

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Washington State.

TANKER SURVIVABILITY

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I think we would all agree, especially in a time of war, that nothing is more important than the safety of our men and women in uniform. And nothing should be more important to our military commanders at the Pentagon.

But I come to the floor this morning because safety was not the priority when the military awarded the contract to build the next generation of refueling tankers. If that decision stands, if the contract goes to the European company Airbus, instead of Boeing, our servicemembers will be flying in planes that they and the military know are less safe. That has me very concerned.

During the tanker competition, the Pentagon considered numerous factors, including survivability; that is, the ability to protect war fighters when they are in harm's way. But even though they found the Boeing tanker was much safer, the Pentagon chose the Airbus tanker anyway.

Awarding a contract for a plane that is less safe makes zero sense to me. Why on Earth would our military choose a tanker that rated lower in safety and in survivability. That is the question I have come to the floor this morning to ask. It is one of the concerns I have raised in a letter I am sending today to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

I know as well as anyone how important it is that we get these tankers up in the sky. I represent Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, WA. The air men and women at Fairchild fly those tankers. Refueling tankers are the backbone of our military. Everywhere we have troops in the world we have tankers. And right now our tanker fleets are in some of the most dangerous regions in the world. We know the war on terrorism will be long and it will be hard and that our servicemembers will continue to be in dangerous regions for some time to come.

We owe it to them to provide planes that will enable them to do their jobs safely and that will keep our aircraft safe as they refuel them.

But with this contract, the Pentagon did not make safety the top priority. Let me take a minute this morning to explain what I am talking about when I say that Boeing's plane was more survivable. Survivability refers to the ability to keep the war fighter safe.

According to Ronald Fogleman, who is a former Air Force Chief of Staff and a retired general: The more survivable tanker would have the systems to identify and defeat threats, avoid threats, and protect the crew in the event of an attack.

General Fogleman said he was surprised the Air Force selected the Air-

bus tanker, even though it ranked lower in all those areas. I wish to read you his quote:

When I saw the Air Force's assessment of both candidate aircraft in the survivability area, I was struck by the fact that they clearly saw the KC-767 as the more survivable tanker.

He added he believes the KC-767 is better for the war fighter and for the military. That is how he put it. He said:

The KC-767 has a superior survivability rating and will have greater operational utility to the joint commander and provide better protection to air crews that must face real-world threats.

By any measure, Boeing's tanker would be easier to operate under hostile conditions, and it would provide the crew with better protection. The KC-767 has the newest defense equipment available. According to the Air Force's own rating, it had better missile defense systems, better cockpit displays that allow our crews to recognize a possible threat, better armor for the flight crew and critical systems on the plane, and better protection against fuel tank explosion, amongst many other advantages.

But survivability is not only about the equipment on that plane, a tanker has to be able to take off and land faster. It has to be able to handle itself in a hostile environment. The best tanker is the one that is harder to shoot down. Our tankers are most vulnerable in situations in which the enemy can use shoulder-fired missiles and smaller gunfire, such as when the tankers are taking off or landing.

Compared to the Boeing 767, Airbus's tanker is massive. It is much bigger than the Air Force originally requested, and its size is problematic for many reasons. Not only are there fewer places for Airbus's tanker to take off and land, but as a larger airplane, it is a bigger target and it is easier to hit. The KC-767 is a much more agile plane, and it is safer for the crew and the aircraft that they are refueling.

Americans want our war fighters flying the best, safest possible plane. So I am asking today: Why would not the Pentagon?

Boeing has appealed the Pentagon's decision to award the tanker contract to Airbus. The GAO is now looking into that process. I look forward to seeing their decision. I think Congress has a responsibility as well. It is our job to check on the administration. We have to look out for the war fighter.

Some of my colleagues have said we need to move the process along quickly so we can get these planes in the hands of our airmen and airwomen. I agree. Refueling tankers are vital to the Air Force. But that is also why it is as important that they get the right planes, the planes that will allow them to do their jobs and keep them safe.

We have a responsibility to ensure we are making the right decision for years to come about the safety of our servicemembers and our Nation. That is why I am raising these concerns today.

I yield the floor and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I am going to proceed on my leader time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, the Republican leader is recognized.

COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, last month, Democratic leaders in the House made a truly terrible decision. They opted to kill a free-trade agreement that had already been reached between the United States and Colombia, one of our closest, if not our closest, ally in Latin America, and a nation that has made great strides at democratic reform.

