

I am proud to say the House Republicans have a plan to increase and improve America's access to affordable and high quality health care. Association Health Plans will help employers, especially small business owners, afford quality health care for their employees and their families, will improve the quality of life and provide much needed health security. AHPs address both health care access and cost by allowing small businesses to create associations that may jointly purchase health insurance for their workers at a lower cost.

Specifically, AHPs establish eligibility requirements so that all AHPs are required to offer fully-insured and/or self-insured benefits. AHPs encourage broad participation and coverage by prohibiting discrimination of any kind against certain "high-risk" individuals. AHPs will cover specific diseases, maternal and newborn hospitalization and mental health issues. AHPs will be exempt from costly and burdensome state health insurance regulations to enable greater and more effective coverage. AHPs will be financially strong and responsible by reserving enough funds for potential costs and other obligations.

AHPs have enjoyed the support of a wide coalition, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Federation of Independent Businesses, the American Farm Bureau, the Associated Builders and Contractors, the Latino Coalition, the National Black Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Women Business Owners and the National Restaurant Association.

These organizations have endorsed AHPs because AHPs will reduce health insurance costs for employers. For example, insurers selling directly to small employers typically incur administrative costs of 20 to 25 percent. By contrast, the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that small businesses that obtain insurance through AHPs will save an average of 13 percent. Other estimates have indicated cost savings could be as much as 25 percent. AHPs will significantly reduce the number of uninsured Americans. AHPs, according to a study by the Research Corporation, estimates that up to 8.5 million uninsured workers and dependents could gain coverage from AHP legislation. And this study confirms even a small cost savings can result in large increases in purchasing power for all of our small businesses. The CBO has concluded, Mr. Speaker, that Association Health Plan legislation would extend insurance coverage for up to two million uninsured American workers with no cost to the government.

I encourage my colleagues to support the Small Business Health Insurance Act, H.R. 525, when it comes to the floor this week.

CENTRAL AMERICAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 4, 2005, the gentleman from California (Mr. DREIER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. DREIER. Mr. Speaker, this week we will address one of the most important national security issues of the 109th Congress. It also is an extraordinarily important economic issue, when it comes to the challenge of growth in this country and throughout this hemisphere. I am talking of course about the Dominican Republic Central American Free Trade Agreement.

As I listened to my colleague from Oregon just a few minutes ago decry the problems of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the fact that there will be overpromising when it comes to the Central American Free Trade Agreement, I was struck by the fact that he really did not get the message that was provided by that great former senator, democratic presidential candidate from Massachusetts, Paul Tsongas, who said, the problem with my democratic party is that they love employees but they hate employees.

The fact of the matter is, if you look all the way across the board, we know that globalization is inevitable. And as Prime Minister Singh said in his address to us a week ago tomorrow, right here in a joint session of Congress, we cannot ignore what is taking place in any other part of the world because of the fact that the globe is shrinking.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I am not going to overpromise and say passage of the Central American Free Trade Agreement is all of a sudden going to solve every ailment of society. But I do know this, 22 years ago, we, with a huge bipartisan vote passed the Caribbean Basin Initiative, which, instead of sending aid, provided an opening, an opportunity for the Caribbean nations to have access to the U.S. consumer market. That has helped us and it has helped them.

Right now, with the Central American Free Trade Agreement, all we are saying is let us have a reciprocal arrangement. 80 percent of the goods, including 99 percent of agricultural products from Central America come tariff free, tax free to U.S. consumer. That is a good thing. It has allowed us, Mr. Speaker, to allow the high standard of living that we have as Americans.

Now, what we are saying is, through this agreement, let us open up their markets so that the 44 million consumers in the Dominican Republic and the 5 Central American countries can have access to U.S. manufactured goods.

Now, one of the challenges that we face, of course, is our competition that is going on with the Pacific Rim. We, at the end of last week, saw finally moves toward re-evaluation of the yuan, the Chinese currency. And we

know that if we are going to compete, it is important for us to implement hemispheric wide trade here so that we can compete with Asia and, specifically, with China.

One of the things we also know, Mr. Speaker, is that if you buy a shirt from China it has a little more than 1 percent of U.S. content. If you buy a shirt from Central America that is manufactured in Central America, over 60 percent of it has U.S. content. So this agreement is going to enhance our ability, not only as a Nation, but as a hemisphere to be more competitive.

We put together a wide range of agreements over the last several years, bilateral agreements with Jordan, Singapore, Australia, Chile, Morocco. They have all been great bilateral agreements. But right now, Mr. Speaker, we have the opportunity to put together a very important multilateral agreement with six countries. That also will lay the groundwork for the very important effort that we have that will begin in the coming days to proceed with the Doha round with the WTO in Geneva. Why? Because the goal as was set forth back in 1947 when the general agreement on tariffs and trade was established was to eliminate tariffs. And we all know, Mr. Speaker, that a tariff is a tax. And so cutting taxes enhances the standard of living and the quality of life for people. This is a win-win for the United States of America, for the Central American countries, and for our region as a whole.

I hope very much that our colleagues join in a strong bipartisan way, doing exactly what we did in 1983 when we passed the Caribbean basin initiative. Let us send this to the President so that it can be signed and so that we can have this win-win all the way around.

RECESS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 12(a) of rule I, the Chair declares the House in recess until 2 p.m. today.

Accordingly (at 12 o'clock and 49 minutes p.m.), the House stood in recess until 2 p.m.

□ 1400

AFTER RECESS

The recess having expired, the House was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mr. KOLBE) at 2 p.m.

PRAYER

The Chaplain, the Reverend Daniel P. Coughlin, offered the following prayer: Loving God, bless all those who work for the U.S. House of Representatives.

