Philadelphia

Rick Santorum: "I Was Basically Pro-Choice All My Life, Until I Ran for Congress"

In a 1995 Philadelphia magazine feature, the 2012 presidential candidate was depicted as a Newt Gingrich acolyte, a Congressional bully, a class clown ... and someone who changed his mind about abortion because of "science and religion."

By Eric Konigsberg

IN THE SUMMER OF 1989, Rick Santorum and a fellow associate at the Pittsburgh law firm of Kirkpatrick and Lockhart left work to drive to Three Rivers Stadium for the firm's annual softball game. Sitting behind the wheel, Santorum popped in a tape, and on came the reedy voice of a man lecturing as if to a classroom.

"Listen," Santorum said. "Newt Gingrich."

"Who the hell is Newt Gingrich?" the co-worker asked.

Santorum explained that Gingrich was a congressman from Georgia, and that he was the guy to listen to if you were considering a future in politics. "At the time," says the co-worker, "I had no idea that was something Rick was interested in." As it turned out, Santorum was already telling people he was running for Congress in the upcoming election. The tape was something he had ordered from GOPAC, Gingrich's political action committee, full of do-it-yourself campaign tips for aspiring candidates.

In recent years, of course, Gingrich's tutelage of Santorum has taken on a much more direct

nature. Last September, Santorum, at 37 a Republican U.S. senator from Pennsylvania, managed the Senate floor debate as it passed its welfare bill,

Rick Wilson/AP Photo

all the while working closely with Gingrich, now speaker of the House of Representatives and the country's most powerful Republican. Santorum, who prior to his election to the Senate last year served two terms in the House with Gingrich, is in fact known on Capitol Hill as Gingrich's protégé and his point man in the Senate. The two meet weekly for early-morning swims at the House gym.

Much of Santorum's record, thus far, has been a series of tantrums. More than a dozen times in his first few months in the Senate, Santorum took to the floor to trash Bill Clinton for not drafting a balanced-budget proposal, holding up handmade signs and repeatedly shouting “Where is Bill?” In March, Santorum went after a member of his own party, angrily demanding that moderate Mark Hatfield, chairman of the Appropriations Committee, resign his post for refusing to endorse *an amendment to an amendment* to balance the federal budget.

Santorum's break with Senate decorum has been roundly criticized—by members of both parties. Hatfield is said to have told fellow senators, “I'll be damned if some little shit who wasn't even born when I was elected governor of Oregon is going to tell me what to do.” Another Republican senator says, “He has such contempt for the institution of the Senate. It's completely disruptive, the way he carries on.” Nebraska Senator Bob Kerrey, himself not known for restraint, was recently heard asking another senator, “Santorum? Is that Latin for asshole?”

But while Santorum's red-faced outpourings might lead one to think he's some sort of renegade—“He's not afraid to alienate the good old boys,” says Florida Senator Connie Mack (who in fact put Santorum up to calling for Hatfield's resignation)—the truth is that Santorum is doing what he's doing precisely *because* he seeks the approval of his elders, particularly those who are pushing Gingrich's anti-tax, anti-government hostility. In other words, Santorum may be abrasive, but he is very much in lockstep with Gingrich and the other legislators towing the Contract With America line—a group that in the Senate includes Mack, Phil Gramm of Texas, Trent Lott of Mississippi and Santorum's ten fellow freshmen. “He is a key player in much of what I and certain reform-minded members are doing in the Senate, all the more unusual for a freshman,” says Gramm. “He will go far here. I could see him as the Senate majority leader in a term or two.”

“Rick does our dirty work for us,” says Pennsylvania Representative Bob Walker, another Gingrich acolyte. “Because he's a freshman, he gets away with a lot of things that we in the leadership couldn't.” A former Republican Senate staffer who has worked with Santorum puts it differently: “He's a Stepford wife to Gingrich. The WHERE IS BILL? signs—that was vintage Gingrich. If you took the key out of his back, I'm not sure his lips would keep moving.” (Gingrich declined to comment on Santorum for this article.)

The genesis of Santorum's own views remains something of a conundrum. He has forgone a past that was unexaminedly moderate for a platform that is unexaminedly conservative, including reversing, rather quietly, his pro-choice stance on abortion. He is a favorite legislator of such moralist groups as the National Rifle Association and the Christian Coalition, and his voting record is in accord with the religious right. In his brief time in the Senate, he has achieved a measure of stature and prominence in part because—like a half-caste pledge in an elite fraternity—he has been willing to make a fool of himself to advance within Congress' ruling core. What he wants most, it seems, is acceptance. “I figure now that I'm here for six years,” he says, “my colleagues have to take me seriously. I mean, they *have* to.”