At the heart of the deal was an agreement that U.S. manufacturers and farmers would no longer have to pay tariffs on U.S. goods that are sold in Colombia. This would have leveled the playing field since most Colombian goods are sold in the United States duty free.

At a time of economic uncertainty at home, the Colombia Free Trade Agreement should have been an obvious bipartisan effort to bolster U.S. manufacturing and agriculture and to expand overseas markets for U.S. goods.

Unfortunately, the House leaders decided that the support of union leaders was, in this case, more important than our relations with a close ally or the state of the U.S. economy. That decision has already had serious and far-reaching consequences, and that is not just the view on this side of the aisle.

Virtually every major paper in the country was swift in condemning the House Democrats for changing the rules and blocking a vote on this trade agreement. They recognized that the decision was bad for our relations with Colombia, bad as a matter of national security, and bad for the U.S. economy.

Here are just a few of the headlines from newspapers across our country:

"Drop Dead, Colombia," said the Washington Post.

"Free Trade Deal is A Winner," said the Charleston Post and Courier.

"Approve Pact with Colombia," said the Los Angeles Times.

"A Trade Deal that All of the Americas Need," said the Rocky Mountain News.

"Our View On Free Trade: Pass the Colombia Pact," USA Today.

“Pelosi’s Bad Faith,” the Wall Street Journal.

“Time for the Colombian Trade Pact,” the New York Times.

“Historical Failure on Colombia Trade Pact,” the Denver Post.

“Lose-Lose; House Rejection of Trade Agreement is Bad for U.S. Workers and Colombia,” the Houston Chronicle.

“Caving on Colombia,” the Chicago Tribune.

And in my own hometown paper, the Louisville Courier Journal, an editorial titled: “Free Trade’s Benefits.”

Here is how the Courier Journal put it:

Far from the Washington Beltway, out here in Kentucky, the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement would have real consequences in real people’s lives—most of them good, in our view.

I could go on. In the days after the House scuttled the Colombia Free Trade Agreement, the Office of U.S. Trade Representative counted more than 75 editorials opposing that decision. It is still waiting for a single editorial somewhere in America supporting the Speaker’s decision to scuttle the free-trade agreement.

A congressional resolution in support of Independence Day would probably draw more criticism than the Colombia Free Trade Agreement has from U.S. newspapers. And the reason is abundantly clear. The decision to block a vote has already had serious and far-reaching consequences. As the San Diego Union Tribune put it in yet another editorial critical of the move: “Bashing Has a Price.”

With respect to tariffs, that price is quantifiable. According to an estimate by the Department of Commerce, U.S. goods entering Colombia have been weighted down with more than \$1 billion—\$1 billion—in tariffs since the Colombia Free Trade Agreement was signed—\$1 billion. This is a heavy burden to place on U.S. workers and the businesses they work for.

We hear a lot from the other side about the need for fair trade. Is it fair that U.S. goods have been saddled with more than \$1 billion in tariffs just in the last year and a half alone, while more than 90 percent of Colombian-made goods are sold here without any tariffs at all? What is fair about that? This, apparently, is what House Democrats in Congress regard as fair trade.

The trade imbalance between the United States and Colombia is a matter of enormous significance for the many States that rely on exports—States such as Kentucky, which exported about \$67 million worth of goods to Colombia last year. Had the FTA been brought up and passed, that figure would have been all but certain to increase this year.

The beef industry is a good example of how the trade imbalance hurts the U.S. Kentucky is the largest beef-cattle-producing State east of the Mississippi River. But at the moment, prime and choice cuts of Kentucky beef face 80 percent duties once they reach

Colombian ports. Obviously, an 80-percent markup on beef makes it hard for cattle farmers in my State to compete.

The House failure to take up the Colombia Free Trade Agreement puts States such as Kentucky at a serious competitive disadvantage with Colombia—despite the fact that Colombia itself wants to level the playing field. It is Democrats in the House, not Colombia, who insist on keeping high tariffs on U.S. goods in place.

At a time when the U.S. economy is struggling, we should be doing all we can to help U.S. exporters sell their goods abroad. Instead, House Democrats are burdening our exporters with high tariffs. In these economic times, we should be expanding access to overseas markets for American-made products and American-grown goods, not standing in the way.

