

## **An Open Letter to Congressional Democrats on Hemispheric Trade Expansion**

Latin America is up for grabs. As Democrats, we are deeply concerned.

Not since the end of the Cold War has US influence in the region been so tenuous or our interests so clearly at stake. The Summit of the Americas agenda, agreed by consensus at the instigation of President Clinton and Vice President Gore, has frayed. Anti-US populism is loud and getting louder. Venezuela's leader, emboldened by high energy prices, is aggressively promoting an alternative vision for Latin America and the Caribbean. Divisions among our neighbors are deepening with serious implications for the United States. Even Castro may be back in the game.

Within this new reality, the United States Congress faces a decision of historic consequence: whether, by standing with those in Latin America who have stood with us, to build the economy and create jobs by opening markets. Along with comprehensive immigration reform, increased development assistance, and renewed support for Plan Colombia, there is nothing more important for US national and economic security interests in the region than passing trade agreements with nations whose leaders have made politically-courageous efforts to link their economies to ours.

The decision should not be in doubt. Now that a deal has been struck by Democratic leaders in Congress and the Administration on a bipartisan trade policy framework, it is time to get behind pending agreements with Colombia, Panama, and Peru. It would be the height of irony were we to talk of "losing" Latin America while refusing to take actions that would directly support fundamental relationships and interests in the region.

That is not to say everything is perfect in the countries in question. Far from it. Both proponents and opponents of the Colombia agreement have noted the high levels of violence there, as well as recent corruption and wiretapping scandals. But the level of violence in Colombia—though still too high—has steadily and significantly declined under President Uribe. Rather than hiding the scandals or minimizing them, Colombia is taking steps to root them out and cleanse the political system, even while recognizing that more must be done, including bringing to justice those who have committed crimes against unionists.

These are serious matters, and Democrats are right to bring them up and insist on progress. But walking away from the Colombia trade agreement or postponing it until conditions are perfect would send an unambiguous signal to our friends and opponents alike that the United States is an unreliable partner without a vision for cooperation in our hemisphere. Colombia would certainly re-evaluate its relationship with the United States, a process that is already underway. And the same is true with Panama, Peru, and others such as Uruguay and Brazil who are making courageous political decisions to enhance relations with the United States despite strong domestic and external political pressure.

As Democrats, we fully recognize that asking the US Congress to vote on these trade agreements is politically charged. Nonetheless, rejecting these agreements would set back regional US interests for a generation. What interests are at stake? In the first instance, US economic opportunity. Because the fact is that the United States is already virtually open to products from Colombia, Panama, and Peru through unilateral trade preference programs, *but those economies do not give reciprocal benefits to the United States*. Far from being “job killing,” these trade agreements would open markets wider to US goods and services and therefore *support* jobs in the United States.

Second, for the past 15 years, the United States on a bipartisan basis has supported economic growth in the Andean region in opposition to drug traffickers and guerrilla movements. In the hemispheric fight against illegal narcotics, trade agreements with Colombia and Peru would lock in trade relations for the long-term, drawing the kind of direct foreign investment that all nations need to develop, while also opening new markets. US exports would increase, economic opportunities would be created, cooperation against illegal narcotics would be maintained, ultimately supporting democratic governance in a troubled region.

Third, US regional influence is at risk. Peru’s President Garcia has stood up to Venezuela’s Chavez at a time when virtually all other regional leaders have kept mum. He would be unlikely to do so again were Peru’s trade agreement to go down.

As for Panama, President Torrijos has publicly welcomed US participation in the expansion of the strategically significant canal, and a trade agreement with Panama would surely improve the competitiveness of US companies bidding on the massive canal expansion project. It would also, importantly, lock in a mutually rewarding relationship even as former Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega is set to be released from his Florida jail cell where he has served time for drug trafficking.

From the Good Neighbor Policy, to the Alliance for Progress, to a focus on human rights and the Summit of the Americas, Democratic leadership has been pivotal to the promotion of US interests in the Western Hemisphere. The time for leadership is again at hand. We must not walk away now.

#### **Former Members of the Congress and Senate**

*James Bacchus, Michael Barnes, Don Bonker, Tony Coelho, Cal Dooley, Sam Gibbons, Bob Graham, Bill Hughes, Bennett Johnston, Harry Johnston, Jim Jones, Buddy MacKay, Sam Nunn, Leon Panetta*

#### **Former Cabinet Officials, Ambassadors, and Foreign and Trade Policy Advisors**

*Anne Alonzo, Bruce Babbitt, Harriet Babbitt, Rand Beers, Sandy Berger, Henry Cisneros, Nelson Cunningham, Stuart Eizenstat, Eric Farnsworth, Richard Feinberg, Gordon Giffin, Marc Ginsberg, Dan Glickman, Ed Gresser, Anthony Harrington, Chuck Manatt, David Marchick, Will Marshall, Mack McLarty, Robert Pastor, Peter Romero, David Rothkopf, Chris Sabatini, Ronald Scheman, Donna Shalala, Ira Shapiro, Maurice Sonnenberg, Alexander Watson, Jonathan Winer*