

Peter Friedmann's View from Washington DC

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In coming days, some of the most important votes of Pres. Obama's eight years in office will determine his legacy. Already, a portion of his legacy is established: the first African-American elected President. Also assured as part of his legacy is the implementation of a national healthcare policy during his Presidency. Expansion of US international trade in Asia under the TransPacific Partnership is likely the last opportunity of his Presidency to get legacy-worthy legislation through Congress. Ironically, it will be the Republican leadership in the House and Senate that will make it possible for President Obama to achieve this victory (over Democratic opposition).

Passage of TPA and TPP is still uncertain. Congress continues to grapple over whether we should expand the US international trade footprint in Asia and Europe. There seems to be the fundamental question in many Congressperson's minds — is trade a good thing? Does it create jobs? Do we really need to compete in the global marketplace? Just because the other major trading powers in the world are negotiating free trade agreements with their trading partners, why should the US do so? Are we better off opening the doors to our markets in exchange for better access to their markets? Or are we better off closing our borders to international trade? It may seem that the answers to these questions should be obvious, but it most certainly is not. At least not to half the Members of Congress, who typically vote against trade expansion.

The discussion above may seem ludicrous. Isn't it obvious that international trade creates opportunities for growth and job creation? Herein lies another irony, and not a pleasant one: it seems to many of us who wander the halls of Congress, that most Members of Congress believe that international trade does benefit the United States. But when they have to go to the House or Senate floor to vote, they vote against trade, currying favor with campaign contributors. But they do so, hoping that there will be enough Senators and Congressmen sufficiently courageous to actually vote their conscience to do the right thing.

This week, the trade votes will begin. Trade Promotion Authority, a very simple concept which authorizes the President to negotiate a trade agreement, then come back to Congress which can either vote to approve treaty or not. Sounds simple doesn't it? But it has been the subject of vigorous and even vicious campaigning. If the President gets the authority, he will move forward to negotiate the Pacific Rim trade agreement (also known as the TransPacific Partnership).

Hopefully that agreement can be reached with our trading partners in time to be sent to Congress before we get too close to the 2016 Presidential campaign. Already, it does not help that the leading Democratic candidate for the nomination Hillary Clinton is now stating that she questions the need for Presidential trade negotiating authority and an expansive opening of markets to Asia as envisioned by the TransPacific Partnership. Maybe it's just campaign talk, maybe she will be like her husband, who campaigned against NAFTA, but upon election, recognizing that he had to do what is best for the country, became the key agent to convince sufficient numbers of his party to vote for NAFTA.

There is a reason why the President went to Oregon last week to publically argue, against the strident opposition of two of his key constituencies – labor unions and environmental groups – for expansion of international trade. It might be one of his last chances to shape his legacy.