This is a consensus view—a consensus view—not just a Republican view. The Senate is ready to vote in favor of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement on a very broad bipartisan basis. For the good of the economy, we should be allowed to take that vote. The House should take up the Colombia Free Trade Agreement and pass it, and they should do it without any further delay.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Missouri.

Mr. BOND. Mr. President, I am delighted to be able to join today with our leader, Senator McCONNELL, in urging prompt action on the Colombia Free Trade Agreement because, as he has said, this represents one of the most important foreign policy and economic opportunities before this Congress.

It is both an economic opportunity to increase our exports, particularly at a time when our economy has slowed down—the dollar is weak—and we should be supporting policies that will create jobs and boost exports.

The U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement also represents a key opportunity to strengthen an alliance with a friend and ally in a part of the world full of anti-American socialists led by, of course, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela.

I have long believed that trade and commercial ties are one of the most effective arrows in America’s quiver of smart power, to build strong alliances for peace and friendship throughout the world.

But, also, as vice chairman of the Intelligence Committee, and a longtime believer in free trade, I believe this agreement is in our national security interests as well as our economic best interests.

First, let me discuss some of the geopolitical and strategic benefits and why Colombia, as a partner with the United States, has demonstrated that it is worthy of such an agreement.

President Alvaro Uribe’s administration finds itself surrounded by states determined to undermine Colombia’s growing democracy. These other states

provide safe havens to insurgent groups, allow freedom of maneuvering in border areas, and provide monetary support for their drug and terror activities that threaten those countries and our own country.

I am sure Hugo Chavez would love nothing more than to see this deal fail. This would be a huge victory for Hugo Chavez. Such an event would embolden his support for rebels in Colombia and undercut American interests throughout the region. Our credibility would be sadly destroyed among people who should be our friends—our neighbors in the Western Hemisphere.

The question we ought to be asking ourselves is, Do we support Hugo Chavez or do we support President Alvaro Uribe? It is critical for peace and prosperity, not just in Colombia but for all of Latin America, and it is very important for our security that we take the opportunity to show we stand with President Uribe, who has done so much to move his country forward in a positive manner.

President Uribe has implemented far-reaching policies to protect labor union members—policies that have led to a general decline in violence, and an even greater decline in violence against union members.

Murders in Colombia overall have decreased by nearly 40 percent between 2001 and 2007, and murders of union members were reduced by over 80 percent. Legal reforms have been implemented under President Uribe to transform the judicial system and increase the number of prosecutions. These prosecutions and law enforcement are necessary because of the violent terrorists who are still operating in Colombia, though President Uribe deserves great credit for cracking down on them.

In October 2006, a special subunit within the Unit of Human Rights was set up in Colombia to investigate and prosecute over 1,200 criminal cases of violence against trade union members.

President Uribe has pushed back Marxist guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC—that we will be referring to later—and the National Liberation Army, or ELN.

Earlier this year, the interdiction of two high-value targets, senior terror planners and former operators, was a testament to President Uribe’s commitment to ending terror operations in his country and stopping the threat to his democratic government posed by the socialist Marxist neighbors trying to bring him down.

It is important to remember that the FARC insurgent group holds more than 700 political and military prisoners, including three Americans.

This regime has been behind some of the most disturbing human rights atrocities over the past three decades, and it finances its operations by facilitating the drug trade. Now, that, if nothing else, ought to get our attention.

If the leadership in the House in Congress is concerned about improving

America's image abroad, fighting to keep illicit drugs off our streets, and improving America's strategic interests in its own backyard, then why don't they start by giving a helping hand to the one good friend we have surrounded by challenges?

What would the rejection of this agreement say about America's commitment to our friends around the world? It would say: Don't count on the United States. Big talk; no action. Big hat; no cattle. We talk a good game, but we can't come through. And that is a serious indictment of the United States.

Friends such as Colombia, and I might even add Korea, who are helping us fight terrorism, fighting for freedom in their parts of the world, want to open their markets to U.S. goods and embrace America's values.

Under President Uribe's leadership, tremendous strides have been made in the last 5 years. Colombia is a functioning democracy in an area surrounded by socialist anti-American vitriol.

The fact that Colombia still faces challenges and needs continued reforms should not lead us to withdraw support for this agreement. Rather, we should increase our support to help Colombia strengthen its democratic institutions, implement continued social reforms, and strengthen its legal proceedings.

