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Prelude

March 2010

When you read this, you'll have an advantage. You will know who won. As I begin to write, however, I'm not even sure who's running. That the Republican candidate for the United States Senate from Pennsylvania in 2010 will be forty-eight-year-old Patrick Joseph Toomey, Sr., of Zionsville in the Lehigh Valley is the only certainty. Well, that and the likelihood that this race will prove to be among the most compelling of a particularly tumultuous election year. Who wouldn't want to write about it?

Toomey's opponent, to be determined in the May 18 Democratic primary, will be either the five-term incumbent, eighty-year-old Arlen Specter of Philadelphia, or fifty-eight-year-old former admiral and Congressman Joseph A. Sestak, Jr., of Secane, Delaware County, in the Philadelphia suburbs. For Toomey, facing Specter in the 2010 general election would represent a peculiar rematch of their very close primary contest in 2004.

There is nothing new about trying to define each party's ideological distinctions. Almost five decades ago Barry Goldwater pledged "a choice, not an echo." Some three decades before that, when the power of his improbable New Deal electoral coalition was at its height, Franklin Roosevelt mused about party realignment, on the English style, with everyone on the right united under the Republican banner, and all those on the left (a perpetual majority, he hoped) gathered under the great tent

of the Democrats. It never happened. But, in whatever form, the two-party system has survived, despite the occasional emergence of a George Wallace or Ross Perot. It transcends even the color-coded confusion of this electoral era: “blue states” versus “red states” (toss-ups are “purple states”). There are “Blue Dog Democrats” and “Yellow Dog Democrats.” Is the opposite of “progressive” regressive? “Liberal” currently enjoys the selective opprobrium once accorded to “conservative.” Does being a “moderate” Republican render the majority immoderate? Can those enduring symbols of our shared history, the heritage of log cabins and tea parties, possibly coexist? And where is the semantic clarity of a William Safire when we most need it?

This is why offering Pennsylvania’s electorate a clear choice in the fall between Pat Toomey and Joe Sestak would be so refreshing: an authentic, principled, thoroughly conservative Republican versus an equally consistent Democratic liberal. During the last administration, according to Sestak’s statistics, he voted 97 percent with his fellow Democrats, Specter only 23 percent. In recent months, however, Specter’s support of the Democratic administration’s programs rose to almost 100 percent. At the outset of their primary battle, Specter enjoyed all the apparent advantages over Sestak—far wider name recognition, an immense war chest, and the active support of virtually the entire Democratic establishment, from President Barack Obama and Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell on down. Moreover, while a February blizzard raged outside, all was harmony within the Lancaster meeting room of the Democratic state committee. More than 77 percent of its members dutifully pledged their support to Senator Arlen Specter. Although such solidarity was preordained, their octogenarian champion treated it like V-E Day. He all but leapt to the rostrum, uttering his fervent thanks and pledging the fight of his life to defeat that archreactionary Pat Toomey in November.

There was only one problem, as Joe Sestak had the tactless temerity to remind the delegates. On their day of decision, Specter had been their fellow Democrat for less than a year. For the prior forty-four years he had been a registered Republican, including all thirty of those he had served Pennsylvania in the Senate of the United States. Only a month after denying he would switch parties, Specter declared on April 28, 2009, “As the Republican Party has moved farther and farther to the right, I have found myself increasingly at odds with the Republican philosophy and more in line with the philosophy of the Democratic Party.” Hence the longest tenured member of the Senate in Pennsylvania history would run in 2010 for reelection as a Democrat.

It was ever thus. When a politician switches parties, he doesn’t view it as disloyalty. In effect, “I didn’t leave the party, the party left me.” For example,

such was the claim of both Henry Wallace on the far left and Strom Thurmond on the far right in 1948. Somehow each was the “real” Democrat. Harry Truman, however, campaigned vigorously from the comfortable center and won.

Of course, the reaction to Specter’s support of President Obama’s immense stimulus package—he was one of only three Republicans to vote for it—may have helped motivate his decision to switch parties. That and the polls indicating that he would lose overwhelmingly to Pat Toomey, who had already declared his candidacy, in the 2010 Republican primary. In their earlier primary contest of 2004, the relatively little-known Toomey had come within 17,000 votes of upsetting Specter (1.7 percent). It is generally believed that only the late intervention of President George W. Bush, accompanied by what must have been a very reluctant Senator Rick Santorum, saved Specter. Yes, Bush agreed, Arlen could be very independent at times, but “I know that when I need him, I can count on him.”

