

REMARKS OF JANET MURGUÍA

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Submitted by
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Introduction

This is an exciting time for the Latino community, for NCLR as an institution, and for me personally. As a people, we simultaneously face great opportunities and daunting challenges. As an institution, NCLR's job is to help address these challenges so more and more Latinos can have access to these opportunities.

As a child of immigrant parents who came to this country from Mexico 50 years ago with no money and very little education and who saw their son Ramon graduate from Harvard Law School; their son Carlos and daughter Mary, my twin sister, become the first brother and sister to serve together as judges on the federal bench; and were able to visit me when I worked in the West Wing of the White House, I know personally both the challenges we face and the opportunities before us.

When we started our work, NCLR was invisible; we spent a lot of energy working to get a seat at the table. We have that place at the table now it's what we do with it that matters. This is a time to build on our history and to move forward with confidence into the future.

The Chicano Federation has been a big part of our progress. Over the years, as an advocate for our community and as one of the largest providers of services to Latinos in San Diego, you labored to make our voices heard and our problems solved. Latinos throughout California are grateful for your efforts.

Throughout the country, NCLR affiliates are accomplishing the same kinds of things. They are getting their hands dirty, working on the front lines, fighting the tough fights, and holding those in power accountable to the needs of their communities.

I had learned a great deal about this work on the “Listening Tour” I embarked on last September. In preparation for assuming the presidency of NCLR, I wanted to hear everything from NCLR’s affiliates the community-based organizations which are in touch with our community every day about their needs, aspirations, and plans for the future. It was a phenomenal experience, and it reinforced how vital it is for NCLR to form the strongest possible relationships with our more than 300 affiliates.

Enhancing affiliates’ ability to do their work will strengthen these organizations, but more importantly, will unleash the power of the Hispanic community. To do that we are undergoing a rigorous,

thorough process of developing a business plan to guide our affiliate relationships in the future. As a result, I expect to improve NCLR's ability to help our affiliates do the amazing work they do every single day.

The Latino Community and its Contributions

But ultimately, our institutions matter because our *community* matters. Our *people* matter. We do what we do to nudge open the doors of opportunity for our parents, our students, our neighbors. These are our heroes.

And the time has never been better to open those doors of opportunity. We have cemented our position as the nation's largest ethnic minority. We are the fastest-growing consumer market, experiencing exponential annual growth that has put our combined purchases near the trillion dollar yes trillion dollar mark. And there has been a great deal of attention to Latinos as the fastest-growing bloc of voters, having added two million new voters in just four years.

But it s interesting until the 2000 Census revealed that we were America's largest minority group, Latinos were largely invisible to

the rest of the country. What a shame that was. Yes, I mean that in political terms, but also in human terms. Too many Americans just don't know what a wonderful people we are and the contributions Latinos have made to America's greatness.

We founded the first city in America. Contrary to popular belief, the first Thanksgiving was celebrated not in Massachusetts Bay but in El Paso, Texas. We have made life-saving contributions to medical science and flown to the moon. We have lit up the Silver Screen, been the toast of Broadway, and excelled on the baseball diamond. We have toiled in the fields and factories, built America's railroads and highways, and taken great care of the most vulnerable of Americans our young, sick, and elderly. And we have fought and died in every war since the American Revolution.

The Issue of Immigration

These are the legacies we build on. But unfortunately, as you in California know all too well, there is an issue out there that extremists use to obscure our contributions, malign our community, and limit our ability to tackle other problems. That issue is immigration.

There are few issues that get as heated and ugly as quickly as this one. The atmosphere around immigration is becoming highly charged in a way in which you in California are very familiar. You're not alone. Our affiliates in Arizona, North Carolina, Connecticut, Georgia, and many other states are reporting new levels of vicious backlash against immigrants and the organizations that serve them.

And it occurs to me that these are exhausting fights. It's like the proverbial "death by a thousand cuts." Extremists keep coming up with new threats and we are forced to contend with all of them. These battles point to the real need for fundamental reform. If, on a national scale, we can settle the underlying issues, we will free ourselves from the bruising, draining skirmishes that sap our strength and prevent us from pursuing the rest of our agenda.

While others swirl around us pushing the politics of fear, we are in a position to be the reformers. Latinos need to lead the charge for reforms that make our system rational, orderly, and fair. We believe this is possible, and we're deeply engaged in making it happen. And I believe there are enough people of good will, across the political spectrum, to move toward consensus and genuine solutions.

The Issue of Immigration Enforcement

Whether you supported him or not, President Bush has created a real opening for a reform debate.

NCLR intends to use that opening to shape the debate on our terms.

