

Free-trade pacts worth fighting for

OUR OPINION: FAILURE WOULD PLAY INTO HANDS OF U.S. FOES IN THE REGION

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When President Bush makes an expected push for free trade in the Americas in a speech in Miami today, he will be preaching to the choir. The people of South Florida understand that lowering trade barriers promotes mutual prosperity and also lowers the barriers that impede international goodwill and friendship. The president's message, however, is both timely and necessary because the expansion of free trade is under attack in this country and elsewhere.

A win for Costa Rica

In Costa Rica this week, critics almost managed to derail a sensible trade deal with the United States by running a negative campaign depicting a proud country about to fall into the clutches of an evil empire controlled by greedy Wall Street tycoons. The people of Costa Rica wisely saw through this curtain of lies and hyperbole, but the narrow margin of approval for the Central American Free Trade Agreement -- some 51.6 percent voted in favor -- offers little comfort to those who believe in the benefits of expanded trade.

The political consequences of free trade are not lost on the loudest anti-American voices in the region. Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Fidel Castro all called for CAFTA's defeat in Costa Rica. Anything that strengthens the bonds between the United States and Latin America is anathema to the enemies of democracy.

This is why it is imperative for Congress to approve three pending free-trade agreements with Peru, Panama and Colombia. Failure would strengthen the hand of anti-American forces in the region and undermine efforts by the leaders of those three countries to bolster democratic institutions.

As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared earlier this week, a reversal "would send a signal loud and clear across the region that the United States cannot be trusted to keep its promises." No doubt President Chávez would be the first to say I-told-you-so the day that any of these trade deals falls through.

Short-sighted opposition

To date, Democrats who took control of Congress at the beginning of the year have not approved any free-trade agreement. This hardly does justice to either the U.S. allies in the region who negotiated these pacts in good faith or to the legacy of former President Bill Clinton. He forged the first regional-trade pact, known as NAFTA, and fought hard to win bipartisan support for it in Congress.

Opposition to a trade pact is short-sighted in terms of promoting U.S. interests in Latin America and a disservice to friendly countries in the region. Negotiators have made a sincere effort to deal with the most pressing concerns of critics by improving provisions dealing with the environment and workers' rights. President Bush should keep pressing the case until he carries the day.