IT WASN'T THAT LONG AGO that Santorum was a working grunt in Harrisburg, serving as staff director to state Senator J. Doyle

Corman. Santorum describes himself in those days as a “jokester,” and indeed there is little in his friends' descriptions of their shared experiences that brings to mind the apprenticeship of a statesman. Charlie Artz, then a roommate of Santorum's and now an attorney in Harrisburg, concurs. “Those were fun times,” he says. “When we were at home, we watched ESPN, a *lot* of ESPN. Rick's favorite thing was to watch that announcer Chris Berman do the hockey highlights, and every time they'd show someone hit a slap shot, Rick would stand up and yell along with Berman 'A *cannonading* blast!' It got kind of annoying after a while, but Rick could really crack himself up.”

A teammate in the state-employees' softball league remembers Santorum, a rather lumbering shortstop, as the sort of person easily coerced into doing something foolish at his own expense. “A classic was when we got him to try chewing tobacco right before he stepped into the on-deck circle. I told him it was something only real players did. When his turn came to bat, he was back in the bushes throwing up. We'd never laughed so hard in our lives.”

Not that Santorum's leisure time in Harrisburg was without reward. “It was a great time to be a young single man in Harrisburg, let's leave it at that,” says Stan Rapp, a Harrisburg lobbyist who remains Santorum's closest friend. Cohorts speak of evenings spent drinking beer at a handful of town bars and, occasionally, setting out for the dance floor—typically at the Marriott or at a club called VIPs, where Santorum was heard to approach a young woman with the proposition “How'd you like to go out with a governor?” He meant himself, of course. “Rick knew it even then,” says Stephen MacNett, a fellow Republican staffer in the state Senate now serving as general counsel to the Pennsylvania Senate's Republican caucus. “Even if we didn't.”

SANTORUM'S OFFICE IS IN the Russell Building—the most handsome and most architecturally elaborate hall in the Senate. He has a few books on his shelves, and his walls are bare. He is tall and broad, but he sags in his desk chair. He seems uncomfortable with the very idea of being comfortable. He flounces around his office with his back arched, letting his arms dangle behind him, penguin-like. His smile is a pained wince, a facial contortion in which his eyes tighten, the corners of his mouth tighten and his jaw tightens. Over the several days I spent in his presence, he rarely addressed me without first looking to his press secretary for approval. Above all else, Santorum's discomfort manifests itself in his tendency to roll his eyes, feigning self-deprecation. That way, no one can mistake him for someone who takes his own words seriously. *Like he cares*. This he does as he tells me what drew him to politics. “It's the closest thing to sports,” he says.

Santorum, truth be told, was never much of an athlete during high school, but was happy to be in the company of athletes. Growing up in Butler, Pennsylvania, north of Pittsburgh, he played junior-varsity basketball and managed the baseball team. During football season, he was in the pep squad's Color Guard. They called him the Rooster. He was a middle child, a latchkey kid. His father was an Italian immigrant who worked as a psychologist at a Veterans administration hospital; his mother was a nurse there. When his family moved to suburban Chicago before his senior year, he made few friends and worked in the locker room of a country club. He was uncertain about college, and his applications were late. “I only applied to two,” he says. “Penn State and the business school at the University of Illinois. I can't remember why I applied to the business school, but I did, and they said I was too late. Thank God Penn State accepted me. I had no idea what I was going to do—I mean, I couldn't apply anyplace else.”

Prior to his matriculation in 1976, Santorum had never had any interest in politics. “I always said I never let school get in the way of my education,” he says. But somehow a vital connection was made. Santorum signed up for a poli-sci class freshman year. To fill one requirement of the class, students were given the choice between volunteering on a campaign or following an issue in the *New York Times*, and “Well,” Santorum says, “I always said I was too cheap to buy the *New York Times* and too lazy to go to the library every day, so I decided to work on the campaign. I figured it would be easier.” He chose the Republican campaign of then-Senatorial candidate John Heinz, because his was the only name Santorum recognized—Pittsburgh and ketchup and all that. He ended up running Heinz's first successful bid on campus by default, and then was recruited into resurrecting the Penn State Republicans' club, which had been dormant since the '60s.

It was the dawn of the 1980s, and the Reagan Revolution was stirring. But Santorum was not yet politically impassioned, and what

political orientation he did have was quite moderate. “There was a Youth for Reagan group on campus, but Rick shunned them,” remembers a friend who was active with him in the Pennsylvania College Republican organization. “He always described them as right-wing fringe. But I don't think he gave it much thought. Through three years in the College Republicans with Rick, I never heard him actually discuss issues.”

