

The Huntsville Times

The CAFTA gamble

Aderholt, GOP allies bet political, economic future on trade pact

By David Prather, for the editorial board.

August 01, 2005

After twisting every arm it could, the Bush administration got its Central American Free Trade Agreement through the House of Representatives by the narrowest of votes, 217-215, on Friday.

A key to the victory was support from Southern Republican congressmen who haven't exactly had a lovefest with NAFTA, the similar pact that eased trade between Mexico and the United States - a success or a failure, depending on who's talking and from what vantage point.

These congressmen also represent what used to be major textile states until a lot of plants blew away across the sea.

Republican Robin Hayes, R-N.C., who represents the Tar Heel Piedmont where textile factories once abounded, was a vigorous critic of the agreement - before Friday. His vote put CAFTA over the top.

Hayes may have changed his mind because many textile companies backed the trade bill this time, although exactly how CAFTA will spur more U.S. jobs is more optimism than fact.

Rep. Robert Aderholt, R-Haleyville, on the other hand, voted for CAFTA after he got a promise from the Bush

administration that the White House would try to protect the 5,000 jobs of sock workers in Fort Payne.

This came despite Aderholt's unhappiness with a 2002 trade bill that he supported after getting congressional assurance that it would help domestic sock producers. It didn't.

This time, Aderholt said, he got assurances directly from the administration, although he wasn't specific as to exactly what those promises were. They apparently involve a pledge to try and rewrite CAFTA, although one of the problems critics levied against it was that it couldn't be amended, by Congress, merely accepted or rejected.

The Aderholt deal raises other questions: Why wasn't the Bush administration concerned about the sock-producing industry without regard to the trade pact? And what are domestic sugar producers, big losers in the trade agreement, to think about promises of help to the sock industry but not them?

Whether CAFTA plays out as an economic boom or boondoggle is only one of the problems that Aderholt and other Southern Republican congressmen may face.

CAFTA's opponents offered a scenario whereby less expensive food imports from the United States drive Central American farmers off their farms in search for livings. And that search, as it has in Mexico, where similar issues prevail, could bring an influx of immigrants.

Border security in general - and immigration ease in particular - are issues that resonate with conservative voters in the South. And these voters, of course, are the ones who have put Aderholt, Hayes and other conservative Republicans in office.

When November 2006 comes around, it maybe that complicated trade agreements won't be high on voters' concerns. But if the economic tide from

CAFTA doesn't raise a lot of boats, and if Central America becomes an outsourcing sweatshop that costs jobs in Alabama, North Carolina and elsewhere, there will be political backlash.

If the worst comes to pass, Aderholt and his allies may look longingly at the position Congressman Bud Cramer, D-Huntsville, took in voting against CAFTA. Cramer, who kept his options open until Friday, said the combination of constituent opposition and concerns about the complex bill's potential perils for North Alabama jobs led him to oppose CAFTA.

Next election, Aderholt may wish he had done likewise - particularly if the sock industry in his district begins to unravel.