

[← Back to Original Article](#)

Gore, Perot Tangle in Heated NAFTA Debate : Trade: Vice president calls pact a path to prosperity. But Texas billionaire says Americans would lose jobs.

November 10, 1993 | JAMES GERSTENZANG and PAUL RICHTER | TIMES STAFF WRITERS

WASHINGTON — In a testy, televised debate over the merits of expanded trade with Mexico, Vice President Al Gore hailed the North American Free Trade Agreement on Tuesday night as an opportunity to explore new economic vistas while Ross Perot denounced it as a blunder that could cost thousands of Americans their jobs.

Gore, who served as President Clinton's surrogate in a high-risk matchup that some Administration officials had considered a mistake, characterized the debate as a choice between "the politics of fear and the politics of hope," and reassured Americans that the trade agreement is a key element of Clinton's strategy to lead the nation into a more prosperous future.

Perot, the feisty Texas billionaire who has become the trade pact's most prominent opponent, countered that ratification would prompt an exodus of U.S. manufacturers to Mexico, eliminating the jobs of U.S. workers and perpetuating the exploitation of Mexican laborers who he said live worse than livestock.

"This is a fork in the road," Gore said. "The whole world is watching."

"The problem is, this is not good for the people of either country," Perot countered.

From the confines of a small television studio several blocks from the U.S. Capitol, Gore and Perot parried statistics and sound bites and traded threats of economic disaster and political recriminations in a 90-minute exchange carried live on CNN's "Larry King Live" program and transmitted to cable television viewers across the country.

The encounter bore none of the reserve of a presidential campaign debate, nor even a presidential veneer of civility. Seated shoulder to shoulder on the cramped set, Gore and Perot barely let each other finish a sentence before edging in to respond.

One of the most personal clashes came when Perot charged that the agreement was the work of high-paid foreign lobbyists "wrecking this whole thing."

Gore responded: "I don't know a single individual who lobbied the Congress more than you or your lobbyists did." The vice president cited what he said were Perot's efforts in the 1970s to get the House Ways and Means Committee to approve a tax break for Perot's business.

Perot shot back: "You're lying now." He pressed Gore to provide specifics to back up the allegation, which Gore was unable to do.

Although the potential audience for the debate numbered in the millions, the primary targets of the policy prizefight was much smaller: about 25 undecided members of the House of Representatives who will determine the accord's fate in a crucial floor vote one week from today.

With the Administration more than 20 votes short of the majority needed to approve the trade agreement in the House, Gore equated it to such momentous turns in American history as creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Louisiana Purchase and the purchase of Alaska.

"This is a major choice for our country of historic proportions," the vice president declared. "If we give in to the politics of fear and make the wrong choice, the results will be catastrophic."

Perot kept up a steady counterattack, portraying the trade agreement as a potential boon to U.S. companies employing desperate Mexican workers in border-town factories, paying wages one-seventh of those received by U.S. laborers and exploiting lax enforcement of Mexican environmental standards.

Exploited workers, he said, lack the money to buy the U.S. products that the agreement would make available to them.

Perot accused the Administration of using false data to support its arguments, argued that Washington has a history of entering into poor trade agreements and insisted that the trade agreement, if ratified, would cost U.S. jobs.

The pact, negotiated by the George Bush Administration, would eliminate tariffs, quotas and other barriers to trade among the United States, Mexico and Canada over a 15-year period. If approved by a simple majority in the House and then in the Senate, it would take effect Jan. 1, 1994, presuming that Canada and Mexico have completed the ratification process.

At one point in the debate Gore, seeking to discredit Perot as much as Perot's argument, mentioned his opponent's financial ties--and those of Perot's son--to a heavily subsidized Ft. Worth airport and trade zone that stands to benefit from increased U.S.-Mexican commerce. He also cited Perot's incorrect predictions of massive U.S. deaths in the Persian Gulf War.

Perot, speaking with reporters after the debate, said he would not tolerate criticism of his son.

"They cannot defend their position so they throw dust in the air," he said.

The attacks suggested that Gore was trying to provoke an angry reaction from the notoriously thin-skinned billionaire. In that, he seemed only partly successful.

