

March 6, 2014

Dear Senator Reid,

Among the nominees for ambassadorships currently under consideration by the Senate, three have generated considerable public controversy: George Tsunis (Norway), Colleen Bell (Hungary), and Noah Mamet (Argentina). The nominations of Mr. Tsunis and Ms. Bell have been forwarded to the full Senate by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

As former presidents of the American Foreign Service Association, the professional association and trade union of career members of the Foreign Service, we urge you to oppose granting Senate consent to these three candidates. Although we have no reason to doubt that the nominees are conscientious and worthy Americans, the fact that they appear to have been chosen on the basis of their service in raising money for electoral campaigns, with minimal demonstrated qualifications for their posts, has subjected them to widespread public ridicule, not only in the U.S. but also abroad. As a result, their effectiveness as U.S. representatives in their host countries would be severely impaired from the start. Their nominations also convey a disrespectful message, that relations with the host country are not significant enough to demand a chief of mission with relevant expertise.

These three nominations represent a continuation of an increasingly unsavory and unwise practice by both parties. In the words of President Theodore Roosevelt, “The spoils or patronage theory is that public office is primarily designed for partisan plunder.” Sadly it has persisted, even after President Nixon's acknowledged rewarding of ambassadorial nominations to major campaign donors was exposed. Recognizing that the practice was inconsistent with democratic principles, the U.S. Congress in the Foreign Service Act of 1980 set the following guidelines:

SEC. 304. APPOINTMENT OF CHIEFS OF MISSION. —

(a) (1) An individual appointed or assigned to be a chief of mission should possess clearly demonstrated competence to perform the duties of a chief of mission, including, to the maximum extent practicable, a useful knowledge of the principal language or dialect of the country in which the individual is to serve, and knowledge and understanding of the history, the culture, the economic and political institutions, and the interests of that country and its people.

(2) Given the qualifications specified in paragraph (1), positions as chief of mission should normally be accorded to career members of the Service, though circumstances will warrant appointments from time to time of qualified individuals who are not career members of the Service.

(3) Contributions to political campaigns should not be a factor in the appointment of an individual as a chief of mission.

(4) The President shall provide the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate, with each nomination for an appointment as a chief of mission, a report on the demonstrated competence of that nominee to perform the duties of the position in which he or she is to serve.

(b)(1) In order to assist the President in selecting qualified candidates for appointment or assignment as chiefs of mission, the Secretary of State shall from time to time furnish the President with the names of career members of the Service who are qualified to serve as chiefs of mission, together with pertinent information about such members.

(2) Each individual nominated by the President to be a chief of mission, ambassador at large, or minister shall, at the time of nomination, file with the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives a report of contributions made by such individual and by members of his or her immediate family during the period beginning on the first day of the fourth calendar year preceding the calendar year of the nomination and ending on the date of the nomination. The report shall be verified by the oath of the nominee, taken before any individual authorized to administer oaths. The chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate shall have each such report printed in the Congressional Record. As used in this paragraph, the term "contribution" has the same meaning given such term by section 301(8) of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 (2 U.S.C. 431(8)), and the term "immediate family" means the spouse of the nominee, and any child, parent, grandparent, brother, or sister of the nominee and the spouses of any of them.

During his 2008 election campaign, President Obama recognized the appropriateness of these guidelines, and promised to respect them. The time for the Senate to begin enforcing its own guidelines set forth in law for U.S. diplomatic chiefs of mission is now. The nation cannot afford otherwise.

Sincerely,

Fifteen former presidents of the American Foreign Service Association –

Marshall Adair, Thomas Boyatt, Kenneth Bleakley, Theodore Eliot, Franklyn A Harris, William Harrop, Dennis Hays, J. Anthony Holmes, Lars Hyde, Susan Johnson, Alphonse La Porta, John Limbert, John Naland, Lannon Walker, Theodore Wilkinson