In fact, Santorum now says, those years brought no epiphany that turned him on to politics or to the conservative movement. “That's just sort of the way my life is,” he says. “I don't really sit down and plan anything. It just sort of happens.”

SANOTRUM LIKES TO CLAIM A LIFE LIVED free of calculation because this supports his Reaganesque, bootstraps philosophy that success in America is a low-hanging fruit. But it also allows him—clumsily, perhaps—to try to affect the sort of aristocratic ease of a real hero-politician like Bill Bradley, who as a college basketball player had spoken of possessing “a sense of where you are,” the uncanny ability to find the basket without looking up. But Bradley was a super-achiever and a leader, an NBA all-star and a Rhodes Scholar. Santorum keeps copies of *National Review* and *PC Gamer*, a video-games magazine, in a hutch near his desk.

By 1979, the start of his senior year, Santorum was encouraged by the faction that had control of the College Republican machine—a group that included his friend Mark Phenicie and Phil English, now a U.S. congressman from Erie—to run for statewide president. He won, but did not have a distinguished tenure. Presiding over the organization's elections, for instance, Santorum abandoned his support of a female friend from Penn State to allow a group of kids to nominate another candidate from the floor (in violation of College Republican rules); he also let a crony who wasn't even enrolled full time in classes run for president (a second violation of the rules). “What Rick did during the convention that year soured a lot of people on politics,” says a College Republican officer who was present. At a meeting at Indiana University of Pennsylvania that year, Santorum led a fellow officer into the student union and began to ask him leading questions about what he thought of other members of the group. He had his hands stuffed into his pockets. When the fellow asked Santorum to take his hands out of his pants, he saw he was holding a small tape recorder, which was turned on. “I have a bad memory, and it's hard to remember everything I talk about,” was Santorum's excuse. Today, Santorum says he doesn't remember the incident.

After college, Santorum enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh for business school. “I applied to Syracuse and Pitt,” he says, “and I hate to tell you this, but I went to Pitt because Syracuse was a two-year program and Pitt was 11 months.” He made it through and moved to Harrisburg to work for state Senator Corman, a Republican he'd interned for in college. Corman is a moderate Republican representing the area around State College. Both he and his wife, Becky, are staunch advocates of abortion rights. Santorum worked in Corman's office for five years, serving much of that time as his administrative assistant. Corman credits Santorum's rise in politics to his memory: “He has an incredible recall that serves him so well with all these complex issues.”

Back then, Santorum was known—like Corman—for being nonpartisan. “Rick never wore his politics on his sleeve,” says J. Barry Stout, the ranking Democrat on the Senate transportation committee. “He was a Democrat when he had to be and a Republican when he had to be. He was a good worker, but nothing special.” Republican consultant William Green, who befriended Santorum in Harrisburg, believes Santorum was politically ambivalent: “Was he impassioned? I don't think I'd have used that word. The zealotry came about later. When he ran for Congress.”

While he was working in Harrisburg, Santorum bought a house by taking advantage of an unpublished, low-interest state loan program. This is especially interesting for a politician who advocates abolishing government programs, including many student loans. Santorum says that he sees no incongruity in this.

One of Santorum's tenants in the house was Corman, who was nearly 50 at the time and says he began to treat Santorum “as an extra son.” In the spring of 1983, Corman decided to go to law school. “He came up with the idea,” Santorum says, “and he said to me, 'You're gonna go to law school too.' I'd never really wanted to do it. Three years, it was hard. Didn't think I wanted to go through

with that. But I ended up going down with him to Dickinson, which was nearby, to meet with the dean." After Corman changed his mind, Santorum wanted to back out too. But, he says, he figured "I'd already paid my 30 bucks to take the [LSAT], I'll take the test."

Again, Santorum applied late. He got in and decided to go, remaining a full-time employee on Corman's payroll even though his class schedule took up most of his day. And he did well at Dickinson. "I have the impression his views have grown considerably more conservative since law school," says Harvey Feldman, Dickinson's associate dean for academic affairs, who describes himself as "the closest thing to a mentor" Santorum had at law school. "He never struck me as much of a conservative. As I remember, it was process that interested him most, not ideology."

