

**REMARKS HONORING CONGRESSMAN ROBERT MATSUI,  
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**

Congressman Jim Kolbe\*

Tonight we honor two distinguished individuals for their service in U.S. trade policy.

It is my honor to present the award to the late Robert Matsui. His wife Doris, my colleague, is here on his behalf to accept this award.

In so many ways, Bob was a cut above the average member of Congress. His intellect, influence, and position spanned from powerful jurisdictions like the Ways and Means Committee to his heading up of the DCCC [Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee]. He was a policy wonk as well as a power broker.

When legislative battles had to be fought, Bob knew how to draw the lines of engagement and devise a plan for victory. He was a legislator you wanted in your fox hole—not someone you wanted to face across the battle line as an adversary. Behind that soft-spoken manner, he was a fierce competitor.

I know by experience. In the legislative arena, Bob and I were both friend and foe. Sometimes we covered each other's back—working together on a bipartisan basis. Other times, we were like boxers touching gloves just before a match.

Those of you who knew Bob well remember that he was an avid baseball fan. If you visited his office, you found it full of baseball memorabilia. He was devoted to the game. This evening we honor Bob for his “inside baseball” game—his contribution to U.S. trade policy over the course of his legislative career. Bob left his imprint on every major trade battle in the decade of the 1990s. All of us today operate in the framework of a debate which he helped construct on the Democratic side.

Tonight, the trade policy community draws together as a family—a family of professionals—but a family nonetheless. Certainly, I look around and I see a lot of young faces. However, I also see the gray hairs and wrinkled brows of many veterans of U.S. trade policy debates. So for those new to these battles, I thought I would revisit some of the ones of yesteryear. Those battles seem so long ago, but they are worth revisiting in light of Bob's contribution.

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\* Jim Kolbe currently serves as a Senior Transatlantic Fellow for the German Marshall Fund United States. For twenty-two years, Jim Kolbe served in the U.S. House of Representatives, elected for eleven consecutive terms, from 1985 to 2007. He represented the Eighth (previously designated the Fifth) congressional district, comprising the southeastern part of Arizona with Tucson as the main population area. Remarks published here are as delivered at the 11th Annual Awards Dinner, Washington International Trade Association, on July 20, 2005.

Like Hollywood movies, today's trade policy debates are, depending on your point of view, either remakes of the old classics or simply sequels to a never-ending saga. The plots are largely the same.

There is a President fighting for liberalization and a Congress that has to be brought along. There are a host of antagonists and protagonists in both political parties. And finally, there is a supporting cast of advocates and dissidents for business, labor, the environment, and even isolation if one counts stakeholders reflecting U.S. sovereignty or anti-globalization concerns.

As we all know, CAFTA [Central America Free Trade Agreement] is just the latest episode of a trade film first screened in the early 90s. Certainly, some of you might think of NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] as the first blockbuster legislative effort in U.S. trade policy. However, before that there were other episodes, perhaps in black-and-white or even in storyboard format.

Because before NAFTA, there were the annual China MFN [most-favored-nation] debates. Bob's first great contributions in U.S. trade policy are found in that era. Post-Tiananmen Square and the 1992 election cycle, President Clinton embarked on a policy of conditioning normal trade relations with China on progress in the human rights dimension. It was a policy seemingly destined for failure. After only a short period, members of the Clinton Administration were desperately searching for an exit strategy.

The mood of Congress, of course, was very different then. Only a small minority of members in the House of Representatives supported engagement with China in the wake of Tiananmen Square. Time and again, both the House and Senate voted with large majorities to cut off trade relations with China. It was only a Presidential veto, frequently exercised by the former President Bush and sustained by the Senate, that maintained U.S. trade relations.

Bob played a crucial role in charting a new course in U.S.-China relations. His vision was pivotal in reversing a failed direction in U.S. foreign and trade policy. In early 1993, he helped form a legislative working group dedicated to reversing the prevailing congressional policy on China. Lee Hamilton, David Dreier, and I joined him in this ambitious undertaking.

Together, the four of us formed a bipartisan partnership that reached outside the Congress. We combined our effort with those of the business and agriculture communities. We created a whip structure—independent of the congressional leaderships—and developed an information campaign to frame the issues. We coalesced with key opinion leaders and think tanks along the trade and foreign policy spectrum. In short, we orchestrated a massive inside-the-beltway effort to change the course of U.S.-China relations.

The legislative history of U.S.-China relations stacked the odds against us. But we were successful. In 1993, we convinced a President to change his policy and we changed the position of the House of Representatives. Not only did we defeat a resolution aimed at cutting off trade with China, we drafted a new congressional resolution that became the framework for U.S.-China relations for years to come.