Specter’s vaunted independence throughout his lengthy career included such extraordinary contrasts as vigorously opposing the nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court yet years later thoroughly trashing Anita Hill’s testimony in the Clarence Thomas hearings. It is likely that Arlen Specter is the only officeholder in American history to be supported by a Republican sitting president in one election and a Democratic sitting president in the next. Originally a Democrat, he had first changed parties in 1965, running under the Republican banner for district attorney of Philadelphia. When is independence integrity, and when is it opportunism? If political candidates were identified by television programs, Specter’s would surely be *Survivor*.

Yet with everything seemingly in his favor and more endorsements falling Specter’s way, by late March, his lead over Sestak in the polls began to narrow. Pat Toomey had predicted it. When I drove to his modest campaign headquarters in Allentown for the first time, in February 2010, I suggested that even the stubborn Sestak might be obliged to pull out of his primary race with Specter. “No,” Toomey replied, “I think I may well be running against Joe Sestak this fall.” I suppose that’s why I’m not in public life.

There will, of course, also be a Republican primary on May 18, but all the major elements of the party have united behind Toomey. Indeed, conservatives too can differ on significant policies. Ron Paul and Pat Buchanan both opposed our invasion of Iraq. Mark Harris, Toomey’s youthful campaign manager, told me that Toomey’s most difficult decision as a member of Congress had been to vote for the invasion. Everyone’s in favor of a strong military. The issue is how and where to best use it.

What Toomey shares with his broad constituency is not agreement on every specific but rather the affirmation of certain core values. In 2009 he outlined his long-held economic philosophy in a book titled *The Road to Prosperity*. “Respect for property rights, sound money, low taxes, and reasonable regulation are the preconditions for a vibrant economy. . . . Government can redistribute and destroy wealth; they cannot create it. . . . People create wealth. People create economic growth.”¹

Toomey’s only opponent in the Republican primary is Peg Luksik of Johnstown, who seeks to give greater exposure to the pro-life convictions she shares with Toomey. The only candidates of fringe parties are likely to be in the Democratic primary. Accordingly, Pat Toomey, although anything but inactive in the spring, should be able to husband his resources for the fall.

In contrast, there is no way Sestak is going to pull out of his challenging race with Specter. In response to a television interviewer’s question about whether he had been offered a high federal position if he would withdraw, Sestak answered simply, “Yes.” All of which created a firestorm of protest in the Specter camp. Any such offer would be against the law and must be investigated. We didn’t do it. What are the facts? Presidential press secretary Robert Gibbs evaded getting involved in that controversy for weeks. His customary response: “I’ll get back to you.” The Specter camp responded with an irrelevant claim that Sestak paid his campaign staff less than the minimum wage, another egregious legal lapse. All of which would come as a surprise to the hordes of unpaid volunteers in every political campaign. The fact is, both Specter and Sestak are reported to be very demanding people to work for. The turnover in Sestak’s congressional office has been extraordinarily high. He insisted that his district office be kept open seven days a week—not necessarily a bad thing if constituent service is a high priority.

It is likely that the progress in computers saved political polling as a viable tool of measurement. There was no such immediacy in the debacle of 1948. Even in 1980 it took postelection analysis to reveal that Ronald Reagan (“There you go again”), in his sole debate with the frenetic incumbent, Jimmy Carter, had looked, rather surprisingly, so much more statesman-like than his opponent that a substantial majority of previously undecided voters opted to go with Reagan. It turned what was supposedly a close race, which Carter had once led, into a landslide for Reagan.

If voter registration were a significant factor, no Republican would ever win a statewide race in Pennsylvania. As of mid-March 2010, there were

¹Patrick Toomey, with Nachama Soloveichik, *The Road to Prosperity* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 214.

