

HONORING DENNIS KING ON THE OCCASION OF HIS RETIREMENT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. HARE) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. HARE. Madam Speaker, I rise today to recognize my Chief of Staff, Dennis King, who is retiring from the House of Representatives after 33 years of distinguished public service.

Dennis, a native of Miami, Florida, first came to Congress as a Special Assistant to the late Representative Dante Fascell. He then served as Chief of Staff for my friend and predecessor, Representative Lane Evans.

When I asked Dennis to continue in the same role on my staff, he enthusiastically accepted, saying he felt like he had "unfinished business to take care of." Dennis' decision to extend his service shows his dedication, not only to the people of the 17th District of Illinois, but to working families and to veterans everywhere.

Dennis and I have been very close friends for over 25 years. We share the same values. Some might wonder how Dennis, a Duke University graduate with a Georgetown law degree, could form such a close bond with me, a factory worker from West Central Illinois. It's simple. Dennis cares about the people of the 17th District as much as I do.

When Congressman Evans hired me to be his District Director and Dennis was my supervisor, he had faith in me from day 1, serving as a mentor and pulling me from the edge of the cliff during the times I lost my way. I will always be grateful for the chance Dennis gave me.

And Dennis is also a congenial and friendly person. Current and former staff say they will miss sitting in his office talking about everything from politics to family to sports. No matter what time of day or how busy Dennis was, he always put down whatever he was doing the minute someone walked into his office. The care and attention he gave to every single person is one of the major reasons he's so beloved.

Another trait I admire in Dennis is his brilliant political mind. I asked him to be my Chief of Staff because, as a new Member of Congress, I knew I needed someone who understood Capitol Hill inside and out, and whom I could trust to keep me on the right path. Dennis has amazed me with his intuitions, decision-making and loyalty, always choosing the right course for the people of my district and this Nation.

It cannot go without saying that when one thinks of Dennis King, one thinks of Lane Evans and vice versa. The two men were like brothers, a friendship that started when they attended law school at Georgetown University. And together they made history fighting for veterans and working families across our Nation.

Dennis often mentions how much he learned from Lane, but the truth is

that Dennis taught Lane so much as well. He was an integral part of all the great things Lane was able to accomplish.

I want to also acknowledge Dennis' family, his wife, Nancy, and his two sons, Steven and Jeffrey. As most of you know, the job of Chief of Staff can take a toll on one's family. The time commitment is great and the stress can be overwhelming. Nancy has demonstrated remarkable patience over the years and remains an incredible source of support for Dennis. Next year Dennis and Nancy will celebrate their silver wedding anniversary, a true testament to their love and respect for each other. I wish them both the best in whatever life brings them.

And Dennis, although I say this with a heavy heart, congratulations on your retirement. Thank you for your service, your laughs, your hard work. Your efforts and advice have allowed us to accomplish many great things in my first term and have ultimately made me a much better Member of this body. Your spirit, humor, intelligence and the ease by which you led the Hare team will be missed.

Best of luck, and please keep in touch.

God bless.

COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. WELLER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. WELLER of Illinois. Madam Speaker, I submit for the RECORD an editorial from yesterday's Washington Post in support of the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement, as well as a column by Edward Schumacher-Matos, a former foreign correspondent for the Times, as well as a visiting professor of Latin American Studies at Harvard, a column that was published in yesterday's New York Times as well.

[From the Washington Post, Mar. 31, 2008]

FREE COLOMBIA: A TRADE PACT EVERYONE CAN LOVE

Sometime after Congress returns from Easter recess this week, President Bush is likely to present the Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement for the approval of the House and Senate. As we have said, the proposed pact is good policy for both Colombia and the United States. Colombia has long enjoyed periodically renewable tariff-free access to the U.S. market; the agreement would make that permanent. In exchange, U.S. producers would, for the first time, get the same tariff-free deal when they export to Colombia. Meanwhile, the agreement contains labor and environmental protections much like those that Congress has already approved in a U.S.-Peru trade pact. A vote for the Colombia deal would show Latin America that a staunch U.S. ally will be rewarded for improving its human rights record and resisting the anti-American populism of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

Sending the agreement to the House of Representatives without the prior approval of Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) would be risky for the president; usually, the execu-

tive and legislative branches tee up such votes cooperatively. But months of Democratic resistance to the Colombia deal may have left Mr. Bush no choice. The agreement is being held hostage by members of the House (and Senate) who argue that Colombia—despite a dramatic drop in its overall murder toll under the leadership of President Alvaro Uribe—hasn't done enough to protect trade union activists or to punish past murders of labor leaders. It's a spurious complaint: Actually, in 2006, union members were slightly less likely than the average Colombian to be murdered. But the human rights issue has served as cover for many Democrats whose true objections are to free trade itself.

