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OUR TURN: Move forward with Colombia free trade

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Free trade is never an easy sell in Congress. When the political interests of 50 states and 435 districts are at stake, someone will always be able to point to this factory or that industry as a victim of "unfair" international competition.

Those parochial indictments sometimes overwhelm the simple truths of free trade. A system where individuals and markets prevail is better than one in which governments and special interests establish protectionist tariffs and trade barriers. And despite its occasional shortcomings, free trade does the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people -- consumers and workers, here in the United States and abroad.

This election year, free trade has become a particular whipping boy of the Democratic leadership. Even erstwhile supporters of the North American Free Trade Agreement are working to distance themselves from their free trade pasts, in spite of the facts.

Since NAFTA went into effect on Jan. 1, 1994, the U.S. economy has grown by more than 50 percent, the American workforce has added 26 million jobs and the unemployment rate has dropped from 6.6 percent to 4.8 percent. No state has derived more economic benefit from the expansion of free trade than Texas.

Now Congress has an opportunity to expand free trade even further and bolster a democratic ally in the process. President Bush is pushing leaders on Capitol Hill to pass a long-delayed free trade agreement for Colombia. When they return from Easter recess next week, they should do so.

More than 90 percent of Colombian imports currently enter the United States duty free. But most U.S. exports to Colombia face tariffs, with an average rate of 14 percent. A free trade agreement would level the playing field for American business by immediately eliminating tariffs on more than 80 percent of U.S. exports.

Critics contend that the agreement doesn't do enough to protect labor unions and the environment in Colombia or displaced workers in the United States. That's an example of the perfect being the enemy of the good.

At the very least, it's an argument in favor of Congress entering into forthright negotiations with the White House -- as it did last year on a free trade agreement with Peru -- rather than merely running out the legislative clock.

Colombia has made impressive political, judicial and economic strides in recent years. And it has done so under difficult circumstances, battling narco-terrorists in a region that has become increasingly inhospitable to democratic reform.

Passage of a free trade agreement with Colombia would benefit the United States while also sending a strong message about the American commitment to such reform. Even in an election year, that's the right message to send.