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## A Fight We Can Win

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The Nation

January 2005

The results of the last election of 2004 could foretell the first serious defeat for the Bush Administration's agenda in the new Congress. The election, a December runoff for an open US House seat representing Louisiana's Cajun country, was supposed to be an easy one for Republican Billy Tauzin III. After all, he was the son of a retiring congressman, who had the support of the entire state and national GOP establishment in a district that had just backed Bush by a comfortable margin. Pitted against Tauzin was Democrat Charlie Melancon, a former legislator without a big name or big-name backers. But Melancon had an issue: He promised to do everything in his power to block Congressional approval of the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Melancon said that while Louisiana may have taken hits from the ten-year-old NAFTA, "CAFTA could be a knockout we may never recover from." And, he promised, "when I'm in Congress, no one will need a petition to guarantee my vote against trade deals that are bad for Louisiana's workers."

Despite a last-minute campaign swing on Tauzin's behalf by Vice President Dick Cheney, Melancon won. His name has thus been added to the list of certain votes against CAFTA, a scheme to undermine protections for workers, the environment and communities that corporate lobbyists see as barriers to trade between the United States and El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras and the Dominican Republic. That's bad news for the White House, which is aware of the close divide in Congress over trade issues but which desperately wants to get CAFTA approved this year. The Administration signed CAFTA last May, but had to delay the required consideration by Congress because it did not want a trade debate to blow up before the election.

Bush and his aides describe CAFTA as an essential element of their economic and political agenda, and even suggest that extending free trade is a tool for combating terrorism. This passion is not motivated merely by the desire to make it easier for multinational corporations to set up shop in the free-trade zones of San Salvador and Managua--many of them, particularly textile firms, have already done so; CAFTA would simply speed up an established pattern. Rather, what is important to understand about CAFTA is that it is considered a "watershed pact," meaning that its approval is seen as essential to clearing the way for agreements with other countries throughout the Western Hemisphere and as far away as South Africa and Thailand. Larry Weiss, executive director of the Citizens Trade Campaign, a coalition of labor, religious and community groups, says that if Congress rejects the agreement "the corporate free-trade agenda will be in deep trouble." In particular, the sweeping Free Trade Area of the Americas agreement, currently being negotiated, could be dealt a severe setback.

Bush's Congressional allies acknowledge that they are in a tight spot. "CAFTA is still the President's number-one trade priority. It will be the key trade vote in Congress this year,"

Representative Kevin Brady, the Texas Republican who is the Administration's trade-policy point man in the House, said in early January. Shaken by the Melancon victory, which was noted by House Republicans who represent districts where CAFTA's implementation could threaten the viability of sugar and textile industries, the Administration wants the agreement approved before Congress debates a Social Security overhaul and tax and tort law reforms. "The window of opportunity right now is open," a trade official recently told the Washington Times. "With CAFTA, the longer it sits around and the longer forces against it marshal themselves, the more difficult the fight could be later on."

To be implemented, CAFTA needs endorsement from both houses of Congress. The Senate will probably give its OK, so the House is the battleground. When in 2001 the House approved by a single vote the Administration's request for "fast track" authority to negotiate trade deals, twenty-one Democrats sided with the GOP leadership. In the new Congress, however, seven of those "free-trade Democrats" are gone. And there is growing dissension in Republican ranks. Concerns about record trade deficits, as well as complaints from constituents who worry that their jobs will be the next to go, have weakened the traditional GOP faith that free trade is an economic cure-all. "I think a lot of members have moved away from simply saying they are pro-free trade to saying they favor trade but want to look at the deals themselves," says Representative Mark Green, a Wisconsin Republican.

Representative Sherrod Brown, who wrote the book *Myths of Free Trade* and who is expected to lead Congressional opposition to CAFTA, says, "The key is to make sure that members who are on the fence feel heat early." This means that foes of the corporate free-trade regimen are in a race against time. The US Chamber of Commerce and other business lobbying groups are preparing a major campaign to pressure House members to back CAFTA; members from both parties can expect to be reminded that backing CAFTA will put them in the good graces of groups that write big campaign-contribution checks. But recent developments, including the Melancon victory and the easy re-election of Wisconsin Senator Russ Feingold, who made opposition to free-trade pacts a central theme of his campaign, have also made them aware that, at least in some parts of the country, trade may have become a potent-enough issue to trump traditional political advantages.

While the new Congress was being sworn in, fair-trade activists from across the country gathered in Washington to plot strategy and begin lobbying. The coalition is broader than in the past. Traditional critics of free-trade pacts, like the AFL-CIO and Global Exchange, are on board, but so are a growing number of green groups--the Sierra Club, for example, is warning that CAFTA rules blocking barriers to trade could undermine the ability of local governments to protect the environment. And solidarity organizations like the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador and Witness for Peace, as well as religious groups with histories of involvement in Central America, argue that CAFTA will do far more for the bottom lines of multinational corporations than it will ever do for the poor in Latin America.

The goal is to use the first weeks of the new term to get enough members of the House to express opposition that the Administration will decide not to press for a vote. That could happen. Says Brown, "Whether they back off because they don't think they can win a vote, or if we actually beat them on the floor, if they don't get CAFTA in 2005 the President will have been denied an important piece of his agenda. And we have it in our power to deny him that piece."