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## Journalism Becomes Stenography: From NAFTA to Iraq to The Secret Trade Deal

*This is the third in a [series of posts](#) following the announcement of a secret free trade deal this past week between a handful of senior Democrats and the Bush administration.*

The weekend in Washington is traditionally reserved for the media royalty to put its mark on public policy, and in the wake of the secret trade deal agreed on by a handful of senior Democratic lawmakers and the Bush administration, the propaganda system is working overtime, both to downplay any concerns and to trumpet the deal without any scrutiny at all. Most stories include none of the many voices - both on Capitol Hill and among the grassroots of the country - who are [raising questions](#) about a far-reaching trade agreement ironed out in complete secrecy. Those stories that do include any voices of concern bury those voices, and lead with triumphalist Bush officials and K Street lobbyists cheering from the office suites of Washington. Meanwhile, the pundit class is on the offensive, pushing this deal in as aggressive and as fact-deprived a way as it pushed the Iraq War and NAFTA.

Leading the way is [Newsweek's Fareed Zakaria](#), who is treated with near Tom-Friedman-esque reverence by Beltway power worshipers. Predictably, Zakaria applauds the deal and attacks Democrats for ever trying to "load trade pacts with environmental and labor standards" (how awful). Meanwhile, [Fortune Magazine's Nina Easton](#) (married to the media adviser of longtime free trader John McCain) pens a breathless article also praising the deal as a "breakthrough...thanks to a handful of men, and one woman, determined to move past the poisonous atmosphere that still stews between the two parties."

**Of course, none of the reporters covering the deal on Thursday has actually seen the language of the agreement they are now praising** because the specific legislative language is still being kept secret (MyDD's Matt Stoller just got his hands on a copy of a more detailed summary and [thankfully posted it here](#) - but it is only a summary and not the actual legislative language that will be included in the Peru, Panama, Colombia and South Korea trade deals, and as we know, legislative language is where the rubber hits the road in trade deals. See the addendum at the bottom for more). All they saw at the press conference were press releases and summaries, and yet they dutifully transcribed those press releases and summaries to report as ironclad fact that this deal means pending trade deals will definitely include strong, enforceable labor and environmental protections.

**No reporter, rank-and-file Member of Congress or member of the public has seen the final language of any new trade pact that this deal purports to represent.** Put another way, in reporting that this deal definitely means strong labor/environmental standards without actually seeing the legislative language, Beltway journalists are behaving just like their idol Friedman, who admitted on national television that he used his newspaper columns and television appearances to champion the [job-destroying Central American Free Trade Agreement](#) even though "[I didn't even know what was in it.](#)"

The omission of the [now-simmering opposition to this secret deal](#) and the unabashed cheerleading of the deal without seeing the actual language is the definition of journalistic irresponsibility that we've become used to in the modern era - and I'm not just talking about these same reporters dutifully presenting as fact the Bush administration's pre-war "proof" of WMD in Iraq. We can actually look back to an even more applicable example: The debate in 1993 over the North American Free Trade Agreement, where the media showed that its dishonesty is entirely deliberate - a calculated and well-practiced routine to deliberately lay down cover fire for the Big Money interests waging a war on the middle class.

As you may recall, the Beltway media in 1993 did its best to pretend that there was no opposition to NAFTA at all. The Washington Post's Howard Kurtz reported back then that "from George Will and Rush Limbaugh on the right to Anthony Lewis and Michael Kinsley on the left, most of [the nation's brand-name commentators led the cheerleading for NAFTA](#)." When economist Jeff Faux pointed out that polls showed the public opposed the deal and that such opposition should at least be given some space in the Washington Post, the Post's editor responded by saying "I don't believe it is right to create an artificial balance where none exists."

The 1993 media portrayals of NAFTA made the very same declarative-yet-dishonest statements that we are now being treated to in the wake of the secret trade deal. Under NAFTA, "Mexico promises major improvements in the enforcement of environmental and labor standards," wrote the Washington Post on 9/14/93. "If NAFTA is defeated, all those benefits vanish." The Post followed this up by declaring on 11/2/03 that "Many congressmen are deeply interested in labor standards and deplore the poor conditions along the Mexican border. Defeating NAFTA won't improve those conditions. But enacting it can make a difference." Meanwhile, the Financial Times - the international Establishment paper of record - declared on 11/10/93 that "President Clinton negotiated environmental and labor protection safeguards to add to the basic pact."

But perhaps the most egregious example came from the Gray Lady (which, true to form, has an [editorial today](#) endorsing this week's secret trade deal, even though its editors, like the rest of the public, have not seen the actual legislative language). In a scathing editorial on the eve of the NAFTA vote, the New York Times attacked environmental groups for raising concerns about the pact's utter lack of enforceable environmental protections. The editorial declared as fact that NAFTA "includes numerous environmental protections"; that "Mexico is more likely to become a cleaner nation with NAFTA"; and that NAFTA was specifically designed not to allow corporations to extract profits from the desperately low-wage, environmentally hazardous conditions in the country to our south, but instead "to protect the environment against the economic explosion" of natural cross border commerce. The editorial further claimed that environmental advocates were factually wrong for asserting that NAFTA would allow foreign corporations to use international courts to sue American local, state and federal governments in an effort to overturn those government's environmental protection laws.

