

The Courier-Journal

A free-trade deal for Congress, Obama

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December 16, 2014

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell and President Barack Obama have flagged free trade as a possible area of agreement with practical consequences: Anyone who plans on buying a pair of sneakers could save the tariffs that triple the cost of foreign-made athletic shoes.

Even though the bill had bipartisan support, Senate Democrat Leader Harry Reid never allowed a vote on a fast-track trade bill known as Trade Promotion Authority (TPA). It was one of many votes that Reid held hostage but that McConnell can bring to the floor when he replaces Reid as majority leader.

Oddly, Obama let Reid get away with it — even though the fast-track trade bill would have expanded Obama's authority. Perhaps Obama's issuance of executive orders has sucked the fun out of proceeding with congressional authorization.

Fast-track is a procedure whereby Congress gives the president specific goals to accomplish in negotiating trade agreements with other countries. In exchange, Congress agrees to give the treaty a straight up or down vote, with no amendments or filibuster, within a short time frame.

This lets the administration conduct trade negotiations with the certainty that Congress will not try to revise an agreement that took years to negotiate. We have only one U.S. trade representative for a reason. Anyone who ever has suffered through editing by committee knows that 535 members of Congress cannot negotiate with other countries on behalf of ours. It would be a logistical nightmare. So, too, for revising an agreement.

Every president for the last 40 years has had fast-track authority except Obama.

The Obama administration has been negotiating two trade agreements for several years, one with Asia and Pacific Rim countries, another with the European Union. Ideally TPA should have been passed before the administration undertook negotiations that are nearly final. Better late than never. If the administration presents a trade agreement that is untenable for whatever reason, Congress can vote it down.

Anything that advances free trade will be good for the American economy, even an imperfect agreement. Free trade allows us to sell our goods and commodities to foreign markets without being subject to tariffs that artificially raise the price of U.S. goods, making them unattractive to foreign consumers. And by ending the U.S. tariffs that make imports cost more here, Americans save money. Free trade also reduces the cost of those goods as inputs that are then used to make something else (like a semi-conductor used to make a GPS).

Daniel Griswold for the Cato Institute notes that in addition to the economic benefits of specialization, there are a number of moral arguments for free trade. Free trade promotes freedom at the most basic level by allowing individuals to sell the fruits of their labor without government interference. "Protectionism is a form of stealing," Griswold writes. By the same token, free trade is a brake on the power of the state.

Free trade brings together people from different cultures, countries and religions. Relationships that begin as economic transactions can grow into alliances, promoting peace. Griswold points to Ned Graham (son of Billy Graham), whose organization has given away millions of Bibles in China. That evangelism would not have been possible but for the opening of China's economy.

Additionally, free trade raises the standard of living of those countries from which we purchase. That leads to more education and the possibility of civil rights; nations that are economically free tend to have a higher degree of political freedom. Anyone who cares about poverty and justice in the developing world should favor free trade.

Labor unions argue that free trade sends American jobs to countries with cheap labor. That ignores the offsetting new jobs that are created. As Milton Friedman pointed out, it took 19 people to farm enough food to feed 20 people in 1776. Today, 1 percent to 2 percent produce our country's food. But we don't complain about the unemployment of all the people who previously would have had to work the farm. Innovation and improved technology enables those people earn their living in other ways. That has improved our standard of living and given us a greater range of products and services.

The point is not just to create jobs, but to create productive jobs. Treaties to make freer our trade with Asia and the EU may be just what the tepid Obama economy needs; it would give us access to one billion customers. Certainly it would help America's dwindling prestige overseas by acting as the great economic superpower that we are.

Republicans therefore should give Obama fast-track authority to negotiate free trade agreements. Supporting the president when he is right will give Republicans more credibility to oppose him when he is wrong. And it has the delicious side effect of splintering the Democrat base.