

Blame the Republicans

BY STEVE CHARNOVITZ

The failure of the House of Representatives to approve fast-track legislation is a blow to future trade liberalization.

Although most pundits are blaming AFL-CIO lobbying or White House bungling, the true culprit is the dysfunctional House Republican leadership.

The majority party in the House bears responsibility for drafting bills, scheduling votes and getting laws enacted. Good leaders don't gripe about the influence of "labor bosses," as

Speaker Newt Gingrich has done. They write bills capable of garnering enough votes to pass.

Rep. Bill Archer, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, had the front-line responsibility for fast track. He flubbed it. Although he has demonstrated ingenuity when it comes to imposing new taxes (e.g., the new \$12 tax on international arrivals), he is intellectually listless when it comes to crafting an acceptable trade law.



President Clinton

The wide-ranging views about fast track can be reconciled. Most environmentalists are not opposed to fast track. They simply wanted the legislation to put trade and environment linkages on a par with other U.S. negotiating goals. The labor unions were harder to satisfy. Still, labor opposition might have softened if politicians had given serious attention to fixing worker retraining programs. The business groups in favor of fast track would have embraced a reasonable compromise.

But Mr. Archer didn't bother to try. Betraying a decade-long tradition of trade policy bipartisanship within Ways and Means, he steamrolled a fast-track bill through his committee with only token Democratic support.

Even so, fast track might have passed if Republicans had united behind it. Sadly, they didn't. The sizable number of protectionists among them opposed fast track to shield farming and other sectors from foreign competition.

The Republican opportunists resisted fast track either to strike a political blow at President Clinton or to link trade with social issues. For example, several Republicans offered to support fast track if Mr. Clinton agreed to cut funding for international family planning. He refused.

Because of the shortfall in Republican votes and deep Democratic hostility, the Archer approach was an iffy proposition from the start. A concerted effort by Mr. Clinton to rally public opinion might have saved the day. But time ran out because Mr. Gingrich had promised a very early adjournment. Delaying fast track until the end of the session proved a costly mistake.

Many observers are puzzled why House Democrats would repudiate their party's president. Mr. Clinton asked for the "benefit of the doubt," and most presidents would have received it. But the Clinton administration has lost its credibility on trade-related labor rights, food safety and environmental concerns.

A number of the president's recent statements about fast track show why he has a credibility problem. In his Nov. 8 radio address he said: "A 'yes' vote means that we can also address labor protections and environmental concerns around the world as part of trade negotiations. That's the very first time this has been a part of the president's negotiating authority."

This statement was troubling. The Republicans made sure fast track would hinder the president from including labor and environmental concerns in trade negotiations. Moreover, the two previous enactments of trade negotiating authority — in 1974 and 1988 — included objectives on labor standards.

Mr. Clinton declared earlier that the fast-track bill would establish a panel of advisers on labor and environment issues, adding, "That's never been done before." But the U.S. trade representative has had a labor advisory panel for over 20 years. A trade and environment advisory committee also exists, but it called only one meeting in 1997. This offered little opportunity for a dialogue among key stakeholders.

When the fight for fast track resumes, the White House and Congress should weave together the concerns of all the parties concerned. Otherwise, Mr. Clinton may qualify for a "first" he doesn't want — the first president since Richard Nixon to be denied trade negotiating authority.

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