The Costs Of NAFTA Are Driving Home

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State politicians and federal judges are going the limit to protect us all from the horrendous highway hazards of talking on cell phones and not wearing seat belts. How about manifesting an equal enthusiasm to protect us against an invasion of 4.5 million large trucks that have not passed U.S. safety inspections? Actually, the U.S. House tried to do that with its stunning 285- 143 roll call vote on June 26 to scuttle the Bush Administration plans to begin allowing Mexican trucks to deliver their cargoes to any of the 48 continental states beginning in January, without inspection required for at least 18 months. The Bush Administration immediately announced that it will try to get the Senate to reverse the House vote, and Mexico warned it will retaliate with trade measures against the United States.

Bill Clinton had restricted the Mexican trucks to a 20-mile commercial zone in four states: California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. At designated locations, they must transfer their loads to U.S. trucks for shipment to other states.

It is painful for me to note that the Bush Administration is less protective of U.S. interests than the late, unlamented previous Administration. But that's the way the cookie crumbles.

The Bush Administration plan is to allow Mexican trucks to operate freely on U.S. highways in all 48 states without auditing their safety practices for up to 18 months. A spokesman for the Department of Transportation added, "If it [the safety audit] would take longer than 18 months, they [the Mexican trucks] would still have a conditional operating authority until we do actually perform that safety audit."

In the House debate, some Members argued that NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement passed in 1993) requires us to admit the Mexican trucks freely. One congressman retorted, "NAFTA is a trade pact; it is not a suicide pact."

Under NAFTA, the United States agreed to let Mexican trucks operate freely in our country after 1999 so long as they meet U.S. safety standards. But they have never met them; and only one percent of the trucks coming across the border are inspected.

The Department of Transportation reported that 36 percent of the Mexican trucks that were inspected last year were ordered off the road because of violations such as faulty brakes and lights. Nobody even asks questions about emissions or about how many illegal aliens and illegal drugs may be concealed in the 99 percent of trucks that have not been inspected.

A safety audit is supposed to include inspection of the truck companies' records of vehicle maintenance and repair, as well as of drug and alcohol testing. But it is widely known that the trucking industry in Mexico, with few exceptions, has never successfully been monitored, much less supervised.

Mexico has no requirement that its trucks must be kept maintained. No Mexican agency is authorized to order a dangerous truck off the highways, and Mexico has no weigh stations such as we see all along U.S. highways.

Mexico has no limits on how long a driver can drive a truck, and the typical truck driver drives several hours a day longer than American truckers are permitted to drive. There is no way to check on drivers' records in Mexico because its database of drivers is still under development.

To gather first-hand evidence, a San Francisco Chronicle reporter drove with a Mexican truck driver for over a thousand miles. The reporter said that the driver drove three straight 21-hour days, sleeping a total of only seven hours, staying awake with coffee, listening to CDs, and talking on his CB radio.

It's too bad that more newspapers and television reports aren't showing us pictures of the long lines of 14,000 Mexican trucks coming across the border into the United States every day. Pictures tell the story better than words.

Mexican trucks are supposed to have to carry the same insurance coverage that U.S. trucks do. With the undisputed poor safety record for Mexican trucks plus lack of record keeping about both trucks and drivers, what is the likelihood of that happening (unless, of course, the NAFTA advocates figure out a way for U.S. taxpayers to subsidize it)?

Before the Senate votes on this issue, we need a full accounting of the risks of accident caused by sleepy or under-age drivers driving uninspected, uncertified trucks. We also need an estimate of the costs of wear and tear on our highways and of the U.S. jobs that will be lost.