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# An Open Challenge to Free Traders: Debate Free Trade on Camera!

I'm going to ask the reader to forgive the somewhat personal nature of this post, as personal experiences are sometimes revealing about larger issues.

Earlier this year, I was excited to organizing a debate, under the auspices of the San Diego World Trade Center and held on the campus of California State University, San Marcos, on the wisdom of free trade as a policy for the U.S. My opponent was going to be the respected Dan Griswold of the libertarian Cato Institute.

It was going to be a well-produced affair, described by the SDWTC staffer organizing it thus:

### **Tuesday 21 June**

11:30 am: Registration and networking

12:00 noon: Welcome Karen Haynes, Ph.D., President CSUSM  
Introductions Bella Heule, President & CEO, WTCSD  
The Debate - moderated by Camille Schuster, Ph.D., CSUSM

1:00 pm: Q & A and discussion

1:30 pm: Conclusions and thanks, Jan Jackson, Ph.D., CSUSM  
Book signing and sales (if you wish)  
Media interviews (if you wish)

The event will be held at McMahan House, a new and very attractive special events complex on the CSUSM campus, which can hold about 150 attendees.

So far, so good. *Then I innocently asked about video.* I mean, I like San Diego and all, but there's not much point in travelling 400 miles to do a debate that only 100 or so people will hear.

Big Mistake.

Much to my surprise, the World Trade Center wouldn't allow video. I got the following email:

Dear Ian,

We appreciate your desire to reach as many people as possible.

The objective for WTCSD and CSUSM is to attract as many as possible to the campus and to learn about the positive and negative impacts of free trade.

We have decided that we do not wish to have a recording of this debate.

If you need to withdraw your acceptance of our invitation to speak at the event, we would understand and respect your action. Please let us know.

Best wishes,  
Hugh Constant  
Executive Vice President  
WORLD TRADE CENTER San Diego  
2980 Pacific Highway  
San Diego, CA 92101  
[www.wtcsd.org](http://www.wtcsd.org)

I tried to find what concession could change their mind, but couldn't. So I withdrew from the now-pointless debate.

Next, I offered a video-recorded debate to the person, Dan Griswold of the libertarian Cato Institute, whom I was supposed to have debated. Mysteriously, he, too, was somehow camera shy. I even offered to have the debate somewhere else, closer to Washington where he lives, and to let him have the same raw footage as my own organization got, to foreclose the possibility of abusive editing. (We can cut, they can cut.) But no dice.

Hmm...

I can only conclude from all this that free traders are uncomfortably aware that their position doesn't stand up well once publicly challenged. (The problem can't be that a debate isn't convenient, or that I'm not a worthy opponent, because they already agreed.) So they're prepared to have a "play" debate, i.e. one that maybe 100 people in San Diego see, but not something that might actually get posted on the Internet and reach significant numbers of people.

At this point, I can only restate my offer to the World Trade Center and the Cato Institute, and reiterate that I am quite prepared to proceed as planned if I somehow misunderstood their position and they are, in fact, willing to have a video recording made.

Beyond that, I'd like to offer this challenge to free traders generally: Is any one of you willing to debate me *on camera*? My only proviso is that it needs to be someone with enough standing that

their own side will take them seriously: it needs to be someone who works for an organization espousing free trade, holds a university appointment, has written a book on the subject, or something like that. (I'm not trying to be a snob here; it's just that the whole point is to have a debate that actually reveals something about the merits of the two sides of the argument.)

Until somebody takes me (or any other critic of free trade, I don't care) up on this, skeptics of free trade are entitled to accuse free traders of being unable to defend their own position. Free traders know perfectly well that with the corporate-dominated media and an academic economics community that's lost touch with the real world shilling for their position, they currently have an advantage that open debate would dissipate.

The last time free trade got a real debate in this country was in 1992 with Ross Perot and Al Gore on Larry King. So c'mon, free traders--how hard can it be to find as much courage as Al Gore?