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Whatever Happened to Free Trade?

Michael C. Moynihan | March 10, 2010

With the tedious details of healthcare "reform" and tickle-fighting fantasists sucking up all of the media oxygen, it takes someone like James Pethokoukis, the most informative Greek-American since Dimetrios Synodinos, to remind us that President Obama is neglecting (or purposefully ignoring) a hugely important issue: free trade.

Not that Obama has a problem with trade. In his State of the Union speech to Congress last January, he stated an ambitious goal of doubling U.S exports by 2015. It is trade policy that he seems uncomfortable with. That bold declaration in the speech was a direct result of lobbying from Obama's economic advisers. But the wonks aren't driving U.S trade policy in the Obama administration. The political team is. Its priority is passing healthcare reform. To pass healthcare reform, Obama needs his core union support. And a push for new trade agreements would alienate Big Labor.

So Obama has not nudged Congress to pass long-stalled treaties with Colombia, Korea and Panama. Instead, the emphasis has been on get-tough actions such as slapping preliminary duties on tires from China and bricks from Mexico. Nor has he tried to energize the Doha trade talks, pushing Brazil to first litigate via the World Trade Organization and now retaliate. And in the U.S., high unemployment has encouraged protectionist forces in Congress. A bipartisan House group just introduced a new bill to abandon the North American Free Trade Agreement, while one in the Senate is pushing for action against China because of its weak currency policy.

You know America what needs in an economic downturn? Lunkheaded congressmen trying to restrict trade! (Cato's Dan Griswold, who knows more about this subject than any man should, addresses the "Nafta is bad for America" crowd [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).) According to Rep. Gene Taylor, a leather-faced Democrat from Mississippi, "At a time when 10 to 12 percent of the American people are unemployed, I think Congress has an obligation to put people back to work." If this makes economic sense to you, dear reader, please explain it in the comments.

Not too long ago, I wondered whatever happened to the free trade Democrat.