

Zappala confirmed as ambassador to Spain

[CITY Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

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Date: Oct 4, 1989

Start Page: 1.A

Section: NATIONAL

Text Word Count: 665

Document Text

WASHINGTON - Joseph Zappala will be the next U.S. ambassador to Spain.

On a 79-20 vote Tuesday, the Senate decided not to make an example of the St. Petersburg developer who, one senator complained, is no more qualified for the job than "tens of millions of Americans."

The wide margin virtually guarantees approval of Mel Sembler to be ambassador to Australia when Senate action on him comes up later this week. Both of Florida's senators, Bob Graham and Connie Mack, voted for Zappala.

Like Zappala, Sembler is a St. Petersburg developer who raised more than \$100,000 for George Bush's 1988 campaign. When President Bush rewarded each fund-raiser with an ambassador's post, critics attacked the nominations as examples of a trend toward trivializing diplomatic assignments.

Neither man has any foreign policy experience. Zappala does not speak Spanish. And when a Senate committee sent out questionnaires asking nominees about their qualifications, members and newspaper editorialists were surprised to find Sembler and Zappala had returned theirs with nearly identical responses.

"This is an absolute insult to the process," said Sen. Paul Sarbanes, a Maryland Democrat. "It's incredible. It's the sort of thing where a teacher in school would hand the exam back, or better yet flunk the student."

The committee nearly did flunk Zappala, forwarding his nomination to the full Senate by a vote of 10-9. Sarbanes held the floor for parts of two days this week, calling the nomination an insult to Spain and complaining that Zappala represents a trend.

The senator trotted out charts to assert that 62 percent of Bush's diplomatic nominations are political, compared to no more than 39 percent for any president since John Kennedy.

He warned that such a volume of political appointments leads to terrible morale among professional diplomats, who devote their careers to preparation for a "chief of mission" post. He said the trend could leave "amateur" ambassadors with a Foreign Service no longer able to recruit the best and the brightest.

"Instead of having a first-class embassy staff to back them up, it will be second-class or even third-class," Sarbanes said.

Several senators rose to defend Zappala's nomination on Monday. But on Tuesday afternoon only Kentucky Republican Mitch McConnell took the floor.

"No one will deny that Joe Zappala made campaign contributions, but it was his contributions to the business world and his community that made the difference to the president," McConnell said. He cited Zappala's leadership in the Straight Inc. drug treatment program and with the Pinellas Association for Retarded Citizens.

Sarbanes replied that Zappala's record of community service is "limited, really" and that beyond his campaign contributions his only visible asset is being "a good person."

"... There are really tens of millions of Americans who meet that requirement," Sarbanes said.

When the vote came, however, it wasn't even close. Legions of Democrats opted not to contest the president's

selection, and only one Republican defected: David Durenberger of Minnesota.

“There’s a lot of people in the Senate who feel that, short of an indictment, the president’s entitled to his choice,” said Bruce Frame, press aide to Sarbanes. He said Sarbanes had made his point, adding that Sembler’s nomination might not even face a roll call vote.

“People can count votes around here,” he said. “There’s no point in dragging it out.”

An aide to Florida Republican Mack said the Zappala vote shows that Sarbanes’ crusade was a lonely one. “It still ended up being kind of a Lone Ranger thing,” he said.

The margin was also due to Zappala’s personal lobbying effort, which was assisted by a leading Democratic fund-raiser from Florida, Jerome Berlin. President Bush’s phone calls to individual senators also didn’t hurt.

Late Tuesday afternoon, Zappala was in Mack’s office awaiting his own call of congratulations from Bush. He continued to decline to speak with reporters, however.

Zappala could depart for Madrid as soon as he is sworn in. While lobbying for his confirmation, the nominee was also interviewing applicants for his personal embassy staff.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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