

jobs and develop the resources to implement strong labor protections. Congress recognized this principle when we passed free trade agreements with Jordan and Morocco. Both Jordan and Morocco have struggled with high poverty levels and a lack of adequate resources to fully enforce labor protections.

Yet bipartisan majorities in the House and Senate demonstrated that economic liberalization was key to improving these conditions and sent these FTAs to the President's desk.

□ 1330

That was a decision that both Houses of Congress made with bipartisan votes. Once again, we have the opportunity to combat poverty and improve labor conditions with the passage of the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, these positive economic benefits have broader security implications for the United States. Rising standards of living in the region will assist in resolving an issue that affects all of us, that issue is illegal immigration. Specifically, we can deter illegal immigration by addressing one of its root causes, that being poverty.

Mr. Speaker, illegal immigration is a national problem that saps the resources of local law enforcement, overwhelms our medical system, and puts great strains on our schools. With over 10 million illegal immigrants in the United States, the cost to the Federal Government and State governments, as we all know, is enormous.

Nearly all illegal immigrants to the United States come in search of work, economic opportunity, a chance to feed their families because they have found limited opportunity at home. In fact, T.J. Bonner, the President of the National Border Patrol Council, estimates that 98 percent of illegal immigrants come to this country for one reason and one reason only, seeking economic opportunity. To stem the tide of illegal immigrants, it stands to reason that we should encourage economic prosperity in the countries that are frequently the source of those illegal immigrants.

DR-CAFTA gives the Dominican Republic and the Central American countries the much-needed push towards prosperity that they so strongly desire. It will open markets and opportunity in the region, allow their citizens to purchase more goods for less money, give small businesses reason to expand, help create jobs, and raise the standards of living.

And most important, the people of Central America will have an incentive to build their future in their own countries rather than to make the dangerous, illegal attempts to enter our country. This is in our best interest as a country. It is our duty as a steadfast ally to our friends and neighbors in Central America.

As the former President of Costa Rica, the Nobel Peace Prize winner

Oscar Arias wrote in the Washington Post, "The Central American Free Trade Agreement would allow Central America to thrive by exporting goods through trade rather than exporting people through migration. Access to the U.S. market is the most important tool to speed our economic and social development and to keep our people at home."

Mr. Speaker, I urge this body not to, in the words of Oscar Arias, punish Central America for achieving peace.

Tom Friedman of the New York Times recently wrote, "In the 1980s we were worried that Central America was going communist. Now it seems today that people are worried that Central America is going capitalist."

Our neighbors want to embrace that economic liberalization and what it can bring. Through the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement, we will help them continue to make progress against poverty in our hemisphere and reduce the flow of illegal immigrants into the United States.

Unfortunately, it is on this very issue of immigration that the DR-CAFTA debate has become clouded. There has been some confusion as to the impact of the agreement, and the impact it will have on U.S. immigration law. I would like to set the record straight. There is absolutely nothing in the agreement that affects our immigration laws. To ensure against any ambiguity in that matter, all seven parties to the agreement signed a legally binding document unequivocally saying "No provision of the agreement shall be construed to impose any obligation on a party regarding its immigration measures." That is actually part of the agreement.

To make it very clear, nothing in the Central American Free Trade Agreement will in any way modify U.S. immigration law. DR-CAFTA fully preserves both existing U.S. immigration law and the power of this Congress to legislate at its discretion on immigration matters. In fact, DR-CAFTA fully preserves the power of this Congress to legislate at its discretion on any matter whatsoever.

This agreement will not cede our sovereignty or create loopholes in our immigration law, as some have argued. What it will do is lower the tariff and nontariff barriers our producers and service providers currently face. It will strengthen the regional supply chain that helps us compete globally, particularly with regards to China. It will build upon the economic gains we have already achieved in this region through the North American Free Trade Agreement, and it will pave the way for even stronger gains throughout the hemisphere.

DR-CAFTA will provide the Dominican Republic and the Central American people with the tools to reach the first rung of the economic ladder, and it will help them as they seek to climb that economic ladder. It will provide hope

for opportunities at home; and, therefore, an incentive to stay and build a future in their home country. It will reinforce their faith in the power of economic freedom and strengthen their commitment to the rule of law and the free market. And it will solidify these six countries as free and democratic allies right at our doorstep.

Mr. Speaker, we have learned just how critical the spread of democracy is to our national security. Our troops are currently in harm's way in Iraq and Afghanistan, fighting to ensure their fledgling democracies are sustained.

The Central American people have already done the most difficult work. With our help, they have rejected dictatorship, totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and they have chosen to embrace democracy. They have laid the foundations of the rule of law, political pluralism and a commitment to free markets.

But these tremendous gains are still very fragile and they are reversible. After all, these are democracies that are only 15 years old. We cannot leave before the job is done. We need the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement to fully achieve what Ronald Reagan set out to do more than 20 years ago, and that is bring permanent peace and prosperity to our back door.

When Ronald Reagan announced his candidacy for President on November 6, 1979, he envisioned a free trade accord for this entire hemisphere. The Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement is a very important step on that road towards implementing the vision of Ronald Reagan.

I urge my colleagues to join with us in a bipartisan way, which is the way that we have traditionally dealt with the very important issue of international trade, and come together when we next week cast this critical vote on the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement.

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

By unanimous consent, leave of absence was granted to:

Mr. BOREN (at the request of Ms. PELOSI) for today.

Mr. LINDER (at the request of Mr. DELAY) for today on account of traveling to Georgia with the President of the United States.

Mr. PICKERING (at the request of Mr. DELAY) for today on account of attending a BRAC Commission hearing for his district.

Mr. YOUNG of Florida (at the request of Mr. DELAY) for today on account of family medical illness.

SPECIAL ORDERS GRANTED

By unanimous consent, permission to address the House, following the legislative program and any special orders heretofore entered, was granted to:

(The following Members (at the request of Ms. HERSETH) to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material:)