



David Sirota

Was Ross Perot Right?



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"Ross Perot was fiercely against NAFTA. Knowing what we know now, was Ross Perot right?"

That's what CNN's Wolf Blitzer asked Hillary Clinton at last week's Democratic presidential debate. It was a straightforward query about a Clinton administration trade policy that polls show the public now hates, and it was appropriately directed to a candidate who has previously praised NAFTA.

In response, Clinton stumbled. First she laughed at Perot, then she joked that "all I can remember from that is a bunch of charts," and then she claimed the whole NAFTA debate "is a vague memory." The behavior showed how politically tone deaf some Democratic leaders are.

To refresh Clinton's "vague memory," let's recall that Perot's anti-NAFTA presidential campaign in 1992 won 19 percent of the presidential vote — the highest total for any third-party candidate since Teddy Roosevelt. That included huge tallies in closely divided regions like the Rocky Mountain West, which Democrats say they need to win in the upcoming election.

A Democrat laughing at Perot on national television is a big mistake. Simply put, it risks alienating the roughly 20 million people who cast their votes for the Texas businessman.

But Clinton's flippant comments and feigned memory lapse about NAFTA were the

bigger mistakes in that they insulted the millions of Americans (Perot voters or otherwise) harmed by the trade pact. These are people who have seen their jobs outsourced and paychecks slashed thanks to a trade policy forcing them into a wage-cutting war with oppressed foreign workers.

Why is Clinton desperate to avoid discussing NAFTA? Because she and other congressional Democrats are currently pushing a Peru Free Trade Agreement at the behest of their corporate campaign contributors — an agreement expanding the unpopular NAFTA model. When pressed, Clinton claims she is for a "timeout" from such trade deals — but, as her husband might say, it depends on what the meaning of the word "is" is, since she simultaneously supports the NAFTA expansion.

Of course, this deviousness is precisely why it is worth asking about Perot's predictions: to make sure America has an informed and honest discussion about impending new trade policies before they are enacted.

And so without further ado, let's answer the question Clinton ducked: Was Ross Perot right?

In 1993, the Clinton White House and an army of corporate lobbyists were selling NAFTA as a way to aid Mexican and American workers. Perot, on the other hand, was predicting that because the deal included no basic labor standards, it would preserve a huge "wage differential between the United States and Mexico" that would result in "the giant sucking sound" of American jobs heading south of the border. Corporations, he said, would "close the factories in the U.S. [and] move the factories to Mexico [to] take advantage of the cheap labor."

The historical record is clear. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reports, "Real wages for most Mexicans today are lower than when NAFTA took effect." Post-NAFTA, companies looking to exploit those low wages relocated factories to Mexico. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the net effect of NAFTA was the elimination of 1 million American jobs.

Score one for Perot.

What about immigration? In 1993, the Clinton administration pitched NAFTA as "the best hope for reducing illegal immigration." Perot, by contrast, said that after NAFTA depressed Mexican wages, many Mexicans "out of economic necessity" would "consider illegally immigrating into the U.S."

"In short," he wrote, "NAFTA has the potential to increase illegal immigration, not decrease it."

Again, the historical record tells the story. As NAFTA helped drive millions of Mexicans into poverty, The New York Times reports that "Mexican migration to the United States has risen to 500,000 a year from less than 400,000 in the early 1990s, before NAFTA,"

with a huge chunk of that increase coming from illegal immigration.

Score another one for Perot.

Clinton may continue to laugh at Perot and plead amnesia when asked about trade policy. And sure, she and her fellow Democrats in Washington can expand NAFTA and ignore the public's desire for reform. But these politicians shouldn't be surprised if that one other Perot prediction comes true again — the one accurately predicting that Democrats would lose the next national election if they sold America out and passed NAFTA.

Foreshadowing that historic Democratic loss in 1994, he warned, "We'll remember in November."

Yes, indeed, Ross. America probably will.

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