

AMBASSADOR NOMINEES' QUALIFICATIONS QUESTIONED

Sun Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, FL) (Published as Sun-Sentinel) - July 30, 1989

- Author/Byline: By Ken Cummins, Washington Bureau
- Edition: ALL EDITIONS
- Section: OUTLOOK
- Page: 2D

Would-be ambassadors Mel Sembler and Joe Zappala of St. Petersburg will have to twist slowly in the wind for a few more weeks while the Senate continues to ponder whether to approve their diplomatic appointments.

The affable Sembler and Zappala were the first two Floridians picked by President Bush for prized posts in his administration. As rewards for their successful fund-raising for Bush and other Republican candidates last year, Sembler was nominated to become ambassador to Australia, and Zappala ambassador to Spain.

But the two close friends, partners in shopping center development ventures and founders of the controversial drug rehabilitation program, Straight Inc., recently have become the butt of jokes in the Senate, subjects for ridicule in newspaper editorials and national symbols of the abuse of political patronage.

Sembler's and Zappala's nominations repeatedly are being used to criticize the practice, followed by every occupant of the White House, of handing out ambassadorial plums to big party fund-raisers who have no other noticeable qualifications for overseas posts. The American Academy of Diplomacy, an organization of former top U.S. foreign policy officials and secretaries of state, rated both men as unqualified for their appointments.

The two nominees contributed to the ridicule they have been enduring by handing in nearly identical questionnaires to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which reviews ambassadorial appointments.

For instance, in describing his qualifications for the Australian post, the 59-year-old Sembler stated: "I have been known as a coalition builder, able to organize my colleagues and peers to action in support of worthy civic, charitable and political causes."

Zappala, 56, answered the same question concerning his qualifications to be ambassador to Spain by stating: "I am known as a coalition builder. I am able to organize my colleagues and peers to action in support of worthwhile civic, charitable and political causes."

Employees of both men, whose St. Petersburg offices are two blocks apart, said they filled out the questionnaires for their bosses and are responsible for these, and other, similar answers. But the similarities prompted The Washington Post's editorial writers to question whether Sembler and Zappala could handle their ambassadorial assignments when they couldn't even fill out their own questionnaires.

Last week, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved Zapalla's nomination on a 10-9 vote, and later OK'd Sembler by voice vote. But the unusually close votes mean that both men are in for some more rough treatment when their nominations come to the Senate floor in September.

- Memo: WASHINGTON POLITICS

- Record: 00039702
- Copyright: 1989 News and Sun-Sentinel Company