



Immoral, Not Inept

The Bush administration and the Republican Party are often criticized for refusing to aggressively use the "soft power" of international diplomacy. But alas, the attacks are misguided. This crew is more than willing to use "soft power" — not in Iraq, but in Central America, and not in an effort to bring American troops home, but in a ploy unfolding this weekend to enrich its big campaign contributors through the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

CAFTA, you may remember, was lobbyists' biggest trophy in the last Congress. Its language gives corporations the right to challenge American environmental and consumer protection laws in international courts; compels Central American countries to privatize public services; forces American and foreign workers into a wage-cutting race to the bottom; and extends medicine patents allowing pharmaceutical companies to keep drug prices artificially inflated in the developing world.

This was a deal so inherently corrupt that when Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., offered a modest amendment to make CAFTA's worker and human rights protections as strong as its protections for pharmaceutical patents, he was voted down.

Just before the final CAFTA vote in the U.S. Congress in 2005, a nationwide Ipsos poll showed a majority of Americans opposed the deal. Unfortunately, the pressure to pass the pact from well-heeled lobbyists was too much and it was muscled through on a close vote.

That's when the diplomatic onslaught started.

As American textile companies started shuttering factories and preparing to head south of the border, the White House sprung into action on behalf of its wealthy donors, pushing CAFTA forward in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and the Dominican Republic — an easy task considering these countries have less than stellar democratic traditions and have become accustomed to being treated like Corporate America's exclusive plantations ever since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823.

Costa Rica, by contrast, was the lone nation that refused to immediately ratify the pact. The pushback was a particularly damning commentary on the deal considering that, unlike its neighbors, Costa Rica is not some war-torn quasi-colony but a longstanding democracy, "Central America's most prosperous economy and a model of social stability for the region," according to the Los Angeles Times.

Opposition to CAFTA exploded from every part of Costa Rican civil society — labor unions, human rights groups, religious organizations, you name it.

The outcry was so intense that pro-CAFTA President Oscar Arias felt compelled to submit CAFTA to a national referendum, which will occur this Sunday, October 7.

Now fearing a humiliating rejection of lobbyist-written trade policy on the global stage, the White House has dispatched U.S. Ambassador Mark Langdale to spearhead a campaign of intimidation, all on the taxpayer's dime. This Texas telecommunications and real estate businessman was installed as envoy to Costa Rica after dumping tens of thousands of dollars into President Bush's political campaigns. And like the loyal corporate crony he is, Langdale has been touring Costa Rica threatening economic reprisals if voters there dare to send CAFTA down to defeat.

This kind of heavy-handed tampering is a potentially significant violation of longstanding international treaties. Nonetheless, Langdale is being encouraged by senior Republican lawmakers like House Republican Whip Roy Blunt, who originally helped lobbyists ram CAFTA through Congress and is now issuing press releases echoing the same promises of retribution against Costa Rica should it reject CAFTA.

The threats are not random. They seem eerily in sync with a secret memo that has recently leaked out of President Arias' office detailing a pro-CAFTA campaign "to stimulate fear" and punish local Costa Rican officials if their constituents vote against the pact.

Will Costa Rica this Sunday take the stand on behalf of workers, the environment and human rights that a bought-off U.S. Congress refused to take back in 2005? It is anyone's guess. Polls show the Bush administration's pressure has helped make the October 7 referendum in Costa Rica too close to call.

No matter what happens, though, the improbably tight state of the race is a reminder that, despite its billing from the Iraq War, the Republican Party is very willing and very able to play foreign policy hardball when it so desires.

The GOP may be diplomatically immoral, but it is not diplomatically inept. Whether ensuring permanent war in Iraq or economic oppression in Central America, Republicans do, in fact, know how to get what they want.

It is what they want that is the problem.

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