

Forgetting Colombia in Debate Over Free Trade Pact

Unproductive Reaction from Colombia's Left

By Marcela Sanchez
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WASHINGTON -- Anyone trying to figure out who has Colombia's best interest at heart in regard to the floundering U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement was at risk of being spun silly last week by developments in Washington and reactions in Colombia.

First, President Bush made the decision to send the trade deal to Congress knowing full well that the House leadership wasn't on board. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had already warned Bush that the measure would fail if pushed too rapidly and without accompanying legislation to address growing economic anxieties in this country. This demonstrated, Democrats claimed, that Bush was less interested in passing the pact than in scoring points in an election year.

After the bill arrived on Capitol Hill, Pelosi took the unprecedented step of postponing the vote indefinitely despite a law that requires the House to decide within 60 legislative days after delivery. This proved, Republicans argued, that Pelosi was more interested in catering to powerful U.S. labor interests that oppose the pact than in supporting Washington's closest ally in Latin America.

Both sides, of course, were putting politics ahead of their concerns for Colombia. That is expected behavior among politicians in an election year. What is strange, however, is to hear those who should be putting Colombia first -- i.e., Colombians -- applauding the impasse and using the occasion to bash free trade.

Among them was Carlos Gaviria, leader of the Democratic Pole Party, who in an interview in *El Espectador* celebrated Pelosi's move, insisting that the free trade agreement would be "harmful" to Colombia's economy and its sovereignty, as well as its poor. Gaviria, who won 22 percent of the vote in the 2006 presidential election, sent a letter to Pelosi last month stating that the agreement would mean the ruin of Colombia's agricultural sector.

Then there was Daniel Samper, *El Tiempo*'s respected columnist and the brother of former President Ernesto Samper, who argued that the agreement would be "suicidal," especially in the context of high food prices. Samper claimed that the trade agreement would kill local industries and thus allow multinationals to face no competition in Colombia and impose whatever prices they wished. Because of free trade, Samper asserted, food would become "a privilege for the rich."

Those views couldn't differ more sharply from the thinking of the left in Chile and Peru, the two South American countries that have free trade agreements with the United States. In both countries, left-of-center governments signed those deals -- enthusiastically.

In Chile, there has been broad acceptance that for such a small economy -- about the size of Colombia's -- free trade is the country's only hope for prosperity. By the time the U.S.-Chile agreement was finalized in 2003, the left in Chile had already signed similar pacts with Canada, Mexico, the European Union and South Korea, and had already lowered tariffs to 6 percent for the rest of the world.

In Peru, meanwhile, free trade has become the rage and President Alan Garcia -- a leftist firebrand in the 1980s -- has turned into an unabashed free trader. Garcia wants Chile's success, the best performing economy in Latin America, to take root in Peru.

The problem with the positions of Colombia's left, as advocated by Gaviria and Samper, is that they whip up a fear of trade and slow the necessary intellectual and practical evolutions that made Chileans more ready to compete.

Moreover, in their passionate opposition to the agreement, they support a status quo that favors uncompetitive big industries in Colombia that have long compensated for their lack of innovation by using their political clout to remain protected.

Take the case of rice, one of Colombia's most protected agribusinesses. It is no coincidence that rice is the one product in the proposed free trade agreement with the United States to have a full 18 years before it must face open competition. Combining current record-high prices with generous protections, the rice industry couldn't ask for better conditions to figure out whether it can compete in a global economy.

Colombia's left would better serve the country's interests by supporting efforts to prepare workers for the inevitable and in giving more credit to the ability of local industries to become competitive. After all, behind the political fog in Washington, the fact is that the pact is not dead. If Pelosi had wanted to kill it, she could have.

Marcela Sanchez's e-mail address is desdewash@washpost.com.