

Trade agreements with the Americas should not be put off until 2009

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ISSUE: Bush touts trade treaties in Miami speech.

Bilateral commercial treaties are far from the most visionary hemispheric policy, but the Bush administration is right to keep pressing free trade agreements with key partners in the Americas. Congress should adopt pending agreements with Peru, Panama and Colombia.

Latin American diplomacy has drifted aimlessly since Free Trade Area of the Americas treaty negotiations hit a standstill following an unproductive trade ministers' meeting in Miami in November 2003. Since then, there have been no initiatives.

In fact, the focus of agricultural and other trade disputes shifted to the World Trade Organization platform, and with good reason. The WTO is the best forum to iron out disagreements over farm subsidies and other global trade impediments.

Still, in the void, Hugo Chávez successfully stepped forward to fill a vacuum and challenge U.S. leadership. Chávez has skillfully sold to the United States petroleum at inflated prices and then used windfall profits to pay other governments' debts, provide cheap energy and even to send doctors to impoverished locations.

That's no small contribution, and it's helped drive a wedge between the United States and several hemispheric neighbors. The ugly rancor and vitriol attached to the U.S. immigration debate certainly hasn't helped America win friends in the Americas, either.

In the face of all this, the Bush administration has been flat-footed. It has offered no meaningful or inspiring initiatives. With just 15 months in office, it's too late for a renewed push.

While it will fall to the United States' 44th president to re-energize U.S.-Latin American diplomacy, the free trade agreements ought not to be put on hold until January 2009. There's much that can be gained by continuing to improve commercial relationships in the hemisphere.

BOTTOM LINE: Trade pacts should not be put on hold until 2009.