



South Florida's trade concerns merit clear answers from candidates

"Everybody talks about the weather," Mark Twain quipped, "but nobody does anything about it." In this election year, free trade is an issue no one is even talking about.



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True, the Bush administration has negotiated a slew of trade accords such as the Central American

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Free Trade Agreement, but these notable accomplishments surely will be tucked away in a broom closet except when the president addresses trade-friendly audiences such as the US Chamber of Commerce.

As for candidate Kerry, he knows he must keep his left-wing supporters from jumping to the Nader camp while convincing centrist Democrats that he's not *anti-trade*. Therefore, he will pander to these groups but avoid talking about trade before the general public.

For South Floridians, so dependent upon trade for their economic well-being, the prospect of Bush and Kerry wimping out on the issue in the 2004 campaign is most disheartening.

Concerned citizens should demand that both candidates respond to trade issues that directly affect South Floridians. Here are a few big ones:

■ **Homeland security.** As reported in a white paper last fall by the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce and Florida International University's College of Business Administration, post-9/11 security measures have created a challenging maze for exporters, importers and business travelers to navigate. The new security measures impose higher costs, longer transit times and more complex procedures than those at non-US ports that compete with South Florida. What *specifically* do President Bush and Sen. Kerry intend to do to ensure a balance between national security and an expeditious flow of goods, services and people?

■ **Agricultural subsidies.** In a sweeping gesture of bipartisan congressional irresponsibility combined with presidential

hypocrisy (Republicans traditionally have opposed subsidies), in May 2002, President Bush signed a subsidy-laden farm bill that will cost taxpayers \$180 billion over the next decade.

In 2003 alone, the US government paid out nearly \$20 billion in subsidies. Two of the biggest winners of federal largesse are orange juice and sugar – staples of Florida agriculture. Imported orange juice is subject to a \$418-per-ton tariff while the sugar price-support program, besides impoverishing farmers from the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere, costs Americans \$2 billion annually in inflated sugar prices and storing excess sugar will cost another \$2 billion over 10 years.

Why should Floridians care? Because the prime beneficiaries of this anti-market scam are a few big sugar barons and inefficient orange-juice producers whose Caribbean contract workers – not Florida residents – do most of the work.

Fact: Four sugar-cane companies in Florida receive more than \$20 million each in benefits from the sugar program every year. Fact: Only 4% of those employed in Palm Beach County work in agriculture. Fact: Without the subsidies to agricultural maharajahs who contribute big bucks to both political parties, the poor in America would pay less for food. What say the two candidates about this trade-distorting fraud?

■ **Outsourcing.** While neither candidate is keen on addressing this issue, it is bubbling up fueled by anemic job growth and the juggernaut of globalization. Moreover, of the more than 300,000 jobs that have been lost to outsourcing, a significant number are white-collar jobs in the information-technology sector.

President Bush shuns the outsourcing issue while candidate Kerry seizes upon it to rally his organized labor supporters and anti-trade minions, promising to reverse this irreversible trend. Although outsourcing affects a mere 0.2% of the US workforce, the hysteria and misinfor-

mation surrounding the issue merits honest discussion and viable solutions from the candidates. Should voters not demand this of Bush and Kerry?

■ **FTAA and CAFTA.** Here, too, we witness the triumph of political expediency over leadership. The Free Trade Area of the Americas is stuck in the mud with the US and Brazil at loggerheads over agriculture and market-access issues. Even an FTAA Lite seems light years away.

Our hemisphere partners want a sign that FTAA is a US priority. The president's designation of Miami as the preferred US home for the FTAA secretariat would be the right tonic – but strangely, this has not been forthcoming. As for candidate Kerry, he has said little about the FTAA and CAFTA – except before union groups (13% of the US workforce, by the way), to whom he has voiced his opposition to *both* agreements.

With Florida a pivotal state in the presidential elections, its voters wield more clout than they may realize. We owe it to ourselves to hold both candidates' feet to the fire on an issue of vital importance to our economic future – trade.