

Nafta's Secret

On March 11 the New York Times printed a story by Anthony DePalma under the headline, “Nafta’s Powerful Little Secret.”

It was a long, thorough, serious, even-handed and temperate story, which means that not many people are likely to have read it. Admit it. You didn’t read it, did you? It’s not too late. A link to the full text is at the end of this article.

Meanwhile the only reason Nafta’s little secret is still a secret is because most of us weren’t paying attention to it when Mr. Clinton and his Wall Street advisors were sneaking Nafta past us in the early ’90s.

Only the handful of tiresome pinkos who read rags like *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, and *Z Magazine* were fully informed back then—endlessly informed, really—that the North American Free Trade Agreement would allow faceless and unaccountable tribunals, acting in secret, to trample over the laws of any nation that signed on.

The pinkos and a handful of tiresome America-Firsters, for Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan were saying the exact same thing, at high volume and often.

Most citizens who happened to overhear this freak show were likely to dismiss it as uninformed falsehoods. Certainly this was the response from the White House, from Congress, from TV, from the papers, and from the free market priesthood in university economics departments.

So naturally Nafta passed. And years passed. And it develops now that corporations have taken to using the agreement—who could have predicted such a thing?—to trample

on the laws of sovereign nations. And not merely the laws of lesser nations, but our own good old American laws.

For instance, right now a bunch of Canadian undertakers claims that a Mississippi court violated Nafta when it fined them \$500 million for trying to drive honest American undertakers out of business. This makes the sovereign state of Mississippi look like some dirt-poor, ignorant banana republic.

And UPS is arguing, before another secret Nafta tribunal, that the very existence of the Canadian postal system constitute unfair competition. (Of course there is no real parallel between this and the Mississippi outrage. Canadian postmen are a brutal, ruthless bunch of socialists.)

Well, enough. Read the full story, below.

Meanwhile, reviewing the history of Nafta's powerful little secret has led me to a new appreciation of bipartisanship, although not quite in the Bushian sense of the word. Mr. Bush is nostalgic for unipartisanship, the form of governance to be found in the Texas legislature and increasingly in the United States Congress.

He may not be aware that the prefix "bi" comes from an ancient Greek word meaning "two." This would suggest that in olden times there might have been "two" political parties with differing ideologies. Could such a thing arise again in the United States?

The history of Nafta suggests that maybe it even is.

In that instance we saw the first stirrings of an alliance between the far left and the far right against our native, north-of-the-border two-headed PRI. Mr. Clinton had the skill to prevail against the tiny uprising. Mr. Cheney probably won't.

Already now we are seeing the same two fringes groping toward merger as the symbols clash over faith-based initiatives. And we will be seeing lots more of the same thing in the coming Rumsfeld-Powell struggle between neo-

isolationism and world leadership—or, to put it a little differently, between minding our own business and neo-imperialism.

For myself, I'm planning to repose full faith and confidence from now on in the political judgment of two men. Whenever Pat Buchanan and Ralph Nader agree on something, so will I.



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TEXT OF “NAFTA’S POWERFUL LITTLE SECRET.”