We all know the real story, just as any objective observer knew it at the time. NAFTA's labor and environmental "protections" were a sham. As critics made clear at the time - and as the media utterly ignored - these "protections" were deliberately made unenforceable at the request of K Street. And the results are, thus, not surprising.

"Statistics from Mexico's National Institute for Statistics, Geography, and Information Systems document how environmental degradation has overwhelmed any benefits from trade-led economic growth" in the wake of NAFTA, wrote trade experts in a [recent report by Tufts University and the non-partisan International Relations Center](#).

Similarly, [Human Rights Watch](#) has shown that Mexican workers now "face unacceptable obstacles to exercising their rights to join independent unions, bargain collectively, and strike" - a key factor in Mexico's wages stagnating and poverty rates increasing in the wake of NAFTA. Meanwhile, multinational corporations like Methanex now [brag on their corporate websites](#) about the suits they are now permitted to file under NAFTA - suits predicted by the critics the New York Times attacked, suits that allow foreign corporations to overturn basic environmental protection laws passed by sovereign local, state and federal governments here in the United States.

Incredibly (or, perhaps predictably) the media doesn't seem to have learned any lessons from the travesty that the coverage of NAFTA proved to be. We are seeing almost exactly the same kind of propagandistic stenography and omission, but maybe even more intense. After all, at the very time the entire media Establishment is claiming that this week's secret deal definitely means new, enforceable labor protections in U.S. trade deals, just one major American media outlet - the [Wall Street Journal](#) - has even bothered to mention that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is out bragging that it received "assurances that the labor provisions cannot be read to require compliance" - and of course, the Journal then ignores that statement entirely by declaring as fact that the deal "opens the door to more protections for workers and communities that are adversely affected by trade."

But again, mere pro-free-trade bias is not the only way the media dishonesty seems to have intensified since NAFTA. Remember, during NAFTA, at least the legislative language of what was being reported on were public and available for scrutiny by American citizens, reporters and lawmakers. The media spin machine was operating then, but at least the public could dig into the text of NAFTA to see what was really going on. Today, that's not so. In the case of the secret trade deal announced last week, reporters are aggressively applauding a legislative agreement

neither they - nor the public - has even seen. For his part, [Rep. Charlie Rangel \(D\)](#), the Democrat who orchestrated the deal, is pulling his best Tom DeLay, hide-the-bill-until-the-very-last-second impression, bragging that he is going to leverage his seniority to arm-twist a little less than half of the House Democrats into voting for the deal - even though he is hiding the legislative language of the deal from the public. On top of this, reporters aren't even bothering to ask the politicians they are covering why those politicians kept the long negotiations secret in the first place, and why they continue to refuse to release the actual legislative language of the trade deals in question.

In Journalism school, you are taught early on not to publish any assertion of fact unless you can prove it and have evidence in hand. Yet here we had a Beltway media making all sorts of assertions about "enforceable labor and environmental standards" in what could be the most important economic decisions in a generation - all while no Washington reporter, rank-and-file Democratic lawmaker or member of the general public has actually seen the legislative language of the deal being "reported" on. The only actual objective evidence we have is White House-connected K Street lobbyists like the Chamber of Commerce's Tom Donohue saying that, actually, he's been given "assurances" that these supposedly "enforceable" standards will not be enforceable at all in the actual legislation.

But, as Ringling Brothers circus emcees say, the show must go on, and so the Beltway myth-making continues - all while the war on the middle class lays waste to [Election 2006's fair trade mandate](#) and the economic future of the country.

*ADDENDUM: In the interest of full transparency, let's remember: It's not totally clear who has seen the actual legislative language of this deal as of now. What we do know is that while many "summaries" have been released, the actual language of the supposedly "reformed" Peru, Panama, South Korea and Colombia Free Trade Agreements have not been made public. We also know that the [websites of the U.S. Trade Representative](#), the Senate Finance Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee only posted summaries of the deal 24 hours after the press conference, not the actual legislative language. Additionally, we know that the ongoing negotiations in pursuit of this deal were kept 100 percent concealed from rank and file members of Congress (including Congress's most veteran fair traders), reporters and the public, meaning the entire process has been shrouded in secrecy. [Public Citizen's Todd Tucker](#) has more on how the press summaries being released by congressional Democratic leaders and the Bush administration deliberately refuse to include the actual legislative language of the trade deals in question, and that these summaries could very easily be very different from the final language - as they were during NAFTA.*

Posted by David Sirota at 8:44 PM