May all House Members and all who serve as their staff be instruments of consultation and wisdom to accomplish the legislative work of the American people.

Renew this Nation in its trust of Your divine providence and in the honest trust of human relationships.

Without trust there can be no open society.

Trust allows us to seek knowledge, experience, and personal wisdom from others.

Trust builds strong partnerships in business and in government.

Trust helps us take down walls, remove barriers, and eliminate friction.

Lord, make us a people who are trustworthy and skilled in building trust.

For this Chamber proclaims what America prays: "In God we trust" now and forever. Amen.

THE JOURNAL

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair has examined the Journal of the last day's proceedings and announces to the House his approval thereof.

Pursuant to clause 1, rule I, the Journal stands approved.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Will the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. SHIMKUS) come forward and lead the House in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mr. SHIMKUS led the Pledge of Allegiance as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

CENTRAL AMERICAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

(Mr. SHIMKUS asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. SHIMKUS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to highlight the benefits of the Central American Free Trade Agreement to agricultural interests in my home State of Illinois.

As the number two soybean and soy products exporter, Illinois already sends approximately \$50 million worth of soy products per year to CAFTA countries. The immediate duty-free access for some products and reductions in tariffs on others are expected to significantly improve opportunities for Illinois soybeans and their products.

Illinois corn farmers are the Nation's number two exporter of feed grains. U.S. corn exports to CAFTA countries will benefit from reduced tariffs and duty-free access for corn products. In total, CAFTA countries are already Illinois' 22nd largest export market, accounting for more than \$211 million in exports in 2004. After the first year of CAFTA implementation, Illinois is expected to realize \$79 million in increased output across all industries in the State and \$24 million in increased employees earnings and nearly 700 new jobs created.

This historic agreement will eliminate tariffs and trade barriers and expand regional opportunities for the workers, manufacturers, consumers, farmers, and service providers of all the countries.

LANCE ARMSTRONG

(Mr. SAM JOHNSON of Texas asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. SAM JOHNSON of Texas. Mr. Speaker, it has been said that a quitter never wins and a winner never quits.

Seven-time winner of the Tour De France, Lance Armstrong, embodies these words. Raised in Plano, Texas, Lance Armstrong has become a household name synonymous with sacrifice, victory, and courage.

Most agree Lance's biggest victory was defeating cancer. Lance has spread his message that "you too can help fight the disease and beat it."

Many now wear his yellow Livestrong bracelets, with countless dollars pouring into cancer research to help find a cure. He truly is a hero of hope.

I thank Lance Armstrong for all he has done for the American spirit and the cancer community. His tenacity, courage, and strength are an inspiration. I congratulate him on his seventh Tour De France victory. God bless him. I salute him.

SUPPORTING EGYPT

(Mr. ISSA asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. ISSA. Mr. Speaker, today the President and countless others will be sending their condolences to the people of Egypt. For the second time in less than a week, they have suffered a loss at the hands of terrorists, this time in Sharm el-Sheik, the site of the historic peace conference between Israel and the Palestinians that have led to the quiet period and the hope for a Palestinian state and for two peoples living side by side once and for all in peace.

It is amazing to me that Iraq's first Arab ambassador came from Egypt, and yet this body seems to be always in doubt about whether or not Egypt is our ally, whether or not military support is necessary for this largest Arab nation anywhere in the world. I believe today after the assassination of their ambassador in Iraq, after the attacks in Sharm el-Sheik, after so many times Egypt has been there for us and paid a price, we should reflect on this special relationship and be glad that this Arab nation is there for us in our time of need.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC-CENTRAL AMERICAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

(Mrs. BIGGERT asked and was given permission to address the House for 1

minute and to revise and extend her remarks.)

Mrs. BIGGERT. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in strong support of the DR-CAFTA accord, not just because it is good for America but because it is good for the businesses and workers in my district in suburban Chicago.

Recently, I received a letter from one of the largest employers in my district. He wrote to say that today the tariff he pays on one of the products he manufactures and sends to Guatemala is 5 percent. If it enters the Dominican Republic, he pays 8 percent. And if it goes to Costa Rica, the tax is 14 percent.

In his letter he pointed out that all that will change on the day that DR-CAFTA goes into effect. Most tariffs on U.S. manufactured goods, including the product he wrote about, will be completely eliminated. For his company, shareholders, and workers, it means profits, greater competitiveness, and jobs.

About 80 percent of the goods made in DR-CAFTA countries already enter the U.S. duty free. Let us level the playing field and do something positive for our manufacturers and workers. Let us pass DR-CAFTA now.

CAFTA AND ITS NEGATIVE IMPACT ON LATINOS

(Ms. SOLIS asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend her remarks.)

Ms. SOLIS. Mr. Speaker, today I rise in opposition to CAFTA because it is a bad policy for families that I represent in my district, particularly Latino families not only in the United States but in Central America.

CAFTA will outsource valuable American jobs. In fact, in the last 10 years when we approved NAFTA, we lost 1,000 jobs in my district alone.

CAFTA will destroy the jobs of subsistence for farmers and others who depend on the environment in Central America.

As the only member of Central American descent, I think I do have the right to say that poverty there is still something that is very real for many of the people that live in Central America and particularly they will be most affected, whether it is their health care, access to medicines, whether it is farming jobs there. All that is at stake for people in Central America.

I am afraid to say that if we take away those opportunities, those individuals might want to come here to this country. And I know that there is a movement here in this country to say close the borders, but at the same time we are sending signals that we are going to be helping the very wealthy in these countries and not those who need it very much.

So I would oppose CAFTA and ask my colleagues to do so as well.