



## Roundtable With Journalists on Secretary Rice's Trip to Colombia in Support of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement

**Thomas Shannon, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, and Daniel Sullivan, Assistant Secretary for Economic, Energy And Business Affairs**  
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**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Regarding the Secretary's trip to Colombia with the congressional delegation, let me just make kind of a couple comments to start with and then kind of open it to your questions.

From our point of view, this was a really useful trip, a successful trip. As you know, we went to Medellin. We spent Thursday and Friday in Medellin. We had with us nine members of the House of Representatives, all Democrats. And from our point of view, going to Medellin was important because in some ways it's a better measure of the change and transformation that's happened in Colombia than, for instance, going to Bogotá, in the sense that Medellin is not a national capital, it's a provincial capital. It is a city well known in the United States for the years of Pablo Escobar and then the drug cartels and then the fighting between the FARC and the paramilitaries for control of areas around Medellin. And this gave us, I think, an opportunity to be on the ground in an important city in Colombia, to see the changes that have taken place under President Uribe's democratic security policy, and especially to understand the impact that our Andean trade preference program has had on economic development in the region and to hear from Colombians themselves, from workers from businessmen and from government officials, how they understand the impact of a free trade agreement on Colombia's economy and especially on Colombia's ability to generate the kinds of jobs and wealth necessary to address poverty and inequality and social exclusion within Colombia.

We had an opportunity to meet with two groups of trade unionists, one opposed to the FTA and one in favor of the FTA. We had an opportunity to meet with the new Mayor of Medellin, who described to the Secretary and to the members of Congress the tremendous transformation that has taken place there over the last several years, and with a special focus on social programs and on public works, especially the tremendous construction of schools and sports facilities and new transportation systems within Medellin as the municipal government attempts to address problems of kind of a longstanding nature in Medellin.

We had an opportunity to meet with former combatants, all former paramilitaries, who spoke directly to members of Congress about their experiences, about why they joined the paramilitaries, how long they stayed in the paramilitaries, why they left and how they understood their futures in the aftermath of the -- of the demobilization and reintegration process. We went to a flower plantation and had an opportunity to look at how these plantations operate. As you know, 70 percent of all cut flowers in the United States come from Colombia and about 100 percent of all carnations.

In the course of visiting the flower plantation, the members of Congress and the Secretary had an opportunity to meet with displaced people, all from Antioquia, who had been forced out of their villages and towns by violence and had come to Medellin, and who through a combined USAID, Government of Colombia, and Colombian Association of Flower Growers Program, had been trained in the flower industry and were working in -- on these flower plantations. And again, this was an opportunity to see the human cost of the conflict in Colombia but also understand how people who had suffered terribly had found a way to get some direction in their life, and understand how they saw their futures. I think both the meeting with the demobilized combatants and the meeting with the displaced people had a profound human impact on the members of Congress.

We then had an opportunity to meet with members of the Flower Growers Association, again, to understand better the impact of Andean Trade Preferences and our free trade agreement on the Colombian economy in a very export-driven sector of Colombia's economy.

We met with the Attorney General of Colombia, which gave the members of Congress an opportunity to talk at some length about the issue of human rights violations and prosecution of human rights violators and how the Government of Colombia is trying to address the longstanding problem of impunity in Colombia.

We then had an opportunity to meet with President Uribe for, I think, a very open and important and useful discussion as far as the members of Congress are concerned. And then, of course, a joint press conference was held with the Secretary, Representative Engel, who as you know is the Chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and President Uribe. And then we got on the plane and left.

From our point of view, it was an important trip. The Secretary's visit underscored our commitment to the Free Trade Agreement, underscored our commitment to Colombia at this important moment in its history. And the fact that nine members, Democratic members of the House of Representatives, were prepared to come on this trip, I think also underscores how important they see Colombia and how importantly they see our bilateral relationship with Colombia and how important it was to them to be able to be on the ground to understand the Colombian reality as they consider, you know, their own votes on a free trade agreement and our own next steps in our effort to deepen our trade and our political relationship with Colombia.

