Free Trade Is An Economic, Not A Moral, Issue

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Most conservatives are so happy that we now have a President who has restored dignity to the White House. We are pleased that he brings a moral dimension to his actions and isn't squeamish about acknowledging his religious faith.
But it was distressing that George W. Bush's recent remarks to the Council of the Americas went over the line. He proclaimed that "open trade is not just an economic opportunity, it is a moral imperative."

Sorry, Mr. President, you have it backwards. Open or free trade may be an economic opportunity (for some), but it certainly is not a moral imperative.

The Bible does not instruct us on free trade and it's not one of the Ten Commandments. Jesus did not tell us to follow Him along the road to free trade.

Calling free trade "a moral imperative" is a sly semantic attempt to cast those who oppose free trade into exterior darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. No one gave our President authority to sweep out of the temple those who espouse what he calls "a new kind of protectionism."

Nor is there anything in the United States Constitution that requires us to support free trade and to abhor protectionism. In fact, protectionism was the economic system believed in and practiced by the framers of our Constitution.

Protective tariffs were the principal source of revenue for our Federal Government from its beginning in 1789 until the passage of the Sixteenth Amendment, which created the federal income tax, in 1913. Were all those public officials during those hundred plus years remiss in not adhering to a "moral obligation" of free trade? Hardly.

The final paragraph in George W. Bush's recent speech exhorted his audience of non-elected diplomats, assembled as the Council of the Americas, to "help to bring sanity to the United States Congress." It's bad enough that President Bush cast those who oppose free trade into limbo with those who lack morality, but it's downright insulting that he labels them as lacking sanity.

Everyone present understood that "sanity" in the President's lexicon referred to passage of the U.S. Trade Promotion Authority bill, known as Fast Track, which Bush urged in his May 10 letter to Congress. That bill would surrender to the President Congress's explicit constitutional power "to regulate commerce with foreign nations."

Free trade and Fast Track are issues that, in one way or another, touch the lives of most Americans. They deserve to be debated as the economic and national security issues that they are, not by name-calling.

The arguments the President offered for free trade were that it "creates jobs for the unemployed," pays "for clean air and water," and promotes "democracy ... in good time." But all those benefits are for foreign countries, not the United States.

President Bush has just demonstrated how he would use Fast Track by the way he is currently implementing NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) to advantage Mexico and disadvantage

Americans. The Administration announced this month that it will allow Mexican trucking companies to operate on U.S. highways without auditing their safety practices for up to 18 months.

How many cheaters do you think would appear if IRS announced that it wouldn't audit any tax returns filed in the next 18 months? In the name of free trade, would Americans accept not checking for foot-and-mouth disease for the next 18 months?

Some 14,000 Mexican trucks have been crossing the border every day but have so far been limited to a narrow region along the border. The Bush Administration will now allow them to operate across our entire country.

The failure of Mexican trucks to meet U.S. standards for safety, emissions, tires, brakes, age and drug and alcohol use of drivers, and insurance coverage is common knowledge. Only about one percent of Mexican trucks are inspected at the border and, of those, at least 30 percent fail to meet our standards.

Why should Mexican trucks have a free ride to escape regulations that U.S. trucks must obey? Furthermore, it's anybody's guess how many illegal aliens and illegal drugs are concealed in the 99 percent of uninspected Mexican trucks.

Another paragraph in President Bush's speech seems just as out of touch with reality. He said, "A recent summit in Quebec symbolized the new reality in our hemisphere, a unity of shared values, shared culture and shared trade."

President Bush's speechwriters should know that there is less reality of shared culture in Quebec than almost any place in the Western Hemisphere. It was only six years ago that 49.4 percent of French-speaking Quebecois voted to secede from the shared culture of English-speaking Canada.

The lesson that Quebec teaches is that language is a powerful pressure point of disunity when one section of the country speaks a language different from that of the national majority. It is unfortunate that President Bush appears to be fostering this same kind of separatism by starting to deliver his Saturday radio broadcasts in Spanish as well as in English.