

# White House set to fire back at Dems over Colombia

By Sam Youngman  
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President Bush will lash back at the Democratic-controlled Congress over its refusal to allow a vote on the Colombia free trade agreement during a speech to Latin American government officials on Wednesday.

White House sources said the president is not backing down on the proposed trade deal, and will signal his intent to keep pressure on Democrats by devoting a large portion of his speech to Colombia at the Council of the Americas. Colombia's secretary of defense will be among those in the audience.

Tony Fratto, a White House spokesman, told The Hill that the president does not view Wednesday's effort as a new offensive, but as an ongoing attempt to pressure Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and House Democrats to allow a Colombia vote.

"We're not going to stop talking about it," Fratto said. "We think it's important."

The president's speech comes just a day after Pelosi criticized the Bush administration for being "in denial" about the U.S. economy while calling for a second economic stimulus plan, according to reports.

The White House responded that trade deals like the Colombia agreement are a way to spur a healthy economy.

In Tuesday's White House daily briefing, press secretary Dana Perino said that "one of the things that they could do right away to help stimulate the economy is pass the agreed-upon Colombia free trade agreement because that would level the playing field for our workers."

Asked specifically about Pelosi's charge that Bush is "in denial" about the state of the economy, Perino again noted the Democratic opposition to the Colombia trade deal, adding that Pelosi "decided to renege on that deal."

"And we would ask her to change her position on that if she really wants to help workers in this country," Perino said.

Pelosi's office said Tuesday that a second stimulus package should be a higher priority than the Colombia trade deal because Americans need economic relief immediately.

"We have said repeatedly that we are willing to work with the president on the Colombia free trade agreement, but our first priority is delivering solutions to address the real

economic plans confronting America's families," Nadeam Elshami, a Pelosi spokesman, said in a statement.

Democratic leaders are under pressure from labor groups to oppose the deal with Colombia, which unions say has not done enough to indict and convict those responsible for the murders of trade organizers. Anti-trade rhetoric on the Democratic campaign trail has made the atmosphere more difficult. Both Sens. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) oppose the deal.

The White House was outraged last month when Pelosi changed House rules to avoid a vote on the Colombia deal.

Pelosi acted after the White House sent legislation implementing the deal to the Hill under so-called fast-track rules, under which Congress has a maximum of 90 legislative days to take action. The Colombia deal is subject to fast track because it was signed before that law expired.

Pelosi, who had made her displeasure with the proposal clear ahead of time, then engineered a House vote to change that body's rules to eliminate the 90-day clock, so that Congress was under no time limit to consider the deal.

The White House and House Republicans were surprised by and intensely critical of Pelosi's unprecedented move, which House Republican Leader John Boehner (Ohio) described as "cheating."

Pelosi's office has said that Bush acted out of school by fast-tracking the proposal when neither the House nor Senate leaders had given consent.