So why don't I stop there and take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, I wonder if you came back with any better sense of if there's any chance this is going to get to a vote this year and also whether there's anything concrete that you and the Colombians can do to allay these concerns about (inaudible) trade (inaudible). Is there any wording, change of wording (inaudible)?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** In regard to whether or not this will come to a vote, I mean, we're committed to this. The President is committed to this. The President would like to see this brought to a vote and it's our hope that congressional leadership will be able to bring this to a vote in the not-too-distant future. We think that Colombia is an ally that deserves this kind of consideration, it deserves to have a Free Trade Agreement that it concluded with us and ratified, not once but twice because when -- remember, when the May 10th agreement between Democratic House leadership and USTR added additional labor and environmental requirements or standards to the agreement, the Colombian National Legislature accepted those, that this is a gesture of good faith by the Government of Colombia and that we need to reciprocate.

I think -- I can't speak for the members of Congress, obviously. They can. But I think all of them came away understanding the importance of Colombia, the importance of the Free Trade Agreement especially in the larger strategic sense, not only in a trade sense but also in terms of how it relates to a broader social and economic development strategy for the region and what it means for U.S. standing and presence in the region.

So from our point of view -- again, I can't speak for them -- but I think they came away understanding that when this does come to a vote that the Congress will have in front of it an important mechanism for deepening not only our relationship with Colombia but also with the region.

**QUESTION:** So yesterday, apparently, (inaudible) was calling President Bush's bluff because he was basically saying listen, he can do whatever he wants, he has the authority to do it, but you know, he's taking a big risk because unless he knows that he's got the votes, this is risky; we don't -- you know, we're not -- we're not in any

hurry whatsoever to bring it to a vote on the House floor. And last Friday, George Miller sent President Uribe a letter saying, okay, you want us to tell you what you -- what we want you to do. First of all, explain why a three-judge panel that was investigating these killings of union leaders was suspended, apparently. And then again, the Democrats have been very blunt about what they want the Uribe government to do, so much so that Secretary -- I mean, Susan Schwab yesterday was very frustrated and said, listen, what else do you want the Colombian Government to do, can you clarify what it is that you want them to do? And so it's this back and forth between the Administration and Congress and it's clear that Bush does not have the votes yet.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** You mean President Bush.

**QUESTION:** President Bush. So can you tell us why is it that you are very optimistic that it will happen when Democrats are telling you that you can do whatever you want but you don't have the votes?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Well, to begin with, I think as the Secretary noted in her own press conference in Medellin, the trip wasn't about the legislative schedule. The trip was about engaging members of Congress on the substance of Colombia and the substance of the free trade agreement. And we did that, and we think we did that in an important way. Again, it's up to members to make up their own minds and it's up to House leadership to determine when this thing comes to a vote.

We think that as we look into the month that is coming, we're going to have a series of cabinet-led trips into the region, which we talked about in our -- in a previous press conference that Dan Sullivan and I did. We're looking at Secretary of Treasury Paulson, Secretary of Commerce Gutierrez, Sue Schwab herself, all traveling to Colombia.

And again, this is designed to underscore the importance of it and it's designed to engage our Congress in a substantive discussion -- not a political discussion, a substantive discussion on the importance of Colombia and the free trade agreement. And the concerns raised by members in regards to trade union violence and human rights are going to be an important part of that substantive discussion. And again, this is one of the reasons why these trips are important, because the members have a chance to meet with trade unionists, which they did on this trip, both those opposed to the FTA and those in favor of it. They have an opportunity to meet with the Attorney General to discuss directly specific issues of concern regarding prosecution of violators of human rights. They have an opportunity to speak directly to President Uribe and they have an opportunity to speak to citizens themselves, people who have benefitted from the peace and justice law -- excuse me, the justice and peace law, people who have benefitted from the effort to find employment for displaced people. And that deepens the understanding of these members.

So again, I can't make predictions. But what I think I can say is that we're committed to the free trade agreement, we're committed to Colombia, and we're going to do everything we can to make sure that there is a positive vote in our Congress. But I can't vote.

**QUESTION:** You said it's clear that this Congress is (inaudible) or not, but it's also the authority of the President to decide (inaudible).

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Correct.

**QUESTION:** So how (inaudible) after all these trips (inaudible) get to a point (inaudible) request (inaudible) that's something that is on the hands of the Administration, not on the hands of Congress. Or are you -- you will wait (inaudible)?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Well, again, this is a decision that's going to be made by the President and by his advisors, so I can't anticipate that. All I can say is what I've been saying already, which is we're focused on this, we're pushing it hard, and we're trying to make sure that as we push it on substantive grounds, which is why these trips are so important so that members understand what is at stake and as they make their decisions they understand what the consequences will be of a positive vote and what the consequences would be of a negative vote.

