

**Peter Friedmann's View from Washington, DC
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Too Little, Too Late

The major headline in DC so far this year has clearly been the expansion of US trade agenda. President Obama is actually aware of limited accomplishments (whether his fault or Congress') during his tenure, which is rapidly coming to a close. He would desperately like international trade to be a central piece of his legacy. Obviously, the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, will be his legacy (until its fully implemented, it will not be clear whether that will be one he is proud of, or not). So he has focused all his energy on gaining approval of Trade Promotion Authority, in order to ultimately enact the TransPacific Partnership treaty, the largest trade expansion in free trade in our country's history. It has encountered rough waters, but whether it is ultimately enacted or not, the lessons will impact all that happens in the remaining 18 months of the Obama Presidency.

The issue of trade expansion has now taken all the oxygen out of the room. Other major pieces of legislation are long overdue and essential for the health of the country. These include a bill to fund the repair and expansion of crumbling transportation infrastructure. Reluctance to increase the Highway gas tax, is preventing the federal government and state governments from even maintaining the existing deficient highways transit systems, bridges etc. In addition, our aviation system awaits legislation to bring it into the 21st century. Again Congress is stymied.

The battle lines are clearly drawn on international trade. There is nothing new here, we all know the formula: 90% of all Republicans, responsive to their business constituencies, will dependably vote for any trade expansion legislation. And 90% of Democrats, responsive to their labor union constituency, will vote against most all trade legislation. In recent years, the environmental community has become much more engaged on international trade legislation, and has aligned with labor unions to become another powerful constituency impacting the votes of Democratic legislators. Thus the formula is this: keep all Republicans on board, and work hard to peel off a few Democrats to vote for a trade bill.

Every major trade vote becomes a nail-biter. It was no different 23 years ago when Bill Clinton had to twist every Democratic arm (and some Republican arms) he could find in order to squeeze enough votes to pass NAFTA. President Obama tried to do the same a few weeks ago, showing up at a Congressional baseball game, and then conducting a meeting on Capitol Hill, where he lectured Democratic Congressmen. It proved to be remarkably, and embarrassingly unsuccessful. House Democratic Leader, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, after the President finished lobbying for TPA, announced that she would oppose it. The trade bill vote went down to defeat. It could be resurrected, but the impact will be felt far beyond the trade arena, for the remaining months of Obama's occupancy of the White House.

This shows the pitfalls of an imperial presidency. Bill Clinton was happy to talk to any Congressman or Senator, Republican or Democrat, at any time, continuously engaging them, entertaining them. He had developed a reservoir of goodwill. It stood him well when the Monica Lewinsky fiasco led to impeachment votes on Capitol Hill. He survived because he had, throughout his Presidency and his career, made a point of making friends, certainly within his own party, and where possible, with the other side of the aisle. And he was able to get NAFTA passed.

Compare this with President Obama who now faces an open revolt by Democrats in the House. As one Democratic Congressman said after the President's visits to the Hill, "too little too late". Members of Congress complained that they had never been invited to the White House once during the six years. On the other side of the aisle, the President has taken every opportunity to blame the Republicans for every ill, so there is no goodwill there. It was noted that the President went to the Congressional baseball game for 59 minutes, he couldn't even find time to stay the whole evening, on the eve of what he claimed was one of the most important votes of his Presidency. It was a rather feeble attempt to ingratiate himself with members of his own party in the House; they weren't buying it.

How will this play out? In the immediate days and weeks it may be possible for the Republicans to find a few more votes. Ironically, by doing so, they will be saving the reputation of their archenemy, the person who spent the last six years attacking them. But longer term, regardless of how the trade votes pan out, President Obama must be concerned about how his own party will act on his other initiatives during the last 18 months of his Presidency.