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**G**IVEN THE decimation it has endured over the last decade, you'd think the last thing the U.S. textile industry needs is another free trade agreement. But trade pacts — the “good” ones, that is — have enabled some domestic textile producers to survive in a near-impossible environment. Generally speaking, these manufacturers fare better under deals that offer hemispheric trading (i.e. the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement) and much worse under those with Asian countries such as Vietnam.

Which brings us to the U.S-Colombia FTA. The agreement was signed in 2006 and renegotiated last year under Democrat pressure to beef up labor and environmental standards in the legislation. President Bush submitted the agreement to Congress on April 9. Under trade promotion authority rules, Congress was required to vote on the measure within 90 days, without the ability to amend it.

But a funny thing happened on the way to its passage — not funny “ha ha” but funny “wow.” House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and most of the Democrat Congress — and a half dozen Republicans — pulled the rug out from under the agreement, at least for now. In an unprecedented move of partisan angst, the House voted 224-195 to drop a requirement for a final vote within 90 days. Nixing the deadline means the Democrats can now postpone a vote on the deal until after the November elections, if they so choose.

**A NUMBER** of U.S. textile producers and the cotton trade support the pact, even though Colombia already enjoys duty-free access for nearly all products it ships to the U.S. through the Andean Trade Preference Act. This FTA would provide some degree of reciprocity, giving U.S. exporters equal access to the Colombian market by ending tariffs on U.S. goods sold there. Yarn producers Tuscarora Yarns and Parkdale, just to name two, have established business in the country and no doubt are champing at the bit for this accord to gain approval.

But let's remove our “textile glasses” for a moment and view this from the 100,000-foot level, as Glen Raven CEO Allen Gant Jr. has urged us to do on other issues. Though representing only a fraction of business on the U.S. trading scale, the ramifications of the bill are enormous. Colombia is a key U.S. ally in a region that includes Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who rebukes free trade or anything else in the region that would encourage pro-American sentiment. Add Chavez's sabre-rattling in the area, and you have yourself a dangerous tinderbox. Just last month, he ordered tank battalions to the Colombian border and mobilized fighter jets in response Colombian troops killing a Colombian rebel in Ecuador, dealing a strong blow to the Marxist FARC guerrilla insurgency. And with this vote, the threat of war just grew in strength.

U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab said the House action will have “profoundly negative consequences for our workers, our relationship with Colombia and the credibility of the United States.” Added President Bush: “The message Democrats sent today is that no matter how steadfastly you stand with us, we will turn our backs on you when it is politically convenient.”



## Shafting Colombia

**AH, POLITICS.** That's really what this is all about, isn't it? Isn't everything inside the Beltway? How else can you explain Pelosi's action? Besides as a show of muscle-flexing against the Bush Administration, she used the move to shelve the bill in order to pander to labor unions that play a role in Democrat election efforts.

And how else do you explain Congressman Robin Hayes (R-NC) voting for the measure to remove the TPA timetable? Locked in a tough battle for re-election against a Democrat candidate he lost to by only 329 votes two years ago, Hayes and five fellow Republicans broke ranks to vote with the majority. Ironically, Hayes cast the deciding vote that gave the president TPA in 2001 and switched his vote at the last minute to help pass DR-CAFTA by two votes in 2005. His opponent, not surprisingly, is making Hayes' trade votes the big issue in a district hit hard by job losses.

And who plays the political game better than Hillary Clinton? Siding with Pelosi and the unions, of course, the presidential hopeful staunchly opposes the Colombia agreement — which her husband, the former president, supports. In fact, Bill Clinton made about \$800,000 from Gold Service International, a Colombian development group that supports the deal, for appearances he made to Colombia, Brazil and Mexico in 2005, according to *AP*. And just this month, Mark Penn, Clinton's top strategist, resigned after news emerged that he had met with Colombian officials to promote the trade accord in his capacity as head of his P.R. firm.

For economic and security reasons, passage of the Colombia agreement is a no-brainer. Politically, shooting it down is brainless.