



Sen. Menendez Falls Short of New Jersey News Conference Standards

By Rich Tucker

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Can we still call something a “news conference” if it provides no “news” and offers no opportunity for “conferring”?

Sen. Robert Menendez, a New Jersey Democrat, will reportedly face federal corruption charges. In an attempt to get out ahead of those charges, the Senator hosted a news conference Friday night. It was bilingual, but equally boring in both English and Spanish.

After he showed up 20 minutes late (At one point, an aide took the podium to apologize and insist the Senator was “just around the corner.”), Menendez read a short statement. To paraphrase: he won’t resign, won’t answer questions, didn’t do anything wrong.

He also played the “don’t you know who I am?” card, mentioning his 23 years in Congress and citing his success at bringing cash back to New Jersey to deal with disasters such as the 2012 storm Sandy (which had been downgraded from hurricane to “superstorm” by the time it reached the Garden State).

The probe stems in part from his relationship with Dr. Salomon Melgen. On Friday, Menendez announced that he and Melgen are “friends” and that, of course, they exchanged gifts, as, he says, friends do.

Melgen’s gifts include donating more than \$700,000 to support the Senator’s reelection.

No doubt, there will be more news conferences ahead for Menendez. But he’ll have a difficult time topping the New Jersey standards set by previous politicians. Consider former Gov. Jim McGreevey.

In 2004, McGreevey was in trouble. The Democrat had given Golan Cipel, an Israeli poet with no security experience, a job as his Homeland Security adviser.

Under fire for having an underqualified person in a key state job, McGreevey seemed to make things worse in his farewell news conference. Not only was Cipel unqualified, he and the Governor were lovers. “And so my truth is that I am a gay American,” he told reporters, his then-wife by his side.

The admission was irrelevant and, in fact, might have been even more problematic for the Governor. Yet in 2004, this was still unusual enough to be interesting. With his sexual orientation as a shield, McGreevey backed slowly away. “Given the circumstances surrounding the affair and its likely impact upon my family and my ability to govern, I have decided the right course of action is to resign.”

McGreevey had a final gift to voters: He wouldn’t allow them to select his replacement.

Even though he made his “gay American” announcement in August, he remained in office until November 15 to avoid a special election. Instead, he was simply replaced by another Democrat, and state government in New Jersey sailed merrily along.

McGreevey’s election gambit followed a trail blazed (burned?) by former Sen. Bob “The Torch” Torricelli.

Torricelli, a Democrat, spent much of his final term in office struggling with ethics charges of his own. Still, he was running for reelection in 2002, when polls indicated something shocking: he might actually be voted out of office if he dared face voters. Torricelli took action.

“I will not be responsible for the loss of the Democratic majority of the United States Senate. I will not allow that to happen,” he told reporters in a teary news conference. “I have asked attorneys to file with the Supreme Court of the United States motions to have my name removed from the general election ballot for the United States Senate. It is the most painful thing I have ever done in my life.”

There was a problem. Under New Jersey law, it was too late for Democrats to put another name on the ballot. So the state’s Supreme Court simply reinterpreted that law. The CATO Institute’s Robert Levy wrote that “the seven Supreme Court justices declared, in effect, ‘We will write the law as we prefer it to be, no matter what the voters of New Jersey, through their elected representatives, have decided.’”

Then-retired Sen. Frank Lautenberg replaced Torricelli on the ballot, and the seat remained safely in Democrat hands.

That raises an interesting point about the timing of the Menendez case. In recent weeks, the Senator has spoken out against the Obama administration's positions on key foreign policy issues, including Cuba and Iran.

Now, as CNN reports, "Attorney General Eric Holder has signed off on prosecutors' request to proceed with charges." If there's one thing Democrats have come to count on, it's that their party will control both U.S. Senate seats from the Garden State. Perhaps his own party has decided it would prefer someone more pliable than Menendez in that seat for the rest of the Obama administration.

That's a question worth asking—assuming reporters are ever allowed to actually ask any questions.