But let's be clear about something; we want the same things that all Americans want no matter what their color, no matter what their heritage, no matter how they identify themselves. We understand the nation's very legitimate needs to ensure its security because, like all Americans, we want to be secure in our own homes.

The fact is, 9/11 changed the terms of debate in America on a whole host of issues including immigration. And in a post-9/11 world, I believe that all Americans including Hispanics share a core set of principles about the nexus between national security and immigration:

- First, as a sovereign nation, the United States has the right to determine who comes and who stays. We all have an interest in this process taking place in an orderly, fair, and safe way.
- Second, to ensure its national security, the United States has a right to secure its borders. We all have an interest in knowing who is coming across our borders, and to stop those who would do us harm.
- Third, to secure its borders, the United States has a right to consider enforcement at a variety of levels, including border enforcement, interior enforcement, and workplace enforcement. We all have an interest in ensuring that our immigration system does not leave us vulnerable at any stage in the process.

We support enforcement for two basic reasons:

First, as Americans, we recognize that it's the right thing to do.

And second, we recognize that enforcement is the framework through which the White House, Congress, and the 260 million Americans whom they represent view a well-functioning immigration system.

The Immigration Reform Agenda

Hispanics also have a special interest in immigration reform. And because we have so much at stake, we have certain other priorities as part of this debate. Here's what else we want:

- A path to legal status for the immigrants who are here and whose hard work does so much to sustain this country. It's not an amnesty our friends and neighbors don't need to be "pardoned." We need to get people their green cards and eventually on a path to citizenship.
- A reduction in the visa backlogs which keep Americans from reuniting with family members.
- A new path for those who will migrate here in the future so that instead of risking their lives in the desert they can come to the U.S. freely, legally, and safely.
- And when they come, they must also have *an absolute expectation of respect for their rights*, including the right to earn their way to permanent status if they choose.

It is not that complicated. And it shouldn't be controversial. After all, these reforms simply make our laws conform to our economic reality. And when they are polled, most Americans express support for these kinds of reforms. There is bipartisan support in Congress and a powerful coalition including not just civil rights groups but business, labor, conservatives and liberals, and people of faith ready to make the case.

And only if we help lead this debate will we have the credibility and the clout to turn back the ugliest and most harmful proposals. You know what they are, because you live with them every day: proposals to turn our hospital personnel into enforcement agents, or turn local police into immigration agents. We oppose these measures, not only because they threaten our values but because they simply don't work.

The Hispanic Agenda

There is another, larger reason we need to engage this debate fully: if we get comprehensive reform, we not only achieve our goals, we can bring closure to the issue of immigration as a political "hot potato."

We need closure. Immigration is a crucial issue, but we need to get it off the table. We need to make room political space for other issues that can fundamentally improve Latinos' lives throughout America.

If we can successfully navigate these waters, we will greatly enhance our reputation as a leader in public policy. By rising above the fray, exposing the flamethrowers and lowering the noise, our community can generate significant political credibility that will pay us dividends for years to come.

And if we demonstrate strong and constructive leadership on these tough issues, it will pave the way for us to take a leadership role on the many other issues which command and must command our attention. Issues such as education and helping to fully fund and appropriately implement No Child Left Behind; providing a strong Latino perspective on the issue of Social Security; or making sure that our nation makes the right investments now in areas such as education, housing, and health care for the future well-being of all Americans.

And we will finally have the chance to tell our story to our fellow Americans. Let me share just one. Today, someone will wake up in a hotel room that one of us cleaned before she arrived. After breakfast, one of us will take away her dishes. She'll then go to a meeting with an

engineer who emigrated from Peru. As she leaves, she will pass a janitor mopping the floors one of us.

Then, she might see an Anglo or two. But after her next meeting, she will have lunch at a restaurant one of us owns, whose food is harvested by several of us.

While waiting for her next meeting, she will read *How the Garcia Girls lost Their Accent* by Julia Alvarez. She will then have a phone call with one of us who is helping to get health insurance for child care workers many, *many* of us.

Later she will see a TV news report about a young soldier honored for his bravery in Iraq one of us. And after dinner at that fabulous new Cuban place, she'll go back to her hotel room clean again and watch Miguel Ojeda make the game-winning hit for the San Diego Padres.

Latino immigrants don't make "contributions" to America. *We are* America.

Conclusion

This is an amazing time. We are at the dawn of a new century and even a new millennium. It is an historic time for our organization, for our community, and for this nation. I truly believe that we have a unique opportunity to write a special chapter in history. My hope is that history will record that we as a community stepped up, that we reached out, that we built the coalitions, the bridges, and the partnerships that allowed us to move not only our community, but an entire nation, forward. We have that opportunity and this is our moment.

Thank you for your support and *muchisimas gracias*.