



Written by [Daniel Sayani](#) on June 9, 2011

Real Conservatives Oppose NAFTA

One of the most important, but widely unknown bills currently proposed in Congress is legislation that would end American participation in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The bill, H.R. 4759, calls for America's withdrawal from the free trade agreement, and is sponsored by several Democrats and a small cadre of Republicans, including Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas) and Rep. Walter B. Jones (R- N.C.).



Introduced back in February, the legislation seeks to immediately terminate American participation in NAFTA. Rep. Mike McIntyre (D-N.C., left), the bill's chief sponsor, says that "NAFTA has done way too much damage, and we need to repeal it! NAFTA has cost too many jobs, eroded our industrial base, and decimated towns and communities. Enough is enough — we need to focus on creating jobs right here in the United States — not in foreign countries!" McIntyre also says that NAFTA and similar trade agreements have resulted in a 29-percent decline in U.S. manufacturing employment since 1993, discouraging investments in U.S. manufacturing facilities while accelerating the erosion of American industry, and he is supporting a "Make it in America" plan that will help bring back our manufacturing base and create jobs right here at home.

Opposition to free trade agreements, while a minority view in today's internationalist-oriented Republican Party, is in all actuality a robust and important part of the history of the GOP. Robert Lighthizer, a trade representative in the Reagan administration, rightfully argues that free trade agreements were a long-standing policy of leftists, including Ted Kennedy, Bill Clinton (who led the push for America's entry into NAFTA in 1993), and Barack Obama. [Lighthizer](#) also says that those considered to be America's leading conservatives, including former Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), former Senator Robert Taft (R-Ohio), Alexander Hamilton (one of our nation's Founding Fathers), and even former President Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote that "pernicious indulgence in the doctrine of free trade seems inevitably to produce fatty degeneration of the moral fiber." In fact, the first vocal Republican in support of free trade was Dwight Eisenhower, who was vociferously opposed by



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conservatives, including supporters of Robert Taft and the then-nascent John Birch Society (Robert Welch's damning investigation, [The Politician](#), discussed much of Eisenhower's leftist tendencies).

Lighthizer also rebukes those free-traders who choose to identify themselves as Reagan Republicans. While Reagan may have chosen to follow certain free-trade policies at times, his record reflects a far more nuanced position on the issue. He arranged for voluntary restraint agreements to limit imports of automobiles and steel. He provided temporary import relief for Harley-Davidson. He limited imports of sugar and textiles. His administration pushed for the "Plaza Accord" of 1985, an agreement that made Japanese imports more expensive by raising the value of the yen.

Yet, Reagan was certainly not the first Republican President to espouse "protectionist" sensibilities. Calvin Coolidge, who was one of the most constitutionalist Presidents in American history, clearly understood the need to defend American industry by blocking free trade policies. In his Second Annual Message of December 3, 1924, Coolidge famously declared that "the protective tariff enables our people to live according to a better standard and receive a better rate of compensation than any people, any time, anywhere on earth, ever enjoyed." In a similar vein, the [Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act](#) of 1930 is yet another example of Republican integrity on the issue of free trade; the tariff sought to protect American agriculture and industry, and in spite of criticisms that it worsened the effects of the Great Depression, monetarists such as Milton Friedman argue that this Americanist economic measure actually helped mitigate the effects of the Depression.

In recent times, however, both Democrats and Republicans have worked to deliver more failed free trade agreements, with few exceptions (especially on the Republican side). While the last Bush administration negotiated several bilateral trade agreements, the Republican Congress notably blocked several free trade policies. In March 2002, for example, Bush proudly signed "temporary safeguards" that imposed tariffs of eight percent to 30 percent on most steel imports for three years. In May 2002, Bush also signed legislation increasing agricultural subsidies by as much as 80 percent, leading economists to label Bush an "anti-globalizer." Bush also supported steel tariffs, as opposed to Clinton, who opposed steel and other protective tariffs. In mid-November 2006, 60 House Republicans also helped block a free trade deal with Vietnam, supplying the margin of defeat and embarrassing the President on the eve of a state visit. And, in the 2008 Republican presidential debates, in contrast to the internationalism of John McCain and Rudy Giuliani, Duncan Hunter and Tom Tancredo both expressed their strong opposition to NAFTA, CAFTA, and other free trade agreements, with Rep. Hunter correctly attributing to NAFTA the surge in illegal immigration from Mexico.

While the effort to repeal NAFTA clearly has strong historical and ideological precedent within the Republican Party (evident also in the fact that 43 House Republicans voted against NAFTA in 1993), it is unclear whether the current Republican Congress will support H.R. 4759, despite the fact that many Tea Partiers [bemoan](#) the consequences of free trade. In a recent poll put out by the Mellman Group and the Alliance for American Manufacturing, 74 percent of self-described Tea Party supporters would support a "national manufacturing strategy to make sure that economic, tax, labor, and trade policies in this country work together to help support manufacturing in the United States." Likewise, 56 percent of self-described Tea Party supporters "favor a tariff on products imported from other countries that are cheaper because they came from a country that does not have to comply with any climate change regulations in the country where the products were made." These sentiments are inspired by both the ill-effects of free trade on American manufacturing and the desire to preserve national sovereignty, which is a key reason to defeat NAFTA, since it is under the pretext of this free-trade agreement that



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plans for the North American Union and the NAFTA superhighway are secretly being moved forward.

NAFTA also severely compromises America's national defense capabilities. Opponents of NAFTA, including former Rep. Gene Taylor (D-Miss.) say that when the Defense Department needed to rapidly procure Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles in Iraq in 2007, the Pentagon was forced to purchase 17,700 of them, and because of diminished manufacturing capacity, it took nine different contractors working together to build all those vehicles. "The decline in our manufacturing base left the contractors without a trained workforce to build these vehicles. This led to delays and choke points in production and overall delivery of the MRAPs," he said. "This was a logistical nightmare."

He continued, "Without a sufficient industrial base capable of mass production, we were forced to spend more tax dollars because each contractor had to train workers and re-invent the parts for production. In some cases, we were dependent on foreign countries."

The GOP would be wise to return to its roots as an anti-free trade agreement, economically-nationalistic party that upholds national sovereignty, prosperity, national defense capabilities, and enhanced opportunity for the American middle class, and with a burgeoning protectionist stream within the Tea Party movement and an out-of-control immigration problem rallying the conservative base, now is the time to repeal NAFTA.



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