

Graham judges Florida nominees differently

[CITY Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: DAVID DAHL

Date: Jul 29, 1989

Start Page: 1.A

Section: NATIONAL

Text Word Count: 992

Document Text

WASHINGTON - Just over two weeks ago, Sen. Bob Graham got up on the Senate floor and asked his colleagues to send a "consistent" message about the war on drugs by rejecting a much-criticized nominee to be ambassador to the Bahamas.

Now, faced with the nominations of two controversial ambassador-designees from his home state of Florida, Graham is a little more flexible. He is inclined to support the two men, Joseph Zappala and Mel Sembler.

"In all candor, the fact that they are from Florida, the fact that there are people who I know personally who have spoken highly of them, is a weight in their benefit," explained Graham, a Democrat.

Zappala, picked to go to Spain, and Sembler, chosen to represent the United States in Australia, are among a crop of Republican fund-raisers and political operatives chosen by President Bush to be ambassadors. The group includes former U.S. Sen. Chic Hecht of Nevada, the new ambassador to the Bahamas. Earlier this month, Graham unsuccessfully tried to block his confirmation.

Democrats have pointed out that several Bush nominees do not have foreign policy experience. Zappala, for instance, does not speak Spanish. Sembler listed his language expertise as "English (fluent)" in a form he submitted to the Senate.

Both men are St. Petersburg developers. Together, they have contributed \$287,000 to Republican causes during the last five years and helped Bush raise millions more.

This week, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved Zappala's nomination by a 10-9 vote. Sembler was approved on a voice vote. They are likely to be considered by the full Senate in September, and Democrats are expected to renew their criticisms then.

The Democrats apparently will not get Graham's help. In an interview, he distinguished between the nominations of Sembler and Zappala and that of Hecht, the Bahamas ambassador whom he opposed on July 11.

Graham focused on the U.S. war against drugs. He pointed out how close the Bahamas is to the United States, and noted the island commonwealth's role in smuggling illegal drugs to this country. In the Bahamas, he said, the U.S. ambassador has a special role in coordinating the drug fight.

"I think it's a combination of the individual and the country," Graham explained. "The Bahamas are a particularly significant nation in terms of the United States' effective interdiction efforts of drugs. The ambassador fills a unique operational role in the Bahamas. That is not true either of Australia or Spain."

Actually, Spain has become a major corridor for drug smuggling to Europe. The drugs have come into the country from both North Africa and South America, according to press reports.

Last year, three tons of cocaine were seized in Spain, according to the Reuters news service. On Thursday, the New York Times reported that European law enforcement officials are worried about increased use of crack cocaine. The cocaine is being shipped by Colombian drug cartels into Spain, the Times reported.

In the interview, Graham agreed that Spain and Australia are important to U.S. interests, but he asserted that the Bahamas, because it is so close to the United States, looms larger in the war against drugs.

It was the Bahamas' location that Graham repeatedly cited July 11 when he fought the Hecht nomination. He forced the

Senate to take the unusual step of recording a roll call vote on the nomination.

"I believe that we need to have an individual who has not only a diplomatic and foreign service background, but also who can serve as a key operational officer in the United States' war on drugs," Graham told his colleagues.

He said that the choice of the ambassador to the Bahamas is a "symbol" of U.S. seriousness about the fight against drugs. "I suggest we need to send a consistent set of statements of our seriousness, of our willingness to commit not only resources but the best American citizens that we have in the critical battleground against the war on drugs," Graham said.

Hecht, a former intelligence officer, said he would feel "at home" in the Bahamas because "I've been involved in gambling in Nevada and I've been involved in banking for 25 year. . . . Also, I understand it is a nice lifestyle. I love golf and they have a lot of nice golf courses and good fishing."

But, despite Graham's pleas, the Hecht nomination was approved 78-19. The senator's role in the fight was carried in several newspapers the next day, and he was praised by Florida newspaper editorial writers.

A Republican aide complained after the vote that Graham objected to the nominee because Hecht, a Republican, was helped in his campaign last year by a Japanese automobile dealer's political action committee (PAC) that Graham has criticized. The same PAC helped Graham's opponent in 1986 and the Florida Republican nominee for the Senate last year.

Graham's aides say that the PAC contributions had nothing to do with his fight.

Now, with the Sembler and Zappala nominations coming before the Senate, Graham will likely follow what is a common Senate practice: Senators often support nominees from their home states, no matter what party affiliation.

During the last few weeks, he has met with both Sembler and Zappala and heard from their supporters back home. He also said that he had met Sembler previously because of the developer's involvement in the Straight Inc. drug rehabilitation program.

"They both have had a distinguished civic record in our state, so my inclination continues to be to support their nomination," Graham said.

While he plans to support the two men, Graham also said he also would like the United States to increase the number of career officers in the foreign service. Democrats have complained during the debate over Zappala and Sembler that Bush has selected a higher-than-usual percentage of political appointees to be envoys.

Graham noted that both the Soviet Union and Japan send career officers to be ambassadors.

[Illustration]

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; Caption: Robert Graham

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

WASHINGTON - Just over two weeks ago, Sen. Bob Graham got up on the Senate floor and asked his colleagues to send a "consistent" message about the war on drugs by rejecting a much-criticized nominee to be ambassador to the Bahamas.

Now, faced with the nominations of two controversial ambassador-designees from his home state of Florida, Graham is a little more flexible. He is inclined to support the two men, Joseph Zappala and Mel Sembler.

Zappala, picked to go to Spain, and Sembler, chosen to represent the United States in Australia, are among a crop of Republican fund-raisers and political operatives chosen by President Bush to be ambassadors. The group includes former U.S. Sen. Chic Hecht of Nevada, the new ambassador to the Bahamas. Earlier this month, Graham unsuccessfully tried to block his confirmation.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.