

Columnist Patrick J. Buchanan urges a more careful look at the projected free trade agreement with Mexico in terms of what it does to the American worker. This column appeared on May 21, 1991, and is reprinted with the permission of Tribune Media Services.

FREE TRADE AND AMERICA FIRST

By Patrick J. Buchanan

The success or failure of President Bush's drive for fast-track authority — i.e., the right to submit his free-trade agreement with Mexico to Congress, for an up-or-down vote, no amendments — will tell us much about the shape of the new world. Both liberals and conservatives are in George Bush's camp and both oppose him on this newly controversial issue of global free trade.

In economic terms, the merits of free trade are undeniable. If one believes in maximum efficiency — the lowest possible price for the highest quality of goods, and maximum freedom of choice for consumers — there is no argument against free trade. Indeed, those who oppose the Mexican free-trade agreement do so on grounds of preserving things they believe are more important.

Years ago, Americans watched, with cool indifference, as thousands of jobs in the textile mills of New England moved to the low-wage South. Those jobs, however, remained in the United States. Should we be equally indifferent to see them move to Hong Kong, or India? Why? While that surely means lower costs to US consumers, are not we Americans something more than mere consumers?

What is wrong with protecting American manufacturers from cutthroat foreign competition? asks the protectionist. Upon them, government imposes wage-and-hour laws, tough environment standards, safety-and-health measures, land-use rules. They are taxed at federal and state levels, and admonished to be good corporate citizens and give generously to local charities. Almost all do so — and all these social costs are factored into prices.

What do we tell that manufacturer when his competitor moves to Mexico, employs cheap labor, avoids US taxes and inspections from EPA and OSHA, as well as visits from the Little Sisters of the Poor, then undercuts him by selling cheaper products?

William Gill, of the American Coalition for Competitive Trade, believes free trade has already cost this nation its economic primacy, that the Mexican free trade agreement will be the final blow: "There are now an estimated 2,000 American factories in Mexico employing some 500,000 workers," he writes, "By 1995 the number of American jobs exported to Mexico is expected to reach one million."

During the first thirteen decades of our history, Gill argues, America went from being a small farming country to become the greatest industrial power on

earth. In those 125 years, half of all federal revenues came from the tariff. While we prospered behind a tariff wall, outstripping Britain as the world's foremost industrial power, Britain practiced free trade. We protected our markets and invaded theirs, as today Japan protects her markets and invades ours.

Any tax discriminates. Today we discriminate against savings, wages and investment in the United States. Why not discriminate, if we must, against foreign goods in favor of American goods?

After World War II, American vets came back to work in the iron plants and steel mills of the Monongahela Valley. A few years later, many lost those jobs to the more competitive mills their tax dollars helped to build in Germany and Japan. If there was anger among vets who had risked their lives in Europe and the Pacific to defeat Hitler's Germany and Japan, only to lose those jobs to Germans and Japanese, can we blame them?

Are there higher values that ought to command our respect than the highest quality consumer goods at the lowest possible price?

A foreign policy that looks out for America First should be married to an economic policy that considers first the well-being of our own business and our workers. This does not mean automatic opposition to free trade with Canada, Mexico, or any other nation; it means that any agreement should be accepted or rejected based upon how it affects Americans, not just as consumers but as a people. ■