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Seattle protesters didn't understand free trade's effects



Reader Editorial Board

This is a big month for unpopular but meritorious international causes.

First, anarchists, fringe environmentalists and born-again 1960s radicals nostalgic for a good riot joined forces to pillage Seattle.

Whatever one may think about the closeted procedures of the World Trade Organization, freer trade has done more to liberate Americans from poverty than all the government programs put together.

That's what happened in 1787.

Fed up with protectionist barriers set up against each other by the new American states under the Articles of Confederation, our founding fathers created a free trade union with their new Constitution.

This has led to economic dislocation and unemployment for some, but greater prosperity for most.

Any economic distress that Americans experience from world trade is modest compared with that created in our own domestic market.

The American way

The American way of life is specialty shops and corner groceries being put out of business by WalMarts and chain supermarkets, to the great benefit of American consumers.

Whether workers in Michigan lose jobs because a plant moves to Mississippi or workers here do because a plant moves to Mexico, the result is the same — more total jobs, more wealth and more economic growth.

That, however, is not much consolation for those who lose jobs in the transaction. They must move and retrain to find new jobs making what those who took their old jobs now need to buy with their new income.

Despite the battle in Seattle, we won't be turning the clock back to fortress America.

The last worthy issue on the last day of the millennium is the formal transfer of ownership of the Panama Canal from the United States to the Republic of Panama.

That process has been under way for the past 20 years, and the Panamanians have been running the canal very efficiently for the past 10.

We will get what we want: the safety, security and sound management of the canal, with our ships given priority passage during national emergencies and our military retaining the right to intervene if the neutrality or security of the canal is jeopardized.

The Panamanians will get what they want: their flag flying over Panamanian territory.

Era of imperialism over

Our interest is in using the canal and making it available to all nations who need it.

Our interest does not lie in administering an American colony in Central America.

A few overheated talk show hosts have tried to persuade people that the Chinese are trying to take over the Panama Canal because a British company with an office in Hong Kong has won through competitive bidding the right to do port maintenance work for the Canal.

Whatever the virtues and vices of imperialism, that era is behind us. We no longer need to own a place to do business with it.

Indeed, that is what world trade and the Panama Canal are both about.

We are proud that we constructed the greatest public works project in history, and we should be equally proud that the Panama Canal has now become a great global institution, administered by the people in whose nation it lies but guaranteed and protected by the United States.



David Bowen of Jackson is a member of *The Clarion-Ledger's* Reader Editorial Board. A former Democratic congressman, he represented Mississippi's 2nd District. He is a writer and a consultant.