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Trade and Terror

It is not the habit of Rep. Charles Rangel to throw verbal rocks at high administration officials. Rangel, the ranking Democrat on the House Ways and Means Committee, is an adept inside player much liked in both parties.

So why was Rangel so furious last week at Robert Zoellick, the U.S. trade representative and fellow Washington insider? Zoellick's sin was to link congressional approval of a "fast track" bill—making it easier for the president to negotiate trade agreements—with the war on terrorism.

In a Washington Post op-ed piece headlined "Countering Terror With Trade," and then in a series of speeches and comments, Zoellick argued that "Congress' action on U.S. trade promotion authority and the rest of our trade legislative agenda would send an unmistakable signal to the world that America will lead." Trade was linked with the battle against terrorism, Zoellick said, because trade "promotes the values at the heart of this protracted struggle."

Rangel called foul, accusing Zoellick of wrapping the trade bill "in the flag." In a lengthy statement, the New Yorker declared: "To appeal to patriotism in an effort to force Congress to move on fast track by claiming it is needed to fight terrorism would be laughable if it weren't so serious."

The episode was an important marker not only in the trade debate but also in Washington's delicate dance over what bipartisanship means after Sept. 11.

Rangel thinks it means dealing gingerly with any issue that caused deep partisan divisions before Sept. 11. And a real bipartisan agreement must involve accord among congressional leaders in both parties. Winning over a few stray Democrats isn't enough anymore.

"That might have flown before the terrorist strike," Rangel said in an interview, but since then "we've done a pretty good job of raising the standard of what people expect."

The trade bill is particularly thorny because Ways and Means Chairman Bill Thomas, a California Republican, has been negotiating a bill with a small group of pro-trade Democrats. It gives the party some of what it wants in making environmental and labor standards part of trade accords. But many Democrats think the proposal falls short. With the bill scheduled to come up in committee this week, they feared Zoellick was trying to roll over them.

Zoellick insists he never intended to use trade

as a "litmus test of patriotism." But in an interview on Sunday, Zoellick continued to argue that giving the president trade promotion authority would strengthen his hand in seeking help from other countries in the war against terror.

"Developing-country democracies around the world want to know that the U.S. is interested in their economic future and stability, not just in getting their help against terrorism," he said. "Traditionally, it has been Democrats who have led the way in asserting that America's internationalism must include economic and development solutions as well as military plans."

True enough, but there are large risks in linking the arguments over trade and terror. Ever since Republicans first floated the idea of passing a quick capital gains tax cut as the solution to post-Sept. 11 economic problems, Democrats—Rangel chief among them—have been suspicious. Even as they staunchly support Bush on the war, they worry that Republicans will use the president's new popularity as a weapon in pre-war ideological disputes. Democrats are especially sensitive on trade, an issue that has long divided their party.

And critics of trade agreements see recent essays and articles linking terrorists' opposition to "an open society" with "protectionism" as a form of guilt by association.

In a speech last week, Zoellick quoted one of those articles and then asserted: "Change breeds anxiety. Anxieties can be manipulated to force agendas based on fear, antagonisms, resentments and hate. And then those who are the weakest, those with the least influence, are hurt the most by cold and hard people who overrun openness and liberty and the rule of law in the name of ill-defined causes."

Since we are all against "cold and hard people," it is an unseemly reach to say these terrorist attacks had anything to do with trade. To forge such a connection risks besmirching patriotic critics of free trade through unintended innuendo.

Much of today's trade debate is not about throwing up new barriers but about the rules that should apply when we tear down existing ones. People on both sides of these arguments favor "open" societies. If Zoellick is right, free traders should be able to win the argument on the merits, and without resort to the terrible events of last month.

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