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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

February 24, 2004

Hamburger Flipping Flashback #1

Good Questions in 1984:

“What is going to happen to the hundreds of thousands of workers whose jobs are taken away by machines? By destroying many high-paying factory jobs, are high-tech production techniques going to turn the United States into a nation of \$50,000-a-year systems managers and \$3.50-an-hour janitors and hamburger flippers?”

Steven Greenhouse, New York Times, September 4, 1984

Dear Colleague:

There is growing anxiety that our economy is threatened by foreign competition. Pundits, politicians and protectionists say that American workers cannot compete with workers in India, China, Mexico or the Philippines. They charge that companies are selling out American workers by investing overseas. They say that pretty soon many Americans will only be able to get jobs flipping burgers or working at WalMart.

These claims are not new. In fact, it appears that this is the 20-year anniversary of the catchy phrase that says that Americans are doomed to “hamburger flipping jobs.” The quote at the top comes from an article detailing the threat to American workers from both technology (computers and automation) and foreign competition from countries like Japan and Germany. I think it’s noteworthy just for the fact that it’s the earliest reference to hamburger flipping jobs that I could find. They were good questions in 1984. Now, we have answers.

Good Answers From 20 Years of Experience:

U.S. employment growth from 1984 to 2004 -- 40 million. Real wages up 30 percent. Worker productivity, the most important economic statistic of all, tripled in two decades.

We have heard these predictions of doom before. The United States is not on the road to economic doom. Skilled Americans are able to innovate, create and compete in the modern open economy. Closing our doors to the world will devastate our economy.

Sincerely,

David Dreier