

Banging Obama For Making Sense on Trade

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Barack Obama has adopted a cautiously critical stance with regard to free-trade agreements such as NAFTA.

The front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination is hardly proposing a new direction, let alone "change."

Obama suggests some tinkering around the edges of existing deals, and only when forced to do so under repeated and aggressive questioning allows as how he might pressure Canada and Mexico if they refuse to address the most dramatic flaws in the North American Free Trade Agreement.

As such, Obama's stance is that of a moderate, corporate-friendly but rational Republican. Indeed, smart observers of the Illinois senator's tortured attempts to distance himself from official Washington's "Wall Street Uber Alles" song and dance on economic issues suggest quietly that, when all is said and done, those who hope for a genuine shift toward fair-trade policies are likely to be disappointed by Obama.

But that has not stopped free-trade fanatics from attacking the candidate for his answer to a hypothetical posed by NBC's Tim Russert in the Ohio Democratic presidential debate. After New York Senator Hillary Clinton -- whose name, through association with her husband's presidency, is synonymous with support for free-trade fantasies -- outlined the barely-muscular negotiating stance that might be used to seek adjustments in NAFTA and other trade deals, Russert turned to Obama and asked: "A simple question: Will you as president say to Canada and Mexico, this [NAFTA] has not worked for us, we are out?"

Obama answered: "I will make sure that we renegotiate in the same way that Senator Clinton talked about, and I think actually Senator Clinton's answer on this one is right. I think we should use the hammer of a potential opt-out as leverage to ensure that we actually get labor and environmental standards that are enforced."

That was hardly a radical statement. Many Republicans in Congress have made similar, and in some cases far more bombastic, statements.

But the Republican National Committee has spent the past several days attacking Obama for taking the tiniest step outside the boundaries of what is considered "appropriate" commentary regarding trade policies that have done severe harm to the circumstance of workers and communities in the U.S. and its trading partners.

This criticism is being echoed by corporate Democrats such as Illinois Congressman Rahm Emanuel, who has consistently used his key position in the House Democratic Caucus to thwart the efforts of labor unions, farm groups, environmental organizations

and human rights coalitions to establish trade policies that respect workers, farmers and the environment rather than obediently serving the interests of multinational corporations.

Emanuel, who helped to promote NAFTA as a Clinton White House aide in the 1990s, is joined in his shredding of Obama's stance by media outlets that once predicted the agreement would usher in an era of prosperity for American industry and its domestic workforce.

Being wrong about trade still means never having to say you're sorry.

But, more importantly, those who have been wrong defend their "credibility" by attacking those who dare notice that the emperor has no clothes.

"Democrats sure have come a long way from the 1990s, when Bill Clinton pushed Nafta through a Democratic Congress," growls the Wall Street Journal. "[T]hey are sounding the loudest protectionist notes by a potential President in decades. More dangerous, neither (Obama or Clinton) is telling the truth about the role of trade in the U.S. economy. If either one makes it to the White House, he or she will carry the weight of this campaign protectionism while trying to lead the global economy."

"Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama continued their wild swings at the 1993 deal at their latest debate in Cleveland, portraying NAFTA as harmful to U.S. workers and the economy," whines the Orlando Sentinel. "Trade boosts economic growth by allowing countries to shift resources to more competitive industries. It opens new markets for companies, farmers and investors. It provides consumers more affordable choices. ... Instead of trying to turn back the clock on trade, the next president needs to pursue strategies to adapt better to the global economy."

In fact, renegotiating dated trade agreements does precisely that--if the renegotiation is aimed at getting a fairer deal for workers, farmers and consumers in the U.S. and abroad. Unfortunately, the Republican National Committee, Rahm Emanuel and their media echo chamber don't want the U.S. to adapt better to the global economy. Rather, they want to maintain trade policies that benefit only the multinational corporations that fund campaigns and own media in a country with an economy that is wobbling under the weight of the largest trade deficit in the history of the planet.