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Politico Misleads on Korea/Colombia Trade Agreements

By [Claude Barfield](#)

December 14, 2010, 4:26 pm

Politico's John Maggs is a very good reporter, but he has written [a flawed, misleading article](#) on the connection between the recently concluded KORUS and the similarly pending Colombia free trade agreement (FTA). The thrust of his piece is that House Republicans "threaten" the Korea pact by linking it with passage of the Colombian pact (and less controversially, the pending Panama FTA). Maggs argues that combining the two (three) agreements would "galvanize" House Democratic opposition and views this is a tactic to "force the White House to choose between its liberal base and the business community ... [and] a way to make President Obama's new embrace of trade costly for him with his own party." This thesis is at best incomplete, and in building supporting evidence Maggs ignores or twists the history of the Colombia FTA.

First, he suggests that Republicans merely want to shore up "Colombia's conservative government ... despite the history of anti-union violence." And, in stats straight out of union/Nader propaganda, he cites the "fact" that some 2,800 union officials have been murdered since 1986. Well, Republicans also pushed hard for the KORUS in 2007, despite the fact that the then-Korean president, Roh Moo-hyun, espoused "liberal" policies antithetical to their views on both foreign and domestic policy. Of greater

import, however, is the use, or misuse, of statistics on murder and violence. Yes, if one goes back to 1986, the figure 2,800 is accurate. But this disguises the fact that since 2001, according to [a study by the Cato Institute](#) (buttressed by other independent assessments), assassination rates of union and business leaders have dropped 80 percent and the murder rate overall has come down some 40 percent. As Cato noted, it is now probably “safer for a union leader to walk the streets of Medellin than those of our own capitol.” All of this occurred as the Colombian government under Presidents Uribe and now Santos fought and finally won a war against drug lords and the Venezuelan-backed FARC guerrillas—and capped it all with a fair and free election in 2010 that saw the “conservative” Uribe voluntarily give up the presidency.

Finally, Maggs accuses the Republican leaders of jeopardizing a new “bipartisan” approach to trade, citing the support of the United Auto Workers union (UAW) and the food workers union for KORUS after the administration extracted “concessions” from Korea. The concessions amounted to a retreat to protectionism but, more important they certainly have not secured a change in union opposition to trade agreements—yes, the UAW and food workers union now support KORUS as a result of this extended protection. But the AFL/CIO federation, including all the major industrial unions—steel, communications, and machinists—all vowed to actively oppose the agreement. And I would bet that the UAW will find some bogus reason to oppose Colombia and Panama, despite the protectionist payoff with Korea.

Having said all that, my own view is pragmatic: if the congressional Republicans have the votes, they should move all three of the agreements in the spring, because of their undoubted benefits for the United States, whatever their side effects on the fractious elements of the Democratic coalition. And I hope John Maggs will celebrate these victories after the “threats” are surmounted.

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