4,313,348 registered Democrats in the commonwealth (including Arlen Specter), and only 3,114,094 registered Republicans. Independent voters totaled 483,246, and the count of “all other” voters was 490,492. For years the state has been popularly depicted as comprising two immense cities on either end—dominated by Democrats—separated by 300 miles of more rural Republican strength. Indeed, Democrats outnumber Republicans in Philadelphia County by more than six to one, and in Allegheny County, which includes Pittsburgh, by well over two to one. The problem is that they don’t always vote that way. And, of course, as throughout the nation, every major city has developed expansive suburbs, the repository of independence. Some voters may even favor perceptions of integrity, too rare a commodity in and out of politics, over ideology or affiliation. Not too many years ago a Democrat turned Republican named Sam Katz, most noted for his business acumen, would have been elected mayor of Philadelphia but for a last-minute corruption probe of his opponent by the FBI, creating a wave of inexplicable sympathy for him. If you’re looking for logic, write about sports.

The respected Rasmussen Poll in mid-March shows Toomey retaining his lead over Specter by nine to ten points in the projected general election and leading Sestak by a lesser margin. Yet other polls continue to have Specter in the lead. Overall, virtually every political report puts the race in its “toss-up” category. What gives? The key appears to be in the fluctuating component called “likely voters.” Democratic ranks swelled in 2008 when large numbers of youthful and African American voters turned out for Obama. Is it likely they will demonstrate remotely the same enthusiasm for Arlen Specter? Although his statewide recognition factor, having served so long in the Senate, is much higher than Toomey’s or Sestak’s, Specter’s “favorability” and job ratings are low for an incumbent. Incumbency itself would be an issue. Ultimately, might not a Toomey bring out the more committed voters in the political environment, volatile though it might be, of 2010? Dominating everything will be the state of the economy, the persistence of high unemployment, and public perception of the effectiveness of the Obama administration’s extensive and costly programs to deal with the realities of a nationwide—indeed worldwide—recession.

A February poll from Franklin and Marshall details the difference between voter registration and likely voter preferences. It estimates that in the general election, “registered voters” would go 33 to 29 percent for Specter over Toomey (25 to 22 percent for Toomey over Sestak, reflecting their lower name recognition by the large percentage of undecided voters). However, “likely voters” would favor Toomey over Specter by 44 to 34 percent,

Toomey over Sestak by 38 to 20 percent. Their questions: “A 14-point swing for Toomey from registered voters to likely voters? Can the Democratic base actually be that demoralized?” Chris Cillizza of the *Washington Post* puts it succinctly: “Polling . . . is part science and part art. Figuring out what the electorate will look like this November is a guessing game, particularly given the huge surge in Democratic registration in the 2008 presidential election.” Stepping back and looking at all the data, Cillizza concludes, Toomey appears to have about a two-point lead on Specter, but with little television exposure or significant news thus far, neither the Democratic primary nor the general election as yet really exists “in the minds of most voters.”

Whatever the registration statistics or turnout, Pennsylvania has traditionally been an unpredictable swing state in presidential, gubernatorial, and especially senatorial elections. Any trends seem to be temporary. For a time there appeared to be a sort of understanding that one senator would come from the western part of the state and one from the east. Yet, starting in the late 1950s, both Democratic Senator Joseph Sill Clark, Jr., and Republican Senator Hugh D. Scott, Jr., lived within a few blocks of each other in the Chestnut Hill section of northwest Philadelphia. The patrician progressive Clark always sounded as if he had just come off the set of *The Philadelphia Story*, and the moderate Scott as if he had never left his native Virginia. Republican moderate Richard Schweiker, from Norristown, a suburb of Philadelphia, denied Clark reelection in 1968. In more recent years, the promising career of Republican Senator John Heinz of Pittsburgh was cut short by the crash of his private plane in 1991. His widow ultimately married Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. Heinz had been preceded by Scott and was succeeded by liberal Democrat Harris Wofford, originally from New York but then a resident of Bryn Mawr, a Philadelphia suburb. Wofford would be defeated by precocious Republican conservative Rick Santorum of Penn Hills, near Pittsburgh (only 36 at the time) in 1994, by a margin of only two points. Santorum was in turn defeated by Democrat Bob Casey of Scranton in 2006. How quickly circumstances change. Casey’s margin was a whopping 59 to 41 percent. Accordingly, both of Pennsylvania’s United States senators in mid-2010 are now Democrats. Wherever the mainstream seems to be, it keeps moving as the parties evolve. Casey, like his late father, is generally a supporter of Democratic policies but is a conservative on such social issues as the right to life. What he lacks in charisma he appears to make up for in rectitude. Which brings us to Pat Toomey.

