

Lobby for Colombia Trade Pact Casts a Wide Net

By Eric Lipton and Steven R. Weisman
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WASHINGTON — There have been all-expense paid trips to Colombia for more than 50 members of Congress, featuring coffee tastings and dinner at a posh restaurant inside an old Spanish fort. The Colombian president has visited Washington to make personal appeals. Major corporations like WalMart and Citigroup are taking up the cause. And former Clinton administration officials have landed lucrative lobbying contracts.

This barrage of activity is over the trade pact that cost Mark Penn, a top adviser to Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, his job over the weekend. Mr. Penn had been working for a presidential primary candidate opposed to the trade deal with Colombia, while also running a public relations firm hired by the Colombian government to promote it.

The debate has been quietly brewing ever since the Bush administration finished negotiating the pact to ease trade restrictions in late 2006. Human rights groups and labor leaders have urged Congress to put off considering the deal or to reject it outright, citing paramilitary violence against labor activists in Colombia.

The behind-the-scenes dispute has now escalated to a classic Washington boil in recent weeks after President Bush, growing impatient with Democrats on Capitol Hill, decided to send the agreement to Congress anyway, an action he announced formally on Monday.

“The need for this agreement is too urgent — the stakes for our national security are too high — to allow this year to end without a vote,” Mr. Bush said.

He and others cited the need to support Colombia, which does \$18 billion of trade with the United States annually and is battling leftist rebels that Colombian officials assert have received financing from the Venezuelan government.

To help make its case, Colombia had already hired at least three firms on Capitol Hill, in addition to the work by Mr. Penn’s firm, Burson-Marsteller, paying out from \$15,000 to \$40,000 a month.

Collectively the Colombian government has paid more than \$1 million to firms that have negotiated or lobbied on behalf of the deal.

They include the Glover Park Group, the fast-growing firm set up by former Clinton White House aides including Joe Lockhart, who was chief spokesman for the president. (Howard Wolfson, Mrs. Clinton’s campaign communications director, was a partner at the firm but has taken a leave of absence.)

The firm has approached more than a dozen members of Congress, focusing on moderate Democrats who the lobbyists believe might be persuaded to disregard their party leaders and vote in favor of the deal.

Lobbyists at Johnson, Madigan, Peck, Boland & Stewart — whose partners include another former aide in the Clinton White House, Bill Danvers — have separately met with pro-business Democrats like Representative Joseph Crowley of New York. And Andrew Samet, a deputy secretary of labor in the Clinton administration, has been hired under yet another lobbying contract.

Mr. Penn got into trouble last week after he attended a meeting with Colombia government officials, as they prepared for the move by Mr. Bush to force a debate in Congress. His firm had been representing the Colombian government since last April, helping it promote the deal with news media, among other tasks.

But Mr. Penn, a strategist and pollster, ended up getting blasted by both sides. The Colombian government canceled the contract with his firm after he called the meeting an “error in judgment.” Mr.

Penn then stepped down from his campaign post after Mrs. Clinton was criticized for having a close adviser lobbying for a pact she opposed. Mr. Penn’s advocacy was particularly awkward because Mrs.

Clinton increasingly has taken a stance opposing free trade during her campaign.

The ties between the lobbying firms and the Clinton campaign illustrate the complexity of Washington’s political world, where players are often switching positions or playing multiple roles.

While Mr. Wolfson has taken a leave from Glover Park, for example, he still has equity in the firm valued at \$500,000 to \$1 million, according to a disclosure form.

A long list of former Clinton administration aides, including Mack McLarty, the former counsel to the president; Donna E. Shalala, the health and human services secretary; and Leon E. Panetta, the onetime chief of staff, also have come out in support of the deal. It puts them in alliance with Mr. Bush and Republican leaders.

Besides the Colombian government, the Bush administration has perhaps been the most forceful player in the fight, holding more than 400 meetings or telephone conference calls with officials on Capitol Hill to push the deal, the president said Monday. It has also paid most of the cost of the Congressional delegations, although an administration spokesman said on Monday that he could not estimate what the tab for these trips had been.

One trip, which wrapped up Sunday night, showed off Colombia to nine members of Congress, who first toured Medellín, the onetime capital of the cocaine trade, and met with the former mayor and labor leaders who support the free-trade deal. They also stopped by a flower farm and tasted Colombian coffee. The next stop was Cartagena, where they heard from other labor leaders who opposed the pact.

But the overwhelming message of the trip was that the deal would be good for Colombia and the United States, said Representative Rodney Frelinghuysen, Republican of New Jersey.

“This is a nation that has recovered enormously from the scourge of violence and drug wars,” Mr. Frelinghuysen said.

To opponents of the deal, the campaign by the Colombia government, their lobbyists and the Bush administration proves how uneasy they are about the prospects for its adoption.

Bill Samuel, a lobbyist for the A.F.L.-C.I.O., said, “They obviously think they have a product that is going to be difficult to sell.”

The opposition cites a history of attacks in Colombia against trade union members, 39 of whom the A.F.L.-C.I.O. says were killed in the country last year after trying to stand up for worker rights. The government there, the union leaders claim, has not completely cut its ties to paramilitary organizations responsible for the attacks or taken stiff enough action against those involved in the crimes.

The A.F.L.-C.I.O. intends to run newspaper advertisements this week that say, “Don’t Reward Murder.”

Colombian officials respond that in the five years since President Álvaro Uribe has been in power, violence in the country has declined significantly, including attacks against unionists. At the same time, the economy has boomed.

Trade with Colombia is a minuscule portion of the United States’ global trade. The United States imports grains, cotton, flowers and soybeans from Colombia, and exports chemicals, plastics, cereal, heavy machinery and electronics.

Most of what the United States imports, moreover, is duty-free under trade preferences that are renewed periodically. But opponents of the deal argue that keeping products permanently duty-free might prompt American companies to transfer their manufacturing units to Colombia, costing American jobs.

The Bush administration concedes that it does not yet have enough Democratic votes to join with the overwhelming majority of Republican votes expected to endorse the Colombia deal.

“This is a very difficult issue for Democrats,” said Representative Rahm Emanuel, the Illinois Democrat who is chairman of the House Democratic Caucus. “The way the administration has handled it has made it more difficult.”