

José Can You See? Bush's Trojan Taco



By **Greg Palast**
April 20th, 2008 - 11:59pm ET

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VOICE
HONORS (3)

Monday, April 21, 2008
(For TomPaine.com)

Psst! George Bush has a secret.

While you Democrats are pounding each other to a pulp in Pennsylvania, the President has snuck back down to New Orleans for a meeting of the NAFTA Three: the Prime Minister of Canada and the President of Mexico.

You're not supposed to know that – for two reasons:

First, the summit planned for the N.O. two years back was meant to showcase the rebuilt Big Easy, a monument to can-do Bush-o-nomics. Well, it is a monument to Bush's leadership: The city still looks like Dresden 1946, with over half the original residents living in toxic trailers or wandering lost and broke in America.

The second reason Bush has kept this major summit a virtual secret is its real agenda. More important, the agenda-makers, the guys who called the meeting, must remain as far out of camera range as possible: The North American Competitiveness Council.

Never heard of The Council? Well, maybe you've heard of the counselors: the chief executives of Wal-Mart, Chevron Oil, Lockheed-Martin and 27 other multinational masters of the corporate universe. And why did the landlords of our continent order our presidents to a three-nation pajama party? Their term is "harmonization."

Harmonization has nothing to do with singing in fifths like Simon and Garfunkel. Harmonization means making rules and regulations the same in all three countries. Or, more specifically, watering down rules – on health, safety, labor rights, oil drilling, polluting and so on - in other words, any regulations that get between The Council members and their profits.

Take for example, pesticides. Wal-Mart and agri-business don't want to reduce the legal amount of poison allowed in what you eat. Solution: "harmonize" US and Canadian pesticide standards to Mexico's. Can they do that? Can Bush just say, "Eat your peas – even if they're radioactive?" Under NAFTA, at least the way George Bush reads it (or has it read to him), he can. At any rate, he does.

The three chiefs of state will meet privately with the thirty corporate chiefs where they are also expected to legally erase more of our borders, to expand the "NAFTA highway." Technically, the NAFTA highway is a set of legal rules governing transcontinental shipment. Some fear NAFTA highway expansion will allow a new flood of cheap Mexican products into the US and Canada. Not so. Their hunger to expand the NAFTA highway is to bring in even cheaper Chinese goods.

Say what?

As trade expert Maud Barlow explained to me, the new "NAFTA highway" will allow Chinese stuff dumped into Mexico to be hauled northward as duty-free "Mexican" products. That's one of the quiet agendas of this "Summit for Security and Prosperity," the official Orwellian name for this meet. Think of the SSP "harmonization" as the Trojan Taco of trade.

Barlow is Chairwoman of the Council of Canadians. She is known as the "Ralph Nader of Canada" (not Nader version 2.0, The Spoiler Candidate, but Nader version 1.0, the consumer advocate). Because Americans are too distracted by the Punch-and-Judy primaries to complain about this lobby-fest on the bayou, Canadian Barlow is leading street protests against this greed-grab.

I caught up with this courageous Canadian (I've seen her face down corporate bullying we can't imagine in the US) on her way down to New Orleans. Barlow's particular concerns are first, the NSS agreement promotes a five-fold increase in the mining of Canadian tar sands for import, as liquid crude oil, into the USA, an idea filthier than a re-make of Debbie Does Dallas. "This is an insane model of development," she says, especially given Bush's recent claim that he wants to slow global warming.

Bush himself is pushing his Canadian and Mexican counterparts to adopt US-style "Homeland Security" measures so that, says Barlow, "we'll all be zip-locked together in one security bag."

There will be other anti-SSP protesters in New Orleans as well, from America's populist Right. They are concerned that the Security and Prosperity Summit is worse than the "NAFTA on steroids" that Barlow fears. The populists see in the SPP a nascent "North American Union," and the elimination of the good old US of A.

They're wrong, of course. The U.S. of A. has been long eliminated, at least economically. The Competitiveness Council is a multinational crew, with one shared set of country clubs, beach homes, art collections, union busters and lobbyists knowing no borders.

The populist radio hosts railing against the coming North American Union don't realize that these CEOs won't take away their flags or Fourth of July or Star-Spangled Banner. The rags and flags will always be kept around to con the schmucks along the Yahoo Belt into donating their children to the Iraq Occupation or other misadventures. A billionaire like Carlos Slim, the richest man on the planet (sorry, Mr. Gates), didn't buy the Mexican government to "protect" his nation from Gringos but to protect his media monopoly.

So there is no United States of America nor Canada nor Mexico - at least as we like to imagine ourselves in our national fairy tales: self-governing democracies run by we the people or nosotros el pueblo. There's just the diktats of the North American Prosperity Council. Get used to it.

Barlow said that the US Ambassador to Canada told her the legal changes wrought in New Orleans will not be put before the three national Congresses for a vote. "We don't want to open up another NAFTA." So, they'll skip the voting stuff. Democracy is so, like, 20th Century.

Is Bush just a reluctant participant in this "harmonizing" of our economic fate? The meetings are secret, so I can't say for sure. But I note that, at the opening ceremony, if you read his lips, you can see our president singing the national anthem as, "José, can you see?"

Greg Palast is the author of the New York Times bestsellers, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* and *Armed Madhouse: Sordid Secrets and Strange Tales of a White House Gone Wild*. Sign up for Palast's investigative reports for BBC on RSS feed at <http://feeds.feedburner.com/gregpalast-articles>.

Make a donation to the not-for-profit Palast Investigative Fund and receive a DVD of the untold story of the drowning of New Orleans, Big Easy to Big Empty, made for Democracy Now! at <http://www.PalastInvestigativeFund.org>.

Note: On May 1, in New York, Palast will speak at the international conference of the victims of Barrick Gold mining operations, the Canadian-American company whose board members included the former Prime Minister of Canada Brian Mulroney and the former President of the United States, George Bush Sr. More information coming soon at www.GregPalast.com

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