

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

In Case You Missed It:

## What's at Stake in Colombia

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*The Wall Street Journal*  
April 23, 2008

I've worked in politics long enough to know that when politicians spend too much time locked in partisan conflict, they can forget what they were fighting about in the first place. Unfortunately, this may be happening with the Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

The White House and Congress have reached an impasse. As a result, an economically and geopolitically important agreement is hanging in the balance. If our leaders in Congress don't change their approach, a critical building block for stability in an important region of South America may fall victim to domestic partisan squabbling.

I know an agreement can be struck because, for more than three decades, trade has been a rare issue that lends itself to consensus. As recently as December, Congress displayed the type of bipartisan leadership that Americans desire when it ratified a free trade agreement with Peru that is very similar to the one proposed for Colombia. And yet, this spring, the world is watching to determine if the United States will remain committed to embracing a free-market global economy, or display a growing isolationist attitude that can befuddle and vex our allies around the world.

The economic arguments that favor the agreement with Colombia are clear. Today, approximately 90% of Colombian exports come to the U.S. duty free under the Andean Trade Preferences Act and other agreements. President George H.W. Bush signed it as a way to counter the drug trade. By increasing trade, the law has helped create almost 600,000 jobs in Colombia, and these jobs are the best defense against the narco-traffickers and the terrorist networks they support.

While the Andean measure is an important and necessary pillar in our efforts to stem the flow of illegal drugs, it also means that American companies and workers do not play on a level playing field. We can change that by passing the Colombian agreement. Once enacted, over 80% of U.S. exports of consumer and industrial products to Colombia would immediately become duty-free, and all remaining tariffs would be eliminated within a decade.

Members of the U.S. Congress should also consider the national security arguments that favor this free-trade agreement. Colombia has long been a valued ally in a region that is increasingly becoming adverse toward our interests. Bolivia and Ecuador are to one degree or another antagonistic toward the U.S., and Venezuela is outright hostile.

Compare that to Colombia, an openly supportive, long-time ally that has long partnered with the U.S. on economic and security matters. Colombia was there when we needed an ally in that region. The backbone of the U.S.-Colombia security relationship, Plan Colombia, was started by President Bill Clinton and continued by President George W. Bush. Since Plan Colombia was conceived in 1998, the Colombian government has worked closely with the United States to prosecute the war on drugs.

It has done so while constantly battling the so-called "Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia" (FARC). This group is no quaint band of pseudo-revolutionaries. Simply put, it is a terrorist organization – so classified by both the European Union and the U.S. government – and one that receives a significant amount of its financing from the drug cartels.

If the contents of a recently-seized computer once owned by Raul Reyes, a FARC leader that Colombia recently killed, are verified as accurate, the world would have incriminating evidence that Venezuela and Ecuador have been clandestinely supporting the FARC.

Does America want to allow Hugo Chávez to remake the Andean region in his image? While this matter is currently being investigated, it is clear that Chávez and his allies are already destabilizing the region. Both Ecuador and Venezuela, two of Colombia's biggest trading partners, have brought trade between them and Colombia to a virtual standstill.

Colombia is at a crossroads; it is literally besieged on all sides. As Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in September, "If the U.S. turns its back on its friends in Colombia, this will set back our cause far more than any Latin American dictator could hope to achieve"

While I understand that some have concerns about the level of violence in Colombia against union members, I urge those skeptical of the FTA to consider three important points:

- Thanks to a renewed effort by the Colombian government to crack down on labor violence, violence against union members has sharply decreased, dropping from over 200 homicides in 2001 to 26 in 2007.
- The Colombian government is investing nearly \$40 million in a protection program that has nearly 2,000 union members enlisted.
- Consider how much worse things would be in Colombia if we did not stand with our ally, and allowed destabilization to occur in the Andean region. A recent editorial in the Bogotá newspaper El Espectador accurately stated, "Blocking a tool like the free trade agreement, which seeks to foment development, does not seem like the best mechanism for defending Colombian trade unionists."

Now is the time for our leaders to show leadership and make a decision based on the overwhelming arguments in favor of this agreement.

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