

The Invisible Culture of Corruption

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Washington is a city of paper, specifically of letters. Congresspeople write letters to presidents. Agencies write letters to other agencies. Letters are an art form in D.C. — and the letter now blanketing Capitol Hill is a masterpiece of deceit.

Forty-three former Democratic officeholders signed this letter, which demands Congress pass trade deals with Peru, Panama and Colombia — pacts that will expand the job-killing, wage-destroying North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The letter employs a corporate lobbyist's smooth touch. As I learned, that is no coincidence.

NAFTA expansion will "support jobs in the United States," write the 43 Democrats, without mentioning that NAFTA resulted in the net loss of thousands of American jobs.

Another passage says Latin American labor abuses are "serious matters." But it says Congress must ratify these new NAFTAs anyway, even though they include no enforceable labor protections.

This letter materialized just as a Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll detailed widespread opposition to America's current trade policy. Nonetheless, those pushing the deals held the letter up as a trophy.

The conservative Weekly Standard said that "former Democratic congressmen, diplomats, and policy advisers, plus retired senators" were taking a courageous stand. The New York Times' pro-NAFTA editorial board hailed the signatories as "Democratic leading lights." The Competitive Enterprise Institute — the industry-funded group famous for praising global warming — reprinted excerpts of the letter on its website. And President Bush cited it in a speech last week, specifically thanking former Democratic Sen. Bennett Johnston for signing.

When I heard Bush utter the name, I realized he was talking about the same Bennett Johnston who heads a lobbying firm representing clients in the energy, manufacturing and defense industries — industries empowered to cut costs when such NAFTA-style pacts aid outsourcing, depress wages and diminish environmental standards.

I wondered: How many others on this letter are paid by industries that stand to make a buck off these trade policies?

Checking federal records, I discovered that the letter's first signatory, James Bacchus, is a former Clinton trade official now employed at convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff's old firm. Bacchus helped the firm this year rake in \$40,000 from a client accused by

watchdog groups of running sweatshops abroad.

Another signatory, Ira Shapiro, is at the same firm and is also a former Clinton trade official. He lobbies for Dole Foods, whose South American operations will undoubtedly benefit from the NAFTA expansion.

Going through more signatories, I kept finding the same thing. Stuart Eizenstat, a Clinton deputy Treasury secretary, now deals with "international business transactions and regulations on behalf of U.S. companies and others around the world," according to his corporate law firm's website. Former Democratic Rep. Cal Dooley is the lobbyist for large food, beverage and consumer products companies. And former Clinton Chief of Staff Mack McLarty provides "advocacy services to U.S. and multinational businesses involved in Mexico and Latin America," according to the website of his private investment fund.

In sum, the majority of those who signed are lobbyists, corporate lawyers or business consultants representing interests with a financial stake in the trade policies the letter endorses. Yet, this letter has been trumpeted by the media without a single mention of that inconvenient truth.

The whitewashing says a lot about the Washington press corps. But the affair says even more about the struggles within the Democratic Party.

The party of the little guy may have won Congress in 2006 by promising to reform America's trade policy and curtail lobbyists' power, but the party is under assault by mercenaries cashing in their public service for the riches of private influence peddling. These shills present their reverse Robin Hood ideology as altruism. But they are really just leveraging their billing as "leading lights" to represent Big Money interests — all under the media-provided guise of objective statesmanship.

In response to the push for the new NAFTAs, at least a few principled business leaders are saying enough is enough. Private equity executive Leo Hindery, a longtime Democratic fundraiser, told me in a recent interview, "The wealthy are now a political constituency unto themselves that is decidedly nonpartisan.

"Those who have personal skin in the trade policies game can't really be trusted to present things objectively or unselfishly," he said. "These folks are only interested in keeping the current system going and even expanding it, as grossly unfair to workers as it has become."

Thanks to Washington's invisible culture of corruption, their schemes may yet succeed.