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Putting the U.S. First

Trade: Two weeks ago, CAFTA looked dead. Lobbyists' cash, populist hysteria and payback for Bush seemed insurmountable. But somehow in the Senate, U.S. long-term interests won out. The House should take note.

The Senate's 54-45 vote on the Central America Free Trade Agreement was a laurel for the upper chamber. Even in the poisonous partisan air of Washington, most members chose the national interest over payback politics.

In fact, the mottled voting pattern showed that despite all the talk about CAFTA being Bush's bill, this was not about party politics. Twelve Republicans voted against it. Ten Democrats voted for it. Regardless of party, the winners rejected fear and chose the future.

To be sure, there were exceptions. Hillary Clinton voted no, insulting her large Dominican-American constituency in New York in favor of Big Labor. She also countered the laudable efforts of her husband, who spoke out strongly for CAFTA, something that may have moved the treaty over the top. If she now thinks she can run for president by riding on Bill Clinton's moderate reputation, she's shown she's got another kind of platform.

But then there was Bill Nelson, a Florida Democrat facing a tough Senate re-election battle. He went for what his growing Latino immigrant constituents know works, and he may well make it to the finish line next year. Greater still, there was North Carolina's Elizabeth Dole, who put national interest over textile lobbies that could see jobs shift if the treaty passes. Her vote was pure leadership.

The U.S. has a national interest in a free and prosperous Central America. It's incongruous for America to expend its all to create a free and prosperous Middle East to break up the soil of terrorism while ignoring the same conditions far closer to home.

Central America is vulnerable. Its savage Mara criminal gangs are the remnants of war displacements. They're composed of the kind of disaffected people who in other countries are ample fodder for al-Qaida or Iraq's foreign fighters, and they're capable of threatening governments. CAFTA and the opportunity it provides for these small countries will wither the appeal of these gangs.

A growing Central American economy will create new jobs so that Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans and others will stay home and continue building their region. Unlike Mexico, whose large, unreformed economy is often scurrilously confused with free trade, or "the sins of NAFTA," much of Central America has already embraced the free market with wide-ranging, Chilean-inspired reforms. All they need is opportunity.

The alternative is not joblessness -- but the likelihood they will solve their joblessness by coming illegally to the U.S. And America's enemies will take note that crossing the border is easy.

Most important, a rich, secure Central America will be a powerful bulwark against intimidation from regional predators. Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez both have designs on the region, with resources ranging from subsidies to subversion. This week, two countries -- Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago -- were able to shrug off Chavez's smothering PetroCaribe oil alliance "invitation." Both of these tiny states have strong economies and political institutions that give them choices. Countries that can walk away from Chavez and Castro are prosperous ones. That's why a strong, self-sufficient Central America is in the U.S. interest.

Which brings the last point: The U.S. has few friends in this hemisphere. From top to bottom, leftist governments (of different stripes) are being voted into power by citizens who are suspicious of our intentions. This would be the case no matter who is president, and the Democrats who supported CAFTA know this.

They also know that Central America is a major exception to this trend, consistently friendly and unashamed to announce its willing partnership with the U.S. The region votes with us in the United Nations and has fought side by side with us -- in El Salvador's case, with great distinction -- to end terrorism in the Middle East. Regardless of who is president, the world is watching to see whether the U.S. looks after its friends.

All this is outside partisan politics. CAFTA began under Clinton 11 years ago, and he lobbied and fought for it well before many had ever heard of George W. Bush. This treaty is bigger than Bush -- it's about our front yard.

The senators who supported CAFTA ignored partisan bickering and went with the national interest. Now the final hurdle is upon us as the vote heads for the House of Representatives. Let's hope it too puts America first.