Wearing a suit and tie to class every day, Santorum stood out at Dickinson. He had begun to carry himself differently in Harrisburg, too. "He had a game plan," says Stout. "That was the story. He was going to keep moving, move somewhere else in the state and run for office. There was a bit of a feeling 'Who does this guy think he is?'" In 1986, when he finished law school, Santorum sent résumés to a couple of firms in Pittsburgh, listing poetry as a hobby. He accepted a job at Kirkpatrick and Lockhart, a white-shoe firm with longstanding ties to state Republican politics. Governor Dick Thornburgh, in fact, had been a partner there, as had Thomas Pomeroy, a former associate justice on the state Supreme Court. One of its more prominent attorneys today is Harry "Woody" Turner, a GOP fund-raiser and a former candidate for Congress. Santorum told friends in Harrisburg he'd be back.

A HANDFUL OF SANTORUM'S AIDES have gathered chairs around his desk for their morning meeting. Attendant are his chief of staff, his press secretary, a legislative assistant and one or two others. They are discussing the current status of Santorum's drive to have Hans Sewering, a Nazi doctor, investigated and tried for alleged war crimes. The monitor of Santorum's computer shows a high-resolution shot of a golf course—a beautiful hole on a cliff overlooking the water, dogleg left. He leans over and pulls up his socks. "We tried to get *60 Minutes* to investigate it," the press secretary is saying, "but the German government won't let them in." He hands Santorum a letter saying as much from Thomas Matussek, the deputy chief of mission for the German embassy.

Santorum examines the letter. "You see how he's signing his name now?" he says, suddenly animated.

"Thing is, Rick," the press secretary says, "*60 Minutes* ran into a brick wall last week."

"It's just 'Matussek,'" Santorum says. "He doesn't even sign his own first name."

The image on Santorum's computer changes. This hole has a long fairway. The sun is setting behind it, the sky is pink.

"60 Minutes can't get Sewering, they can't get records," says the press secretary.

"This doesn't even look like 'Matussek,'" Santorum says. He holds the letter up. "It looks like 'Pall.' P-A-L-L."

"In any case," says the press secretary, "they can't get an interview."

The screen changes again. Three bunkers around a putting green. Santorum stares at it.

"Rick?" the chief of staff says.

"What, now?" Santorum says. He snaps out of his links-man's reverie. "Sorry."

WHEN SANTORUM BEGAN WORK AT Kirkpatrick and Lockhart, he bought a house in suburban Mount Lebanon, an unusual location for a single associate. The area's representative in Congress was Doug Walgren, an ineffectual, if beneficent, Democrat

who had been in office since 1976. The enclaves of Shadyside and Squirrel Hill, where most young professionals in Pittsburgh choose to live, were within the boundaries of another district, one represented by William Coyne, a Democrat who was far more popular and far less vulnerable to a newcomer like Santorum.

Santorum was a competent lawyer by some accounts, less so by others. “Rick was very persuasive, very good,” says a friend and fellow associate, “but after a couple of years, it was clear to him and to everyone else at K&L that he didn't have a chance of making partner. He worked 40-hour weeks, which just didn't cut it at a place like that, where your worth is determined by the number of hours you bill. He was always leaving work early to golf. One time he took off most of a Friday to drive to see Penn State play at Notre Dame.” The firm had Santorum doing corporate law and litigation, and using his Harrisburg contacts to lobby a few low-priority cases. In the best-known of these, a case somewhat beneath Kirkpatrick's station, Santorum was enlisted to represent the World Wrestling Federation, arguing that pro wrestling is not a sport and therefore needn't be regulated against steroid use. Occasionally, Santorum paced the firm's library, randomly asking fellow associates what they thought about abortion.

By the fall of 1988, Santorum's former colleagues in Harrisburg were awaiting his return. A seat in the state House of Representatives was open, and they encouraged him to run. Santorum told them he would indeed seek office, but that he was headed to Washington. He said he had it all mapped out. On Tuesday, November 6th, as the Republican challenger John Maxwell went down in flames to U.S. Congressman Doug Walgren, Santorum stood outside the polls at Markham Elementary School and told exiting voters he'd be running against Walgren. In two years.

Kirkpatrick and Lockhart's partners were not surprised when they learned of Santorum's plans, but they didn't think he could win. Charles Queenan, Kirkpatrick's managing partner and another of its well-connected Republicans, told Santorum if he wanted to run, he'd have to leave the firm. Santorum never hesitated. “Do you know how to help me raise money?” he asked.

