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TROUBLED ALLIES;
Free trade for Colombia;
Its paramilitary scandal is bad enough, but economic and political insecurity would be worse.

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IF ONLY EVERY American ally were a paragon of virtue that followed Washington's every wise counsel, U.S. foreign policy would indeed be a cakewalk. Alas, the Bush administration has been blessed with few such trouble-free allies -- nor has it been a blameless international leader. And so, in his seventh year in office, President Bush is in a weak position to make the case to Congress in favor of one of our most troubled and yet still deserving allies, Colombia.

Long a favorite of Washington, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe is losing some of his luster. His government is enmeshed in a widening scandal over allegations that senior officials had links to right-wing paramilitary groups believed to have assassinated scores of labor leaders, journalists and human rights activists. These charges will be devastating if proved. And Congress is understandably growing impatient over reports that Uribe's efforts to make peace with the left-wing militias, meaningfully demobilize the right-wing paramilitaries and curb abuses by his own armed forces are all lagging.

Colombia has received about \$5 billion in U.S. aid since 2001 -- most of it military aid for the war against violent left-wing guerrillas and narcoterrorists -- and it has made much progress. But the massive U.S. aid program, called Plan Colombia, hasn't done much to stop the drug trade. True, Colombia cultivates fewer hectares of coca plants, but it still supplies 90% of the cocaine entering the United States. This is by no means all Colombia's fault. Despite its rhetorical fealty to the power of the free market, the Bush administration has done nothing to dampen domestic demand for cocaine. And the U.S. has reportedly slashed air interdiction efforts over the Caribbean to beef up air power in Iraq.

Now the Democratic-controlled Congress is balking at passing a painstakingly negotiated free trade agreement with Colombia. This would be both a betrayal and a blunder -- because free trade and economic growth are perhaps the only ways to help the country continue its progress from near-failed state to democratic government struggling toward a modicum of peace, prosperity and accountability after four decades of violence. Colombians will view rejection of the agreement as a repudiation of their hard work and proof that U.S. protectionism trumps American promises about friendship, security and joint prosperity.

The U.S. should by all means keep up the pressure on Uribe to disband and prosecute the paramilitaries and improve human and labor rights. And as it approves the trade deal, Congress should compensate by allocating more aid to rural development, labor, justice and environmental programs and less to the Colombian military. To deny this struggling nation access to the U.S. market would hurt Colombia's poor, embitter its elite, embolden the far left and potentially drive Bogota closer to Caracas and Havana.