

By Malcolm Lazin
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Specter's courageous stand

In 1977, having successfully headed federal grand jury investigations into public corruption, I ran as a Republican for Philadelphia district attorney. Arlen Specter, who had lost his bid for reelection as district attorney four years earlier despite having distinguished himself as a prosecutor, served as honorary chairman of my campaign, and we met once a week. While I ended up losing to a then-unknown Democrat named Edward Rendell, I won in that I learned from Specter and became his friend.

At the time, I was married. By the late 1980s, I was divorced and had come to terms with being gay. Rendell said this week of Specter, "No public servant or elected official has done more for the people of Pennsylvania ... with the possible exception of Benjamin Franklin." Similarly, few elected officials have done more than Specter for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community.

In the 1960s, gays were routinely entrapped and blackmailed, easy targets for shakedowns by corrupt officials. This was back when people known to be gay could scarcely be employed. Many gay people readily paid bribes rather than lose their jobs, go to jail, and be subjected to public infamy.

In 1964, shortly after he served on the Warren Commission, Specter was appointed a special prosecutor to investigate Philadelphia's corrupt magistrate system. He investigated and successfully prosecuted shakedowns of gay people, and the practice of extorting bribes from them ended in Philadelphia. Specter was likely the first prosecutor in the nation to use his power to protect gay citizens from public corruption.

Later, as a Republican senator, Specter would join Democratic Sen. Ted Kennedy as an early sponsor of legislation against hate crimes and employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. When the AIDS crisis unfolded, Specter, who was a member of the Senate Finance Committee and was active on the subcommittee on health, supported the Ryan White Act and otherwise championed funding for HIV/AIDS programs. And when President George W. Bush advocated amending the Constitution to define marriage as being between a man and a woman, Specter was one of the few Republicans who voted against the measure.

These positions were unpopular and politically unwise when Specter took them. They made him vulnerable, especially in GOP primaries.

But as a son of Jewish immigrants who grew up in rural Russell, Kan., Specter understood prejudice. His support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans was principled and a profile in courage.

Just as I was privileged to know Specter, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans were fortunate to have him as an ally. In so many ways, Pennsylvania and America were blessed to have him as our elected servant.