Toomey’s hometown newspaper, the Allentown *Morning Call*, while headlining in February that “this time, the timing’s right for Pat Toomey,” goes on to suggest, “It would have been difficult to imagine just one year

ago, when the Democrats had all of the political momentum, that a conservative like Toomey would be a favorite in a moderate state like Pennsylvania.” There seems to be an implication that Toomey’s appeal might be more in terms of philosophy than personality. After all, he limited his tenure in Congress to only six years. “He wasn’t in there long enough to develop a bigger personal relationship,” Lehigh County commissioner Percy Dougherty is quoted as saying. “The thing that impressed me most about him when he was here is that he was very professional, no nonsense. Right to the point. He did not believe in much of the pork.” Toomey, particularly after his first term, was surely no John Murtha in terms of bringing home lucrative “earmark” projects, yet he had little difficulty being reelected in what had been a predominantly Democratic district.

In the interest of full disclosure, I’ll admit that I like Pat Toomey. When I met him for the first time, ushered into that spare Allentown office by his campaign manager, Mark Harris, I was struck by his ability to get to the point, despite his unpretentious informality. There is a relaxed, conversational quality about Pat Toomey, whether in talking to a large audience or to only one individual. I had previously seen him speak in videos and interviews, and his opinions were expressed in a low-key and reasonable fashion, accompanied by a sense of humor. What may seem strident in a news release just doesn’t sound that way in person. For example, on the very night the House narrowly passed President Obama’s health care plan, Toomey’s office released this statement: “For the first time in our history, one political party has used every trick in the book to force a broad new government entitlement program through Congress despite bipartisan opposition. Today is not a cause for celebration but a cause for concern about the state of our economy, our health care, and our political system.” That is what Toomey believes, and consistent with what he has said throughout, but it would have sounded very different coming from, say, a John Boehner, and there probably would have been some profanity added. Toomey has already said he will join the campaign to repeal the bill, which the last Gallup Poll before its passage said Americans opposed 48 to 45 percent. Even facing the relentless bullying of Chris Matthews on MSNBC’s *Hardball*, Toomey simply smiled calmly back and framed his reply (echoes of “There you go again”).

Explaining to Toomey what I had in mind, writing about this pivotal campaign from inside, I suggested we might sign a sensible confidentiality agreement. After all, I would hope to see every news release and analysis, the results of meetings, strategy, and planning sessions—material no other writer would have access to. I envisioned a more substantive version of the kind of books I had written as hoops seasons unfolded—from the pre-game

coaches' analysis of the opposition, into the locker room, practices, meetings, everything about the team. However, my emphasis would be more on my own observations than on intrusive interviews. At the outset, we could only predict the outcome, making this book a journey of discovery to be shared with its eventual readers. Toomey suggested I put my proposal into writing. I summarized it in one page, but then I'm not an attorney. Submitted to his lawyers, we had their five-page agreement returned and signed within two weeks. My immediate challenge was how to get started without bugging everyone to death—particularly Mark and director of communications Nachama Soloveichik. Their pace of activity, like the candidate's, would only increase with each week.

Almost everyone in Toomey's headquarters is young and energetic. As of now there are only about a dozen of them, appropriate for an effort based on economy. However, that number is sure to grow, and the campaign is buttressed by two very experienced Washington consulting firms. As I write this, Toomey is already on the road consistently, if quietly, raising funds. He is very slender, of average height, has well-defined features and a high forehead, moves with ease, and appears younger than his forty-eight years. But for the Obama ears, he is almost handsome. From what I've seen thus far, Sestak's manner is more intense. We'll soon have an apt comparison. They have appeared together on a platform at Muhlenberg College and will have what amounts to a second debate at Philadelphia's La Salle University in April. Sestak had originally asked Specter to join him in a series of debates, but the incumbent declined. Why give his primary opponent more publicity? Although rhetorically skilled as a former prosecutor and the only lawyer of the three, Specter has a methodical style of speaking that may derive from his Kansas roots. As with Hugh Scott's Virginia accent, Arlen Specter has never sounded much like a Philadelphian. Of course, he's not in Kansas anymore, but that doesn't seem to matter to the electorate. From the days of Ben Franklin, a lot of prominent Philadelphians have come from elsewhere to build their careers, lending their talents to "America's great experiment," as Sam Katz puts it.

