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PASS COLOMBIA TRADE DEAL

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Democrats have started dickering with the Bush administration over the proposed free trade agreement with Colombia. That provides some hope -- though, realistically, not much -- that the deal could get a hearing this year.

Last week, House Democratic leaders said they didn't anticipate a vote. That's not surprising; both candidates for president have been bashing the North American Free Trade Agreement. But Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., and others staked out a bargaining position. Sen. Baucus urged U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab to help Congress and the Bush administration improve the Trade Adjustment Assistance program, which provides training and other benefits to U.S. workers harmed by international trade agreements. "Get that done," Sen. Baucus said, "and we can talk."

Displaying the usual aversion to compromise, the Bush administration has taken a hard line against significant expansion of the program. But if Colombia is as important as the president says in fighting terrorism and drugs, and if the trade agreement is as vital to Colombia as Mr. Bush and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe say, any compromise that gives Democrats needed political cover is worth it.

Last week, on the Senate floor, Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Fla., reiterated the president's reasons for supporting Colombia: "President Uribe and the Colombian people have made clear their commitment to a hopeful future for a stable, democratic and economically thriving western hemisphere. The FARC (a left-wing Colombian rebel group) is our common enemy."

Sen. Martinez and President Bush were responding to Colombia's incursion into Ecuador to kill a FARC leader, a move protested by Ecuador and Venezuela, led by Bush nemesis Hugo Chávez. While it's true that Colombia is more democratic than Venezuela, and that FARC is a narco-terror group that funnels narcotics to America, the situation is complex.

Colombia's government, using billions in U.S. aid, has been accused of supporting right-wing death squads and murdering labor leaders -- another reason opponents have fought the Colombian trade pact or demanded proof that President Uribe's policies are different. Violence has driven an estimated 200,000 Colombians to South Florida. FARC is the primary culprit, so Colombia's war against FARC, if it can be conducted without victimizing civilians, is in America's interest as well as Colombia's.

In an increasingly anti-American region, allies need economic help from America. The Colombian free trade agreement would provide it.