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Editorial: U.S. political leaders must recognize importance of free trade

By Ed Black
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As the leading export industry of the nation, the high-tech sector is a strong supporter of free trade and open markets. That is why the current confrontation between Congress and the Bush administration is so alarming.

We believe the Colombia trade agreement is good for our national security and foreign policy as well as for our economy. More important than the deadlock on this agreement itself is that it illustrates how far the United States has strayed from the path of bipartisan commitment to free trade.

Global trade has been and remains vital to the U.S. economy. The extraordinary economic growth after World War II was, in large part, due to the fact that the United States opened itself up to the world. Thoughtful political leaders of both parties understood trade's importance, and chose to subordinate politics to trade. The challenge was always to mitigate harm to some impacted sectors while expanding trade.

We regret several recent developments: the Democratic delay in voting on the Colombia agreement; President Bush's breaking with tradition and sending it to Capitol Hill before House leaders asked for it; the House changing the timetable for voting on trade agreements. A compromise should still be considered, but as the president made clear last week, he would rather pronounce the agreement dead and attack Congress than seek compromise with the House's admittedly escalating demands.

Our leaders must recognize the value of trade, and

find ways to address the very real economic hardships sometimes imposed on key constituents, even by great trade deals. Meeting legitimate worker concerns need not thwart a deal entirely. We need a way out of the current polarization and political posturing.

This nation began to go off track in the late 1990s. A Republican Congress, seeking to preserve and expand its majority, started to use trade as a wedge issue. Votes on trade agreements were structured and exploited to expose vulnerable Democratic members and make some moderates choose between unions and industry. These political tactics were designed to change the balance of power on Capitol Hill, but they undercut broad support for trade and weakened the United States' ability to negotiate favorable trade deals, which ultimately affects the economy.

Support for free trade has always been a politically difficult choice for a member of Congress - even in the best economic times. It's often said the benefits of trade are diffuse, while the costs are acute. Voting for free trade is often a courageous and statesmanlike decision, putting the long-term greater good ahead of short-term political calculation. The administration and the congressional leadership must encourage such stands - not undermine them.

Political leadership requires action to alleviate some of the acute costs of trade through such programs as Trade Adjustment Assistance and provisions that reasonably address international labor and environmental issues. The political consensus for free trade is delicately balanced in the best of times. With current public support for free trade eroding, it's more important than ever that our political leaders put aside partisan agendas and work to maintain that consensus.

Actions by the administration and Congress in recent days threaten to unravel the entire framework of cooperation that had worked so well in years past. This cannot be allowed to happen.

We need to recognize that trade policy is too important to be subjected to political whims and to insulate it from politics. Trade agreements need to be debated and voted on according to the merits of the agreement - not according to electoral advantage. To borrow the words of House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel, we must get back to a point where "the facts on the ground" once again matter more than "the politics in the air."

The politics in the air need to be inspected and potentially grounded - that is, grounded in sound economic judgment and by the broader U.S. goals for the future.



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ED BLACK is president and CEO of the Computer & Communications Industry Association. He wrote this article for the Mercury News.

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