Once the agreement arrives on the Hill, Congress will have 90 legislative days to vote yes or no—no amendments and no filibusters allowed, because special "fast track" rules apply. The Bush administration is betting that enough Democrats would support the pact to ensure its passage in the House, if it ever comes up for a vote. Of course, Ms. Pelosi could make an issue of the president's failure to get her approval to submit the pact and then could have her caucus shoot down the deal. But she could also engage the White House in serious negotiations. The president has signaled a willingness to consider reauthorizing aid for workers displaced by trade, legislation that is dear to the Democrats' labor constituency and that he has heretofore resisted.

Ms. Pelosi recently said that no Colombia deal could pass without trade adjustment assistance—without also mentioning the bogus trade unionists issue. Perhaps she is realizing that talking to Mr. Bush about swapping a Colombia vote for trade adjustment assistance might actually lead to a tangible accomplishment. At least we have to hope so.

KILLING A TRADE PACT

(By Edward Schumacher-Matos)

President Bush has been urging Congress to approve a pending trade agreement with Colombia, an ally that recently almost went to war with Venezuela and Hugo Chávez. Even though the agreement includes the labor and environmental conditions that Congress wanted, many Democrats, including Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, now say that Colombia must first punish whomever has been assassinating the members of the nation's trade unions before the agreement can pass.

An examination of the Democrats' claims, however, finds that their faith in the assertions of human-rights groups is more righteous than right. Union members have been assassinated, but the reported number is highly exaggerated. Even one murder for union organizing is atrocious, but isolated killings do not justify holding up the trade agreement.

All sides agree that trade-union murders in Colombia, like all violence, have declined drastically in recent years. The Colombian unions' own research center says killings dropped to 39 last year from a high of 275 in 1996.

Yet in a report being released next week, the research center says the killings remain "systematic" and should be treated by the courts as "genocide" designed to "exterminate" unionism in Colombia. Most human-rights groups cite the union numbers and conclude, as Human Rights Watch did this year, that "Colombia has the highest rate of violence against trade unionists in the world."

Even if that is true, it was far safer to be in a union than to be an ordinary citizen in Colombia last year. The unions report that

they have 1 million members. Thirty-nine killings in 2007 is a murder rate of 4 unionists per 100,000. There were 15,400 homicides in Colombia last year, not counting combat deaths, according to the national police. That is a murder rate of 34 citizens per 100,000.

Many in Congress, moreover, assume that "assassinations" means murders that are carried out for union activity. But the union research center says that in 79 percent of the cases going back to 1986, it has no suspect or motive. The government doesn't either.

When the Inter American Press Association several years ago investigated its list of murdered Colombian journalists, it found that more than 40 percent were killed for nonjournalistic reasons. The unions have never done a similar investigation.

There are, however, a growing number of convictions for union murders in Colombia. There were exactly zero convictions for them in the 1990s, Colombia's bloodiest decade, when right-wing paramilitaries and leftist guerrillas were at the height of their strength. Each assassinated the suspected supporters of the others across society, including in unions.

With help from the United States, in 2000 the Colombian military and the judicial system began to reassert themselves. Prosecuting cases referred by the unions themselves, the attorney general's office won its first conviction for the murder of a trade unionist in 2001. Last year, the office won nearly 40.

Of the 87 convictions won in union cases since 2001, almost all for murder, the ruling judges found that union activity was the motive in only 17. Even if you add the 16 cases in which motive was not established, the number doesn't reach half of the cases. The judges found that 15 of the murders were related to common crime, 10 to crimes of passion and 13 to membership in a guerrilla organization.

The unions don't dispute the numbers. Instead, they say the prosecutors and the courts are wasting time and being anti-union by seeking to establish motive—a novel position in legal jurisprudence.

The two main guerrilla groups have an avowed strategy of infiltrating unions, which attracts violence. About a third of the identified murderers of union members are leftist guerrillas. Most of the rest are members of paramilitary groups—presumed to be behind two of the four trade unionist murders this month. The demobilization of most paramilitary groups, along with the prosecutions and government protection of union leaders, has contributed to the great drop in union murders.

President Álvaro Uribe, who has thin skin, can be unwisely provocative when responding to complaints from unions and human rights groups. Still, the level of unionization in Colombia is roughly equal to that in the United States and slightly below the level in the rest of Latin America. The government registered more than 120 new unions in 2006, the last year for which numbers are available. The International Labor Organization says union legal rights in Colombia meet its highest standards. Union leaders have been cabinet members, a governor and the mayor of Bogotá.

