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The Washington Times

July 17, 1993, Saturday, Final Edition

**SECTION:** Part A; Pg. A1

**LENGTH:** 890 words

**HEADLINE:** Going the distance for Md. ;  
Schaefer trots globe to sell state

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**DATELINE:** ANNAPOLIS

**BODY:**

ANNAPOLIS - Almost a year ago, a Czechoslovak delegation visited the United States hoping to gain an audience at the State Department.

No one at State was interested. But William Donald Schaefer was.

Maryland's governor, hearing that federal officials had no inclination to talk with the Czechoslovaks, told them to get on New York Avenue and drive east. When they crossed the District line, state police were waiting with their flat-brimmed hats, sidearms and polished black boots to escort them to Annapolis.

At the Governor's Mansion, according to Maryland's international trade chief, Scott Blacklin, Mr. Schaefer won over the visitors by telling them about a romance he had many years ago with a Czech gymnast.

"They were great," said Curt Matthews, a spokesman for Maryland's International Division, "because we recognized them when no one else would."

The official who led that delegation, Michal Kovac, is now president of Slovakia, a newly independent nation that Mr. Schaefer visited earlier this month.

State officials are hoping the trip will help Westinghouse land a lucrative contract for air traffic control systems, which would translate into jobs at the firm's Linthicum plant.

The governor left yesterday for his second international trip in a month and his 13th since taking office in 1987.

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This time it's a five-day trade mission to Mexico, ostensibly to talk up the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which would eliminate trade barriers.

But with Mexico already NAFTA-friendly, Mr. Schaefer should find plenty of time for his chief concern. He travels as the state's No. 1 promoter, carrying a list of Maryland businesses ready to meet any nation's needs.

It is a role, apparently, that the governor relishes.

"He is absolutely in his element," says Gene Raynor, head of the state election board and a longtime Schaefer buddy. "He's always at meetings. They've got him on a schedule that is unbelievable. He loves it."

It's hard to say just how effective the trips have been, especially since the Maryland Department of Economic and Employment Development refuses to estimate how many jobs have been created.

Partly to avoid criticism, the department has cut back on the size of the delegations accompanying Mr. Schaefer. Mr. Blacklin said he now travels with five or 10 officials compared with as many as 50 in the past.

State officials said Mr. Schaefer's role on the trips is to open doors, not to negotiate contracts or bring back a specific number of jobs. The fact that the Maryland delegation is scheduled to meet Monday with Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari shows he is doing just that.

"You just can't get off the plane and hold up a bloody pelt and say, 'We've brought back 600 jobs,' " Mr. Blacklin said.

Nevertheless, the state can point to concrete benefits from Mr. Schaefer's trade missions, including:

- \* A \$51.6 million air traffic control system contract for IBM, which has a facility in Gaithersburg, after an August 1990 visit to Taiwan.

- \* A \$2.5 million manufacturing operation, run by CarnaudMetalbox Enterprises in Harford County, after a meeting with company officials in London last year.

- \* A \$10 million expansion of Delsey Luggage's Denton plant after a 1989 meeting in Paris with Delsey's chief executive officer.

Business officials who come along at their own expense say the missions are invaluable because Mr. Schaefer can get them into meetings, dinners and receptions with a nation's most powerful politicians. That can be important in countries where politics and business are more closely linked than here.

"You have to approach another country that operates like that in the same way," said Richard Marks, the president of Paris Foods, an Eastern Shore frozen-food manufacturer, who has been on a couple of the trips. "It helps to gain ground."

Mr. Schaefer, whose unpredictable behavior has been well documented at home, takes his eccentricities with him.

During a trip to Budapest in 1990, he rode in a van with most of the state's business officials, insisting that then-Agriculture Secretary Wayne Cawley, a farmer, use the limousine that had been reserved for him.

On his recent trip to Slovakia, according to his press secretary, Page Boinest, he cut short the nation's environment minister during the elaborate formalities at a reception, saying, " 'Look, we're here because we want to do business with you.' "

Mr. Raynor, who occasionally travels with the governor at his own expense, calls him "a great promoter."

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"He tells them that if they ship things into Baltimore's harbor, once the goods get onto a truck, they won't hit a red light until they get to Chicago," he said.

Not all the trips are successful. Mr. Schaefer was the first U.S. governor to visit Kuwait after the Gulf war and came away with an agreement that Kuwaiti imports would come into Baltimore. But the business never panned out.

Some critics say the governor should spend more time worrying about Maryland companies and their problems at home.

Mr. Blacklin argued that Mr. Schaefer's efforts compare favorably with those of most other governors.

**GRAPHIC:** Photo/Chart, Photo) NO CAPTION; Chart Caption) MARYLAND'S TRAVELING SALESMAN