**STAFF:** If I could just introduce Assistant Secretary Sullivan and give him an opportunity to --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SULLIVAN:** Yeah, I'm very sorry I'm late.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** I didn't touch anything economic. (Laughter.)

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SULLIVAN:** Well, I just -- obviously, my colleague, Tom Shannon, doesn't need any support from another assistant secretary, but because we went together with the Secretary on the trip and we've been working very, very closely -- our bureaus -- on this issue, given its importance, I'll give you just a quick overview of just the impressions really on the economic side that you may find of interest.

First of all, I would highly recommend that you take a look, if you haven't already done so, at the Secretary's remarks that she gave at this reception in Colombia, which --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** They're on the website.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SULLIVAN:** Yeah, they're on the website. And it really sets out a strong case and something -- and maybe Tom's already touched upon it -- to add a little flavor from the trip, was the reception that she received in Medellin. I mean, it was overwhelming in terms of in any venue, whether small meetings, whether walking out in public, you know, just the number of people greeting her, the number of people that were very pleased, very pleased, to see the Secretary of State, no matter what they thought about the FTA. It was quite interesting. But I would highly recommend you take a look at some of her remarks when she was down in Medellin.

Tom and I did a press briefing prior to the trip, and I focused a lot on the economic story in Colombia and the very strong reform program, the strong growth, the strong poverty reduction under President Uribe. And I think members had an opportunity to see this in talking to workers, in talking to labor or union leaders, in talking to government officials. I think that was really important, and to look at the aspect of the free trade agreement in terms of how it's supporting our current free trade between the United States and Colombia through our preference programs, how it's literally supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs in Colombia. And I think that was an important element of the trip for members to see that.

And I think one thing that was very interesting, and you probably saw it from our schedule, is to look at how that job creation helps bring positive results in other areas of Colombia. This to me was one of the more striking aspects of the trip. For example, if you saw we had an opportunity to meet with former paramilitary -- really young people who were moving -- who have moved out of that, moved out of those groups in large part because they have opportunity. And similarly, we had meetings with some of the displaced people, the internally displaced individuals who are working now in the flower sector. Again, these people are now having opportunities. They're moving on with their lives in a way that is helping not only with regard to their economic opportunity, but to help them deal with some of the other elements of the civil strife that you had seen over the last ten years.

So to me, I think that -- and some of these meetings -- they actually were meeting the members in smaller groups with some of the State Department officials with some of these individuals, I thought were very powerful and provided a lot of insight on how the economic growth story, when you look at the statistics, they look good, they are very good, but to actually see what that growth is doing for the lives of individual human beings, I thought was something that was very powerful. And obviously, we can't speak for the members of Congress on the trip, but watching some of their reactions, I think they were impressed as well.

The final issue that I wanted to raise that I thought was quite interesting was the discussion, whether it was with the labor groups that were for the FTA or the labor groups that were against the FTA or government officials, but with regard to the issue on some of the labor rights issues. And there was a wide recognition, I think, among some of these groups -- and it was very interesting to watch how the revived -- really the May 10th agreement that the Administration worked with the congressional leadership, and particularly on the issue of core ILO principles and how those would be enforceable in this free trade agreement, how that was an important issue and a welcome

issue in terms of enthusiasm for the agreement that came out in a number of the discussions. And some of the members were interested in that as well, and I think it goes to a point that we made prior to the trip that there really has been a strong effort to reach out to the Congress, a bipartisan effort to move forward on our trade agenda. And I think you're seeing some results of that.

And so those were some of the impressions from my perspective that I thought were quite interesting. And again, I don't want to be able to speak for the members, but there was a lot of interest in some of these issues.

**QUESTION:** Can you address the whole Chavez side of things? You know, the President talked about this (inaudible) South America. How much is that a part of the argument on Capitol Hill (inaudible) played well on the Hill.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Well, I mean, I'm sure you noticed that the Secretary in her public remarks and in response to questions kept her answers focused entirely on Colombia.

