

Democrats for Free Trade

Former Clinton officials are urging Congress to ratify deals with Latin America.

by Duncan Currie

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SEVERAL FORMER CLINTON administration officials--including Bruce Babbitt, Sandy Berger, Henry Cisneros, Richard Feinberg, Dan Glickman, Leon Panetta, Donna Shalala, and Ira Shapiro--have endorsed an open letter to Congressional Democrats urging them to ratify free trade agreements with Latin America.

"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*," the letter reads. "Far from being 'job killing,' these trade agreements would open markets wider to U.S. goods and services and therefore *support* jobs in the United States." In addition, the letter notes, trade expansion would help foster Latin American growth, bolster democracy, maintain strategic cooperation, and preserve U.S. regional influence in the face of a challenge from Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

Other signatories to the letter include a mix of former Democratic congressmen, diplomats, and policy advisers, plus retired senators such as Bob Graham and Sam Nunn. (The list of signatories is actually still growing.) "It would be the height of irony," they argue, "were we to talk of 'losing' Latin America while refusing to take actions that would directly support fundamental relationships and interests in the region."

Of the three trade deals in question, Colombia remains the most divisive. After a lengthy delay, the U.S.-Peru FTA is now [expected](#) to win congressional approval next month. The U.S.-Panama accord [may be hindered](#) by the recent election of Pedro Miguel González as leader of the Panamanian national assembly--González has been

indicted in the United States for the 1992 murder of an American soldier--but it has heretofore been far less controversial than the U.S.-Colombia pact.

Why is Colombia such a hot potato? The answer is somewhat ironic. Since his election in 2002, President Alvaro Uribe has weakened Colombia's revolutionary guerrillas and driven them into the jungles, while also demobilizing thousands of right-wing paramilitaries. The metrics are undeniable: Uribe has presided over historic declines in murders, political assassinations, kidnappings, and terrorist attacks. The security gains have been especially noticeable in the two largest cities, Bogotá and Medellín, which once resembled war-torn Baghdad.

These gains have also provided a boon to the Colombian economy. GDP expanded by 6.8 percent last year, its fastest annual growth rate since the late 1970s. Foreign direct investment reached a combined total of over \$16 billion in 2005 and 2006, up from less than \$5 billion combined in 2003 and 2004. As financial journalist Karina Robinson observes, "Colombia is rated above Chile, Mexico, and Spain in the authoritative 2006 IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook." Uribe won reelection by a landslide and remains enormously popular.

Lately, however, he has been dealing with fallout from the "parapolitics" scandal--the discovery of just how deeply right-wing paramilitaries were able to infiltrate the government, the police, and the armed forces. Among those implicated are several of Uribe's political supporters, including his former intelligence boss, Jorge Noguera. This has been highly embarrassing. Both the army and the justice system continue to be plagued by corruption and malfeasance. Though weakened, the drug cartels maintain their poisonous influence over all sides of Colombian politics.