

NAFTA future: Education vs. exploitation

By JERRY CAMMARATA

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which recently passed both houses of Congress by a narrow margin and was signed into law by the president, is one of those acts of government which induce great displays of passionate rhetoric from both supporters and opponents, but which also leave the public feeling more than a little confused about their real meaning and potential ramifications.

While NAFTA champions were assuring America that this agreement will create jobs and opportunities for our nation and give a much-needed boost to our stagnant economy, those who fought against it are equally certain that the pact will lead to increased unemployment in the United States and end up costing Americans dearly.

While no one can know for certain whether either of those scenarios is accurate until we begin to see the actual results of the treaty, it is now law so it's incumbent on our society and government to examine carefully its various aspects and determine what courses of action we should be taking during its implementation.

Potential for danger

A primary concern is that NAFTA has the potential to be exploitative and, in the long run, could do harm to each of the nations involved. If it is going to be a win/win contract for all the parties concerned, then the potential for exploitation must be minimized and factors built into our participation to insure that this will not take place. That's not to say that the United States should, or can, dictate all aspects of the agreement, but there must be a sound philosophical base from which we approach NAFTA as its realization unfolds.

Two of the key elements which that philosophical base must include are education and humanitarianism, both as they relate to us and as they relate to the other countries involved, with the ultimate goals being the preservation of capitalism and the expansion of America's economy without doing harm to our global interests or to the nations and peoples with whom we are interacting.

To cite an unrelated example of the kind of complex economic, environmental and humanitarian issues which NAFTA will present, consider another situation with which we've been dealing for the past several years in the United States — the issue of tobacco.

Through a combination of government pressure, increased tax-

ation, restrictive legislation, private and public advocacy and education, there has been a massive shift in America's smoking habits, but not without heated controversies involving smokers' rights, non-smokers' rights, farmers' rights, the principles of free enterprise and — least talked about — the rights of the people of other nations.

Some of the fundamental questions raised by the tobacco issue include whether government has a moral right or obligation to pressure people not to use tobacco when its use is legal; whether education and culturalization should be employed in a free society to influence people's behavior; whether corporations that sell tobacco products should be forced or persuaded to diversify, whether government can or should continue to subsidize farmers who grow tobacco and whether the tobacco industry should be allowed to continue to exploit the people of Third World countries who are less educated and more susceptible to the popularization of smoking as an alternative to the shrinking United States market.

Thorny issues

While many of us believe that NAFTA, or something equivalent to it, is necessary for America to maintain its continuing role in the worldwide economy and in the ebb and flow of international rela-

Another view

tions, comparable thorny issues which the treaty creates can't be ignored. When our partner countries, for example, particularly Mexico, decide to construct new manufacturing facilities to build products for export, will those facilities include the same level of environmental safeguards and worker safety measures required in the United States?

Will there be mechanisms put in place to help Mexican workers achieve better educational levels, improve their standard of living and become equal partners with United States citizens in the sharing of goods, especially in their ability to purchase our products?

Creating incentives for other nations to maintain an undereducated, sometimes near-slave-labor, workforce accomplishes nothing either for Americans or those countries. Only through an improved standard of living can the dream of establishing equal trading relationships be realized.

The construction and operation of schools in areas without them, for instance, should be a part of the contracts awarded through NAFTA. So should requirements for safe and environmentally modern manufacturing facilities. Aside from the moral imperatives involved, purely from a selfish standpoint, without such actions there will simply be no market

among our trading partners for American products.

While the United States has a literacy rate of 96 percent and Canada one of 99 percent, Mexico's literacy rate is only 88 percent, and even that figure is suspect. Obviously, it is the illiterate portion of a population which is most likely to work in low-paying jobs with undesirable working conditions, and those are the workers American unions warn could draw United States companies south of the border to exploit and which Mexican companies have traditionally exploited to produce exportable products more cheaply.

Mexicans have a 10-year lower life expectancy than Americans and an infant mortality rate of 47 per thousand, compared with a U.S. rate of 9 per thousand. Just 71 percent of the Mexican population has access to safe water compared with 100 percent in the United States. In Mexico, per-capita private spending on food, housing, clothing, health care, etc., in U.S. dollars, is only \$1,990 a year. In the United States the comparable figure is \$14,630. Only 5.3 percent of the Mexican population has any education beyond high school compared with 32.2 percent of our people.

History has shown, again and again, that over the long haul, exploitation does not lead to economic or social stability. The collapse of the Soviet Union was as much brought on by repressive

and regressive working conditions and by its ability to offer its people the basic items of consumption as by any other cause. In the case of NAFTA, the advertising slogan of a clothing manufacturer makes international sense: An educated consumer is our best customer. It is only through education and progress that we can fulfill our obligations as a citizen of the world and that the people of our trading partners can become active consumers of American products.

At the same time that we encourage this elevation of the educational and societal conditions among our NAFTA neighbors, we must also undertake a quest for improvement in the education that takes place in our own schools in order that American workers remain competitive, produce better products and maintain our traditional position at the top of the world economic chain.

It's no secret that the quality of American education, from preschool through college, has been slipping alarmingly in recent years and, as we see more global markets and more worldwide competition emerging, it becomes increasingly crucial that this trend be reversed.

Although we spend \$445 billion a year on all levels of schooling in America, a rise of 40 percent (adjusted for inflation) over what we spent 10 years ago, the results have been monumentally disappointing. In a study conducted by the Educational Testing Service of the mathematics and science knowledge of 9-year-olds from 10 countries, the United States placed ninth in math and third in science. In ETS tests administered to 13-year-olds of 15 countries, the United States placed 14th in math and 13th in science, a dismal record. These results certainly do not bode well for the American workforce of the future, particularly in an international environment.

The route our nation must follow, then, as the NAFTA treaty becomes a reality, is to combine education, which creates opportunity through knowledge, with a willingness and acceptance of responsibility to establish humanitarian goals, and with an economic point of view which seeks affordability for American products through an equalization of the standard of living among our partners in order to produce a trade policy which will benefit us all.

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