**QUESTION:** The President in his State of the Union (inaudible).

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Well, I think what the President was highlighting is that as we engage in our broader positive agenda in the region, we are attempting to ensure that democracies in the region have the ability to deliver the goods; that through creating economic opportunity and through investing in people, their own people, investing in their national infrastructure, that they can ensure that the benefits of economic growth reach the poorest and most vulnerable members of society; and that the kind of development model that we and others in the region are promoting is an enduring one, it's a sustaining one. And that's the distinction I think he was making. I don't think he was focused on a particular individual.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** I think -- again, if you look at what this Administration has been able to accomplish in terms of negotiating free trade agreements through the hemisphere, it has concluded or ratified ten agreements, you know, beginning with Chile and ending with Peru up to this point in terms of ratifications, and with Colombia and Panama outstanding. And with the exception of the Dominican Republic, all of these free trade agreements sit along the Pacific coast of the Americas and they extend in an unbroken line from Canada to Chile.

And this creates a strategic platform that allows this important grouping of likeminded countries to reach across the Pacific to the most dynamic economies of Asia and to have, I think, a very important conversation with those countries in the region that have not yet committed themselves to this free trade process. And so I mean, I think that's what he was focused on.

**QUESTION:** While you avoid (inaudible) Chavez, he at the same time accuses Colombia and the U.S. of trying some type of military incursion or whatever against him. Do you actually take these things seriously? Do you see a threat in those things or is it part of his same --

**QUESTION:** The rhetoric?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** The rhetoric is not new. So I mean, I would just say that it's up to Colombia and Venezuela to manage their own bilateral issues, and I think both countries are capable of doing it. They've shown in the past that they're capable of doing it. So we don't view this with alarm.

However, I would say though that we're focused on a positive agenda that builds and creates, not a negative agenda that denigrates and tears down. And therefore, we work hard to make sure that our rhetoric, our engagement, that our programs are focused on this larger positive agenda. And again, that was the broader point of Colombia. It's about building a relationship. It's about building economies. It's about building opportunities.

**QUESTION:** Talking about the negotiations to try to release the three American hostages and all of the hostages, how do you see the efforts to try to achieve that and the difficulties with President Chavez and the difficulties with also the FARC has imposed because they want specific conditions that the Government of Colombia would (inaudible) grant to the FARC. So what's your position and the U.S. position about who could be the (inaudible) mediator in the new stage (inaudible) of these negotiations?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Well, I mean, to begin with, for quite some time we've indicated support for President Uribe's efforts to fashion some kind of humanitarian agreement that would release all of the hostages held by the FARC. It's important to underscore the "all." We, of course, have a very special interest in the three Americans who are being held there. But we have always kind of understood a humanitarian agreement as something that would address everybody who is held illegally and forcibly by the FARC.

In regards to facilitation, we have also indicated a willingness to support third-party efforts to facilitate as long as it is coordinated with the Government of Colombia. Ultimately, facilitation only works if the facilitators are accepted by both parties. We said this when President Chavez had his brief moment as a facilitator. We have said this in the past when countries like Spain and Switzerland and others have sought to play some kind of facilitation role. And that will continue to be our approach.

**QUESTION:** It's interesting that you underscore the "all" because yesterday the FARC, after the sentence of Simon Trinidad (inaudible) made clear that they are doing the negotiation of the Americans as something that has to do directly with the release of Simon Trinidad. It seems that they are already excluding from any humanitarian exchange they might reach with the government the fate of the Americans. And that's made clear with the statement they made yesterday where they said give us back our two, and we'll give you back your three. I don't know if you're trying to send a message to the Government of Colombia because it will be to the Government of Colombia not to engage in a discussion with FARC that doesn't include the Americans.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Well, I mean, that's been our message to the Government of Colombia for a long time. And again, the Government of Colombia has always been committed to a humanitarian agreement that tries to ensure that all hostages are released. Because at the end of the day, if you start breaking the hostages up into little packages, you're not addressing the central issue, which is that these are people who were taken by force illegally and are being held against their will. These are innocent people, all of them, and the FARC needs to release them all.

**QUESTION:** Does the 60-year prison sentence rule out the possibility that Simon Trinidad would ever be released?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Well, I mean, 60 years is a long time. He's 57 years old. Again, I think it's important to underscore that Simon Trinidad was convicted of crimes and sentenced for crimes. The hostages committed no crime. There's no equivalence between the two.

