



Introduction

U.S. Representative Robert T. Matsui

The North American Free Trade Agreement is an incredible and far-reaching achievement for the United States, Canada, and Mexico. NAFTA is more than just a U.S. trade agreement with Mexico and Canada. It is vitally important for the continued economic growth of our country and for our future relationships with other trading partners. Every state in the Union will benefit from increased trade with Mexico and Canada. Furthermore, NAFTA is one of the pillars of President Clinton's comprehensive economic security plan that includes lowering the deficit, health care for all Americans, welfare reform, and worker retraining.

During the 1993 debate on NAFTA, some critics conducted a campaign against the free trade agreement that was based on emotion and fear, rather than on facts. The fact is that, prior to NAFTA, the United States already had a trade policy with Mexico that allowed Mexican products to enter our country far less expensively than U.S. products could be shipped to Mexico. Our trade policy prior to NAFTA encouraged maquiladoras, allowed environmental problems to continue at the border, and did nothing for U.S. workers whose jobs were going to Mexico or Asia. NAFTA, however, changed all that. NAFTA's opponents, when they argued against the free trade agreement, argued for the status quo. They failed to acknowledge that without NAFTA all of the things they were complaining about would have continued.

Opponents of NAFTA also decried Mexico's human rights record and warned that NAFTA would import human rights problems to the United States. Yet, just the opposite is true. Only by passing

NAFTA could we ensure a dialogue with Mexico that will improve Mexico's human rights record. As one of its chief benefits, for example, NAFTA will stem the tide of illegal immigration from Mexico to this country. Millions flock to the United States in the hopes of finding jobs, which are unavailable at home. They do not really want to leave Mexico for unknown opportunities and an uncertain life, but they find that they have no choice.

Those of us who have fervently backed NAFTA believe that creating a North American common market represents a fundamental means of coping with the far-reaching immigration problem. NAFTA will significantly help to revive the Mexican economy, creating a vibrant middle class and making better paying jobs available. That, in turn, will reduce the incentive for people to immigrate illegally to the United States.

Critics of NAFTA also argued that since Mexican wages are much lower than those in the United States and Canada, cost-conscious U.S. and Canadian companies would flock to Mexico after NAFTA passed. NAFTA's proponents conceded that there is a wage differential between the United States and Mexico. However, the real impetus for American companies to move some of their production to Mexico came not from low wages, but from trade policies that required U.S. companies to operate in Mexico if they wanted to sell products in the Mexican market. NAFTA, by removing these trade restraints entirely, is a major spur to our exports and allows us to keep manufacturing jobs here in the United States.

Rest assured Mexico itself, recognizing the benefits of a free market, is taking bold action to move its economy ahead. Starting with the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid in 1982, Mexico began to end its reign of protectionism and tight state dominance over the economy. The switch has assumed tidal proportions under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Salinas has opened Mexico to foreign investment, lowered tariffs, pressed for free competition, fought corruption, and enlisted a cadre of young, highly trained technocrats. As a result of these reforms, our exports to fast-growing Mexico have vaulted since 1986 from \$12 billion to \$40 billion. NAFTA pledges our support for these initiatives and reaffirms our commitment to prosperity and democracy in Mexico and throughout Latin America.

The effects that NAFTA will have on North America is the subject of great debate in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. What follows in these pages is a lively discussion of NAFTA's potential impact on human rights in these three countries.