But a funny thing happened on the way to Santorum. While the firm's connections did serve him well, especially since the Republican National Committee gave no assistance, his real boost came quietly from the foot soldiers of the Christian right. This was a resource still untapped by most national-level politicians in Pennsylvania. “The Republican Party has no organization in the western part of the state,” says H. William DeWeese, minority leader of the state House. “Santorum had to mobilize someone.” And so he sent thousands of mailers to evangelicals. “Having returned to my church after a period of absence,” he wrote in one, “I now understand the connection between a personal, vibrant faith commitment and the moral fiber of our nation's needs. While I will represent all the people of my district, I will do so in a principled fashion, derived from my religious commitment.” Anti-abortion ministers in area churches began praying for a Santorum victory, and a local newspaper estimated that more than half of Santorum's 2,000 volunteers were evangelicals. A campaign aide was quoted, agreeing, “We are an army that meets on Sundays.”

What made the campaign such a sticky wicket for Santorum was that the 18th District, a stronghold of Big Steel, was overwhelmingly moderate. More than half of its voters were registered Democrats, and many of its Republicans were pro-choice. So Santorum was careful about what he said to whom. “Believe it or not, he kept his views on abortion very quiet throughout the campaign,” says a prominent Republican active in Planned Parenthood. “At least he did with us. No one here had identified him as anti-choice.” Santorum knocked on 25,000 doors and some days stood, campaign sign in hand, at major interstate exits during rush hour. He crashed Walgren's fund-raisers and attacked him as a Washington insider who barely visited his home district, voting for Congressional pay raises and owning a house near Washington.

In seizing upon this theme, too, Santorum was ahead of the curve. One ad showed a photo of Walgren's house outside Washington, shot from an angle that made it appear larger than it actually was. (This September, Santorum put his Pittsburgh residence on the market and bought a house in suburban Virginia.) And while Santorum called the need for Congressional term limits reason enough to challenge Walgren, to this day he has not announced his own term limit. Even worse, Santorum's campaign mailed out a flyer dummied-up to look like a tear sheet from the *Washington Post*, making unsubstantiated charges that Walgren's wife held a job that presented a conflict of interest for Walgren. “I have never in my life seen a politician so dishonest,” Walgren says today. “Typically in

a campaign debate, when you confront your opponent for saying something misleading, he will back down and try to spin the issue. But Santorum would look right at me and just repeat charges he knew to be wrong."

During this time, Santorum also found himself a wife. In 1988, he had met Karen Garver, a law student considering an offer for a summer associate's job at Kirkpatrick, and they'd connected right away. Like Santorum, Karen was Catholic and from Pittsburgh. At the time, she was living with Tom Allen, a well-known OB-GYN who in 1972 had co-founded Pittsburgh's first abortion clinic. He also happened to be the doctor who had delivered Karen and some of her siblings. She had moved in with Allen when she was a nursing student in her early 20s and he was in his 60s. Upon leaving Allen for Santorum, she told him one of her considerations was starting a family. "When Karen told me she was moving out," Allen says, "she said, 'You'd really like Rick. He's a lot like you. He's politically active and he's pro-choice.'"

Santorum and Karen were married in June 1990, as the campaign escalated. The ceremony took place at Heinz Chapel, a nondenominational place of worship at the University of Pittsburgh. "Today," the priest said in his benediction, "we pray for good luck, fertility and enough votes to win on election day."

Now, the Santorums have three children, and Karen works part-time doing legal work for Brabender Cox, the political-consulting firm Santorum has used for all his campaigns. (He also put Karen's sister on his Congressional staff during his first term.)

SANTORUM DUCKS INTO HIS CONFERENCE ROOM, where a group of low-income housing advocates from Philadelphia are waiting to talk to him about the welfare bill the Senate passed the day before, the one Santorum calls "the bill I put together."

Indeed, Santorum was highly praised for his work. Wyoming Senator Alan K. Simpson, in a press conference just after the bill had passed, called Santorum's work as the floor manager "a sterling performance. One that I have not seen in 30 years of legislating."

But his actual role on the floor is a matter of some debate. "Santorum was brought in by Gramm to help rewrite the existing welfare bill, which was fairly moderate, and make it more stringent," says a senior-level staffer to a Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, which drafted the bill. "But he had no idea what he was doing out there, and in the end, the final bill that passed was similar to the original one." As it turns out, the only amendment Santorum added to the bill on his own was an anti-privacy clause that will grant police departments access to the addresses of welfare recipients who are fugitives from the law.

Now, Santorum slaps a palm against his chin and fields a question from a 50ish woman. "It sounds as though Community Development Block Grants may be threatened by this," the woman says.

Santorum tilts his head, seemingly confused, and holds the pose for a second. And then he rolls his eyes. "I'm not familiar with that one," he says.

"But...it says here..." the woman stammers, pointing to an article from the day's paper.

"*Uh, no*," Santorum says. That closes the matter. A few minutes later, he checks his watch and stands to leave. "Thank you very much," he says.

