

NAACP chief: Visit to Seoul opens eyes about trade policies

By The Rev. Randolph Bracy Jr.
Orlando Sentinel
September 14, 2007

Back in July, my wife and I attended the NAACP national convention in Detroit, and on our way to downtown from the airport, our taxi driver took us through Dearborn.

In Dearborn, we passed a Ford plant that looked like a ghost town. The plant was massive, and we could tell that it was a great industrial concern in its day. Now cables dangled from overhead, and grass grew through the floor where thousands of cars were once assembled.

Our driver -- who worked at this plant for 20 years -- had been terminated and was reduced to hacking 12-hour days to make ends meet. He gave us a litany about how America was going to pot because of the outsourcing of its manufacturing jobs and one-sided trade policies that provide advantages to foreign countries at the expense of American workers.

By the time we arrived at our hotel, my wife and I agreed with the driver that Detroit is a city in deep trouble because of its eroding automobile manufacturing base.

Just before Labor Day, my wife and I took a vacation to Seoul.

On arriving in South Korea, we discovered that the trip from Incheon Airport to downtown Seoul takes about an hour by taxi. Along the way, we had tremendous difficulty understanding our driver because of language, so we were reduced to looking out the window and observing the landscape. We did take notice of the cars on the highway, and every car that we saw had either the KIA or Hyundai logo. Initially, we thought that this made sense because the country supported its own manufacturing base. Conspicuously absent, however, were any American-made cars on the highway.

Seoul is a city of 12 million people, and since the Korean conflict of the 1950s, South Korea has set about on a massive rebuilding of its infrastructure, and from its gorgeous skyline today, it appears that they have done a great job. We also noticed that all of the heavy-duty, earth-moving construction equipment we saw had a Korean logo.

We later took a bus tour to the Demilitarized Zone, and on our way, we got stuck in traffic. Our tour guide took the traffic jam as an opportunity to prattle on and on about the fact that South Korea is the sixth-largest shipbuilding country in the world, and that it had above a 90 percent graduation rate from high school, and that more than 90 percent of its graduates go on to some form of postsecondary education, and that English is mandatory

in high school, and that there is little or no unemployment. Meanwhile as I looked out of the window at the traffic jam, I noticed again the conspicuous absence of U.S.-made cars.

So what is the point? The point is that we spent six days in South Korea, in one of the world's largest cities, and we did not see six American-made cars in those six days.

I am not an expert on trade and the global economy, and I do not pretend to know all of the nuances of tariffs and protectionist policies and the like. However, from what I saw in Seoul, I believe that something is wrong relative to America's trade policies, especially when one of our treasured cities like Detroit is teetering on the brink of disaster, and we as a country look the other way while opening our borders to all kinds of foreign investment.

Make no mistake about it: Both KIA and Hyundai have made substantial capital investment (i.e., dealerships, research and development facilities, assembly plants, jobs) in this country. Based on what I saw in Seoul, however, much of the trade is one way. There is no reciprocity!

Finally, when we landed back in Orlando and on my way home from the airport, I noticed a large commercial development going up in my neighborhood. Mountains of dirt were being moved to make headway for the new development. To my chagrin, I looked up and noticed that all of the heavy-duty, earth-moving, construction equipment on the work site had the Hyundai logo.

Will someone tell me what's wrong with this picture?

The Rev. Randolph Bracy Jr. is president of the Orange County branch of the NAACP.