

Chuck Sweeny: Team USA's uniforms made in China? Shocking!

Oh, the hypocrisy of our grandstanding Congress. When they discovered last week that the U.S. Olympic team's uniforms, designed by Ralph Lauren, were made in China, congressmen and senators, mainly Democratic ones, were in an uproar.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said all the uniforms should be gathered together and burned in a bonfire.

"Our Olympians don't train their entire lives to don Chinese uniforms," chimed in Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. According to the Financial Times, Schumer sent a letter to the U.S. Olympic Committee to let them know he had found a suit maker in Rochester, N.Y., who could make new uniforms in time for the Opening Ceremony in London.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, said of the Olympic committee: "You'd think they'd know better."

The committee said it is too late to procure new uniforms because they've already begun distributing them to athletes. They're expensive, too: \$1,945 for men and \$1,475 for women. Lauren, who was probably shocked at these complaints, vowed to buy American for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

Now some Democrats are writing legislation to require future American teams to wear U.S.-made uniforms. They call it the "Team U.S.A. Made in America" bill.

This fracas reminds me of a similar fight that U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo, R-Egan, picked with the U.S. Army in 2000 over the Army's decision to buy made-in-China black berets for the soldiers. The Register Star wrote about it in 2001: "In October (2000) Army chief of staff Gen. Eric Shinseki announced that soldiers would switch to black berets by June 14, the Army's birthday.

A few months later, lawmakers were outraged to learn the Pentagon was paying overseas companies \$30 million to make 4.7 million berets. 'I just don't think it builds morale for someone in the field to take off their beret and see a label that says Made in China,' Manzullo said.

Ever since then, Manzullo has campaigned for re-election as the man who stopped the Army from buying Chinese berets. As of 2006, the 837,000 Chinese-made berets were languishing in an Army warehouse in Virginia. Cost of storage for that year alone: \$102,000.

Why are federal lawmakers feigning shock over Chinese Olympic uniforms and Army berets?

For three decades, presidents, congressmen and senators in both parties eagerly joined hedge funds and venture-capital firms in pursuing trade policies that encouraged American manufacturers to make their products in low-wage countries. Public school systems joined the outsourcing trend by closing vocational education programs all over the country — ensuring that there would be no Americans trained in mechanical and factory work.

The government and Wall Street succeeded beyond everyone's wildest expectations. In just the 2000s, the U.S. lost 5 million to 6 million factory jobs, mostly to low-wage countries. We even lost nearly 700,000 high-tech jobs, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The domestic textile and clothing factories are mostly gone. Companies that made textile machines, like Barber-Colman in Rockford, have been gone longer.

Reid, Schumer and Boehner should spare us the histrionics and look in their closets. I'm sure they'll find shirts, pants, shoes, coats and ties made in China, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Taiwan, Mexico, Malaysia and Honduras. In fact, let's all do that. Most of the Third World hangs on our clothes racks.

Not everyone thinks this is a bad thing. Daniel J. Ikenson of the libertarian CATO Institute is one. Ikenson writes on the CNN website that outsourcing the actual making of clothing makes good sense:

"So, what exactly is un-American about Chinese-made Olympic uniforms? Nearly half of the clothing in America's closets is made in China, and almost all of the rest is made in other foreign countries. With a very few exceptions, we simply don't cut and sew clothing much in the United States anymore.

"But we design clothing here. We brand clothing here. We market and retail clothing here. The apparel industry employs plenty of Americans, just not in the cutting and sewing operations that our parents and grandparents endured, working long hours for low wages."

Does he have a point? What do you think? Let me know.

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