According to a study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a left-leaning Washington think tank, the new Republican formulas do not benefit any of the Northern industrial states. Senate cuts will table Medicaid funding in Pennsylvania by up to $2.5 billion over the next seven years, amounting to an 18 percent cut. Cuts in earned-income tax credits to working-class families in Pennsylvania will result in an average tax increase of $327 per taxpayer. Perhaps worst of all for Pennsylvania, which has the second-highest elderly population in the country, is the GOP Medicare plan, which the Department of Health and Human Services

has estimated will cut funding to the state by $15 billion over the next seven years.

“Santorum is the only politician in this state—Democrat or Republican—who is happy with the impact the Contract With America will have on Pennsylvanians,” says Philadelphia Congressman Chaka Fattah. And Santorum practically admits as much. “The Contract is not supposed to help or hurt Pennsylvania *per se*,” he says. “It's a *national* plan. And spending cuts are something we're just going to have to take.”

SANTORUM WON THE 1990 CONGRESSIONAL election against Walgren by 4,000 votes. Late that night, when a TV reporter called the Republican National Committee for tallies, the RNC spokesman couldn't remember Santorum's name. But it didn't take him long to capture national attention. By March 1992, he was leading a group of freshmen who called themselves the Gang of Seven, demanding that Speaker of the House Tom Foley make public the list of Congressmen with overdrafts at the House Bank. Santorum and his Gang raised popular ire over what amounted to very little money and played off minor, perfectly legal negligence —essentially a few hundred dollars for some members in interest-free loans—as crude dishonesty. But Santorum seized the moment and took to the House floor, addressing Foley and the Democratic leadership as “Big Brother.” He posed for an RNC-sponsored poster of the Gang of Seven that looked like a thuggish, white-collar Nike ad. He appeared on *Donahue*.

This is the one moment in his life that Santorum will permit himself to describe as pivotal. He's right, of course, it did make a splash, although not quite in the way he says it did. “I can't tell you how hard that was,” he said. “Older members told me I couldn't get away with it. I had a member beg me not to do it; one even threatened me.” But the outbursts won Santorum favor from Gingrich and the other Republican revolutionaries. “That was how Rick made his name,” says Senator Mack, a former member of the House. “Speaker Gingrich and I, we saw quite a lot of ourselves in how we used to go after Tip O'Neill.” Gingrich called and began inviting Santorum to weekly policy sessions with some of his closest allies—representatives Steve Gunderson, Nancy Johnson and Bob Walker, as well as Jim Pinkerton, the Bush Administration's thinker-in-residence. “Santorum was sort of our Gang of Seven guy,” Pinkerton says. “He was there because he's confrontational and very good at getting on the offensive on issues. In that way, at least, he and Gingrich are kindred spirits.”

THE DAY SANTORUM WAS REELECTED in 1992, he told friends that in two years he would run for the Senate against Harris Wofford; he said he had to get there by '94 to be a vice presidential contender in 1996. Meanwhile, Gingrich helped him get a seat on the powerful Ways and Means Committee, where, according to a fellow committee member who's a conservative Democrat, “he spent most of his time grandstanding for his Senate race, speaking vague, cost-cutting rhetoric designed to get him on C-SPAN. He would be very polite in person, but when he got in front of the microphone he was a monster. You had to wonder how much of an act it was.”

“Santorum had no depth on tax issues,” says a staffer to a Democratic committee member, “but he could run a long ways with nothing. He was assigned to make life crazy for Democrats. They always knew he would be a little pit bull to take us on on issues simply for the sake of slowing things down, but he couldn't keep his facts straight. It got to the point that other Republicans would have their staff draft the issues for him so that at least he'd have some facts to work with.”

The Republican overclass in Pennsylvania—the core group of which is moderate—tried to discourage Santorum from running for the Senate. “We felt it was presumptuous on his part; he didn't exactly have much of a record in the House,” says a powerful Republican who has worked for Heinz, Thornburgh and Governor Tom Ridge. “But it was more than that. Of course, there was his personality—he had rubbed a lot of us the wrong way, and in Congress he's been a bull in a china shop. In the end, the problem was that nobody knows what Rick stands for. He kept trying to tell us what a moderate he was, but there was the Christian thing that turned us off. I think Rick stands for Rick.”

