

# THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

## Pandering To Economic Fears Threatens Trade and Growth

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The traditional defenders of stronger trade are oddly quiet as voices appealing to discontented workers dominate the presidential debate.

The national mood has soured on free trade for a number of reasons, but a key cause is President Bush's failure to explain and defend trade agreements with the persuasive passion of former President Clinton.

Now, all the Democrats running for president are blasting trade deals as unfair while Republicans, sensing trade skepticism in their own party, are emphasizing other things.

A recent poll published in the Wall Street Journal found that three out of five likely Republican voters now think trade has been bad for the country. They're wrong, but their feelings are based on legitimate concerns of wage inequality, job insecurity and rising public and private debts.

Watching the changes from London, The Financial Times accurately captures our frame of mind: 'Americans have become deeply pessimistic about their prospects over the last few years. Some polls show a majority believe their children will be worse off than they were - a strikingly new and un-American mindset.'

A telling change is seen in how Sen. Hillary Clinton separates herself from husband Bill in her stance on trade. As president, Bill Clinton was a trade champion. He overcame union opposition to push through the North American Free Trade Agreement, which his wife now says 'hurt a lot of American workers.'

But the former president, who presided over stunning economic growth, is right not to apologize. He now says of the controversial trade pact, 'Knowing what I know, would I still try to pass it today? Absolutely.'

President Bush seems to reserve his passion for tax cuts and national security, and deserves part of the blame for the economic negativity rampant during reasonably good economic times. A constant theme of his speeches is the terrorist threat.

It is easy for listeners to confuse open borders with free trade and begin to fear both. Bush has celebrated success but showed little sympathy for trade's victims. He has constantly urged the nation to patriotically support the troops, and shouldn't be surprised that when Democrats call for economic patriotism, folks nod in agreement.

But Democrats are making a mistake to cash in on the nation's economic insecurity. Blanket trade restrictions will not boost real wages.

Democrats should replay the classic 1993 debate and learn from Vice President Al Gore's defense of NAFTA against populist businessman Ross Perot.

Gore, decrying the 'politics of fear,' gave Perot a verbal beating, then delivered a knockout by handing him a framed photo of two former members of Congress. It was a picture of former Sen. Reed Smoot of Utah and former Rep. Willis Hawley of Oregon, who sponsored the Smoot-Hawley tariffs of 1930 that contributed to the Great Depression.

How quickly Democrats have forgotten.