Approving the Colombia FTA will embolden President Uribe to continue to make these positive reforms and keep Colombia on the right path.

As for the economic benefits, as I have said, if the strategic and geopolitical benefits were not enough, I believe the economic interests in supporting free trade are just as compelling.

As anxiety increases about what most analysts agree is the beginning of a recession, a sure way to help head it off is through increasing free trade and opening markets abroad to sell U.S. goods. Yet the Colombia Free Trade Agreement, as have other negotiated FTAs, has been held hostage by shortsighted politicians and Presidential election year politics. These politics are denying American producers and exporters expanded markets.

Now, my colleague and good friend, our leader, Senator MCCONNELL, has already talked about an 80-percent tariff on beef going into Colombia. It is not just Kentucky beef producers, it is Missouri beef producers, it is America's beef producers who want to have access to that market because that is going to be an important market to them.

But look at the others. Here is what the U.S. workers have to pay for the goods they produce to export, and that is a tariff—a tax—on what they are exporting.

Automobiles: American workers pay 35 percent in tariffs put on by Colombia. They pay 2.5 percent. Furniture: a 20-percent tax on goods going into Colombia. Mineral fuels: 5 to 15 percent.

There is no tax on fuels coming into the United States. Cotton: Our cotton farmers have to pay a 10-percent tariff going into Colombia. They pay less than 4 percent. Metal products: Our workers in the metal products industry are hampered by 5 to 15 percent. They pay zero. Computer products: We are taxed 10 percent on computer products we send to them. They pay no tax. They come in free.

Why is this not a good deal? It makes no sense. These are efforts that could increase by \$1 billion our trade with Colombia.

I remember in 1999 going to the battle in Seattle. There were people demonstrating against world trade. There were longshoremen up there. They were out demonstrating against free trade. Without international trade, they have no job. There were workers at Boeing in Washington who were demonstrating against free trade. Over half their business is in world markets. There were teamsters up there demonstrating against free trade. The largest teamster employer in the United States, I understand—at least at the time—was United Parcel Service, UPS, but for every 40 packages UPS sends abroad, they hire another teamster.

We need to get real about economics. Free trade is in our interests.

Some people have been throwing around the term "Hooverism." They are worried about Hoover economic policies, and I think they are right, because President Hoover made some disastrous decisions that kept us not only in recession but deepened it into a long-serving depression we only came out of with World War II. In 1930 he signed the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, setting off a wave of protectionist retaliation and damage to the world economy. He damaged it more than the initial stock market crash did in 1929. Two years later, he undid the Coolidge-Mellon tax cuts, raising the top marginal income tax rate from 25 percent to 63 percent. Now, that is Hooverism: When you are in a recession, impose protectionist barriers and raise taxes. That got us the longest depression we have had in the last century and a half.

Unfortunately, we are hearing some people in the campaign talk about raising taxes and withdrawing from NAFTA, withdrawing and stopping free trade. That is a recipe for disaster. We need to look beyond the politics and look at the economics. Free trade expands not only economic and commercial ties, but it strengthens critical cultural ties and strategic alliances.

Yet many in Congress seem to care more about improving our image by talking with rogue regimes such as those in Syria, Venezuela, and Iran than working with and completing trade agreements with friends in places such as Colombia and Korea. Their denial of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement, if we continue on that path, would irreparably damage our ability to maintain and forge new strategic alliances with countries of the world.

To close, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently said:

Continued progress in Colombia is essential to stability in the region . . . the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement will help a neighbor and a long-time ally continue putting its house in order under very difficult circumstances. It offers a pivotal opportunity to help a valued strategic partner consolidate security gains, strengthen its economy, and reduce the regional threat of narco-terrorism. This is an opportunity we cannot—and must not—ignore.

I could not agree more. We cannot continue to delay the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. It will disadvantage America's economy and most certainly damage our reputation in Colombia, Latin America, and damage our national security interests. I join my colleagues in urging the House to pass the Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Texas is recognized.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, may I inquire how long remains for morning business on this side of the aisle?

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Seventeen minutes.