The personal tone continued as Gore declared that Perot's prescription would hurt the U.S. economy and divide and weaken the country. Perot, who heads a political organization called "United We Stand, America" would end up heading "divided we fall," Gore said.

Perot warned that, if Congress approves the agreement, voters would get their revenge at the ballot box in 1994 and would throw out the agreement six months after its beginning, which is permitted under the pact.

"Working people of this country are extremely angry and there's no way of stopping them," Perot said.

Gore denounced Perot's remarks as "a direct political threat against anybody who votes for this." But, he said, "we're not scared. We're not a nation of quitters. We're not afraid to compete in the world marketplace."

Perot said the Administration's warnings about the dangerous consequences of a defeat in the House are part of a pattern in which the White House sounds the alarm each time a proposal is threatened.

"They go into 'The sky is falling!' " Perot said. "The next thing, it will be 'The British are coming!' "

Perot said that Gore was painting an overly optimistic picture of the U.S. economy and the likely impact of the trade agreement that is not supported by the facts. "If this is all true, why isn't our economy booming?" Perot asked. "It just doesn't fit."

Perot argued that the United States should not begin to strike such a deal with Mexico until that country cleans up its human rights record, improves its standard of living for workers and makes its political system more democratic.

Gore responded that "the idea that we can isolate ourselves from the rest of the world and only do business with countries that do what we want them to do is pretty unrealistic."

Meanwhile, Administration allies circulated a report prepared by the International Trade Commission, a government agency, that counteracts an assertion that much of the growth in U.S. exports to Mexico has come from the shipment of components to Mexican factories, where labor-intensive assembly work is completed. The finished products, such as television sets, are then sold in this country, in a cycle that takes the higher-wage production assignment out of the hands of workers here.

The report was requested by Rep. Cardiss Collins (D-Ill.), an opponent of the agreement, who, Administration allies said, kept it under wraps when it failed to support arguments against the pact.

The report states that such exports--although increasing 93% from 1987, when Mexico began large cuts in the tariffs intended to keep U.S. products out of its markets--failed to keep up with the general growth in Mexico's imports from the United States, which rose 224% during the same period. As a percent of total shipments from the United States to Mexico, they fell from 32% to 21%.

As the Administration presses ahead with what continues to be an uphill battle, it needs to accomplish three goals before the vote, said Thomas E. Mann, director of governmental studies at the Brookings Institution, an independent Washington research organization.

It must generate support in the districts of House members who fear that a vote for the trade agreement could turn out to be political suicide because their constituents believe that it would cost them jobs, and it must conduct one-on-one negotiations with those members to determine if quiet deals can be achieved to sway their votes.

In the only arena in which the debate could have an impact, Mann said, lies the Administration's third goal: improving the climate of public opinion, which remains generally divided over the merits of the trade plan, to make support for Clinton on this controversial issue less of a political liability.

Even before the debate, there was some good news for the Administration. Five Democrats who had been counted as undecided announced that they will vote for the agreement. They are Reps. Stenny H. Hoyer and Benjamin L. Cardin of Maryland, Dan Glickman of Kansas, Bob Clement of Tennessee and Al Swift of Washington.

After the debate, a sixth, Rep. Jim Bacchus of Florida, said he will vote for the pact.

In addition, several members who had not previously declared their intentions voted for the agreement in the House Ways and Means Committee, which sent the legislation that would implement it to the full House. However, they could switch when the full House votes.

Where NAFTA Stands

The status of NAFTA among the three potential partners:

* United States: President Clinton is estimated to need 25 more votes to assure passage of NAFTA in the House of Representatives in a vote scheduled for before Thanksgiving. Then, it will go to Senate, where support is stronger than in the House.

* Mexico: NAFTA must still be approved by the Mexican Senate, but that is assured because the ruling party of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari controls the body.

* Canada: Prime Minister Jean Chretien says he may delay giving his final approval to NAFTA unless Mexico and the United States agree to some changes. Parliament approved NAFTA in May, but Canadian laws do not go into effect until officially proclaimed--and Chretien notes he could stop that from happening.

Source: Times wire reports

