

Editorial: Pulse of the people. Free trade and home security get expert treatment

Thursday, January 29, 2004

Free trade continues to be one of the major foreign policy bones of contention in American politics. It will almost certainly be an important issue in the presidential campaign.

The first session of a "deliberative poll" held Saturday in Pittsburgh -- locally sponsored by Carnegie-Mellon University, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and the Post-Gazette -- involved the opinions of about 100 Pittsburghers on two questions. One was the Iraq war and national security; the other was free trade.

A deliberative poll is an experiment to learn how much public opinion changes on issues when people are given expert information. The Pittsburgh effort was part of a 10-city exercise called "By the People," which will be featured tonight at 8 on WQED-TV.

Negotiating free trade agreements has been one of the principal planks of Bush administration policy. Latin America has been a particular target, given the extent of U.S. trade with the rest of this hemisphere. The North American Free Trade Agreement has now been in existence 10 years. A new agreement was signed with Chile last year. One administration goal, not yet achieved and still facing opposition, is the effort to get agreement on a hemisphere-wide Free Trade Area of the Americas by January 2005.

The newest piece of the effort to be achieved was the successful negotiation of CAFTA, the U.S.-Central American Free Trade Agreement. It will lower tariffs and other trade barriers between the United States and five countries of Central America -- Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Agreement was reached in December after nine rounds and a year of talks.

The basic concept from the American point of view is that trade between the United States and these five countries is important and growing. It amounted to some \$17 billion last year. Over the years the U.S. relationship with the five has been to some degree based on U.S. aid in support of their economic development, rather than on straight-up trade. Relations at this point have evolved to where these countries can benefit more from trade than from aid: thus, the negotiation of a free trade agreement to maximize the economic relationship for both sides.

There is justifiable concern in this country, however, about American jobs migrating south as tariffs fall and free trade expands. Thus, the controversy and the sometimes bitter debate continue, as will be seen on tonight's program.

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