Mr. CORNYN. I ask unanimous consent that I be given half of that time, and the Senator from Florida, Senator MARTINEZ, be given the other half of that time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I join my distinguished colleague from Missouri in talking about the Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

Last week marked the inauspicious benchmark for American companies that do business in Latin America, and there are a lot of them. Since the Colombian Free Trade Agreement was first signed in 2006—533 days ago—more than \$1 billion in tariffs has been exacted against American companies that have sold their goods, their produce, to Colombia. Put another way, that is \$1 billion in a missed opportunity.

The reason why that is a problem is because Colombia pays no tariffs or duty on their goods coming into the United States, of which my State is the single largest trading partner. They pay no tariffs or duty on their goods. So we have a decidedly unlevel playing field when it comes to goods and services that are exported from the United States to Colombia. It is something they are willing to level the playing field on if we will simply act, if the Speaker would call up the Colombia Free Trade Agreement for a vote in the United States House of Representatives.

I would think at a time when we are all concerned about the softening of the American economy and jobs here at home, we would want to create more jobs, producing goods for our farmers and greater markets for their produce in places such as Latin America. But

instead, we find this has become more or less a chip in a high stakes poker game. It is totally inappropriate to the responsibility we ought to demonstrate with regard to one of our best allies in Latin America and America's national security and economic interests.

As I mentioned, last year Colombia bought about \$2.3 billion in goods and services from the State of Texas. This has been good for our economy, good for job creation and, as I said, Colombia has been an important ally in fighting the narcoterrorists, the FARC in particular, who have had it their way unimpeded far too long in Latin America, and particularly in Colombia.

After more than a year of being stalled by Speaker PELOSI, the President was finally left with no option but to send this Free Trade Agreement for fast track approval. But rather than Congress doing its job—acting on this Free Trade Agreement on an expedited timetable—Speaker PELOSI went to the most extreme lengths to avoid a vote on this critical agreement. The Speaker of the House, instead of following the rules, decided to rewrite the rules to avoid the possibility of this coming up for a vote in the House of Representatives.

Unfortunately, this isn't the first time politics has taken precedence over our national security and economic interests. I remind my colleagues we are still waiting for the House of Representatives' cooperation to finally enact essential reforms our intelligence community needs to timely receive accurate information through something known as the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. I want to come back to that in a moment, but I think it is instructive to look at this chart to see exactly what I was referring to when it comes to the importance of this free trade agreement for the United States from an economic standpoint.

As I indicated, without the passage of this free trade agreement, American goods and services continue to bear a tariff as they are exported to Colombia and imported into Colombia. For automobiles, it is 35 percent; furniture, 20 percent; mineral fuels and coal, 5 to 15 percent; cotton, 10 percent; metal products, 5 to 15 percent; computer products, another 10 percent. If Speaker PELOSI would simply allow the Colombian Free Trade Agreement to be voted on in the House of Representatives, I am confident it would pass, and this 35-percent disadvantage for our domestic auto manufacturers, which are particularly suffering in these slower economic times, would go from a 35-percent tariff down to zero. Likewise for all of the other goods I mentioned a moment ago. This is most decidedly in America's best interests. This is most decidedly in the best interests of a strong economy. Also, as I said, it is in the best interests of our national security as well.

With the current state of the economy, we have passed one or perhaps

now two stimulus packages with discussion of passing yet another. But I continue to believe the most effective way to jump-start our economy is to put more money into family budgets. One thing that is clear to me is that giving American businesses a fair path to compete in foreign markets will bring money back to the United States and back to the people, particularly small businesses and farmers who work so hard here in America to keep our country prosperous and provide for their families. Growing businesses mean growing wages, growing jobs, and a growing economy. There is no better way in these uncertain economic times to help our economy grow than to create new markets in places such as Latin America, and particularly with one of our greatest allies in Latin America, the nation of Colombia.

But in addition to helping our own businesses in America, we need to consider the additional benefits of granting a meaningful agreement to our strongest Latin American ally. This agreement would be a strong showing of our support for the reforms that are continuing in Colombia and the leadership, at great risk to President Uribe in particular, when it comes to improving its democracy, respecting the rights of all of its citizens, and fighting against the drug cartels and terrorist organizations and the like.

