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Carl Leubsdorf: Ron Kirk, the [White House](#) enforcer of fair trade

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Columnist [George Will](#) accuses President [Barack Obama](#) of caving in to fellow Democrats' political pressure for protectionist trade policies in hopes of salvaging his health care bill. Banker [David Rockefeller](#) warns that the administration's stance could endanger the global economic recovery.

And Obama's top trade official, former Dallas Mayor Ron Kirk, concedes that, despite his well-deserved reputation as a free trade advocate, he's become, in effect, the administration's enforcer of fair trade.

"I don't know that I would quarrel with that representation," Kirk said in an interview.

The president's special trade representative says that the stance is not a repudiation of free trade, but rather an inevitable step in tough economic times to ensure that trade agreements help to expand the global economy, rather than reward countries with cheap labor and bad working conditions.

"One of the reasons we highlighted enforcement as a key tenet of this administration's trade policy is that, as trade matures, one of the ways we're going to open new markets and create access is by making sure that all of the players open up the markets as we anticipated," Kirk said.

"Otherwise, our business, our ranchers, our farmers don't get the full benefit."

He defended the administration decision to raise Chinese tire tariffs, calling it "foolishness" to refuse action against countries that "ignore the rules" simply because "we don't want to appear to be protectionist."

Kirk, a strong advocate of the [North American Free Trade Agreement](#) during his unsuccessful 2002 [U.S. Senate](#) bid, was a surprise choice for the trade post. But White House Press Secretary [Robert Gibbs](#), who worked for Kirk in that campaign, notes he brings both a close personal relationship with Obama and "a fresh perspective, a mayor's perspective about trade as an on-the-ground necessity for job creation and economic growth."

Several prior trade reps also had strong political backgrounds, notably two former party chairs, Dallas Democrat Bob Strauss and Republican [Bill Brock](#).

Kirk said the administration has sought a balanced approach. It has warned against protectionism, worked to complete pending trade pacts and sought to grow U.S. markets abroad, while curbing the Chinese imports it felt were damaging U.S. manufacturers.

Kirk also sought to curb congressional protectionist efforts, warning Democratic lawmakers against a measure to delay trade talks pending a re-evaluation of the impact of past pacts, including NAFTA.

He said he told the House Trade Working Group in July that if it succeeded in passing its proposal, "that wouldn't give me a lot to do."

So far, he's had plenty to do. His travels include a forthcoming trip to China with Commerce Secretary [Gary Locke](#), preceding Obama's scheduled November trip, and an August trip to Africa with Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#).

Kirk is working with Panama, Colombia and South Korea to resolve barriers to completing agreements negotiated by the Bush administration, calling it a "misconception we inherited these three agreements, all with the bow around them."

In each instance, he said, issues need to be resolved before the pacts can be submitted to Congress. He said there is no plan to renegotiate them, as some Democrats want, adding, "I would certainly hope" they can be finished by the 2010 election.

The Obama-Kirk relationship stems from 2002, when Obama attended a Kirk Senate fundraiser in Chicago. Later, Kirk organized Texas fundraisers for Obama's Senate and presidential races. But he said their friendship really grew from the fact that both have two daughters.

Set aside politics and pending economic issues, and "we probably spend as much time talking about our girls and balancing the lives we lead publicly with how you maintain the kinds of relationships you want to have with your daughters and our brides."

Kirk recalled he told Obama that, if he won in 2008, rather than a job, he'd like to be "first buddy."

"I kept telling him, 'Bob Strauss is 90, [Clinton pal] Vernon Jordan is 70, ... [if you win] somebody gets to be the new Bob Strauss,' " Kirk said.

In a sense he has as he manages the trade portfolio that Strauss once ran for President [Jimmy Carter](#) and becoming, if not Obama's closest buddy, a regular leisure-time companion on the golf course.

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