Anne Anstine, who chairs Pennsylvania's Republican Party, has been a firm Santorum supporter, but concedes he was not her first

choice when candidates were drafted. “It was important to a lot of people in the party to have a pro-choice candidate,” she says. “We felt we owed it first to Teresa Heinz [wife of the late senator], and then we sought out Julie Nixon Eisenhower, who was not interested either.” In fact, Anstine—along with Senator Arlen Specter and Elsie Hillman, Pittsburgh's wealthy Republican National Commiteewoman—were so unhappy with the prospect of a Santorum candidacy that they courted some half-dozen others to run against him, including Julie Eisenhower's husband David (neither Julie nor David has ever run for office), former gubernatorial candidate Sam Katz; state auditor general Barbara Hafer; and Sandra Schultz Newman, recently elected to the state Supreme Court. None of these people bit, and when Santorum took the primary, party elders had no choice.

Hillman, for whom Santorum worked one summer, is said to have raised little money for his campaign. “His being pro-life,” she says, “was a problem at first. The Christian Right makes me uneasy. Nevertheless, he was our candidate.” Specter, who is Jewish and pro-choice, did finally endorse Santorum, dispatching his chief of staff, Pat Meehan, and his son, Shanin, to work on Santorum's campaign. But there have been whispers that Specter and the majority of his staff actually voted for Wofford. (Specter refused to comment.) Santorum reciprocated last March by formally endorsing Specter's presidential bid, but he had difficulty containing his reservations and proceeded to roll his eyes and make agonized faces on the Capitol lawn as Specter, declaring his candidacy, spoke in warm tones of America's liberal tradition.

“Santorum does the impossible,” jokes one Specter associate. “He makes Arlen the more pleasant senator from Pennsylvania.”

SANTORUM IS ALONE AT HIS DESK, waiting to meet Gingrich and Bob Walker at a luncheon. He reads aloud a press release his office will be sending out. He puts it down to take a phone call from one of his Pennsylvania offices.

“Hey,” he says. He pushes the flat of his hand back along his head. His hair is sticking up. He runs his hand forward over his head; his hair sits in place.

“Mmm-huh,” Santorum says into the telephone. His hand runs up one side of his head; a wing of hair stands in suspension.

“Yeah, maybe,” Santorum says. He pats the wing back down. And then he works the other side: the wing goes up, the wing goes down.

He hangs up and dials his scheduler in Pittsburgh. “Hey,” he says, “it's Rick. You know, this education thing that I'm supposed to speak at for an hour? It sounds like a real yawn.”

He listens to the other end. “Has it been scheduled yet?” he asks. “I can't talk for an hour at an education seminar.”

He listens some more.

“See, this is some pretty detailed stuff. I can't talk for an hour on this stuff. I'll go if it's like a greeting or a photo op. Can I, like, just answer some questions or something?”

SANTORUM'S RACE AGAINST HARRIS WOFFORD brought frequent comparisons with *Bob Roberts*, a movie that two years earlier had parodied the cult of personality and its role in campaign politics, pitting—with remarkable prescience—a distinguished, slightly diffident liberal senator against a charismatic, insincere upstart prone to singing such inanities as “This land was made for me.” The movie was set in Pennsylvania.

Wofford was a noblesse-oblige activist—a former president of Bryn Mawr and a Peace Corps founder—closely associated with Bill Clinton. About Wofford's plans to help Clinton institute a National Service Corps, Santorum said he had no interest in young people

“picking up trash in a park and singing 'Kumbaya' around the campfire at night.” Addressing Wofford's support of the Clinton health-care plan, he described a White House social-policy adviser as “a Marxist.” One Santorum mailer, paid for by an anti-gun-control organization, showed a bull's-eye target with Wofford's name in the center. Although Wofford has worked for John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Santorum's campaign did little to distance itself from the ads when confronted afterward. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette also reported that Santorum was employing an office staffer on the campaign, a violation of campaign laws.

Again, the religious right's involvement was essential. When the Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia printed 150,000 ballots for area parishioners, asking them to vote on select positions of Santorum's and Wofford's, the Christian Coalition and the Santorum campaign expected Wofford to score higher. (Wofford has pro-life leanings, and the majority of the Catholics surveyed also favored his support of gun control and family leave.) So the Christian Coalition and the Santorum campaign implored the Archdiocese to print new ballots using slightly different criteria. The Archdiocese obliged, destroying its original batch of scorecards and publicizing the new ones, on which, of course, Santorum had come out ahead.

Santorum's was the second-highest-priority race for the National Republican Senate Committee, behind only Oliver North's in Virginia. With the help of the NRSC, Santorum managed to outspend Wofford—which is rare for a challenger. Wofford's effort, meanwhile, was poorly run. Its celebrity adviser, James Carville, was off promoting his book throughout much of the campaign, and Carville's partner Paul Begala spent time on two other campaigns that had hired him simultaneously. Santorum came from behind to win, though he almost blew it in the final week, tripping over his own ego twice: First, he exploded at Teresa Heinz, attributing her support of Wofford to the fact that she was “dating a Democratic senator from Massachusetts”—John Kerry; then, he snapped at a LaSalle University student when pressed on his conviction to cut Social Security.