Unfortunately, I think we too often neglect our Latin American neighbors, both when looking for partnerships and when identifying threats. We are well familiar with the rhetoric of President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and, frankly, I think there is nothing that Hugo Chavez would like better than for Speaker PELOSI to prevail in her attempt to block a vote on the Colombia Free Trade Agreement. After all, Venezuela is a next-door neighbor, and President Chavez, who has been host to President Ahmadinejad of Iran and who has made himself an enemy of the United States, has to be enjoying the blocking of this free trade agreement, because he can say to President Uribe and like-minded democracies in Latin America: This is what you get when you cooperate with the United States.

That is exactly the opposite message we need. We need a message which portrays that when you cooperate with the United States in terms of developing your democracy, opening your markets to our goods and produce and services, when you cooperate with the United States to fight narco-traffickers and to bring peace and stability to your country, we will be your strongest ally and we will be your best friend. Unfortunately, the message we see being sent by Speaker PELOSI is that rather than treating the nation of Colombia as one of our best friends in Latin America, they are being demeaned into being treated as nothing but a poker chip in a high stakes game of cards. It is not right.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Florida is recognized.

Mr. MARTINEZ. How much time remains in morning business?

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Nine minutes.

Mr. MARTINEZ. Mr. President, I wish to follow the comments of my colleague from Texas, Senator CORNYN, who so aptly framed this issue of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement. I wish to focus on a couple of points.

Senator CORNYN pointed out that the differential in tariffs is tremendous. Now, what does it mean to the American worker? It means if an American worker is manufacturing something that is sold overseas, when that product is being sold in the Colombian market—suppose it were a heavy piece of equipment made by Caterpillar and is going to be sold now in Colombia to build roads or other things that are happening there because the country is prospering as a result of President Uribe's leadership—that particular piece of equipment is now competing in the Colombian marketplace with one made in Japan and one made in Germany. The American piece of equipment today has to pay that tariff.

As we speak, Colombia is negotiating a free trade agreement with the European Union. As soon as that is done, they will have the opportunity to then bring their product in at a tremendous advantage over an American product. Canada is in the process of negotiating a similar type agreement with Colombia. Mexico already has negotiated one. So when it comes to American manufacturers, the advantage to the others is going to be that over time, these trading patterns will be set with other countries. Contracts will be made with the others because of the tremendous advantage. While they may prefer an American-made good, they are now going to pay an extra 35 percent for it, and as the American good goes in there with a tariff, the advantage will be to our foreign competitors.

This is a global marketplace. Colombia has other trading opportunities. As they work and create free trade agreements with other marketplaces, they will put American products at a tremendous disadvantage going into the Colombia market. That may not just be for the one particular sale. That is going to be for time on into the future because, as I say, trading patterns will be set and contracts will be made, many of which could have a long-term impact. So it is not good in that respect. It is not good because American jobs would not be created. I was in Tampa with the Ambassador from Colombia on Monday. We have an opportunity in that very important trade city, the port of Tampa, and for the American economy. The fourth largest trading partner using that port is Colombia. For that very reason, the longshoremen's union in Tampa is in favor of this agreement because they know it will mean more jobs.

In the first year this agreement is in place, our trade with Colombia will increase by \$1 billion. That increase will translate to not only jobs but good-paying jobs in the cargo area of the airports, as well as in our ports and harbors. These are good-paying jobs, which pay well above the minimum wage. These are the kinds of jobs we need to create in Florida and across the United States so the American worker can benefit from this enhanced trade relationship.

There is another dimension to this problem, which I know has been touched upon, and I wish to put my two cents in. We are in an ideological battle in Latin America. The fact is the Cold War ended, and we pretty well let our guard down in terms of this ideological competition. Well, it is back in a big kind of way. We have the country of Venezuela, under the rule of a tyrant, who is less democratic every day and who has maniacal ambitions of conquering the entire region. He talks of a Bolivian revolution. That ideology is rooted in the Castro brothers in Cuba, who have given him the playbook, if you will. On the other side of Colombia is Ecuador. We know Colombia, for 40 years, has been in a fight with terrorists, with those who would subvert the democratic process. Colombia has had a long and established tradition of democracy. This tradition is now threatened by the FARC, the narcoterrorists who have been kidnapping, killing, and maiming in Colombia for a number of years.

