

THE UNITED STATES OF MONSANTO

Last night, I was on BlogTalkRadio with former Ambassador to Nigeria John Campbell talking about WikiLeaks, secrecy, and democracy. As a way to illustrate how the secrecy of diplomatic cables hides a great deal of undemocratic ideas, I raised the emphasis State Department Under Secretary for Management Patrick Kennedy placed in a hearing on WikiLeaks on State's role in pitching US business.

This formal channel between Washington and our overseas posts provides the Department and other U.S. Government agencies crucial information about the context in which we collectively advance our national interests on a variety of issues. For example, these communications may contain information about promoting American export opportunities, protecting American citizens overseas, and supporting military operations.

I pointed out that WikiLeaks had revealed that our diplomats had proposed a "military-style trade war" to force Europeans to adopt Monsanto's controversial products.

The US embassy in Paris advised Washington to start a military-style trade war against any European Union country which opposed genetically modified (GM) crops, newly released WikiLeaks cables show.

In response to moves by France to ban a Monsanto GM corn variety in late 2007, the ambassador, Craig Stapleton, a friend and business partner of former US president George Bush, asked Washington to penalise the EU and particularly countries which did not support the use of GM crops.

“Country team Paris recommends that we calibrate a target retaliation list that causes some pain across the EU since this is a collective responsibility, but that also focuses in part on the worst culprits.

“The list should be measured rather than vicious and must be sustainable over the long term, since we should not expect an early victory. Moving to retaliation will make clear that the current path has real costs to EU interests and could help strengthen European pro-biotech voices,” said Stapleton, who with Bush co-owned the St Louis-based Texas Rangers baseball team in the 1990s.

Here’s another example of how our government bureaucracy has decided that Monsanto and highly subsidized American cotton growers are more important than things like funding heating oil for the poor or teachers. {h/t Raj Patel)

On February 18, Republicans in the House of Representatives defeated an obscure amendment to the House Appropriations bill by a 2-to-1 margin. The Kind Amendment would have eliminated \$147 million dollars that the federal government pays every year directly to Brazilian cotton farmers. In an era of nationwide belt tightening, with funding for things like education and the U.S. Farm Bill on the chopping block, defending payments to Brazilian farmers may seem curious.

These subsidies are the compromise the US and Brazil have concocted to resolve a trade dispute: Brazilian cotton growers won a case against US cotton subsidies. In response, Brazil proposed suspending its Intellectual Property obligations. Instead, our government effectively agreed to subsidize Brazilian growers to make sure we can continue to pay silly cotton

subsidies here in the US without endangering Monsanto's royalties in Brazil.

In WTO language, Brazil was allowed to suspend its obligations to U.S. companies under the Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement. This constituted a major threat to the profits of U.S. agribusiness giants Monsanto and Pioneer, since Brazil is the second largest grower of biotech crops in the world. Fifty percent of Brazil's corn harvest is engineered to produce the pesticide Bt, and Monsanto's YieldGard VT Pro is a popular product among Brazilian corn farmers. By targeting the profits of major U.S. corporations, the Brazilian government put the U.S. in a tough spot: either let the subsidies stand and allow Brazilian farmers to plant Monsanto and Pioneer seeds without paying royalties, or substantially reform the cotton program. In essence, Brazil was pitting the interests of Big Agribusiness against those of Big Cotton, and the U.S. government was caught in the middle.

The two governments, however, managed to come up with a creative solution. In a 2009 WTO "framework agreement," the U.S. created the Commodity Conservation Corporation (CCC), and Brazil created the Brazilian Cotton Institute (BCI). Rather than eliminating or substantially reforming cotton subsidies, the CCC pays the BCI \$147 million dollars a year in "technical assistance," which happens to be the same amount the WTO authorized for trade retaliation specifically for cotton payments. In essence, then, the U.S. government pays a subsidy to Brazilian cotton farmers every year to protect the U.S. cotton program—and the profits of companies like Monsanto and Pioneer.

Now, how did our country decide this kind of insanity is really in the "national interest"? Who decided Monsanto was a more worthy American "citizen" than the poor and the children?