Across Hamilton Boulevard from Toomey's headquarters are the roller coasters of Dorney Park, an appropriate setting for any political campaign. The only indications that this campaign center in a small group of offices is the heart of a statewide enterprise are the small "Toomey for Senate" sign over the front door and Toomey bumper stickers on the cars parked outside. The State Farm sign next door is larger. I'm told this space was vacant for some time, as is often the case with short-lived campaign headquarters. It still looks barely occupied. Like many such locations, Toomey's has all

the ambience of an auto rental office, but without the amenities. There is a front counter, but not even a chair in the lobby for visitors. Everyone could likely move out in about an hour; for now they are all busily engaged. Campaigns may be temporary, but not convictions. Occasionally people drift in and out of each other's offices as in a college dorm, stopping for coffee or a chat, informal and apparently unstressed, though intent. They believe in what they're doing. It may well lead to a career, here or in Washington, but they would do it anyway. And, reminded of Specter's accusation about Sestak's staff, I doubt that anyone is compensated excessively.

During lunch at the nearby TGI Friday's, twenty-five-year-old Mark Harris told me that when he arrived back in February from his honeymoon, there were some 660 e-mails awaiting him. Yet, encouraged by campaign treasurer Sue Zimskind, he was good enough to call me the following Monday morning. Maybe that's why, despite my general despair with any form of technology, I try to treat the computer as if it represented an authentic form of communication. Within hours of our agreement to proceed, I already had about a dozen e-mails from bright, cheerful Nachama and her associates, Kristin Anderson and PR director Tim Kelly. Every day since, there have been more and more coming in. Do they ever go home?

Much of it, predictably, consists of notification of Toomey's appearances, a compilation of video clips, daily news releases from and about the candidates, and the like—but some of it is far more interesting and relevant to any thorough account of a political campaign. Occasionally, there is something really cheerful for internal consumption. The most inventive creation I've seen thus far is the Toomey team's webcast "March to Madness," a takeoff on the pervasive "bracketology" of the NCAA basketball tournament. The competition is to discover whether Specter or Sestak is the most "mad" (that is to say, most liberal), based on their public utterances. Eight video clips (thankfully not sixty-four) will lead to the semi-finals, and the ultimate championship. I don't know if there's a prize for the winner. Perhaps a t-shirt. My choice for most bizarre behavior would be Senator Specter's patronizing treatment of Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann during a joint television appearance. "Act like a lady," he memorably admonished her, "and don't interrupt me." She kept her cool and continued to stress prosperity through job creation in the private sector, but later admitted that she was stunned by his sexist arrogance.

When I returned a week later to Toomey's headquarters and walked around a bit more, trying to avoid interfering with a CNN camera crew, I noted that the walls were not entirely unadorned. In the central room there is a large blackboard on which people are apparently encouraged to note

their random observations, a statewide map showing where regional campaign offices are to be situated, and a memorable display of all the specifics, county by county, of Pat Toomey's primary campaign against then-Republican Arlen Specter in 2004—a reminder for everyone. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* of May 3, 2004, had put those results in context: "On election night, as Rep. Pat Toomey conceded that his campaign to unseat Sen. Arlen Specter had fallen an eyelash short, the candidate reminded his supporters that only a year ago, 'Nobody knew who I was.' 'They do now!' his boosters belated back. . . . With his proven ability to rally the Republican base, raise money, and run a focused campaign, Toomey has established himself as a political force to be reckoned with. . . . 'Sometimes you can win by losing,' said Larry J. Sabato, director of the Center for Politics of the University of Virginia. 'He lost, but he lost so impressively that he's got a ticket to a future race.'"

Six years later, as that new race begins, it's worth considering the path each of its three protagonists took to get to this place. Ideology aside, each in his own way personifies variations of the American dream we all share.