

Local businessman is GOP moneymaker

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The ability of businessman **Mel Sembler** of St. Petersburg to raise money for politicians has drawn him higher and higher into national circles over the years.

Now Sembler has reached the zenith of his field: He is the new finance chairman of the Republican National Committee, in charge of overall money-raising operations for his party.

"They wanted the best fund-raiser in America, what can I tell you?" Sembler, 66, joked Tuesday. His choice was approved by new party chairman Jim Nicholson of Colorado.

Political parties raise money from contributors to pay for their own operations, to spend for general advertising during elections ("Vote Republican," "Vote Democratic"), during campaigns and to boost candidates in targeted areas or races.

Sembler said that as finance chairman he would no longer take sides in Republican primary elections. For example, he had intended to support U.S. Rep. Bill McCollum of Altamonte Springs in next year's U.S. Senate primary, but now that would be inappropriate, Sembler said.

Sembler, chairman of the Sembler Co., a shopping-center development company, became involved in politics with George Bush's unsuccessful 1980 presidential campaign.

He stuck with Bush in 1988, not only raising money but contributing more than \$100,000 of his own to Bush and Republican causes. He served on Bush's national finance committee and was finance chairman for Bush's inauguration.

Bush named Sembler ambassador to Australia, which got him included in a series of Doonesbury comic strips poking fun at the link between money and patronage.

Sembler more recently has been state Republican finance chairman, and is currently Florida's national Republican committeeman. He was national finance co-chairman of Lamar Alexander's campaign for president last year.

Asked what made him good at asking for money, Sembler said there was nothing magic: "I make my phone calls, that's all. I've got a lot of friends around America."

Sembler said most contributors do not think they are entitled to anything in return except for office-holders with a philosophy they support.

"I've always heard that," Sembler said of donors seeking favors in return for money. "But interestingly enough, I don't see it that much."

By coincidence, the job of being Sembler's arch-rival - national Democratic finance chairman - was filled until recently by another Floridian, Miami lawyer Marvin Rosen.

Democratic fund-raising has been surrounded with scandal following the revelations of ties to foreign sources of money and easy access to the White House. Rosen has finished his stint, has hired a public-relations consultant and was the subject of a somewhat unflattering profile recently in the New York Times.

Besides business and politics, Sembler and his wife, Betty, also have been active in anti-drug useefforts. He advised the Reagan and Bush administrations on drug policy. The Semblers founded Straight Inc., a drug-treatment program for adolescents.

Last week Sembler was in Washington for the national committee meeting to elect Nicholson chairman. Despite (or perhaps because of) his fund-raising prowess, he ducked out to make a phone call, counted his change, and asked: "Got a dime?"

[Illustration]

COLOR PHOTO, ANDREW INNERARITY; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; Caption: (1996) Mel Sembler, shown at the '96 GOP convention in San Diego, (ran CITY & STATE, METRO & STATE); Mel Sembler (ran TAMPA & STATE)

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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