

Unsafe at Any Speed

Once again, the new administration has demonstrated its conviction that fidelity to free-trade dogma trumps all other concerns, including border security, highway

safety, and the interests of American labor. The recent omnibus budget bill included a provision stripping all funding for a pilot program started in 2007 to permit Mexican trucks to travel throughout the United States in accordance with the North American Free Trade Agreement. While President Obama signed the bill, he has since bowed to domestic criticism and retaliatory Mexican tariffs, and Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood has promised to revive an alternative version of the program.

Under a rule established by the Clinton administration in 1995, Mexican trucks had been limited to within 25 miles of the border, where their cargo had to be transferred to American trucks for delivery throughout the rest of the country. The Mexican government has resented this restriction and lobbied to end it, arguing that NAFTA requires full access to the U.S. market. The Bush administration, always keen to satisfy requests from south of the border, won support for a trial run at expanding Mexican trucking access over the strenuous objections of pro-labor Democrats and conservative dissenters such as Duncan Hunter and Ron Paul.

Despite the latter's opposition to the pilot program in the past, neither voted for the larger spending bill to which the defunding provision was attached. The responsibility for temporarily killing the program rested primarily with North Dakota Democratic senator Byron Dorgan, who has distinguished himself as a leading critic of our trade policies

and was one of the Democratic senators instrumental in quashing "comprehensive immigration reform." In the 111th Congress, Dorgan has many new Blue Dog and moderate Democratic allies ready to take advantage of the electorate's increasing interest in economic populist measures. This could help the majority head off a midterm backlash against the big-spending fiscal legislation they have been backing.

Beyond the basic concerns about highway safety and ensuring that Mexican trucks meet regulatory standards required of American trucks, providing unfettered admission to the United States

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will undermine our efforts to combat drug and human trafficking. In light of the increased violence wrought by drug cartels on the border cities and the broader problems of corruption and official collusion with dealers in Mexico, it would be foolish to make American cities outside the border zone more vulnerable to the effects of our misguided drug war.

Along with organized labor, the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers' Association, the largest group of its kind in the country, has called for an indefinite suspension of the pilot program. This should serve as a warning to Republicans that they have again allowed the Left to outflank them and stake out the popular (and correct) position.

As with the "Buy American" provisions in the stimulus legislation earlier this year, allegations of protectionism coming from the GOP are making a badly damaged party seem even more disconnected from the public—indeed, from many of its own voters. A June 2008 Rasmussen survey found that 56 percent of Americans believe NAFTA should be renegotiated, a view shared by a large plurality of Republicans, 49-22 percent. And this was before the full onset of the financial crisis.

One of the least appreciated causes of Republican failure in the last two election cycles, especially in the Midwest, has been the refusal of party leaders to modify their views on trade policy, which put them more at odds with public opinion than perhaps any other policy besides the war in Iraq.

The Obama administration will be making a mistake if it follows through on its pledge to start a new Mexican trucking program. But it is unlikely to pay much of a price as long as the GOP continues to identify itself as the party of free trade. Unlike 1994, when Clinton suffered electoral repudiation partly because of his embrace of NAFTA, Republicans are not going to be able to exploit the public's dissatisfaction with the president's party unless they change their tune.

If they continue to support the pilot program and insist on stringently applying the requirements of NAFTA, the Republican Party may remain out of power for years to come—and with good reason. ■