**QUESTION:** There's not, but the FARC -- it's clear -- I mean what (inaudible) they will have in releasing the Americans -- I mean, we're not talking about (inaudible) or that they're in a hurry to make some concessions. I mean, they don't have any interest in releasing the three Americans unless they gave (inaudible) back the two of them that are still in jail. I mean, they view as you took two of ours, we took three of yours. So --

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** But our policy on this kind of issue regarding hostages is quite clear. I mean, we've never traded because we know what the result of trading is: You get more hostages taken. This has been a consistent U.S. policy for decades.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SULLIVAN:** Can I make one other point because I was late and some of you weren't at our briefing before and I do want to make a point that came up in the State of the Union. This is obviously an important element of our relationship with Colombia, critical -- the Free Trade Agreement I'm talking about. But as

the President pointed out in the State of the Union, these FTAs clearly benefit American farmers, workers, businesses, and it's important to recognize that we are doing this -- that we are so interested in having our Congress pass this -- because it truly is a win-win economically and, of course, on the foreign policy side. And I did want to emphasize, underscore the point that the President made in the State of the Union, and we talked about this a lot on the trip.

The average tariff, U.S. tariff on a Colombian import, is about .1 percent because of our preference programs. So we essentially already have one-way free trade. It's free trade coming into the United States. The average tariff, a Colombian tariff on a U.S. export, is about almost averages about 13 percent. In agriculture, it's closer to almost 17 percent. So you don't have to have a Ph.D. in economics to understand that as we go to 0, from .1 percent to 0, and they go from an average of about 13 percent to 0, this will significantly provide opportunities for American businesses, workers, farmers. And there's an ITC study that essentially estimates about an additional \$1.1 billion in U.S. exports because of that tariff differential.

So this is an important agreement for American workers. And when you hear the rhetoric, particularly on Colombia, that somehow this FTA is going to negatively impact the American worker or American businesses, it is people who have not looked at the facts on the ground. This will positively help American workers, businesses and farmers. And that's an important reason why we are also pressing this and the other FTAs, and the President mentioned it in the State of the Union as well. So it's important to look at the benefits on both sides. Clearly, there are large benefits economically to Colombia and from the foreign policy benefits they are incredibly important, but there are significant benefits to American businesses and workers. And I think sometimes that story does not get reflected in some of the commentary and press on the importance of the Colombia FTA.

**STAFF:** I think we're going to have time for one last question.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) talk about -- you know, talk about all the good benefits -- the benefits, how it's a win-win for all. And we've heard this message constantly since the FTA was signed and you guys, both the U.S. Government and the Colombian Government, have been lobbying for this with these back and forth visits. And yet that message is not sinking in to Congress and so I'm just wondering what else do you think you should do -- maybe change the tactic a bit -- or what else should you do so that that message gets -- you know, gets in there and you get your vote, you know, and Congress (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** Going back to that question, what do you think should be the benchmarks that (inaudible) should achieve on violence against unionists? And many analysts in Washington say that Colombia and the U.S. Government always talk about what Colombia has achieved until now, but for Democrats to, you know, be convinced of change, some proactive action should be taken by the Government of Colombia, say, you know, these are the next steps we are going to take, we are going to reach these numbers until, you know, the end of the year, so they could offer Democrats, you know, a new element into the discussions and not just keep talking about what, you know, violence reduction and all the numbers have that been, you know, put out until now because it doesn't seem to be working. I mean, is there anything else coming up in the next month with these visits or are you planning to do, you know (inaudible) plan to offer these benchmarks?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Those are very, very, very good questions, obviously. And this is something that the members themselves were very focused on in their meetings because they wanted to understand better those aspects of Colombian life that most disturb trade unionists here in the United States, and also human rights NGOs, understand what the Colombian Government has been doing, is doing and what more it could do, and especially what more we could be doing with the Colombians in order to improve that record.

And again, from our point of view, the Colombian Government has done a lot and we're seeing trends that are very positive. But obviously, these trends have to be continued and the goal is to help Colombians construct a state that is democratic but also defined by the rule of law. And there's a lot more we can do, there's a lot more the Colombians can do and there's a lot more that our Congress can do in terms of providing the funds to help us accomplish that. And that's why the -- that's one of the reasons why these trips are important because, you know, we continue to have conversations with the members when they return and we seek to understand better what it is that they especially think we need to be doing with the Colombians in order to make them feel more comfortable about a positive vote on the free trade agreement.

