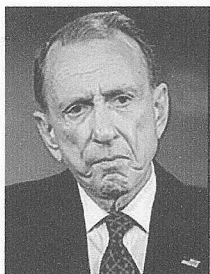
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## Could Tom Ridge Upset the Dems' Specter Strategy

By SEAN SCULLY / PHILADELPHIA Thursday, May. 07, 2009



U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, left, and Tom Ridge, former secretary of Homeland Security and former Pennsylvania governor.

Left: Alex Wong / Getty; Susan Walsh / AP

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After the initial shock of Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter's decision to switch from the Republican to Democratic parties, one conclusion seemed inescapable; in one fell swoop, the seemingly vulnerable moderate Republican had become the de facto Democratic nominee for the 2010 race, virtually assured of victory against conservative Republican Pat Toomey in the general election. But in the days since, as state and national party officials on both sides have digested Specter's seismic shift, the outcome of the Senate contest no longer seems so predetermined.

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Pennsylvania Republicans, for one, aren't yet ready to concede their nomination to a hard-core conservative like Toomey, a former congressman whom few believe can win a general race in the increasingly Democratic-leaning Keystone State. As a result, they are hoping an old name will provide the long sought new face for the party — former Gov. Tom Ridge. In many ways, Ridge is an obvious choice, having risen from a poor family in the industrial west of the state to attend Harvard, win a Bronze Star as an infantryman in Vietnam, serve in Congress, and eventually serve two terms as governor in the '90s, a time that is remembered as both prosperous and politically peaceful in the normally contentious state. ([See 10 elections that changed America.](#))

"I personally believe that the governor, in his own mind, understands that he has something to offer and he would be a catalyst for bringing the party back together in Pennsylvania and leading us to victory," said Bob Asher, a Republican National Committee member and the leading cheerleader in the state for Ridge to reenter politics.

Ridge's name was being thrown around within hours of Specter's switch and the speculation reached a high pitch on Tuesday. Ridge is seriously considering the possibility, those close to him say, and he could decide as early as the end of this week. Staff on Capitol Hill said several senators had called to urge him to step in.

Three polls released early this week suggest that while Specter enjoys a comfortable lead over Toomey, he is vulnerable to a Ridge challenge. A Quinnipiac University poll released Monday has Specter beating Toomey 55% to 33%, but in a statistical dead heat with Ridge. And a poll released Tuesday, commissioned by Bob Asher and conducted by Public Opinion Strategies, a national Republican polling firm, showed Ridge leading Specter 48% to 41%.

Pennsylvania Business Council President David Patti said Ridge is the only state Republican with the national standing to raise money and get help from national figures in campaigning. And he'll need it. Specter is known as a relentless and often ruthless campaigner, and he already has around \$6 million in the bank. Just as importantly, thanks to the deal he made as part of his party shift, he boasts the avowed support of Gov. Ed Rendell and President Barack Obama, meaning the race will be exceptionally expensive for any challenger. "Ridge is going to have to take this very seriously and go for the jugular, because Arlen will," Patti said.

But some observers wonder if Ridge is up to the task, or why he would even want the job. Ridge has been out of the public eye since 2005, when he left the Bush Administration, where he endured widespread criticism and even ridicule as the first director of Homeland Security. Since then, he has been making a comfortable living as head of his own D.C.-based consulting firm. He has also had some minor ethics scrapes, particularly when he failed to register as a lobbyist for the government of Albania for two years, which could become issues if he entered the race. In addition, opponents might well question Ridge's commitment to his native state, an issue that hurt former senator Rick Santorum in his unsuccessful bid for reelection in 2006; although Ridge maintains a residence in his native Erie, he lives almost full time in Maryland, so he would have to uproot his new home and business to even begin to campaign.

Perhaps most important to his calculation, if elected, Ridge would become the junior-most senator in a minority party at a historic low ebb in its power and influence. "I can't imagine that a majority of Pennsylvania voters care much about rebuilding the GOP," Philadelphia *Daily News* political columnist John Baer wrote in a skeptical column on Wednesday. "So Ridge, I assume, runs on grounds that the two-party system is essential to democracy and that basically he's a nicer guy than Specter." ([See pictures of 60 years of election night drama.](#))

For the moment, at least, Toomey has kept his sights on Specter. By betraying the Republicans and voting against his new Democratic colleagues, he claims, Specter has created a problem for himself in terms of his "credibility, character and trustworthiness." But given the fact that Ridge is pro-choice and took some decidedly centrist positions on issues such as education and the environment as both a congressman and then governor, it's a safe bet that Toomey would give him a real fight for the nomination by appealing to the state party's conservative base.

It's not even guaranteed that Specter will reach the general election without a fight. Specter's first week as a Democrat has been awkward, to say the least — he has backed Republican positions in a number of key votes, has irked organized labor by continuing to oppose legislation making it easier for workers to organize, and was reported to have suggested that he hoped that Republican Norm Coleman would end up winning the hotly contested, and still undecided, Minnesota Senate race against Democrat Al Franken. (He later disavowed the comment, saying he "misspoke.")

Specter "does not have an automatic endorsement here for the Democratic primary," said Bill George, president of the Pennsylvania chapter of the AFL-CIO, which represents more than 900,000 workers statewide. For a

Republican, George said, Ridge had a decent record with organized labor, particularly in his later years in office, and could conceivably win over some labor voters if he were to come out in support of some key issues, such as more permissive unionizing rules, health care reform, and labor protections in free trade agreements, which Specter has been elusive on.

Several candidates remain in the race to challenge Specter in the Democratic primary. Congressman Joe Sestak, a retired admiral, has not jumped in, but continues to position himself for a challenge by making comments critical of Specter's actions. Particularly vexing, Sestak told TIME, was Specter's vote against a resolution supporting Obama's proposed 2010 budget. He said he is leaning more toward a run against Specter, though it will take several months to decide.

"We're getting out of the political calculus part of it — the 60 votes so such," Sestak said. "People are beginning to get into, OK, is this a man we can say you're going to be with us in the long haul? This is going to be a long, hard fight — are you going to be with us?"

Pennsylvania Democratic officials profess not worried, however. Specter retains the support of the popular Gov. Rendell and the party establishment, said Abe Amoros, the state party's deputy executive director. and any challenger "will have an uphill climb" against Specter's fund raising apparatus.

With respect to Ridge, Amoros said, Democrats would take him seriously as a threat, but they wonder if he would be any more comfortable in the modern Republican Party than Specter was — especially given his public support for abortion rights, anathema to many conservative voters and a position that has torpedoed Ridge's chances to run as Vice President on a Republican ticket. The party "is an entirely different party than when he got elected [governor]," Amoros said. "This party has gone off to the right."

Moreover, Democrats would not be shy about reminding voters of Ridge's loyal service to the Bush Administration, including his invention of the widely mocked color-coding system to describe the current terrorist threat level. "I am certain anything Gov. Ridge has been involved in would be fair game," Amoros said.

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