Delaying the approval of the trade agreement would be convenient for Democrats in Washington. American labor unions and human-rights groups have made common cause to oppose it this election year. The unions oppose the trade agreement for traditional protectionist reasons. Less understandable are the rights groups.

Human Rights Watch says that it has no position on trade but that it is using the withholding of approval to gain political le-

verage over the Colombian government. Conversely, they are harming Colombian workers in the process. The trade agreement would stimulate economic growth and help all Colombians.

Madam Speaker, I rise in support of the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement. I urge the Speaker of the House to bring this important agreement to the floor for a vote, an agreement that was, where negotiations were completed 2 years ago, where an agreement that was signed 18 months ago and has been waiting for a long time. This agreement is a good agreement for America. It's a good agreement for Illinois. It's also a good agreement for Colombia.

Illinois is a major exporting State. My district is dependent on exports to grow jobs. And last year my State of Illinois exported \$214 million worth of Illinois products to Colombia, and that's just the beginning because under the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement, 80 percent of all tariffs, and tariffs are taxes, on U.S. and Illinois products are eliminated immediately when the trade agreement goes into effect.

And I would note today that Colombian products come into the United States duty-free, without taxes. But we suffer taxes when we export to Colombia.

And I would note that the facts have shown that exports grow 50 percent faster with nations like Chile and Peru and Central America, where we have trade agreements, than those where we do not.

Who is Colombia? Well, Colombia is our most reliable partner and best friend in Latin America. Colombia is our most reliable partner in counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism. It's the longest standing democracy in all of Latin America. And they have a popular president, President Uribe. The reason President Uribe has been so popular is he's reduced violence; he's brought security to the entire country.

People today feel secure traveling between cities, where five and 10 years ago they feared to go. In fact, 71 percent of Colombians today say they feel more secure under President Uribe. 37 percent say President Uribe respects human rights. Homicides are down by 40 percent; kidnappings are down by 76 percent. In fact, the murder rate today in Colombia is lower than Baltimore or Washington, D.C.

No wonder President Uribe is the most popular elected official in this entire hemisphere. And compare that 80 percent approval rating President Uribe enjoys with the 18 percent that this Congress suffers and the difference in approval.

Now those who oppose the U.S.-Colombia Trade Agreement say, well, Colombia just hasn't done enough. They need to keep doing more before we'll give them the privilege of having this agreement with the United States. And they say that there's been violence against labor leaders.

Well, let's look at the facts. President Uribe has made major changes in

how they prosecute those who commit murder and violent acts. He's added 418 new prosecutors, 545 new investigators, 2,166 new posts overall in the Prosecutor General's office. And he's increased prosecution funding by 75 percent.

A respected labor leader in Colombia said, Carlos Rodriguez, President of the United Workers Confederation said about these new posts and this funding, never in the history of Colombia have we achieved something so important. \$39 million was spent this past year providing bodyguards and protection for 1,500 labor leaders and activists. No other group enjoys this special kind of protection. And it's been successful. I would note no labor leader has suffered an attack or lost his life who's participated in this program.

The International Labor Organization has removed Colombia from its labor watch list. Colombia has agreed to a permanent ILO representative in Colombia. That helps explain why 14 major labor leaders in Colombia have endorsed this trade agreement.

Colombia is our best friend in Latin America. It's our most reliable ally. Colombia deserves a vote.

Think about it. 2 years this trade agreement has waited; 18 months since it was signed by the leadership of both countries.

Latin America is undergoing some challenges, and those who are not friends of the United States have made it very clear they want to defeat the U.S.-Colombia Trade Agreement because they think that's in their best interest, and they've also said that if the Congress defeats the trade agreement, it will send a powerful signal to all Latin America that the United States can't be trusted, and that if you're a friend of the United States, in the long run they'll let you down.

Well, President Uribe and the government of Colombia, the democratically elected government of Colombia, are our best friends, our most reliable allies in all Latin America, and all Latin America is watching on how we treat our best friend.

This agreement is good for America. It's good for Illinois. If you're an Illinois worker, an Illinois manufacturer, an Illinois farmer, you win under the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Authority.

Madam Speaker, I urge that this House schedule soon a vote on the U.S.-Colombia Trade Agreement and ratify this agreement so important to democracy, freedom and economic growth in our own hemisphere.

□ 1730

THE CURRENT HOUSING CRISIS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from New York (Ms. CLARKE) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. CLARKE. Madam Speaker, today I rise to express my dismay regarding