But in this regard, let me just make two fairly quick comments. First, Colombia is South America's oldest democracy, but it's also one of its most violent. And as you look at Colombia's history, it has had several waves of violence, beginning in the 19th century and through the 20th century. But what has defined this violence is that, first of all, it's largely political or it's expressed in political terms. And ultimately, when the violence ends, it ends because of agreements made between the two political groups that have been fighting each other, so violence becomes resolved politically.

What is changing in Colombia and what is unique about the effort begun under President Pastrana and now consolidated and being continued under President Uribe, is that for the first time Colombia is attempting to address the underlying causes of violence institutionally. It's attempting to address the underlying causes of violence by expanding the authority of the state, by completing reforming and transforming its judicial system, and by building up a prosecutorial capability that really will allow Colombian democracy to begin to create the rule of law and what we call a culture of justice, as opposed to a culture of impunity.

This is an historic accomplishment. It's not complete. There's a lot of work to be done. But as we look forward, we need to understand that we played an important role in this transformation of Colombia and that the role was built through bipartisan support and cooperation. It began under President Clinton, it has continued under President Bush, and it has been supported by bipartisan votes in our Congress. And we believe that the free trade agreement, just as the Andean Trade Preferences Act has been, that the Free Trade Agreement is an important part of helping Colombia make this kind of historic transition. And this is why we believe this is -- has all the markings of a major foreign policy success, a major bipartisan foreign policy success, and that now is not the time to step away from Colombia. And although some here might understand our Free Trade Agreement as only an aspect of free trade policy, the reality is that it's a central component of our economic and social development strategy. But for the Colombians, it is a strategic alliance. It represents a commitment to the United States, but also a commitment to certain political values and to certain economic understandings. And if we step away from them now, we'll be sending absolutely the wrong signal. And we need to understand that there are still forces inside of Colombia that would prefer that Colombia not be an institution-driven country. There are still forces inside of Colombia that would prefer to see the rule of law not establish itself, that would prefer to see a culture of impunity continue, as opposed to the creation of a culture of justice. But it's evident that the Colombian people don't want that, and now is the time to stand with them. And this is why we think the free trade agreement is so important, but ultimately if you ask the question does -- do Colombian workers, do Colombian trade unionists and do average Colombian citizens benefit from a no vote on a free trade agreement, the answer is no.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SULLIVAN:** I think the premise of the question that you pose I would have a bit of a quarrel with. I think the focus, the congressional delegations, the outreach, the speeches, the latest from the President on the State of the Union, I think it is having an effect with members, and a positive effect. As you know, members of Congress have a lot of different issues on their plate at any one time, and so what a lot of this has been is looking at the opportunity to provide further information for the members on a broad cross-section of issues, so that what Tom just talked about some of the history of Colombia, these were discussions we had with some of the members during the course of this trip. The issues with regard to the economic benefits are not widely known, and so we have been making the case. And so I think we're going to continue to make that case, and it's a strong case across a wide variety of interests, whether it's economic, foreign policy, or mutual beneficial economic arrangements for both countries.

**QUESTION:** But the reason I brought it up is that the concrete result here is that all this back and forth, you know, 16 months or so after the FTA was signed, you still don't have a vote on either chamber. And so that's -- you know, if you want to measure your lobbying success for this FTA as, say, for instance compared to the FTA with Peru which was passed, you know, late last year, then, you know, the concrete result is here we are sitting here and there's no vote programmed in either chamber. So I understand why you're doing it and the concerns you bring and how it's a frank discussion, but the bottom line is you still don't have a vote.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHANNON:** Well, but again, the focus at the moment is to continue that element of our outreach to Congress, which is on the issue of addressing members' concerns and also on the issue of spreading -- informing them through visits, through discussions, through meetings, of the broader implications of this -- the entire package. And I think it is having a positive effect. Of course, the ultimate determination of that is if you ask the members themselves, but I think that there was a lot of interesting exchange and deeper understanding of the issues and the importance of the FTA with regard to a broad cross-section of issues.

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