We know, because of recent incidents that have occurred, that the Venezuelan Government, with assistance from the Cubans, has been funding and giving all sorts of resources to the FARC. The fact is the FARC is in existence today in large part because of the support they are getting from Venezuela. Venezuela now is engaging in new negotiations with Russia, and Hugo Chavez will be traveling to Russia in the near future to sign another large arms agreement. With the price of oil at \$120 a barrel, Venezuela is awash with cash that it is utilizing to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries in the region, with Colombia, with the FARC, and it is also interfering in the political process in other countries, where large sums of money are being passed to the political candidates of their favor.

The United States is AWOL in the region. We need to engage there. The worst message we can send to those who look to the United States for leadership and partnership and friendship is we are an uncertain ally, that we will not even go into a free-trade agreement which, in fact, is to the great benefit of the United States, simply for politics as usual in Washington. That is unacceptable.

I submit it is in the long-term best interest of the United States, not only from an economic standpoint but also from a geopolitical standpoint, from the regional implications of the trade

agreement, and what it would mean to all those in the region who look to the United States for a signal: Are you with us or will you ignore us? Are you going to support democracies or not stand behind democracies?

The time is now. I know the Hispanic community of America looks upon this agreement as a signal. I know there is a great movement afoot by those who deeply care about the region and about the need for this agreement to help create jobs in America, and it is going to be felt and heard throughout this Nation.

So I am pleased to join my colleagues in talking today about the virtues of the free-trade agreement with Colombia. It is important from an economic standpoint, and it is important to create jobs. I know it will create jobs in Florida. I know it will create jobs in other parts of the United States. I know it is good for Colombia. It will tighten and close ranks with a country that is our ally and long-time friend.

I believe the time has come for this agreement to get an up-or-down vote on the floor of the Senate and in the House. It is time for Speaker PELOSI to not play politics with something of this importance, this magnitude. I ask that the free-trade agreement with Colombia be brought to a vote and that we have an opportunity to engage with this close ally and friend.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. NELSON of Nebraska). The Senator from Texas is recognized.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, how much time remains on our side for morning business?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There are 1½ minutes.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I thank my distinguished colleague from Florida for his leadership on this issue. This is not one of those issues that grabs a headline, but it is certainly one that is very important to the economy of the United States, and it is important to our national security.

There is one other point I wish to make in that regard. For those concerned about the exodus of individuals from Latin America and other parts of the world who are looking for jobs and opportunities because they have none at home, this is an important part of our overall strategy to try to see that people have jobs and they have hope where they live, so they don't feel compelled to have to come to the United States in order to get a job and provide for their family. This is an important part of our strategy across Latin America.

There is another initiative that I think we will be hearing more about soon, called the Meridia Initiative, to help our ally in Mexico, President Calderon, as he fights the drug cartels down there, for the future of that country, which of course is on our southern border, 1,600 miles of which is common border with my State of Texas.

Whether we like it or not—and I know some people don't—our fate, in

many ways, and our economy and our security are inextricably tied to countries in Latin America, in the Western Hemisphere. It is not smart—it is perhaps even naive—to think we can ignore what is happening in Colombia, in Mexico, and we can fail to come to the aid of our allies and people who are like-minded in wanting to establish democracy, security, and prosperity in those countries. It is naive to think we can simply turn a blind eye to things such as the Columbia Free Trade Agreement and the Meridia Initiative to help President Calderon in Mexico fight the drug cartels, in what is a fight for the future of that great country on our southern border.

I yield the floor and yield back the rest of our time. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. DODD. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. DODD. Mr. President, what is the present business of the Senate?

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is now closed.

FLOOD INSURANCE REFORM AND MODERNIZATION ACT OF 2007—MOTION TO PROCEED

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of the motion to proceed to S. 2284, which the clerk will report.

The assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

Motion to proceed to S. 2284, a bill to amend the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968, to restore the financial solvency of the flood insurance fund, and for other purposes.

Mr. DODD. Mr. President, my colleague from Louisiana would like to enter into a discussion. Before we make any additional motions, I yield the floor to my colleague.

Mr. VITTER. Mr. President, I thank the chairman and ranking member for their cooperation and help on this bill. As they know, this issue and this bill is an enormous concern for all of us in coastal regions. In particular, my colleague from Louisiana and myself and the two distinguished Senators from Mississippi have been very focused on this bill and on several amendments, also, that we believe are absolutely critical to improve it as we reauthorize this necessary program.

As we have told the chairman and the ranking member in discussions over many weeks, we have no intention to obstruct and filibuster and stand in the way of reauthorizing this important program. But we do have to have