He won without a majority—49 percent of the vote to Wofford's 47 percent. Coming as it did in the worst Democratic year in more than three decades, it was a weak victory. And while national Republicans hailed Santorum's as a cornerstone of the great victories of the Conservative Revolution, the Republican Party back home wasn't completely thrilled. When a friend approached Elsie Hillman to ask her how she felt about her state's new senator, she shrugged and rolled her eyes in a very Santorum-like gesture. “What can I tell you?” she said. “He worked for me.”

It should come as no surprise that Santorum has taken heat in Pennsylvania, a state that has always elected moderates: Heinz, Specter, Wofford, Ridge, Bob Casey, and to a certain extent Thornburgh.

Even Santorum calls himself a moderate; or so he did when I visited him (though in the same month he described himself in a political newsletter as a “kick-ass conservative”). “The only position I have that is not embraced by moderates is my stance on abortion,” he said. But his votes certainly place him right of center: He has supported tuition tax credits for Christian and private schools, and voted against gun control, against allowing gays into the military, against letting immigrants with HIV into the country, against federal funding for “obscene art,” against Henry Foster's nomination for surgeon general and against the Civil Rights Act of 1991 (though he eventually voted for George Bush's diluted version of it).

Santorum's simplicity has enabled him to convince both voters and colleagues of the sincerity of these positions. “He is extraordinarily effective, very smart and very believable,” says Representative Walker. “He is so straightforward you can't help but understand from listening to him why there is such a need in America to reduce the size and power of the federal government.”

Similarly, many have been convinced of his Saul-to-Paul religious conversion. During Santorum's first two Congressional campaigns, says a veteran of those two efforts, his staff held daily prayer sessions. One of his top staff members claims to have spoken in tongues with Clarence Thomas, and at least one other has biblical quotations on her computer screen-saver. Recently, Santorum joined a Bible-study group, consisting of a half-dozen or so senators who meet Thursdays at noon in Vice President Gore's Senate office (when Gore is not there). “I couldn't tell you what religion he is by what he says in this group, but I would say he's got a wonderful spirit about him,” said former Senator David Durenberger, a frequent attendant. “He's got a sense that he hasn't arrived

yet, in terms of formal religious study, but he's not afraid of expressing himself, no matter how silly it sounds."

Santorum does concede that he's had a volte-face on abortion. "I was basically pro-choice all my life, until I ran for Congress," he said. "But it had never been something I thought about."

"So why did you change?" I asked.

"I sat down and read the literature. Scientific literature."

"So religion had nothing to do with it?"

"Oh, well, of course," he said. "And religion too. It was both of those, science and religion."

Santorum's political identity is better defined by what he is against, by what he seeks to disrupt or dismantle, than by what he hopes to erect. Each of his best-known "accomplishments"—inflaming the House bank scandal, as well as the Hatfield and Clinton eruptions—have held the shape not of reform, but indictment.

I asked Santorum if throughout his life he had encountered any book or movie, any cultural or intellectual touchstone, to inspire his political worldview. He stared at a fixed point on his desk for several seconds, then looked at his press secretary.

"I wouldn't say there was any book," he said finally, pausing again. "I'd say Martin Luther King, and what he was speaking about had a profound influence on me, his commitment to bringing the races together."

When I asked what he had done in his legislative career to try to realize King's hopes, Santorum grew testy.

"Well," he started. "It's not ... You don't necessarily ..."

"Welfare," his press secretary said.

"That's right," Santorum said, not missing a beat. "Welfare reform. Welfare reform that will get blacks working and eventually bring about racial equality."

AS LONG AS SANTORUM REMAINS WILLING to let Gingrich and his disciples project their agendas onto his tabula rasa, his usefulness and stature seem likely to grow. Several Republican members of Congress say privately that they expect him to make a bid for the presidency in either the year 2000 or 2004.

"I'll tell you," Santorum said, "when I decided to run for the Senate, Newt said to me..." He stopped. "I don't know if I should..." He stopped again. "I think he put it this way: I was one of the few members, or the only one, who could be president. But as I told you, I've never had a big plan, never needed to look too far ahead. I just do what's in front of me, and things just sort of happen."

"And here you are in the U.S. Senate?"

He looked at his press secretary and chuckled. "It's a great country," he said.

This story originally appeared in the December 1995 issue under the title, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Santorum."