

Making the case for Colombia — with head and heart

By: Thomas J. Donohue

March 3, 2008 03:57 PM EST

The great trade debate of 2008 will be over the pending free trade agreement with Colombia. Rarely have the facts been arrayed so compellingly in favor of a trade accord that is squarely in the economic and security interests of the United States as well as our friends in Colombia. Logically and morally, the case for Congress to approve it is overwhelming.

For American business, the economic case for the agreement centers on fairness. Nearly all imports from Colombia enter the U.S. market duty-free under the Andean Trade Preference Act, which Congress has renewed repeatedly with the support of Democrats, Republicans, the business community and even the AFL-CIO. By contrast, U.S. exporters face double-digit tariffs when they try to sell their goods in Colombia.

This status quo is unfair to American businesses, workers and farmers, who expect Congress to look out for their trading interests at least as carefully as it does for those of our friends and allies overseas.

As the second-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, Colombia has a market that is enticing: It grew by 7 percent last year and, despite its high tariffs, is already a top global export market for U.S. crops such as corn and cotton. With the trade agreement in place, U.S. exports are projected to rise by more than \$1 billion per year.

In addition, Congress has the chance to leverage last year's bipartisan breakthrough on new ways to address labor and environmental concerns in trade agreements. The breakthrough reached last May allowed Congress to approve a similar free trade deal with Peru by a massive 2-to-1 bipartisan majority, and it should logically pave the way for the Colombia agreement.

Of course, logic is a word that we sometimes neglect in Washington. But if we dust off our high school logic textbooks, we might recall syllogism, a kind of logical argument in which a conclusion is inferred — inescapably inferred — from a pair of premises. So consider what we are calling the Peruvian Syllogism below.

First Premise: Congress approved the U.S.-Peru trade agreement by an overwhelming bipartisan majority because the agreement effectively addressed Democratic demands for worker rights and environmental protection.

Second Premise: The trade agreement with Colombia includes those same guarantees for worker rights and environmental protection.

Conclusion: Congress should support the pending trade agreement with Colombia.

The logic here is inescapable. However, six weeks after last May's breakthrough, the Democratic leadership of the House issued a kind of "yes, but" statement. It abstained from criticizing the Colombia agreement itself but added: "We believe there must first be concrete evidence of sustained results on the ground in Colombia."

This sounds perfectly reasonable. But where in recent history have we ever seen more impressive "sustained results" than in Colombia over the past decade?

The murder rate is at its lowest level in a generation, and kidnappings have decreased by 80 percent.

The murder rate among members of labor unions — a concern emphasized by opponents of the agreement — is now lower than the U.S. homicide rate. More than 40,000 fighters have been demobilized as the country's narco-guerrilla groups have lost legitimacy. While drug trafficking remains a threat, Colombia's leaders have eliminated two-thirds of its opium production.

Colombia's transformation over the past decade is a triumph of brave and principled Colombians. It is also a bipartisan triumph for U.S. foreign policy, which played a supporting role through Plan Colombia and trade preferences.

If these aren't "sustained results," what are?

To these logical and practical realities, finally, we must also add the moral case for approval of the U.S.-Colombia trade agreement. While Colombia has made remarkable progress against lawlessness in recent years, the country continues to face sharp difficulties arising from narco-trafficking and the violent crime it generates. U.S. demand for cocaine is the fuel that drives the narco-trafficking machine and the violence it creates. Indeed, as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) wrote in *The Miami Herald* in December, "American demand for illegal drugs fuels this crisis."

In the same vein, Barry McCaffrey, who served as President Bill Clinton's drug czar and as a former commander of the United States Southern Command, recently wrote in *The Washington Post* of the "moral obligation" of the U.S. to stand with Colombia and approve the trade agreement.

This is exactly right. Colombia's problems are our problems. The United States has few allies in the world that are as steadfast as Colombia, and Colombians have stood with us in conflicts ranging from the Korean War to today's ideological struggle over democracy and free enterprise in Latin America.

In the end, the case for the Colombia trade agreement isn't just economic and geopolitical, it's logical and moral. If the goal is to give opportunities to working Americans on factory floors or Colombians rescuing their nation from drug violence, what possible benefit could there be in defeating this trade agreement? This is why I am confident that Congress will use its head — and its heart — and approve the U.S.-Colombia trade agreement.

Thomas J. Donohue is the president and CEO of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the world's largest business federation, representing more than 3 million businesses and organizations.