Those early China MFN battles set the stage for the now-famous sequel, “the fight for permanent normal trade relations for China.” It was another film Bob Matsui starred in. But Bob was always a star.

All of this early spade work in coalition-building was the precursor to the NAFTA. On NAFTA, Bob’s contribution to U.S. trade policy grew to greater heights. In the NAFTA fight, Bob’s “mettle” as a legislator truly shined. His story is a remarkable profile of courage.

In the ’92 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton announced his support for NAFTA. At the time, Bill Clinton was almost alone in the Democratic Party on this issue. And had it not been for the work of Bob Matsui, President Clinton would have remained alone.

At first, Bob was just a foot soldier in support of the agreement on the Ways and Means Committee. Then, Chairman Rostenkowski and Congressman Gibbons made him a General in the Democratic effort to secure passage. Like Bob, I was a foot soldier at first. Then, I assumed a larger role joining him in the effort.

Despite all of our work during the China MFN debate, the two of us—by Washington standards—were still a strange pairing. In fact, Bruce Stokes of the *National Journal* called us “the Odd Couple” in one of his stories covering the NAFTA debate. Bob was a member of the Ways and Means Committee. I was a member of the Appropriations Committee which had no jurisdiction over trade.

Even after a decade, NAFTA remains the big “enchilada” of all trade debates. It was the first of its kind. It redefined trade policymaking in the modern era of American politics. Like China MFN, it possessed the attributes of coalition building. But unlike China MFN, the NAFTA debate was truly national in scope. It involved grassroots campaigning, sophisticated polling, print, radio, and TV advertising.

Again, Bob Matsui and his staff were at the heart of this campaign. On the Hill, Bob directed the Democratic effort. The two of us worked together orchestrating the whip team. We organized member and staff working groups to wage the fight—sector by sector, issue by issue. As one lobbyist put it, “it was guerilla warfare, district by district, member by member.” In the end, all of you know that we were successful.

Without a doubt, Bob’s leadership helped solidify the now-historic bipartisan coalition that passed NAFTA. At its nucleus were members like David Dreier and Bill Richardson, Lee Hamilton and Pat Roberts, as well as John Boehner and Mike Kopetski. In the legislative process, it was the closest thing you got to what could be called a “band of brothers.” Bob was its founding member and essential leader. As with China, trade with Mexico and Canada would never be the same without the contribution of Bob Matsui.

Now, a decade later we face another critical debate and vote on trade. Next week, the House of Representatives will vote on the FTA [free trade agreement] with the Dominican Republic and five countries of Central America. Bob and I did not see eye to eye on that agreement. He opposed it. I support it.

And so tonight, in our tribute to Bob, a discussion of the pros and cons of this agreement is not in order. However, I do think it is appropriate to raise the sensitive topic of partisan polarization and its implications on U.S. trade policy.

Bob and I, and many in this audience, worked long and hard to build the bipartisan center for U.S. trade policy. Now on the eve of the CAFTA vote, it is clear that center is but a shadow of its former self. When this unraveling began, back in 1997 or 1998, on one of the previous efforts to support trade promotion authority [TPA], it was clear that Bob Matsui was pained. I think we all were.

As we thank Bob for his contribution to U.S. trade policy, it is appropriate to lament what has become the prevailing environment and resolve to do something about it. Over the years, for both Republicans and Democrats alike, there have been less and less incentives to work together and more and more incentives to work against each other—particularly in the area of trade policy.

Trade, as a policy matter in American politics, has become a wedge issue being used by each political party against the other. Republicans and Democrats alike share blame for this sorry state of affairs. Both parties have used trade as a tool in the political battles for control of Congress. In the debate on granting President Bush trade-promotion authority, one senior Republican aide said Republicans should pass TPA with no more Democrats than are necessary in order to alienate Democrats from an economic dialogue. Democratic leaders, in turn, have said that no Democrat should vote for CAFTA because doing so would allow another vulnerable Republican to vote “no” on CAFTA.

In an earlier age, there was an agreement among senior leaders of each party not to use trade policy as a wedge issue for tactical party purposes. That agreement was supported by other stakeholders in the trade policy process. It was an age that Bob helped create. It is an age that is gone, but one that we ought to attempt to recreate.

That is not to say we avoided all party intrigue at the highest levels in those debates on MFN for China, NAFTA, and even the Uruguay Round. We had our fair share of temptations. But we were honest with each other and we managed the tension far better than we do today.

Tonight, in saluting Bob, it is important that we dedicate ourselves to reactivating that bipartisan center in American trade politics. I think he would want us to do that. It is a great honor to present this award to a man who did so much to build that center once before, our beloved friend and late colleague, Bob Matsui.

Thank you.

